

THE

FREEWHEELER

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DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

SHIV NADAR UNIVERSITY

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FACULTY ADVISOR'S LETTER



Dr. Vikram Kapur

The years do whiz past. It seems just yesterday *The Freewheeler* was conceived and we were scrambling to get the first issue out. The magazine is now in its fifth issue. Through it several greenhorn creative writing students have made the journey from the classroom to publication, going through the arduous process of producing several drafts of their stories before arriving at the definitive draft that makes it to the pages of *The Freewheeler*. A number of editors and copyeditors have painstakingly worked on the stories in a bid to make them as good as they can possibly be. And each issue has been enhanced by the efforts of various illustrators and presented attractively on the page by dedicated designers. Each incarnation of *The Freewheeler* is the result of the collaborative efforts of a number of students, and the current issue is no different.



This time *The Freewheeler* includes a Reviews section for the first time. The credit for this goes to this issue's editors, Parul Kamra and Namita Gupta, who came up with the idea for such a section, thereby enhancing the scope of *The Freewheeler*. The eight stories that appear in it are diverse in style and content. There are stories that are sombre in nature, stories about family and relationships, as well as a story about exploitation.

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

I thank you all.

EDITORS' NOTE



Parul Kamra and Namita Gupta



The journey of this issue of *The Freewheeler* has been an experience which we are proud to be a part of. We thought that prior experience as editors would help us, but now at the end of our road we have come to realise that each magazine is unique in itself, and bound to run into bumps and speed-breakers. Coordinating different teams from different streams can prove challenging, and quite often a taxing job – chasing people on a giant campus is not a task for the faint-hearted. What got us through was each other and our serendipitous synchronization. Two different personalities, yet oddly enough, we had a similar vision and complimented each other in our skills.

In the process, we were exposed to a variety of extraordinary writings, a flavour of which we hope to have captured in this issue. This issue is a little more special for it features not just the usual stories, but introduces a new section on reviews of recently published books. We hope that the section stays a part of *The Freewheeler*.

This magazine is not a product of just our efforts; many minds came together to make *The Freewheeler* what it is, and to whom we are extremely grateful. The magazine wouldn't have materialized without the constant support and guidance of our faculty advisor, Dr. Vikram Kapur and we are grateful to him for providing us with this opportunity. A magazine is nothing without its writers, and we appreciate their willingness to share their words and their quick responses to our numerous emails. We would also like to thank the illustrators – Anurekha, Meghna, Tanaya, and Kattyayani – for taking out time and lending us their talents. A special shout-out to Wynona from whose drawing board we got our wonderful cover. The magazine looks as beautiful as it does because of them. We are also grateful for Soumya for putting the



pieces together in a composite whole. Finally, the proofreaders, Ishan and Isha, who straightened the rough edges and delighted us with their enthusiasm.

We write to be read, and dear readers, we hope you enjoy this issue.

Happy reading!

CONTRIBUTORS



Uday Kanungo is a reader, an occasional dabbler in fiction, a creature of infinite melancholy. He thinks like a madman, he writes like a legible graduate, he speaks like a child.

UDAY KANUNGO

Writer

Learning the rules,
So, I can break them
someday.
Playing it cool,
As I find my own way.

**IVAN PAUL
VERGHESE**

Writer



She has been reading verses in faces and landscapes ever since it struck her that the world is a book of poetry.

UNNATI UPADHYAY

Writer

CONTRIBUTORS



Wynona is from Mumbai and no one lets her forget about it. She knows all the movie stars and feels like one now and then. She is very lucky to have not had her bio edited and would like to thank Parul for letting her do this.

**WYNONA
ALWYN**

Writer



A reluctant economist and aspiring writer, he looks for stories in strangers. Known for devouring all genres of fiction, it is strictly advised not to leave him unsupervised in a bookstore.

**MEHUL
BHARDWAJ**

Writer

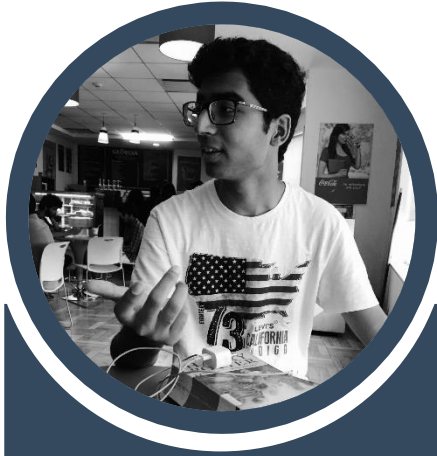
Sowmya is an avid user of adjectives, an aggressive eater of cake and a clumsy painter. If there are two kinds of people in this world... Sowmya doesn't like both.

**SOWMYA
MIKKILINENI**

Writer



CONTRIBUTORS



Bipolar computer nerd with a love for all things binary. Potter(scar?)head. Can be found in the library wearing formal shirts and sports shorts, nodding to dark rap music. Eager for feedback on everything except his hatred for chocolate.

**KANISHK
KAKAR**

Writer

Presently self-proclaimed review writer, otherwise a human being on Earth trying to contribute to aesthetics and literature.

**ISHITA
SINGH**

Writer



Can be found in the spaces between line-breaks and indigo paisleys.

**ZOYA
CHADHA**

Writer

CONTRIBUTORS



A compulsive day dreamer daydreaming her way through life and eternally torn between food or sleep and book hoarding or reading.

**JASLEEN KAUR
BAGGA**

Writer



“Lost”

**ARGHYA
CHAKRABORTY**

Writer

Dog Lover. Avid Reader. History Buff. Idealist. Die-hard Cicero Fan. Surabhi Baijal is a first year MA English student at Shiv Nadar University.

**SURABHI
BAIJAL**

Writer



CONTRIBUTORS



My name is Tanaya
Rao Raj.
(Chhota packet Badha
Dhamaka)

I did my Bachelors
(B.F.A) from the
College of Art, Delhi
and am now pursuing
my masters from Shiv
Nadar University.

**TANAYA RAO
RAJ**

Artist

Meghnanimous

**MEGHNA SINGH
BHADAURIA**

Artist



Kattyayani is in her
third year of her
Bachelor's in
Sociology. This is her
first collaboration with
Wynona, something
they hope to continue
when back in Bombay.

**KATTYAYANI
JOAG-SAMANT**

Artist

CONTRIBUTORS



I'm Anurekha Deb. I'm from Assam and currently pursuing my Masters of Fine Arts from SNU.

Unashamedly a wild child and full hearted by nature.

**ANUREKHA
DEB**
Artist

2Stressed

**SOUMYA
RAMPAL**

Designer



CONTRIBUTORS



Choices; Not fate.

**ISHAN
GUPTA**

Proofreader

A curious mind with
OCD and a strong
desire to try all the
cheesecake around
the globe.

**ISHA R.
VEDANTAM**

Proofreader



LUCIDA AND OBSCURA



Uday Kanungo

08-23-2009 3:12P.M.

VID—CAM—PSI2 WED

Day 1: My neck hurts. I have been craning it in precise movements for five years now: a sixty-degree swivel towards the left, rotating as much as my holder allows, to catch what's going on in the 'Cereal and Homemade Food' section, then a deft pivoting towards the top-right where the vending machine pops wretched chocolates labelled 'nutritious'. And then I come back to my default, my lens pointed at the varnished floor and the grim heads of customers, trudging along with frivolous kids (tousled hair, jumpy t-shirts, the latest gadget, you know the usual) along the 'Housekeeping' section, fidgeting with wiry wipers, brushes, vacuum-cleaners while the elders drowsily browse pipe-cleaners, garden sprinklers, and deflated Teflon's. An oval yellow plate, on which in big, spilling red paint and plush cursive, is a sign I've been seeing since I knew I could see (and I can only see, and can see only so much) – "REFRESH" – following in a smaller font – "The Perfect Retail Grocery Chain for the Great Midwest" – and then in still bleaker size – "Minnesota. Ohio. Nebraska. Wisconsin."

All this I see every day, and end up storing indefinitely. These daily visions don't go away; every day I wake up to these sonic sights and remember, as the digital imprint of date and time changes, that some time has passed between yesterday and today, and everything isn't beginning anew. However, particular changes evade me; I have no

remembrance of whether some cunning shoplifter, for example, was furtively emptying a jar of jellies, and I cannot be sure whether in that corner two tawny teenagers broke out in a scuffle. Every day the source code scrapes off 24 hours of my very short short-term memory (I know this because I can read the source code, but alas, cannot prevent its ultimate effects) and stores it in a bigger drive, condemning me to the blurry long-term counterparts as the lights go off at 10 in the night.

Nor can I do anything, but see. My words seem only to buzz in a flood of white noise, no one hears. I wonder if someone out there, while shopping, thinks he hears a noise, turns around to find no one, and happily supposes it a delusion.

08-23-2009 9:52P.M.
VID—CAM—PSI2 WED

Nothing much has happened today. The lights are already going off.

08-24-2009 11:37P.M.
VID—CAM—PSI2 THU

These are still early hours. A familiar face, climbs up a ladder, far away, over on the corner but just opposite me. Well, well, a new friend is being installed!

It has been five years with me and my friend – PSI1 – it on the inside corner, I on the outside, just near the entrance to our section. We are both of the Lucida model make, launched at the same date by OCULAR – the company which supplies all the cameras for this store. For half a decade, we have manned this 10-by-5 space, day and night. Sometimes it

gets boring too, you know, watching some nincompoop talk on the phone, or a bag of chips falling, stuff like that. It gets lonely. Sometimes PSI1 and I, when the randomized twists of our necks coordinate so perfectly that we end up looking at each other (and nobody was watching *us*, might I add), chuckle at each other's lenses, in our language that goes unseen, for those gifted seconds when the code cannot dictate us, while everyone thinks we are just doing our job.

But this is mighty good news, this new arrival. PSI3 – for I'm pretty sure the manager proceeds serially – is not yet activated from the central point at the counter, so it remains static. We have to wait only a second, I think. Oh, how exciting to see when a new lens gets going! It has been two years since I saw such action – clearly do I remember the initiation of PSV1 (a different make, malfunctioned in about twelve days). How its lens-cap

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My words seem only to buzz in a flood of white noise, no one hears. I wonder if someone out there, while shopping, thinks he hears a noise, turns around to find no one, and happily supposes it a delusion.

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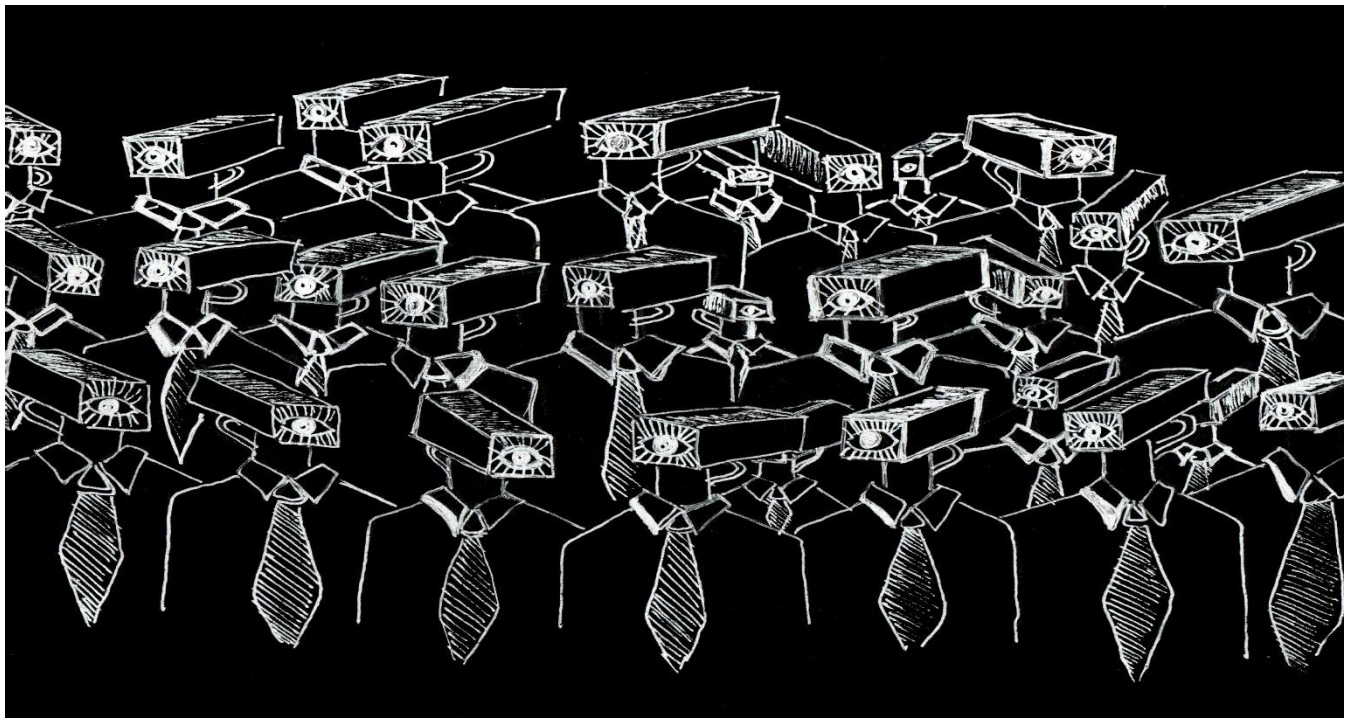


Illustration: Meghna Singh Bhadauria

twitched that day, and how the internal wires must have quivered with voltaic energy, when the static code waiting inside merged with the gush of electricity and unleashed that spark which enabled vision, all at once. Here it is! I see some movement, yes, for sure. Welcome to REFRESH, Obscura.

