

THE FREEWHEELER

2020-21 Volume 01 | Issue 08

The Poetic Parallax

Discover the parallax of perspective while sailing through some wonderful poems.

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An inspiring interview with Gunjan Jain, author of *She Walks She Leads*.

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The Prosaic Paradigm

Travel across dimensions into the fantastical world of gripping tales.

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Faculty Advisor's Message

When the last issue of The Freewheeler came out, the coronavirus pandemic was a few months old. India was coming out of a lockdown and several vaccines were being developed all over the world to combat the virus. Now the virus has been part of our lives for almost a year and going in and out of lockdowns has become part of the new normal even though several vaccines have been rolled out.



In the midst of all this tumult, literature has been a source of comfort for those of us who are immersed in it. It has been our creative outlet, our fountainhead of learning and contemplation, as well as our way to escape the tribulations of the times we live in. One could argue that is the purpose of literature in every age. But I believe it is most keenly felt in times fraught with fear and peril.

The Freewheeler fulfils the purpose of creating literature on the SNU campus. In the process it allows students to flex their creative muscle while giving the entire SNU community the experience of enjoying good creative writing produced by some of its members. Every year we have gone from strength to strength and this year's issue continues that tradition in terms of its excellence. This year we are breaking new ground by featuring poetry for the first time along with prose. A big kudos to all the writers featured in this issue.

Each incarnation of The Freewheeler is the result of the collaborative efforts of a number of students. However, I would like to make special mention of this issue's editors, Rishi Kohli and Sagar Arora, whose hard work makes this incarnation of The Freewheeler possible.

Over the years The Freewheeler has grown into a respected publication. None of that would have been possible without the support of several people. I would like to especially thank my colleagues at the Department of English, who have been behind this endeavour from the start, and the unstinting support of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences without which this magazine would not have been possible.

I thank you all.

Vikram Kapur

Letter from Editor in Chief

This past year has been a tough ride for people all around the world. The global Covid-19 pandemic has made a strong dent in our lives, affecting all the areas of our day-to-day existence. My prayers to all whose lives have been affected by it in any way. On a positive note, now thanks to the global efforts we are getting vaccines. Hopefully, soon we are near the light at the end of this dark tunnel.



Last year when writing the editors letter I affirmed my belief in the therapeutic power of literature, in its ability to transport us into a world outside of our present. I will reiterate this again in this edition of the Freewheeler as well, that literature has great power to not only help us escape into a land of imagination and provide entertainment but also help us learn, contemplate and reflect back on our own reality. A good story, article or poem can change the way we look at the world. In doing so it sometimes improves us as human beings.

I'm happy and confident to say that this edition of Freewheeler is one of the best we have had, with strong creative pieces from our contributors in the form of short stories, poems, and an inspiring and insightful interview by best-selling author Gunjan Jain.

I would like to thank all our contributors for their submissions.

Also, Dr Vikram Kapur under whose guidance this project could see the light of the day.

And last but not the least, the Freewheeler team, without their effort this could not have been brought together into a cohesive whole.

To all the dear reader - happy reading. Enjoy.

Rishi Kohli

Letter from Art Director

I have come across some beautiful stories. Some are in the frame of language, others are pixelated or painted onto a blank canvas. Each expression, however varied, had a similar goal of communication and transcendence. As the Art Director of the 8th Edition of the Freewheeler, I hope that each element of expression laid out in the following pages gains tremendous depth with your reception.



In an attempt to find visuals that would compliment the literary pieces, I found myself searching through my archive of photographs. Every piece would almost call for a certain trait in the visuals, allowing me to add meaning to my perception of the photographs that I clicked in the past. The two-dimensional memory became an alternate reality once associated with an expression of such intensity and curiosity.

Before reading the literary pieces, I had an astronomical theme in mind, to metaphorically represent the happenings of the human world with that of the cosmic. My presumption failed as I realised that the human experience exhibited in the literary pieces demanded more than what is out there, but fairly what is within. Every photograph that I have associated with the piece is just an attempt to compliment the creative creation. The visuals do not hold a deterministic aspiration, but an inspiration for you to follow your thought process by giving it the meaning you think is appropriate.

This edition of the Freewheeler celebrates creativity in every way possible. Professor Vikram Kapur has extended his classes into a pedestal that feeds confidence into the creative minds of Shiv Nadar University.

My gratitude to Gunjan Jain, who was kind enough to guide our readership with her experience as an author. I am sure that her journey will inspire young minds to gain the courage to express themselves.

Sagar Arora

Letter from Sub-Editor

Close your eyes. Breathe in deep. Let it out. Perfect. The thing is, we forget to breathe sometimes for the world keeps bending us backwards. Then one day, the world decided to clutch our hearts with a force uncalled for and wrenched out our hopes when Corona decided to make friends. I, personally, felt lost in my own bubble, let alone have the courage to peek at the world and look at other crumpled faces. Months passed and it only got worse, for now I didn't need to peek anymore. The world decided on its own to bleed into my tiny bubble and so, now, I had to face the fears of the world as well. Ow, my head hurts just recalling all of the madness.



So a few more months later, Dr Kapur gave me the opportunity to contribute to this Edition of The Freewheeler. Finally, after months of succumbing to anxiety, the idea of getting back to this project again felt like a can of peaches. I was overwhelmed with gratitude and enthusiasm. Having Sagar, our Art Director and Rishi, our Editor-in-Chief as fellow contributors to the magazine felt like double that can of peaches. Truth is, I needed a way to balance being in my bubble and being pushed to face the world. Working on this project seemed to provide me with the stick that I needed to help me walk the tight-rope. And I'll forever be grateful to Dr Kapur for showing me the direction to the stick and to Sagar and Rishi for showing me how to use it.

This edition of The Freewheeler is a product of our hopes given form, and we are willing and ready to share all this mountain of hope with you all. I wish you end up taking as much hope as you'd like and when you're ready, pass it on. Sure, the world went bonkers but that only means that you need to learn to be just as crazy to survive. I'm pretty sure you'll find inspiring, fantastical, feel-good and all sorts of craziness inside this collection of hope of ours. I truly hope that this magazine acts as the tether that holds you to hope. The world may have wrenched it out of us but that shouldn't mean we stop making more for fear that the world might do it again.

A bucketload of love, origami rabbits, two more spoons of love and warm moonlight to you on this day.

The Poetic Parallax



Photograph by Sagar Arora

Dry Eyes

My father's eyes reflected his placid temperament,
a façade of confidence and equanimity
Though, his eyes had wizened and dehydrated, caused by a LASIK
surgery to lessen his myopia.

Every morning, the ritual consisted of a coral green bottle of Refresh
Tears ®

Squeezing two drops in the right and two drops in the left eye—
Refilling, lubricating and moisturizing his eyes with artificial tears.

.
. .
. . .

My bua handed me a bag of raw white rice.
I went outside where the trees act as impassable blocks for sunlight
And the air ghost-quiet except for the caws and kraas of crows.

I dumped the rice on the ground at once, returning to the wispy
smelling room
Glancing at everyone taking turns to touch her feet while she lay
covered

With the remnants of scented marigolds.

Soon, the metallic lever is pulled, triggering a needle-like shrillness
Elevating her body and revealing blinding heat and blazing embers.

There was a moment, an inertia of stillness
As I witnessed the flames engulfing the body of my grandmother
Trailed by a nebulous furnace now flaring deep inside my father
As a cascade of invisible visible tears trickled down his eyes.

By Ranbir Negi



Photograph by Sagar Arora

Paper Lantern

The lantern rises slowly,
Quivering nervously in the wind
The flames getting stronger
As the journey begins.

Its glow lights up the sky,
And the curious souls,
Draw fascinated sighs
Witnessing the marvel unfold.

The mighty wind brings
Companions of all sizes.
They will accompany it
While it trembles yet rises.

The clouds get closer
But the flames grow weaker,
As new lanterns
Embark on the same adventure.

Flying above unknown terrains
Some familiar others strange
The companions grow distant
Resisting the destined change.

The flames finally snuffed
When the lantern touches the sky,
The smoke from the flames
Carrying unheard stories and wishes alike.

What could have been...
Places it could have reached instead...
Companions that never were...
Regrets, memories, and happiness.

The smoke disappears slowly.
On a lonely night,
Only the shell remains.

By Kritika Rawat



Photograph by Sagar Arora

The Pale Blue House

A pain dawdles;
Meaningless and abundant.
In the mornings, when you wake up
In the afternoons, when you skip lunch to read books
In the evenings, when you laze around
Watching the sun die
Only to let the moon rise, bringing along
The glory of the stars.
The light, blinding and beautiful;
For beauty never comes alone.
It brings along pain, cleverly concealed
By beauty.

You move down the roof
Your heart in pain
Heavy from the burden and turmoil
Of having to live another day.
You stand there,
The hallway smelling of dead rats and poison,
Ensnared by a spider-web.
The pain saunters;
Hollow and unintelligible.
Staring at you from the huge family portrait
Dangling on the opposite wall
With faces of people you barely know.
The sofa slipcovers
Changed months ago,
Dusty still intact.

You mope around
And slump on the bed in your room
Where four dirty blank walls
Peer at each other
Like tear-stained faces.
The pain lingers;
Veritable and accrescent.
The black cursor blinking on the white laptop screen
Delineating your relationship with a friend
You thought you would never lose,
As you try restoring your friendship with this one last letter.
Peeking through the steel grey cupboard,
The pink dress you wore to date with a guy
Who never showed up.

The pain dwells;
The only other inhabitant of The Pale Blue House.

By Akriti

Photograph by Sagar Arora



Coop

With hands firmly clasping worn rubber handlebars,
I cycle down Haralur road on Sunday morning,
soaking in the scent of fresh filter coffee.
I gaze upon, the web-like patterns in the clouds after a shower,
illuminated by a watercolour sun. When
abruptly;
my eyes are transfixed...

by a red truckload of whitish chickens a few feet before me.
Glazed in yesterday night's rain,
each steroid-pumped, chemical-pickled body is grossly bloated.
I try to tear my gaze away but it is caught
by the dumb, glassy eyes that stare back at me.
Empty.

Dirty yellow claws clutch the edge of the cage,
with cracked pus-filled beaks slightly open.
But no sound, scarce a peep.
Their macabre silence screams at me,
Stacked upon one another, squeezed into the smallest filthy space,
Smothered in their yellowish-brown excreta,
straining against the steel-edges of a personalised hell.
Those undead pieces of factory-produced meat,
slouch slowly towards slaughter.

Each pothole causes confetti of limp white fluff to erupt.
Redundant feathers that would be plucked one-by-one.
An existence that must be perpetually condemned, made servile
For the sin of not being human.

The truck keeps receding as I slow to a halt.
Retching last night's dinner
onto the cracked brown asphalt pavement.

By Apurva A Prasad



Photograph by Sagar Arora

Short Poems

I

Piece by piece
you pull me apart
piece by piece
I allow you to.

