

THE FREEWHEELER

Vol 1 | Issue 10

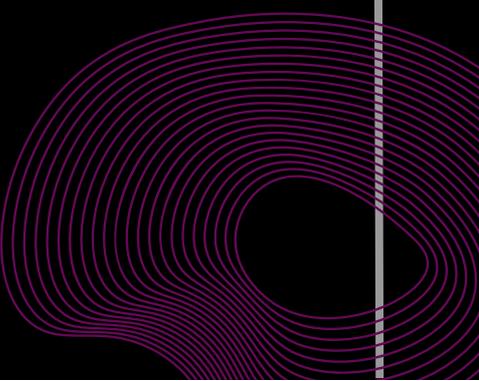
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DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
SHIV NADAR INSTITUTE OF EMINENCE



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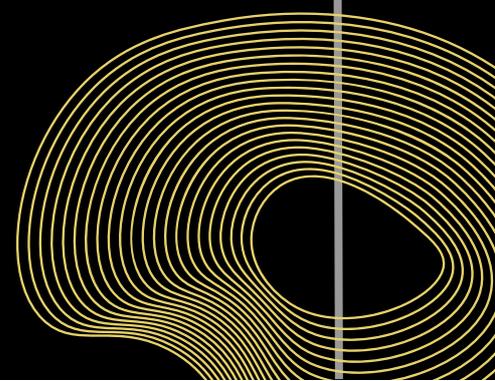
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FACULTY ADVISOR'S LETTER

Prof. Vikram Kapur

It seems that it was just yesterday when we were scrambling to get the first issue of The Freewheeler out. Now the magazine is in its tenth issue. Which is in itself a milestone. In the ten years since the first issue of The Freewheeler came out India, the world and the university have seen significant changes. There have been wars and a pandemic. The Indian political scene has shifted. Shiv Nadar University has become the Shiv Nadar Institution of Eminence. Through it all The Freewheeler has remained consistent in its mission to showcase the creative work of the university's students. Thanks to it, several creative writing students have made the journey from the classroom to publication and got first-hand experience in what publication entails. A number of editors and copyeditors have painstakingly worked on the pieces accepted in a bid to make them as good as they can possibly be. And each issue has been enhanced by the efforts of various illustrators and presented attractively on the page or the screen by dedicated designers. Each incarnation of The Freewheeler is the result of the collaborative efforts of a number of students, and the tenth issue is no different.

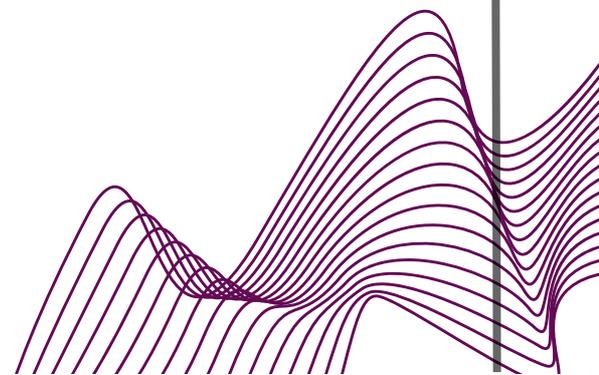
This issue of The Freewheeler includes a wide-ranging collection of poetry and prose. Its twelve poems are diverse in style and content. The same can be said for the eight short stories that made the final cut. Some of them involve fantastical elements.



Others are suspenseful. And still others deal with issues as relatable as love, coping with death of loved ones and relationships within families. The pages of the magazine are lit up with wonderful pictures and illustrations. The credit for making all this possible goes to the issue's editors, Nandini Dogra, Ranbir Negi and Vaishali Batra, and their team of dedicated student contributors, proofreaders and artists.

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

I thank you all.



EDITORS' NOTE

Nandini & Ranbir

Before I go ahead and congratulate the team, our coordinator and the writers, I have a question for you, the reader. But first, unclench your jaw, open your shoulders, and straighten up, you banana-shaped human! So, when was the last time you took a deep, mindful breath? Not simply the yogic practice, but actually feeling the gentle force of the oxygen streaming through your nostrils, filling up your lungs, reminding your body of the transitory life force before escaping again. Well, I hope you have now. Feeling a bit refreshed? This is exactly how we hope this edition of *The Freewheeler* makes you feel. We present to you the absolute package of fantasy, friendship, love, suspense, horror, and thrill, woven into the many stories and verses.

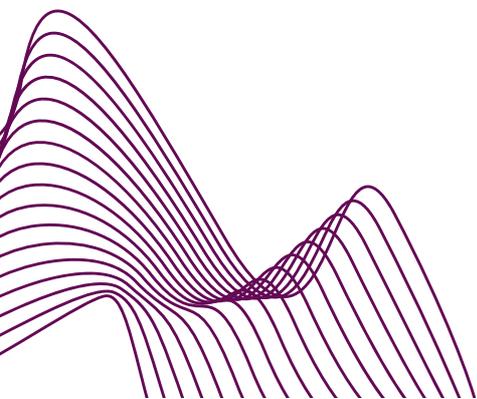
We move through the realms of the demigods, take voyages across oceans, and make eye contact with the presence behind us while accepting the gaze that surrounds us, only to see strangers transform into friends and friends being revealed as snakes (figuratively, obviously!). We are pretty sure the following pages will be as rewarding to you to read as they were to us.

We are extremely grateful to Professor Kapur for his guidance and support which made working through ceaseless editing, proofreading and design feel like a relief from the drudgery of everyday life filled with long lecture hours and never-ending submissions.

The beautiful cover design of this year's edition—the exemplar of the pool of creativity you will discover—would not have been possible without the efforts of Kripi Singh from the MFA Department, who graciously agreed to design the cover and was amenable to our changes and demands. The cover looks as beautiful, yet mysteriously alluring, as the creative pieces in this edition. We must thank Vaishali Batra who helped us with proofreading and editing, while providing us active feedback as we sought to tie all loose ends to compile and produce the literary magazine of the English Department of Shiv Nadar Institute of Eminence.

Finally, without the writers, of course, this edition would not be possible. It is too limiting to call their writings “short stories” and “poetry” when they encompass such a broader ambit. We appreciate their willingness to share their works, and seeing this year's edition in print is immensely delightful for us all. There is no doubt in saying that *The Freewheeler* is a platform dedicated to the students of SNU to showcase their best works, reflecting the variegated and diverse ways we perceive the real and the imagined.

We hope you all enjoy reading this!



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Forelsket. That's what stories are to me....



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"Of All The Places I Could Be, I Just
Want To Be Here With You."



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"I feel like a Kentucky Fried Idiot!"



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To be, or not to be, that is the question



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Here I am



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"phainetai moi..."



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"My soul wandered, happy, sad, unending."

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"There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
rough-hew them how we will."



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You don't get to know me.



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God blessed me with fantastic hair
and shit conversation skills.

MEET THE TEAM



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Until Their Gaze Lingers

Vanya Nautiyal

They found us at the house at the end of the street. When my mother realised she was pregnant with me, she dropped out of college and moved there. It wasn't a bad place. The neighbourhood was full of others like us, down on their luck or approaching the end of their life. We left them alone, and they did the same to us. My mother's family never contacted us either. Whenever I tried to ask about them, she just smiled and took me in her arms, saying, "You're all the family I need, my love." And I always buried my head in the crook of her neck and believed her.

We had never really been apart from each other. I was too young to be sent to school then, and my mother didn't think I could bear being away from her. Every day began with her waking me up and doing something fun for breakfast. Some days, we had microwaved dinners for breakfast in bed, which to me, were the most exquisite meals we could afford. On other days we took all the old fruits in our house and made jam out of it. We did our chores to music, choreographing a new dance routine each time we switched radios. My mother always held my finger as I tried to twirl.

She even took me with her whenever she got a job. She was a fantastic painter and was sometimes hired to paint at weddings held at the old church on the street. Shotgun weddings turned into fairytale scenes under her brush. I saw how the brides glanced at it and looked away tearfully, almost ashamed of how their bleak reality held up against the painting's beauty. And when the father-daughter dance began, I felt my mother put her arm around me and squeeze me into a hug. "We'll dance like that someday, too, yeah?" She murmured into my hair each time.

After we celebrated my seventh birthday, something happened. One day, when I went to open the front door, two strangers stood in front of me. Two men dressed in suits with shiny leather shoes. The brims of their hats put their faces into shadow.

Before I could say anything, my mother grabbed me and pulled me back to her. "My baby, can you wait inside the bedroom for me, please?" Her voice was

gentle, but her grip on my shoulders was not. I nodded and went to the room as fast as I could but pressed my ear to the door after closing it. The wood muffled it somewhat, but I could hear my mother screaming at the two men that "I don't care who sent you! You have no right to tell me what's best for my child!" The minute I heard them open the door to leave, I ran back to my bed and pretended to be asleep. Through half-lidded eyes, I saw my mother slowly open the bedroom door and tiptoe over to me. Her hand was very warm as she ran it through my hair. But it shook with something I could not understand.

The next day, she told me that she had registered me for school starting next week. She said it casually as she slid eggs on my toast, but I was devastated. I stood up and ran to her, tugging her apron and tearfully asking her not to send me away. She laughed and swept me up in a hug. "You'll be there for just a few hours a day and come back here immediately! Nothing will change, Ava. I promise you that." But even though her warmth was the same and I buried my face in the crook of her neck, even though I wanted to, I didn't believe her.

The next day, she went to her job without me for the first time. "To prepare you to stay in a house alone," she said. I was terrified of being in the house alone, but I refused to show it. Instead, I stood still as she gave me multiple little kisses and told me to be careful, to not open the door for strangers. As the front door closed, the silence closed in. Our home was always full of music, laughter, and our voices. But it wasn't that scary, the silence. It was almost comforting. Familiar. I spent the entire day playing by myself, and when I opened the door for my mother, I didn't cling to her as she expected me to. She was surprised but smiled and planted another kiss on my head.

"Weren't you afraid, or lonely?"

"No, mommy. You were right. It wasn't that scary. I think I can manage."

"Well, now, I'm proud of you. It's a shame, though, since I quit my job today, so I can wait for you at

home from now on.”

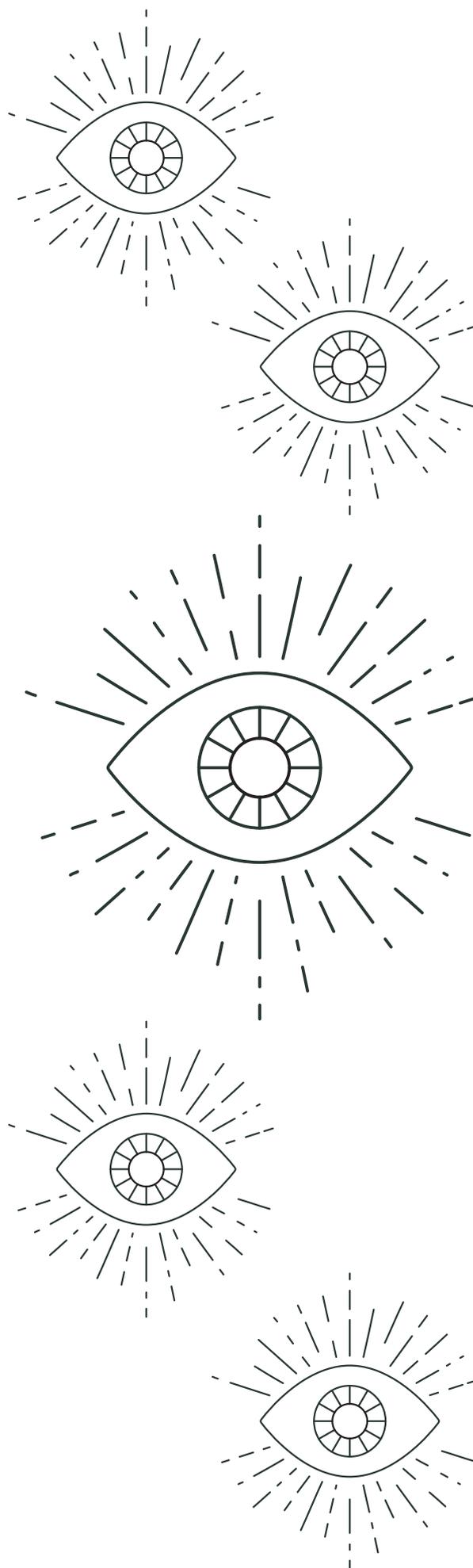
I couldn't imagine my mother not making art. She had a rare talent, and I was secretly proud of her work. I must have let the shock show on my face because she ruffled my hair to reassure me.

