

# EXODUS

An Anthology  
Summer Institute Class of 2020-21

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Edited by Esther Okonkwo

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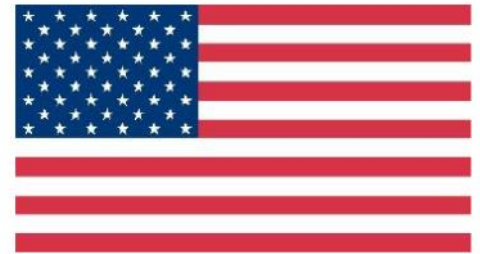
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## Table of Contents

Foreword .....	7
Acknowledgements.....	11
Contributors.....	12
Waterbody.....	22
___ Yamini Krishnan.....	22
October.....	25
___ Yamini Krishnan.....	25
Who Here Feels the Stone? .....	27
___ Osahon Ize-Iyamu.....	27
Lone.....	35
___ Ellora Bultema.....	35
After Freedom .....	41
___ Shigraf Zahbi.....	41
Muntazir (the one who is waiting).....	48
___ Eiman Nasir .....	48
The Lingering.....	55
___ Fahim Ifrah.....	55
(the absolute and immeasurable horror of a flawed creation) .....	59
___ Himangi Shekhawat .....	59
Undoing.....	62
___ Shanza Sarafraz.....	62
On this Day.....	70
___ Ayesha Sadiqa.....	70
The Green Dhaaba.....	73
___ Minahil Abideen .....	73
milk teeth: an elegy in three parts.....	77
___ Nidhi Krishna.....	77
Angsty Queer starring in <i>Angsty Queer Monologue</i> .....	80
___ Nidhi Krishna.....	80
Days of Youth .....	84
___ Fatima Sajjad.....	84
53 Dunbar Street .....	89

___Tiana Wilder .....	89
Tuesday .....	99
___Sidney Savannah Wollmuth.....	99
A Mourning of Two Villages .....	101
___Moachiba Jamir .....	101
All That Remains .....	111
___Loretta Rodriguez.....	111
Nonsensical Popsicle .....	115
___Anita Zehra.....	115
The Lost Son.....	120
___Jeiliany Pizarro Rodriguez .....	120
Surviving a Pandemic.....	122
___Mahnoor Zubair .....	122
Confessions of Saint Swalalala.....	134
___Shehzor Mujthedi .....	134
What do Narrow Lanes See?.....	136
___Abhiram Kuchibhotla.....	136
As for Myself, a Fatal Longing for Home .....	145
___Kritika Dixit.....	145
In Kashmir .....	150
___Junaid Manzoor .....	150
Chase .....	153
___Luke Reynolds.....	153
Tales of Kashmir .....	169
___Irram Andrabi.....	169
Lichen: A Fairytale.....	172
___Maya Goel.....	172
Two Cups of Cherandi Ice .....	175
___Diya Isha .....	175
Abandoned Pleasures.....	183
___Hunaina Khan .....	183
The Traditional Customer.....	189
___Ali Khan Yousafzai .....	189
Over Heights.....	192

___ Qazi Akash Ahmad .....	192
A Boy and His Sword .....	194
___ Talha Khalid .....	194
Children of Lesser Gods .....	197
___ Tanya Singh.....	197
Going .....	199
___ Megan Steblay .....	199
Making Headlines.....	210
___ Sophie Kim .....	210
Dear Diary.....	213
___ Zain Ahmad.....	213

## Foreword

During this past unprecedented year, rife with uncertainty, isolation, and new forms of fatigue and grief, I have found so much strength in the Summer Institute's community of writers. When it has been most needed, participants, mentors, and staff have laughed and cried together. We have found great comfort in one another's company. We have been there for each other.

For me, no moment more clearly speaks to the healing power of this community than the program's graduation event in March 2021. Sure, we gathered to formalize the program's completion. More importantly, we convened to celebrate a high point during challenging times. That hour together was a respite and an occasion to honor shared experience over 10 months.

This anthology is another opportunity to celebrate. And to relish in community.

How did we get here? In 2017, the US Embassy in Islamabad extended a call for proposals for programs that would bring together young people from Pakistan, India, and the US. Drawing upon its five-decade history of cultural diplomacy through literature, and its human and cultural capital and know-how, the International Writing Program drew up a project for a Summer Institute, and had the good fortune to be chosen.

A cultural exchange program, the Summer Institute selects, in an open application process, 10 remarkable college-age writers from each of the three countries to convene and give special focus to creative writing and the power of narrative. Attendees take part in collaborative workshops focused on their creative work, in seminars to expand literary knowledge of diverse global literatures, in special seminars on the craft of writing, and in activities designed to forge new lines of understanding and shared purpose.