II

Somewhere between
madness and sanity
a writer walks,
ever afraid of falling
to madness,
but bored by
sanity.

III

It is only when I am with you
I forget that I exist.
And I like it.

By Rishi Kohli



Photograph by Sagar Arora

The Celestial Sisyphus

You have grown on me like poetry,
Like blissful deceit of a growing belief.
Like Sisyphus gradually shaping his destiny.

The little I could say,
The lengths of what I could feel,
Is entrapped in the sea.

Tonight, for you, dear Luna,
The sea burst in a symphony,
The tidal pull of melancholy,
The calming descent of the night breeze.

As I collect the frame of your eglantine shine,
I can only feel this verse brimming with light.
And all I can really say,
Is that your day,
Is an ornament for my night.

By Sagar Arora



Photograph by Sagar Arora

AN INTERVIEW WITH GUNJAN JAIN

BY SAGAR ARORA

“EVERYTHING AROUND
US IS A STORY.”

“CREATIVITY IS A LIMIT-
LESS WELL, AS LONG AS
YOU REMEMBER TO PUT
IN THE HARD WORK TO
DRAW FROM IT.”



“OUR WORDS ARE ONLY
AN AMALGAMATION OF
OUR OWN EXPERIENCES
AND PERSPECTIVE ON
THE WORLD.”

We have to begin with your journey. For somebody who has mastered a variety of subjects, how were you inspired to become an author?

For as long as I can remember, I wanted to be a writer. I always knew that in my heart; I just didn't know 'how' for a wearisome amount of time. But it was through this dilemma that I realized that I had to figure out what I wanted people to read, instead of what sells or what is already working for others.

When I came back to India after studying abroad across 5 countries, I noticed how different the definition of "success" is across different demographics and cultures, especially for women. And you pick up any book on/about/around women so far—none of them are well-defined or well-described on the matters of success; and all of them are limited to particular industries or genres. An individual's success depends on so much more than just their professional capabilities, and none of these books captured that essence. You have to talk about the individual in all their elements when you're discussing their success.

That was the birth of *She Walks, She Leads*. I wanted to write a book that inspires not just women of all ages, backgrounds, cultures, professional aspirations, etc, but every individual who reads the book. It was a struggle laying out the idea, I worked non-stop for 3 years, but in the end, it was worth it! As for my other works, that involve fiction and a collection of tales and poems, I am in love with storytelling and its art. Everything around us is a story. From the way one smiles, to the way they sit, to the way they phrase a sentence/emotion—everything is a story. And I don't think I can ever get enough of the stories that surround us, especially the ones we often fail to notice.

Tell us something about your experience of writing a compilation of such inspiring stories as your debut book. What is the major message behind the well-acclaimed, *She Walks She Leads*?

Although it may seem like it, but *She Walks, She Leads* is meant to be for everybody. It is not just for women. The “moral of the story” for this Penguin bestseller is that you can achieve anything if you put your heart into it. Hard work and persistence precedes everything. If you are passionate about something, gather courage and strength to work towards it. Of course, it won't be an easy path, but it won't be as difficult as you think it will be. I mean, success and failure are two sides of the same coin—what matters is that you keep trying till you achieve the former. Your life is your doing, after all. You need to realise your priorities.

Also, this book reflects the simple fact that for a truly successful life, you need to balance your professional and personal relationships. Each of the 24 women featured in the book had supportive families/spouses who encouraged them in their professional decisions to be brave and outgoing. Unlike the popular belief, between your professional and personal life, you can't choose one over another if you want to lead a happy life. You need to balance both.

And this book is for every person of every gender of every generation out there, to realize and understand that ideas should not be accepted and acted upon based on who they are being offered by, but rather on the credibility, originality and scope of the ideas.

How do you approach your writing process? Is there a daily discipline attached to your writing style or is it mostly guided by the musings over your experiences?

Initially, I have to admit that my writing was rather ad hoc. I would often struggle to write on many days, and on others I'd sit day and night pouring every last ounce of my creativity. But over the course, I have realised how important it is to be structured with it. Creativity is a limitless well, as long as you remember to put in the hard work to draw from it. But without proper planning and structure, you will be all over the place. It is always a good idea to work out a time table for yourself. Discipline is the key here.

Of course, everything is guided by the musings over your experiences, whether it is a daily discipline or not. Our words are only an amalgamation of our own experiences and perspective on the world, and I think a good writer would be smart enough to not limit themselves on new experiences—whether it is through their own, or someone else's stories.

What is the role of literature in society according to you?

Storytelling, whether verbal or written, plays a massive role in the society. From the stories with morals that our grandparents and parents recited to us before bedtime, to the history that we learnt in school, to the present-day stories that we choose to believe or ignore, stories and storytelling have the power to make or break society. The literature that you choose to read and consume, will ultimately shape your thoughts and actions, and thus your beliefs/stereotypes of how the world works. If you make an effort to consume literature that blooms open-mindedness and rational questions, you will become more accepting of cultures, people and ideas that are new to you. What you consume, consumes you.

How do you feel about the shift of readership from physical books to E-books? The massive consumption of social media? As an author who understands the market of literary expressions, what are your thoughts on the digital space of literary expressions?

I think E-books are brilliant; they are so much more convenient than paperbacks. And they are, of course, environmentally friendly. But I have to admit that the charm of physical books cannot be matched with anything else in the world. This might sound like a poor example, but the difference between physical books and e-books is similar to that of watching a movie in a theater and watching it on a mobile screen.

I think social media has helped create a wonderful global community of literary lovers. It is a huge boon for the creative world. You can share your art, writings, etc. with anyone from next door to halfway across the world! And it is free, easy to use, accessible in most parts of the world. The digital space of literary expressions has created limitless possibilities and opportunities for storytelling to travel around the world in mere seconds—it is phenomenal. I feel lucky to be witnessing this blooming fragment of storytelling. I personally tend to hibernate a lot from social media when I get into my bubble with work and books, but I hope to change that soon.

As a creative entrepreneur who has analysed the market for a long while now, what do you have to say to young artists who are often intimidated by the thought of fitting in the competitive frame? We know a lot of students who are great at expressing themselves through words, photographs or painting, but they can't find the courage to convert their talent into a profession.

I think one thing that often bothers me is the fact that most writers these days are more concerned with what will sell, rather than what they want to bring out into the world. As I pointed out in one of the earlier questions, writers should think about what they want to read, instead of worrying about which genre is more popular, or which style of writing is more accepted. If you keep offering the same recycled versions of the same stories, people will lose interest. If you really want to bring something new to the world, start with what kind of stories you want to read today.

Plus, I think more and more writers need to realize the potential of self-publishing. You are entirely responsible for the creative control on your work, and it is as easy as it gets. I know first-hand how stressful and confusing publishing can be, but self-publishing has made it a piece of cake. I think more writers should explore the otherwise untapped advantages of self-publishing.

Tell us about your favourite creative pieces, a book that you would recommend or a movie that you feel is a must-watch.

I have been reading a lot of Atticus lately, and I must say that his work is a testament to the fact that even a few simple words have the power to pierce through hearts. His work hits home instantly.

The Prosaic Paradigm



Proud in Pink

“But I was brave. I was brave. I was brave.”

- Divisha

It was my third year at the Pride Parade. I consciously drew a blank, remembering nothing of the ‘real’ world. Disregarding the disappointed reaction of my parents and countless others who got horrified when they noticed my “exaggerated” hand movements while talking, I looked around hoping to find Sudhir in the crowd which seemed impossible at that moment. I hoped that he would be able to identify me this time. I had finally found a way to escape my mother’s eagle eyes—set my clothes out, put them in a bag, and informed my parents I was leaving to stay at a friend’s place overnight. I knew Maa would never doubt the staying over part.

I’d applied a shimmering eyeshadow that glowed under the winter sun, adorned a multi-coloured scarf that was specially bought for this occasion, and painted a pink butterfly narrowly escaping its cocoon on the left cheek, my better profile. It was a joyous occasion and the energy around me was infectious enough to make me forget how things were otherwise. Huge rainbow flags at the Pride Parade made me smile. Glittered faces, cross-dressing and huge banners – it was neither a sham nor any over the top display. The laughing faces reflected kindness that was lost in the world. Bonded by the lack of empathy from the people in the city, the Parade fabricated the bubble of a world where concealing identity wasn’t normal and it made me believe that at least some part of society supported us. There was a streak of wildness, of sinning just by existing, and while on most occasions I’d be embarrassed by my sexual identity, the judgment-free zone here rekindled my disregard for the opinion of my



batch mates who mocked the way I conversed on various occasions and of numerous others who shamelessly looked down upon me for the way I walked. Surrounded by drum rolls and feather heads, this year's turnout had exceeded all expectations. Some families looked uncomfortable but were supporting and celebrating with their children, a father wore a poster and was giving out free hugs; it reminded me of the strain between my father and me. We hadn't looked in the eye for more than a year. Letting the thought wash over me, I tried moving forward for the much-needed hug when the lyrics of "We Shall Overcome" started floating around and the momentum of the Parade took over as more enthusiastic voices chimed in. I sang along and passed on an appreciative look of understanding to everyone.

One hour into the Parade and halfway through Barakhamba Road from the Tolstoy crossing, I had forgotten all about Sudhir and joined a large group who walked like a human chain, elbows intertwined and steps matching, one after the other. I could feel my phone buzzing or maybe it was how my nerves felt alive. People kept joining in as we all laughed and struggled to make it through five barricades. This went on for at least twenty minutes before we gave up and snuggled in for a group hug. Pleased at how the happiness in my day was building up, I turned around and bumped into Sudhir.

"Where were you Aryan? I've been trying to call you – did you throw your phone in the river?"

His huge frame towered over mine. And I found myself at a loss for words.

"I...uh...."

He flung his hand over my shoulder and started talking.

"You know we should start meeting more often now. It's been three years and these annual Parade meets can't be the only time you want to meet me."

He smirked while keeping his eyes fixed on the couple ahead of us. We may have met only twice in the last two years but I didn't have to glance at him to know how proud he was now that he had put me in a spot.

I had first stumbled upon Sudhir's profile on Grindr, an online platform for meeting gay singles in a given area set according to the user's choice. He was charming and the seventh person who had hit on me. This was three years back when I could not lie to myself about my identity. I was gay and I had decided that I wanted to feel comfortable in my skin. Unsure how to tackle this instability, a random internet search at three in the morning had led me to Grindr. This app was a boon and I could have embraced the founder with a light-hearted smile and teary eyes. I had never received validation

as much as I did from its users. It instilled a sense of confidence that I lacked. Not a lot had changed since then, but I had started accepting myself. Creating a profile on Grindr made me feel a tiny bit rebellious and at that point, Sudhir was the third man who I'd matched with in the first week. Unlike others who were interested in sexting or had lost interest mid-conversation, he kept the chain of texts going.