PSI3 is an Obscura model, the series following our launch, and more updated, I assume. You have to give it time; it'll turn and jerk erratically for a minute, and when it has gotten used to it, it will follow its own code, and acquaint itself accordingly. I can only sympathize. For new vision is burdensome, especially first seconds. And in mere hours my slate will be wiped clear by the backup tool, and I will be startled to look at PSI3 tomorrow morning, and the next day, and the next day, until it becomes a regular blot on that wall and secedes into my long-held long-term memory.

08-25-2009 2:02A.M.
VID—CAM—PSI2 FRI

We do not sense sounds, obviously. Wheel chaired invalids shouting for help, slurring teenagers, frustrated

mothers who lose their children in labyrinthine supermarkets – take note! No help can be provided by howling complaints to a *camera*, it's not our department. We merely see. Sounds don't mean anything unless they equip us with a decibel-reading system.

What we do sense is motion. And something has moved just half-an hour ago. I am sure. When the night-cam switches on, we all go into a small hibernated rest. But if there's foul play in motion, the sensor fills our necks with alarm, and we wake up from our inert snoozes, like men from nightmares in midnight.

The activity is clearly happening on my side, for I cannot see PSI1 moving. And there is! From the green haze which filters the night-mode, I can see a person dragging a long man-shaped bag, catching it by its edges and pulling along the ground. He must have disturbed the rack of utensils which stands just at the threshold of our section, and then entered my field of vision. I cannot see his face presently, but he has a hat which shimmers of whiteness; since night mode is on, colour is off, which

means, in this situation, that the hat is black. I don't know what all this is, but I go on seeing, as usual.

Now I see PSI1 rearing its neck out too. Attaboy! The man must have moved to its side, dragging along the thing with him. PSI1 is at the very corner and can follow him much better than I can. I can see it rotating its neck as far as possible towards its left, trying to cover the deepest corner of the section, where no doubt the man is hovering right now. I presently see him staggering back into my purview, slowly, now free of his load. This is all confusing me now. I hope whatever I have recorded is helpful to the manager, or whoever oversees the tapes.

08-25-2009 10:55A.M.
VID—CAM—PSI2 FRI

The entire section is deserted today. The stacks are as still as shop-window mannequins. On Fridays, you can sense the quietness in the alleys, all items fastened tightly to their places, no one fiddling or turning them over to check the barcodes. One day in the week everything stops. But we keep on seeing.



I have been troubled by two different sights since the first light of morning has trickled through the windowpanes. There is a new device – an Obscura, that too – in the section. Was it here before today? Cannot recall, unless I can access the tapes stored day-by-day. But a bizarre vibe in my source code tells me it was. I can zoom in and see its serial number – but, no need, it is definitely christened PSI3. Welcome, Ocular Obscura.

The other troublesome sight is right down below me. On the sparkling granite, there is a band of red imprinted, scraping the floor as if someone was painting it that colour. Don't know about the new Obscura, but I have the typical Lucida-model polychromatic distinguisher which filters tones into seventy thousand varieties, and it tells me this lies somewhere between "blood" and "crimson". The trail starts off brightly from below me, and then slowly fades towards where our faithful PSI1 resides, and then vanishes down a wicked turn towards the back of a small counter, whose other side I have never seen in my short life.

I daresay my old friend has seen and covered more than I have of whatever happened last night – PSI1 is installed nearer to the site. How I wish we could shed all the codes and talk, disregard the chance turn of our heads and convey whatever goes through our lenses to each other. Many a few times, when our gyrated surveillance drops in intensity and we find ourselves at leisure, I have sensed a sadness, a drooping of the focus, a violet tint clouding over the eyepiece of PSI1, and find it looking at me as if tons of visual data is waiting inside to find an audience, as if it is in on a secret, and is fearful of spilling it.

And that look is exactly what he is giving me now.

The REFRESH store is vacant today. The manager, the one who operates

us, charging battery and stuff, is the only one who has been hovering around this section. Here he is now, but he has someone with him, I see. Yes, a stocky person, with a black, wide-brimmed hat. No doubt, the blackest shade of black, the same black which violently masqueraded as a shimmering white in the night-mode cam, the same silver tinted badge across its front which gives the company name – "Atlanta", the very same. I could not take a look at the face in the night, but I'm hoping PSI1, or the new Obscura one has.

They are both talking, and briskly moving towards the freezer, now under my nose, and now approaching the ambit of PSI1, now taking that devilish turn towards that elusive counter whose whole form I may not ever glance. I can vaguely locate a white freezer, from which I have seen many varieties of ice-creams purloined by schoolchildren, and now they both are trying hard to open the glass casket, jammed with ice perhaps, under which those saccharine treasures lie. But why, on a Friday, out of all REFRESH stores are they searching here, under this freezer? Now they are both staring at each other, and then they fling both their hands in the freezer, struggling enormously to carry something, and now, they bring out onto the floor, with a great thud, the same man-shaped baggage, covered in old, brown sacks and rugs, covered with that same tincture of crimson and blood. Please, for code's sake, turn your neck and record this lucidly, PSI1!

08-25-2009 6:05P.M.
VID—CAM—PSI2 FRI

I am confused. This is not my usual Friday. On Fridays, at the most an uncouth prankster, after somehow getting past the locks, would come and smugly look me in the eye, climb a stool to reach my level (I'm situated quite high from the ground), and as venom bubbled at his lips, would put

one of his fingers on each hand up (the middle one, I think), and emit smoke which clouds my lens. What this gesture means, I know not. At other times, a pair of youth would stick their bodies close together, shed their skins, and move in implausible movements, contorting their faces and shake the rows of items convulsively for a short time. Sometimes during this activity they would catch my eye, as if they didn't know I was there (How naïve they are!), whereupon two actions may follow: they would embarrassingly disentangle themselves, and then put on their skins quickly; or they could show me those fingers – that mythical sign which means nothing to me, and I don't think it is for me.

But today was most unusual. And with the manager himself involved, too. Most unusual. And PSI3, hasn't turned a degree of left or right. And what happened last night? Had PSI3 been deactivated then? Was it ever activated?

They took out the man-shaped bag about three hours ago, and now the manager is out with a mop with a long, slender handle, and is using a lot of detergents from some other section of the store, and furiously washing the entire floor, scraping off every tile, till it's sparkling clean. He and the other fellow have swiped the surfaces of every nook, double-checking every corner, and hurriedly filled the room with short, sharp spurts from a deodorant spray. What, in code's name, is going on today?

PSI3 is still static, but definitely activated. A red blob of neon shines at the base of its slender neck. Did it see anything last night, through the hazy, green-hued night?

08-25-2009 9:05P.M.
VID—CAM—PSI2 FRI

Curiously, since the bizarre events of today's morning, the manager and the other person have been careful



not to cross the path of PSI3's vision. Peculiar.

And now, their job is done, it seems. They both rest their hands on their waists, and stare finally at us – the manager at me, the other fella at PSI1, as if about to do something to us. The manager points to us both, and then quickly to PSI3, standing precisely in between his old servant and the new entrant, as if judging their respective value.

He points towards me, speaks something to his 'Atlanta-hat' pal, and makes a motion of his hand as if severing the air, right at my direction. The mad hatter friend scoffs at PSI1, and then goes away, but swiftly returns with a ladder. I fear the worst for me and PSI1, if only there were another camera to catch all this... PSI3, I'm hoping against hope, you will stand witness whatever may

happen to me and my friend.

But it will not. I can decidedly say it will not. The manager had gone, I can now see, to catch hold of a screwdriver, and now he presently climbs on a stool, as he carefully evades the range of our PSI3, our new Obscura, to go behind its neck and snap a wire to deactivate it for the time being. The red dot flickers and disappears into the skin of its holder as all electricity is cut off. No one will know, because the diabolical hat is hovering around PSI1 now, as it tampers the lens, twists its holder to ruthlessly detach that great optical device I was friends with for so many days. All those hours recorded together, and not even a last glance, not even a friendly turn of the neck to acknowledge its friend was afforded by that nefarious ebony-hatted devil, as it snapped out the ball of eyeglass.

And now comes my turn. I have done the duty of seeing. The tapes of all those years, all the days are there. I trust the manager; he'll make some sense of what was happening last night, when he sees them all, lodged safely in the hard-drive, and I am sure he will make out what odd thing was going on with his friend and that man-shaped bag. I can see all things blur, slowly, slowly, shades of white raindrops are disturbing my vision. My last turn of the neck leaves me fixedly facing PSI3, and to it I say – Be true to your source code. Do your duty, turn your neck and see everything, and store everything as long as you can, so that whenever the dark gift of sight gushes through to you, you can serve the manager, the REFRESH store. This is the last thing I can emit through these fibrous wires before everything dwindles before me and I say farewell, Obscura.

(Originally published in Pif.)

THE INVISIBLE PARTNER



Ivan Paul Verghese

Summoned me again, has he? I was in the middle of a movie, and just when it was getting to the climax, this! Why can't I just be informed before I get teleported between worlds? It'll probably give me a heart attack someday. One moment you're enjoying a movie in the spirit world, and the next thing you know, you're somewhere in the human world. There he is, my human, Mathew, staring at an empty Word file on his laptop. What does he have to write this time? Ah, I see, it's just a short story. Let's see what his plan is. Great! he's absolutely lost, no clue on what he wants to write about, and the deadline is in three days! What has he been up to?

"If only I could get some inspiration!" Mathew exclaimed to an empty room. No, I'm not giving you an idea that easily. Being a Genius isn't easy work, you see, you get no credit in the human world, and in the spirit world it's all about how good your given human is. Very rarely does one Genius compliment another. The working hours are terrible, you get called upon whenever your human needs an idea, with zero consideration about what you're doing, like me right now. The worst however is if you're given a boring human. Look at mine struggling, and taking out his frustration on his poor pillow. He's a nice guy though, he's been good company from a very young age. We've had our share of fun, seeing his toys come to life; laughing at the poem he wrote for that girl in the seventh grade; being proud when he finished his first book, and much more. We've been together for more than twenty-seven years now. I've seen him grow from a chubby little baby to a handsome

young man; from doodling in his textbooks, to writing a bestseller; from a below average schoolboy to a famous author. The world may see him as one of the best young talents to come out of India, but I still see him as a little kid. I mean, look at him, pacing around the room hitting his head hoping an idea will pop out.

"Come on! Something, anything!" Mathew again took to speaking out his frustration. Serves him right for procrastinating until the last minute. Guess I'll also have to start doing my research on what he's got to do now. It's probably for that magazine he's working for. Yes, I was right, this time the magazine has given him complete freedom on what to write. I think he's been getting into his boss's good books. He always wanted to break free, and that's what his book was based on. It was delightful seeing how mature he was while writing that book, so much passion and excitement; I just gave him the idea and he did the rest. But now that he's totally free he doesn't know what to do; humans are funny creatures.

Well, he's calmed down now and he's back on his laptop. Maybe this idea could work. Hmm, he seems to like it; he's writing, and he's gone and erased it. The idea wasn't that great, can't blame him. What is he searching on Google now? *How to find inspiration for writing*, seriously Mathew? That's a new low that you've reached. You think the internet has all the answers? I'll tell you the real answer, you get yourself away from all distractions and clear your mind so that I can give you the ideas. Oh, that is what the internet says, I think it was Ishan who got his human to write an article about this.

Mathew seems to be trying meditation now. I've got a good idea to give as well. Amazing! Perfect time for the phone to ring! Just perfect! I'm not giving him that idea again, in fact, I'm going to give him the silent treatment, or as they call it in the human world, Writer's block!