Drawing on IWP's five-decade experience, above all its Fall Residency—the host of several generations of distinguished Indian and Pakistani writers—but also the youth summer exchange program, *Between the Lines*, and several others, the Summer Institute aims to connect participants across national, linguistic, and cultural boundaries, promote social justice, and foreground diversity, empathy, and community. Each participant, we hope, will come to see their writing as a form of action—a personally-empowering skill that can also be employed for social change.

The first of these groups came to the University of Iowa campus in 2019, where they engaged in an intensive two-week session of writing and learning. In 2020, due to the global pandemic, the program was redesigned as a 10-month virtual experience, hosted again in Iowa City and finding home in cities spread not only throughout the mainland US, in Pakistan, and in India, but also in Puerto Rico, Canada, Nigeria, and the UK.

Zooming in from around the world, then, everyone participating in simultaneous selfie-taking with their computers, graduation was much needed levity. As well as, for me, a powerful and joyful memory to mark the far-reaching bonds made over space and time.

So, let me focus for a bit on the community created since the group came together last year. I could recount all the milestones since June 2020—the highs and the lows—but that list is too long. By community, I'm thinking of the connections—across borders, time zones, and cultures—Summer Institute participants made with each other, the opportunities unique to this program they made the most of, learning and growing together, as well as the support they offered one another during uncertain and difficult times—support of the emotional kind and support for each other's craft as writers.

From the start, participants all agreed to try something different, to experiment with us at the IWP to engage in a whole new kind of Summer Institute. Amidst a pandemic, they saw, like their mentors, my colleagues at the IWP, and me that connecting with folks around the world in meaningful ways is both desirable and necessary. Our belief in a shared and interconnected humanity and our collective love for writing and literature, we told each other many times, and, in many ways, will always have a place—and they can even heal and restore us in times of hardship and loss. They can lift us, too, when times are a little good and great! Participants' WhatsApp thread connected them. Their offerings during open mic and other Zoom events connected them. Their meetings with mentors connected them. Across borders, time zones, and cultures they found—and, no doubt, will continue to find—ways to connect with one other!

Along the way, the group took advantage of opportunities being a part of a virtual Summer Institute extended them. This began with saying yes to what we called the “online pre-program” when it was clear that bringing folks to Iowa City was not possible. Participants learned with me,



with the program, as we got better with Zoom and with ICON. And how about ICON?! All those modules and all those menu options: lecture recordings, selected readings, writing prompts, mentor meetings, small writing groups, and social media content. They took the opportunity, some for the first time, to read their own work during a live open mic event in front of their peers and mentors. They attended the Speaker Series to hear from compelling guest speakers.

Perhaps most importantly, participants supported one another emotionally and as fellow writers during a scary and exhausting 10 months. They showed up. They smiled and laughed. They said thank you and extended compliments. They listened and offered their feedback. They received constructive feedback. They shared their personal thoughts and feelings. They allowed themselves to be vulnerable and they empathized. And sometimes they just showed up...because sometimes that was already a lot. To their Summer Institute community, participants in the 2020-21 cohort gave their trust, they took some leaps of faith, and they certainly offered their hope for better days ahead!

*To you students, it is my hope you share with others what you've learned during the Summer Institute. Generously pass along the lessons and wisdom your mentors have offered you. Willingly connect cross-culturally with more of your peers—especially across that border between Pakistan and India—and relish in the ways that friendships, openness, and respect help make the world a far better and more interesting place. And, of course, keep writing and searching out the opportunities that bring you into collaboration with others, in ways that benefit you, them, and us all.*

And indeed, in the pages that follow, readers will reap the benefits of writers having spent sustained time together, informed by one another and the (rapidly changing) world(s) they navigate during a stretch of time that will live long in our collective memories. This anthology includes stories to challenge our assumptions, to offer us lessons, sometimes uncomfortable ones, about our fellow humans, and to transport us—if only briefly and while safely indoors on a couch or socially distanced a park bench—to places we otherwise would not have been able to travel.

The power of narrative—story and truth telling—is on full display in *Exodus*. At the Summer Institute, we mentor participants to see their writing as a form of action and themselves as engaged citizens and leaders in their communities whose words contribute to social change. From where I sit, they have most certainly taken this to heart. The pieces in this collection serve as mirrors to the societies in which they were written (and well beyond them, too), comment on them, and, surely, in

some cases, are insightful and necessary critiques of them. Stories in the anthology are feminist, queer, anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, liberationist. They complicate notions of home, of belonging, of class and caste, of privilege, of love, and also of survival during pandemic times.

Journey well, then, into the brilliant poetry and prose of these exciting up-and-coming authors!

Ever grateful to read their work,

Peter Gerlach

## Acknowledgements

Acknowledgment is due those without whom The International Writing Program's (IWP) Summer Institute will not exist: the US Embassy in Islamabad; the US Embassy in New Delhi; Christopher Merrill, Director of the IWP; and the IWP staff at large.