“Don't worry, I'm not giving up art entirely. I think I'll strike out as an independent artist from now on. I've had enough of weddings.”

Everything was the same. I started going to school and loved it, and my mom stayed at home and worked on her art project. She had begun painting eyes all over the house for some reason. When I asked her why, she said, “So I can keep an ‘eye’ on you, even if I'm not here any more.” She whispered comically, and I always laughed. Everything should have been the same. But the more I disappeared into my room to work on homework or talked to friends using the land-line, the more my mother focused on her work. She worked furiously, covering the wall from the ground to the ceiling with eyes of all shapes and colours, with broken and whole irises, abyssal pupils, and crawling eyelashes. They followed me everywhere I went. Even when I turned my back on them, or closed my eyes, I could feel the weight of their gaze on my skin. I wanted to complain to my mother, but I feared it would unsettle her. She was aiming to get featured in an art magazine, I remembered. She had been following it since her college days, and we had copies of it all around the house. I didn't have the heart to ask her to give up on her dream once again.

But I should have said something, at least at the time she started to complain of heaviness in her eyelids. The doctor she went to said there was nothing wrong, but maybe it was time for her to stop taking sleeping pills at night. After giving them up, she became worse. She stayed up all night, working on her ‘masterpiece’, and even skipped meals despite my pleas for her to eat with me. Soon, I began to avoid making eye contact with her. Her deadened, yellow-ringed irises frightened me more than the eyes she painted. I knew that my mother was going down a twisted path, but there was nothing I could do to tear her away from it.

One morning, she knocked on my door. “It's done, darling!” Head still heavy with sleep, I went to open the door and followed her through the house. My mother seemed almost back to her old self. She led me through the house, talking and laughing just as she had before. I couldn't understand what was going on, but I was



happy. Then, we headed to the kitchen and toasted her achievement with orange juice. As I watched her squeeze her eyes at its sourness, I felt my heart settle into peace for the first time in weeks. Maybe she was right. Nothing will change in the end.

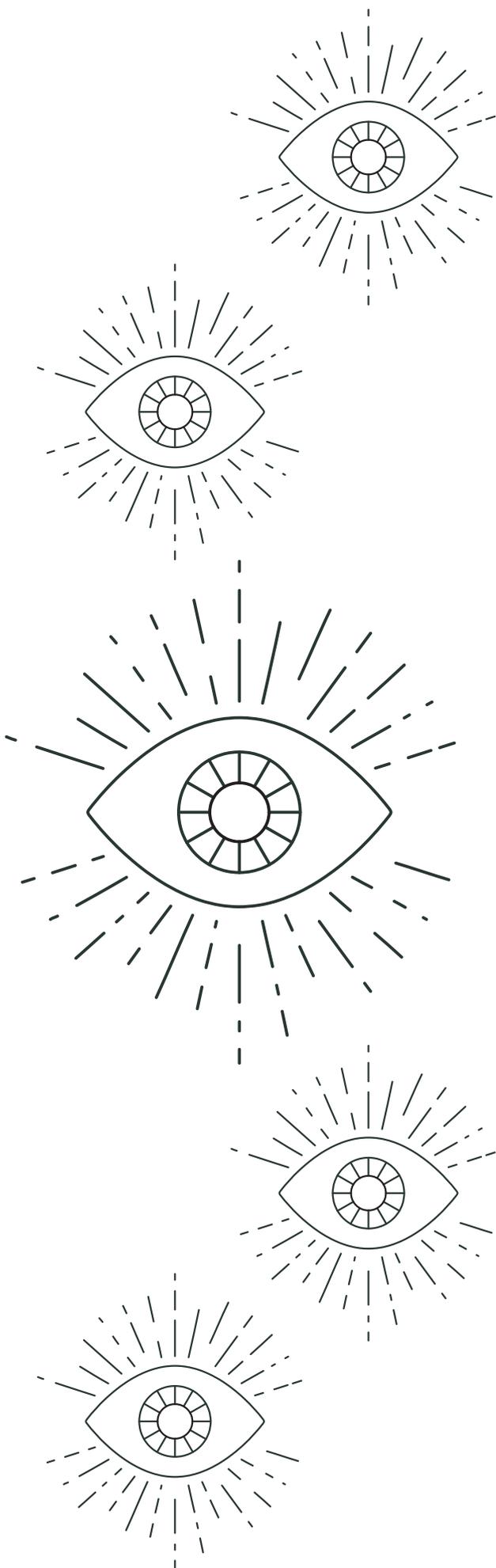
The next morning, she woke up screaming about how she couldn't open her eyes any more. I stumbled over to her room and found her entire face covered with scratches and blood. She was sobbing violently, and when I tried to take her into my arms to comfort her, she pushed me away. Asking me to stay away from her. My arms remained as they were, helpless and outstretched. After a few more minutes of crying, she stopped. Asked me to get the knife.

And I knew she had decided she needed something sharper than her nails.

I ran to the kitchen before I understood what she meant. Grabbing all of the knives and shoving them into a cabinet beneath the stove. Then I grabbed the landline and pressed 911. I did everything efficiently, without emotion. Later, they told me that I must have already gone into shock. All I remember is my certainty that my mother was about to die. And I was going to die with her. After everything was done, I went back upstairs. Found her sleeping on her bed, and turned to her side. Her breathing was peaceful. Almost familiar. Within the gaze of all the eyes on the walls, I laid down next to her and curled around her sleeping figure. And the silence of our house that had been suffocating us for weeks returned to a comforting one. I held my mother close and pressed my lips to her head. I held my mother as the life ran out of her body, even though she did not hold me back. But her hand underneath mine was warm until I held it.

By the time they found us, it was too late. People kept talking about "Wilson's disease", "organ failure", and looked at me and hushed their voices while saying "genetic, but probably recessive in the child". Before they sent me to the foster home, I was sent to the house to pick up my things. Under the gaze of the same social workers who had come to our house all those weeks ago, I packed our life together in a suitcase. Before I left, I looked at the eyes again. No longer distant, they were now my mother's eyes, pleading with me to stop growing up, to stay with her as always.

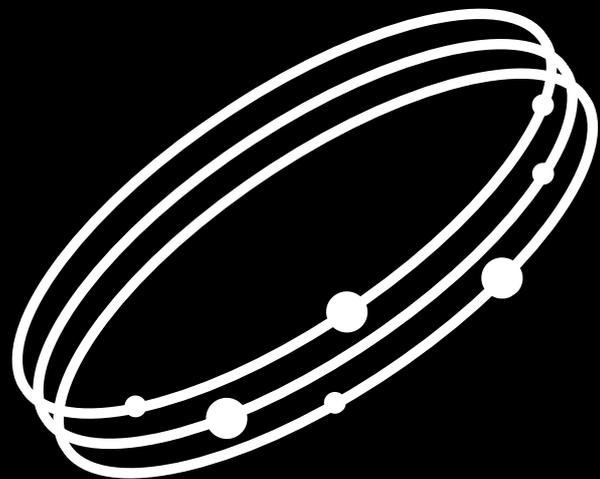
Legally speaking, my mother left me just the house. This is why, once I turned 18, I returned to the neighbourhood to live in the house, and decided to paint the outside with the same eyes. Just like my mother, I wish to show how there was beauty even in the loneliest time of our lives.



My Wrist Sings

Oviya Cherian

My wrist jingles with much to say.
A gold band from an ocean away,
Beads with a story from mountains so cold,
And the secrets of my grandma's household.
Blue stones, by a friend, strung together.
And passed down, a circlet of old leather.
One, my sister braided, my heart swelled.
Every clang, every chord is a memory closely held.

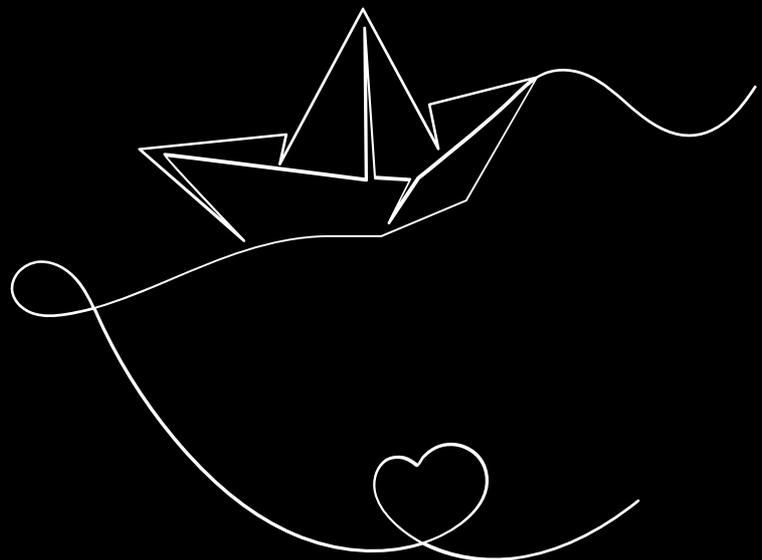


Ode to a Paper Boat

Suditi Sundaram

Taking a piece of scrap paper,
I gently ease its folds;
upon the rapid water,
I set it afloat.

Oh, paper boat,
please teach me your ways—
tell me how you're the hardest to catch
yet the easiest to make.



A Blind Man's Elephant

Jayasuchita Jayakumar

Zayde

There is silence in my world.

I watch as my mother speaks to Ms. Shawna, adjusting her grip on the heavy grocery bags dangling from her hands. Light glints off her metal bangles as they slide against each other with motion. Ms. Shawna's gaze quickly darts to the bangles.

I crouch and run my fingers through the fine sand dusting the playground. They're beyond me, these things that happen. How did Ms. Shawna know of the bangles before she saw them? Why did Dad tiptoe into the living room when he wanted to surprise Mum? What jolted the milkman despite the neighbour's dog being locked up out of his sight?

Yesterday, I was practicing my signs in front of the window. It was raining outside, an early morning drizzle to ensure the midday's stifling heat. I had thrown the window wide open, to let the cool breeze swoop into my sultry bedroom. As the first drops of windblown rain landed on my skin, I began signing the alphabets. By the time I had completed three rounds, I was pretty proud of myself. Everybody in the kindergarten class would want to be my friend now. They usually stared when I signed to them, but that was probably because I was doing it all wrong. Smiling, I dashed to my bed to pick up the book lying half-open. 'Sign Language ABC', it said.