He was twenty-four, worked at a startup as the design head, and lived alone. I was twenty, stuck in a college that did not accept homosexuality, and lived with my parents. Our late-night conversations began on a light note and soon enough kept me on an edge; I was beginning to feel flustered. Anonymity on social media is like bragging about a feast to the starved, one cannot help but develop a taste for it. So when I opened up about my life, Sudhir understood where I was coming from, he heard me. I finally felt understood. When we first decided to meet, I made him wait a month and decided that my first visit to the Pride Parade would be an apt occasion to plunge into the murky waters of romance.

It took me a few minutes to get out of my reverie and he waited. He always did. I replied with a shy "Hi" while lowering my eyes.

"That was fast", he smiled.

Wearing his favourite Hawaii shirt, a purple feathery string around his neck and musky fragrance, he pulled me towards the footpath. We started walking. He was looking at me again. What do I do? What do I say? Why did I have to get so awkward? Urgh.

"So...", I turned to him. "It's been a while since we met huh?"

"Not if you count the innumerable calls." He was laughing.

"Let's go to Diggin' today?", I asked nervously.

He took a few seconds before he stopped walking. Was he going to turn me down? If he said yes, it would count as our first date.

"I've been meaning to kiss you. Can I?"

It was 10:00 p.m. I was late. I had changed my clothes before boarding the Metro. Tried to sneakily enter from the gate without ringing the doorbell, I was hoping Maa would be asleep. I opened the front gate with my keys, slipped inside, and turned on the light only to see her facing me. How lucky!

Arms crossed, she didn't say a word. I stood there, prepared to never hear the end of reaching home on time.

“Maa, I’ll be back by 5 p.m., as soon as college ends...”, she imitated me.

“But I tried –”

“I don’t want to hear this again. And what is all this? Why do you have glitter on your face?”

She took one step forward and was standing closer now. I could see her inspecting me like a lab rat. Her suspicions about my sexuality had been the cause of unrest in the family for two years. Her frequent questions, “Aryan, is this how real men dress up?”, her sudden interest in my girl-friends in the past years and her obvious disappointment every time I choose to wear a pink t-shirt,

“Hello?” Maa flicked my head.

“Give me your bag”, she ordered.

What? No, I can’t.

“Why? You know it’s rude to check someone’s stuff”, I tried to lighten her mood.

Choosing to ignore me, she took a hold of the bag’s strap instead and pulled it off my shoulder.

I could feel the panic; my palms were sweating.

She began to open the bag’s zip. I put my hand over hers, “Let me come inside Maa, you can check my bag later.”

She didn’t look-up and instead brushed my hand to the side.

Unfolding the purple feathered scarf and the little box of an eyeshadow palette, a little tear escaped and I instinctively closed my eyes. There was a stinging pain in my cheek, Maa had slapped me. And just like that, the discomfort I felt in my own skin caught up with me.

“It’s been two years and you have continued to behave like a girl. Your hand like this, your voice like that – What is all this? Have you learned anything from last year’s incident where we caught you searching for sexy men on that wretched Google? We gave you the freedom and look at how you’ve misused it. You broke our trust and I gave you nothing but time. This internet and your misplaced mind will be the end of me. Does your father’s silence to you in the past year mean nothing? He has been angry and worried sick. All of us can see how you hide your pink nail paints in your cupboard and spend time with those weird boys. Why are you acting like a hijra?”

“Do you not want us to be respected in society? Imagine what our neighbour Simmi Ji will say? She already believes that you’ll bring home a nice girl who is going to keep the family together. How can she know that our son refuses to act like a man! Destroying our culture by behaving like this, who are you trying to be? This cannot be my child!”

“But I am Maa, I haven’t changed, I’ve always been this way.” I begged.

“I am...”

Plucking the courage, I closed my eyes. “I am gay.”

I cried myself to sleep that night. The next morning, it wasn’t the alarm that woke me up but the first rays of the sun. Red eyes and entangled hair greeted me when I looked in the mirror. It was a look I found familiar. Yesterday’s Parade resembled a dream and this morning felt like I was stuck in a tragic loop. When I turned to leave for college, I found my parents sitting at the dinner table, enjoying their breakfast – eggs, and paratha, the usual. The brooding aura was palpable. There was an invisible wall that stood between us. I tried crossing to the other side, but I had become an outcast the moment I uttered “gay.” I was sure that Paa knew what went down between me and Maa. I was used to his silence now, one person less to scrutinize me. It was awful that I had no control over what was happening to me, I had fought myself too long only to be made to feel terrible again and sit quietly in the corner. They didn’t have to say a word; I could sense shame making its way on their faces and did not bother greeting them and stepped outside.

I was aware that they thought I’m different, but they didn’t have to hate me. It wasn’t only Maa and Paa. Each day, my classmates were sinfully proud when they chose to interact with the other gender, unaware of their freedom of choice. In the last three years, exploring my independence and content with the self-realization to unlearn the hatred hadn’t been the smoothest ride. Becoming a boy that suited my parents’ choice was difficult, if not impossible. Watching people walk past me after giving me a stinking eye had been a daily occurrence. Their hostility often left me feeling like I was a powerless employee standing against a rich employer, begging for his mercy and acceptance. Obviously, I had given up my place in heaven – for a long time, I had known my truth, accepted and shouted it with strangers, also at strangers who debated the very existence of homosexuality. Men filled with old hatred considered heterosexuals ‘normal’ and I was placed on the side only to become the ‘other’ – the secluded lot in the community. Taught to fear homosexuality- the anxiety of letting others in on the truth before my parents, required more guts than I could have otherwise claimed.

Did I have the courage to try life without my parents? Did it matter more, now that I wanted to be true to myself first? I did not wish to fight anymore. I wanted peace. So I turned around. I rang the doorbell. Maa opened the door. She squinted her eyes, confused why I had returned. I rushed inside and took my ready-to-move-out bag that was sitting in a corner of my cupboard, gathering dust, waiting as I built resolution over the years. Maa came and stood near the door.

“Where are you going?” I could imagine fumes coming out of her ears.

“I don’t think you understood me Maa or ever will. It is understandable that the world refuses to acknowledge and even equates gay with what you call charitra haran but why do you and Paa have to be mean to me? It’s not in my hands to change myself.”

“Do not dare to say you were born this way. If you step out of this house, I will have no choice but to call the police and get you and your friends arrested. Do you understand me?”

I was neither surprised nor did I bother to reply. While Maa went on raving about how having a child like me was a shraap, I messaged dad.

“Paa, I am leaving the house.” Sent.

“Good,” he said before adding,

“It is better to be childless than have a son like you.”

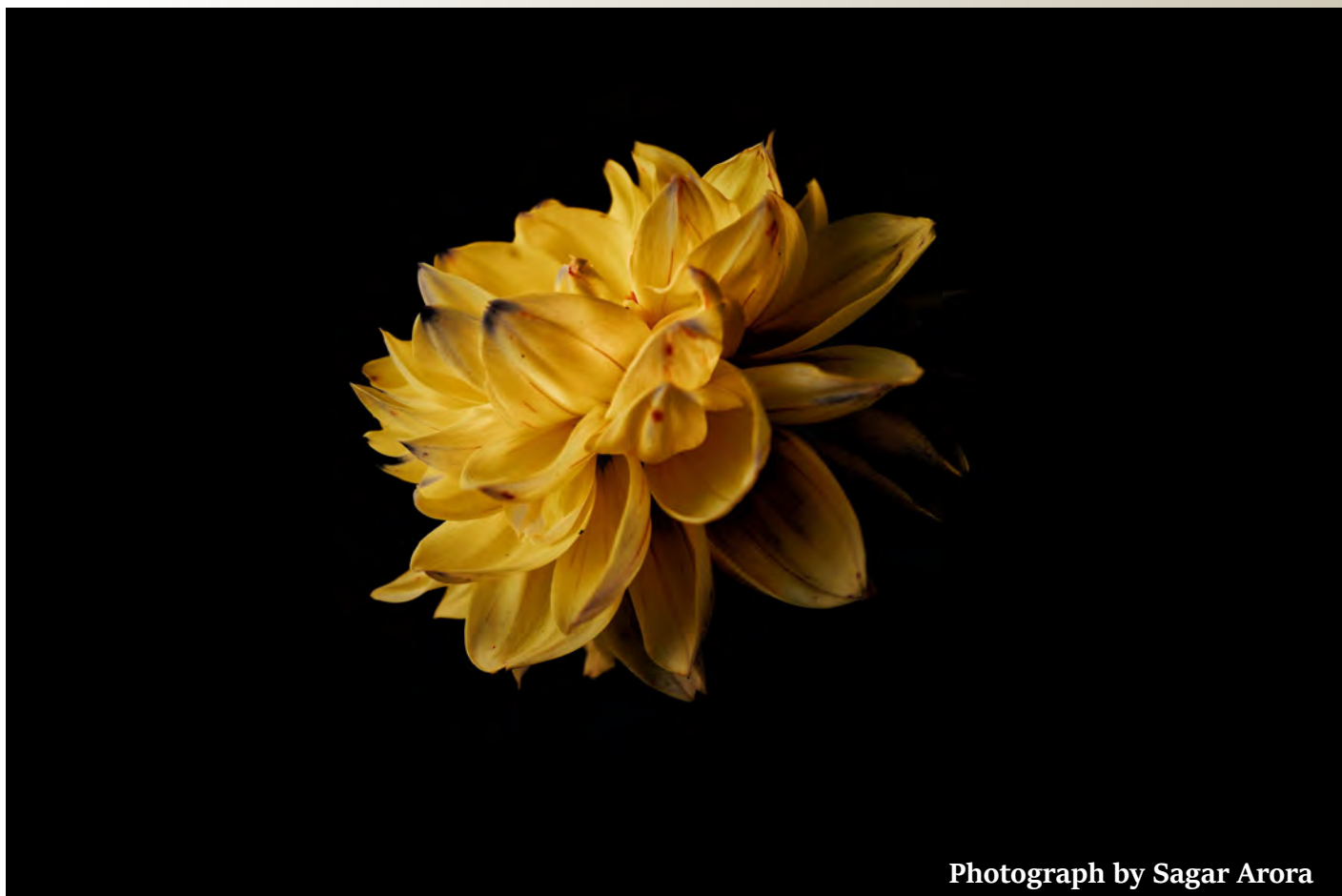
That was the last straw. Tears poured out. I wanted to slip on the floor, lie on the ground, and feel numb. Maa thought her dialogues created the desired effect. She was wrong. They all were wrong. The lack of a consistent source of support and love had forced me to recoil in a spiral of self-harm. But I was brave. I was brave. I was brave.

Maa was once again, viewing every move like a scientist experimenting on a lab rat. But I was not a lab rat. I could speak, not look back and run for miles. I just hoped that they would call me. Once.

Half an hour later, I rang a doorbell for the second time during the day. Sudhir opened the door.

“Hi.”

Lilith



Photograph by Sagar Arora

“The other five chuckled and she continued, “You are not evil if you are wicked. You just...know how to have fun.”

