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Faculty Advisor's Note

Why do we write? Why do we create?

In the age of widespread AI slopification, these questions have become increasingly pertinent as more and more people seek to use generative AI as a kind of shortcut to reading, thinking and writing. A bizarre but completely predictable arms race has touched off amongst students, as they tell me that they use AI because they fear being left behind. The tragic irony here is that in using gen-AI, they are in fact short circuiting their own cognitive development. As others have also remarked, rather than taking away the drudgery of petty, repetitive and redundant tasks, Gen AI threatens to decimate our cognition. Perhaps one way to think about this honestly is to consider the question of why we write and create. And perhaps the answer lies in what Kurt Vonnegut said, "We are here on Earth to fart around, and don't let anybody tell you any different."

To honour this tradition of farting around, we are proud to present the thirteenth issue of The Freewheeler magazine. Over the last couple of years our magazine has ventured beyond the confines of the Shiv Nadar University campus to sample and present talent from across India. We are proud to say that this year we had multiple submissions from across the globe, from all walks of life, including Eduardo Ramos, a Dominican poet from New York, and Aparna Chivukula, Winner of the 2023 Toto Award for Creative Writing in English.

We are grateful to all who submitted for their time and hard work. I would also like to thank the excellent editorial team of The Freewheeler, headed by Isha Kansal and Ishita Kumar, for their hard work and dedication in putting together a thoughtful and enjoyable issue. And for those of you reading this, who enjoy farting around, whether in SNU or not, I hope you consider submitting to our next issue.

Happy Reading!

Chinmay Sharma, PhD,
Staff Advisor, The Freewheeler,
Assistant Professor, English,
Shiv Nadar University

Editors' Note

Dear reader,

Welcome to Issue 13 of The Freewheeler!

What might you uncover simply by turning something over? This year, we invited our contributors to take what feels cemented, stable, or too easily understood and flip it. To look again. They did not disappoint.

Every piece you encounter in this issue is carefully constructed to make you linger on an image or idea, demanding you look as the light shifts around what is familiar. Reading them, we could not help but feel a turn of pleasure. We hope you do too. We also hope you find a piece to carry around with you, to think about as you're doing laundry or taking a walk. We find those are the best ones.

Putting this magazine together has been an exercise in love – on the part of our readers and editorial team, who selected and pored over each submission till they had it committed to memory. Our design team, who worked on all of the illustrations you see on the pages. Elza, who put together the cover because of which you might have picked up this issue in the first place. Our social media team, for making sure people knew who we were. Our associate editors, Meenakshi and Aryaa, who brought incredible energy to the magazine and have proven invaluable in putting it together.

Of course, we could not have done any of his without the constant guidance and patience of our faculty advisor, Dr. Chinmay Sharma. We would also like to thank the Department of English, for engaging with and showing their support for The Freewheeler.

Over the past year, we have tried to make The Freewheeler a space through which people can come together to share and think about writing. Each of our events, reading circles and writing challenges has been in effort of this. We hope it will continue to be such a space for our team, writers and readers.

Warmly,
Ishita and Isha

GUEST



FEATURE

Bangalore Disturbances

Aparna Chivukula

At the LIC building, two groups of schoolboys
cross each other, the game still stuck to their shoes, and
a stray hand, like a tie flying,
calls one back, one forward,
and right there, at the junction, they combust.
From a pulled collar, an elbow cracking,
crawls out the city's heat, its honking,
its phone-flash grammar
fading into the Bible Society's display:
the Word was with God,
and the Word was god —
god muttered in the car
inching down the road.

Suppose you could disturb the city.
Suppose you were a schoolboy upturning an ink pot
over your god, pleading for easy ten-mark questions.
Suppose you were lugging your bagstrap up the shortcut.
In 1928 politicians were watching schoolyards.
They wanted boys who'd readily wring their best friends
on a laundry line if the electricity paused long enough.
Children were always waiting to cross the road.
And people who write wanted to keep writing.
It was just like this.

"Though the disturbances of July 28-30, 1928, a largely schoolboy affair, were not major, and resulted in 'wounds and bruises' not fatalities, it shook the state government and public life of the city. (…) the Bangalore Disturbances revealed how fragile were the networks of camaraderie and religious commingling, so true of the old city, in the face of unchecked rumour and determined exaggeration in the 'vernacular press'. In short, it took effort to produce even that brief disruption."

– from Janaki Nair's 'The Promise of the Metropolis: Bangalore's Twentieth Century' (2005)



FICTION

The Second Quilt

Khadija Rehman

I kneaded the dough a little longer than necessary.

I wetted my palms with water and a few drops of mustard oil, poking my fingers into the mass and wrenching it with a measured strength that tried to imitate the sensuality of a special oil massage. The copy of *Lihaaf* lay open beside the stove, partly hidden under a basket of ripe tomatoes. In the glow of occasional embers, I wondered whether Ismat had really seen the sheen of Begum Jaan's legs as she stretched them out for a massage. Her hands were large and smooth, her waist exquisitely formed—I read further, the words blurring as heat rose around me. Did Begum Jaan tell the truth in the Lahore courtroom that day?

Manto Saheb was outside at dusk, sweeping the verandah, laying the charpai beneath the neem tree, gathering nimkaudi in the folds of his kurta. He believed nimkaudi could cure every ailment and affliction of body and soul. When the Progressives declared they would withdraw support from Ismat and *Adab-e-Lateef* if she herself were diseased with the aberration she wrote about in Lihaaf, I wondered how many nimkaudis it would take to cure her conscience.

I flipped the chapati on the tawa, the sudden heat reminding me of the uneasiness of Ismat's touch on my body. Speaking for myself, if anyone were to touch my body so often, I would certainly rot to death. Did Ismat tell untruths in Lihaaf then?

Ismat and Shahid Saheb had visited Manto Saheb many years ago after Ismat had insisted on meeting me. My initial discomfort around her, as I often felt around strangers, dissipated quickly. We had moved to the zenana, the kitchen, for our feminine conversation, away from the men. Ismat asked me many intimate questions and chided me for blushing. She asked me about my first experience with childbirth—if my hips grew wider, how swollen my lactating breasts became, and if I liked having them touched, if my sweat during pregnancy became intoxicating, and if I enjoyed the hot oil massages post-childbirth. I felt like my mouth had swallowed my tongue. The inquiry made my cheeks turn hot.

She then slithered closer and put her hands on my torso, gliding across with her fingers. I fought the urge to recoil. She claimed she wanted to feel the texture of my stretch marks. She then dipped a finger into my navel, pinching the edge. I had flinched away a little; it was instinctive. The touch was foreign and vulgar, and her breath was hot and moist against my cheek. I tethered to my composure. I told myself hat well-read women simply had different ways.

And her tiny puffy hands moved dexterously over Begum Jaan's body—now at her waist, now at her thighs, and now dashing to her ankles? *Lihaaf* felt eerily familiar now. Begum Jaan's words rushed into my mind again—did Rabbu really exist or had Ismat dreamt her up?

Ismat tried to coax me after my abrupt flinching. She brushed my hair with her fingers, slightly touching my waist. She left some distance between us and sat down on the kitchen floor. She then asked me about my wedding night, whether the sweat made my skin gleam in the dark, if I tasted my own sweat to see how salty it was, and which places I like to be caressed, and if I like my armpits to be licked? My voice quivered when I answered, and she laughed and pressed me for details. When she invaded me with questions, her eyes were piercing and her lips slightly wet. I had concluded that well-read women were routinely intimidating. I answered most of her questions with a blush followed by *tauba tauba*. She would nudge me and break out into laughter.

I was relieved when Manto Saheb had intervened. He had caught slivers of our conversation, and he was furious, disparaging us for the lack of modesty and vulgarity. Ismat had protested noisily and asked Manto Saheb what transgression occurred in our conversation that elicited *chee chee* out of him, and said that there was nothing filthy about what womenfolk talk about. She argued that our conversation was natural and that we both enjoyed it.

But no woman had tried to swallow me like that before.

Manto Saheb's demand for chutney for dinner, along with fried chicken, broke my reverie. I nodded in affirmation. I glanced again at *Lihaaf* after he left—*I woke up one night and was scared. It was pitch dark, and Begum Jaan's quilt was shaking vigorously, as though an elephant was shivering inside.*

On the day of the first hearing in Lahore, Begum Jaan stood before the judge and witnesses with agitated composure. The assembly was glorious; the courtroom brimmed like Mecca during Hajj. Impatient whispers of degrading morality and fallen virtue spread through the room. Ismat sat smug, wavering between mild arrogance and irritation. Shahid Saheb looked drained; these shenanigans did not sit well with him. He was caught in a flood he neither desired nor could stem.

Manto Saheb looked insignificant from a distance, disarrayed, yawning with disinterest. This was the most I had seen of him in a month—at the trial for obscenity. He spent his days drinking with friends and his nights at the kotha. I longed for him, but kept it to myself.

My gaze shifted to the young lawyer beside him. Four *angeethis* burned in the courtroom. He sweated lightly in the Lahorian winter, dabbing his brow, licking his finger to turn the thick pages. Watching beads of sweat trickle down his temples made me thirsty; my body grew hot. It had been very long. Very long. I turned away, coaxing my sinful thoughts into silence.

The witnesses were wild cats, ready to pounce.

Begum Jaan was summoned to the Lahore court on charges of obscenity, alongside Ismat, Manto Saheb, Shahid Ahmad Dehlavi, and the calligrapher. Lihaaf chronicled a non-fictional Begum Jaan—the adopted sister of Ismat's mother, married off to a much older Nawab who had performed Hajj. Ismat had told Sultana; someone at the radio station overheard Sultana; and the news travelled like plague.

Begum Jaan was accused of polluting the

sanctity of our values and culture, of committing forbidden, unnatural acts. Ismat was apprehended for writing and publishing so obscene and unchaste a story.

When the witnesses demanded that Begum Jaan explain and confess her shameless, unmentionable deeds, Ismat rose in protest—against her lawyer's will—and declared that she had neither read nor been taught anywhere that the relationship between Begum Jaan and Rabbu was unnatural or sinful, or that writing about it deserved censorship.

Begum Jaan held a copy of Lihaaf in her hands. She lifted it in the air and spoke to the people in the courtroom with amusement —"Judge Sahib, do you really find any semblance between the Begum Jaan and me described in the story?"

A loud buzz floated across the room. A thorough debate had ensued.

I had not read *Lihaaf* back then.

I put the pot down, drained out the hot water, and began to peel the potatoes as my eyes remained glued to the pages of *Lihaaf*.

Her complexion was marble white, without a speck of ruddiness. Her hair was black and always bathed in oil. I had never seen the parting of her hair, nor a single hair out of place. Her eyes were black, and the elegantly plucked eyebrows seemed like two bows spread over the demure eyes. Her eyelids were heavy and eyelashes dense.

Begum Jaan was tall, as Ismat had described, but the grandeur and mysticism were nowhere to be found. Her skin was supple yet wheatish, her eyes brown, her hair dyed with henna. Even at forty, she could not have been as surreal as Ismat had rendered her.

When a witness conceded there was an inconsistency between the writing and Begum Jaan's appearance, Ismat roared, "Are you insinuating that I lied?"

Begum Jaan guffawed. She measured Ismat like a prey, and spoke again with composure, "Ismat, my child, who was Rabbu? Where did I have the itch no hakim could cure? When did I receive massages with the special oil? If Rabbu was an ugly witch, why would I desire her? Even if all you wrote was true, why did *you* stare at me like that?"

Ismat looked briefly taken aback; she had not anticipated this. She had told us that, alongside Begum Jaan, she would argue that such desires and acts were as natural as any other, and win. After a moment, she gathered herself and spoke with unshakeable conviction: "I remember those nights and those massages, Begum Jaan. You don't have to be scared. They were not obscene or sinful."

The courtroom was hit by a wave of muffled conversations again. Begum Jaan addressed the judge and asked him to reconsider the facts in Lihaaf. She asked Ismat again, "Did Rabbu rub oil on my waist to cure my itch, or did you dream her up?"

Ismat lost her composure and demanded, "Begum Jaan, who was inside your lihaaf then?"

Begum Jaan sighed and said, "Child, your imagination!"

—

Manto Saheb barged into the kitchen. He was drunk again. He asked for fried chicken, chutney, and aloo bharta. I handed him the chutney and followed him to the verandah to

set the meal on the charpai. When I returned, I tucked Lihaaf beneath my dupatta and went back into the room. I did not want dinner; I was hungry for Ismat's truth.

A few years before the summons, Ismat and Shahid Saheb stayed the night at our house. She had brought along a copy of Aslam Saheb's *Gunaah ki Raatein*. It was a cool evening, and we decided to sleep in the verandah. She praised the book into my ears, extolling it in superlatives, telling me it held titillating passages and that she would read them aloud if I wished. I did not know what awaited me. Our charpais lay side by side, and when she saw me shivering in the night breeze, she urged us into the warmth of the kitchen.

Manto Saheb and Shahid Saheb were fast asleep, snoring. Ismat rose stealthily, took my hand, and we slipped from the charpai into the kitchen. She sat close and read in the thin light filtering through the small window. The story burned my insides, filling me with sweet pleasure and shame. I was committing a wrong by listening. After a while, it became unbearable. I asked her to return, but she lit a candle instead and went on. On the wall, her shadow heaved gently, frightening—just as it did in *Lihaaf*. *Once again, the quilt started singing. I tried to lie still, but the quilt assumed such grotesque shapes that I was shaken. It felt as though a large frog was inflating itself noisily and was about to leap onto me.*

After the judge set a date for the second hearing, I studied Ismat's face in silence. It was absent-minded, her thoughts drawing inward. Begum Jaan had preyed on her like a vulture, tearing at her confidence. I was clouded with misapprehensions at first, but now, looking back, Ismat's truths seem to glare at me.

Begum Jaan must have stirred countermemories—what had Ismat deliberately forgotten, and what had she forged?

Shahid Saheb was furious, locked in a heated argument with Ismat, threatening her with divorce. The quarrel spilled out of the courtroom and onto he benches outside. Ahmad Nadeem Qasmi had brought a basket of maltas. As we each picked one to peel, Ismat turned to me and said, "Squeeze it soft, like a mango or a breast. Then pierce a hole and suck merrily." My cheeks burned as she laughed under her breath.

We climbed onto a tonga to explore Lahore. Shahid Saheb was relishing his Qandhari pomegranate juice when Ismat fixed her gaze on Manto Saheb's feet, studying and admiring their tenderness and shapeliness, their feminine suppleness. She had bought a bottle of attar, along with Kashmiri shawls and a box of dry fruits. She spilled a little on her wrist, then bent and rubbed it against Manto Saheb's ankle. He growled and jerked away—"You crazy, pig-headed woman, they shouldn't just summon you, they should sentence you to imprisonment." Ismat guffawed, shrugged with careless ease, and Shahid Saheb grimaced faintly at her distasteful behaviour.

I flipped back to the pages where Ismat had described Rabbu. I found a peculiar semblance of Rabbu's lack of beauty in Ismat's description of her own feet. She called her feet ugly and manly. In Lihaaf, Ismat wrote of Rabbu—Her face was scarred by smallpox. She was short, stocky, and had a small paunch. Her hands were small but agile, and her large, swollen lips were always wet. A strange sickening stench exuded from her body.

When Ismat had gazed upon Hijab Imtiaz Ali, she told me with great zeal how arrested

she was by her light makeup. She wanted to be around her—fly around a jar of honey—and eagerly left us to go visit her house. She said she had a great desire to see the arghanoon, allusions to which were too frequent in Hijab's story. Even though Ismat saw it, she came back unsatisfied. Just seeing the arghanoon was not enough. Ismat was often confused about what she desired.