A special thanks to the mentors and the instructors: Dini Parayitam, Chandrahas Choudhury, Anam Zakaria, Ather Zia, Shilpa Raj, Pranav Prakash, Sabyn Javeri, and to the 2020 SI assistant, Sharaf Zia.

To all who have contributed to the success of the 2020-21 IWP Summer Institute, thank you.

Peter Gerlach and Esther Okonkwo

## Contributors

### A

**Abhiram Kuchibhotla** hails from Hyderabad and is currently living in the state of Gujarat. He is pursuing a Bachelor of Arts degree at the Manipal Centre for Humanities and enjoys writing short stories drawn from the web of Indian society. He likes to tiptoe the line between fiction and non-fiction.

**Ali Raza** is from Takht-i-Bahi, Mardan, Pakistan. He writes about existential, social, and intimate settings. His work has been published in *Writer's Revival* and he has received a prize from the Governor of KPK for coming first in an Essay Writing Competition.

**Anita Zehra** is a South Asian writer and a visual artist. Her work is driven by constant rumination and imagined sauntering of Karachi streets. She is currently graduating from Habib University with a major in Communication and Design and a minor in English Comparative Literature. Her work plays with speculation and magical realism, all while staying true to her South Asian roots.

**Ayesha Sadiqa** lives in Rawalpindi, Pakistan. She aspires to be a poet and a short-story writer. She is a graduate of Fatima Jinnah Women University, where she studied Electronic Engineering. She likes to write about tragedy. The main themes of her work are 'Coming of age' and 'Individual vs. Society'.

### D

**Diya Isha** is a writer from Kannur, India. She studies Philosophy and Creative Writing at Ashoka University. Her writing has appeared in *Scroll.in* and *LiveWire*. She has edited a fiction manuscript slated to be published by Simon & Schuster and several articles on independent news websites

like *Scroll.in*. She is currently working on her Creative Writing thesis: a collection of short stories of different genres which tackle the lives of South Indian women.

## **E**

**Eiman Nasir** is from Lahore, Pakistan. She prefers narrative writing, short stories, memoirs, and essays. She writes about whatever inspires her in the moment. In her writing, she wants to explore human pain and ideas of justice.

**Ellora Bultema** was born in Anhui, China and grew up in Colorado Springs, Colorado. They attended Coe College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa as a recipient of the 2016 Williston Jones Full-Tuition Diversity Leadership Scholarship and earned a BA in business administration, creative writing, and Asian studies while pursuing a minor in economics. During their time at Coe, they focused on playwriting and their thesis project was a full-length play titled “A Teacup Moon”. They have also been published in literary magazines such as *The Pearl* and *Coe Review*.

## **F**

**Fatima Sajjad** is from Karachi, Pakistan. She is interested in literary realism and coming-of-age/Bildungsroman fiction. She likes to explore themes of female identity, more specifically, the South Asian Muslim woman’s experience in her fiction. She received the Kensett prize for distinction in O-Level English Language and Literature at the Karachi Grammar School.

## **H**

**Himangi Shekhawat** is a poetry enthusiast and writer from Jaipur, India. She lives in New Delhi and is a student of English Literature at the Lady ShriRam College for Women. Through her work, she attempts to explore the universality of human emotion by drawing on her own experiences and her responses to them, and by placing them in the context of the collective human experience. Her monthly column can be found on *Jabberwock Online*, and her poetry will be featured in an upcoming anthology in the *Literati Magazine*.

**Hunaina Khan** is from Karachi, Pakistan. She is a student at Habib University and writes fiction and poetry. She is interested in incorporating the theme of representation, gender, queer theory and psychoanalysis.

## **I**

**Ifrah Fahim** lives in Islamabad, Pakistan. She prefers to write young adult fiction, fantasy and women's fiction. She won a silver medal in the HRCA 6th International children's painting and essay writing competition in 2015 and secured 3rd position in Pakistan in the CEATS English linguistic contest in 2016.

**Irram Andrabi** was born in Srinagar, Kashmir. She lives in Srinagar with her parents and two elder siblings. She is currently pursuing a degree in English Language and Literature. She writes fiction and the occasional non-fiction. The main themes of her writing include democracy, freedom, friendship and love. She is inspired by Virginia Woolf's concept of the "androgynous mind" and would love to write a feminist text around this idea.

## **J**

**Jeiliany Pizarro Rodriguez** was born in Manatí, but lives in Ciales, Puerto Rico. She is a student at the University of Puerto Rico-Arecibo. As a writer, she likes writing poetry and fiction. Her works often develop into romance stories or intense longing directed towards finding oneself.