- Ritika Chhabra

They say Adam had a first wife, one before Eve, and her name was Lilith. When Adam asked her to be subservient to him, she rejected him, only to end up getting banished from Eden. She lured Satan the moment she met him. They say that Satan was so captivated by her beauty that he was ready to give her anything she wanted, only to keep her with him. She agreed after receiving an immense power, the kind Adam could never ever have. Henceforth began the age of the witches.

They say that it was Lilith who ensured Eve and Adam’s fall from the Garden of Eden and not Satan. But she didn’t do that because she despised them. No, she just wanted to help. In Eden, Eve was made to walk around naked, she was made to serve Adam anytime he wanted, and then some. He would decree some rules and she had to follow them, whether she wanted to or not because she was made to believe that it was only Adam who knew what was best for her. All Lilith wanted was to make her realize that this was wrong, to make her aware of her own potential. She was a witch, but she wasn’t evil.

This was the story I found in my mother's journal. Grandma says she was always writing, filling pages upon pages with things she wanted to say. Yet, this was the only journal I could find. I remember stumbling upon it in the attic one day. Grandma wouldn't tell me where the others are. The last entry on the page had been made the day before she died, the day before I was born. In that entry, she promised herself she would name me Lilith; somehow, she already knew I was going to be a girl. Grandma says that was her last wish too, and although Grandma hated Lilith's tale (a fact she never tried to hide), she kept my mother's wish, nonetheless. Yet, she never called me that, always preferring Lily. She never even informed me of this story; I had to ask my aunts about it, who only visited us once a year. So then I had to wait a whole year if I needed any clarity. The story I found online was...a tad bit different.

Until I came across my mother's journal, I hated her for naming me after the first criminal in the universe. Names are important in our family, or so Grandma always told me, but how could I ever take pride in my name if I was named that? But no, Lilith was more. Lilith may not have had an unquestionable desire to obey her husband but she was selfless; she craved freedom. I respected that. Others, including Grandma, not so much. And yet, the name brought with it, its own set of complications.

The first time that happened was on my fourteenth birthday. I had recently switched schools. There had been an "incident" at the previous one. This was why I tried keeping a low profile here, except I ended up catching the eye of one of my classmates, Adam Scott. Back then, I had thought it would be funny to date him; a nice play at our names. Except, none of my aunts thought of it that way. When they visited our house on my birthday that year, the way they would always do, they were flabbergasted to find Adam at the door. He had come early so that I could return on time and spend the major part of the night with my family, but they sent him straight home, denying us the dinner I was really looking forward to. (I was pretty sure I would have had my first kiss that night.) Later, they lectured me on how Adam and Lilith could never be together. Needless to say, that was the end of my dating life.

The second time was the day before my sixteenth birthday when my best friend called me an adulteress; turns out that's what Lilith was for seducing Satan. This was last evening. She hadn't been taking my calls or messages ever since. I just wanted to tell her it was all a misunderstanding but she wouldn't pick up. So, when Grandma said last night that she wanted a quiet sweet-16 (sixteen was a huge number in my family), I didn't mind. It would mark sixteen years since my mother passed away. Grandma said it was still too fresh. (We never knew who my father was.) I understood that. Had I been in her place, who knew if I would have even liked myself. So, for her sake, I hoped it was a quiet one, but I knew it wouldn't be. My aunts had a tendency for extravagance.

Usually, their talkative bunch arrived in our small town in the middle of nowhere on the evening of my birthdays. That was the only day in the entire year that they made their visits. They lived together in London, apparently, and Auntie Agatha had promised me she would take me there once I was old enough. Grandma would often ask them not to make the long journey—she didn't like them very much, even calling them a nosy bunch, but they always came. I should spend the day with family, they would say. I had once asked my Grandma why it was only the aunties that visited. The girls in my class had fathers and brothers and uncles, too. But Grandma said men in our family led a...-difficult life. There weren't any around to talk about, anyway, whatever that meant.

Besides, every time they visited, they would share at least one interesting anecdote about my mother, so I didn't mind having them here. Most of these things, however, were rather peculiar and often made Grandma uncomfortable, which is how I grew up hearing tales of my mother's wackiness every year. Auntie Eugenia, for example, once said my mother loved cleaning. She didn't say it in as many words but it was implied. Apparently, my mother had a broom that she cleaned every night.

They would also bring with them strange gifts. Auntie Persephone once gifted me a huge black pot. Grandma once called it a cauldron. I was ten back then. Auntie Sabrina had brought a piece of stick that year and Auntie Jocelyn a ring with five rubies. Grandma packed all of those things the minute they left and never let me touch them again. Their gifts had gotten more and more peculiar lately. The year they lectured Adam Scott and me, all six of them came with plants. Why would I need plants now? What good were they for me? Besides, Grandma had all the plant knowledge that I could ever need. I was certain she knew more than the town gardener.

When I got downstairs that morning, the kitchen was bubbling with excitement. They were early. Six ladies stood inside, each trying to speak over another as they cooked, what I presumed was breakfast. This was another thing about them. They had strikingly similar personalities (Auntie Agatha being the only distinct one because of her style – she had watched far too many Star Wars films growing up and loved Yoda) and somehow, were always trying to speak over one another, which made it hard for me to distinguish between who said what.

Grandma sat on the dining table, sipping a cup of what I was certain was tea. In front of her was a tray of biscuits that I avoided. I tried calling my best friend once again but to no avail.

“What's wrong?” Grandma asked, scrunching her eyebrows. Before I could reply to her, Auntie Persephone arrived from the kitchen, opening her hands wide (they were covered in dough) to give me a hug.

“There is the birthday girl!” she exclaimed, taking me in. I quickly adjusted my ponytail so it won’t get dough on it.

“Oh, is she here?” another auntie called and soon I found myself being enveloped by six people in quick succession.

“How is our favourite girl in the universe?” asked Auntie Jocelyn.

“She is fine,” I nodded.

“Oh, we can’t believe our littlest one is sixteen already!”

“Oh, how time flies!”

“Whoop! You better take care of yourself, young lady. Sixteen is a terrifying age.”

“Hear, hear!” “Hear, hear!” “Hear, hear!”

I could almost feel Grandma shaking her head from behind. Having spent sixteen years together, I was beginning to pick up on her mood without even looking at her.

I realized then how everyone had stopped speaking. Seven sets of eyes stared at me eagerly. Has somebody asked me something?

“H-hello,” I waved, raising my left brow.

“I told you she doesn’t care for it, Perse,” Grandma said from behind. Care for what?

“But her mother would have been so proud, Marla!” Auntie Persephone exclaimed.

That had my attention. I raised my eyebrows, waiting for her to continue.

“Amethyst wouldn’t have cared for anything more and you know that, Marla,” added Auntie Rowan. Amethyst was my mother.

“Cared for what?”

“For you to know and embrace your wickedness, Lilith.”

“I’m not wicked!” I liked to believe I was morally perfectly good, thank you very much. The perception of my namesake’s actions did not have an effect on me.

“Wicked isn’t bad, Lilith. Oh!” Auntie Eugenia giggled. “I never thought I’d be saying this to a Lilith.” The other five chuckled and she continued, “You are not evil if you are wicked. You just...know how to have fun.”

I squinted my eyes, trying to make sense of it. What were these women going on about? I know how to have fun. I don’t have to be wicked to do that.

“Lilith, what have you been doing with the gifts we brought you all these years?”

Auntie Sabrina asked, her forehead wrinkled.

“I...” I looked at Grandma. Should I tell them Grandma hid them away because she didn’t like them?

“This is enough!” Grandma exclaimed at that very moment. “We will not have this discussion any further!”

“She has to know, Marla. Amethyst would have wanted her to know and embrace it. You know she would have.”

“And look where that landed Amethyst!” Grandma shot back. “If it wasn’t for me, this little life would have died.”

“Us too, she has,” Auntie Agatha added.

“Amethyst was a little...misdirected. If you had let us talk to her, it would n—”

“No! I promised myself I would end this nonsense the minute Amethyst left. I’m not having this discussion again!” Grandma exclaimed.

“You have to. We need her, Marla!” Auntie Eugenia cried. “Look at Rowan, she is already losing half her hair.” I turned to Auntie Rowan. She certainly seemed to have less hair than before. “Jocelyn’s nails have started disintegrating.” Auntie Jocelyn instantly hid her hands in her sleeves. “We need her, and you know that. She deserves to know.” “I will not let you take away my daughter!” Grandma screamed, her voice vibrating across the room. A shiver ran down my spine and my chest grew cold.

Silence ensued, only to be broken by Auntie Persephone’s sob. She often cried. “Your daughter is gone, Marla,” she croaked. Grandma’s face paled and she edged towards her room, leaving us standing around the small dining table. I noticed then how small this table was. With the newspaper, the tray and a small vase, there wasn’t any space to put one’s head down and try to understand what just happened.

Suddenly, I felt a calming air envelop me as if felt for the first time. A strange sense of serenity overcame me as Auntie Agatha hugged my shoulder. “Okay, it will be,” she said. “You need to know.”

“I...I don’t under—”

“But you do, don’t you, Lily?” Auntie Sabrina asked, putting her arms around me, too. Her eyes watered and as I looked around the room, the other ladies began blinking away tears, too.

“You have known for some time now.” For the first time in my life, I didn’t have to look up to see who it was. It was Auntie Persephone. “It was the day we told you about the broom, wasn’t it?” she continued.

“Very intelligent selection, it was,” Agatha chuckled.

“Amethyst would have been proud,” all of them said together. But as I looked at their faces, I realized how none of them was speaking. It was all...going on in my head. My eyes widened as the realization dawned upon me, but Persephone shook her head.

“You’re part of us, Lilith. It wasn’t by chance that your mother wanted you to have that name.” All six voices seemed to be speaking at once. Even Agatha, who spoke differently.

“She knew the end was near,” Sabrina continued, keeping her arms still wrapped around me. “She wanted you to take pride in your name. It takes great strength to hold a name like that and not fall. Not everyone has it in them, but you...you did it, Lily. Amethyst knew you could.”

“I don’t—”

“You’ve been blessed by your namesake, Lilith. You are stronger than you can possibly imagine. And right now, you are all we need to complete us.”

“Complete you?”

“They’re a coven,” Grandma whispered from behind. I looked around to find her shivering. She folded her arms across her chest. “It was your mother’s and mine before that, and my mother’s before that and my mother’s mother’s before.”

The hairs at the back of my neck tingled. “They’ve been a member less ever since Amethyst. The older ones are losing their magic now.” She looked at Rowan and Jocelyn, who turned their heads away.

“You’re old too, Grandma.”

“I gave up witchcraft a long time ago, Lily. I’m still in my natural form.”

“Natural?” I asked, even when I could hear six voices inside my head telling me no.

“When you live past your age, you need the magic to survive. Else, that happens.”

“So, I’m a witch?” I whispered.

Grandma shook her head. “You have the chance to be, but you must make your decision wisely.”