I remembered Shahid Saheb telling Manto Saheb that he should overlook Ismat's debates and arguments with him. He had mentioned how she used to have fights with her brother and his friends in her childhood. While her other sisters were busy drawing admirers, she fought with any boy she ran into. She fought with Manto Saheb too; it was like cock fighting, but she was always gentle toward me—just like she was toward Begum Jaan.

—

An enormous quarrel had broken out between Ismat and Shahid Saheb after the second hearing. Shahid Saheb's family had written to him demanding answers, asking if he was certain that Dulhan was a woman.

On the day of the second hearing, Begum Jaan had come to the court with her grandson. She stood before the judge and witnesses and stared at Ismat for a minute and spoke—"What made you say that Nawab had opened his house to young boys with firm calves and slender waists, and he had tucked me away in the room? Child, I have a grandson, too. Does this not wash away the mud you slung upon Nawab's masculinity? I ask again, who is Rabbu?"

A torrent of arguments followed. Shahid Saheb looked like a phantom when the witnesses began casting aspersions on Ismat and the falsity of their marriage.

It has been many years since the trial now. The Partition has erased many memories. As I finished reading Ismat's story, I wondered a great deal about it. Who was Rabbu? Was there a *lihaaf* over Rabbu, or had Ismat hidden herself beneath the *lihaaf*?

Was it Ismat Chughtai versus The Crown or Ismat Chughtai versus Ismat Chughtai?

Stick Figures

Urbi Mukherjee

"In another life I would've been a painter, I think," she said, exhaling smoke in a thin, deliberate stream.

The city sprawled beneath them like an overturned jewellery box, all glitter and sharp edges illuminated by the half-light. She sat with her legs dangling off the edge of the roof, nursing a cigarette that was more prop than habit.

He glanced at her, caught somewhere between amusement and disbelief. "No, you wouldn't."

"Yes, I absolutely would."

"You can't even draw stick figures properly." He nudged her shoulder with his own. "Remember that game of Pictionary at New Year's? Three minutes of frantic scribbling and all anyone could guess was 'distressed octopus.'"

"It was clearly a chandelier."

"It had eyes!"

"Those were crystals."

"It had *angry* eyes." He took the cigarette from her fingers and drew a long drag before continuing. "Besides, you'd hate being a painter. You'd need to sit still." She watched as he held the smoke for a beat too long before releasing it. A habit he had picked up from her. She wasn't sure when.

"Maybe I'd be a different person in another life. A patient person. Someone who sees beauty in stillness." She glanced at him. "What about you?"

"A baker."

"Oh, fuck off," Her laugh bounced off the concrete roof and disappearing into the night. "You've never baked anything in your life."

"Exactly. That's the point of another life, isn't it? Being something you're not."

She took the cigarette back. "Fair enough."

Below them, traffic moved in luminous rivers. Someone in the opposite building was having a party—silhouettes pressed against windows, the bass line of a song she felt she should recognize thumping faintly across the void between buildings.

"God, I love being up high," she said, more to herself than to him. "Everything looks manageable from up here. All those tiny problems scurrying about." She pointed her cigarette at the streets below. "Look at them all, rushing home to their tiny kitchens and their tiny arguments."

"And their tiny baking projects."

"Right. And their tiny paintings."

He smiled, but there was something strained about it. "You still haven't told me why you texted."

A plane blinked overhead, distant and silent. She tracked its path across the star-scattered sky. “Do I need a reason?”

“Three months of silence and then ‘Roof. 9pm. Bring wine.’ Yeah, you need a reason.”

She flicked ash over the edge and watched the embers die before they hit the ground. “Maybe I just missed you.”

“Try again.”

“Maybe I'm dying.”

He gave her a sharp look, “Are you?”

“No. But ‘I'm dying to see you’ felt melodramatic.”

He sighed, a sound she used to be able to catalogue—irritated, amused, exhausted, content. This one was new. Or perhaps she'd forgotten the index.

“I got the job in Berlin,” she said finally.

“Ah.”

“I leave next week.”

He nodded slowly, “Congratulations. You wanted it.”

“I did.”

“And you'll be brilliant at it.”

“I will.”

They sat in silence for a minute. The wine bottle between them was nearly empty, though she couldn't remember drinking most of it.

“I made a list,” she said suddenly.

“Of course you did.” His voice was gentle now. “What kind of list?”

“Of all the things I'll miss.”

“And?”

“It's a long fucking list.”

He laughed, and for a moment, they were back in that kitchen two years ago, her sitting on the counter while he chopped vegetables with absurd precision, both of them laughing about something neither would remember the next day.

“Let me guess,” he said. “Proper tea. Your mother's reluctant hugs. That bookshop with the cat.”

“You.”

His gaze snapped toward her.

She continued, desperate to fill the space. “Which is ridiculous because we hardly see each other anymore anyway. So what difference does a thousand miles make when we're already—”

“When we're already pretending we don't orbit each other?” He finished for her.
She stared at him. “That's not what I was going to say.”

“But it's what you meant.”

“Don't tell me what I mean.”

“Sorry. Old habit.”

She picked at a loose thread on her jeans. “In another life, we would have worked.”

His laugh was short, more of a breath than a sound. “Define ‘worked.’”

“I don't know. Moved in together. Got a dog. One of those relationships where you finish each other's—”

“Medication?”

She winced. The reference hung in the air, sharp and unexpected.

“Sorry," he said quickly. “That was—"

“No, it's fine.” She plucked at the thread harder. “We should be able to joke about it by now, right? It's been what, ten months?”

“Twelve.”

“Right. Twelve.”

His face softened. “How are you, really?”

“Better.” She met his eyes briefly. “Much better. The new meds are working. And I have a therapist I don't hate, which is apparently progress.”

“Good. That's good.”

“Sentences,” she said suddenly. “I was going to say ‘finish each other's sentences.’ Not everything is about... *that*.”

“I know. I'm sorry.”

She leaned back on her palms, trying to regain the earlier lightness. “In another life, would we have gotten married?”

He looked at her then, really looked at her, in the way that always made her feel like he was seeing more than she intended to show.

“No,” he said finally.

“Wow. Not even a moment's consideration.”

“We wouldn't have needed to.”

She blinked. “What does that mean?”

“It means,” he said, turning fully toward her, “that in another life, we wouldn't need contracts and ceremonies to prove we were staying. We'd just... stay.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

She leaned back, suddenly aware of how close they were sitting. “And in this life?”

“In this life, you're going to Berlin.”

She nodded, a tight movement. “And you're staying here.”

“I'm staying here.”

A breeze picked up, carrying the scent of someone else's dinner, someone else's life. She shivered.

“Cold?” he asked, already shrugging off his jacket.

“I'm fine.”

He draped it over her shoulders anyway, “Liar.”

The jacket smelled like him—coffee and that ridiculously expensive cologne his sister gave him every birthday. She pulled it tighter around herself.

“You know,” she said, “I almost didn't text you tonight.”

“Why did you?”

“Because I wanted to see if it still hurt.”

“And does it?”

She met his eyes. "Like a bitch."

He laughed, a real one this time, head thrown back. “Always the poet.”

“Painter,” she corrected.

“Right.”

They fell silent again, but it was a different kind of silence now—less tense, more familiar. The silence that used to fill Sunday mornings when neither of them wanted to be the first to get out of bed.

“I have a confession,” he said suddenly.

She arched an eyebrow. “Should I be sitting down? Oh wait, I am.”

“I've been taking art classes.”

“What?”

“For about six months now. Every Tuesday night.”

She scrunched her eyebrows. “You hate art. You said modern art looks like ‘what happens when a toddler discovers espresso.’”

“I still stand by that assessment of that specific exhibition. But I've been learning to draw. And paint, a bit.”

“Why?”

He hesitated, then reached for his phone. He scrolled for a moment before handing it to her.

On the screen was a painting—amateurish but recognizable. Her, sitting at that café they used to go to on Sundays, looking out the window, a half-smile on her face as she watched something on the street.

“Oh,” she breathed.

“I wanted to remember you like this. Not like—" he gestured vaguely between them.

“Like what?”

"Like *that*.”

Her throat tightened. “Can I keep this?” she asked, still staring at the image.

“It's digital. I'll send it to you.”

“Not this, genius. I mean the real one. The painting.”

He looked surprised. “If you want it.”

“I do. Plus, it’s free. And it’s my face, so copyright,” she forced a smile.

She handed his phone back, careful not to let their fingers touch.

“So,” she said, attempting to lighten the mood, “you're a painter in this life.”

“Hardly. I'm a guy who goes to a cheap art class once a week to stare at fruit and occasionally paint people he can't get over.”

The honesty of it knocked the air from her lungs. She'd come here tonight armed with carefully constructed indifference, with practiced casualness, and here he was, demolishing it all with one sentence.

“That's not fair,” she whispered.

“What isn't?”

“Saying things like that when I'm leaving.”

He shrugged, a gesture so familiar it ached. “When has anything about us been fair?”

She didn't have an answer for that. Instead, she looked back out at the city. Somewhere in the distance, a siren wailed.

“Do you remember," she said eventually, “that weekend in the countryside? When it rained the whole time and we had to stay in that tiny cottage?”

“With the leaky roof and the resident mouse you insisted we name?”

“Martin,” she supplied. “We named him Martin.”

“That's right. Martin the Mouse.”

“And we played that stupid board game with the missing pieces—"

“—and made up our own rules.” She smiled at the memory. “That was my favourite weekend.”

“Mine too,” he said softly.

“Why?”

“Because it was just us. No work, no friends, no distractions. No escape routes.”

“No roof access,” she added.

“No midnight trips to the Emergency,” he said quietly.

She stiffened. “I thought we weren't talking about that.”

“We never talked about that. Maybe that was the problem.”

She finished the last of the wine straight from the bottle. “If I asked you to come with me, would you?”

The question seemed to catch him off guard. “To Berlin?”

“No, to the moon. Yes, to Berlin!”

He looked at her for a long moment. “No.”

The simplicity of it stunned her. “No?”

“I can't.” His voice was gentle but firm. “You know I can't.”

“Right. Because of what happened.” It wasn't a question.

“Because I can't be the person who finds you again.” His voice cracked slightly. “I'm not strong enough. I thought I was,

but I'm not."

"But I'm better now," she said, hating the pleading note in her voice. "I haven't had an episode in over a year."

"I know. And I'm so proud of you for that. But I can't—" he took a deep breath. "I still have nightmares about that night. About the bathtub… About how cold your hands were —I—"

She looked away. She could only hear him breathing heavily, the air thick with memories she didn't want to bring up. Not today, at least.

"I am sorry. I never meant to—"

"But you did."

"I'm sorry."

They sat in silence, the weight of shared history pressing down on them.

"It wasn't your fault," she said eventually. "You know that, right? It wasn't because of you."

"I know. That's what makes it worse, in a way. There was nothing I could have done differently."

"So we're just... impossible?"

He smiled sadly. "In this life, maybe we are."

She brushed away a tear before it could fall.

"That's a pretty shit answer."

"It's the only one I have."

She looked down at her hands. "Well, I guess that's that then."

"I guess so."

Neither of them moved.

"In another life," she said suddenly, "I think I would have been brave enough to say what I needed to say before it was too late."

"And what would that be?"

She met his eyes. "That I love you. That I've always loved you. That I'll probably love you in Berlin, and after Berlin, and in every other life where we meet on rooftops and pretend we're just friends."

He smiled, a small, sad thing. "In another life, that would be enough."

"And in this one?"

"In this one, I am a coward who is scared."

The city continued its relentless hum below them. Lights flickered on and off in distant windows—people ending their days, beginning their nights, living their one wild and precious life, like in that one poem she loved.

She took a deep breath. "So this is goodbye, then."

"Not goodbye. Just... see you in another life."

"When we're both painters."

"And bakers."

"And people who don't fuck each other up quite so thoroughly."

He laughed despite himself. "That too."

She stood up, brushing off her jeans. "I should go. Early meeting tomorrow."

"Right."

He stood too, and for a moment they just looked at each other, registering changes, memorizing details.

"Take care of yourself," he said finally.

"You too."

She turned to leave, then paused. "The painting. Will you bring it to me before I go?"

"Yeah. I'll drop it off."

"Thank you."

She was almost at the door when he called after her. "Hey."

She turned.

"For what it's worth," he said, "I think you'll be brilliant in Berlin."

She smiled, a genuine one that felt strange on her face after months of careful expressions. "For what it's worth, I think you're already brilliant here."

A gust of wind swept across the rooftop, sharp and sudden, clanging the metal door shut. He blinked against it, and when he opened his eyes, she was gone.

He pulled his jacket tighter— the jacket that still sometimes smelled of her, though he knew that was impossible.

"In another life—" he whispered. In another life her meds would work. In another life, he would be going with her.

He took a long swig from the wine bottle.



Muck

Arushi Madan

Mira's school bus is brown. It's the only brown bus at her school in a sea of yellow ones. Children of other buses point at it, noses scrunched in mock disgust, tongues out and cackling, when they catch up on the highway outside the school. It's the potty bus.

The faces of the potty bus kids burn red, sometimes; they pretend they cannot see those yellow bus kids. The potty bus speeds, razor-sharp, zooming through the afternoon dust, fleeing in humiliation. Mira complains to Lalita, who is her friend only while they travel in this bus, about the booing kids. I thought we were too old for this, she huffs. Lalita nods understandingly. Her serene, rosy smile, on that perfectly shaped face of hers, does nothing to soothe Mira.

Mohan does not pretend as if he can't see the jeering faces on the other side of the road. He points his thumbs down at them, shaking his head disappointedly. His friends join in, the whole lot of them falling all over each other in the rocky backseats while booing the yellow buses from their window.

Mira thinks back to three weeks ago when some boy had pulled Mohan back by his schoolbag. Mohan's shirt had stretched across his stomach. She had stared at the slight plumpness of his bellybutton contained beneath the straining blue cloth, the white buttons threatening to pop. She had turned away, her stomach warming, something sickly and familiar bubbling.

Mira schools her face, nodding at Lalita's happy spiel about her day. Mohan's voice rings in the back, cuts through the noise. She hates how she can always hear him, how his voice has slowly stopped cracking, how it's rumbly now, but smooth and easy. With a little laugh to it.

The potty bus crawls into the latter half of its route, slowing into the smaller streets, the houses and markets, where the drains overflow and the roads are patchy. In half an hour, the bus is almost empty, the last three survivors of a perpetually overloaded sixty-seater awaiting their turns. Lalita steps off, her hair shining honey-brown in the sun like a halo above her head. Mira waves at her, patting down her own warm head of hair that's turned bristly over the day. She drops into her book.

It's a dangerous book, perhaps, because she had slid out its thin copy from the parent pile in the bookcase at home. She had smuggled it in her backpack, that nobody ever checks, to school. It's time. The potty bus tumbles about, her head resting against the loud, vibrating window. The noise thrums through her body and makes it all subside, makes her heart stay in its place, and if her spine trembles, it doesn't look so strange. She closes her eyes before she can dive in, willing the whiteness of that room, in her memory, to stay back. The largeness of him, the tallness. Big, cold, gentle hands. A stained, threadbare white sweater. Let it all be colour, she implores. Yellows and browns, reds of the houses, greens and blacks of the sewers, blues

and greys of the sky.

Although Mira is an experienced reader of her parents' books, this one takes its sweet time in making sense. It's a politician, a married man with adult kids. His son brings home a girlfriend, an Anna, who entraps the politician into a filthy affair. Mira doesn't want to read on. The lurid way he describes her puts an ache in her limbs, or maybe it's the bumpy road. The pages are crinkly but soft, that middle-aged way a book behaves before it starts wafting off that scent.

Somebody taps her shoulder from the back. She snaps the book shut. It's Mohan. He's lounging across the seat behind her, his feet dangling, trousers pulled up to show his pristine socks.

What? It comes out harsher than she intended. She wishes she were softer. How's it going? He's smiling easy, but there is something in the set of his mouth, or in his eyes.