I had gotten most of it right, except for A and E. I flung the book down and clenched my right fist. Thumb pointed up, A, thumb pointed in, E. The bed shook as I jumped up and down. Today, school might be fun. Today, someone other than Ms. Shawna, my teacher, might talk to me.

I bounded off the bed and back to the window. I was so happy I expected the air around me to feel it too. Like a pebble rippling the water, I wanted to do something so the silence enveloping me would thrum with my joy. A strange feeling was bubbling up my throat, and I wished it would bubble out around me.

The rain sprinkled me again, as it rushed to splatter the ground with dampness. The drops of rain continued to hit the mud, only to disappear, and I wondered. *Do you feel it too, rain? Do you want the world to know when you smack into the ground? Do you want to shatter whatever it is that holds you silent and hear it ring?*

One moment I'm playing in the sand, and the next the sand is warming my face. The air is knocked out of me. The back of my head throbs angrily as my blurry gaze takes in the ball rolling to a stop a few feet ahead of me.

I wait for the daze to wear off before climbing to my feet, hardly noticing as Mum dusts my trousers with fluttering hands. My gaze flits over the kids spread across the ground, each eyeing me with confusion, frustration, and some semblance of childish pity. Some of them have their hands thrown up, others are standing closer to me than I would have expected.

They seem to be shocked, exchanging wide-eyed looks and signing with their mouths amongst themselves. That is another thing that had recently dawned upon me. They sign with their mouths: tongue, teeth and all. Even Mum, Dad and Ms. Shawna.

Is that why my classmates ignore me, because I haven't learned their signs? Why does Ms. Shawna not teach me that, then?

Everyone keeps staring at me, so my hands grow clammy. I don't like this feeling, of me somehow being on the other side of an invisible line. The urge to run and hide is overwhelming, especially when I lock eyes with a boy whose glare is the sharpest.

My skin prickles under his stare, but I can't look away. He looks at me like there's something wrong with me. Discomfort snakes through me, along with a strange sensation that keeps inflating. Suddenly, he breaks our stare-off and looks behind. I follow his gaze to find Ms. Shawna calling him.

The thing welling inside me bursts. It's a groggy realization at best, but deep inside, I've come to know. *I know.*

There is something I cannot attain, something that they all share but me. They can sign with their mouths without having to look at each other because of that. They're not pushing me to the other side of the invisible line; I'm already there. I'm different, because I don't have what they do. I might never.

I blink back the tears pricking my eyes. No, I won't let myself think like that. I retrieve the ball and toss it to the closest kid. I smile at her, but turn away before I see whether she returns it. I'm going to learn their mouth-signing and drag myself to their side. I'll see her smile then.

Mum is still fussing over small scrapes across my knees so I tug at her sleeve. When I pat her hand to assure her, she hugs me before reluctantly standing. She pulls me along with her to Ms. Shawna. Ms. Shawna, who was busy chiding my mates, now looks me over. While Ms. Shawna and Mum say their goodbyes, I acknowledge the gaze burning into my face.

The boy cocks his head and studies me with an inscrutable look. Maverick, I think. He's popular and has lots of friends. He could be my hook to the other side.

In a moment, I'm going home. I wrack my mind, wondering what a moment's difference I can make, for him to lose that wariness as he regards me. For him to regard me as one of them.

When my Mum tousles my hair to get my attention, it strikes me. I might not know their mouth signs, but I've seen this boy sign with his hand. I have no clue what it could mean, but it's worth a shot.

So I do it. I raise my middle finger at him.

.....

As the years pass, I resignedly accept that that which eludes me is not as easy as being learnt. It's beyond that, so I'm never gonna capture it. It's simply beyond me.

There is silence in my world, and chaos inside my head.

.....



Maverick

There is always a wind whistling in my ears, a clock ticking in the room, or a bird chirping far away. No true silence anywhere. No knowing how it would feel without sheer life bustling around me, despite me.

That kind of silence can be lonely.

The boy who gave me the finger in kindergarten becomes more notorious with every grade that passes. Third grade, he slipped away from the class when on a trip to the beach and almost drowned in an attempt to hear the sea.

Fifth grade, he snuck out to go to a rock concert. The management had found him snuggled up behind one of the speakers, running his hands all over to feel the vibrations.

Seventh grade, he skived off school and lazed at a nearby park. He had startled an old lady quite out of her senses when he had started screaming out of the blue.

Ninth grade, he stole the counselor's iPod along with the earphones and walked around the entire day wearing them.

Somewhere along the way, he had gone insane. Doing the same thing again and again, but expecting different results.

It was in the tenth grade that that daft boy finally understood that he was deaf. Of course, he had known all along, but that was when he forced himself to accept it. He realized there was no way across his soundlessness.

Now, he's back to being the boy he was before all this. Zayde reads, Zayde sketches, Zayde takes long walks in the park by himself. Zayde has cut himself off from the world that he can't listen to, and given in to the world where he can.

Clench your teeth hard. Really hard for a few seconds. Do you hear a sort of zing in your ears? It's a sound, you're welcome.

That was the first note I sent him. It was nothing special. I accidentally discovered it, so I decided to be gracious and pass it on to him.

What does the moon sound like? he sent back.

I had a good laugh before sobering up to how it was not funny at all. Not only did he not know sounds, he didn't know that not everything made sounds too.

I also realized that Zayde was the kind of person who would steal your house if you gave him an inch.

Tell me more.

Because of my abject altruism, I did. I told him the mixer sounded like the rattle of everything inside his head. The clock sounded like a more mechanical version of his throbbing headaches. His Mum's voice sounded like honey, and mine sounded like bread toasted to a crisp.

I never directly approached him. I wasn't about to learn sign language just to entertain that boy, thank you very much.

Ten years before the day we exchanged vows was the day I finally mustered the courage to face him. Somewhere along the way, I had fallen for his silent sounds and endless longing.

Ignoring my breathless heart, I had stridden up to him.

I thought long and hard about this, but came up with only one sound that I didn't have to guide you through.

I closed my palm around his fist and pressed it to his heart. Funnily, that was the moment I got my first true silence. Watching Zayde experience his first true sound.

His heart was racing underneath our joined hands when he raised his other open palm to mine.

Not the only one.

The Yellow Lemon

Kaveri Mathur

The yellow lemon falls off the shelf,
A bounce, a roll, bruises on bubble-skin.
Plop, splash under the tap; its shell
Pops, among rust and wood, a golden tint.

The yellow lemon, fuzzy and soft,
Has hidden under its pastel zest,
Tart insides, the mouth contorts,
And thus unveils the lemon's mess.

The pale lemon, now nothing but husk,
Long gone are scattered shades of dusk.
Convulsing, knife damp with mist,
Wringing it dry, are turning wrists.
The pale lemon, cries out, but oh-so silent,
Longs for the shelf, far from quiet violence.



The Night

Shikhi Singh

Looking into the darkness of the night,
Crickets could be heard far from sight,
the light of the moon on the notebook,
as the rich aroma of arabica coffee
scatters across the room,
with its bitterness settling soon,
a soft breeze caresses my skin
dumping all my worries in a bin.



Mun Sel Pin Varugerain

Oviya Cherian

Crouching and eye to eye with his youngest, Indrani, Raj wiped the tears off his children's faces. "...and when I get there, you can introduce me to all your new friends. You can show me around the camp and teach me all about Chennai", he continued his comforting whisper.

Of medium height and trim, greying at the temples but with a full head of hair and tears streaking his face, Raj was neatly dressed in ironed yet creased khaki pants and a linen shirt buttoned all the way up. His family was properly made up too. "As long as you present well you will be treated with respect, regardless of caste or money", he had lied to them earlier that morning as he adjusted the belt on his son's pants. Chandan was fiddling with the large, silver buckle now. It was a friendly lie, one to comfort them, one to fill the sad silence. His children were still at that age where they lapped up whatever he said while his wife, Shanti, laughed into her hands.

On the dock, the large white ship loomed over them. The skies were a warning, dark and cloudy.

He pulled his wife aside, handing her three bundles of envelopes, each tied in smooth silky ribbons he had painstakingly picked out the day before. A soft, warm yellow for Chandan, a deep violet for his wife and the firetruck red for his little explosion of a daughter. Each envelope was marked neatly: "open when you're sad", "open when you miss me", "open when you're angry with Amma", "open when you need a hug from me" and on and on. He flexed his still aching fingers, remembering the tearful nights he had spent writing these letters under the dim moonlight as his wife slept, signing every letter off with "I will see you so so soon". Every word, a beat of his heart.

If only he could wrap their voices up in an envelope, to hold against his ear like a conch shell. Shanti looked into his eyes, and saw the shine

of tightly wrapped grief. She didn't ask what the envelopes held. She just tucked them into her sari, where it bunched around her waist, and ran a shy, quick hand through his hair.

"All aboard for Rangoon to Chennai!" the sailor on the docks yelled while untying the rope that kept the ship ashore. "Indian" families all around them scampered, rushed into tight embraces and too-short farewells. Shanti gathered them all into a final hug before, through his tears, Raj ushered them toward the ramp, the cheap deck tickets in hand. They would spend the journey at the weather's mercy.

"We'll be fine, come find us. Seekroma. I love you," was all Shanti said as she held her husband's face in her hands resting her forehead against his. Then she turned around, leaving him for the first time in fifteen years. She put on a brave face and consoled her sobbing children, asking them to smile for their father, to give him strength. Indrani sent loud kisses his way, her hand flicking them from her mouth into the sky. Raj caught them in his hands, pressing them to his pounding heart. Chandan, though older, couldn't gather the strength to do more than cry into his mother's pallu. And so with a mere 175 kyat to each "returning Indian", his son, his daughter, and his wife left their country, their home and him. Raj stood at the docks, his vision clouded. One hand clutching his shirt tight, he watched till the ship was a blip in the far distance, the sun lighting the sky in rivers of pink and gold.

"Uncle, newspaper?" Raj glanced down at the young boy selling newspapers, then at his shoes which were getting wet as the waves danced onto the dock, his socks squelched under his toes. He forced a smile, and paid the boy, ruffling his hair. He took the newspaper and turned around. With his head bowed he trudged his way to the bus stop and fixed on the front page.

1. Munn sel pin varugerain: "You go first, I will follow" in Tamil
2. Seekroma: "fast" in Tamil

But all he could see was another paper, an older one, read over cooling coffee, losing steam, that said "Taking the Country Back in 1963, General Ne Win Sends the Aliens Back". 'Resident Aliens'...my father's father, his mother's mother, none of it counted for anything. Born here, raised here, aliens, revoked residents, not citizens.

At the stop, staring unseeingly at a red splat of paan on the pavement, he was nudged by a neighbour to get on the bus. He glanced at the man's gentle smile. Did he cheer when the general ordered us back to outer space... he thought. He was finally knocked out of his dreary reverie by the jostling commuters around him and his newspaper fell out of his trembling hand. He wiped the tears off his face that had been streaming. unabated since he left the dock.

None of his spurned feelings meant anything, it wasn't safe here. That's why he reminded himself, he was doing this, why he allowed his family to go so far away while he stayed back, alone. And how he was going to justify that his children, 13 and 8 years old, were probably not going to remember anything about where they came from. The driver's radio echoed in his skull, a now familiar refrain. The chorus repeating - "Ne Win...aliens...returning Tamils", the numbers leaving in the hundreds every day. The crowd jostled against him, someone stepped on his foot. Picking at his nails and clenching his toes against the cheap leather of his shoes, he waited for his stop.