“You’re a Lilith. You have to be a witch,” Persephone whispered.

“She doesn’t have to be anything, Perse,” Grandma shot back.

“Decide, you must,” Agatha whispered. “Part of us, you need to be. Destiny, it is.”

“I...” I noticed seven pairs of eyes looking at me. My mother’s invisible eighth pair stared at me from her picture on the wall. In times of need, I always came to her for support, but now, it seemed as if she was the one stopping me from getting any.

“I...”

“Go on,” Eugenia said. This time, I was pretty sure it was inside my head.

“I...” I could feel apprehension dripping from each of their thoughts. I couldn’t catch it, but it was there. I looked from one face to another, to another. “I think Lilith deserves to try.”

The Enemy

“He was demanding answers from someone, but the apartment was empty and he was all alone.”

- Mukta Kher



His eyes were fixated on the lush green grass beneath, and his mind wandered. What was he going to do now? The man was standing right behind him. Stephen could not move. Sweat ran through his grey hair, they showed his middle-age. His mouth went dry. He put his right foot forward, while the left one trembled. Stephen, then, slid his left hand into his pocket and pulled out a handkerchief, white, perfectly ironed before, but now creased and crushed. He wiped the sweat and took a deep breath, preparing to run. At the very moment, the other man placed his hand on Stephen's right shoulder and Stephen collapsed. He was still in his senses as he could see a hazy silhouette of a bearded, bald man staring dead into his eyes. The silhouette gradually vanished and everything turned black.

Suddenly, Big Ben struck, but to Stephen's surprise his eyes were open and he found himself on the bench. He looked around. It was the same field, the same grass, but there was no one around. He stood up and realised that the paper he held in his hand was moist. He started walking in the direction of his apartment, carefully handling the paper so that it didn't tear. While climbing the stairs for the second floor, Stephen recalled what the doctor had said. As he reached the door of his apartment, he took out his keys and opened the lock. He switched on the iron, dried the paper and carefully unfolded it. It was the doctor's medical report. Stephen knew he had been diagnosed with PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder). He had recurring dreams of suicide and violence. The Afghan war had been haunting him since he returned from it, only this time it wasn't a dream. He was now hallucinating with open eyes, and his condition was deteriorating.

Memories and nightmares haunted him. He was the soldier who never came home from war. He could see a man everywhere he went, even in his flat. He could feel that the man watched him.

Stephen could never utter a single word to his psychiatrist. They say it helps if you talk, Stephen did agree to it, but could never do it. He could never have the right words to describe what he felt. He would always look away while talking to someone as if looking at that person reminded him of the faceless man. Every time he lay on the bed and closed his eyes, it felt as if he was on that stone-cold battleground again, in a camp, surrounded with injured soldiers, some even dead. He would want to open his eyes and get up, but he couldn't move. Stephen remembered the incident as he kept the medical report on the table and collapsed on the couch.

*Who was this man? Why did the face seem familiar?
Is this Afghanistan?*

He was demanding answers from someone, but the apartment was empty and he was all alone. He rubbed his face in anguish and rested his head on the couch's back. Just as he closed his eyes, the man he had seen in the park appeared. Stephen opened his eyes hurriedly. He could never see the face of the man. Every time the man appeared, it was either his silhouette or a thermal scanned image, showing heat signatures of a body.

It takes a lot for a patient to accept his disease. Stephen too could not understand what happened to him. The doctor's vocabulary was way beyond his comprehension, and he would just experience numbness, fear and anxiety, but could never articulate it.

Ever since the war, Stephen had not been able to sleep. The first symptom of his

trauma was insomnia. He would spend nights with his eyes wide open, staring at the dull yellow ceiling. His mind never let him forget the incident. He would keep on moving his eyes from one corner of the room to the other, and then outside, where a street lamp flickered, every night. Stephen would be reminded of – gunfire, grenades, and explosions– and then everything would disappear under a thick layer of smoke.

A military veteran would always have some kind of weapon with him, a pistol or a gun. But Stephen could not hold his pistol anymore without his hand shaking. The doctor said this condition was his coping mechanism, which reminded him of something horrifying that had happened when he had the pistol in his hand. His mental condition never allowed him to draw a connection between all the things that made him anxious or reminded him of the trauma, which is why he could never see the face of the man.

Memories returned to Stephen's mind in a flood, and he stood up from the couch and went towards his bedroom. The old, hand-carved drawer lay beside the twin-size bed, with its polish wearing off. Stephen looked at the drawer and walked towards the mirror. His mind started visualizing himself as the furniture, growing old and weary, with no one to take care of. Along with his own mirror-image, Stephen saw his pistol lying on the table in the reflection. On the table was a glowing lamp, papers arranged into a pile with a paper-weight shaped like a military tank, and a mug with traces of coffee. Stephen walked to the table, picked up the gun, sat down on his bed and closed his eyes with the gun still in his hand. The man appeared again. Stephen's hand involuntarily rose, and he held his gun in position as if aiming at someone. The man had his back towards Stephen and just as Stephen tried to pull the trigger, the man turned. Stephen saw his face, he trembled and dropped the gun. He could not figure out if he was dreaming or was actually seeing the man standing in front of him. His eyes were still closed.

The man stepped forward, his face illuminated as he bent towards Stephen and put his hand on Stephen's right shoulder, just the way it had happened in the park. Stephen looked at the man's face and tried to recall who he was. All he could remember was his last battle before coming back.

The opponent armies were busy in a continuous exchange of fire. The enemy was standing right in front of him, with a grenade attached to his uniform. Stephen was going to fire when the enemy pulled the pin on the grenade. Stephen prepared himself to embrace his death but the enemy started to run away from him. Intense light, sound and dust erupted as the grenade detonated and blood covered the battlefield. Stephen could hear the shrieks of men from the site where the grenade had detonated. Stones pierced Stephen's arms and head, and blood and dirt mixed, forming a meshed layer at

the site of injury. There was chaos all around and Stephen lost his senses.

At this point, Stephen opened his eyes. He saw the pistol lying on the carpet that was spread on the floor. He reached for the pistol with his right hand and firmly gripped it. Surprisingly, his hand did not shake at all.

Stephen could never understand why the enemy had pulled the pin on the grenade and had run away. To anyone, it would occur that the enemy was saving Stephen. But why would he? The question remained unanswered for Stephen.

The man had died, the war had ended, Stephen was back home, but was he actually? The enemy had saved Stephen, but did he?

The unanswered question was the reason Stephen would see this man. The trauma didn't have a cure, because the answer was buried along with the enemy's dead body.

“Why did he save me? Why did he save me?” Stephen muttered these words in a chant as he rose from his bed. He started walking towards the drawing-room, and with every step he took he would say the words “Why did he save me?” Stephen reached the table where the doctor's medical report was kept. He picked up the paper, unfolded it again and kept on staring at it while the question hammered his mind. He then picked up his phone and dialled the doctor's number from the paper. The appointment with the psychiatrist was confirmed for 7 pm. He moved his eyes from the paper to the window. As the London sky turned purple and then black, Stephen's mind mixed into its colours.

“I want to taste wonder again, I decide as the touch of death passes by in a whoosh.”

- Sanyukta Shiv Kumar



Photograph by Phillip Larking

“Wonder is found when Surprise takes Expectation by the throat.” Ms Bark says weird things at times. Today, though, is the first time I process those words as I watch an owl bump into its mate with a joy that surpasses mine, when I found out I could finally tell Wonder my name. I’m so dazzled, I don’t stop myself from being carried by the wind two bushes ahead. I’m Blue, The Third, and I’m a petal. There are fifty-two others like me who think that Wonder is just beyond that third pine tree from ours, waiting for us to finally ask him out to play. I’m finally on my journey to find him and give him a hug big enough to engulf Mr Padmakar Pinecone. As I feel a trail of leaf kids brush past my blueness, Uncle Sun’s rays shine on my bottom, making it look like I’m wearing yellow trousers. I begin to sizzle and look up to see him polishing his rays with the inside of his sleeve. He gives me a nod. I flip mid-air as usual. He grins and it’s so

bright, I curl unto myself until he goes back to his polishing. Two and two more seconds pass when I see white fairies dance in front of my eyes. I almost closed my eyes to check if they were real. Five seconds pass, they click-clack, tip their hats off to me, and continue on their journey to find more eyes. I'm still no closer to finding Wonder. A few more houses say goodbye before I scent strawberries coating the air. Janaki, the Human would get strawberries that time of the year when my uncle would go to bed earlier than me and my aunt would complain about waking her up too soon on his way to goodnight. She'd deliberately shine brighter than my uncle on his good days, and us Blues would have to wake the grumpy Branch Sisters at night to shelter us from my aunt's pretty-looking wrath. The blissful scent the following morning, though, would be worth the torture. The mailbox would smell fruity for days. Now, I follow a similar scent and reach a red house. I wince as I think about how many Reds of our kind had to be killed for their brains and bodies to decorate the wall I float in front of. My run-away thoughts run back to me as I hear the jingle of the front door as it opens. I enter and stop short as I realise even strawberries can betray you sometimes. A weird-but-cute-shaped brown star behind a small transparent wall beckons me towards it. It reminds me of Janaki's squishy star she would cry into in the middle of the night. Then my aunt would gasp at her cries and turn in her sleep, her nightgown flowing over Janaki's tears, calming her racing heartbeat, killing her unbidden nightmares. I look at Brown Star now and think about what Ms Bark used to say. I sigh, squash my face against the transparent wall and mouth *There you are*. I'm still pressed up against the glass when the woman with the pretty hat and pink smile takes out Brown Star and offers it to another woman with willowy hair and stars in her eyes. *Brown Star is going to make friends. Oh no.* I don't want my Wonder to become someone else's, so I float in speed and perch atop the brown bag that holds Brown Star as it probably wonders where it's going. Willowy Woman jiggles the bag, then, in her merry, and I fall, fall, fall into Brown Star's arms. I shake myself as I gather my bearings, which is only just my blue self. Brown Star sits still without a noise, without a face. I can hold myself no more. I dive deep into its brown goodness and gobble up everything in my path. I become a Brown Star's nightmare. I become its ruination. I became Brown. Brown Star vanishes into me, it remains painted across my skin, my

teeth. It tasted like chocolate and more Wonder than my belly can carry. I climb my-brown and blueness out of the bag and drop to the ground with a thud. I may not be able to fly for eternity. Then I think twice and add two more days to that for good measure. The ground is grassy with two shades of green and one shade of blue. I burp and the sound ends on a giggle that ends on a fit of laughter. *I finally found my Wonder and I loved it till the last taste!* “Why do you look like Uncle Sun shined on you too much?” It’s Blue, The Fourth. “I look crazy, don’t I?” I ask. “How did you find me?” “I did not,” Fourth replies. “I came for a float and thought someone stepped on you.” His words give me pause. We’re petals, after all. Our kind has been stepped on, murdered, eaten, pasted... My breath passes and I realise that I could be stepped on, murdered, eaten, pasted... Wonder tasted like what strawberries would under our aunt’s safety blanket. I want to taste wonder again, I decide as the touch of death passes by in a whoosh. Life passes by in a whoosh. I turn towards my brother, take his hand and ask him in the most serious tone I can muster “Do you want to look for Wonder with me?”