She tells him about the exhibition results. Math team won.

How unfair, he remarks.

Yeah, well. How was your game?

We smashed them. He's chirping.

Congratulations. She turns away; this must be the extent of them when it's just them. She isn't the signalling type.

Mira, hey. How are you?

She looks at him in bemusement, him smiling in that small way he does to her. It's stiflingly private. Maybe he was messing with her when he asked her that.

And how are you, Mohan?

He is not smiling. A recollection floats, she imagines, from her eyes to his, of what he used to look like hanging on to her in this very bus. They were kids. He could see shapes in the clouds she couldn't imagine.

His stop is almost here. She reopens her book, then ignores it in favour of the window. She can hear him shuffling about, flinging on his bag. She pulls her hair to the sides of her face, patting at her cheeks, cringing at the feeling of grime on her skin. Her hair is in two braids and she hates them. She hates when it's like this.

He barks a bye at her, which she tosses back. The bus screeches to a halt. Something floats down next to her on the seat. Mohan's head is descending out of view, down the bus, his shoes stomping on the metal steps. It's a letter from him.

In the bathroom, at home, Mira shakes open the letter. It's written on notebook paper, rough and thin and grey, tattering at the edge from where he ripped it out. The ink's gone soft from the heat. Mira wipes at her neck, a touch of aggression. She's still in her uniform, damp with sweat.

She tilts the letter into the afternoon sun that beams through the bathroom's tiny window, above the sink. Her eyes rove, lips pressed, heart thumping in her throat. Something of his, only for her; she can hardly believe it.

I know what happened in the staff room, during the exhibition. I won't tell anyone. He is a monster. Talk to me.

His handwriting is pretty as always, she registers, but clunky in places, the pen must have retched. She can distinguish exactly where her body ends and the letter begins, where the perimeters of her skin lie, at her fingertips.

Mira reads it again. She's standing over the sink, so she starts tearing it to bits. She tears and tears till there is much of nothing and turns the tap on. She rubs the bits of paper into pulp, the water washing on her fingers warm and stinging in the summer. It dissolves, as does she.

Mira refuses to attend school the next day. Or the next. She pleads with her father to drive her to school. He doesn't ask her why, but after three days of chauffeuring he drops her back in the potty bus. She clutches her book, which she has made no progress on, refusing to look up.

When Lalita leaves that day, it's blindingly sunny out. Mohan won't leave her alone, she knows. She used to be delighted, secretly, about that. His laugh in the back of the bus with his hordes of friends is now dreadful. There's something of a betrayal there, how he floated from the middle of the bus, where he would nap in the afternoons next to her, to the back. She has never told him. She feels herself stiffen when the bus starts revving, moving from Lalita's spot, carrying none but two kids. He's got her today.

—

Mohan has been waiting, barely acknowleding Braj beside him who has his head in his hands, mumbling about some girl. Mohan struggles with the knot of his tie, loosening it. He flings it out, off his neck, and unbuttons the top of his shirt. There's about ten people left in this fucking bus. He stares at Mira's hunched shoulders, in the front, with Lalita next to her speaking at her animatedly.

His foot taps the floor, rapidly, he lets it run for a minute before reining it in. It's all coming back like bile. Kanha, his teacher. Sir. Tall, with a rotten tooth in the centre of his winning smile, with a wife and a daughter. Mohan could not find him as funny as everyone did, but he had supposed him a good one. A good teacher, kind to students in the way that he never hit them like the others did. Sometimes he was too friendly with Mohan's unmarried class teacher, but she did flirt back. Mohan figured that Sir and his wife probably did not like each other. Pretty usual. Maybe, she didn't like to flirt with him or touch him. Maybe, he wasn't attracted to his wife anymore. Mohan knew that boys in class often chased multiple girls simultaneously, but usually preferred one over the others, the one with the highest-ranked combination of face and body. It never made much of a difference whether she wanted them back, unless she did and was shameless about it. He figured Sir had been one of those boys, a slight cinch in his otherwise shining persona.

Mohan had sat with his teacher in the empty staff room. It'd been a late school day. Mohan had stayed for his exhibition project. Sir's charm was undeniable, an ease in him that could be infectious. The enormity of his frame as he had shifted closer to Mohan, flipping through his file. It lingered even now, in Mohan, the feeling that his memory must be warped, unreliable, hijacked by something vicious and parasitic. It can't be the same man.

Do you know that you are on the brink of life? Oh, dear Mohan. This is the age.

His teacher was in another world, Mohan understood. In the past, or somewhere he could be glorious. Somewhere not this tiny school that flooded with rainwater every year.

He had grown progressively boisterous, making Mohan laugh, remarking that Mohan's Hindi teacher should be an army general. They had laughed together, quietening only when the last bell rang, an evacuation call in the late evening. His teacher had turned to him, standing, and held his shoulders to beckon him up. His hands were heavy. Mohan's body was warm and alive, yet unaware. His heart was aglow, fearless of the future. He couldn't have realised, he wasn't friendly with discomfort. It wasn't until Kanha had strolled out, ten minutes later, that Mohan's frozen body had begun to shiver, to gather itself close.

It feels like forever before Braj steps off, and others, and then Lalita. Mohan has been gulping air from the backseat window, hoping the smell of dust in the air would mix with the dread in his gut and neutralize it.

When it's just Mira and him, he makes his way to the seat behind her. There's a thrill in him at her return. He had almost believed that she wouldn't. Her head is down, the frizz of her hair a soft halo around it. She looks shrunken, possibly trapped in her book. That tattered copy she has been carrying. He had tried to sneak a look at the title on the white cover of it. Mohan sits straight, taking a moment. The parting of her hair at the back of her head is perfectly straight down the middle, but for one clump of hair that has traipsed into the wrong braid. He imagines unwinding the braids, letting them down, making that slight wrongness of the parting disappear. He would snap her hair ties onto his wrist. She would call him a thief. Maybe she would give him that look, if he brushed her neck.

She used to shift as close as possible to the window when Mohan would board the bus, when they were ten. Every day, it was a competition of who could spot the most remarkable things outside the window, so the spot next to it was coveted. She would always win.

The bus shoots and trembles through the dust, past the mandir his mother frequents, twenty minutes from their house. He taps her on the shoulder. He feels like saying sorry.

She turns around, anger radiating from her. He wishes she would scream, or hit, but she simply looks at him, her mouth closed and set. His hands twitch with the urge to hold her by the shoulders across the seat and unlock her out of that stare. To hold her hands, maybe. They haven't touched each other since before they knew what it meant to touch.

She tells him to never write to her, to mind his business. He's arrogant, she says. Presumptuous. He doesn't ask her what that means. She's swearing at him, with the same, firm mouth she uses as the class monitor to snitch on them all for swearing.

He shifts from behind her, where the seat was between them, to the seat next to hers. He's aware, suddenly, of the way he must look, all narrow shoulders and stumbling legs. She follows his move with red eyes. She's going to split at the seams.

So, you read my letter. He tilts his chin up at her. His resolve is breaking.

You should keep your mouth shut about things you know nothing about. Nothing even happened.

He says nothing. It's time. Mohan gently touches his mouth with his fingers, tapping on the bud of them. He puts his hands on his shoulders, then chest, pressing. He skates them down his abdomen, his hips.

He touched me here, all these places.

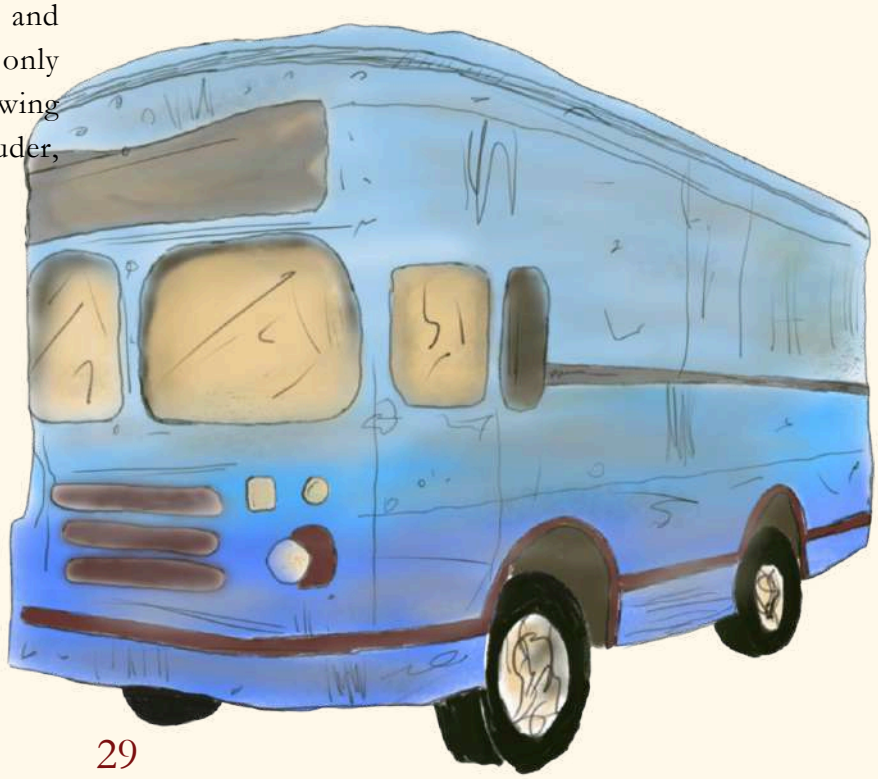
There's a pause before Mira clutches her mouth.

His hand, unwilling, brushes over his crotch, stopping at his thigh. Mira's face is blurring out of his sight. His ears burn.

And here.

Mira is splitting, her sobs tumbling out like cotton from a rag doll. He wills his hands to stop shaking and reach over. To do nothing. He doesn't want to touch her.

She's nodding, her hands beginning to slowly squeeze her waist, hidden beneath her bunched shirt. The tips of her fingers crawl to her chest, brushing at the roundness, and she bows her head, unclean. Mohan can only look at her face, unable to speak, knowing despite himself. The bus is getting louder, bumpier. It's screeching.



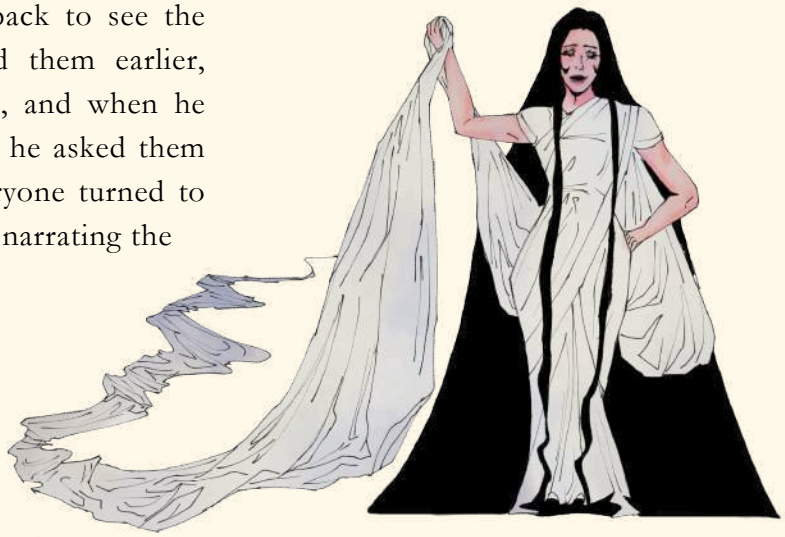
Nine-Yard-Saree Aunty

Diya Rose Denny

The streets were dead silent and looked pitch black as Tapasya stepped out from the verandah of her ancestral house, along with her three older cousins, who were the only reason she was even doing this because they had asked her during dinner if she wanted to sneak out of the house with them after midnight and she had nodded her head doubtfully because she was only ten and was still really afraid of the dark, but she did not want to back out of it because then that would make her look like 'the youngest cousin who was too scared to do anything fun' and so now, here they were, all four of them, in their tracksuits and nightgowns tiptoeing with fingers over their mouths to shush each other as they slipped out of the gate, and they had just walked a little distance on the mud-paved street, when they heard a loud clap which made everyone jump - Tapasya's fingers clasped her sister tightly, while Reshma bumped instantly into Surya who had no jumpscare moment at all yet they slowly turned around to look and saw an old man on a cycle, looming quietly from the dark alley behind them, with a torch fixed in front of his cycle that stopped right in front of them, and in a soft, sharp voice, he told them not to wander about this late at night because it was unsafe for little kids and he chuckled softly and cycled past them into the poorly lit street that stretched ahead and soon after he disappeared into the darkness, Tapasya felt her hands trembling but she didn't dare discuss this with the others because she knew it was best not to bring it up to avoid teasing and so she tried her best to brush it off and followed her cousins who seemed to be largely unbothered by the old man's warning as they went on cracking jokes till they reached a junction which was deserted and brought chills to Tapasya as she glanced at the shops with their walls in rubbles, long steel shutters swaying in the wind and suddenly, cutting through the heavy silence that hung in the air, Surya suggested that they all should go and look around at 'Nine-Yard-Saree Aunty's' house which produced puzzled stares from all of the others except from Reshma because she, like Surya, had heard of the age-old rumour amongst the locals of Thanjavur about the last house on this street being haunted by the ghost of an old lady who wore a nine-yard saree all the time and apparently many locals and tourists had also spotted the presence of the nine-yard saree aunty in the bungalow built on the last plot of the street, and so she was the only one who protested against Surya's quirky suggestion but a bizarre and daring experience was exactly what the others wanted from tonight's sneaking out, so Tarini, who was Tapasya's sister and Surya, paying no heed to Reshma's objections, caught hold of the girls' hands and eagerly walked towards the end of the street where everyone else in this town avoided going to and this ofcourse made Tapasya breathe in longers gasps of air as she shakily followed them because now she knew that the place they were going to had a history of haunting as well, and that did absolutely nothing to soothe her fears, and so she was on the verge of tears when they finally reached the street's end and there they they saw it, the large bungalow looming in the darkness in front of them and it looked like

the epitome of a horror setting described in books or movies, with twisted dark green creepers adorning the walls, barren leaves swaying against the wind, broken glass-windows with yellow stains on them, a rusted swing creaking on one side, while the brown leaves on the ground rustled and made its way to the open courtyard which lay isolated at the centre of the plot, and this very sinister scene in front of them made Tapasya tremble even more as she felt her heart beat faster and it took everything in her to not say she wanted to leave, so she clung onto Reshma as Surya and Tarini quietly walked towards the decaying, tall iron gate which swung open with a loud and long screech when Surya unlatched it and pushed it open, but as soon as they walked through the open gates and stepped into the so called haunted plot, they heard the sudden sharp howls of dogs nearby and the insane timing of it certainly did alarm Tapasya but even this did not set the others off because they did not believe in ghosts and so they walked forward, towards the open courtyard, beyond which there was a long dark verandah and an open door which lead to another open space with small rooms arranged circularly around it and a spiral staircase on the left side, leading to the top floor which looked more secretive than the rest of the house, but this cryptic and abandoned layout of the bungalowproduced no worry in any of them except in Tapasya because the rest of them were engrossed in the jokes Surya was cracking, as they crossed the courtyard and stepped onto the verandah which looked a bit dusty, and eventually led to Reshma sneezing that echoed in the walls and they all giggled more as they went further inside through the door and Tarini led the group, first to the room on the left, which had a single cot, buried in dust and cobwebs, and a wooden chest next to it, which caught everyones' attention and they all rushed into the room to check it out except Tapasya and Reshma who were walking at a slower pace and they had just reached the entrance of the room,when Tapasya froze and stood still, gasping for breath and gripping at Reshma's hand so tight that her nails were digging into Reshma's flesh which made her cry in pain and when she turned quickly to snap at her, she saw Tapasya's unmoving, open mouthed face gaping at the spiral staircase and that's when she saw her too - an old woman dressed in a white nine-yard saree with long black hair slicked back, cold eyes and mouth closed to a grim line who was also staring back at them with her piercing gaze like she was about to devour them all but the worst detail about her was that she did not have feet and so it looked like she was floating at a decent height above the steps with her killer gaze and pale face which made Tapasya want to scream but she was not able to and just when she thought that she might pass out, she heard the others come out of the room, so nonchalantly, as they walked to the next room to explore and it was quite funny how they hadn't noticed neither Reshma and Tapasya standing like statues, nor the 'nine-yard saree aunty' looming above them on the other side of the hall and mysteriously enough, as soon as the others entered the next room,the ghost had disappeared into thin air but Tapasya and Reshma were still shook and wanted to leave this place as soon as possible so they gathered every ounce of courage left in their souls, yanked the others out of the room with force, shut their ears to every word of protest that came out of the others' mouths and rushed as fast as they could towards the gate and only after all of them were outside the plot, did they tell the others what they saw and this produced different reactions in them-Surya rolled his eyes and smirked but Tarini looked pretty