**Junaid Manzoor** is from Pulwama, Kashmir. He is currently a Civil Engineering student at the Vellore Institute of Technology in Tamil Nadu. He writes both fiction and poetry and his writing is highly influenced by the struggle of the people of Kashmir.

## **K**

**Kritika Dixit** lives in Noida, India. She prefers writing non-fiction, and short fiction. The major thematic concerns of her writing and literary interests revolve around socio-political aspects of identity, belongingness, wounded-ness, and empathy. She is currently an undergraduate student of English literature, and works as a writer and editor for her college's annual print magazine.

## **L**

**Loretta Rodriguez** is a short fiction writer from McAllen, Texas, a small city on the Mexican-American border. Through her writing, she explores how the perception of our memories can change over time and affect the way we move through the present. Her work has been featured in High Noon Literary Magazine, Trinity Magazine, and The Telescope Podcast. In 2019, she was awarded Trinity University's June Cook Scholarship for Creative Writing. She will be pursuing her MFA in Creative Writing at Oregon State University in 2021.

**Luke Reynolds** is from Iowa City, Iowa. He loves to write contemporary and literary pieces centered around queer identity and self-discovery. He writes primarily for teen and adult audiences. He also writes reviews on his blog, Naturally Flavored Animal. His piece 'Leo Flores' was published in Coe College's literary magazine, Coe Review. The story was also selected for 2019's Mission Creek Festival.

## **M**

**Mahnoor Zubair** is a writer from Islamabad, Pakistan. She is a student at the National University of Science and Technology, Islamabad. She writes dystopian fiction and fantasy and, occasionally, argumentative or opinion essays. The themes of her writing are social commentary, romanticism, and escapism.

**Maya Goel** lives just outside Madikeri, Coorg, in the Western Ghats of Southern India. Since she has grown up in this forested environment with its unique shola-grassland ecosystem, her writing

tends to focus on the natural world. She is interested in both fiction and non-fiction, and wants to explore themes of time, consciousness, memory and affect.

**Megan Steblay** is from Ramsey, Minnesota, in the northern part of the United States. She writes both poetry and fiction, finding that the line between the two is often blurred. The environment is an important focus of both her studies as an environmental scientist and of her work as a writer – and so you’ll often see the natural world as a player in her pieces.

**Minahil Abideen** is a writer from Lahore, Pakistan. She prefers to write fiction, nonfiction and poetry. Her writings deal with trauma, oppression, love, and belonging. Her poems have been published in Outcast Magazine, and “The World That Belongs To Us: An Anthology of Queer Poetry from South Asia”. She is one of the eight winners of the LUMS Young Writers’ Short Story Contest.

**Moachiba Jamir** is currently pursuing his BA in English from The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, in India. He hails from Nagaland, India and likes experimenting with different genres and literary themes. He is drawn towards magical realism and fantasy and would like to incorporate them into his writing. His literary interests center around the socio-economic and political conditions of Nagas (The native inhabitants of Nagaland).

## **N**

**Nidhi Krishna** is a student and writer from Pune, India. She has been pursuing an undergraduate degree in English from St Stephen’s College in Delhi and is fond of writing poetry and drama. She talks about queerness, womanhood and gender in her work, and hopes to write feminist comedies in the future. Her work has been featured in The Bangalore Review, Mad Swirl and Scroll India.

## **O**

**Osahon Ize-Iyamu** is a Nigerian-American writer shuttling between Edo, Nigeria and Maryland, USA. He is a writer of speculative literary fiction. Some of his literary interests include concepts such



as cultural roots/ancestry, inter-generational trauma and bias, as well as superstition and faith, which he hopes to explore in his work. He has been published in magazines such as *Clarke's World Magazine*, *Strange Horizons*, and *Omenana*.

## Q

**Qazi Akash Ahmad** is an inhabitant of Mardan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. He writes poetry, short stories, and novels. His writing explores what it means to have a self and a soul. He is the author of three books on Amazon and Goodreads: *Soul Shadow*, *Human Flora*, and *The Triangle*.

## S

**Shanza Sarfaraz** lives in Karachi, Pakistan. The main themes of her work are transgenerational trauma, mental health, and navigating love in a society that considers it taboo. She wrote a feature in *The Index Newspaper* released by the Oshkosh West High School (Wisconsin) in October 2015 and has been published several times as a child for poems and letters to the editor in *Young World* by Dawn.

**Shezor Mujthedi** is a non-binary writer and musician from Hyderabad, India. They enjoy writing postmodern fiction that takes its cues from Thomas Pynchon, and Marxist theory. They also write poetry and songs in their native Dakhni language, rapping under the name COM.Ü.L. Currently working on a novel that explores polyamory, Maoism, and human accountability, Shezor also runs a Dakhni podcast called *Awaarelaal Philosophy*, which discusses revolutionary themes in culture and politics.