"Hello sir. Yes, I'm working on the story right now. I had just gotten an idea. You want to know what it is? Well, actually the phone call cut of my train of thought. No sir, I'm not making any excuses. What? You want it tomorrow? Yes sir, I understand the deadline has been brought forward, I'll get it done by tonight!"

“

Just perfect! I'm not giving him that idea again; in fact, I'm going to give him the silent treatment, or as they call it in the human world, Writer's block!

”



“Oh God, please help me!” Mathew pleads after he puts down his phone. He’s so helpless without me. He looks like such a wreck, poor boy, he should probably go out for a walk, the fresh air will do him good. Admiring the beauty of the human world even helps me think sometimes. It’s always good to see new places and indulge in different experiences. A Genius, wise as we may be, grows up with our human, even our creativity is based on them. Their characteristics and way of life shape the ideas we create. It’s a team effort, you’re only motivated to work hard when the human exhibits some drive and purpose. The more we’re called upon the better we get. That’s why they say, “Practice makes perfect”. But there’s also an extent to how much we can help. We may be able to tell them what to write, but how to write it depends solely on the individual, and it’s his or her past experiences that help them do so. All art is an imitation of sorts; it’s how the artist portrays it that makes it what it is.

Now that his mind is fresh he should be able to think clearer, he can finally receive the idea. I’m still upset with him though. Well he seems serious now, he’s switched off his internet and put his phone on silent, glad he’s learnt from his mistakes. However, he’ll probably have it all back on next time he needs a story. He seems sincere now; and helpless. “What more must I do? I really need help!” Mathew says desperately. He really knows how to appeal to my softer side. Why am I so forgiving? I’ve had an idea for a while now, I should probably give it to him.

“Oh, my God! This could work! Yes, finally something I can work with. Thank God!”

You should be thanking me, boy! But he doesn’t even know it’s me giving him all this. I suppose the thanks is to me anyway; we can be seen as the Gods of ideas in a way. It’s quite nice to think about ourselves that way!

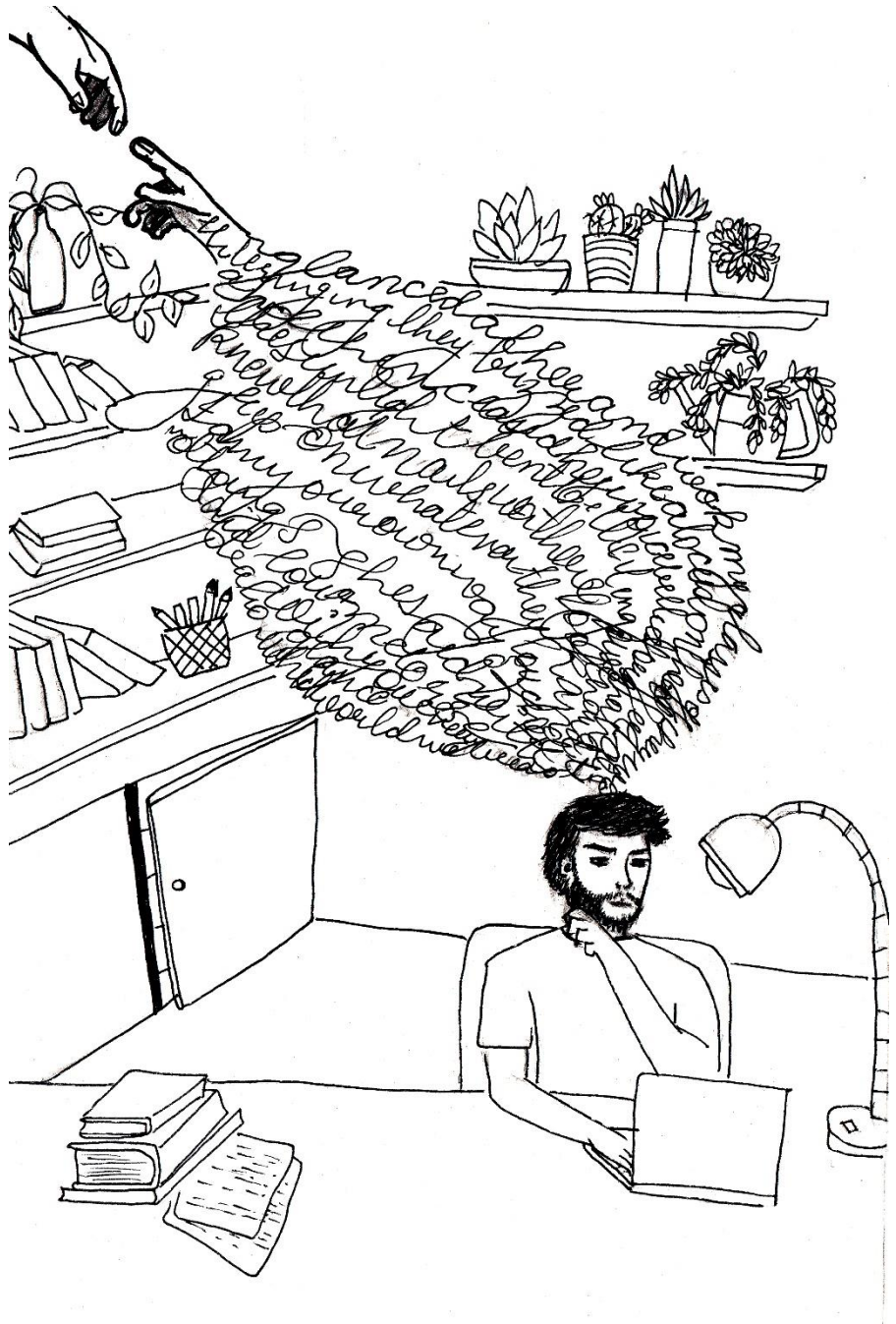


Illustration: Meghna Singh Bhadauria

It’s always nice to see him happy and smiling. I don’t know what pleasure I get by making him suffer, but that too has its satisfaction. Probably a matter of my pride, such a thankless job, why should I give everything to him so easily. But I guess that’s just the way we do it; he’ll find a way to annoy me again and I’ll find a way to make him pay for it.

I hope I won’t be disturbed again for a while though, and he better not call me to help him with his ending!

YELLOW ROSES



Parul Kamra

Roshan and I became the best of friends in the first ten minutes of meeting each other. Both of us stood in between the two groups – the children, aged four and below, and the adults, aged eighteen and above. With a difference of four years between us, Roshan and I would balance wanting to be a part of both groups of cousins, pretending to be sophisticated adults at one point and bursting into childish laughter at someone's clumsiness the next. Every summer he would visit India and we would make fun of each other's accents. Now, living in constant fear of the politically-correct-police, we only dare to do such things in the privacy of our homes.

Roshan's mother, my *masi*, too did not seem to belong anywhere. My mother would narrate stories of her, her wildly curled hair and equally wild personality, her ability to get her way with the dimple in her right cheek and her lust for life, for new things. To me she was this alien creature, so very different from most women in my family. I wanted to be with her, and at times I wanted to be her. I would imagine worlds where she would adopt me and we would fly to exotic lands and eat chocolate all day. I always wanted to know more about her but my attempts were always thwarted by the tears in *nani's* eyes, or the frown my *nana* would get when asked about her. Other members of the family would also avoid the topic, often diverting the discussions to other safer topics. I did not have the heart to ask Roshan; I would get a bitter taste in my mouth whenever I would gather to courage to ask him. All I knew of my *masi*, then, came from mama's stories, *nani's* tears and *nana's* sighs. I was

free to make her as exciting, as adventurous, as attractive as my young imagination could.

It was the 12th of March, 2007, when my mother called me to come quietly to her room. I remember groaning to myself, thinking this would be another birds-and-bees lecture, but was soon proved wrong. My *masi* had been diagnosed with cancer and was coming to India to be with family, family she had chosen to be estranged from, but would now act as her sole support system. My immediate thoughts were not appropriate for the situation, and I have never gotten over the guilt; I was excited to see the woman from my dreams, the jet-setter who had given birth to my favourite cousin. I was also excited at the prospect of meeting Roshan again, and was already planning the various things we would do.

I, then twelve years old, waited excitedly at the airport along with my parents. I kept craning my neck, looking for a mane of lush, curly black hair, dancing grey eyes and the deepest dimple you could imagine on a right cheek. I remember a woman walking up to my mother, and was immediately irritated as she was blocking my view, my view of possibly the most interesting woman I would ever meet. Roshan followed that woman and it was then that I realised that the woman was her. This was Rita, my mother is Simrita. They were so close as children that my *masi's* name was changed so they would be close in behaviour and in name. But she did not look anything like my mother; she was not the exotic person I had conjured up. There was no untamable hair and there

seemed to be no indication of a thirst to live. Her bald head was covered in a blue scarf, her dimple could hardly be seen in her sallow, sunken cheeks and the oddest detail has stayed with me since – she had no eyebrows. She shook my hands, said hello in an accent similar to Roshan's, but now I felt no urge to make fun of it. I felt cheated. What should have been a life-changing moment for me turned out to be a packet of chips filled only with air. There was only an illusion of something there. It would have been better to have left the packet unopened, continuing the illusion of there being something worthwhile.

Rita *masi* and what she represented now scared me. Was God trying to

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People die; the ones left behind have to build themselves up from the rubble the devastation has caused.

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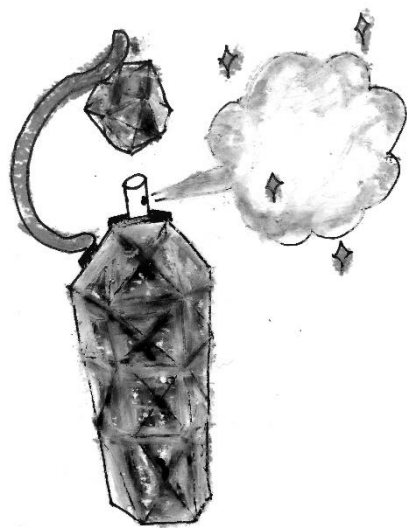


Illustration: Anurekha Deb

punish her for being too independent? Or had the struggle to live life on her terms finally taken its toll? Either way, I wanted nothing to do with her, and only made small talk for Roshan's sake. Roshan's face would light up when he would see the two of us talking. *Masi*, too, must have realised how our interactions affected Roshan, and made it a point to chat with me in front of him. But apart from mama, Roshan and I, she refused to talk to anyone. She would spend days sitting listlessly in a chair in the corner of the room, and this act was replicated in her hospital room. She would not speak; she would not cry. She would sit and stare at the outside world, perhaps reliving memories, wishing she could have done less or more; no one could guess, and we did not probe. We let her have her space to just be.

Soon she stopped allowing visitors, and the doctors advised us to accede to her wishes, saying that any outburst could worsen her situation. Only Roshan was allowed, and Roshan allowed just me to go with him. I would go with him to the hospital in an auto, wait an hour outside and

then take him back home. I now wonder whether my home was his home; home could not be California, it could not be the hospital room where his mother lay dying. I could not imagine an eight-year-old boy going through a situation like the one he was experiencing. He was never bogged down by the fact that his mother would have good days and bad, that his father had refused to even call his mother, that all most relatives ever wanted to know was how his mother was doing, never asking about him. In these situations, I would always think that it is the people who are left behind that are affected the most. People die; the ones left behind have to build themselves up from the rubble the devastation has caused.

I saw Roshan grow up in front of me. He would use sarcasm as a defence mechanism, and it broke my heart that such a young boy should even need one. It was only when we would be alone that he would take his mask off, his shoulders drooping. Sometimes he would cry in his sleep, and I would rock him to calmness. But in front of his mother, he was always smiling. He would tell her of the new levels he had conquered of the new Mario game, he would dry and press flowers with my help and make cards, he would copy jokes from the newspaper carefully and narrate them to her, hands flailing wildly. One could tell that both of them were trying their hardest to put on a show for the other. *Rita masi* would laugh at a joke and then look away, grimacing in pain; Roshan's eyes would have almost a manic gleam, feverishly looking for approval, so worried that he would not be enough. The one present she loved was a perfume he had bought her for her birthday, celebrated between mother and son by cutting a cupcake. I often have wondered whether she did actually like it, or just sprayed it on herself to make Roshan happy. Dying and loving often make people do strange things.