concerned even if not fully convinced, and while this was happening, little Tapasya looked over her shoulder and swept her eyes across the big bungalow one last time and there she saw it again- a pair of long and saggy slender hands clenching at the rusted iron rods of the window overlooking the street but that was all she could see - no face, no body, no feet but that was enough and so she ran, ran away from her cousins, the bungalow and the 'nine yards saree aunty' as fast as her legs could take her and while this happened Reshma turned to see what Tapasya had seen and once her eyes fell at the window, she screamed loudly and ran as well but Surya and Tarini, the older cousins of the lot, looked amused and joked about the 'ghost', and it was only when they looked back at the bungalow that they began trembling too because they saw it this time - the pair of hands still clenched at the iron rods, and their eyes widened and they felt chills go down their spine until finally Surya screamed 'run' and they ran for their lives screaming and shouting as loud as they could and very soon they caught up with Tapasya and Reshma who had stopped at a distance and were now standing there with their hands on their hips, their faces still pale, catching their breath, and as soon as they all got back together they heard the ring of a cycle bell and turned back to see the same man who had warned them earlier, cycling slowly towards them, and when he saw them looking breathless, he asked them what had happened and everyone turned to look at Tapasya so she began narrating the story right from the very beginning as best as she could and slowly felt tears forming in the corner of her eyes when she remembered how terrified she had been and when she reached the part where she had seen the 'nine yards saree aunty' on the spiral stairs, she stopped suddenly because she felt that the others would laugh at her again and call her a 'baby' but the man prompted her to keep going and she looked into his eyes and went on to describe everything she had seen, without leaving any detail, and she realised that the more she talked about it, the less she trembled and by the time she reached the end of the story, her voice had stopped wavering, as she described the pair of hands she had seen at the window before she ran off, and as soon as she finished the story, Surya slowly came forward and hugged her tightly, whispering a soft 'sorry' and Tapasya's eyes were filled again as she felt the others join in, one by one and they all stood like that for a while.



A Very Relaxing Normal Easy Day

Vanalee Saharia

Sumita did not want to meet Aryaman. Her boss had scolded her, her male colleagues had assumed she, the resident woman, should supply coffee at meetings, and she desperately wanted to bed-rot. Aryaman could bear to wait one day but no, this princess had sicked her mother on her.

Sumita, we give you a lot of freedom. We bear that you break our heart and live far away in Delhi. We find you a nice Kayastha boy from Delhi. He's willing to put up with you. All we ask is that you treat your to-be-husband with respect, and you fail at that. Your father and I raised you better. We are disappointed.

Warmly,
Mrs. Sinha

Her mother kept writing texts like emails, despite Sumita and her brother's attempts at educating her. She also lost the urge to mask her casteism as she aged, so now everyone had to deal with messages like this. Sumita shut her eyes to the world for a second, breathed the disgusting, smoky Delhi winter air until her lungs felt uncomfortably full and cold and just sick enough to remind her of her mortality, and checked Aryaman's chat.

babe

Why did he call her that?

i get that ur busy

He did *not*,

but I need my sumita time.
ma was asking me how its goin wit us
i rly wanna tell her smthing good

How convenient. He left her no choice.

I'll meet you at 8 for dinner, is that fine with you?

His reply was instant.

whatever u say goes, babe :)

Dinner was always at Sumita's place. She cooked, because Aryaman couldn't. He thought everyone should know how to cook, but his family believed it was a woman's job and she could cook, so, wouldn't she please be understanding and cook him a meal? Of course she could why not it was the least she could do! He did so much for her he paid for their dates he bought her presents he didn't mind her dark sorry wheatish skin why wouldn't she cook infact she lovedcooking for him it gave her purpose she'd cook for him forever why wouldn't she –

Chants of the Gayathri Mantra from the doorbell her mother had picked out brought her back. Aryaman.

His highness, dressed in his ridiculous grey corporate suit, entered her apartment and immediately grinned. He had brought booze, his only contribution to their meet ups, because women of "good homes" did not line up outside *thekas* (they didn't even drink post marriage, how delightful). He

always brought red wine, not white, because red went "best with meat" even though they were eating chicken, not red meat, never red meat. She often wondered how beef would taste. Never out loud, though.

Dinner was fine. Aryaman prattled to fill any lulls. It was the *post*-dinner cleaning that she dreaded.

He never helped with the dishes. This time, he was *pretending* to rearrange trinkets in her living room. Sumita observed him for a while, scowling, as he examined her generic, 99 Store buddha statue. Would moving it make the *complex* and *cerebral* layout of her 500 square foot musty rental more Bauhaus?

Her stomach clenched, "Aryaman, could you help me dry the dishes?"

He would refuse, obviously. What an ass, acting like he *cared* about her when he couldn't even do the dishes for one godforsaken meal. The knife in her hands felt so cold, so smooth and she was squeezing the handle –

"Sorry babe, the Vaastu here is wrong, let me fix it."

Vaastu. He couldn't come up with *anything* better. Like her mother hadn't already barged in and turned every old couch to the east and bed south or *whatever* and now this asshat of a man whose lap she had pushed Sumita into was using Vaastu to get out of drying dishes not even washing just drying dishes and it was so cold and her hands were freezing and so prune-y and ceramic plates were slippery okay and expensive what if she dropped one of them? Her hand would bleed and the entire set would become unusable and she'd have to redo the dishes because of the blood and this *idiot* man would *never* help her even if her hands bled and –

"Hey," where had Aryaman appeared from, "what are these tears about?"

Her hand came up to her face. Wetness.

"Hey hey, don't touch your eyes with soapy hands," he looked so delighted, "Let's wash your hands first. Chop chop."

She washed her hands, because Aryaman was looking at her so expectantly, and he led her away from the dishes and onto a dining chair.

"You find dishes so hard to do babe?" he was *still* smiling when *she* was teary, "I'll hire a maid babe, you don't have to worry about the money. Women from good families shouldn't do all this anyway."

"I can afford domestic staff, Aryaman," her voice sounded thin, *pathetic*. But he looked funnier, eyes blaring confusion at her like a tree frog.

"Then why do we do the dishes all the time?" How easily taken credit for the chore! *We*!

"Because I don't want to pay someone to clean up the mess I've created."

Aryaman, the audacity, laughed, and then said, in all the good humour of the world, "Then I'll buy you a dishwasher, Ms. Philosopher. No need to break down. The wine is making you so emotional."

He meant well, she was sure, but he was coming closer. His thigh was pressing the fat

of hers that spilled over her chair, and he didn't even notice because he was busy buying imaginary dishwashers. And now his hand was moving stray hair out of her eyes. He was leaning in. Holding the back of her chair. *This* time he would kiss her, she knew, even though every other time he'd leaned in halfway and then stopped, but this time he was looking into her eyes, and she felt anticipatory heartbeat thumping in her fingertips.

Then he rested his head against her shoulder.

He was saying something, "adorable," "squishy," but Sumita wanted to convulse like a dog. Why did he *act* like a gentleman? Why did he *pretend* to different from *every other man*? She wasn't oblivious, she had eyes. She saw the way his jaw clenched when she jumped, the way his fingers fluttered towards her when she bent down, the way he ogled when she walked away, but he wouldn't *come out* and *take* what he so *clearly* wanted. Their parents had matched them, it was socially sanctioned sexual tension, no need to play parts when they both clearly knew the endgame.

"Our children will be adorable," he had moved to her ear, and apparently his idea of *seduction* involved *children*.

"It's getting late, Aryaman." If he wanted to *flirt* by reminding her of childbirth, of her body twisting and contorting, then he could just go home.

That shook him to his senses. "Yes, this is inappropriate."

They took the lift down and he graciously told her to not step out into the smog. She returned to her bad-Vaastu apartment to finish the dishes.

Our children. He *kept* mentioning children. Childbirth loomed over her like an unwanted companion, like danger. Randomly, throughout her day, she felt phantoms deforming her body, inflating her womb and splitting her apart to emerge, bloody and gory, into the world, leaving *her* hollow, and oh, the man's genes rotting inside her forever, becoming part of her or *taking away* parts of her because her body wasn't just hers it was something else's *home*.

Sumit*a*. That extra letter, with the weight of breasts and ovaries. Could her parents have made it more obvious that they wanted a boy, not this disappointment with a vagina? And now they wanted to surrender her to the first man who didn't hate her and expected her to bow in gratitude. Her multiyear penance to transform into the next best thing, an ideal daughter, the ideal woman meant nothing. Her monthly bleach treatments were not enough. The weight of her long hair was not enough of an offering of beauty, of femininity.

Frantic eyes darting across the room came across kitchen scissors, sitting right there. The front of her hair was out of her braid. She could… cut it. She could reduce the weight on her head. Straight across. Bangs. A harsh line, a boundary, against her body.

She rushed across the apartment to the bathroom and looked into the scratched mirror. Her hair fell below her waist. Now it would hang like a shield before her eyes.

The scissors were bold in her hand. Cut across the cheekbone, hairstylists said, so she set out, pinching to locate the bone beneath all the layers of flesh and fat. The circular

curve of her cheek hid all bones. And her forehead looked so little.

She circled a finger across the temple. The skin was dark and splotchy. There was no angle to the face, everything pudgy and small like a muddy ping-pong ball.

A straight line. Cutting across a ping-pong ball.

She imagined it, the padded body, like stacked circles, with straight cut bangs.

No one in good conscience would give it bangs. *She* wouldn't give it bangs.

What could she do anyway? She could hug the body, the body that she owned and lived in and tell it to breathe, it's okay, bangs just weren't for her. There was hope, yes, so much hope even for the face in the mirror. The blurry, disgusting face in the mirror, with dark circles and acne scars, with beady red eyes and snot on the upper lip, yes, she'd find something good, something better, something just hers, and everything would be beautiful and nothing would hurt and –

She could not bear to look at the mosaic of tears and mucus in the mirror anymore. Sumita closed her eyes and turned away.



Kite-Fishes

Jayasuchita Jayakumar

"What would you rather be, caged bird? A blind, blind birdie, or a birdie with broken wings?"

The Royal Fool's jaunty voice sounded more distinct than before, so she must be getting closer. The squeals of excited children sounded through the crisp air, lacing it with warmth. The smell of mooncakes was in the breeze, drifting from all the carts lining the road to the lake, she supposed. Taro, durian and red bean paste fillings, each note landing differently on her tongue.

A loud sound rang out over all the din, pulling her out of her reverie. The third last gong had been sounded. Her palms choked the kite, the matter at hand suddenly seeming unavoidable – unavoidable it had always been, but it dawned on her like the crash of the gong that she would have to do it with her own hands. Someone pressed into her from behind, and she shuffled forward, keeping with the slope of the ground.

"*Effano*!" someone swore ahead of her, the thick curling of the word marking an accent not from around. From experience she knew the capital was swarming with outsiders from all over, gathering for the festival. As a little girl, she and Hal would steal away from his chaperones under the cloak of the night. He would charm their way to a few free mooncakes, she would giddily slide and clasp his sticky fingers with her own, amazed at how his words looped so musically.

Then as they made their way to the lake, she would pick out words floating about them and ask him to say them. He would mimic them to life, stomping and grunting along with certain words, whispering some of them, close very close, whirling her round and round with others, his voice never fully able to lose the elegant twist to it. Through it all, he held her hand.

"*Effano*!"

She started to let the string of the kite slide along her fingers, something to meet her hands, something to calm her. But no, that was not possible, the kite was meant for someone else. Nothing would stay her hand, of that she was certain. The resolve that had set her plan in motion had hardened to crust, but the same resolve was stretching her skin taut, clinging painfully as something tried to pry it away.

She followed the sound of splashing to the lake, hurrying, arms stretched to shove away all those in her path. She pushed past squeaking children chasing each other with their kites, past vendors peddling kites – "Have you ever seen a deal as good? Three for the price of one, sir!" – past guards haggling outsiders for permits. The shorn verses of a well-worn folk-song danced around her.

Hey-oh-yee-hey,

We are the kite makers,
Hey-oh-yee-hey,
We make thee for our stars…

The breeze brought snatches of the earthy and salty lake to her, engulfing her on all sides, and for a moment it felt like the lake could be anywhere. She froze, all the scents and sounds and accents blurring. The many merry voices chorusing the song, beats of the hand drums, strums of the banjo, all the whooping and hollering…. all this noise had always been too much for her, spinning her out to cast for sense helplessly. It was when the music would start up that Hal and her would leave all the festivities behind, and head to their cove by the lake. Hal had just as much reason to get away, his chaperones would be on the lookout for him, but the cove was mostly to protect her from the racket. He had discovered it on one of his earlier escapades. From the distance, soundless except for some splashes, some creaking toads and his beating heart, he'd tell her of the hundreds of kites sailing through the twilight, star-flung sky. She'd close her eyes and simply listen. To how the last dregs of day bled into the far edges of the lake, lighting up the colorful kite-fishes swimming about. And whenever she thought of light, she'd think of him. Of when she'd traced his mouth, pressed her lips to his and discovered that he had a grin that was just shy of uncouth.

Hey-oh-yee-hey,
We saw and sew and stitch,
Hey-oh-yee-hey,
May the stars be with us…

Where are you, Hal?

The second last gong sounded. She stirred, turned toward the crash and started in that direction.

Strings caught at her wrist and entangled in her hair, but she shrugged them off and kept her pace. She had to reach before the final gong…

She stepped on something soft and bumpy – "Watch where you're going, miss!" – and realized, quilts, thank her lucky stars, she'd reached the lakeside quilts. Beyond the quilts where the audience were gathered was the Flyer's Arena. Panting and out of breath, she rushed to the arena and found a spot amidst excited voices and hushed conversations. About a hundred people took part in the official kite flying competition, not counting the hundreds of others that wandered about the festival grounds with their kites coasting high.

She unwound her kite, her fingers trembling. This was it, once the kite rose to the sky, there was no turning back. A chill rushed down her spine, her heart picking up speed. She had to do this, she would do this.

"THE EMPEROR WHOSE REIGN IS BLESSED BY THE STARS HAS ARRIVED!"

Shuffles erupted all around her, followed by soft thuds. It took her a moment, her fingers tightening around her kite, but she went to her knees slowly. Sharp shards of anger cut through her hesitance, her nails digging into her palms. Long live the Emperor! echoed until the final gong was sounded.

She gritted her teeth as she stood up, heat pounding at her temples. The competition was the way to the Emperor. The Emperor was the way to Hal. Her kite ascended to the sky, whistling on its way up.

The competition commenced to the harmony of whistling kites taking to the sky.