**Shigraf Zahbi** is a writer based in New Delhi with a bachelor's degree in English from Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi.

**Sidney Wollmuth** is currently attending the University of North Carolina Wilmington where she is double-majoring in English Literature and Creative Writing. Her writing has been recognized by the

Scholastic Art and Writing competition, *Huffington Post*, and *No Contact Mag*, among others. She works as the Editor-in-Chief for *Atlantis Creative Magazine* (atlantismagazine.org). She loses way too many things.

**Sophie Kim** is a queer Korean-American slam poet, playwright, and filmmaker from Los Angeles, California, USA. Kim is the author of *SING THE BIRDS HOME* (Penmanship Books, 2019) and served as the 2018-19 Los Angeles County Youth Poet Laureate. Kim is a Lambda Literary Fellow in playwrighting; an alum of the Iowa Young Writers' Studio, the Kenyon Young Writers Workshop, and Winter Tangerine Workshops; and The Adroit Journal 2020 Summer Mentorship Program in Poetry. Kim enjoys writing sad gay poems.

**T**

**Talha Khalid** is a student from Lahore, Pakistan ostensibly doing a degree in accounting. On his good days, however, he approaches the question of money differently, by attempting to capture the middle-class experiences of the city. While he particularly enjoys sci-fi, his own writings deal with a range of genres. While he takes great pride in his writings, they have yet to win him any prizes or accolades.

**Tanya JADE VINE Singh** (they/them) is a 21-year-old transgender/non-binary writer, SW, essayist and editor from Chandigarh, India. They are the author of *Heaven is Only a Part of Our Body Where All the Sickness Resides* (Ghost City Press, 2018). Their work has appeared in *Gone Lawn*, *Minola Review*, *Polyphony H.S*, and elsewhere, and has been recognized by the *Times of India* and *Bow Seat Ocean Awareness Student Contest*, among other places. They are a founding member of *Quilab* and *Punk Indus*, anti-capitalist arts collectives for South Asian transgender & non-binary creatives. They are deeply inspired by the transformative justice movements and the politics of indispensability. Find them on Twitter: @TanyaJVSingh.

**Tiana Wilder** is a recent graduate of Claflin University. She is from South Carolina in the US. She loves not only writing but knitting and crafting as well. When she's not reading cozy mysteries, she's playing with her dog, Bentley. She will be attending NC A&T in the Fall for her Master's in English and African American Literature.

## **Y**

**Yamini Krishnan** is a writer from Pune, India and studies English and Creative Writing at Ashoka University. She finds herself writing about things like girlhood, youth, friendship, and nature. She's been published in Vayavya Magazine and the On-Reclaiming Shame Anthology.

## **Z**

**Zain Ahmad** is a resident of Lahore, Pakistan. He is a student at the National College of Arts, Lahore. He enjoys descriptive prose but would like to explore poetry and fiction as well. His writings revolve around the theme of man vs. himself or man vs. nature and wants to broaden the range of themes he wants to explore.

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**Peter Gerlach** received his BA and MA degrees in English from Ripon College and the University of Northern Colorado, respectively. After serving in the U.S. Peace Corps in Mongolia, he earned a PhD in Cultural Foundations of Education from Syracuse University. Since 2004, he has taught university students in subjects such as composition and literature, English as a foreign language, qualitative research, and international education. In addition to the IWP, where he has been since 2018, Peter is adjunct assistant professor in the International Studies Program at The University of Iowa.

**Esther Okonkwo** is a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Her works have appeared in Isele Magazine, Catapult, and Guernica. She is a 2021 recipient of the Elizabeth George Foundation Grant, and currently teaches creative writing as an adjunct professor at the University of Iowa.

*“Remember that you and I made this journey together to a place where there was nowhere left to go.”*

*— Jhumpa Lahiri, The Namesake*

# **EXODUS**



# **Waterbody**

## **Yamini Krishnan**

The summer of  
sunlight splitting through  
seawater

and the way I always feel

lighter with my head  
under the surface

— there are days I  
do not want to be  
seen on land,

only to disappear into  
turquoise, to inhale  
sea-foam. Trade me

a conch-shell for a hipbone,  
teal for all my blood. My  
body misses the water

like a rusting, lovelorn  
magnet. My mouthfuls  
and mouthfuls of salt

have been dry for months  
in the mainland. The sea  
simmers in my dreams

like something that could  
vanish if it isn't loved.  
I long to be buoyant,

formless and floating—

the kind of woman who  
comes back to herself often.





## **October**

### **Yamini Krishnan**

Close the curtains. The sun grows too sharp in October—  
The flowers on my windowpane deplete through October.

I find myself in blue light speaking to no one's waiting ears,  
my tongue drying fast, a dying parakeet in October.

My skin simmers in loneliness, leaving me stuck in myself.  
The slowness of a day makes me itch to unseat October.