#

The silence around him was loud. All he could hear was his harsh swallow. Raj stood in front of his little stone house, staring, too scared to enter. But, he did. It had never felt so empty. His wife and he had built it from the ground up with their hard-earned money, refusing loans from her father. They helped in the construction and built a house for a family. A house to last for years and years. A house that should have seen their two children grow into adults. The notches marking their heights on the wall of the kitchen entrance shouldn't have stopped at 8 and 13 years old. Raj ran a hand over the notches seeing phantoms of their time here. He couldn't bear the thought of now having to live here alone, not without Chandan and Indrani muddying the floors and scuffing the walls and not without his wife beside him to laugh at or chide them.

He walked to the children's room; Chandan's half, neatly organised with his clothes carefully folded on his bed and a small shelf of books, now with a few gaps where the ones he had chosen to take with him used to sit. And Indrani's half, messy with her bed unmade and colourful scrawls pasted on the walls.

Slowly, with pain evident in every move, Raj opened the children's closet with a loud creak and placed their clothes into an old brown suitcase and neatly cushioned the remaining books between them.

He sat on Indrani's bed, clutching her soft blanket to his chest before taking each paper down delicately. He placed them into an embroidered folder and into the suitcase. He stayed on the floor, hands on the suitcase and eyes glazed looking blankly ahead of him.

"Bananas, fresh bananas, ripe bananas, 175 kyats for five bananas!" bellowed a fruit seller outside the window. The wheels of his cart rolled over the gravel noisily. Fifteen bananas were all his family warranted...He got up with the suitcase and walked to the door.

With a deep breath, he went into his and Shanti's bedroom. This was easier. Before Shanti and the children had left, the couple had packed up almost everything in their room together so all Raj had left to do now was pack away his toothbrush and the photo albums into the top of the brown case.

He pulled three photo albums from under the bed and flipped through the biggest one. It was large and bound in cardboard, decorated in a white and purple floral from an old bedsheet. On it, he had embroidered each of their names, on each corner. On the first page, there were two faded, black-and-white photos of their wedding. He was in a black suit, much younger, hair far blacker and an obnoxious moustache that he had oiled and oiled for months prior praying for it to grow to impress his future wife. She was dressed in a red sari and simple gold jewellery from each of their mothers. In the first picture, he was stiff with his eyes wide and back ramrod straight. She was comfortably smiling at him in amusement, one hand on his arm.

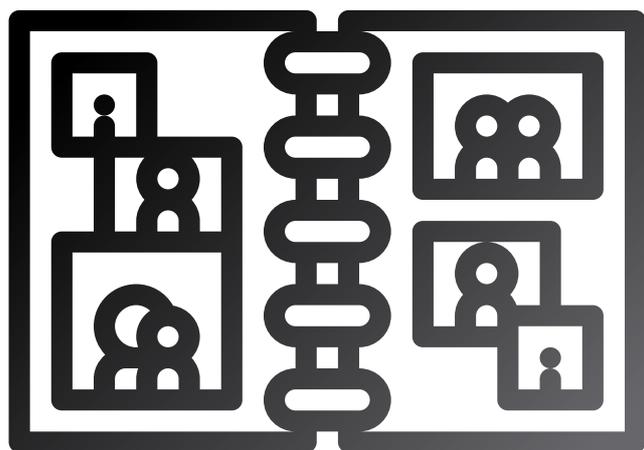
It was the first picture they had taken as a married couple, he had been so scared and his mind was racing with thoughts of how on earth the woman next to him had accepted him. The guests around them had been a joyful, familial mix of ethnic Indians as well as Burmese. Drinks had been passed under tables, the uncles louder with every sly sip,

getting less sly by the glass. The aunties feigned ignorance but rolled their eyes loudly. Shanti too had palmed her fair share behind a curtain with the aid of her brother and adoring husband. Their steps fumbled by the end of the night.

Raj flipped to the next image, a more recent one of his family. Here, he was leaning over his wife's shoulder to look at his newborn daughter, much more at ease than in the previous picture. Sitting next to his mother, Chandan was gazing at his new sister in awe, his young hands holding one of her feet wondering how they could be so small and so soft. Shanti looked tired with the baby tightly held in her arms but her head was resting against a pillow and her eyes were closed in contentment.

Raj smiled and closed the album. He dusted them off and packed them up. He latched the buckles on the faded suitcase, safely sealing his life away. He picked up his baggage and walked out of his house. Taking a deep, shaky breath he locked the plain wooden door for the last time and put the key in his pocket. He refused to live in this house without his family. They *were* the home, *his* home, their noise and liveliness. For now, simple, impersonal employee lodgings awaited him. Until he made enough money...

Raj took his first step back to them - down the winding road back to the bus stop and away from the little stone house.



Dried Ink

Tanmay Jain

The time has come to put my ink to dry,
Inspiration, hurry! The noose 'round me is taut.
A man of letters, left by old friends to rot.
Words elude me, I don't know why.

The Muses now forsake their old ally.
Kvasir's Mead fails to spark any thought.
I sit with my pen and paper, all for naught.
Will my power ever return? Dare I try?

I look to the sky, to the trees, I look outside,
I look at the ocean, the seas, the high tide,
I look towards you, towards him, towards her,
I look inside, something begins to stir.
Pen to paper, the poet is born anew.
Now the dried ink, of their beauty, sings true.

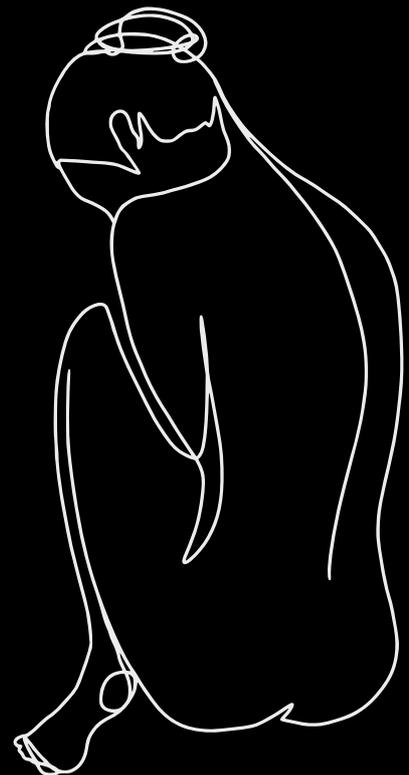


Drawing on my Walls

These walls tell some tales.
The scars on my body,
Fill in the other details.

Language of Love

The words that left her lips,
Always felt like lies
Overlooked by me as I was listening
Only to her ravishing eyes.



Voices and Notes

Nandini Sharma

Miles Davis' *Bitches Brew* makes a horrible soundtrack for a late-night commute across mid-winter mountain roads. Sliding down frozen, twisting turns, my nerves are already taut, out-of-tune, and ready to snap when the opening notes of bass, drums, and piano begin their ominous introduction. The first blast from Miles' frantic trumpet catches me off guard. I jump in my seat as the brass instrument fills my cab with its echoing lament. It's both the tortured cry of the abused and the manic laugh of the abuser.

Tension fills the cab of my truck.

My headlights prove little use around the sharp corners of the rising road, and my eyes strain to see what lies ahead in the peripheral light. Trees slumbering under a heavy blanket of snow create a tight corridor on the highway. Angry at my disturbance, they stretch long, shadowed claws before me, trying to snare and pull me off the road to join the night. The trumpet goes silent; the bass clarinet gives voice to the ghostly trees and their ponderous awakening.

Snapping fingers call to me, yanking me momentarily from the horror story my mind is constructing around those jagged, reaching silhouettes.

"Calm down, dude," I chide, "Since when are you afraid of the dark?"

I focus on what's directly ahead. I can feel the trees, shadows, and the monsters lurking behind them be damned. To get distracted on a night like this, only knowing where the road is by watching where it falls off, is negligence beyond measure. Out here, I'm alone with no phone, internet, or way out in an emergency. Reminding myself of the isolation is a wrong move, sending my mind on a rabbit trail of ways I could die. An elk jumping into the road, sliding into a tree or off of a ridge, getting stuck in a ditch, and freezing before anyone finds me hours hence. The list goes on.

What the hell has me spooked?

I blame it on fatigue and the unearthly music I chose to accompany my drive home. It's too late to change now; I'm not pulling over to let the terrors hiding in the brush rush out to play. My rational mind knows they don't exist, but like a kid sitting around his first campfire listening to ghost stories from an older brother, I've let the phantasms gain a foothold, and I can't shake them off.

I reach over and turn off the radio. The cacophonous riot of sound dies.

I could collect myself for a few minutes and banish the chill, building a spider web of fear as it crept up my spine. And then a harsh wind begins in earnest. Its banshee wail fills the night with the mournful dirge of a thousand lost souls riding an endless tide to nowhere and everywhere.

My hand again pushes the radio's power button before my brain catches up to instinct and tells it to. The steady double bass comes with its simple refrain that builds ever towards a climax but fails to deliver. Confusion, chaos, and anarchy attack my senses, but better the imagined voices of demons than the too-real song of the dead.

I've always enjoyed this record, delighted in its absurdity, but tonight I'm hearing its cold, calculated terribleness for the first time. The mocking, maleficent, almost human tone of the trumpet. Somehow it has always escaped me, always been...

"Missing."

I choke the steering wheel with a ferocity that makes my hands ache, assuring myself that the clammy leather cover is authentic, that the voice I heard moments ago, the whispered word that floated forward, is only a hallucination. But I don't dare look in the rearview mirror. The octopus-ink darkness lurking behind my seat oozes long tendrils of fear that curl around my shoulders. I feel them hovering scant millimeters from my neck, a sinister version of

a lover's almost-touching-you-caress.

I can't stop my head from slowly turning; I have to banish this illusion before it gets further out of hand.

My pulse quickens. My legs stiffen with anticipation, causing an unconscious acceleration. I round an acutely sharp corner dangerously fast. I barely have time to register the massive bull elk standing in my lane. He stares at me with disdain, a king in his domain, head held high and straight, a crown atop the rich mahogany cloak that drapes his frame. His antlers stretch the width of my truck and a half again. I slam my brakes and begin to fishtail towards him. I'm in a complete spin as I approach and, by pure luck, manage to avoid a collision. I finally slide to a halt about twenty yards away, my rear wheels in a ditch.

"Jesus Christ," I yell. My hands are shaking, my heart audible even after I manage to choke its fleshy mass back down my throat. Before I know it, I'm out of the truck screaming in frustration at the bored animal, who has turned to watch me with what I imagine is contempt, not for the close call but because I'm in what he assuredly believes to be his territory, his road. He's not shaken and snorts derisively at me before sauntering off the road.

I turn to see how badly I'm stuck and am surprised that getting out shouldn't be too difficult. A sigh of relief escapes me. I'll just put it in four-wheel drive and baby the accelerator. I get my breathing under control before sitting back in the driver's seat. In a few minutes, I've resumed my drive, so close to home I can feel relief wash over me like a hot shower at the end of a cold, rainy day. Adrenaline cascades through my veins, bringing with it an ecstatic shudder.