Hal would groan and shift his weight when she settled in his silken lap. She'd elbow him in the ribs, because how rude! He'd chuckle and slide his arms around her as he taught her to carve a slit into the top of a dried gourd. It took them more than ten days to make, a whistling kite. To size the kite. To frame the kite with bamboo strips of the same length and thickness. To cover the frame with fabric. To make dozens of whistles out of dried gourds and attach them to the kite. Why me, she'd ask as they carved the whistles. Her kind lived in the space that the ever-rising buildings spared. Her kind were like the wind, registered when passed by but not remembered for too long. She was born of kitemakers, not those who were revered for the sanctity of their art like back in the day, but those who were as much shadow as they were bone. Courtesy of the Emperor. Hal was a star, she was a kite that could only hope to reach the sky. Why me, she'd ask again. He'd turn her in reply, and kiss her. Let her slide her fingers into his thick, messy hair. When she'd attempt to trace his features or his torso, he'd dance away, laughing, teasing. Darting across the lakeside moor, whistling kite up in the air, leaving her to chase him with her own.

Her kite whooshed through the air, in trills and tweets, cutting down yet another rival kite. "*Efanyo*!" How many more kites were up there, she couldn't tell. Led by the whistles, she glided her kite, left, right, up and down, weaving and dodging, swiveling and cutting. One by one the kites gave away like water to the stern of her sailing kite. The royal decree that mandated whistling kites only be allowed in the competition had made her impossible dream come true. Her kind deigned a second glance, took presentable shape and flourished on New Year's Eve. Kites were symbols of salvation, conduits for worship. They coasted the closest to the sky, where the star deities resided. And now she could partake too, sending her prayers and wishes up to them.

She was getting closer and closer to the Emperor, she could tell from the Royal Fool's cheery voice. "Tell me, Sire, were you a caged bird, would you rather be blind or have your wings broken?"

A knotted ball of anger and distress lodged in her throat. She locked her elbows and her knees to quell the trembling in her limbs. The kite moved flutily up above as though it responded to her mind and not muscle – it must be flying through her lucky stars. The inevitable task was reckoning, she was careening toward it, she must not stop, she would not be betrayed by her reluctance…

Heart pounding furiously, she battled a kite that chirped like a dozen birds. Her mind raced. All that was left to do was direct the kite toward the Emperor. All she needed was one word from him. It would be quick work after that, looping around his neck and slicing clean, like string through a mooncake.

Bile rose up her throat and she stumbled into a crowd of bodies.

Hands slammed into her back. "Get away from the Emperor!" a guard barked.

She had the sickening feeling of falling before a pair of arms curved around her. A calm, elegant male presence surrounded her, long strands of his hair tickling her cheek.

"Sire?"

Instinct took over and she seized her chance. Slipping free from his grasp, she looped the string around his neck, careful not to press too hard. The move put them in an awkward position, her holding on to the loop in front of him and him bending his neck toward her.

"This is *manja*" she warned, pretending to tighten the string, as she heard the guards scrabble to reach for her.

The clamoring noises paused.

She could hear the Emperor's breathing, steady and unaffected. She was certain he heard the terrified beat of her heart, her panting breath. She fought the urge that screamed at her to run.

A cool voice commanded the guards, "No one will lay a hand on her."

"But Sire…"

Whatever gesture he made shut that voice up.

"Do not follow us. This is a matter best resolved by myself."

Half by herself, and half led by him, her in a daze and him in that awkward bend, they trudged away from the competition grounds, the festival. Whispers and cries of shock followed them as they passed through, ebbing away the closer they got to the cove. He easily dislodged her with a twist of his wrist once they reached and stepped- one, two…ten steps – away from her.

She snapped out of her daze, mind finally catching up. The kite was still in her hands. It took her two tries to swallow the dryness in her throat.

"Hello, Halazer."

The grass brushed her ankles, a nightingale cooed nearby.

"Or perhaps I should address you as Crown Prince Halazer? Sire? The Emperor blessed by the stars?"

Hal had a gift for pressing silences to submission. For all his sounds that shimmied up to her, his chuckles, his laughs, his imitations, for all his talking, he had shared very little about himself.

A short breeze ruffled her hair. The silence stretched between them, strained and unfamiliar, a fraying tether on her end. Her ire cooled, and she realized she was tired, so very tired and alone.

"Hal?" she whispered, "Hal, I can't see you."

Two tense moments passed. Then, "Hello, *Astrea*." In that urbane voice of his.

She drew a sharp breath. "Don't call me that."

"You tried to murder me. Forgive me for taking some liberties" he answered in a neutral tone.

A snort of laughter escaped her. "Hardly" she retorted. "I was testing something."

A twig snapped, a boot stepped toward her.

"If you really do die in your enemy's arms if shot by your lover."

He sighed, a sound suspiciously close to resignation. "I am not your enemy, Astrea. Whatever has caused that assumption, I had no part in it."

In that instant, she desperately wished she could see the expression on his face as he uttered those words. The tether snapped. "How could you lie so shamelessly? You've left us to rot, extorting tithe after tithe!"

His chuckle was pinched. "Don't give me too much credit, love. That would be the work of my father."

She knew that, of course she knew that, but it changed nothing. His family were still a blight upon her kind. At the mention of his father, though, the late Emperor, she stiffened.

He must have noticed. "Ask what you really want to, *Astrea*."

"How could you not tell me you were the Crown Prince?" she croaked, "How could you not tell me that he–…" The day she accidentally happened upon the split at his temple, the raised scars on his torso and back was branded in her memory.

His silence returned.

Tears burned her eyes. The loud, wild boy from her memories was gone. Or perhaps he had never really been that. Perhaps that was all he had let her see.

Her knees gave out beneath her, the kite slipping from her fingers.

His reply was quiet, gentle. "It's alright, love. It's all in the past now."

The crunching of grass signaled another step.

"Come closer, Hal" she whispered, her voice thick.

Tender breeze lifted up the kite, its whistles' musical notes dying on the wind as it came down. His arms closed around her.

She took her time reacquainting, tracing his features, the dips and curves, the sharpness that age had lent him. His hair now reached his shoulders, tame and smooth.

"Is it really true? Are you engaged to marry that princess?"

He chuckled, his tone light, teasing. "I was not aware that was an offense worth being murdered over."

She elbowed him in the gut. He threaded his fingers through her hair.

The quiet now was the quiet of their cove nights.

"Did you ever imagine an us, outside of secret coves and whistling kites made in the dark?"

He let the silence sit long enough that she was surprised by his answer.

"At a certain point, New Year's Eve was all that was worth living for."

She curled her fingers into his chest, the tips resting against his scars.

"And what about now? Where does all this

leave us?"

His sigh rustled her hair. "I'm as unsure as you, *Astrea*, but of one thing I'm certain. One does not marry a princess when one could have a star."

In the distance, across the lake of kite-fishes, the Royal Fool riddled.

"What would you rather be, caged bird? A blind, blind birdie, or a birdie with broken wings? Never know nothing of flying, nothing of the world and always come back home? Or know the taste of freedom, want for freedom and always run away from home?"



Kaltana

Samya Puranik

"*Idella tumba agtaane irutte kanro; report fill maadi, late bere aagide, naale nodteerante*," Thimmappa muttered carelessly as he passed the form across the table as he thought about just how many phones get stolen in this city. At this point, there are probably more phones than people in Bangalore, he thought. "One fellow will have three phones – one personal, one for office, and one for girlfriend; *amele yaavdo* waste *mundedu* will steal off, so he will buy one more! Daily minimum ten phones will get stolen, in one area only. Waste fellows, those *kallru*."

Two teenagers stood there, restless and worried. The girl reached out for the paper as she said, "Please sir, help us out. I am only a student. Kannada – I don't know so well. I stay alone here, I need my phone sir. Please sir."

"Naan en madlamma? What I can do? *Avugalo, bike mele hatti ishtabandaur kayyinda kithkotare; neev ibbru bere valle party ge hogohange ready agidira! Ishtu rathri bere, maneg hogbek antha gottilvamma?* It is late no, why you didn't go to home?*"*

Kids these days, he wondered; "Roaming in shady parts of the city with costly phones and all. Anyway. what for them? Their parents will buy one more costly phone. Full *kaas parties* only."

"Sir, please call this number if you get any information. I will keep trying to call my number. I'm all alone here sir, please help me. Thank you so much sir," Nayana said as she handed Thimmappa a piece of paper that she scribbled her roommate's number on.

"Ha amma. Okay, okay!! They will remove the sim card also pa. You try. We see how much we do *antha. Sari na? Manege hogi ivaga. Nodkolana. Phone ae taane, appa kodustare bidi. Ond eradu dina selfie-gilfie togolakkagalla ashte*!" he chuckled like he made the joke of the year; like she was going to laugh and feel better about having lost her phone in a city she lives all alone in.

The night rolled into day and Thimmappa showed up at the station at 9pm after his heavy Donne Biryani meal followed by a nap. "*Thimmappa, makklu bandidru. Yaavdo phone case anthe*? Red cap *haakidnanthe*. Blue stars. *Neen handle madtidya*?"

"*Hu maga. Yaavdo phone case-u. Hogatte baratte. Makklu tale tintare. Bitbidu*." If only Nayana knew how seriously they did not take the case, she'd show up to the station and start doing their work for them.

The dusty cream-colored clock soon struck 1 am as Thimmappa yawned, his mouth opening wider than the size of his face. "*Nam hendthi basari saar. Avalna oorige karkondhoytaydini ivattu belagge."* He waited for saar to say something. *"Ivattu bega hogboda saar? 2'o clock horadteeni? 6 ghante bus ide saar. Majestic alli Airavata bus alli karkond*

hogbeku saaru."

Thimmappa would never ask *saar* for any favors or requests. But his pregnant wife gave him an earful for never standing up for himself. "Constable *neevu*! *Kelsadaur alla*. You are gornament employee just like sir. Leaving early one day will not do anything. *Muchkond bega banni*."

"*Huun sari kanla. Hendathi na sarig nodko. Maduve aagi* 3 years *aaytha*?" "*Illa saar*, 2 years."

"Ok, Ok. File all reports. Then you can leave."

Sailaja and Thimmappa had a 6-year age gap. Sailaja's older brother was in Thimmappa's class when they studied in the government school; and they were pretty close, too. Sailaja always laughed at Thimmappa's jokes. She always put *mallige* in her two little braids when she knew Thimmappa was coming home. As the years rolled by, childish stares and giggles that were one-sided and unrequited became passionate glimpses that they caught of each other without being busted by Sailaja's family. They'd sneak off to the *pettige angadi* at the edge of town from time to time for some privacy, and soon, they were in love.

"*Appa nanige Thimmappa ishta. Preethi madtidini*," that was the last thing Sailaja told her father. The next morning, Sailaja and Thimmappa ran off to Bengaluru and got married in the Veeranjaneya Swamy Temple. She tried to call her brother but he never answered her calls. She tried calling them once every week and after a couple months, she stopped.

Thimmappa wanted to take Sailaja home in an AC bus. No AC bus went to Bargur. All AC busses from Bengaluru were non-stop that went straight to Hassan, but Thimmappa had a solution. His friend Janak was a KSRTC bus driver that drove the Airavata to Hassan at 6 am every other day.

"Help *maadappa*? *Nan hendthi basari kanla*. Junction *hathra nilsko*, *Yogi jeep tartaane allinda*. Please *kano*." "*Sari bido! Neen kelad hechho, naan madadu hechho? Ashtu madakkagalva nange*?"

His plan was in order. If he left the station by 2 am, he'd reach home by 2:30. Sailaja had already packed. He would take a small nap and wake up at 4 am, get ready, and by 4:45, they would leave for Majestic Bus Stand.

"*Appa en anthro*… He seemed happy on the phone. *Baydidre saaku Thimmu*. I'm happy to go home. *Annange phone hachhi kodri, please*?" Sailaja walked with a jump in her walk. It was 5:15 am and they were walking amidst the bustling Majestic market, trying to swerve, not get hit by moving motorists. There was garbage here and there but they knew where they were going. Thimmappa grabbed the blue and red duffel bag in his left hand as he reached into his pocket. He was happy to be seeing Sheshu. His best friend. His phone number never changed. He grabbed his phone to dial the number when ZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZAH!

He felt someone push his neck and grab his hand. Before he realised he saw two men riding away on a bike. His phone was gone. The pillion rider wore a red cap with blue stars on them.

"Thuuu Nim Janmakke!"

YOUNG WRITERS



The Doctor's Escapade

Adrita Todker

It was a sunny day. However, as soon as dusk arrived, heavy storm clouds rolled in, swallowing the light. I had just seen off my last patient at the clinic and started my journey back home. After a couple of minutes of driving silently through the winding country roads, I noticed the first heavy drop of rain hitting my windshield.

Soon, it started pouring. The world outside turned into a blurry, grey smear. All I could see were the last rays of sunlight fading completely into the darkness. The car radio was switched on, but the music barely reached my ears over the rhythmic thumping of the rain and the occasional boom of thunder.

Suddenly, my headlights illuminated a silhouette on the side of the road. I squinted through the cascading water. It looked like a man, drenched and standing completely still. What was anyone doing out here in this weather? I wondered.

I wondered whether I should lend him a hand. I tried to get a good look at his face, but his head was entirely covered by a thick raincoat hood. He looked miserable and was caked in mud. I stopped my car beside him, guided by empathy and pity for his situation. I then leaned over and gestured for him to get inside. He looked instantly relieved and opened the door. As he stepped in, a strange metallic smell filled the car, mixed with the scent of wet earth. A sudden tingling struck the back of my mind—a bizarre sense of déjà vu. I felt as if I knew this man, but I quickly dismissed the feeling.

"Who are you? What are you doing out here?" I asked, sparing a quick glance away from the dark road. He had pulled the raincoat hood back, but the poor lighting cast deep shadows over his features. All I could make out was his jet black hair and dark complexion.

"My name is Barry. I'm a farmer," he replied in a husky, low voice, ending with a small, dry chuckle. "I own the land about two miles south of here. I had some extra work today, so I told my wife to take the jeep and go home. Thought I could walk home... didn't expect the sky to break open like this."

Something about the way he muttered the name Barry sent chills down my spine. This was a ridiculous coincidence.

"Where do you want to go? I can drop you," I inquired, trying to steady my voice.

He scratched his heavy stubble, his hand moving in a slow, mechanical rhythm. "If it's not much of a bother, could you drop me at the Rhys Crossing? My house is just round the corner from there."

"No, it's no bother at all. I'm Kyle, by the way," I said, forcing a polite smile.

"Nice to meet you, Kyle," he murmured, turning his head to stare out the side window.

As we drove, the silence in the car grew heavy, suffocating. My mind kept drifting backward, pulled under by the sheer weight of that name. Barry. It was the nickname of my best friend, Bartholomew Mortem. Just thinking of him brought a familiar, phantom ache to my temples. I reached up, my fingers absentmindedly tracing the thick, jagged scar running along my hairline, a permanent parting gift from the horrific car accident three months ago. Bartholomew hadn't survived it.

It had been a dark, rainy day just like today. Barry had warned me against driving in such hazardous weather, begging me to pull over and wait until the cascading water stopped blocking our vision. I hadn't listened, stubbornly thinking I knew better. And he had paid the ultimate price for my arrogance.

Everyone told me I was lucky to walk away from the wreckage, but ever since that night, my memory had been fractured, filled with frustrating blanks that I constantly struggled to fill in. I shifted my gaze over to the silent stranger sitting beside me. Bartholomew had always loved the rain. He used to say these country roads were at their most beautiful when it poured.

"Did you ever know a man named Bartholomew?" I asked aloud, the question slipping out before I could stop it. "He lived near the south ridge."

The stranger didn't turn around. He just kept staring into the black glass. "Can't say I did." He paused. "What happened to him?"

"An accident," I whispered, my chest tightening. "A terrible accident."

Suddenly, a loud bang echoed. I seemed to have hit something on the road, quite unsurprising, considering my limited vision. The steering wheel ripped violently out of my hands, and the car skidded, grinding to a shuddering halt. The engine died instantly.