The razaai falls by morning; a scattered sari for the floor—  
there is no one left to gather up the pleats of October.

It's all geographical— this want, stirring peaceless in my room—  
like my fourth-grade teacher said, it's the heat of October.

The month sizzles like eggs for one, filling up my house—  
who struggles this much, Yamini, to try and beat October?



## **Who Here Feels the Stone?** **Osahon Ize-Iyamu**

The pastor traps all of his congregation members in the church at the end of service. He does it with a rock, one that he pushes out from the Offering and Tithes room with all his strength. It looks like a precious carved marble, the shape of Goliath, and the rock is the perfect peg to fit into the hole of the door that is New Faiths Pentecostal Church.

He bricks up the door with the rock during the second service of the day, which is relevant to all of the congregation members in the church because it makes them wonder why? Why oh why did he choose to trap them? It's not like he had any important announcement to make. It's not like they

are special. Pastor Samuel just sits at the edge of the pulpit now, fish-eyed and sweaty and expressionless, and everyone watches him do nothing while they sit in the church hall.

The congregation is naturally very fidgety. They came for two hours of praise and worship and hallelujah, not to be sitting in some circle with a bunch of other tired and restless people. It's been a whole day now, the sun has even risen, and now Mama Adesina can't go and buy beans from the supermarket. Now Daddy Dennis won't go home to see his kids (not that he ever does anyway, he prefers beer parlours). Now Sister Femi won't go to her house and make rice and stew for everyone in her family, which makes her very happy. Always the one to avoid house chores, Sister Femi.

When are you coming back home o?, Brother Paul's sister, Joy, texts. He is charging his phone by the only power-socket in the church, sitting under one busted ceiling fan at the back of the building—he'd waited for the space to be free so he could use it. Now his phone is buzzing with grey light like some stupid anyhow torchlight. Now Brother Paul has to answer messages he doesn't know quite how to respond to.

I dunno o, Brother Paul texts back, which is about the best thing he can say. What answer can you give in this type of situation? Big Adeniyi, an elder at the church, who has a bad back, curses and shouts all night at the prospect of being trapped in this building. He is not alone—Daddy Dennis joins him as well. He's an old man, Big Adeniyi—he shouldn't have to go through all this. He has seen the greater recessions of Nigeria and the worst of the Biafran war, but this is the nightmare that tests his patience. He needs to be let out. Everyone wants to be home.

“So let's ask the pastor again na,” Sister Femi says, picking at the scab that dots her toes like the gills of a fish. She is sitting at the front of the church, on one of the church's only good plastic seats. She fought to get it. She is kicking her legs, looking at the congregation with a face that says hm? A face waiting for some type of answer. Waiting for some kind of uprising. Waiting for some bloody response, ah ah now, it's been over twenty hours and she hasn't had anything substantial to eat. All of them stuck in the building had to help themselves to water diet and stale buns that the ushers didn't even share at the end of first service, and Sister Femi could see the reason why they didn't when she bit into the pastry. The buns tasted like sorrow, ashes, but the congregation all took turns and the elders ate first. Because respect.

All ate except for Pastor Samuel, who just continued to sit on the pulpit with those his big fish-eyes, not saying anything.

“You people should not doubt our pastor o,” Mama Adesina speaks, with utter conviction, not fazed at all. Most people in the building immediately agree with her. It is not good to question a man of God, for he has been anointed: it can lead to curses. Since Mama Adesina has been trapped in the church she has sat in one small corner of the room, playing games like “snake” and “candy crush,” while watching WhatsApp Broadcasts. Mama Adesina brought her kids with her to church, because who else will take care of them, and when Sister Femi gets tired of talking too much she teases the children and starts chasing them around with a leftover stick that fell down through one side of the church’s patch-patch roofs during one bad day of rain.

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Brother Paul’s sister, Joy, comes the following day with two hefty policemen to come knock on the door of the church, try to push down the stone. The two policemen, Officer No Such Thing as Awoof and Officer Ginger Me, push with all their might like big bad wolves at the entrance of the building, but it is entirely shut. Sealed, like the swollen lips of a child that a teacher has beaten with a ruler in order to shut them up. And they are shut up, the members of the church. They are completely connected and disconnected from the outside world. They can shout to Joy and the police officers, but they can’t do anything else. They can’t reach for them, can’t touch them. Brother Paul’s sister and the officers immediately leave after failing to free the church members, and Joy and the police officers argue with each other. The officers are clearly upset and want an extra N500 for their work.

The congregation is full of doubt on the second day. They actually want answers—why are they here? They want the specific verse and the particular testament that explains why they are being tested. What is God’s plans for their lives? They want to ask Pastor Samuel but everyone is too shaken to ask him from where he stays at the pulpit. None of them want to disturb his silence. Their respect for him.