“Atiye remembers her grandmother's stories about Old gods who answer prayers. She also knows she shouldn't pray to anything that answers in the dark. But she is desperate. She wants to stop reliving that day.”

- Khushboo Aneja



Photograph by Sagar Arora

Atiye is standing in a line at the grocery store on a Sunday morning. It is the busiest hour of the week, and she is expecting to be ignored. She wanted to come out in her oversized pyjamas and plush slippers but fearing attention, she quickly changed into blue jeans and a black hoodie to mix in with the crowd. Her desperate efforts to remain invisible usually pay off but today is not that day. The cashier at counter number 4 is Mrs Douglas, who has just recently lost her teenage son Matthew to an accident. And she can't stop thinking how mean her last words were to her son. She keeps thinking of what she could have said and what she would say if she got the chance again, which she knows she won't. But today is a good day for her. When Atiye reaches the front, she takes out her items and puts them on the counter. Mrs Douglas starts scanning them when a packet of biscuit slips from her hands. It was Matthew's favourite.

She looks at Atiye, “I am so sorry. My son also loved these biscuits. Let me get someone to exchange this packet for you.”

Atiye raises her hands and signals it's okay. When Mrs Douglas fails to understand her gestures, Atiye takes the packet from her hands to keep it in the bag. That's when all the clocks in the universe stop except the one on Atiye's wrist. Mrs Douglas sees the face of her son in Atiye and breaks into a sob.

“Matthew, I am so sorry. I didn't mean it when I said I brought you in the world for your brother's sake. I was selfish. You know your brother is weak and it's just that I love him so much, but that doesn't mean I don't love you. I should have been a better mother.” Atiye takes out a goodbye card from her pocket and scribbles a message that she thinks Matthew would have said. Matthew would have understood and forgiven her. Matthew would have told her how much he loved her. She slips the card into Mrs Douglas' pocket. Atiye's watch ticks for sixty seconds and time slips into the world again as if it had never stopped.

A huge load lifts off Mrs Douglas' heart. She takes a long deep breath. A smile spreads on her face, and she scans the rest of the items in Atiye's bag.

“How are you paying, dear?” Mrs Douglas asks going back to her routine as if nothing happened. But Atiye can tell she is feeling better.

Atiye hands her the exact change and leaves with her groceries.

She can't remember the last time she spoke. She can talk well if she wants to, but for some reason, Atiye cannot remember why she stopped talking after losing her parents. She doesn't remember anything from her life with her parents. It is as if she willed all her memories away. One day she woke up in her grandparents' house with a realisation that she had lost her parents and her will to speak. Her grandfather took her to a lot of specialists, but there was nothing wrong with her vocal cords. Some doctors called it selective mutism. Once you get used to the silence and the need to not speak, it gets comfortable. As a child, her silence didn't affect her much. All she had to do was take care of herself and help her grandmother with the listed chores. She would study and listen to everything everyone had to say to her. Her words didn't matter. Or maybe she was afraid she would say something she didn't mean and hurt someone. And there's no way to take back your words. As she grew up, she got addicted to this peace of not

change anything. She created a world around her that accepts the way she is. Her work as a greeting card writer doesn't need her to speak either.

As far as goodbyes are concerned, she has accepted that as well.

It started a year after her parents' death. She was confused at first when her classmate started crying. Atiye had just handed her a pencil, and the girl sitting next to her broke into tears saying goodbye to her mother. It happened over and over again. Every person she touched, in some way, would cry and bid goodbye to a loved one. For those sixty seconds, their pain shifted to her heart before it was lifted again. She was angry at them and hid in her room for days. She didn't want to hear the tearful goodbyes and the pain those sixty seconds inflicted on her.

But, she couldn't hide forever. So, she tried to evade people and their touch as much as she could. She couldn't tell anyone what was happening to her. She couldn't fathom why, either. Once, she tried to tell her grandmother in the form of a story, and her grandmother laughed it off, thinking of it as some fairytale. Not finding an escape, she accepted her fate. She has yet to meet a person who touches her and doesn't cry. Over the years she started carrying little goodbye notes as well. Though she doesn't speak, she knows her words have power. They can make people feel. And unlike when spoken, words written are more careful. Her words are always sad, and her memories a blur. It is not a perfect life, but Atiye is comfortable in her cocoon of stories, books, and not being able to remember how her parents died and why she stopped speaking. But it is time someone reminds her. The universe is nothing if not about balance. A deal was struck, and it is time Atiye paid for her part.

The next day on her morning run, Atiye feels a strange cold enveloping her. Her mind goes blank, and she loses her step. She bumps into someone and almost loses her balance, but the stranger holds on to her. And suddenly she feels new emotions in her being. She feels alive. The surroundings around her brighten as if someone has increased the brightness or taken off her sunglasses. She wants to speak and laugh and be fearless. Her bones which felt empty until now are so full. It's as if someone has breathed life into her, but it lasts as long as the stranger holds her arm to steady her. As soon as the touch is lost, her brain returns to a lull. For a second, she is breathless, but it lasted for such a short time that she doesn't know what to make of it. So she closes

eyes and takes a breath. She waits for the goodbye to come to her. But when it doesn't, she looks up at the stranger.

“Hey! You are not going to apologise?” the man asks.

Atiye is surprised. He doesn't have anyone to say goodbye to? She looks at him closely as if he were from a different planet. But he looks like an average guy with a handsome long face, lean stance and a height of around 5'9. But his eyes are the darkest shade of black Atiye has ever encountered.

“Now this is just mean. First, you don't apologise, then you stare at me as if I am the one at fault here. Attitude problem, ma'am?”

Atiye looks for a pen and a paper out of habit. Not finding one she takes out her phone and types a sorry on it in a rush.

“You can't speak, or you choose not to?” the stranger smirks and walks off, leaving a dazed Atiye.

It is a strange moment for Atiye. First, the rush of emotions, then the stranger who didn't say goodbye, and his question. She doesn't let herself dwell on it and quickly gets ready for work. That morning when she walks into her office, she finds the stranger from the running accident sitting there.

“So, we meet again!”

Atiye raises her eyebrow in response.

“I am Ozan if that is what you are asking.”

Atiye gestures for him to continue.

“I am here to make you remember...” He looks into Atiye's zoned out eyes and doesn't complete his sentence. The clock ticks sixty times.

Atiye knocks on the table, asking him to state the purpose of his presence.

“I am here for an interview about selective mutism. It's generally a condition that occurs in childhood due to a traumatic experience or social anxiety. It rarely stays till the age of 25. But here you are, my rare case.”

“I don't have anything to tell you,” Atiye writes on her notepad. She knows he is lying. There is something strange about him. The cold she felt in the morning is back, enveloping her like a heavy blanket. She has this sudden urge to touch him. She remembers how it felt, all those feelings and mostly the absence of pain and the sadness she

carries around.

“But you do have a story and a reason.”

“I don’t remember anything,” she writes.

“That’s why I said, I am here to make you remember.”

With this, he walks around the table, coming to sit between Atiye and the table and leans in to kiss her. Atiye doesn’t respond to it, but she can’t push him away either. His touch affects her. It is like putting batteries in a toy. Her mind lights up like fireworks on the fourth of July. The memories come back rushing to her. She is barefoot. It is dark, and her feet hurt, but she keeps on running and crying, out of breath. Ozan breaks the kiss, and the images in her head fade. Atiye feels like a deflated toy.

“The poem,” Atiye whispers. Her first words in 15 years. Her voice is rusty and groggy.

Ozan winks and leaves before Atiye can do anything. Her head feels heavy. She can see some memories rushing up to her being.

A girl is running in the dark. Tears blur her vision, but she keeps on running. The girl wants to stop running. She wants to lie down and not feel. She wants her heart to lighten. She wants to stop thinking. The memories that plague her being, she wants to throw it all away and be free. The girl turns to the woods. She has spent her entire childhood beating down these paths. She knows she won’t get lost, but she wants to. She is tired, her legs slow down, but she doesn’t want to stop. If she does, she knows she won’t be able to escape. The wind picks up, ruffling her skirts, helping her move quickly.

The woods quiet down. The only noise is the sound of her feet crushing the dry leaves. Her breath is ragged. She slows down and notices she can only hear her heart beating—the loud thumping of this mechanical heart, thump, thump, thump. The forest mirrors the sound. It irritates her, the constant reminder that she is alive while her parents are not. She keeps reliving the moment. It has been a year today to when she slammed the door on her parents’ faces and wished them dead. She can’t even remember why she was so angry. All she remembers is her last words to them- “I wish I didn’t have parents.” Fifteen minutes after they drove away, she had received a call from an unknown number telling her parents had an accident. And that’s when her world crashed around her.

“Pray, child, what is it that you want?” the dark whispers.

Atiye remembers her grandmother's stories about Old gods who answer prayers. She also knows she shouldn't pray to anything that answers in the dark. But she is desperate. She wants to stop reliving that day. She wants to escape from her memories or change them.

“I want to take my words back. I shouldn't have said that. How could those be my last words to them?” Atiye whimpers.

“You can't take your words back, but you can choose to forget,” the dark advises.

“I can?”

“You can, but I don't grant wishes. What will you give me in return?”

“What can I offer?”

“I will take your voice, but you will still have your words and ears. You will forget your past, but you will never be yourself again. You will hear goodbyes over and over again. There's no escape from the pain, you just won't realise it was yours, to begin with until...”

“I will do whatever it takes,” Atiye replies hurriedly.

“What the poet forgets, the poem remembers,” the darkness laughs.

The puzzle comes together for Atiye. At least, a few pieces. She made a bargain with the dark. And now her time is over. Her poems always remember the pain. She was never able to write happy endings, and it is time she remembers, too. Atiye wonders if having a voice, her thoughts, her memories back is a good bargain. But it felt so good when Ozan touched her. She felt alive like she could breathe on her own. She could feel emotions other than the bleak sadness. She felt happy at that one moment. She doesn't want to go back to being numb. She heard so many goodbyes over the years, felt the pain of so many people. And her words, she knows now how to be careful and maybe she can speak and heal people rather than just through writing. Perhaps this is what she is supposed to find. But her memories will haunt her still. That night, she slammed the door on her parents' faces when they left. No, she is fine the way she is. Numb with no memories.

But what did the darkness want?

“The only way out of the labyrinth of suffering is forgiveness,” comes Ozan's voice.

She leaps up from her chair and moves towards Ozan, who is standing by her cabin door with his hands folded. Before Atiye can reach him, he stops her.

“You can make this all go away. When you touch me, I feel alive! I don’t feel my memories dragging me down. I don’t feel pain. I don’t feel choked or numb.”