"Darn it," I muttered, my heart hammering against my ribs. "Hold on, Barry. Let me check the damage."

I pushed my door open and stepped out into the freezing downpour. The rain blinded me instantly, soaking through my clothes. I walked around to the front, the mud sucking at my shoes. Both front tyres were completely blown, torn to shreds as if they had hit a strip of spikes. The car wasn't going to budge an inch without a push onto firmer ground.

I walked back to the passenger side and knocked hard on the glass. "Barry! I'm very sorry, but I need your help. Come out here and help me push the car into the clearing!"

There was no movement from inside.

Wiping the cascading water from my eyes, I cupped my hands against the wet glass and peeked through the window. The passenger seat was completely empty. My breath hitched. I ripped the door open. The seat was vacant, though the fabric was darkly soaked with water and smeared with fresh mud.

"Barry?" I called out, my voice cracking against the wind. "Barry, this isn't funny!"
I turned around, scanning the pitch-black tree line, hoping to catch a glimpse of his raincoat. The rain felt heavier now,

stinging my skin like tiny needles.

Then, I felt it.

A hand dropped heavily onto my left shoulder.

I froze. A violent shiver racked my entire body. The touch wasn't just cold; it was an icy, dead weight that seemed to drain the warmth right out of my blood.

Slowly, agonizingly, I turned around. At that exact moment, a brilliant flash of lightning tore through the sky, illuminating the road in blinding white. For the first time, I saw his face clearly.

I gasped, a choked sound catching in my throat.

No. It could not be.

But it was.

The stranger's face held a terrifying, unmistakable resemblance to Bartholomew Mortem. But it wasn't the Barry I remembered from our college days. This face was pale, greyish, and deeply distorted. And worst of all, a massive, jagged chunk of flesh was entirely missing from his chin, exposing the bone beneath.

My heart thumped violently against my chest, wanting to leap out of my ribcage. Panic took over. I tore myself away from his icy grip and started running. I ran blindly into the darkness, the storm roaring in my ears. I lost all track of time, my lungs burning, my feet splashing through the mud, until suddenly, a pair of blinding headlights rounded the corner, heading straight for me. That bright, piercing glare was the last thing I saw before my legs gave out, and the darkness consumed me entirely.

When I finally regained consciousness, it felt as though I were dragging myself up from the bottom of a deep ocean. A dull, throbbing ache pulsed through my entire body. My left arm felt heavy, bound tightly in a thick cast, and a sharp, stinging sensation radiated across my forehead where my old scars resided.

I opened my bleary eyes, expecting to see the dashboard of my car. Instead, I found myself staring at a sterile white ceiling and harsh, buzzing fluorescent lights.

The room felt entirely familiar. I turned my head slowly, wincing at the stiffness in my neck. The sight of the medical cabinets, the IV stand dripping saline into my arm, and the distinct smell of antiseptic made me frown. The most surprising thing was the handcuffs that tied me to my hospital bed.

My clinic, I thought, trying to force the chaotic pieces of my memory together. I must have been brought to my clinic. But why was I tied down?

Before I could ponder further, the sound of quiet footsteps approached. The doorknob turned, and a woman appeared within my field of vision. I recognized her instantly. It was my elder sister, Xylie.

She looked exhausted. Deep dark circles hollowed her eyes, and her clothes were damp from the rain outside. As we made eye contact, she gave me a small, incredibly sad smile and sat on the plastic chair beside my bed.

"How's it going, sweetie?" she inquired softly, leaning forward to brush a strand of hair away from my bandaged forehead.

"Horrible," I replied, my throat dry and raspy. I swallowed hard before continuing. "I saw Barry, Xylie. As in Bartholomew. He was in the car with me."

"So?" she replied. Her voice was tired, as if she expected me to say this.

Her lack of reaction hit me like a physical blow. A sudden burst of anger flared up inside me. "How can you be so calm?!" I screamed, my voice cracking as I tried to sit up, only for a sharp pain in my ribs to pin me back down. "Didn't you hear what I said? I saw Barry! He is supposed to be dead! How did I see him, Xylie? How?"

My voice trembled into a sob, and I felt warm, thick tears flowing down my cheeks. I was shaking uncontrollably.

"Shhhh, sweetheart. It's okay," Xylie consoled quietly. She wrapped her arms around my trembling shoulders, gently avoiding my broken arm, and kissed the top of my head.

"What is happening to me?" I wept, gripping her sleeve with my good hand as if it were my only lifeline.

She pulled back just enough to look me in the eyes. "Kyle... do you know where we are right now?"

The question confused me. "We are at my clinic, aren't we?"

Her eyes gleamed with unshed tears, reflecting the depth of her sorrow. "Kyle... look around. Do you honestly think we are at your clinic?"

"Of course we are," I replied quizzically, though a sudden, terrible pit began to form in my stomach. "I'm the doctor here. This is my facility."

Xylie closed her eyes for a brief second, a tear escaping down her cheek. When she opened them, the profound sorrow in her eyes made me freeze.

"Honey, I am so sorry," she started, her voice breaking entirely. "You were a doctor. That's correct. But you haven't practiced in three months..." She let out a breath and steadied herself before continuing. "This isn't your clinic. This is the psychiatric wing of the county hospital."

I stared at her, my mind spinning.

"This is the fifth time you've managed to wander out of the ward," she said, pointing at the handcuffs. "That's why the nurses decided to take precautions. I couldn't talk them out of it, not after you stole another car and crashed it."

She looked down, as if making eye contact with me was too much for her to bear. She continued, "The nurses called me when they found out about your little escapade. I was coming to the hospital itself when, luckily, I found you running down the road along Rhys Crossing, screaming into the rain."

She took a deep breath, squeezing my hand tightly. "You remember the accident with Barry? You survived the crash, sure, but the head trauma... it changed

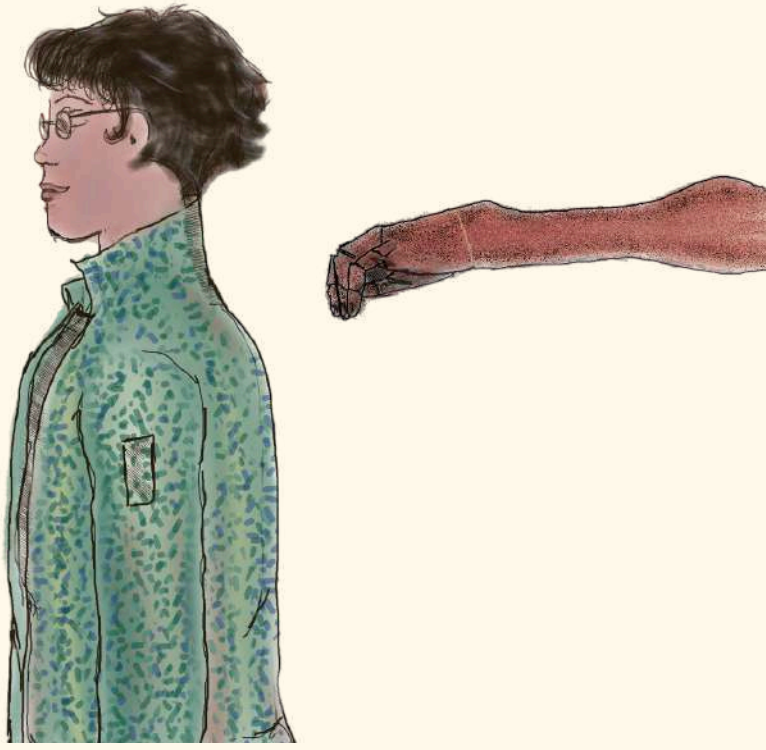
something. Ever since that night, you've been seeing him. Everywhere. All the time. Every single time you run away, I come here and explain what happened, but your mind resets, confusing reality all over again."

A small, heartbreaking smile touched her lips. "But at least this time... you remembered that Barry actually died. The doctors said any breakthrough in your memory is an improvement."

She covered her face with her hands, her shoulders shaking as she wept quietly.

I lay there, completely paralyzed. My thoughts were running wild, a thousand questions crashing against one another. I couldn't believe it. Am I really that ill? It didn't make sense. I could still feel the phantom chill of Barry's touch on my skin. It had felt too cold, too solid, too terrifyingly real to be a mere fragment of a broken imagination.

And if what Xylie said was true, if it was all just a delusion born of grief and a damaged brain—then why, as I looked down at my mud-stained clothes from earlier tonight, was there a distinct, drying print of a muddy hand pressed firmly against my left shoulder?



Seen and Steadied

Diya Saravanan

The warm buzz of chatter filled the Odyssey bookstore as children sat cross-legged on the floor, their eyes fixed on the woman on stage. She was graceful, with a spark in her eyes, holding a book titled "Seen & Steady - Held gently by a true friend, I stay rooted." Her voice was soft, yet carried weight.

"This story," she began, "is about a friendship no one saw coming. Especially not us."

Ananya adjusted her glasses and sat upright in her seat, notebook ready, while the rest of the class groaned at the teacher's announcement.

"You'll be working in pairs for this semester's History project."

Across the room, Rhea slouched dramatically in her chair, twirling her stylus on her tablet. She smirked when she heard the words "assigned partners."

"Rhea Kapoor and…Ananya Sharma."

Rhea's smile widened. Jackpot. The girl practically lived in the library. This would be a free grade, she thought.

Ananya sat on the edge of Rhea's bed, books in her lap. Rhea, legs up on the bed, half-listening while tapping away on her phone.

Ananya spoke gently, pulling Rhea's attention, "So… I was thinking we could divide the project into two parts. Maybe I handle the research and you could work on the slides?"

Rhea, without looking up, like she was only half listening said, "Wow. You even sound like a group project instruction manual. Do you ever, like, not plan stuff?"

"Not really. I like to be prepared. It saves time later" Ananya chuckled softly.

Rhea raised an eyebrow with a grin. "You know that's what old people say, right? Fail to prepare, prepare to be boring."

"That's not quite how it goes. But I'll take it," said Ananya, her fingers still resting between the lines of the pages.

Rhea put down her phone, leaned back slightly, tilted her head with mild curiosity, clearly interested in the conversation now. "Hey, you probably color-code your socks or something."

Ananya was grinning at the joke Rhea just made. There was a brief pause. "Okay, to be honest, only my notebooks."

Rhea shook her head and said, "That's tragic." Lighter moments began unfolding with their attention shifting from the project to knowing each other better.

Ananya asked playfully, "And you? Let me

guess – assignments magically appear completed at 11.59 p.m.?"

Rhea gave a small uneasy laugh. "Ugh! Please. I don't even look at them until my mom screams. Then I just charm my way through."

"Does that…work?" Ananya asked.

A soft murmur came out of Rhea. "Depends. Teachers either love me or threaten to email my dad."

Ananya smiled, a hint of encouragement in her voice. "You joke a lot. Do you ever take anything seriously?"

Rhea replied slow and detached, "What's the point? Life's just… one big annoying group project." Ananya noticed the quiet sigh.

"You mean, people expect stuff from you?" Ananya asked, warm and supportive.

Rhea's eyes narrowed. "You say that like you get it. And you?"

"Maybe I do. I just handle it differently. I try to be the person I'd want to rely on." Ananya smiled.

"Ah ha!" Rhea smirked, folding her arms. "That's so noble. Do you also rescue puppies and recycle cartons?"

"Only on weekends," Ananya replied.

Soft giggles filled the room.

Rhea sat back watching Ananya with a curious gaze. "You're weird, you know that? Like, freakishly nice. It's kinda suspicious."

"So back to the project, like, you actually enjoy this ancient war stuff?"

Ananya smiled. "I've seen that look before." She continued, "Well, it shaped the world. Kind of fascinating, don't you think?"

"Fascinating? I barely survived reading the first page. But hey, since you're into it, you can do the research and I'll… vibe check the font?" Rhea gave her a quick, playful wink.

Ananya glanced up quickly. "Nice try. We're splitting the work with steady tracking."

"Ugh. Responsibility girl strikes again." Rhea continued, "Maybe I can sign up for a course online to design the sketches for that and it could make the presentation unique and interesting. By the way, do you even have fun?"

"I do. I just don't need a screen to have it" Ananya responded, shifting her attention back to the unfinished pages of her book.

"Ugh!" Rhea exclaimed with a mock gasp, "Violation! Tell that to my PS5."

Just then, Rhea's phone buzzed. She sprang off the bed in a rush. "BRB, emergency gossip in the group chat." She darted out of the room, giggling at her phone. A few minutes later her mother peeked in.



Rhea's mother stepped into the room, carrying a welcoming presence.

She sat down after pulling a chair closer, passing Ananya a cup of tea and a snack.

Rhea's mom began with soft tone, "Sorry about her, Ananya. She's not used to this… focus thing. I hope you are comfortable."

"It's okay, aunty, she is funny" Ananya replied.

"Do you like gadgets? PS5?" Rhea's mother asked. "She is obsessed. Sometimes I regret saying yes when she asked for gadgets," she added.

"Not really. I like reading. Journaling." Ananya looked at Rhea's mother, her honesty carrying a subtle sense of encouragement.

Rhea's mother's voice softened even more. "Oh, lovely. Rhea was like that once, smart at grasping things." She paused. "With the gadgets gaining her attention, friends got fewer, unfinished tasks and drifting thoughts ... and she started chasing screens like they'll love her back or may be it helps her to stay in her social circle."

Ananya gave her a small, knowing nod, added, "She probably just wants to feel seen."

Rhea's mother gently prepared to leave, said with a reassuring smile, "I'm glad she is talking to someone like you. That means more than you know."



Over the next few weeks, study sessions became regular. Rhea still cracked jokes, but sometimes she'd glance at Ananya while pretending not to care.

One evening, Rhea put her phone down. Voluntarily.

Rhea, titling her head faintly, asked Ananya, "You really don't get bored, do you? No Insta? No gaming?" as curiosity flickered in her expression.

Ananya replied, "I don't need constant noise to feel okay."

"Must be peaceful in your head." Rhea let out a sigh.

"Sometimes. But it's not perfect. We don't have much, but it keeps me grounded. My Mom's a teacher, Dad's an electrician. I was on a scholarship until this year."

Rhea said softly, "You're lucky, you know. I wish I could focus like you. I literally zone out after twenty minutes unless something's flashing or vibrating in my phone."

"That's okay. Maybe we just need to find what works for you." Ananya comforted her.

They experimented. Ananya helped Rhea break her study time into 15-minute sprints, taking a break for another 5 mins and returning to the tasks from where she left off. She replaced gaming nights with evening aerobics. As Rhea's mind craved quick rewards, Ananya included the switch to active learning methods like flash cards and quick recall. Slowly, Rhea found joy in journaling with doodles, and surprisingly, poetry.

Her grades improved. She began speaking up in class, less phone, more eye contact.

By the next semester, they were inseparable. Rhea wrote her first poem about overthinking. Ananya encouraged her to submit it to the school magazine. It got published. Rhea never forgot that moment. And Ananya never let her forget what she was capable of.



The woman on stage closed the book gently.

"That girl – responsible and quiet, steady – went on to become a diplomat. She speaks for the country now, but back then, she spoke for me when I couldn't." The audience was silent, moved.

"And I?" she smiled. "I became a writer. A poet. The one no one expected to stop scrolling long enough to find herself. Because of one girl who didn't judge me- just understood me."

A little girl in the crowd raised her hand. "Are you still best friends?"

"Always," the author smiled. "Some people become chapters in your life. She became the title."

Illustrated by the author.

A Porcelain Bird

Sharada Subramanian

Her feathers were smooth,
Not uneven and ruffled,
Their shades a beautiful maroon,
Untouched and protected.

Her beak a delicate curve,
Her expression serene,
Her tail feathers in a gentle swerve,
Her neck slender and lean.