Eventually Pastor Samuel does rise from where he’s sitting. Praise God, the entire congregation thinks. Now they have a bit more confidence to talk to him when he’s not on the pulpit. Big Adeniyi wants to tell Pastor Samuel that the church elders need big mattresses to sleep on if they

are to stay here any longer, and Brother Paul wants to ask Pastor Samuel what he should tell his mother about being trapped. Everyone looks at Pastor when he gets up and when they approach him, gently, he quickly enters inside the tithes and offering room, and locks the door. The man barely has a word to say. The congregation is stumped.

It's strange, because before Pastor Samuel put the rock up and before he trapped them here Pastor Samuel was always so talkative, he talked and talked and talked. He talked about fire and brimstone, mami waters and wicked enemies, Revelations and God's punishments in Genesis, full of passion and vim, from his pulpit. He was as furious as a lion, no he is, and that is why the congregation members liked him—no they like him—he is supposed to be a no-holds-barred kind of pastor. He is supposed to be a have-no-mercy kind of pastor. Now, they are not quite sure who he is, and that might just be the worst feeling. Being trapped here by someone that you don't know (and maybe you never did) anymore.

Sister Femi and the children now play games on the church floor. They play Tik Tac Toe, and they play Shark!, and they play Who here isn't afraid of the dark? Certainly not Baby Timi, Mama Adesina's small toddler, who runs around the room like a catfish in a plastic container that they've threatened to kill. Baby Timi hasn't learned about the church yet, for he's far too young to understand worship, and Sister Femi wonders if there's some freedom in that, in being young and not grown up and not having to wonder about the expectation of every sector of Pentecostalism. To not have to think about tying her hair before she leaves her house and not have to think about not having dreads because they're for bad people and not wearing jeans and her favourite white t-shirt to church because Pastor Malcolm, another pastor in the church, said it was unbecoming, and called her unholy. Sister Femi wonders what that freedom is like, to just be in touch with God and not anything else, to not have to wonder which part is God and which is church. Who is trying to control the house of God, she ultimately thinks, but she cannot express her words, so she just chases the children, and kicks her legs, and imagines she's a bird in the blue of the sky flying just above the water on a clear sunny day.

Sister Femi has to calm down Baby Timi in the night in order to get him to sleep, and Mama Adesina has largely forgotten her children exist. She has used this period of being trapped to catch up on her WhatsApp messages, pass level 365 of snake, to tell everybody to keep on believing in

Pastor, but nobody wants to hear it by day three. Even she can't be too sure anymore. They are all full of grumbles and sadness and questioning, their heads buzzing like ringtones that have been playing till the end of eternity. Mama Adesina is even saying keep believing half-heartedly, for she's barely paying attention to the cluster of people who have been stuck in this room, who are packed with feelings of anger, and stress, and disappointment of having not seen their kids that they never really wanted to see anyways.

And so Big Mike, who is eldest in the church, lines up in front of the door of the offering and tithes room to go and speak to Pastor. The congregation has had enough of this silence, and now they want to plead with their Big Daddy to be let out. To be free.

Big Mike knocks three times on the door. The pastor does not open up. Pastor Samuel is lying on the floor of the chilled air-conditioned offering room, shaking like a jellyfish because he doesn't know what to do. He doesn't know what to say to his followers, the reason for why he's trapped them, other than the fact that he got a little carried away and he wanted to show all of the congregation how much of a leader he really was. He really is. He wanted to experiment with his church members' faiths, and he got the perfect opportunity to do it after Sunday school and first service. In that hour, he was preaching about the weight of sin on human beings' bodies, how it piled and piled up, and how the church members would never be able to pray away all their sin so they just had to keep repenting and keep dropping plenty offerings and keep on hoping that they don't go to hell because they could, and they would, and they'd suffer for all eternity. The sermon gave him the idea to trap his church members in this small building, so that they would scream and cry and beg for his mercy, and then at the end of the experiment he could tell them he did it to show them what their sins feel like, dirty unclean people, and they would praise him and clap for him and thank him for the smart message.

And then the rock came into his office, big and wide and precious, as the answer to his thoughts. The Biblical miracle.

The minute he put the rock over the door he'd known he'd made a mistake. He didn't expect to feel so locked in, trapped and claustrophobic, and now he doesn't know what to say, after all the hours of silence and locking them in, because the people weren't shouting and screaming and begging

and crying. They were asking him questions now, questions he'd never thought he'd have to answer. Questions he'd never thought about. And now his head is full of the weight of his mistakes, what he could have done differently. He pushed the first stone into the wall of the church, but who was here without sin? Who here was pure?

Big Mike knocks on the door again, asking to be let in.