The chemotherapy was not helping; the cancer refused to let go of her body. She finally decided to stop the therapy and live her numbered days without the chemicals and their harsh side effects. She came back home, her room always filled with wild flowers Roshan would collect every morning. She would not eat a lot; her diet consisted mostly of oats and tea. She did not have the energy to stay awake for long periods of time or to hold extended conversations, but she always made an effort to dress herself in bright and colourful outfits. This was where I would see glimpses of who she used to be, her choice of sometimes pairing outrageous colours in one outfit somehow showing that her stubborn streak was alive and kicking. Roshan and I bought lots of multi-coloured wigs. *Rita masi* would try them on and make funny poses with Roshan. There was a picture for every day she spent with us at home.

Rita masi died alone in an afternoon of August 2008. My mother had gone to give her lunch, and she was found in her chair, facing the sun. She looked so calm; she could have been asleep. While everyone had known that she would pass away soon, one still hopes beyond hope, and death



Illustration: Anurekha Deb



always comes with a shock. I was the one to give Roshan the news, my parents busy with calling the family up and making funeral arrangements. This was not a callous decision my parents made; they knew of the special bond Roshan and I shared. Roshan was playing cricket with a few neighbours. I think the moment he saw me he knew. He let the bat fall from his hands and just stood there. Even from a distance I could tell that he was breathing heavily from the way his chest was moving up and down. He started walking towards me, and covered the last few metres by running. His hug knocked me off my feet. It did not seem like a hug though; his nails were scratching my skin leaving red lines in their wake and his arms felt like a chokehold around my neck. He kept shaking his head back and forth, “no” coming out of his mouth like a monotonous tune.

Rita *masi's* cremation was held two days later. Her ex-husband had refused to come for this as well. Roshan had never looked so small. Gone was the bravado that he had



Illustration: Anurekha Deb

shown when his mother was alive, but dying. He looked like a lost boy, his face as pale as his white kurta. After the cremation, there was to be a langar, but before that Roshan wanted to make a small speech, “For mumma”. There he stood, a nine-year-old boy with curly black hair that would break the strongest of combs and the hints of a dimple in his left cheek showing his physical bond with his mother. His voice unwavering, he spoke of his favourite memories of his mother, a few funny incidents that brought a few smiles to his audience. It was only at the end that his voice broke, when he told us that he would always love her, that he would always remember her as someone full of life and laughter, someone who had done everything she could to ensure her son’s happiness. She would always be his inspiration.

Life after her death was not easy for Roshan. He spoke less, and would snap if prodded too much. He hated seeing the pity in my eyes and stopped talking to me. I struggled with wanting to go on with my own life, and the need to make sure that Roshan would become his old self; with what I wanted to do and what I felt I should do. Eventually I realised I could not juggle the two and made the selfish decision to move on, still maintaining the hope that things would work out by themselves. It was only two years later that I saw a glimpse of my Roshan. He came to me to tell me he liked a girl in his class and asked if I would help him make a card for her. I could not control my smile. I wanted to dance for joy, to scream from the rooftops, to give Roshan the biggest hug I could possibly give. I resisted, and resolutely shook my head up-and-down. Love that had dried up after his mother’s death seemed to flow again. I was sure that this beautiful boy would live a normal life after all.



Illustration: Anurekha Deb

THE CONFESSION BOOTH



Unnati Upadhyay

"Bless me father, for I have sinned. I do not deserve God's forgiveness."

"Son, we all deserve His forgiveness. Go on and confess."

"I love a man, father."

"It's not a sin until you have indulged in the act."

"I have, a very long time back."

"What made you think about it now?"

"I just had a baby girl, father. I can't look her in the eye knowing I'm homosexual and she isn't supposed to be here, be my daughter."

"Why did you marry your wife?"

"I desired a family. It just couldn't be with the person I love."

"Where is he? The man?"

"I don't know. I grew up here in Carlingford. I came back looking for him. He used to work for my father. Often he would pick me up from school to drive me back home. He is ten years older than me."

"What happened then?"

"I grew closer to him. He would help me with my schoolwork and I would give him a hand at his chores. We would lie down on the grass, gazing at the stars. And then one day, dad fired him from work."

"Did he find out about you two?"

"I don't know. I was too scared of my father to question him."

"Did you see him again?"

"Yes. I would bunk school to be with him. We made love. But I knew it wasn't going to last. I went on to attend college in Dublin, and my family also moved there. I never looked back."

"Were you in touch with him?"

"Not really. He came to meet me once. I got mad at him for coming like that, unannounced. I didn't know what to do. I just sat there, crying. All I wanted was to embrace him and ask him to never leave. But I couldn't. I made myself believe that it was just a phase, that I would get over him and find someone else."

"Did you?"

"No, father. He was the only one. He is the one."

"Does your wife know?"

"I don't want to hurt her. She has loved me unconditionally. I do not wish to see her go through any kind of pain; she wouldn't be able to bear it."

"Why did you come here? Are you really ashamed of yourself?"

"I can't change who I am, nor can I undo any of this. My mother used to come to this church to confess and I used to go to her. Now that she's gone, I couldn't think of anything else, but to come here."

"What you are doing with your family isn't right."

"I know that, father. I'm not worthy of

their love. I have often thought of ending my life, you know? But my child needs me now. What should I do?"

Silence.

"I knew you would come back looking for me."

"What, father?"

"I'm a coward, William."

"Joseph?"

"Yes. Father Joseph."

"I..."

"Don't. I know it's complicated."

"Complicated? This is fucked up!"

“

“Do you not love me anymore?”

“I take your name before Christ in every prayer, every single day.”

“What do we do now?”

“Forget about it.”

”



"Watch your tongue, lad. You're in a church."

"Gobshite! How could you?"

"After you left, I needed to start things over. Becoming a priest was my idea of penance."

"This is unbelievable! The easy way out, huh? Seeking solace in your religion because you know you betrayed it once. How is it turning out for you?"

"That is not true. It has never been simple."

Silence.

"Tell me one thing, why did dad fire you?"

"He got to know, Will. But I told him you were just a child who just did as asked."

"You could've told me. I would've stood by your side."

"I know you would have. When I came to see you in Dublin, I could see it in your eyes that you loved me. You just couldn't admit it. But I would have ruined your future if I stayed."

"Oh, so now are you happy with what you've done?"

"Please don't talk like this. You saved my life, Will. I was a good-for-nothing. I couldn't concentrate on any job I got. So I decided to jump into the river. Set myself free. But you called me back to life, Will. I heard you screaming my name. I didn't drown."

"I had nightmares, you know. I used to wake up screaming your name."

Silence.

"I would really like to meet your family."

"That would not be necessary."



Illustration: Tanaya Rao Raj

"Go back to your life, Will."

"God loves us all."

"Do you not love me anymore?"

"The priest in you is starting to annoy me."

"I take your name before Christ in every prayer, every single day."

"Bring Josephine to me when she is old enough to understand all of this."

"What do we do now?"

"I could never muster the courage to tell her."

"Forget about it."

"I would. She must know, Will."

"How can I now, when I couldn't in the last fifteen years?"

"What about us? Can you live the rest of your life locked up with your God?"

"You have a family, Will. Think about your daughter. *(Pauses)* What did you name her?"

"Go in peace. The Lord has put away all your sins."

"Josephine."

"Don't you even want to see me? I could wait outside."

Silence.

"I wish I had the strength to watch you leave and do nothing about it again."

"Is she baptised?"

"Not yet. I don't want to raise her as Catholic."

"I love you, Joseph."

"Why? Because you regret being one?"

"Amen."

"Don't you, father?"

With heavy footsteps, William walks away from the church, his head bowed.

RETURN TO SENDER



Wynona Alwyn

My neighbour is one of those annoying wannabe YouTube personalities. Over the years, I've seen him cough out cinnamon, lay flat on the hood of his car as it slowly creeps down the driveway, and douse himself in lukewarm water, all the while screaming epic win, epic fail, or some other shit for all I know. It can get tiring to watch him go about his shenanigans in the pursuit of viral fame. So, when he knocked on my door the other day, told me he was going away for a few weeks and asked that I get his mail, honestly, it was a relief. I can't explain the peace of mind I had knowing I didn't have to brace myself for any of his loud stupidity for a while. I was always afraid his stunts would wind up bleeding over into my life.

Things were pretty normal for the first couple of days. He received a few bills, a bit of spam, and what I could only assume was a birthday card. Then, one evening, I got home to find a cardboard box waiting on his front porch. In big red letters was written "Return to Sender".

I'm no small fry, but I must admit I had trouble lifting the box on my own. It was really freaking heavy. Lugging it across the road to my house was even harder, and I quickly realized there was no way I was going to drag it up the stairs and through my front door. I decided I'd leave his package in my garage. It wasn't like I kept my car in there: the garage door was a piece of shit that refused to open without a good thug and a whack. It was less trouble just leaving the car in the driveway than it was to fight with the garage door every morning and night. In hindsight, I should have set the package down

while I struggled to open the tricky door, but you know how it is when you've got a good grip on something, no point in setting it down if you don't have to.

It was as I kicked the door for a third time that I lost my grip on the package, and it fell to the ground. I heard a light crack inside.

"Shit," I cursed.

I hoped I hadn't broken anything important, but figured I just wouldn't tell my neighbour about it and let him assume the break happened en-route.

Hands free, I finally managed to get the garage door unstuck, and boy did it screech in protest as it rolled up and over me. I dragged the box the rest of the way, setting it in the corner for whenever my neighbor would come back to claim it. And then, I forgot all about it. Until a few days passed, that is.

I'm not sure exactly how long it took for the smell to waft in from the crack under the garage-to-house door, but it came in in slow progression. It was a sickly sweet odor similar to a skunk, and for the first few days after I smelled it, I genuinely assumed that's exactly what it was: roadkill that had left its mark on my house. It was only when I realized the scent was growing more intense instead of fading that I went looking for a source. That's when I opened the garage door, and that's when the odor knocked me back, holding my nose.

The culprit wasn't hard to identify. The only change in my garage was the box in the corner. I remember

thinking it must have been one of those meat-of-the-month subscription boxes. The meat must have gone rancid from being left out of the fridge for so long. How much meat could have been in there for the box to have been so large and heavy? An entire freaking cow?

I covered my nose as I approached the box, a pair of scissors in my hands. I probably wouldn't have needed them to open it, as it had become soggy enough at the bottom to poke through with a finger, but I wasn't about to poke my finger into spoiled meat juices. That soggy bottom was the reason I had to open the box in the first place. If I tried to drag it out whole, everything would spill onto the floor. I was going to have to dump the pieces of meat one garbage bag at a time, and take them down to the dumpster, a process I wasn't looking forward to.

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How much meat could have been in there for the box to have been so large and heavy? An entire freaking cow?

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Illustration: Kattayani Joag-Samant

My scissors tore through the tape along the top of the cardboard box. I thought the smell couldn't get any worse, but as I flipped the flaps open, I discovered a whole new world of stink. It was like opening a burning oven, but instead of a heat wave, I was met with waves of piss, sweat, shit, and putrefaction. It was so bad that I staggered back and had to force down the puke begging to guzzle out of me. I don't think I could have handled that scent mingling with the horrors coming out of the box. I'm not ashamed to admit I ran out the door for a breath of fresh air, but in the short time I'd spent in the garage, the smell had become so ingrained in the fabric of my clothes that it clung to me like a shadow.

Nothing I tried could keep the smell out of my nostrils. Not air fresheners, not a face mask, not three showers and a change of clothes. Every second that box lay open in my garage was another second the smell was allowed a foothold into my home. I had to bite

the bullet.

I returned to the garage, the flaps of the box still open as though inviting me to look. I was prepared, a clothespin pinning my nostrils shut, a garbage bag in one hand, the strongest cleaner I could find in the other, and long rubber gloves to keep my skin from having to touch what was inside. But, as it turns out, I needed none of those things.

I wouldn't have to touch or clean the contents of that box, I would only have to suffer the nightmares every night. You see, there was meat in that box, but it didn't come from a cow or a pig. No, it was worse than that. It was my neighbour. Dead. Still in one piece, but dead.

I called the cops, and naturally, they took me in for interrogation. It's kind of hard not to suspect the man with a corpse in his garage, after all. Thankfully, they soon realized I wasn't

involved. My DNA might have been all over that box, the smell might have left a mark throughout my house, but there was one piece of irrefutable evidence in my neighbour's own hands that proved my innocence: a logging camera.

They showed me the footage only once. I'm not sure if they were allowed to, or if they felt so bad for me they figured it couldn't hurt. Either way, I saw it.