Her legs hooked onto curious fingers,
That failed to hold her carefully,
One shake, then another,
And through the air she fell gracefully.

She should have flown to protect herself,
But she was never made to keep,
She'd been made too perfect,
And now she lay on the ground in a broken heap.


Poetry

One is Not Born but Becomes a Man

Urbi Mukherjee

My ribs unfurl.
Stretching hands, budding legs:
A whole foetus under my chest—
Poking— prodding—
Bulging my limited flesh.
My ribs grow further,
They now have heads—
They suckle on my blood and whites,
Their teeth erode my breasts.

I am tied to a table:
My legs tightly crossed,
No thighs need parting
For a birthing of this sort.
They all await the inevitable,
They give eyes to the probing lights—
The heads of my ribs grow— and grow
Until they form minds.

My ribs are not my own then,
The foetus now a child;
Born of sick and love and rage—
Born of warning wives.
My sternum heaves a sigh of hate—
My mouth a door for them:

One by one they all crawl out,
My children born of a cage.

I am only a mother on a table cold
As my children get ready to prey—
They spare no looks till the end of time,
they can only walk away.
When the last one leaves and the lights are gone—
The shackles clog my brain—
I weep and scream as I realize:

All my ribs have become men.

Shame.
What a shame.

I Would Not Tell This Out Loud But

Pradipta Mukherjee

I've blown on many eyelashes.
Love left. (so many)
Through the window
of the MF-8 bus;
into the rain
from the 17th floor.
In the backyard (so many)
of the kali mandir and
under the mango tree
in my dimma's garden
(so many) From the 2nd
bench of the 3rd row
in class too. Love left
(so many).



What I Remember When I Think of My Mother

Preethi Srinivasan

Not luscious locks and dewy skin or almond eyes, but her face always glowing when she smiled. No stunning figure but didn't flinch when she had to travel one fifty kilometres everyday to teach. How she used to braid my hair while I was still fast asleep, that tug to secure it in place always made me mad. How she knew the genus of any plant, tree or flower you could spot, but that mind never worked when it came to taking her medication.

How she hated to cook. I don't know if she was saving me or herself but she never let me into the kitchen. Now I'm here cooking feasts for people, making rasam she cannot taste. I wish she sang more, I wish we had recorded it more. How she loved. How she glared when we didn't follow her plan. My mother's face with her gums visibly widening as she smiles from her eyes. I keep searching for them everyday in the mirror; in the garden, in crowds, when I wake up in the morning and when I try to find her again in my dreams. My mother's face. Oh, what I'd give to embrace it and kiss it again as she would shyly push me away.

They’re Crawling!

Sneha Jain

Before it begins:
The following fiction contains very little to no concrete plot. The character(s) have no names, origins, ages, or genders. Things happen at an unknown, undisclosed place. Reader discretion is advised.

Let’s play a game.

You tell me one lie,
I make it come true.

I tell you one truth,
You wonder ‘bout the world it be possible in.

I win = You hide.
You win = …?

They’re Crawling!

They're all buried under here.
Sometimes I fetch a piece of flesh or two.

The mud tastes disgusting.

I'm starving.
A little digging, and that's it.
I can see the pretty purple fingers.

You know? Living beings are useless.
Their flesh stops regenerating after a point.
Could’ve provided me with another meal, now.

How selfish.

Well, something’s up there too!
That's me, hanging in the air.
My limbs have been dangling for an eternity now.
My head, is nowhere detected.

I killed that person.
I cut off the limbs, and sewed them back.
I cut off the head, could not sew it back.

I *had* to sew them up.
So I don't overstock my food.
The regenerations lived but later became useless.
For none of them knew the art of walking.

They were crawling.
From here, to here, to there, to over there.
Fret not! They're all buried down here now.

I get my meals after digging up a foot or two.



Something I Will Never Tell My Sister

Vanalee Saharia

When they tore me from your clasp, you cried for days.
I smiled and waved. Was I a heartless child?
No, just confused. I could not imagine a life
parted from you. I did not exist until the summer
when I touched your pudgy cheek— and cried,
and cried,
and
cried.

Dandelions

Cithara Susan Patra

In your little hands, you grasp dandelions
blowing them apart, letting them sail in wind.
Your laughter follows as each little piece
flies far from your fingers, floating to the sky.
You jump up and down, unable to grab them
though your laughter never fades
those little dandelion parts continue to fly
continue to evade you until they disappear,
fade into the empty gray sky.
And my vision of you, full of life and laughter
fades as well.



What I Wanted

after Robert Hess

If I had an apron
half-an-inch broader,
a dress
two shades darker—
would I, then, still have stains
in need of hiding?
Would night and day have become
a mangled mess?
Would I still be served regrets
at my own party?

Time is trickling away, quietly,
out an emptied mustard jar by the sink.

The oven dings, the turkey beckons,
the salad sits unmade in a bowl.
'Do you need help?' a voice asks.
Laughter, small talk, glasses chinking,
the jar by the sink slowly slipping—
there's so much left to do.
'No, I'm good, thank you.'

Aasma M.N

The Fireflies Devoured The Moon

Cithara Susan Patra



tonight, the fireflies devoured the moon
and plunged the world into darkness
leaving nothing but their lights
and the stars to guide us around

the streets blanketed in black
the trees covered in shadows
the nocturnal creatures peek out
and seek their prey in the dark

as for the fireflies, they light up
like tiny dots blinking on and off
blink
    blink
        blink

without the moon, they're all we have
and they're all the lights we'll ever get
to make our way in darkness
and brighten our nights

My heart is a stranger

Vanalee Saharia

My aunt always told me,
Once a child leaves home, the shape of her heart changes.

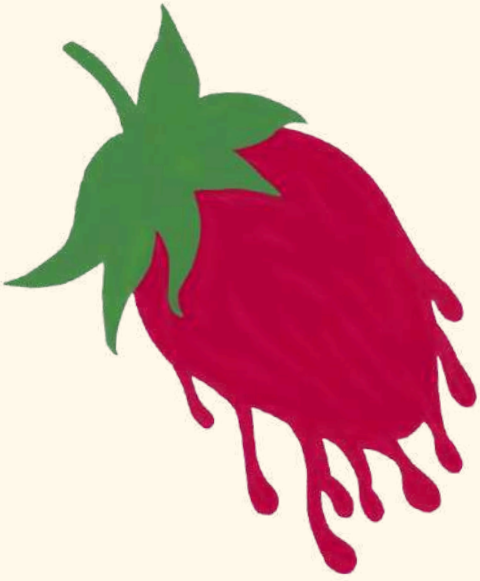
There is an island at the centre of the lake
That my hometown surrounds.
And no matter how hard I paddle my rented boat
I can never reach its floating ground.

How do I tell my aunt
That my heart is shaped like that island I have never touched, never seen?

Name

Rik Bhattacharya

Are you here to cut me up again?
Good, I have been waiting for a while. There seems to be a delay.
The stems are growing rapidly, the root of my 'human' conscience slows the process
You see, I am a working man, my work shan't be hindered
Mr Sat thinks I have immense potential to contribute to His firm
Nobody knows his full name and no one should.
Names are unreliable, we do believe in numbers, however
If I had to remember names, I'd be an idiot teacher
There are so many irrelevant ideas, concepts and institutions in this world.
Our job is to cut them up and make the world come under a new systemic order of numerics
Cut the names, place the numbers.
I just cut mine yesterday or tomorrow...
I don't remember it anymore. I'm told it's funny.
Some memories are troublesome, they are diseased
I can't afford to remember them.
Mr Sat is very displeased
He thinks I'm being poetic. Worst insult of my life.
Anyways, my blabbering is causing more delays
Why won't you start cutting? What was your name again?
Oh, right. Never mind.



Tender Flesh Fruit

Esha Karthi Raj

Blood red, strawberry
Skin, plump
A fruit, I sink my teeth in
A sloppy job I'm doing
A real mess I'm making

Bumpy over the surface
Little hairs, little dips
Sour in the center
I pucker my lips.

Actually Sweet

Umaimah Siraj

In his bitter, black
cup of coffee, you'll see.
You'll see a mess of a table;
our papers, poems, prose,
all mixed in a pile.
And if you ask for a reference,
he'll find what will help.
And for help, of course,
he also has
a broken cup of coffee
where he stores all the things
that he thinks we might want.

Habuchi's Belt

Eduardo Ramos



Gold writing stitched on fabric
once black, now faded
from countless hours
of the gentle way.
Your name
on a frayed field.

Was this one you wore
during any of our matches?
I wore it when I faced your son.
When Tatsu's knee…
I don't wear it anymore.
They wouldn't understand
why I wear your name.

I cherish this belt more
than the one with my name;
gold letters against solid black.
Both belts carry your lessons;
this one carries your battles.

I am an origami swan being undone

Pragya Sharma

Life upturned. Or life turned inside out, like a t- shirt worn the wrong way. It is uncomfortable, yet it is. I sleep on the cover, there is a cover on me, but it doesn't stop the cold. Skin turned inside out, the blue of my veins out instead of in, mouth open jaw slack my breath went out and never came back again.

It won't turn back out. Yet I am. I am not quite 'I'. Yet I am.

The stitching of the cloth rubs my skin the wrong way. I can't see it, I see red, raw flesh no pale supple soft cocoa glow enriched skin stretched tight over the red, raw flesh. That's all. The loud drum is annoying. It beats. Beat. Beat. Beat. Beat. Beat. This needs some guitar, what shitty band is this?

I am thinking that I used to be able to think outside of what I'm thinking right now. There is an outside. Which side? If this is my all, then am I in? Or am I finally out?

What a sight I must be. Sore eyes. What a sight I was? I don't quite…know. I did know. I think I could know, I can feel it. It's right there for me to grab and swallow and absorb and know but I don't know how to know. I am aware that I am very, very unaware. I know these words. I know enough to know and not know.

I think something should be over by now. Time? It should be over by now.

Ache. I know that. I know it happens. I ache with its passing, time. Time. I know that. 12 pieces of pie with two chopsticks and a brown leather strap. That sounds about right. You eat one piece, then another, then another, then another, then another, then another, then another, then another, then another, then another, then another, then another and your tummy aches because of too much pie. Too much time. Don't be greedy. Don't eat too much. Leave some for others. Die early.

Just get to it. They are slow, the eaters. Worming their way in. They haven't gotten here yet. Here where I still exist. I still have something, that's why they are here. My red raw flesh is rotten brown mixed with a slurry of oozing something and leaking something. Wet and dark and heavy, everything itches. There are a lot of them, and there is a lot of me for them. They are everywhere but not here. Come here and end me first, so I can do that. That. Rest in peace.

Die. Die. Die. Rot and turn into ashes that are turned into earth and water and air and fire. Something about elements. What was full is blank. The pressure of soft gums, I am pulled apart. It's over, time. Beat…beat…beat. Stops.

Deformed Since

Adwaitha N

Our sentenced bodies hold court.
The verdict falls red on our feet,
A period.

Our mouths dry
From the weight of history, the incessant debates.
Chain you to a box
For you to chain me in mine.

Sentenced at birth, and till the grave we drag.
Quick, quick! Tell me! What was I born to be?
Is it silenced lips you see?
Or puffed-up shoulders scrubbed of their vulnerability?
The submitted evidence
Of hair and fabric dug up from buried bodies.
You lay one after the other as they crumble to dust.
Are you tired yet?

Girl, boy…others?
Entering a contract,
That we never saw.
The mirror does not show us, a lie
What we should be,
What we are claimed to be,
What we are,
Is deformed.
We submit an appeal
To an empty face.

The gavel is slammed,
On the hunched-over wood.
They will not infect our ways, you say.
How long until it is slammed down your throats,
Until it is digestible enough,
To cast off the chains of normalcy.
Centuries of your baseless claims shall fall,
And the people will dance over your screams of tradition.

The Marriage Contract

Khushi Mohunta

I. Preamble
In the margins of a book that was never meant to be read,
we press our signatures like fingerprints on cold glass,
tracing *yaad* and absence,
kamre humari yaadon se pehle hi saans lete hain,
and the quiet genealogy of shadows that preceded us.

II. Articles of Agreement
Clause One: Love shall be practiced in silence,
in the pause between closing doors,
khamoshi aur kaifiyat ka farq hai ek chai
in the folded corners of letters, stacks of newspapers no one reads,
where centuries of *chahat* coil like smoke.

Clause Two: Desire shall be folded into ritual,
a curve of your hand in mine,
the tremor of fingertips brushing a folded dupatta,
ishaaray bolte hai, jise zubaan kabhi nahi keh sakti.

Clause Three: Words are currency—
your touch – *shabnam* on my wrist,
my *vaade* folded into letters the moon alone reads.

III. Addendum
We may wander in thought,
while preserving ceremonial elegance.
But in the courtyard, shadows converse,
the *chhat* listening to secrets we do not speak aloud,
raat aur aangan mein sirf saaye nahi, khayalat bhi ghoomte hain,
the night folding us into its *aangan*,
teaching patience, teaching distance,
teaching the art of remaining
in a single *nazr*, a shared sigh, a single *saans*.

IV. Signatures
I sign with trembling fingers,
you, with eyes that measure the distance between us,
nikah sirf kagaz ya siyahi nahi, yeh faasla hai jo humesha saans leta hai –
a *sukoon*, a *sawal*, a *khushbu*
that lingers on hands and memory,
folded into eternity before it is ever opened.


NON
FICTION

Between Fear and Flight

Jhalak Gupta

The decision to skydive sounded absurd in every possible way. In a city where the wind was gentle, where river water moved quietly, and the air carried the faint smell of grass, time itself seemed to slow down. Christchurch did not rush you, it invited you to linger, stay grounded. Each morning, I witnessed that quiet beauty from the balcony of the room I had checked into. The chirping of birds would be the first thing that would wake me up, followed by the gentle rays of the sun. Waking up felt like a part of the landscape, gradual and unforced. Watching the city breathe, it was hard to imagine that in parallel existed another reality. The night before, on a call with my parents, their voices were filled with concern- so much so that it felt as if they were the ones about to jump. They knew me too well. They knew how escalators make my heart race, how the idea of height unsettles my body. My dad told me, his voice edged with uneasiness, to drop the idea, reminding me that not every challenge needs to be accepted. His voice slowed, "You don't have to prove that you are brave." My mother joined and added, "We know you."

I almost agreed.

Almost chose the familiar relief of backing out. The comfort of remaining where I was, untouched by risk, untested by possibility.
But somewhere between his concern and the silence that followed, a small voice made me pause. It wasn't loud, it did not promise anything, but asked me to wait. I told them that I would still like to accompany my cousins and would see if simply being in that space, close to gears, instructions, and the atmosphere might change my mind. My dad was still not very keen on the idea when he said, "We will be happier knowing you are safe than brave." I was 8000 miles away from them, and yet I could hear it in his restrained voice, in the way his words softened without fully agreeing.

The photograph in the photo memory on my mobile of that day shows me smiling a bit too widely. It is neither poised nor practised. It reminds me of a time not long ago, though when I would wonder how one can ever overcome a fear. And to be honest, that was one of the many mistakes I made in life, to believe that fear is something that can be conquered and left behind. I imagined fear as a finish line, and I stood far from it, gathering courage to spring my way towards the other side. People who know me know a very well-established fact that how scared I was of heights (I still am) and often asked me what made me jump off a plane? (with a parachute, of course) Was I high or drunk enough to just not care or feel? Or too adamant to prove others wrong? Well, the answer is way less dramatic (or that's what I keep telling myself). I jumped because I was tired of rehearsing courage in my head, of living my life with what-ifs and almosts.