“It’s not me you need. It’s you,” Ozan says.

“Until I forgive myself for what happened,” Atiye realises what darkness wanted to tell her.

Moving Out Staying In

“In May, we were still naïve enough to think that we could, if nothing else, move out together and visit college one last time”

- Sukriti Lakhtakia



Photograph by Sagar Arora

i

As with all things virtual these days, I vacated my room for three years over a video call. In the unusual circumstances of the pandemic, the college had ended abruptly in March. In August, the unofficial circuit of the landlords and landladies across Delhi had decreed that it was high time to have their rooms emptied. Over the video call from my home in Hyderabad, my mother and I watched my landlady, Beena Aunty, give orders to the resident helpers to cram my belongings into four, big, white sacks. Beena Aunty was a loud woman, and she loomed large on my phone screen, like a giant stepping over my small town of things.

When Beena Aunty informed me that I had to move out by the end of August, I was upset because the chances of me travelling back to Delhi were slim. The virus was at its peak, and the number of cases seemed to have doubled within a week. Hence, moving out.

A few days after the call, Beena Aunty had all my belongings sent to my home through a packers and movers agency, but more for her own sake than mine. Any ambivalent feelings of gratitude towards her are difficult to convey.

My room at the PG had peeling motel wallpaper which grew on me as time passed, and the balcony let the breeze and sunlight visit often. The view from the balcony faced the back of our neighbourhood and was largely occupied by gleaming amaltas trees of all heights, a skyline in different shades of yellow. On especially stormy days, the leaves broke off and softly circled our building, as though drops of sunlight were falling from the sky. My room was bigger than most others because I had two roommates. While the three of us hit it off comfortably, our intimacy, as I have learned after moving out, was confined to the four walls of our shared room. On the call, my room looked dull, there was no sun streaming in and the white lights inside made it look like an interrogation room. My roommates had already moved out a few days ago, and the usual colours of our presence had been replaced by the white sacks sitting on the floor like elephants in the room.

I could clearly hear the exasperation in Beena Aunty's voice, as I guided her to different places in my room where I had stored my things: my cupboard, my shelf of books, the box under my bed, my bed drawer, side-drawer, desk-drawer, and a green suitcase. "Beta, aapka samaan toh khatam hi nahi ho raha hai," she said, her tone telling me she had better things to do with her time. As I write this, a month after having moved out, I recall that I forgot to ask her to pack my white towel, which might still be clipped to the frayed green rope hanging outside the room in the shared balcony.

I kept quiet during most of the call, smiling sheepishly and ignoring her jabs at the state of my room. The final glimpse I got was accompanied by the deep jingle of Beena Aunty's voice and the turbulence of her movements on my small screen. In less than half an hour, my room of three years had been stripped of all the markers that showed that I had once lived there, or that I had once attended college in the building across the PG. Never had I imagined that moving out would be such a quick and impersonal affair. When I first moved into Beena Aunty's PG, I had mistaken her master salesmanship for what came across as maternal generosity. She always said the right words in front of my parents, "Sukriti toh humari beti jaisi hi hai, chinta ki koi baat hi nahi hai," never failing to assure them that I was like their own daughter. Over the three years that I lived under her roof, my only relief was that I was on the top floor, three levels away from her own room on the ground floor. She rarely bothered to climb six flights of stairs, and by my third month there, I had become adept enough to walk through the main gate without catching her wandering eye.

A perpetual problem at the PG, and presumably across all women's hostels, was

the curfew timing. For several months, our guard bhaiya who was an old man seemed to detest any of us that went out outside after 7PM. The winters made him especially bitter, and because he fell asleep sooner than most of us, waking him up when we returned later at night was the real task. He was very fond of asking us, more so out of resentment than curiosity, “raat ke baara-baara baje kis tarah ki ladkiyan vapas aati hai?” and we would only smile sweetly in response and shuffle through the door quickly in the chill of the night. I wouldn't have put it past Beena Aunty to ask him to keep detailed records of when we went out, how often, and with whom.

The quickest escape route from the PG was an eight-minute walk to the back market – a cluster of small shops some three lanes behind our building. We were friendly with Batra Uncle, the owner of a kirana shop, an old man who smoked far too much and saw too little. His eyes had become unfocused over the years, and he simply refused to wear the glasses that had been prescribed to him. His second nature had become to squint, at customers, price tags, product information, to see only through that small, sweet spot where failing eyes could read and see sharply, always with a half-smoked cigarette dangling from his darkened lips.

The market was very self-sufficient, and it was surrounded by small parks on all sides. Once every week, the lanes of our neighbourhood livened up with the lights and chorus of the Saturday market. Set up close to the parks, it was largely a fruit and vegetable bazaar but if there was anything at all missing from the back market, it could be found here. And there was little else like sharing warm, crisp jalebis on a cold winter night.

In March, when my friends and I had all left Delhi for each of our homes, we were confident that we would return in time for our last few weeks of college. In April, as coronavirus cases were rising, we managed to stay optimistic that everything would somehow get sorted just in time for our farewell. In May, we were still naïve enough to think that we could, if nothing else, move out together and visit college one last time. We realised only a few weeks ago that the first disappointment should have already been one too many.

ii

It took five days for my things to arrive from Delhi, and for two days the bags remained untouched near our doorstep for fear of contagion. The evolutionary trait of adaptation to the new pandemic circumstances naturally made us formulate new rules at home – to bathe after each visit to the outside world, to sanitize the handle of our front door every alternate day, to leave foreign objects near our shoe rack. Despite the rule however, I

couldn't resist hovering around the bags, trying to examine the contents with my roaming eyes, and inspecting the corners for any tears. The not-so-white anymore bags were disposed of almost immediately after I opened them, and for a day or two all my clothes and books lay in two large heaps to greet anyone who walked through the front door. Not many did.

Nearly a week passed in sorting through my things; there were books to straighten under mattresses, clothes to wash, keepsakes to mull over. What is the appropriate amount of time needed to unpack 120kgs of memories? The spiritualist in my mother gently chided me for being weighed down by my attachment to material objects, but the friend in her didn't have the heart to say it again. But some of these were no longer ordinary things – they had travelled through many hands, across distance and through time. Almost half of all my books have a friend's name or book fair tags attached to them, and my clothes have stubborn food stains that remind me of a simpler time. I was a collector of things usually thrown into the trash after their purpose had been served – stray restaurant bills, movie tickets, postcards, dried flowers – all of which had wound up in a single book which would be my one thing to carry out from a burning building.

My materialism, for the lack of a better word, can then help one imagine my despair when I realized that some of my winter clothes had never arrived. Some frantic calls were made to Beena Aunty, who took it upon herself to get offended and have a shouting match, shuffling rapidly between various pitches. She thought my mother was accusing her of having stolen the clothes, when all we really wanted from her was to check my room again for anything that could've been missed. We haven't heard from her since, and what happened to my two shawls, one black dress, and one blue sweater is still a mystery.

Missing clothes also meant a loss for my elder sister because we shared a wardrobe. She and I are three years apart in age, but we are easily the same size. Over the past few months, it seemed to me as though my sister and I had become the same person, or rather, we had become mirrors of each other. We weighed the same, woke up and slept at the same time, often wore each other's clothes, thought alike (“Are you – “—thinking what I'm thinking? Yes.”), and often ended up adding the same things on grocery lists twice.

My mother, who has an ear for the slightest of sounds, failed to distinguish between our voices and the patter of our feet around the house. My father was simply happy to have both of us home, even if we did seem like copies of each other. The only

thing that differentiated us was the length of our hair, but even that wasn't a marker of difference for at least twenty days because my short hair had grown out and my sister had recently gotten her long hair cut short. I would be lying if I said it wasn't a little unnerving for the both of us. Our individuality seemed to be at stake.

Perhaps the strangest thing about this development was that my sister and I were actually quite different in nature. She was quiet, earnest, calm, and easy to get a laugh out of. I can be quite loud, I try to be sincere in my work, and while I am the resident entertainer, I'm anxious most of the time. As a notorious six-year-old, I once bit her out of anger – not her hand or her leg, but her back, which sounds like the most inconvenient place for a gnawing and I can't imagine how I managed it. She didn't say anything then and loves me still. We resurrected some of our lost individuality soon enough once our mother pointed this out. We are still thick as thieves, but if someone had to differentiate between us, they should know that she would never steal, even if her life depended on it.

My sister and I have spent nine full months at home together with our parents, having brushed through six large toothpaste tubes, but it still feels strange to have fallen into a routine when everything outside remains very much dystopian. I have had it so easy during what has been perhaps the most difficult year for the majority. So what if I have had to deal with an uncooperative landlady, or didn't get a chance to celebrate my graduation with my friends, lost a couple of clothes, and have settled into a fairly predictable life?

If there is anything that the faceless statistics hovering over news websites have taught me, it's that while the scale of the pandemic has been enormous and wide-reaching, its impact has been uneven. Batra Uncle relied heavily on his day-to-day customers; how must he be coping now? What about our old guard bhaiya, personal battles aside, who is presumably out of a job because there is no guarding to be done at the empty PG anymore? The countless men and women who sold their goods at the Saturday market, were they earning enough for themselves and their families? Every day that I skim over the headlines, I am reminded of a Sunday newspaper comic that explained our situation succinctly: all of us are not in the same boat, as the saying goes. Rather, we're only in the same storm, and while my boat can probably be called a ship by ordinary boat-standards, a large number of the boats are too small, leaking, or close to drowning altogether.

“The sky, it wasn’t a sky at all but a canvas, and spread upon it was lights of a quality I hadn’t known before.”

- Smriti Verma



Artwork by By Eric-Roux Fontaine

Many years ago, my grandmother was born in a crater village during the dry heat of summer, where ceaseless water flowed all year. Most people that lived there were farmers, but the landscape was dotted with mansions of city slickers who came and went as they liked. With time, the village had come to depend on these temporary dwellers, for whom the water and the sky and the grass was simply a break before they went back to their concrete walls and computer screens. But, despite years of interaction, no screens or concrete made their way in the village and so the lives of the villagers there were a series of quiet, peaceful evenings. They did not know, for instance, about the meteors, about the measures in the city that could help them, and a time when their dependence on nature would fall away like the ground under their feet.

They weren’t called crater villages then: the slow life crawling hollows left from the meteors that they are now. Then, the people lived as if in a story of their own making. There was no history except what one heard in stories and saw as children. My grandma brought up in a family of many, had been living for some years in the isolation of the city, which was when the meteors came and she lost everyone she had loved. She was twenty-four when she tied the cloth on her eyes along with everyone else. In time, the village came to be called *the crater of the willful blind* but everyone there knew the

the self-imposed blindness came not from a will but an almost devout sense of fear. Who had named it? We still don't know. The world scorned their history, emotions, and loss. Which is another reason why the people in the craters turned away from it and lived with a depth of religiosity that couldn't be wrested away from them for another two centuries to come. Somewhere in the middle, I was born, and I was called Elia, my eyes wrapped with my grandma's cloth, which always strangely smelled of rotten avocados. As a child, I was unruly, but Grandma had taught me to work with my hands, to feel, to study, and to use them to my advantage.