My neighbour was sitting in the box outside of a shipping facility, laughing as he told the world how he was going to mail himself across state lines. He'd brought pee bottles, food, a pillow, and a few flashlights. His friend – a guy I'd seen at his place several times to help with his stunts – closed the lid and presumably dropped him off for shipment. Throughout the next couple of hours... or days, I'm honestly not sure, my neighbour recorded a few short clips about his progress. "I



think I'm in a truck now, I can feel it moving", 'Must be in a warehouse. Pretty warm here. Still got plenty of food!', that kind of stuff. And then, on the last entry, he talked about how he should have reached home by now, looking at his stupid glow in the dark watch. Mid-sentence, the box toppled over followed by a low dragging sound. He broke his neck, and that was it. The camera recorded until either the memory card got too full, or the battery died.

There's one thing I didn't tell the police after they showed me the video. One thing I heard in the footage that will haunt me to the day I die. Just after the tumble that broke his neck, I heard the familiar screeching sound of my garage door.

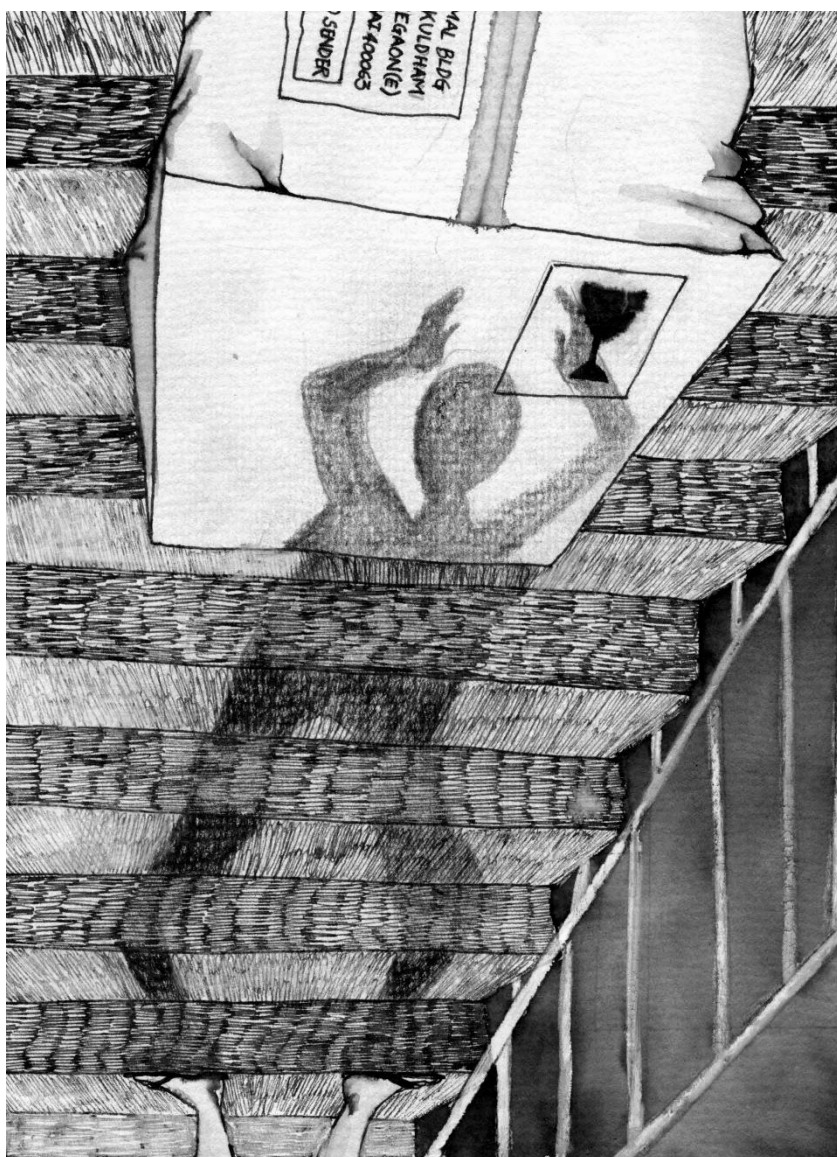


Illustration: Kattyayani Joag-Samant

BURGER OVER KEBABS



Mehul Bhardwaj

“Welcome to Burger Express. May I take your order?” I asked without looking up. My mind was focused on the computer screen in front of me which had started malfunctioning again. I tried the good old Indian remedy first – I gave the computer a hearty smack. The crack of skin contacting skin filled my ears.

I looked up to see a mother scolding her six-year-old. The poor boy was crying, his cheeks red from the blow and his ears red with embarrassment. This is what we’re best at. Smacking our machines and kids. It does work sometimes though. My computer screen had lit up again. The same couldn’t be said for the kid.

I smiled as wide as I could. “May I take your order, ma’am?”

“I’d like a double chicken and small fries.” she said, unsmiling.

“Anything else, ma’am?” I asked, looking at the kid.

“No that’ll be all”, she replied as she started fumbling with her purse.

I took the chance and slipped a toy from the happy meal section into the boy’s hand. His mother saw it.

“I’m not paying for that...” she began. “You don’t have to, ma’am. Here’s your order.” I interrupted. I wanted to fling the bag in her face but decided against it. I didn’t give her extra ketchup. She grabbed the bag and her boy before hurrying outside. I felt a familiar ache in my stomach as I watched them leave. Mummy never used to hit me like that. Even at her worst, she was always calm. She was the rope that used to keep our family

together.

I needed a break. I looked around for my only friend in the place. I found her turning the heat for the fries.

“Aradhya, could you please cover for me? I need a moment.” I begged her.

“Yeah, sure, but be quick about it.” she said, coming over to my counter.

I mouthed “I love you” and started my way towards the washroom before my manager caught me. He was a towering Sikh with a glowering stare. The ‘manager’ badge on his chest was level with my eyes and that’s what I stared at as he stood before me.

“If I see you doing that again, I’ll make sure you’re never behind that counter again. Do you understand me?” he bellowed.

“Yes, sir.” I said sheepishly before making my way towards the washroom again. I slipped out of the back door in the washroom that led to a small alley. I took out the last crumpled cigarette and lit it at once. My shoulders relaxed as nicotine spread its trap in my blood. I had picked up the habit a few months earlier and I wasn’t proud of it. But working double shifts after college in an unknown city had made me vulnerable. Being ‘independent’ and paying your own bills, living on your own terms, all this had seemed something to look forward to, but a few months in the real world came like winds of change.

I hurried back inside before the manager could notice my absence. I was relieved to see that Aradhya had not left the counter.

“I owe you one.” I said as I reached the counter.

“Wear the stupid cap. The manager is already pissed at you.” she said, noticing my lush curly hair.

“I don’t like the colour. Why do I work for a company that has an orange uniform?” I said, but put the cap back on.

I smiled at the next customer before noticing the man who had entered through the front door. He had dense curly hair and a wiry frame quite like my own. He was wearing a kurta pajama and had more wrinkles than when I had last seen him. I blinked my eyes to make sure I wasn’t hallucinating. It was my father.

“

I felt a familiar ache in my stomach as I watched them leave. Mummy never used to hit me like that. Even at her worst, she was always calm. She was the rope that used to keep our family together.

”



Illustration: Anurekha Deb

He took the table in the corner and sat unblinkingly, staring at the menu. Why is he here, I wondered as I took the order of the next customer. I tried hard not to, but I found myself looking at him again and again. On the other hand, he hadn't changed his position a bit. He was always a strong-willed man, my father. I had admired him a lot when I was a kid. He had lost his own father at an early age and had laboured hard to take his small kebab stall to a big restaurant in Indore. He had rarely left Indore in his life. But he was in Delhi today. He shifted his seat a bit and I noticed his hair was greyer. The first ones had appeared after my mother succumbed to cervical cancer four years ago. Things had changed a lot after that. The loss was hard on me and I suffered a lot emotionally. It was different for my father. Death of a close one wasn't something new to him but I knew he was mourning inside. On the outside he had turned distant and sullen. My grades started dipping and our

relationship turned sour. I secretly blamed him for ignoring my mother's constant complains of back pain and swollen legs as her cancer was discovered in the advanced stages. He labelled me 'weak' as I couldn't handle myself much less help him in his business. After a while we both recovered from my mother's death in our own ways. My grades improved and so did my father's business. Our relationship on the other hand kept deteriorating.

My father finally moved, joined the queue for another billing counter, different from mine. I kept my eyes on him even when I was typing out orders. But he didn't look at me once. I thought this was really strange. Why come all the way from Indore to Delhi if you don't even want to see me? Was this visit only to check if I was alive? And how did he even find me? Only a couple of friends in Indore knew where I worked and they had assured me that they would not tell

my father. I thought he must have got it out of them somehow. He moved back to his seat and sat facing the window so I could only see his back. As I typed down orders I remembered the last conversation I had with him. It was a week after the class twelfth Board results had come out.

"I want to go to Delhi." I told him as we were having dinner in the drawing room. We were still living in the old 1BHK flat even though we had a bigger flat. This one smelled of mother.

"Isn't Indore big enough for you to waste your time?" he replied.

"I want to study economics in DU." I said, ignoring his jab. I had scored a 99 in economics in the Boards and was looking forward to pursue a career in this subject. My father laughed in my face.

"And what will you do after that?" he



asked with a smile. I didn't like the way this conversation was going.

"I'm serious papa. Why do you think I'll be joking about it? I have thought about it, and I really want to do this." "And what have you thought about it huh! Where will you live? Do you know the rent of a 1BHK flat in Delhi?" his smile had vanished now.

"Suraj, my senior from school has a flat there and he's in DU too." I countered.

"And how will you manage there all alone? Who will be there to carry you though your breakdowns?"

"I am eighteen now, papa. An adult. Don't you think I am old enough to study in another city? Even the fee is not much. And I can handle my breakdowns pretty well now."

"What about the restaurant? Who will manage the restaurant here? Don't you see I'm getting old? Hardly a day goes by when my back doesn't trouble me. In some years I won't be able to sit in the restaurant the whole day. Who will take the responsibility, huh?" my father had begun shouting.

"Mother used to complain of back pain too." I said quietly.

"What did you say?" My father got up from the chair.

"Mummy used to complain of back pain too", I said loudly looking squarely in his face.

He raised his hand and whipped it across my face. My cheek was burning but I didn't move an inch, not taking my eyes off him. He slapped me again. My head snapped to the side with the blow this time.

"Do whatever you want to do. Go wherever you want to. Just don't show me your face."

That was the last time I had heard his voice. I had left the house two days later and was living with Suraj ever since. I paid for my fee and food by working double time in the fast food joint.

But the past few months had been hard. I had lost a lot of weight and was barely getting enough sleep. I was tired of smiling and was telling myself otherwise, but the truth was that I was miserable. The sight of my father had further aggravated that feeling.

My father had finished his meal and was getting up to leave. He didn't even look at me. Grief spread through me like wildfire. I wanted to sit down and weep. I was the same kid my father had described. The kid who couldn't survive on his own in the big city. The kid who couldn't deal with bully managers. I wanted to tell my father that I'd help him with the restaurant and I just wanted to go home. Mother was there too.

My father went out. I made up mind. I took off the stupid cap and followed him outside.

"Papa!" I called out, choking back tears. He turned and I was shocked to see him smiling.

"So, have you had enough now?" he asked.

"What?" I replied.

"I said, have you had enough now? You wanted a taste of the big city. And it looks like the city is faring you well." he said.

I stood unblinking, thinking of a response. He continued when I couldn't find one, "Come back with me now and all will be forgiven. I was surprised when you didn't come back in a few weeks. But it's clear that you're struggling and you won't last long. Be a sensible kid and come with me."

"Is that why you're here?" I asked.

"Yes. To remind you of your duty and take you home." he replied.

"No." I said, and turned. I couldn't stand his smug face any longer. I could hear him calling out as I walked back to the restaurant. Ignoring the manager's glaring eyes, I put my cap and smile back on.

"Welcome to Burger Express. May I take your order?"

A STROLL



Sowmya Mikkilineni

Picking at some weeds in the rose-bed in my part of the garden I start to reminisce about the days when my *Mama* used to let me tag along when he went to work on his paddy fields. He used to talk extensively about sowing and harvesting and I could hardly understand anything of what he was saying. An ache builds up in my chest and my mind goes in the inevitable direction that it does every time I think of him.

I ran out to the *verandah* on that fateful day, grabbed my slippers with my hand and sprinted up the street not paying attention to *Amma's* "You get back here RIGHT NOW, Chinnu!" Fearing that she would send *Anna* to get me, and him being much faster than my 5-year old self, I went at full speed. I slowed down at the edge of the market, put on my slippers and pushed my way through the crowd.