I laugh at myself for letting my imagination get carried away and almost causing a serious wreck. The trumpet joins my amusement, not seeming as sinister as before. I love jazz, constantly changing and taking on new forms and meanings. The excellent stuff manages to stay one step ahead of you and surprise you despite the familiarity. Miles Davis, the man, had talent. The trumpet work is incredible, possessing surreal vocal clarity. I don't remember hearing this section, but it's a twenty-seven-minute track, and the possibility that I've previously zoned out for portions of it exists. I reach out for the FM transmitter plugged into my dash to make a mental note of the track's current time. The transmitter's

cradle is empty; the iPod thrown in the spin. Not the first time it's fallen out, but it probably won't be the last.

"Wait, if there's no iPod, why is the track still..."

What moments before was a trumpet blaring from every speaker transforms into the tortured cackle of a nightmare horror sitting directly behind me.

The marble-cold knuckles of a fist brush my Adam's apple pushing a weak whimper past my lips. The iron tip of a dead fingernail begins a left-to-right crawl across my neck.

I have no breath to scream.

The tortured cackle turned into voices I'd heard so many times before, but they were never this frightening. Their presence won't leave me. They're telling me to do something. The kneeling of their threatening voices ricochet in my head. A frozen finger retraces my neck, and nothing in me is ready to get out of the seat. The voices are forcing me, pulling me up, shouting and screaming and surrounding me. This seems to go on forever when it clicks. It clicks that all of this is not real. The voices calling at me are not real. The dreadful creature sitting behind me is a fragment of my imagination. I try to collect myself and do what my psychiatrist always tells me to do; I sing my favourite song, pick up the small orange container from the passenger seat, and take two pills.

I can't wait for this night to end.



Meditation

Ritik Dahiya

Sitting with 'my' legs crossed,
Back straight and silence all across.
Not knowing what this is meant for,
I looked inside—
Looked inside with my eyes closed.

Thoughts were rushing in—
Like traffic jam on a narrow street.
I ran across the busy streets,
Reached a hill,
Where everything was discrete.
I sat above, fished through my thoughts,
To look for an 'I'.
But there wasn't any 'I' to seek.

I dipped myself in repeating breaths,
Loud, then silence, pause and repeat...
Rippled through the breath,
Maybe a thing of past
Enveloping, encompassing breath and me,
Soon I was it and it was me.

My 'My' was gone.
The 'I' was gone.
As there was nothing to behold.



I (Ai)

Riya Kurian

She reminds me of cherry blossoms,
Sakura, soft pink like her cheeks
She reminds me of springtime,
Haru, warm like her hugs
She reminds me of innocence,
Innocent, like our first love.

But, gone too soon,
You still wander my mind
I look towards you, my moon
As we spend our last night
I make a wish at the shrine;
"Near the Sakura swing
Whilst it rains
Until next spring
I will see you again."



Dida

Madirekshana Chakraborty

The car pulled over in front of a rusty wrought iron gate. A hollow “Ram-Ram, Hari-Hari” filled the all-consuming vacancy, replacing the ringing in my ears. I could not discern where it was coming from. I shut the creaking gate behind me. Straight ahead, the Ganga lapped the black stony shores of Kalighat. There was a group of people, faces I could vaguely recognize from a distance, all dressed in cottony white. As I approached, the monotony of the chorus seemed to get louder and more oppressive. I wasn’t dressed appropriately for the pious, somber grounds I was occupying. I was in my Pujo best, clothes given to me on Ashtami last year by my Dida. The airplane seats had left them a wrinkled mess, but I had straightened them out as best as I could in the short while before deboarding. It was Baba’s idea I wear it. “She’ll feel better when she sees you wearing what she bought for you”, he’d said. Over the past year, I had developed a sort of apathy for that dress. In my mind, I had outgrown all my girlishness the year I went from twelve to thirteen. I was a teenager now and shunned all things unfortunate enough to fall under the umbrella of ‘girly’. Dida’s white and pink top and skirt set was the embodiment of what my new teenage grown-up persona was trying to avoid. It was decidedly childish with its insane number of frills and bows and pearly motifs. The only reason I had decided to wear it that day was a silent prayer for the woman in the hope that she would get better. I really thought she would.

It was only after I had landed in Kolkata had Ma broken the news to me. I had been waiting in the car expecting to go to the hospital in a rather pensive state of mind. I was standing in front of the airport gates, one hand in my father’s and the other desperately trying to fluff out the insipid lace flowers on my shirt (ugly or not, I had promised myself I would not make a fuss). In front of us, lungi-clad men and yellow ambassadors swarmed the city streets. My backpack was precariously perched on the edge of my shoulder, threatening to slip any second. I stood there, under the sweltering sun in blatant

discomfort, fluffing obnoxious fabric flowers and pushing my elbow into the side of my bag to keep it straight, waiting for Ma to come and pick us up. She had flown out two days earlier, the moment Dada’s first call came. My fervent, panic-stricken grandfather, unable to think coherently had called up his two daughters in Delhi before ringing up any of our relatives in Kolkata. “Your Ma has had a heart attack”, he said. His shaky, faraway voice did little to mask the wetness that was surely in his eyes. “Come quickly, please.”

Dida was a remarkable woman. She was exquisitely beautiful, even in her waning years. She made the Kolkata house a home. Its walls had mothered me and my mother before me, and on its roof I’d lie, on top of a frayed chadar, whiling away summer afternoons in the scorching sun. I remember lounging on the cool verandah floor, the hot Calcuttan sun warming up my back, poring over pictures from her youth. The endless Indian June always seemed a little hotter here, always adding a little more colour to the skin. There was a disparity between the pictures I saw and my Dida whom I could touch and feel. It seemed an impossible idea to my nine-year-old mind that the black and white still, smiling face in the pictures, was the woman at whose feet I lay sprawled thirty years later. The paper the pictures were printed on was thinning, a few were faded with spots in them. They showed a young girl, not more than twenty, her hair oiled, parted neatly down the center, tied off into two plaits embellished with ribbons. She donned a plain saree, whose colour she claimed to have forgotten. She sat above me, her square spectacles balanced on the rim of her nose, red plastic knitting needles in hand. Her thinning grey hair was always pulled back into a bun and the wrinkles etched into her skin told the stories of her time, stories which she later imparted to me during mealtimes. Dida used to sit with me, for hours on end feeding me lunch with her own hands. I am convinced that the world’s greatest peril is being the grandmother of a young, picky eater with a

penchant for talking and an endless patience for listening to all kinds of stories. Every day, little heaps of bhat-dal-machh would lay discarded on the steel plate Dada had bought for me until Dida would finish telling her story to my satisfaction. She spoke of the great love between Tagore and Kadambari Devi, of Hanuman's devotion to Lord Ram, of Sita's unbroken resolve in the Ashok Forest, of Shakuntala Devi. She spoke of the story of the monkey and the crocodile, the tortoise and the hare, and for an hour each day, I saw all that she talked of, transpire on the ochre walls of the Kolkata house. The misshapen crack near the ceiling fan became the snake and the oblong chip facing it, the mongoose, guarding its family till it met its unjust end. Each crack or mark on the wall was a player, and the dining room wall, my fantastical world's stage. Not even Ma could do what she did. Dida would capture my undisciplined mind with stories and feed me as I sat in rapt attention. It was through her that I inherited a love for tales and a culture of storytelling.

The kitchen was Dida's inner sanctum. Those who wished to enter her gastronomical temple, even just to spectate, must wash both their hands till their elbows, both their feet till their knees, and remove their slippers on the little woven doormat kept outside the kitchen door for this explicit purpose. Going by outward appearances, it was nothing remarkable. The room itself was hardly four square feet, scarcely room enough for two people. On top of that, there were her utensils – shiny pots and pans covering every inch of the open cement shelves, and the excess kept in a large steel dish with about 5-inch walls, easily covering up a quarter of the floor space. The walls were blackened with soot because my grandmother, the traditionalist, had refused to part with her trusty cow dung cakes and switch to a gas cooktop until quite recently, when I was a child. Dida was a magician in the kitchen and her mutton was unparalleled by any other. I used to tell her that if I could eat this every day for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, I would. She would throw her head back and laugh. It was a musical laugh, one that brightened even the blackened walls of the dingy kitchen. "Too much of one thing is never good, even tasty things", she would say. Her hand would instinctively reach toward the riot of colourful masalas and pastes kept in reusable little glass bottles with metal tops, and pick out turmeric, red chili powder, garam masala, or whatever she desired to put in her cooking. I would sit with Dida as she cooked meticulously, sitting on the black granite countertop, playing with the little

bit of flour she gave me to make my own roti. She was always very ceremonious about preparing her mutton. She would hand me a little spoon and a bowl for multiple taste tests, filling it halfway with rich gravy. The purpose of each test was different, once to check the spice, then the consistency, the salt. I liked playing the food connoisseur, pretending I knew what I was talking about as if everything didn't taste the same to me, and Dida enjoyed my high praise. Each test was always a success. After the mutton was ready, Dida would bake the roti I had haphazardly rolled out over the open fire. I would watch with wonder as the bread would miraculously rise. Dida never used tongs; her fingers seemed impervious to the fire as she flipped the rotis over the flame. Just another little bit of her magic, for my young mind. After everything was cooked, Dida would put the most tender pieces of mutton into a bowl, pour an ample amount of gravy over top, drizzle on some ghee and lemon juice, and we would have our meal together. I have yet to taste mutton like hers for many years.

They were all waiting for me when the car from the airport pulled up to the ghat. Dada and Ma wouldn't let them take her away before I saw her in all my glory, wearing my Ashtami best. I could taste the sour bile in my mouth as I walked up to where she lay. There was an acrid stench in the air, maybe the smell of death or the indolent cattle and their waste that always lay around Kalighat. Becoming more aware of my surroundings and the situation I had been thrust into, I saw that the "Hari-Bol" chorus was coming from a group of temple mourners, putting a surprising amount of grief and passion into their singing for someone they did not even know.

I had never seen death before. I didn't know how it looked, how it presented itself. Its incomprehensible finality. All I knew, from the knowledge of Dida's demise told to me about an hour ago, was how it felt. It was frightening to me. "Is she covered in blood?", I asked my mother as we approached the body. Sensing my fear, she parted her stoic lips and gave me a small smile through the tears streaming down her cheeks. "No. She looks exactly as you saw her last." Indeed, that was true. Dida didn't look like she was gone. Her forehead still bore the red mark of vermilion, a bindi in her signature shade of maroon sat snugly between her eyebrows, and her hair was pulled back into a neat bun as usual. It was as if she had just come out of the shower and got dressed

mere seconds ago. Sure, there was no movement, but she could have just been sleeping. Now that I look back on it, maybe the evidence of death was too much for my younger self to fathom. The colour from her face was lost, her limbs were rigid, and her skin was crisp in the middle of September. It was easier to convince my unripe mind that she was merely asleep. Still, despite the lack of dramatic change in her appearance, I was scared to touch her. The body at my feet, with familiar hands and known stories engraved on her face, had no more tales to tell, and no more mutton to lovingly feed me. This was not my grandmother; her essence had long dissipated into the murky waters of Kalighat.