"Make sure to touch every tip before you form the image in your mind," she would tell me as a child while teaching me to read a book from the impressions on the paper.

"But why is it so hard?" I'd murmur, tugging the avocado cloth which had bothered me as a baby.

"You'll learn," she tugged my hand away from the cloth. "And you're a big girl now, almost eight, don't do that. Don't you remember the story from the last bonfire?"

"Yes."

"Do you remember the singing?"

It was the first time I had heard music. Grandma called it singing, said that the child's first song was an experience to be celebrated and nurtured, and so the tradition had come to be one of utmost care. She said it was magic, and I'd been enamoured with the word ever since.

"Magic?"

"Magic. The cloth is magic. And you should never turn away from magic."

"But why does it smell so rotten then?" I said, turning up my nose.

She laughed, holding my hand tightly in hers. I smiled. This was her way of telling me she loved me.

And every night we would play deceiving games on our fingers to pass the time, sleep with our hands intertwined and wake up to the smell of dew. This was the sense of greeting I grew up with, where the skin of another's against yours would be the mark of welcome, of respect, of love. For me, the holding came as easy as music to a songbird, and it was the only way I knew to understand people.

Grandma worked as a paper artist, carving the tales of old onto sheets that could be read by their impressions. The meteors would not hit the same place twice and so the village was a bubble of safety, but looking at the sky was still something looked down upon, and when it came to Grandma, forbidden. "The Gods above don't want mortal eyes upon them," she'd tell me and being a god-fearing, sensible woman, she felt no

need to challenge their will. Childhood curiosity, however, lends its way to desperate measures, and for ten-year-old me, it was limited to the task of somehow getting out of the ghastly piece of cloth despite the comfort of Grandma's hand.

The crater of the willful blind was not, in full effect, oblivious to colour, and rumours of what the world outside their four senses looked like, it spread in whispered details. I lived for those stories, hearing stories from the neighbourhood kids and their parents about the old days when we could see. I still did not know what they meant and tried with all of my tiny imagination to create a world within my mind, often running out of details to complete it.

“What do you think it is, Ila?” I asked, sitting by the river with my neighbour's daughter.

“Seeing?”

“Mhmm.”

“It must be like music.”

“Like music?”

“Music; like magic. Like hearing music for the first time, but this time you don't hear. Parents say the ancient ones never wore these horrible clothes, so it must be something to do with them,” she said.

“You mean like feeling? Grandma says we feel with our hands.”

“I don't know,” she muttered, throwing a pebble in the river.

“I don't know,” I echoed.

But the idea kept turning in my head until I found my answer in the scythe my grandma used to cut the chickens' throats for dinner, and, that night, after her breathing evened out, I slowly took my hand away from hers, went to the scythe, and used it to cut the visual prison, ever so carefully. I was ten, young, and felt a naked fear as it came off before my entire world came crashing down upon me, as the world inside our crater house was as dark as the one I had known for all these years. I had been wrong though, as I found out when I set out of the house to find something of substance and stumbled upon the entire expanse of the universe. It wasn't the colours my eyes registered first or the darkness of the skies that somehow mirrored the blind reality I'd known all these years. No, the sky was only a backdrop. The sky, it wasn't a sky at all but a canvas, and spread upon it was lights of a quality I hadn't known before. They weren't solid, like the dark, but something was moving about them, something alive and raw that everything else ceased to matter.

My breath caught in my throat and my hand gripped the cloth tighter, as someone would hold onto a part of themselves. Yet that moment of holding the cloth in my hand and knowing it wasn't a part of me but something expendable, something I could let

was exquisite. For a moment, I was lured to the thought of letting the cloth go as I raised it towards the sky and against the stars. My eyes shifted from the yellow, dirt-stained apron of the cloth towards the stars and I knew that there was no question about what reality I wanted to accept. It wasn't that the stars felt like home to me – they didn't. But there was something in their twinkling that looked more vibrant than the touch of hands, or the sound of music.

A rumour that went around about the stars was how these lights were emitted thousands of years ago and were visible now since the distances were too large. At that moment, I couldn't grapple with the truth of it or the truth of what I was witnessing. The apron was still in my hand and I had to go home. As much as the thought hurt, I couldn't wait to tell Grandma, my constant companion, what I had seen.

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I gather the letters, carefully carved, and put them away, as unread as they had been for the last ten years. I couldn't read them now, even if I wished to, knowing the distance of time, the distance between our lives. The world of ease and quick living I belong to now is too far away from the slow rhythms of my crater village, my world of innocence. I sit in a room where sunlight pours in, hurting my eyes, which are still sensitive after almost more than ten years of having seen and drunk the world with them I don't mind the pain, having grown up with much deeper impossibilities and knowing that almost anything can be endured: whether it is learning to read with your hands, navigating a childhood of darkness, or the ultimate pain of knowing the existence of the whole sensory world, alive like electricity at the ends of your fingertips, taken away from you.

This morning, I received notice of Grandma's death in a letter from Ila. She wrote a short letter, but it bothered me nevertheless that she sent a carved letter instead of a normal ink one, since she had also left the village a few years ago after hearing about me and had sought me out for help. Her letter brings me to the drawer, draws me towards it, to my grandma's unread words, which may as well not exist as long as I ignore them.

I left the village when I was fourteen. The night I came back after having seen the stars, I poured my heart out, while my grandma sat quietly and listened. Somewhere inside me then was a sliver of hope, an image of leaving the crater with my grandma for the lies it had fed us. After all, there were brighter landscapes to explore, and even as a child, I knew enough about rumours to know that there was an element of truth to them. Yet, the terse nods of Grandma hinted towards something I was suspicious of – that she had already known this reality and chose to reject it. I knew that when the meteors had started colliding, she'd been caused a river of suffering, enough to turn her towards God for good. But as a child, I couldn't understand her stubbornness. For Grandma, the blindness was a comfort she embraced. For her, the sky was chaotic, a sign of unresolved grief, of painful mourning, and no words from me could convince her otherwise. As I'd retired that night to my bed and tied the cloth around my eyes at grandma's request, her



hand no longer sought mine out, and that was my first night of loneliness.

The next four years were painful, days of receding touch, of silence, and of unacknowledged distances that I felt every night as my grandma's hands slipped further away from mine before dawn, and some days failed to touch it. I left as a shattered child of fourteen, wrapped in my world of distress as I had been wrapped up in her cloth. I had been enamoured with the stars as a child, and at fourteen, they informed for me the entirety of the world I had missed – I imagined the world as exciting, as beautiful, as trembling with vitality, and there was no longer any love in the village to hold me back.

A few minutes later, the front doorbell rings, and Ila stands in the doorway, quietly, as I open it. I invite her to come in, her hand going to mine, an old habit.

“Are you alright?” she asks. I answer her with a small murmur; deflecting. Ila and I had barely been in touch the last two years, and though she was from home, I no longer felt close to her.

“Do you want tea?”

“I can't stay very long. My mother sent me,” she says, sitting down on the sofa.

“Will you be coming back for the last rites? They need someone from the family.”

I look at her, a smiling expression mingled with sorrow. “I can't, Ila.”

I can see ‘the why’ at the tip of her tongue as her eyes turn away from me. I almost forget how much faces can say and how much you can miss when you don't see them. But she knows my answers, knows it is better not to press and leaves as abruptly as she came.

That night, and every night for the coming month, I'm at the drawer again, eyeing it from the outside, almost burdened by its content. In desperation, I open it, over and over again, scatter the letters, throw them back, consider throwing them away, but lacking the willpower for it. The last night of doing so, I see something hidden behind all the letters and the souvenirs of my past life, a green-yellow dirty thing, the cloth I'd grown up with. I fish it out, holding it between my fingers, feeling the fabric grow tender under my fingers as I push a thumb through it in my frustration and try to tear it. Why do I still have it?

The fabric gives away, and I realise the cloth is folded, has been folded all these years, a cloth of many layers that gave it its strength. I open it up as it comes apart, spreading it on my bed as a bedsheet, discovering parts of it that are still muslin white while others are spotted yellow. It looks almost like a tie with a dye pattern of sorts, with inscriptions and designs in the margins. They seem to be fading away. I look closely to admire the pattern, only realise it's not a pattern, but a language; not design, but the alphabets of my grandma's words, and they're just as soft as always, yet more

curved, easy, lacking the hardness of her later personality.

*I'm locked inside dirt... all voices of father mother brother are gone... my hands are full of soil I spent days not breathing, why am I still alive? the sun is not coming through, I saw a hand it becomes dark inside the holes I am twenty-three I am still alive no one is hearing my whistle or my music or my words I screamed for days father told me to never leave goodbyes are no longer possible the voice I hear in the dark tells me people are coming they'll help us in the craters they'll help our pain and we can have happiness again but I'm dying and there is a heaviness I can't name and hours have swept away and I am scared, I am scared if this will be the entirety of my life*

I hold a hand to my chest. I feel the air filling up my lungs, and I let my hand fall away.

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There. Right there. Just behind that tree. I'm wearing a smirk tinged in violet. Tea?

-Sanyukta Shiv Kumar

I'm like the little worm in the picture- you don't always find me but when you do, I am surrounded by nature, food, and sunshine.

-Kritika Rawat





A fanatic of balling and r&b/soul music. He aspires to start a vinyl collection as coveted sneakers are too exorbitant.

- Ranbir Negi

Enjoys reading, writing, baking and practising yoga and meditation. Secretary of the literary society of SNU, words.Ink and frequent contributor to University newspaper Campus Caravan. Always up for an open-spirited discussion. Glad to be a part of this edition of the Freewheeler!

- Apurva A Prasad





I'm such an incredible writer that it took me 2 days to come up with this sentence.

- Divisha

Ritika once had a dream: to be a Disney Princess. But when she found out her singing could rip out eardrums, she drowned her heart in reading and writing. A student by day, a sleep-deprived writer by night, she is now known as the girl who ruins notebooks with her scribbles.

-Ritika Chhabhra





Reader and writer of occasional poems. Other personality traits include: complaining about the weather, using the word “edgy”, finding bad YA rom-coms subversive.

-Smriti Verma

I'm constantly trying to explain something incommunicable.

- Akriti





What is the point of writing assignments when the sun is gonna blow up into a beautiful supernova in another hundred billion years.

- Sagar Arora

In search for the next story.

-Rishi Kohli





An editor by day and writer in the last remains of the day, she writes poetry on her typewriter when it rains. Known for reading a book in a day, she can be found on the terrace talking to the moon.

-Khushboo Aneja

If I could describe myself in less than 50 words, what would be different? Lately preoccupied with birds and learning how to cycle.

-Sukriti Lakhtakia



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The universe is made of stories, not
of atoms.

-Muriel Rukeyser