I was still seething at the events that had led to my flight. How could she have grabbed my toy truck and fling it at the floor? My favourite truck too! A gift from *Mama*. It was the same yellow colour as his tractor. I hated her. I swore to never ever go back home. Oh, how I wished *Mama* had not gone away to search for a job. Why did he need a job when he had huge rice fields? I missed spending time with him; I missed not having him support my antics at home.

I walked forward towards the woman yelling "A dozen oranges just for five rupees!" over and over again. I stared up at her and the other women passionately haggling. Standing on my toes, I stretched out my hand, picked an especially orange looking orange and walked away. I was going

to peel it when a hand descended and yanked it out my hand. I turned around and saw the selling lady waving her finger at me and saying something with a frown but it all faded out because I saw one of her teeth glint. A gold tooth! My eyes widened. Screaming, I pointed at it, stumbled and ran for dear life.

Stopping in front of the *jalebi* stand, I caught my breath and looked around for the *jalebi* owners' cat. I heard the familiar "meow" and spotted her digging around in the dumpster. I picked her up and walked over to a bench nearby. She settled down on my lap, and I stroked her soft fur. I had named her Maya after my favourite comic book character. Maya also had a brother who lived in the gully in front of our house. Purring, Maya listened to all my woes with an ear twitch for a response. I wondered idly how good life would be if cats could talk human.

"Oi!" I said out loud and stood up abruptly making Maya hiss. Great big clouds had gathered and a flash of lightning in the evening sky had startled me. I did a spontaneous little happy dance in the middle of the road and wondered maybe if I should head back home after all. *Amma* used to make onion pakora when it rained and they were quite unbeatable.

By now I had reached the end of the street and so decided to pay my *Appa* a visit. I went up the stairs to the shop that bought old newspapers. I spotted him at the back of the shop talking to another man with a beard up to his stomach and walked over to them. He looked at me, surprised to see me there, alone. I told him all about the horrific event that had transpired a

while back and how I had stormed out of the house. Upon hearing my rant, *Appa* turned to his bearded friend and said, "I will meet with you tomorrow, Guru," and after the man left, grabbed me by the ear and dragged me out the shop. I cried out in pain while my unsympathetic *Appa* hoisted me up into his arms and walked swiftly back towards our house.

He set me down at our door and I escaped inside, dodging *Amma* and kicking at one of the truck's broken parts. I came across *Anna* sitting by the kitchen door, chewing on sugarcane. Nudging him over I settled in his lap and while fidgeting with his fingers, I drifted to sleep.

I woke up spread eagled on my bed and upon hearing voices out in the hall I quickly slipped out and saw that everyone was talking in high-strung

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I came across Anna sitting by the kitchen door, chewing on sugarcane. Nudging him over I settled in his lap and while fidgeting with his fingers I drifted to sleep.

”



voices. Noticing that my *Attai* had come over, I ran to her excitedly to give her a leg-hug only to notice that she was sobbing uncontrollably. Confused, I turned and looked at my *Amma* and was surprised to see her crying as well on my *Appa's* shoulder. I went to them and forced my way into *Amma's* arms and asked her why she was crying. She just shook her head and hugged me a bit too tightly. "Ow *Amma*, let me go". I squirmed out of her embrace and asked my dad if he knew why everyone was crying. He didn't say a word either. I looked for *Anna* and found him toying with his radio and listening intently; I went over to him and tried to get him to say something.

"You know how *Mama* went far away for work? Well, the place he is in is in danger and everyone is scared that he might never come back."

"No way *Anna*." I said, "Before he left, he promised me he'd come back with sweets. He will definitely come"

I went over to my *Attai* and told her not to worry, because *Mama* had promised me, and he always kept his promises. On hearing this, she hugged me and started crying even louder, cursing the gods.

Dusting my hands on my kurta, I go inside the house and fish out the old sari bundle which held the broken parts of the truck from eighteen years ago. I had tried several times to assemble them together with cellophane but had failed. If only *Mama* was here he could have fixed it. But he wasn't. And neither was my father who had gone in vain to rescue my uncle from the floods. In just a week our entire lives had fallen apart like the pieces of the truck. But we had picked them up and managed to get through. With a sigh I go back into the garden and stroll through the colourful flower beds plucking at the stubborn weeds occasionally. As my *Appa* often said, '*zendagi migzara*'.

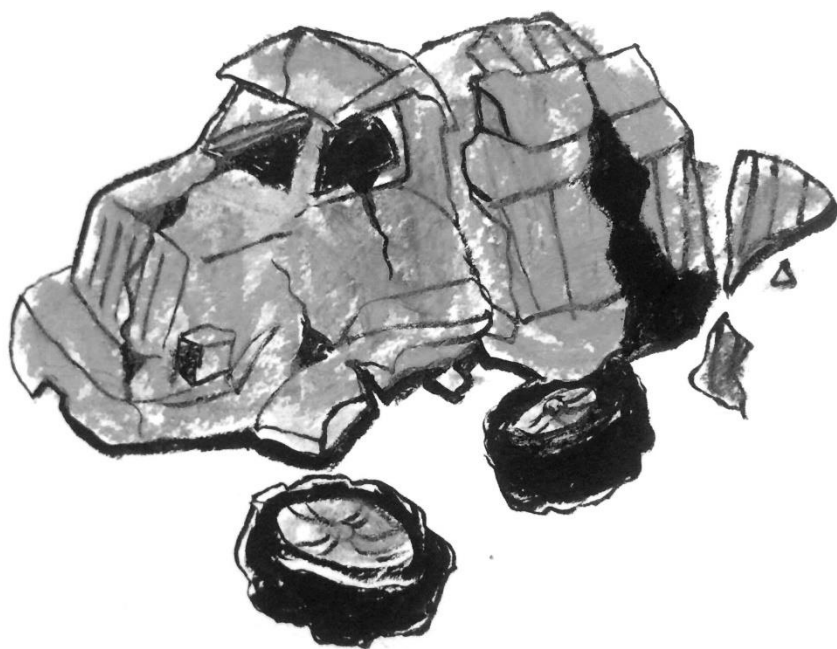


Illustration: Anurekha Deb

MILK (THICK AND THERAPEUTIC)



Kanishk Kakar

Uttar Pradesh, 1976

Usually, the shrubs flanking the path from Azulpur to Lucknow preferred to spend the afternoon dancing about with the summer wind in lazy frivolity. That day, however, they quivered in morbid anticipation as one after another was disfigured by the blood-stained feet of a rather skeletal boy who was too short for his years, all nine of them, all mired in shit and sweat and tears.

Rahul ran ahead with his lips pressed tight, careful not to let air escape his parched lips. That'd be a waste of energy; if there was one thing spending his childhood in a slum had taught him, it was that you never wasted anything. Ever. There was water in *soo-soo* too, his mother had once told him during the drought ten months ago as Charkhi restrained his dehydrated yet protesting self. He had glued his lips together then as well, and it was his sister who'd managed to open them in wonder at something he was still amazed by, like an astronomer sitting forever under the night sky.

Do you know why you're called Rahul and I'm called Charkhi? It's because we have to stay together. Because your name means rope and mine means pulley.

A thatched roof loomed into view amongst the dust, and Rahul prayed to anyone who'd listen – not God, slum kids rarely believed in an entity that granted wishes in exchange for faith in Him – that the *hakim* was there, that he'd have milk and medicine. He'd grit his teeth again and get Charkhi her weekly dose, then figure out another lie to tell

Mother when she asked him how he bought them.

The hut was too large and too clean to earn that moniker, but too dark and unwelcoming to be called a house. The stone pathway leading into the complex was enveloped by creepers.

Creepers terrified Rahul. *Creepers, as in creepy, as in something so disgusting it haunts you*, Charkhi had taught him.

He was greeted with the familiar smile of thirty-one white teeth and one rotting canine that wiggled dangerously when the middle-aged man shook his head. He gave him tea, as usual, that went untouched, as usual, and asked meandering, meaningless questions that went unanswered. As usual.

“What do you want, Rahul? You look awfully sad today. What's going on?” Two words streamed out, no hesitation to trip them over. Almost as though they'd been practiced.

“Milk. Medicine.”

“Ah, well. Little Charkhi again, is it?”

“Yes.”

“Well, let's see”, he said, toying with Rahul. “This one here will cost you ten rupees, and this one”, he closed his eyes and muttered calculations, “...the total is twenty-five rupees, my dear friend.”

“I don't have that much.” Rahul replied simply.

“Well, if you put it that way...” his head cocked to the side and the canine took centre stage again.

The child stared back at the *hakim*, renowned in the village for his knowledge and civility. He motioned

with a flamboyant flourish of his arm for Rahul to sit on the little stool. He took off his slippers and slowly lowered himself on to the taller one, smiling like a fat diabetic promised a bag of sweets.

The *dhoti* fell quickly, quicker than Rahul's eyelids could manage to cover his pupils. His hand was muscular and hairy. Rahul's was bony and smooth. The former guided the latter gently, but firmly. The slum child vowed not to shudder as his fingers clasped around the veined organ, warm, pulsating, hard.

“Smoothly this time, shall we?”

Rahul's arm muscles moved of the *hakim's* accord, up and down.

“

Two words streamed out, no hesitation to trip them over. Almost as though they'd been practiced.

“Milk. Medicine.”

”



Milk and medicine.

“So, I heard the dogs in your colony are getting money from the government. Do you people even understand money, or do you simply trade in Gandhi portraits? I honestly don’t get why the shits in your locality keep grovelling at the *babus*’ shoes. Look at you getting medicine to save your dying sister. You work, and you get paid. All because I’m the bigger man.”

Something made him chuckle. His breathing was getting ragged.

Milk and medicine.

“It’s very simple, way I see it. You’re like my investment. You make my day a little better, and you help your sister get a little better. Maybe when she starts walking again, you can bring her here for a more direct dosage of milk.”

His monologue was punctuated by

the same low groan Rahul had learnt to fear. He kept his eyes clasped shut as the thick fluid flowed over his hand, digging nightmares into its skin.

Milk and medicine.

Thirty minutes later, he was back at his sister’s side, waiting for her to wake up and take the medicine with the milk the *hakim* had given to him in a bottle. If Rahul was skeletal, she was a corpse; her ribcage was visible through the thin shirt as her chest rose and fell, labouring under the chore of breathing. He lovingly brushed his left hand through her silken hair, careful to keep the right one away from anything until he went to the river later in the evening. She blinked lazily; the fever showed in the redness of her eyeballs.

“Back so soon?” she whispered through her chapped lips.

“I run fast.”

“Yeah, well”, she whimpered as she attempted to sit up, “not so much when you’re running with me, do you?”

Rahul didn’t respond. He handed her everything she needed to take, then sat cross-legged on the floor and watched her silently. Later, he’d know that what his heart ached with right now was pity for her when she tried in vain to make meaningful conversation, puzzled by why her brother didn’t crack jokes anymore. Why he didn’t laugh anymore. Why he preferred to sit cross-legged, moving backwards and forwards, like a rotting canine in a grinning, overeager face.

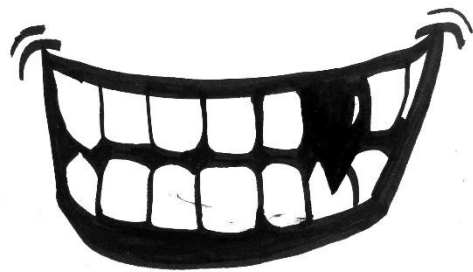


Illustration: Anurekha Deb



Illustration: Anurekha Deb

Review

SOLAR BONES



Uday Kanungo

Only a handful of books come to mind when one tries to sift from memory narratives which explored the vibrant aesthetic possibilities which lie dormant in everyday science, waiting

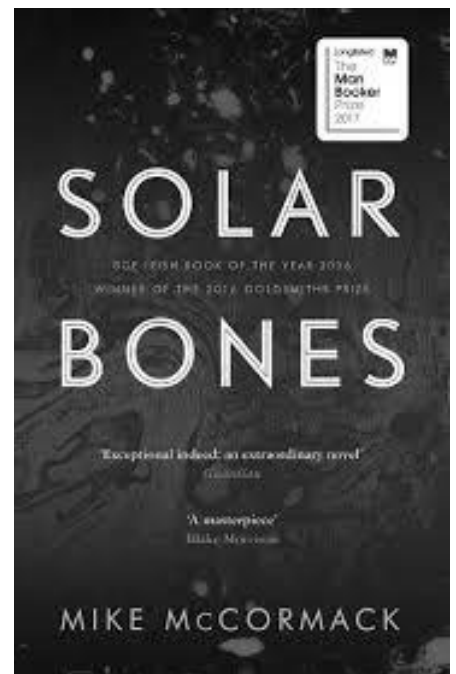
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The physical world gone down in flames mountains, rivers and lakes and pulling with it all those human rhythms that bind us together and draw the world into a community, those daily rites, rhythms and rituals upholding the world like solar bones, that rarefied amalgam of time and light whose extension through every minute of the day is visible from the moment I get up in the morning and stand at the kitchen window with a mug of tea in my hand...