Everyone took turns touching Dida's feet. The scent of sandalwood wafted from the incense sticks, in their little gold holder placed near her head, into the putrid Kalighat air. My Dida had no sons so my mother, being the eldest daughter, performed all the rituals. She walked around escorting those who came to pay their respects, stood watching as people decorated her with flowers, replaced burnt out incense sticks with new ones, and made the same small talk about how she had died. Yes, she told all those who asked, and everybody did - the immediate family really ought to have checked her blood sugar levels earlier. I followed my mother wordlessly like an automaton, one end of her dupatta clutched firmly in my enclosed fist. She made sure to make me a part of the funeral, hoping that the novelty of it all would make my first brush with death a little easier. Ma silently handed me a silver bowl filled with clear water. It was Gangajal. She made a gesture of dipping her hand into the bowl and shaking it over Dida to show me what to do. The water was strikingly cold. My fingers played with the cold water in the bowl, perhaps a little longer than they should have. I had watched Dida splash Gopal ji as a final step in her morning puja. The shower meant that the ceremony had been concluded. Something about sprinkling Dida with holy water felt conclusive. Capturing her in stone and making her immobile like the stone idols she worshipped. The winding sheet around her body was strewn with flowers. She was dressed almost just like me - I wore pink lace roses while she sported yellow and orange marigolds in her Ashtami best. Ma coated her thumb with a shade of turmeric paste that perfectly matched the marigolds and pressed it to Dida's forehead. She made me do the same. She was cold to the touch. The only warmth on her body was from my mother's lingering touch, and now mine. I smoothed her flyaway hair as I knelt to

anoint her with the turmeric. She had always been very particular about it, and she wouldn't want to be seen in a state of disarray in front of the entire family. Her nostrils and ear holes were stuffed with cotton balls. I remember having the irresistible urge to take them out. How would she breathe, I wondered? The decisiveness of death had not dawned on me just yet. After the rites and rituals had been completed and the family had paid their respects to the body for long enough, they pulled the white shroud tugging at her neck over her face. That was the last I saw of my Dida.

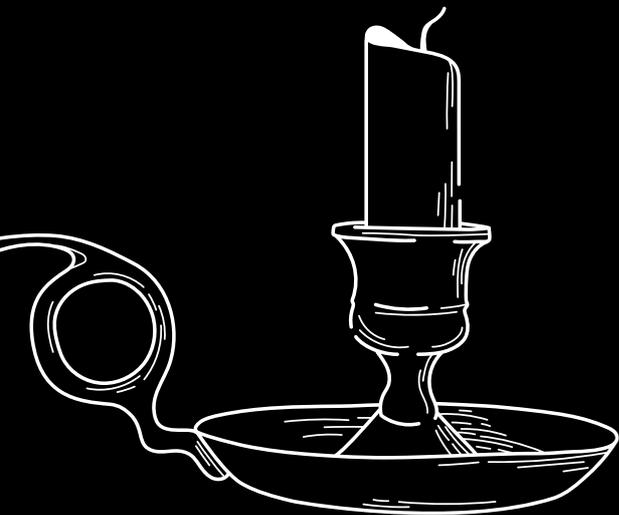
I feel her sometimes. Both the ascendant presence one talks about experiencing during seances and her pervasiveness. Ma tries and fails to recreate the magic of Dida's mutton. No one can really match hers. Her name still pops up in conversations about things that are now long bygone. Ma and Maasi still wear her old saris. I wore one of hers, a rich, hand-painted Taant, for this Puja's Ashtami. I wear the crescent moon gold earrings she had made for me twenty-two years ago when I was born. Dida's picture hangs on the wall of the pooja room, a garland of fresh Rajnigandhas around the frame every day, her favourite. Two sandalwood incense sticks are lit in front of the picture every morning. They burn away slowly, leaving their fragrance in the room until they become ash. The pictures I once looked at everyday during my summers in Kolkata lie neatly plastered in an album, underneath a pile of her old sarees and the jewelry she has set aside for Ma, Maasi, and me. They wait for one of us to look through them and reminisce, all over again. Sitting on my twenty-one-year-old designated armchair (it's just the right amount of worn-in, in all the right places) in the living room with a book in hand, looking over the verandah and into the kitchen, I see her standing there, just for a split second before the apparition (or my imagination) disappears. I am not the only one. Ma, my aunt, Dada, we have all seen her in and around the kitchen, presiding over it even in death. It's not an unsettling sighting, but rather a comforting one. She remains with us still.



A Night's Promise

Jayasuchita Jayakumar

Crumpled silk and a wrinkled tie,
Fresh mint long gone, a whiskey-laced high.
Notes of sandalwood and spice against lavender sweet,
Time slathered in honey, languid and discreet.
Ripples of Swan Lake, and a melodious pirouette,
Joining us in the dark, candle light silhouettes.
A calloused caress to whisper-soft skin,
'Tis to night's call all desires we pin.



Penpals

Ruchika Aggarwal

I

Welcome to the Penpals community, RENA!
Log in, and find a new friend or soulmate.

You have ONE new notification.
Hello, Rena!
Say hello to your penpal, Aster.

Hi Aster. Rena here. Its not my real name. I am assuming urs too is not. Rena is short for Rihanna, my fav singer. Hv u heard of her? What kind of music do u listen to? I like English & Japanese songs. I cant understand their lyrics but they are so goood. I would like to knw more about u. Do reply!

Hello Rena. Interesting inspiration behind the penname. I didn't knw who Rihanna is. Had to look up her songs. Loved the song Diamonds. I chose Aster becoz its the name of my aunts dog. I dont like dogs but I like this name. I listen to Hindi songs, especially the slow ones. I like to dance on the upbeat ones.

Diamonds song is fab. U dance? I m picturing u as carefree & fun. Am I close? What animals do u like if not dogs?

I dance to cheer myself up. I dont knw which animal I like. Havent had any pets. I think I like horses? The adjectives to describe me r introverted and optimistic. Unsure about fun.

I was curious. U r a girl right? R u in school? Which class? I am a ninth-grader and yes, a girl.

I m in eight-grade. A girl. Is it still okay if we talk informally? The fact that u r a senior has made me nervous, I dont know why (^_^')

No need to be! I would like u to not treat me as a senior but as a friend.

How is school lyf for u? For me it seems boring. I dont enjoy getting up early in the mornings. It makes sense to wake up at 6 for jogging but not for school.

Why is it monotonous? The classes r boring as hell no doubt. But it is fun coz of friends. My friends r

crazier than me. In the past they hv given me dares which I surprisingly completed- dont knw where I got the confidence to. I flirted with my physics teacher once. He is always sweet to students (especially girls) so maybe he was flirting back too! Then, once in a school assembly I shouted, "We want a new Principal." Thnkfully nol realized it was me. Its all laughter when we r 2gether. What bout ur friends?

My friends are okay. Surely not as crazy as urs. We do spend time together but it doesnt feel like they understand me. Or even knw me. Its amazing how people who actually talk to u can be completely unaware of ur true self. Could it be my fault? I used to think I m not good at hiding myself from others. Or can people be that self-absorbed?

Thats how humans r. We try hard to survive on our own but then we cant live alone too. I dont like to ponder on life much. Btw you are really thoughtful & mature.

If its okay to ask, do u have a boyfriend? Or a crush?? ;)

How about u? I am positive ur love life might be more happening than mine. In my case its non-existent.

I hv been in a few relationships. Ok, seven times. Girls in school dont like me. I dont care what they gossip bout me. I want a long-lasting relationship but all my relationships end within a month. I hvnt noticed any patterns coz the reasons for breakup varied from "dating for time-pass" (the 3rd guy I was dating said this) to being cheated on & because of my height (apparently I was too tall). My 5th one lasted for three months & he was so nicee. Handsome too. Getting to knw someone who is different from u feels great. I loved how he treated me. He wanted to knw me & would ask so many questions. He was special. He made me feel special. Am I sounding cringe? We broke up coz he changed schools in 11th & didn't believe long distance would work.

It is so easy for me to get in a relationship frankly. It

hurts a lot when I break up. I think I might be breaking up soon with my current bf. You would think those seven times would have taught me something. I m naïve. Everyl tells me so.

How do u find it easy? I find it difficult to even talk to guys. I might never get in a relationship.

Hmm it happens. See if u like somel u should go & talk to that person. Dont feel nervous. You might not knw it but people r very friendly. Dont feel intimidated. U r cool & a lovely person to talk to. Just be urself. And if somel is not interested, u will knw it. Good riddance I would say.

Is everything okay?

I was wondering if you ever look at people and think, "Oh god, is no one normal?" Everyl's so weird in a way & it gets me thinking about my own weirdness. Like only yesterday I finished reading a book that I started 3 days ago. I spent ALL my free time reading it, even when I wasnt interested in the plot.

I wonder why I couldnt stop reading it midway. Why I suffered through pages & more pages, instead of deleting it from my phone & forgetting all about it? It made me think about myself & my life. I waste time on certain things when I could be doing something more. Something better, something that I really love & enjoy. Its like I know what I want but I am holding myself back.

Do tell anything weird about urself.

Hi Rena. I m good. Was caught up in something. How are u doing?

I m not okay. I am not the sharing type but I feel like talking about it with u. My father moved out two days ago. I woke up early becoz my parents were shouting downstairs. I didnt think much of it. They fight a lot, in the mornings when dad is about to go to work and in the evenings during dinnertime. They just somehow find a topic or another, especially from the past to blame each other for. To shout and slam doors in each others face. I cry sometimes. I ignore it most of the times. I did the latter that morning. I freshened up, bathed and got dressed. I saw no one in the house so I went back to my room and studied. I waited for mom to come home and serve breakfast. But she didnt come back until 2 hours later.

I saw her face and knew something was wrong. She wouldnt look at me. When I touched her shoulder, she fell apart. I will never forget that moment. I have seen her cry a few times. But it was different this time. She stood hunched up, clutching the handle of the door, clinging to it for dear life. She couldnt breathe. I could see her tears falling and her nose was red. But there was no sound. A faint wheezing sound would escape from her open mouth now and then but mostly there was silence. I was scared. I called dad and when she realized that, she snatched my phone and threw it hard. I got a little mad. I shouted at her for throwing away my phone and to tell me whats wrong. She said in this small voice "Its over". I couldnt understand her. I saw her eyes and I didnt recognize them. That look didnt belong on her face. The look of despair. Mom is a cheerful person. She likes to laugh. She loves to socialize. Despite their fights, mom and dad have a good marriage. Had. I dont know. Mom is saying she wants a divorce.

Things never got this bad. I cant make sense of anything.

Heyy Aster. It will all be okay. Stay strong pleaseee! God this sucks! I dont knw how to comfort u. You must be going through a lot, feeling a lot of things. U are not alone. Ur mom is going through hell. Be there for her. She needs u. U need her. Try talking to her & your dad maybe?

Dont overthink. Dont think of the future & worsen situations. I am sure things can be resolved. I hope they do.

*

You knw Aster, life is tough. Even when your life is normal & you are a teenager, u go through emotions that cant be explained. I really hope u r doing ok. I hope u find strength during this difficult time. U have been a gr8 penpal. Take care!

II

I look at her, not for too long, and always from a safe distance. Even though I am aware that if I stand in front of her, she would not recognize me.

Aster is at the canteen window with her friend.

Her real name is Meenakshi.

I envied her a little at first. I don't know how I imagined her to look like, but definitely not this pretty. Aster has black hair that turns light brown in the sunlight. She wears it in a bun. She is fair and has this perfect figure. It surprises me that boys don't approach her, that she hasn't been in a relationship.

But her situation at home reminds me that her life is far from perfect.

Her friends also look mean. They walk and lunch together, but I don't see any closeness between them. Meenakshi is so nice. What is she doing being friends with them?