After that call with my parents, sleep was not easy to come by. I heard my younger sister

talking with my elder brother, her voice with anticipation, how excited she was, and my brother couldn't agree more. Their excitement felt distant, almost unreal. Morning arrived regardless. I remember that day clearly. It was 34 degrees outside, the sun was a bit too bright, it almost felt intrusive, as if it wanted to be close enough to witness my decision. I left my hair open, thinking I would not jump anyway. I convinced myself that I am going there only to accompany, to observe from a safe distance. And yet, after having breakfast, I found myself in front of the bathroom mirror, braiding my hair. I French braided my long hair, an act of effort which was practical and controlled, unlike my mind. It required patience and focus, unlike my scattered thoughts. If my hands could stay steady, maybe I wasn't as unprepared as I felt. Without any declarations, my body was telling the truth- some part of me was ready to jump.

It was a three-hour drive, and with every passing minute, my heartbeat grew faster. Outside the window, however, the world seemed untouched by urgency. The vast green land stretched endlessly, cows grazing with the kind of patience that made time feel slow. That was perhaps the first time I had encountered groomed and hybrid cows. Shops closing by five, streets emptying not from exhaustion but from completion, people returning home as if evenings were meant to be lived rather than filled. Music and conversations helped distract me, but the ultimate question was if I were up for the jump. The fact that the atmosphere was lively was that my cousins assumed that I was going to jump because the reservations were made and the fact that I never said no.
The car came to a halt. We arrived at 4 pm. I was the last to step out. A banner hung above the entrance, Skydive Arena. The sky was awfully quiet. We were led inside by a man who was in his late 40s, taken into a small room with seats and a huge projector screen. It was just the three of us and we were told to watch the video carefully. It was a video of some random person, geared up, who sat at the edge of the plane with what I could make out was the instructor. He was smiling, I could hear the wind, and my heart was racing. Then they jumped. The camera followed him, capturing the moment as if he dropped into nothingness. After the video, we were informed that the free fall lasts only 45 seconds. It sounded short when spoken, less than a minute. I tried to imagine what that would feel like. What would I do if I were there? Fear crept in quietly, and my mind was trying to reassure me that it was happening only in my mind and not in reality. He later gave us instructions on how everything worked. We would be harnessed with one of the trained instructors. How to position the body, when to breathe, the arm movement and when to stretch the legs. I listened carefully, nodding, absorbing each detail as if preparation might replace fear. I haven't denied yet.

My elder brother gave our passports for verification. He asked for us to record our adventure. I wasn't sure whether I should admire his enthusiasm or hit his head. Then came the moment to sign the agreement contract. We were each handed a sheet of paper stating that we were of sound mind and fully aware of the risks involved. I almost laughed at the irony. I was voluntarily choosing to exit a perfectly functional aircraft mid-flight. If anything, this document should have asked, blink twice if you are unsure and need help. My hands were not steady, but with that one signature, fear became official. It was documented.

There was no going back now.

It was no longer a question of if but only when.

We were then asked to put on the dress, zips were pulled, and straps adjusted. I looked down and noticed that my shoelaces were undone. I stopped to tie them up, but my hands refused to cooperate. They were clumsy and unsteady, as though my body was already bracing for the fall. My elder brother was already walking toward the plane. And my sister was having her picture and video recorded before the jump, she looked certain and excited. I tried again, slower this time, but the knots slipped through my fingers. "Seriously?" I muttered to myself. Zack, my instructor, could see how nervous I was, but without drawing attention to it, he bent down and tied the laces for me, his movement steady and practised. "We will be just fine", he said, looking up with an easy smile. "Keep smiling." (I wanted to scream at him at that point). He recorded our reactions, cracked jokes and made efforts to make me laugh. I think one of the major reasons I did not quit was because of him. We boarded the plane one after another, ducking our heads as we stepped inside. Three long benches ran along the sides and down the middle. We sat in the corner seat and a few trainees were in front of us. I told him that I didn't want to go first. He asked no question and smirked, sure. Only for me to realise that we were in the first in line to jump after the solo trainees. We shuffled closer to the open door. The wind was aggressive now, loud and forceful, filling every gap between sound and silence. We moved together towards the opening. I was scared, I was told not to look down. But I did. I saw how small everything was. I was not imagining but living that moment. We sat at the edge of the plane. The air was cold, the sound was harsh. Zack leaned in, "Ready?" I wasn't. But I nodded anyway. He said we are almost there (not sure what there meant anymore.) All I could see was the vast, endless sky.

Then came the countdown "3 2 1" and we jumped, just like that. The first sensation was shock. The panic I expected never arrived, only the sensation, the rush of air. The free fall lasted barely forty-five seconds, but in that very moment, I felt dramatically alive, felt as if fear dissolved into sensation, the wind, weightlessness, and tears all felt unreal. I wasn't thinking, I wasn't doubting, I wasn't fighting. I was just there. Alive and very much real. More present than I had ever allowed myself to be. I was carefree. I was happy, happy in a way that is only possible when fear loosens its grip and you stop resisting. It sounds weird as I remember it now. We played with the trainees who jumped ahead of us the game of Rock, Paper Scissors. It was unplanned, and so was my laughter. Only when the parachute was off, with a jerk, only for me to realise that I had jumped. My mind could not register the act. Floating there, suspended between sky and ground, I finally caught up with myself, admitting that I did the very thing which sounded absurd and felt impossible. That jump was personal, it was memorable. Zack handing me a tiny rubber baby duck toy during our descent felt humorous. I remember tightening my fingers around it, afraid to drop it in the sky. It became a proof that the moment was real. We were the last to land among my sister and brother, even though we had jumped before them. The parachute curved gently, unhurried, as if the air itself had agreed to slow down for me. "We did it," he said while recording, and I laughed, smiling, mesmerised by the view unfolding beneath us. It felt

unreal to witness the view with my own eyes, to be inside a scene I had only ever imagined from the ground. What had once been hypothetical, something I rehearsed only in thought, had become real.

I called my parents soon after bidding byes and high fives with Zack. My hands were still unsteady, and a few strands of my hair loosened. They answered immediately. I told them that I did it. They thought I was joking, so I moved the camera to show the banner of the Skydiving arena. I zoomed in for them to see my attire as well, to leave no room for doubt. Silence followed, brief perhaps with disbelief. My mother was the first to speak, "Were you not scared?" Following my dad, added, "I am glad you are alright." His voice was low, his smile soft and genuine (I knew how frightened he was for me), but yes, I had been scared, I still very much was.

So, back to the question of how I did it, I don't know. Perhaps the body knew before the mind was ready. Perhaps it understood that fear does not need to be defeated, not something it can be conquered, merely lived with. That day, I did not overcome fear but accepted that fear can exist without letting it decide for me. By the time we landed, my sister and brother were already waiting, smiling, certain that I would be shaken.

I was not. My cheeks were flushed, my eyes dry from tears stolen by the wind.

I was still afraid, but lighter as if fear had loosened one of its grip like the parachute.



Every Few Years, I Return

Mridula Vijayarangakumar

As the 2026 Winter Olympics ends, here's a nostalgic look at my teenage obsession with figure skating—from Yuri!!! on Ice to Yuzuru Hanyu—the thrill of chasing magic and love on the ice.

My obsessive phase with figure skating ended in 2022, when Yuzuru Hanyu announced his retirement. It truly felt like the end of an era. Netflix had cancelled Spinning Out two years earlier. Tessa Virtue and Scott Moir had retired four years prior. Six years had passed since Yuri!!! on Ice promised a movie. And by then, any real hope for Ice Adolescence or a second season was long gone. In Olympic terms, my devotion had lasted exactly two Winter Games, just one full cycle.

I was a starry-eyed fifteen-year-old when I first discovered figure skating through Margot Robbie's *I, Tonya*. Living in a tropical city with no ice rinks, I had begged my parents for roller blades instead, desperate to get as close as I could to a sport that existed far beyond our means and my parents' worldview. It wasn't that I ever believed I could become a figure skater. I just wanted to experience, even if for just a single moment, the way magic felt. That if you closed your eyes, for those few seconds that you rotated to land an Axel or arched yourself into a Camel spin, the world turned ethereal.

In hindsight, what I was searching for was also just a form of love, an all-consuming one. At that time, figure skating had reveal-ed itself as the most obvious answer. Not because it was beautiful, but because that beauty required pain and an obsession that one could not withstand without a very ridiculous kind of love for the ice. For someone who grew up in a house with the motto "no pain, no gain", that kind of worship seemed like the pinnacle of love. There was a balance in that magic, an understanding, give and take, break and make.

I felt this and more when I watched Yuuri skate his free program for the first time. In the anime, Yuuri's theme for the season is love, and his soundtrack mirrors his journey from loneliness to finding love. It opens with a delicate piano solo, like gliding across an empty ice rink, serene, but lonely. Around the 25-second mark, a single key falls, like a raindrop hitting a pond, sending ripples across the stillness. *A quadruple toe loop-double toe loop combination.*

The piano swells, in your gut, hope spreads, lifting with each note, each breath. By the end of the first minute, strings weave in, joined by drums, violins; the full orchestra rises. *A quadruple Salchow. A Camel spin. A triple loop.*

At the midpoint, the piano returns, but this time, even if the rink is empty, there is reassurance; the ice will hold. *A spread eagle.*

Glide. Steady. A lunge.

The music crescendos, *a triple Axel, a triple flip*, the orchestra reaches its peak, a triple Axel,

single loop, triple Salchow combination. "I want to become stronger. I can become stronger," Yuuri tells himself. "I can surpass Victor's [his coach] wildest dreams." *A quadruple toe loop*. No, he switches it to a quadruple flip. His coach's signature move, 11 points base value, the third hardest quad to land. The ice blooms. Love blooms. The last few piano chords play tenderly, the closing notes of a love letter, Yuuri's, as the soundtrack is aptly titled: Yuri on Ice.

At the time I first watched it, Yuuri Katsuki and I were far too similar in our self-esteem and mental state. Watching him find himself again through skating—after losing himself to it in the first place—gave me so much hope, especially as someone who was falling in love with an "unrealistic" career path and trying to figure out my future. Amid all the writers I looked up to, figure skaters found a way in, too.

Someone once told me that in figure skating, the ice is like an empty canvas, and the skaters are paintbrushes, coaxing the ice into bloom. Magic. It's a beautiful way to see it, and for many years, as a teenager, that's how I saw it. I think of it differently now, in reverse. The ice is the paint, and the skaters' bodies are the canvases. Magic doesn't exist until they offer themselves to the ice—their bodies, their lives, their trust. I like to think the ice remembers: every blade that has carved and scratched it, every flower flung from the audience stands, every fall and embrace, fears and hopes. Magic.

Agape, or unconditional love

By the time Yuzuru Hanyu stepped off the podium for the last time, I was almost twenty, heading to college for the first time. Although I had technically already spent two years in college, it had been at home, blurred and displaced by a world struggling to recover from a pandemic. Over time, my perception of figure skating had shifted. I began to notice the impossible body standards it demanded, the way the sport was rigid, shaped by conservative and heteronormative norms, and its overwhelmingly white and elite culture, along with other issues I was becoming increasingly aware of.

Yet, this year, as another Winter Games arrived, I found myself watching the ice with the kind of nostalgia that makes me sound like I'm sixty instead of twenty-four. Then again, since I no longer keep up with the drama, perhaps I am sixty in internet terms. Like clockwork, whenever figure skating fever sweeps the internet during these Games, VirtueMoir begins trending on the internet again (technically, they were ice dancers, not pair skaters, but to a casual viewer, it all looks the same at first—this is not the piece where I get into those technicalities).

It goes like this. Someone discovers the lore: the most decorated figure skaters in the sport's history, skating partners for over two decades, but never romantically involved despite their absolute electric chemistry on the ice. And, like many before them, the person falls down the rabbit hole. First come the edits of their Moulin Rouge performance from PyeongChang, then Rihanna's *Stay* from the Sochi 2014 gala. The rest follow in a cascade of slow, aching cuts and layered effects; old interview quotes get pulled out and analyzed (only for the hundredth time). And inevitably, we arrive at Moir's wedding day, where he apparently spent too long speaking about Virtue (who was neither the bride nor in attendance), and the whole salacious cycle starts again.

Figure skating is, and always will be, part art and part melodrama. It's what happens when love burrows into an art form, messy and muddled. Pair skating, ice dancing, it's about synchrony, two bodies becoming one heart for the length of a song. There is a specific sort of trust that binds the skaters together, born out of love for the sport and a hunger to win. You train to the bone, desire scorching your belly. In close quarters, spending all that time learning each other's bodies and hearts, the line blurs—friend, family, partner—all folding in on each other.

It's two people worshipping love as art and love as love, held together by it: the weight of a body against yours, against the ice; the graze of your fingertips as you draw each other into formation, the sound of your breathing as you push yourself over and over, with the ice, and against it. Like binary stars, caught in each other's orbit. Virtue and Moir embodied it: magic on the rink and magic outside of it. After all, history does not become history by itself. Making history requires storytelling—someone, somewhere, makes us believe in it.

Pragma: Long-lasting, ever-growing love

Let's come to this year's Winter Olympics in Milan, where Mikhail Shaidorov (nicknamed Misha) from Kazakhstan was crowned the men's singles champion. His free program was breathtaking, with such technical finesse and beautiful execution. He's the first to have pulled off a 3A+Eu+4S (triple Axel + Euler + quadruple Salchow), and it gave me the same kind of goosebumps I got watching Yuzuru Hanyu for the first time. Misha's potential to evolve is unmistakable; with some tinkering in the choreo department, he'd be unstoppable.

It is unfair to compare any male figure skater with Hanyu because he was in a league of his own, someone who redefined the limits of the sport. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Hanyu was really born to be a figure skater. His command over technique, jumps, and quads was extraordinary. Above all, he was a storyteller, constantly reinventing himself with every piece of music he performed. Watching him on the ice was to understand the beauty of figure skating. He skated as if it liberated him…and the crowd came alive too. Hanyu was, and remains, the people's skating prince. Even now, as he performs solo shows around the world, audiences gather to experience that same magic.

When he retired, I realized I could no longer love figure skating in the same way. To me, figure skating has always been about people and the stories they can tell. And although there were many pairs and individual skaters I continued to admire and looked forward to watching, somewhere deep down, I was already moving on. By then, I had found my own equivalent of skating in writing. So I set aside the blades and began chasing ink and paper instead.

Figure skating found me in a time when I was trying to figure out my own ideals of love, navigating my own obsession and passion for a different art form. Where was the line between dream and reality? How far was too far? Figure skaters create a timeless, unreachable beauty, which we get to perceive as magic. It left me both in awe and yearning —for a dream much bigger than myself or the wishes and expectations of my family. In being just out of reach, figure skating showed me how it felt to not just chase the feeling of magic, but to create it.

So here I am, almost a decade later, with a more nuanced understanding of figure

skating and everything that comes with it, but still deeply in love with writing and lucky enough to have found a way to make it a part of my career. For someone who spent most of their teenage years holed up in their room being very "unsporty", I developed a weird interest in watching sports anime and Olympic events. It helped me find a way to build an enduring relationship with writing, much like how Hanyu continues to skate outside of competitive figure skating, or the way Virtue and Moir ended up at the Olympics this year, not as skaters but for a brand deal and as a coach, respectively. So I guess I'll keep coming back every four years during the Games, just to take a peep and find that magic again. In the end, there is a story to be found in everything, whether the canvas is ice, our bodies, or paper.



Contributors

Aparna Chivukula is a writer and artist from Bangalore. She has worked as a teacher in undergraduate and high school classrooms, and as a book-maker and editor.

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Urbi Mukherjee is a recent Masters graduate from Shiv Nadar University. An occasional poet and full-time reader, she mostly writes to find the words to make normal things sound unnatural.

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Khushi Mohunta believes people are walking houses to stories, and scrounging for these stories is a search one should never cease. She is the author of Waist Number 42 and has contributed features to Champak, The Indian Express, Ahmedabad Mirror, PNN Digital, Sangri Times, Madras Courier, and Poems India.

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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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