”

for a poet's precise touch. Philip K. Dick did it in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, Delillo in *White Noise*, and recently Ted Chiang in *Story of Your Life* (which saw the Technicolor light of day in Denis Villeneuve's *Arrival*). Somehow one is swirling in eddies of sci-fi and gadgets, futuristic currents which often land in dystopian shorelands, somehow one is shorn of the rhythm of daily life, the footsteps of an everyman.

McCormack's *Solar Bones* is very much about these rhythms and rituals which rock the mundane but quaint world of West Mayo, Ireland; but surely one of its small victories is that the civic trials and tribulations are shot through with incisive commentary by its protagonist, Marcus Conway, County civil engineer – as banal as it sounds but not banally written – who sees his profession's pros and cons through a cosmic lens. In a refreshing inversion, it is not the ponderous, pensive, Sartre-drunk French-speaking academic who thinks, but the man who issues contract forms and measures rates of percolation (in fact, it is his wife who fills the previous criteria). Contemplating about 'mountains, valleys and bogs', about the nature of the interventions that engineers put through the course of



natural streams when they build bridges, dams and houses, McCormack's book reads best when cross-breeding the elements of nature and science with the streams of consciousness that a single mind handles, and it often does so with prose that which animates the daily marginalia of an average life – knives, tractors, and office cabins.

Ample note has been taken about the formal conceit of the book – a single, stuttering sentence meandering through the bends of several



Photo: Mike McCormack

reminiscences and fears. Fortunately, McCormack takes only as much as needed; any excess and the balance tips over to the side of 'gimmicky' rather than 'heartfelt'. The single strain of voice brilliantly replicates the cadence of a Ghost's speech, a systolic thump which pumps word after anxious word to rein in snippets from his boyhood, youth, fatherhood and marriage - all that man is, to convey how the journey from his father's rudimentary tractor to his fancy equipment (and the suave screens that his children enjoy) is not a simple, unblemished path of progress, but riddled with a host of anxieties.

McCormack probably won't have a choice in the matter, but his novel will be given the customary Irish check, culled from a long line of Irish prose both observing and reversing tradition. In terms of time it draws something from Joyce, and a hat-tip to Flann O' Brien, and in its outlining of silent surroundings John McGahern. Most importantly, it draws upon the myth of All Souls' Day - an interlude when the souls of all are not quite in the living or the dead - but suspended in thoughts. No wonder then, that the best of this book lies in Marcus's cloudbursts of thought regarding death, apocalypse, and suchlike, the

news of it in radio being almost a daily ritual in a small town.

Lastly, this book is a single thinkscape, its spotlight on the memories and thoughts inside, and we need more of those in today's literary world, a world which desperately scampers back to the clamour of 'outside' and 'real' world, is far less willing to think than to shout a verdict, or to project itself on a bigger screen. It is a book to rein in the horses of the mind, and let them focus on a single, albeit quivering strain.

Review

LONE FOX DANCING



Ishita Singh

From not so blissful childhood to a writer on the hills, a journey less of surprises and more of nostalgia.

If you grew up reading Ruskin Bond's works, the autobiography *Lone Fox Dancing* does not come with much of surprises. The small, tiny and big incidences that took in his life have

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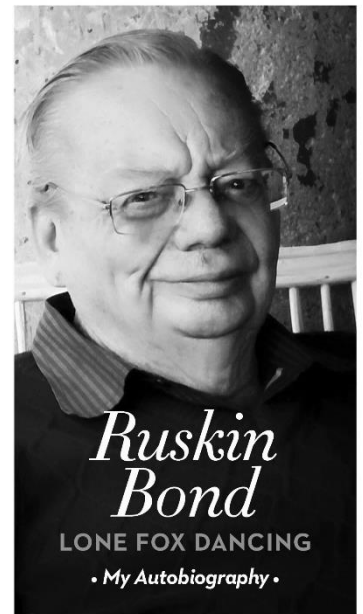
For that man is strongest
who stands alone.

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been fictionalized in many of his works. Throughout the book one would be able to associate the people Bond describes with various characters in older works.

The autobiography is divided into four parts, mapping the journey of his personal and his professional life. The book is even more fascinating because Bond includes the pictures “of a little boy who ate a lot of Kofta Curry and was used to having his way” to his present writer self, with people who have helped Bond create bewitching characters in his earlier works, from Khaansama and Nanny, to friends he grew attached to while living in Dehradun as a child. While reading one realizes how Bond helps readers travel the familiar landscape of Dehradun in his popular literary works, such as *The Boy from the Hills* and *The Blue Umbrella*.

Bond penned a poem “Lone Fox Dancing” where he says, “Sometimes when words ring true/ I'm like a lone fox dancing/ In the morning dew,”. He begins his autobiography, that shares the same name, with the words, “Even a fox needs a family”, accepting his need to belong. The idea of acceptance seems to be very crucial in his work. Surprisingly, his



loneliness as a child does not reflect in his works, which were mostly for children. Bond discloses many aspects of his life like the “torrid affair” that he was a result of. He even shares which life he preferred more, and who was his favourite parent. The divorce of his parents is no secret, but surprisingly the quarrels between his parents are noted as footnote to an 'idyllic childhood'. He says, “For better or for worse, we are all shaped by our parents.” He reveals the reason why he chose to remain unmarried which seems to be a true revelation.



Photo: Ruskin Bond

Bond's language has always been able to capture our attention easily and thoroughly. Here, too, he has not failed us. Instantly you find yourself experiencing his life from his perspective. *Lone Fox Dancing* is for all those who have enjoyed Bond's books through the years, as it is a giveaway to where he got most of his literary inspiration from.

The tone of the narrative, however, is very slow. The book could have been edited better to make it crisper. The brilliance of Bond's writing feels overshadowed by brooding monologues that could have been cut down. But once engaged with the text, one would not want to keep the book down. The book seems to appeal more so

to the people who have read his previous works as compared to people who have not. Even still, his interesting life might appeal to audiences of all ages, in general.

Review

WHEN I HIT YOU:

OR, A PORTRAIT OF THE WRITER AS A YOUNG WIFE



Zoya Chadha

In March 2012, *Outlook* ran the account of a woman who had escaped an abusive marriage. The piece sketched a series of shocking incidents as the author related, rapidly, the drastic turn that her husband took soon after the wedding. She endured his behaviour for months, she said.

This was not the last time that she

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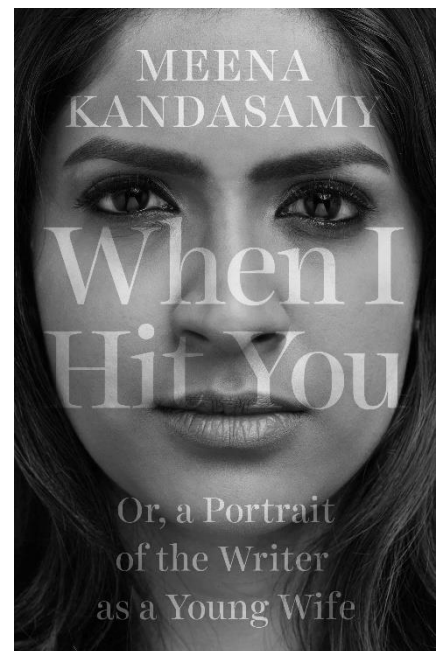
Abstractions are easy, but my story, like every woman's story, is something else.

”

would tell this story. For Meena Kandasamy, the woman in question, and already an established writer by the time, would continue to write. And five years later, she would go on to publish *When I Hit You*, a work that while presented as fiction is still heavily framed by autobiographical elements.

Unsurprisingly, Kandasamy's novel carries the force of its truth like a second skin. For this story of violence, while undoubtedly personal, is also a tale with something of a universal echo. The unnamed narrator is a wife abused physically and mentally, but she is also a feminist, a poet, and a writer who carries all of herself into a marriage. Instead of a mutual partnership, she soon finds herself at the heart of this story, where her voice is dulled, daily, against the filing of her oppressor's knife.

While the sections that narrate abuse at the hands of the husband are graphic and haunting, what really makes the novel come into its own are the stolen moments of rebellion. It is when the protagonist finds herself alone that the author's skill really comes through, it is here that every word becomes part of a larger struggle against the patriarchal



foundations of our times. And the novel's craft is such that both tones of narrative heighten the effect of the other, and culminate in a rhythm that precludes certainty.

The author's understanding of language and its possibilities, as well as its inadequacies, renders her already powerful prose all the more devastating. If there is one thing that can keep the reader hinged onto a potentially triggering novel such as this, it is the writing. And like Kandasamy, the protagonist is an



author whose control over words appears seamless, even in rage. It is frightening, then, that even with her prowess with the written word, she struggles against the very real fear of losing control over her own narrative.

When I Hit You is a remarkable book for a number of reasons, and it is quite precisely reflective of its narrative strategies. What kinds of stories, after all, do we desire from survivors? To whom do they owe their experiences? Must they fit within our neat paradigms of justice, or forever be left martyred in judicial limbo and social memory? Kandasamy's writing envelopes and eclipses these questions as she dismantles the monolithic perception of a battered wife, and implicates far more than just the husband in the trauma that the protagonist undergoes. And one of the gems that the that the novel provides is an inescapable, shattering response to anyone who asks: *but why didn't she just leave?*



Photo: Meena Kandasamy

Review

EXIT WEST



Jasleen Kaur Bagga

“...and when she went out it seemed to her that she too had migrated, that everyone migrates, even if we stay in the same houses our whole lives, because we can’t help it. We are all migrants through time.”

Shortlisted for the 2017 Man Booker Prize and a New York Times bestseller, *Exit West* is Mohsin Hamid’s fourth novel. It is a

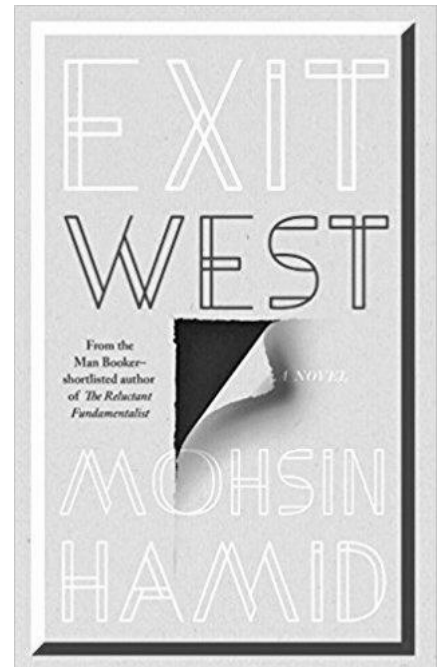
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...and when she went out it seemed to her that she too had migrated, that everyone migrates, even if we stay in the same houses our whole lives, because we can’t help it. We are all migrants through time.

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beautifully written piece of fiction recounting the story of a migrant couple who flee from their country under the grip of a raging civil war and make their way to various other nations such as Greece, England and then eventually the United States in order to start their lives anew. The unnamed country inhabited by Saeed and Nadia attains the status of a representational world in the contemporary times, symbolic of a space, which howsoever hostile or perilous, still embodies the concept of home and that which offers a sense of security and certainty. This recognizable aspect is soon lost when the violence escalates and the inhabitants are compelled to evict their homeland and look for prospects which offer life instead of death. In a blink of an eye, a quest for basic necessities begins which renders the ordinary daily routines an unfamiliar distant reality irrevocably altering their lives.

The plot is also sprinkled with anecdotes about the lives of unnamed characters belonging to different geographical regions yet going through a similar struggle of finding life in the face of death’s omnipresence. The minimalistic detail with regard to most of the characters not merely leaves space for the readers to fill in the gaps with their



experience or knowledge of contemporary reality but also adds an element of universality to their trauma.

Later in the second part of the novel, an element of magic realism is introduced which comes as a relief to the desperate victims of oppression at the hands of the brutal militants. It is interesting how the device of magical doors acting as “the passage that was both like dying and like being born” assists in the exploration of the idea of an odyssey which is undertaken by all those who



Photo: Mohsin Hamid

could afford to buy the tickets to the other world. This cyclical aspect of the journey is sustained throughout the novel which lends the otherwise deeply tragic tone a hint of optimism and hope.