It took me two days to digest the coincidence that she studies at my school. How I came to know about it overshadowed all my excitement though. The whole of Gopalganj is talking about her family. About her parents' divorce. People in small communities do love to gossip.

Her mom is filing for divorce on grounds of emotional abuse. Aster said that her mom is a cheerful person. Her mom must have been good at putting up a front.

My parents had a love marriage. In spite of their random bickering, their bliss has made a lasting impression on my mind. But now, for the first time, I wonder about other realities.

The sky is cloudy and a cool breeze is blowing. A few stray strands fly across my face and fall into my eyes. I turn my head right, push them back, and jump. Meenakshi is sitting a few feet away from me. We are closer than ever.

I swallow the last piece of spring roll hastily and burn my tongue. Tears blur my vision for a moment. She senses that I am looking at her and turns her head, giving me a curious look.

My hands start sweating, and my heart palpitates. My mind is torn, wanting to talk to her desperately and afraid of talking to her. What if she is not as friendly as she was online?

Her mean friend with pink-streaked hair gives me a nasty look. I feel like strangling her.

I have to do this. I can do this.

The very instant I say "Aster", some random guy eating a samosa comes and sits between us, blocking my view.

I panic. Did she hear? Oh god, what do I do now? I do the stupidest thing possible. I scuttle away like a rat and do not look back. I reach the stairs and hear someone say, uncertainly. "Rena?" She heard me.

She followed me. Our eyes meet.

"Aster?"

She smiles. "Hi. My real name is Meenakshi."

Her eyes shine with such warmth and kindness. God, I feel like hugging her. She is completely taken aback. Hugs are not standard greetings between strangers, but we are friends.

I giggle, feeling light-hearted. "Hi! My real name is Jyoti. Can you believe we were in the same school all this time? How come I never saw you before?" "Yeah, I never saw you either." She speaks in a low voice. "You must be shocked right now?"

"Yes, a lot." She smiles and doesn't add anything. I spin around, looking here and there. Awkward.

"How have you been?" The corners of her mouth turn down slightly. "I am okay."

I ask her if we should sit somewhere. We climb the stairs and sit on the third-floor staircase. It overlooks an empty courtyard, surrounded by labs and a sports room. I have been studying at Greatland School since sixth class. It is a private school generally afforded by children of upper-class families.

"I know what you're going through. That's why I didn't feel that bad when you ignored my messages. But you can talk to me about anything. Don't try to close your heart." She nods. "I am sorry. It's...hard for me to reach out for help." "It's hard for everyone."

Silence descends.

Meenakshi breaks it first. "I was wondering...why did your previous friends stop talking to you?"

"Hmmm. They didn't like me. I got to know from someone that they talked badly behind my back. Like, very bad, untrue things. Then, when I confronted them, they stopped talking to me. Whatever. As if I would have stayed friends with them."

A moment of silence. "Good riddance, I would say."

"Yeah, good riddance." I grin. "Did you sign-up at the penpals website after seeing the poster on the notice board?" "Yes. I thought people wouldn't be interested in that."

"Why were you interested in it?"

“Me? I like talking to random people. Especially if they are good people.” “So, you are saying I am good?” I ask hopefully.

“You are not that bad.” She smiles. After a pause, she asks, “Where are your friends?”

Another pause.

“In the cafeteria. I wanted to eat spring rolls from the canteen, so I didn’t go with them.” The lie sounds natural to my own ears. Regret washes over me. I need to tell her the truth. “Actually, I don’t have friends. I lied because I didn’t want to look like a loner.”

I wait for her reaction. Is she mad?

Meenakshi brushes my arm and keeps her hand there. She tries to comfort me wordlessly.

She waits for me to say more. To pour my heart out. I continue, “I know people come and go from your life. That’s what mom told me when my best friend from first class broke our six years of friendship, when my previous friend circle stopped talking to me.” She nods. “You will find good people in your life again. You deserve nothing less.”

“Thank you.”

“Plus, you are not alone. You have me as a friend now.” I feel joy for the first time in a long while. I don’t think any words could convey my gratitude for her at that moment. We smile at each other involuntarily.

“How’s your relationship going?” She asks, changing the subject. “He might become history soon.” Meenakshi looks apologetic for asking, but I laugh. “I am not that upset about it. I think if anything, it’s because I would be the one breaking up this time.”

“Why?”

“He is self-centered. He gives football and his friends more time than he gives me. I feel like I don’t have much importance in his life. I did confront him about this and he made it sound like I am clingy. Like I am asking him to spend all his time with me.”

I look at Meenakshi. I know why she is asking me so many questions. She is avoiding talking about

herself. She is trying to be optimistic. I don’t want her pretending to be okay in front of me. “How’s your mom?” I finally ask.

Her gaze becomes unreadable. She doesn’t look at me and stares at the tree in the middle of the courtyard. Its brownish-yellow trunk and bare branches are thin and flimsy. How is it still surviving? When will green leaves grow on it again?

“Mom is seeing a therapist. She is the strongest woman I know. I had no idea what she was going through. I wish I could have known. If only I had seen a sign. Anything.”

“You were not ignoring the signs. She must have been hiding them from you. It’s not your fault.”

“Everyone complains that their parents fight a lot. But I didn’t know it was this serious. I haven’t talked to my dad since he moved out. I don’t think I will be able to forgive him for what he put mom through.” “It will happen one day. But not yet. And it’s okay.”

“It will be okay.” Her sad smile conveys the turmoil within her heart.

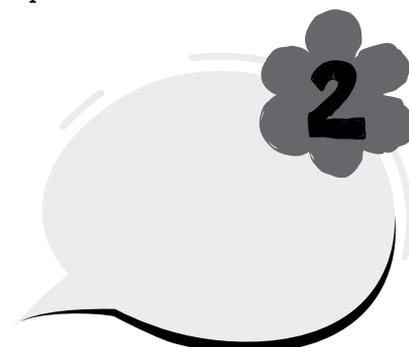
The bell rings. The lunch break is over. “I will see you around,” Meenakshi says. We remain seated. She waits for me to respond.

“Will you reply if I message you on the penpals website? Or better yet, is it okay if we WhatsApp?” “Oooh yes,” I say, too enthusiastically.

We decide to meet at the bus stand at 2 p.m. We reach the first floor. She walks down the corridor to the right, looks back, and waves me goodbye.

I wave back. “Catch you later!” I shout.

We’re no longer penpals. We are real-time friends, who can meet face-to-face daily. There’s so much I want to know about her and so much I want to talk about with her. The anticipation of our next meeting buoys my steps.



To be an Unclaimed Corpse

Ramyani Kundu

Cold...

... settles into my bones like the nightly rain of last December

It suffocates in this hastily tied body bag!

Insects--scuttling across life's hushed conversations

Moulds--digesting the remnants of living matters on cadavers

Breeding... spreading... colonizing

In life and death, a chainless loon

Who cries when lost memories stick into clumps---

--like sand on my wet skin. Abrasive

Oh, it's warm again!

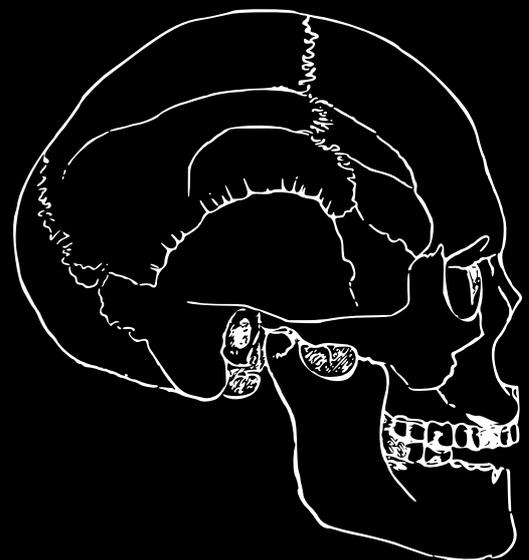
Flaming stink of fire's crispy breath

Softly stroking this cold flesh into eternal sleep

Time savours life; In last appetite

I sleep, while you light the match of life

But oh look! There are more! ... All burning under the same sky.



The Self-Sustaining Economy

Aaryan Das

“Argh, I am sick of my nine-to-five job.”

“But aren’t nine-to-five jobs underrated? I work hard, go back home, and spend time with my family.”

“But what about a sense of adventure in life?”

“Well, I have had my fair share of adventure.”

“Oh? Well tell us, we know nothing about you.”

This is where Linda always stepped in, his wife, but we often referred to her as the man of the house. She was almost as tall as me, had ginger hair and freckles on her face, always carried a handful of loose change in her pocket and kept challenging everyone for a coin toss every now and then. She always told us that the city didn't suit them, so they decided to shift here. Apparently, they wanted their sons to grow up in the countryside. But from the many Sherlock books I have read, these are the families that look perfect from the outside and share nothing about their past. The ones which are just running away or hiding something.

It's been three months since I shifted here and have been observing them as a neighbour. They have a set of introductions for themselves which never change. They seem to be quite well-to-do yet want to live in a town that is completely cut off from the world outside? The more I think about it I realize, a lot of the other families here are the same and so am I.

That day the water in the pipes outside had frozen, despite that a sweet, warm smell entered the room with Linda. Is that hot chocolate? The children had their mouths wide open and bounced around on the sofa, but just as I leaned forward to grab my cup of hot chocolate, I heard the sound of glass shattering. I turned around to find that the kids had knocked a photo frame over. Linda and Patrick both quickly tried to collect the pieces of glass before anyone got hurt, but among these pieces of glass, I saw a red folded piece of paper, I could describe the exact touch of it. I felt the same adrenaline I had felt four years ago when I first received this pamphlet.

The same Pamphlet that led me here.

I was trying to hide my pale face but my shaking legs would have given it away. I just wanted to hold this conversation until the kids had gone to sleep. Confronting them was risky, what if it's not the same pamphlet and I have to explain what I thought it was, but mistaking that red velvety pamphlet was really hard especially when it was responsible for turning my life around. The kids weren't in the mood to sleep at all. Holidays, I sighed. I spent a good few minutes just sitting there biting my nails until I saw an opening, Patrick said he was going out to smoke. I instantly asked if I could join him. We started walking in the well-lit streets with snowmen smiling at us.

“I thought you didn't smoke, Carl”

“Yes I don't”

I couldn't hold it back anymore and decided to just ask him about the Pamphlet. Before I knew it I could hear our footsteps a lot clearer than before. He didn't utter a single word in response, but just by that silence I could tell—it was the same pamphlet. My panic dissipated, and I felt relief. I wasn't alone in this.

“How?”

That is all he said, but I understood what he wanted to ask, and I proceeded to explain.

Summer of 1989 just as we had returned from our vacation with our daughter, there were a tonne of unopened packages on the pavement. Among them was this envelope, containing the same red pamphlet and a box. The Pamphlet read “leave town or die.” It had my middle name on it and that's something no one knew. It had my daughter's school address and my wife's daily routine. As for the box? it had a bullet with my name engraved in it*, THOMAS, and where I come from, you don't take that lightly. We fled that night, and since then I have changed my name and my family's, sold that

* Gypsy tradition where they engrave the name of someone they want to kill on a bullet.

house, and bought a house here through a broker who didn't ask for my id, neither did they keep any proper records plus in a self-sustaining economy the interaction with the outside world is limited. This place felt safe.

There wasn't much that we could do and decided not to inform our wives about this conversation of ours, that there were others just like us. It would just give rise to unnecessary panic. We were leading happy lives now. But were we?