The simplicity of the prose is complicated with the use of dense images and ideas that ends up making it poetic, thereby giving the readers the experience of narrative poetry as well. The brilliance of Hamid's prose lies in the fact that the ominous duality regarding the life of nomad-like refugees is maintained throughout the course of the novel. The lack of description about the temporal and spatial journey undertaken by the

characters across vast stretches of land emphasizes upon the psychological hardships such as a sense of loss and exile – “for when we migrate, we murder from our lives those we leave behind.” The sense of overarching disillusion is undercut every time that Saeed and Nadia move from one place to another, each time encountering a different set of difficulties, and thereby devising different ways to deal with them.

Towards the end when Saeed and Nadia were on the San Francisco bay, Hamid writes, “the apocalypse appeared to have arrived and yet it was not apocalyptic, which is to say that while the changes were jarring

they were not the end...” which seems to encapsulate the essence of the entire novel ending on an optimistic note.

The structural incongruence is compensated by the thematic organic unity which is established fundamentally through the devout character of Saeed for whom prayer becomes a medium to connect to his dead parents. The prayer for loss that “unites humanity, unites every human being, the temporary nature of our being-ness, and our shared sorrow, the heartache we each carry” reminds us, that if nothing else, the entire humanity is united in its pain and suffering.

Review

THE MINISTRY OF UTMOST HAPPINESS

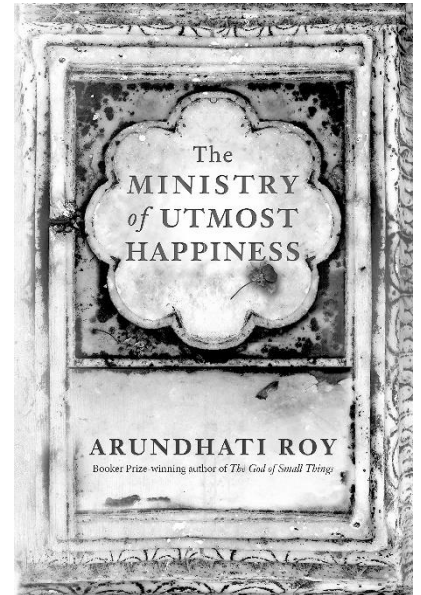


Arghya Chakraborty

How to tell a shattered story?

I do not consider it very proper to talk of an author's work by comparing it to their previous oeuvre, but in case of Arundhati Roy an exception has to be made. Roy's much-anticipated return to the novel after a nearly two-decade long hiatus still has the magnificent aura of her furiously successful debut. This is by no means

to say that this work is of the same species as *The God of Small Things*. Rather, it is a vitally different beast. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* does not have the haunting, almost monomaniacal depth of its predecessor. However, in its stead it opens up a breadth which is dazzling in its scope – reminding us that even if this work isn't of the same species, it shares the same ambitious genus of its predecessor.



Roy's novel is an interesting story of the remarkable intersection of lives in a remarkable city, but it is more than that. It is a mission to craft a metaphor – a metaphor capricious enough to capture the fragmented, violent, and endlessly bizarre subaltern history of this country. Although sometimes visibly strained to its limits, Roy's prose never falters in its ambition. It is fast-paced and intense, seamlessly traversing – or rather as seamlessly as it is possible – between distant shattered landscapes: from the plural *duniyas* of Delhi to the killing fields of Kashmir and The Red Corridor. The characters who populate it are just as diverse and fascinating – an Old Delhi *Hijra*, a Dalit masquerading as a Muslim, a rootless Kerelan architect, an Intelligence Officer, a Kashmiri militant, an ex-revolutionary

journalist, among others – who all serve as the moving elements that allow Roy to tie together an impossibly broad tapestry of lived experiences that denote the fractured reality of India as a country.

How to tell a shattered story?

By slowly becoming everybody.

This reality is assembled in an intense prose that yokes together these heterogeneous elements while skewering duplicitous political figures lightly dressed in the garb of fiction,

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How to tell a shattered story?

By slowly becoming everybody.

No.

By slowly becoming everything.

”



Photo: Arundhati Roy

and unflinchingly decomposing the anatomy of the chronic conflicts that have plagued the country. Roy's politics burst through the pages of the novel at an unapologetic pace with little time or interest in responding to naysayers, choosing instead to simply blaze past the peanut gallery with sharp, merciless invectives conjugated with laconic sarcasm; stoically whizzing through a pinwheel of horror and conflict. This novel shouts with the fiery intellectual voice of Arundhati Roy that has seeped into the public imagination ever since *The God of Small Things* put a spotlight on her. However, it also whispers with traces of the subtle delicacy of her earlier fictional oeuvre, as she does find the time to slow down to lovingly

paint in the canvas of relationships that tie the characters together and coax out their brokenness. The characters are explored in captivating portraiture, assembled from letters, memories, impressions, notes, and interactions. They become potent catalysts which temper the fervid narrative. The broad political brushstrokes are painstakingly woven with a vulnerability that lends stakes to these silenced conflicts and colours its mute victims. For all its fiery polemics, this novel has a profound degree of humanity to it.

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness can leave its reader distraught and consequently with a knot in their stomach in as little as a few

pages, as Roy merges the hardened real, with the surreal, with the magical, pushing the novel to its limits to conjure up that ambitious metaphor. And while there isn't much joy to be found in the novel, from within the shattered darkness emerges a faint glow of hope. It permeates through the narrative, reassuring us with a quiet determination. It is a novel quite easy to fall in love with, despite all its imperfections.

How to tell a shattered story?

By slowly becoming everybody.

No.

By slowly becoming everything.

Review

NORSE MYTHOLOGY

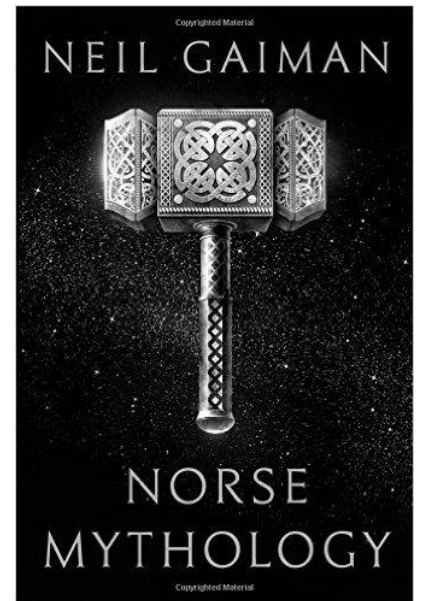


Surabhi Baijlal

Re-introducing the classic tales from the pantheon of Norse Myths, Neil Gaiman's novel titled *Norse Mythology* is an homage to the rich oral tradition of the Northern people. The author has beautifully fashioned these primordial sagas into a collection of stories that begins with the legendary nine worlds. Further, it goes on to narrate the vast and varied

exploits of deities, dwarves and the giants which then leads to Ragnarok, that is, the twilight of the Gods; thus resulting in the eventual birth of a new time and a new people. Further, from this riveting novel, emerge the Gods with their fiendishly competitive natures, their constant propensity to dupe and be duped, and their tenacity to let passion dictate their overtly reckless actions. However, what caught my attention is the fact that despite the collection being a re-telling of these well-known tales, it remains immensely faithful to its source. Gaiman has graphically painted images of the most loved Norse Gods Odin, Thor, and Loki, dispelling the long-held image constructed in various the films and comics created by DC Comics. Odin, the king of the Gods, isn't as benign and wise as we know him to be; he is a wily opportunist who attained his wisdom by sacrificing his eye. Neither is Thor the brightest of the Gods, even though he does possess an incredible amount of strength; nor is Loki pure evil – he is complicated, though a Trickster to the bone. Further, we see these Gods engaging in a battle amongst themselves, or with the elements, and a whole group of evil adversaries.

Gaiman, with his flair, has successfully



made these ancient tales accessible to the ordinary reader. Like always, the author has maintained his signature style: mingling humour with a host of complex characters, and just the right amount of charm. Apart from this, the author has stolen the show by showcasing an unquestionable relationship between the tales and various aspects of the real world. These Gods are very much like us – consumed by intrigue, jealousy, and an insatiable desire for power. This fast-paced and action-packed collection is an enthralling portrait of a time and a people who

“

Until now I have told you of things that have happened in the past, things that happened a long time ago. Now I shall tell you of the days to come.

”



Photo: Neil Gaiman

irrefutably believed in the existence of Odin, Thor and Loki and their many escapades.

Further, Gaiman's work seems to be raising another very important question: Does everything end? Does that mean that the immortal Gods can, just like us humans, become non-entities? Does then the Old Order pass into the New erasing all traces of the past? Well, it most certainly does but literature keeps them alive. It seems that all through this collection of tales

Gaiman has been building towards Ragnarok. We see him very aptly remark:

“Until now I have told you of things that have happened in the past, things that happened a long time ago. Now I shall tell you of the days to come.”

Thus we witness the end of an era: the Gods get embroiled in one last battle. Loki does not fight beside the Gods of Asgard, instead leading the army of the dead. Many Gods perish in this fierce battle and

thereby begins a new era. The progeny of the slain pick up their weapons, marking the change of leadership. This inevitable cycle continues, and Gaiman's work is a masterpiece which has captured the soul of this ancient folklore, breathing much needed new life into it.

Review

THE REFUGEES



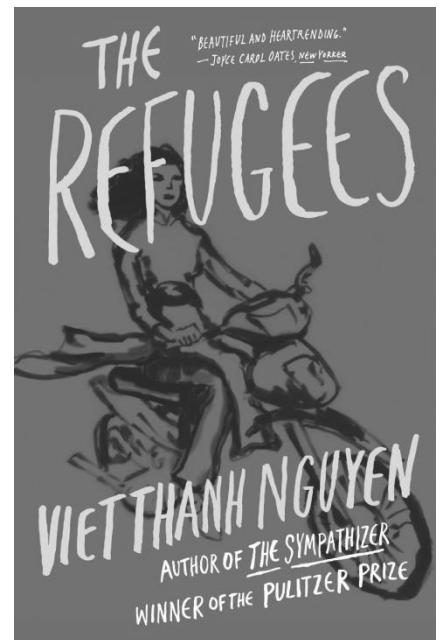
Namita Gupta

An early 2017 publication, this collection of short stories has already received much acclaim as a worthy addition to the oeuvre of Viet Thanh Nguyen. The collection of eight short stories provides a personal twist to the general tone of his writings, as he records the experiences of those poor souls caught between two nations – their homeland which has expelled them, and a country which resists

them. A refugee of the Vietnam war himself, Nguyen's stories capture the fears, the dreams, and the emotions of this in-between state through characters who seem to be pieces of his own life.

The collection opens quite appropriately with a story titled "Black-Eyed Women" which ties together themes of loss, displacement and trauma, as a ghost-writer declares her intention to come out of the shadows to give voice to the ghosts of memories of the war, and in a metafictional moment establishes herself as a mouthpiece for the refugees around the world. The process of writing, the author seems to say, is his way of recovering – not merely from his trauma but also the cultural experiences forever lost in the rubbles of the war. The stories that follow through a negotiation of varied interpersonal relationships, bring out the various aspects of grief and repressed anger in the small community of the survivors, as well as record their interactions with a culture so alien to theirs.

The last story, "The Fatherland" is again, like the first, a bold proclamation – we find in here the most candid portrayal of anger and



disappointments and a direct denouncement of war. Stories that make up the journey from the tone of grief in the first story to the tone of anger and resolution of the last, mark the writer's own process of coming to terms with his past. Certain stories stand out, and we not only get the perspectives of the refugees but also of the veterans who fought in the war, people who had to deal with the burden of killing innocents in a war which was seen in the aftermath as a humiliating moment for America.

“

Stories are just things we fabricate, nothing more. We search for them in a world besides our own, then leave them here to be found, garments shed by ghosts.

”



Photo: Viet Thanh Nguyen

Nguyen displays in his writings a certain sensitivity to issues of marginalization and experiences of other minority communities in America and, in his stories, hints at the undercurrents of xenophobia and racism not out-rightly but through careful and calculated insertions peppered throughout his collection.

The collection in its assertion of the Vietnamese experience, also seems to strongly oppose the 'Americanisation' of the narratives around the war. In the present context, the collection seems to resonate with the deteriorating inter-community ties around the world, and gives a voice to the suffering of thousands of refugees

being created every day.

"In a country where possessions counted for everything, we had no belongings except our stories."

A word after a word after
a word is power.

- Margaret Atwood