We headed back home and I asked Patrick where the restroom was. He pointed in a random direction. I took a wrong turn and accidentally entered their bedroom, but but decided to use its attached bathroom anyway. Just as my hand hovered over the knob, another photo frame caught my attention and engaged the same feeling of deja vu that the pamphlet had. Linda was standing in the photo with the broker that helped me settle here and sell my previous house. My overthinking had taken over again, but I quickly used the washroom and rushed out, to not seem suspicious.

Since that day, I have been actively trying not to hang out at their place, but kept joining Patrick for a smoke now and then. Yes, I had picked up smoking since our conversation. It was also a way of gaining Patrick's trust. I was too close to the truth now to stop, the Sherlock in me had been craving such a mystery, I was tired of the lost cat and dog investigations. I could tell he wasn't involved in this by his reaction that night, but my next plan of action was to find out who that guy was in the photo. On a fairly starry night just as we began to smoke, with my chin down I asked him.

"So how did you guys manage to get a house here"

"Linda's brother is a broker, he helped us out" he replied without any hesitation. I didn't pry further, I had to be as stealthy as possible, but I knew I was close to solving this mystery.

My next encounter with him came as they invited us over for a pool party. The kids had already made plans and were really excited about it so we couldn't say no. We packed up some snacks and went over. The vibe was jolly and I tried my best to keep it that way. I heard a ping and glanced over at Linda's lighted phone.

"I have dropped the Parcel, what's next?"

I pretended not to have looked. Just as I was looking at all the possibilities and planning my next move, Patrick invited me for a smoke. After a short walk and a conversation on the stock market that I wasn't really a part of, we encountered Linda on the pavement. She walked up to us and informed Patrick that she was going to visit her brother and would be back by dinner time.

I quickly said my goodbyes and rushed to my car. I had to follow her, this was it, my first big break. After following that neon learning drivers' sign for an hour and a half we reached a storage barn. I kept enough distance throughout to avoid being spotted, but just as she walked out of the car to meet the guy that sent her the text, I couldn't help but press the accelerator just so that I could steal a peek at the guy's face. It was the broker that I had conveniently just stumbled upon just as I had gotten the death threat through a parcel. All the pieces were coming together, all I had to do now was to camp this place out and wait for the right moment.

After waiting for three more hours they finally left in opposite directions, it was time to put an end to this mystery. Just before I began to pick the lock to enter the barn I messaged my wife. "I'll be out for dinner today"

As I entered, everything was in front of me. I approached one of the shelves with files in it. My initial glance revealed the file with my name THOMAS, the file had every little detail about me and my family. I had it all figured out, why the people here seemed so perfect and how this place and its economy were functioning. Were people being pumped into this place with the idea that they will be safe here, but this was the origin of all the threats? Just to run this place? I spotted red paper on the printer's tray. Just as I went to check on the red paper, confirm my theory and get my first big break as a detective, I heard footsteps approaching. They were accompanied by the clinking of coins and I froze. Before I could muster up the courage to turn, someone had already knocked me out.

I have just woken up after that and my head still hurts. This seems to be Linda and Patrick's bedroom. Patrick has just entered the room.

"Join us, Carl, aren't you bored of your nine-to-five job?"

The Undying Corpse

Vanya Nautiyal

Here is the cemetery on the edge of the town,
Here is the desolate corner my parents saved,
Here is where I bury my sorry little heart,
And kneel, sobbing over its grave.

My mother accompanies me, most days,
Holds my hand, wipes the tears with her handkerchief
But some days, she stands behind me, has a smoke,
Keeps her eyes on the sky, afraid of my grief.

My father? His presence would poison the air.
He waits in the car, crossed arms frozen in place,
But he is here. he is the blisters on my hands,
He is the bruises on my mother's face.

I kneel over the grave, and scream and cry,
For the wide-eyed child, who knew neither pain nor wrath,
For the parents, who never learnt how to grieve,
Even though their own tombs lie right down the path.

They grew up like this, ashamed of their tears,
Taught to drown their fear in a whiskey malt,
Two lives, separate spheres, constantly colliding,
Began to part, like seawater from salt.

This is why, their child, with eyes once full of light,
Who ran down empty roads, who laughed and cried
Only in their arms, who asked to be kissed goodnight,
One day, that child's heart shriveled up and died.

Here is the empty husk that once held a heart,
Here are the cuts and bruises, dyed black and blue,
Here is the corpse that weeps over its own grave,
And the heart, buried underneath, cries too.



Closer to Her, Closer to Life

Kaveri Mathur

Part 1: Closer to Her, Closer to Life

After the collapse of the Golden Age, the gods started to fade. Among hostile empires and disillusioned devotees, they were forced to abandon their realm and seek asylum in the Netherworld. The powerful ones flourished, while the smaller deities lived as shadows in fear of being forgotten; hidden beneath civilization, only to come out during the thirteenth month, the time when the barriers between life and death weakened, allowing spirits and deities to visit the human world.

I have many forms; I could seem mortal or divine. I would disguise myself and visit the shrines dedicated to me. Devotees; both kings and peasants would seek my blessings or fear my curses.

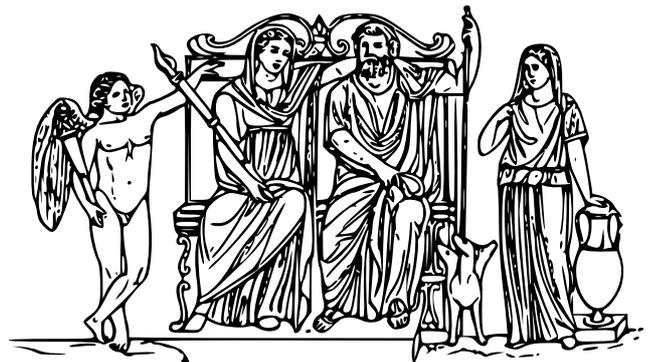
I sensed it too. The fall. Growing translucent, formless, I grew out of breath, out of breadth. Each day my heartbeat strained. The people who used to bow to me, greeted me with confusion, then indifference. I became invisible to them. Where once I used to travel between my world and theirs, I found it harder to return. I could either become trapped in my mortal body or say goodbye to their world.

Morphing mercilessly between human and god, I lost even that broken form. I never thought the myth of the forgotten gods would catch up to me. Never thought that that myth was reality. My time and form would soon be confined to nothing but the thirteenth month.

As I lost my identity, as it got harder just to be, I isolated myself to a secluded island town far east, where the people passed me by without question.

That was until I met her.

At first, I didn't notice her looking in my direction, "I love your dress! I've never seen that around these parts? Are you a foreigner?" a young girl, an empty basket in hand, bubbled with these questions. She had to strain her neck to make out the wreath of leaves that I wore upon my head. My unblinking eyes followed her gaze, following my creases and



*A traditional Japanese string instrument, played with a bow.

Turning my head to the side I asked "How can you see me?" I couldn't help but give away the desperation I had been holding onto for so long.

The rumble of a fruit-seller's cart muffled her giggle, "Of course; you stand out among us regular folk, with your blond streaked braids and smooth silk. And even without that, you are beautiful. Even the Nakamoto new-born won't deny that." She lightly held my hands, bringing them closer to her eyes. "Do you play the kokyū*?" She asked with comforting curiosity, "...your skin seems rough from the strings just like my mother's." I could do nothing but fumble in agreement, as I pulled my sleeves over the cuts from my bowstrings.

Like fallen cherry blossom petals returning to their branch, I felt the vacuum weaken, the flesh on my bones gaining sentience. Hair made of something more than air. All the while I wondered how this strange girl could see me.

"Who...are you?"

"Oh how impolite of me, I forgot to introduce myself, sumimasen. My name is Ashimi," she nodded "... and you are?"

I was caught off-guard. It had been so long since I had had an identity, since someone had asked for my name. I couldn't reveal the truth, and I couldn't think of something as simple as a false name.

"I am Miyashi" I blurted the first thing to pop in my head.

"Oh, it sounds like our names mirror each other!" her face lit up.

I let myself inch closer to her, to life, to the present, even if the future was not guaranteed. With my revival came the end of my time, time spent freely however painful it was. The few days I spent with her in wonder, made me forget that it was time to leave my home and this world.

Being revived for the thirteenth month meant annually sacrificing the rest of your days to that realm of Hades that exists between celestial and mortal consciousness.

Ashimi brought me back to life, but she also brought me closer to the realm where gods go to die.

Part 2: The Only Way

"If we go there, I can't protect you." Even though it saddened me, like the beach waves, Miyashi's voice soothed me. Her mere presence was soothing after a lonely year.

"I cannot guarantee you paradise, my love. I hope this is enough." Miyashi pleaded.

"But that's not true," I had to tell her, that I felt her presence even when she wasn't there in those twelve months. Because this was the only time I could hold her hands, hold her gaze. I needed to assure her. "... that's not true, because even in the months of winter, autumn, spring and summer I can see you. The dream I had last night, that was the closest I've come to seeing your childhood home. In November, it snowed on the last day of my music recital, that was you. In October, when all the trees shed their leaves in our vicinity, our tree bore green leaves and fresh fruit. That was you. In September, a charming singer came to perform at the festival. His voice was magical. His sound, his words were all you. In August, a cat visited our yard, her eyes were yours. What I'm trying to say is that even though this..." I held her hands tighter "... is only possible today, I feel like we meet every day."

I found myself wiping her tears, she came closer.

"It's the only way," she said. Her expression turned grim, sadder than I had ever seen. But determined. Her voice so small, only someone as close as me could hear it.

"This is enough, it's more than anything I could hope for." I told her as I pulled her closer.

"... the only way," she said. I could only see her eyes. I felt her hands retreat.

"... I'm sorry, my love, we'll be at peace...very soon." I couldn't hear her voice; I could hear her in my thoughts. I felt a piercing pain creeping up from where she kissed my forehead. The feathers of a silver arrow sprouted from my chest. Yet surprisingly that was where it hurt the least. Through my blurred vision, I could see the huts get smaller; the town square, a mere dot; the pumpkins became cherries and soon the air turned cold as ice. Why could I hear wings flapping? A shimmering quiver?

“Miyashi...” I hoped she could hear me over the raging winds.

“Ashimi, do you believe in love?”

With my remaining strength I caressed her cheek. My quivering eyes became witness to something beautiful; with each passing cloud Miyashi glowed brighter. Shimmering gold skin, bronze-tinted hair and obsidian irises. Encountering a rain cloud, her white feathers engulfed me. She slowly lifted them and looked at me,

“Would you believe me if I told you I am Eros?”

Tears turned icicles dotted my face.

Miyashi. Eros. The god of Love.

“This is the only way...I cannot take you home, but I can take you with me. Away. To an imperfect world. Hidden from mortality. Somewhere we can be together.” Her voice echoed calmly between my ears.

I took one last look at her, the one I loved. A simple woman, a god, with feathered wings and arrows sharper than currents. The sky turned darker and deeper.

She looked at me as my eyelids turned heavy in her arms.

“We’ll be okay.”

I heard her say, over and over again, till sorrow morphed into relief. I believed her, we’ll be okay.



"There's a trick to the 'graceful exit.' It begins with the vision to recognize when a job, a life stage, or a relationship is over — and let it go. It means leaving what's over without denying its validity or its past importance to our lives. It involves a sense of future, a belief that every exit line is an entry, that we are moving up, rather than out."

- Ellen Goodman

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