"He's not opening," Big Mike says, after a final knock, and the entire church shouts in we've had it! But the congregation is not entirely sure what they've had enough of so they just sit on the floor, helplessly. We've had it, but without certainty, until Brother Paul starts to speak.

"So if this Pastor doesn't come and open the door for us, then what are we going to do?" Brother Paul shouts, because he has stayed here for too long and is starting to get sick of this. His feet are itchy, and his bend-down-select trousers are starting to smell like rain from the wet chair he's been sitting on all these days. He is tired of being in one room, packed with so many people, like they are all sardines fitted inside one of those Titus tins.

The congregation all think and rumble and hmm to themselves. Because they are not really sure what to say. "What are they going to do" is a question they have never thought about—who could comprehend this situation? What are they going to do now that Pastor Samuel won't open up for them and they don't know who he is anymore? What will be their next steps now that Pastor Samuel has left them to one another and has stopped being the self-assured brimstone man that he is? They've been looking for their righteous and leading pastor but can't find him anymore. The rock blocking the front of the church is as big as a chained fortress, a gate of iron, a barbed fence. It is as tall as a ladder to heaven, the staircase to a mansion, a full-grown husky. What will they do to leave this place that they have been trapped in for so long?

"I say," Sister Femi speaks, as she has been waiting all this time to say something. "We all join hands together and break the rock."

"Please I cannot break anything in the house of God o!" Mama Adesina says, typing on her Nokia phone. She has used the last of her data to download Wordscapes now, and she is engrossed in level 21.



“Yes abeg,” Daddy James, another man in the church, agrees with her, folds his hands together. “Even if we are planning to leave, we should have some decorum in the things we are doing.”

“You people don’t know anything!” Pastor Samuel comes screaming out of his office. He won’t let them challenge him. He comes out of the offering and tithes room looking so sweaty and spaceless, out of his vim of before, out of thought. The church members don’t see the self-assuredness they love in Big Daddy Samuel, only panic now. They don’t understand. “That rock, as I have put it there, marks all of you people’s sins, for you are all unclean., You are all tainted. The rock cannot be broken, and so you cannot all leave here without worshipping and praying and dropping your offerings! Are you all so without faith that you would just leave because I didn’t speak? That was all part of the plan! Do you doubt me so much like that? This is why you all need to remain here: you are all trapped by sin and cluelessness and you need to feel the full weight of your shame before you kneel down and repent.”

The entire congregation is a little shocked and confused by the appearance of Pastor Samuel. After all this time. After all their asking, their waiting, their knocking on his door? They do not understand the essence of these small experiments when they have things to do, places to be. But they do consider his words. Maybe they would feel differently and have more faith if they felt they were talking to that fire-and-brimstone pastor, that take-no-prisoners man. But did they even like that? Was that how they wanted to be preached to? Maybe they would all stay in the room if one person, at least one, rose up their right hand and screamed in epiphany, yes he is right. Pastor is right! I feel the presence of God here, His glorious miracles. But nobody does that. And so the congregation realises this room is just a room. This rock is just a rock—even if it is something more, they should get past it. And now, with Pastor’s sweaty face and the days of the man’s indecision, his utter speechlessness, they now know fully well that they are talking to a human being. And human beings are often wrong, they are not the ones to listen to.

“What about if we all come together, make we all push the rock away from the front door and push away the sin? Push past it?” Sister Femi offers to the congregation, to herself most of all, clutching one of Mama Adesina’s restless pikins with her hands. Everybody grumbles Oya now. The

entire congregation agrees, whole-heartedly. Even Mama Adesina says, while not looking up from her phone, You People Ride On. Pastor Samuel tries to speak to his congregation members, big eyed and speechless, but they have long progressed past the need for him. So they all gather together, Mamas and Papas and Bigis and Sisters and Kids, hands all pressed together, and with screaming tired this-might-be-futile-but-make-we-try-am type sigh, they push.



**Lone**  
**Ellora Bultema**

*Three monologues exploring loneliness*

## BAD DAD

Donovan is going to confessional for the first time ever.

DONOVAN

*(DONOVAN sits down in confession box, he is nervous.)*

Ok so... it's been awhile since I've done this. So I guess I just go?

*(pause)*

Ok. Uh, forgive me Father for I have sinned, it's been... eh about three years since my last confession, give or take. So, I guess that's a sin right?

*(pause)*

Alright listen, I'm just here cause my girlfriend forced me. She's not super catholic but for some reason the whole confession thing is really big for her. So, how about we just talk for a couple minutes and call it good? I leave with a happy girlfriend and you get some nice small talk?

*(pause)*

Come on Father, I'm really not a bad guy, sure I tell the occasional lie and break the rules like jaywalking but who doesn't.

*(pause)*

You're telling me that I have go through every one of my sins?

*(pause)*

Fine I'll play your game. I parked in a handicap spot at Target yesterday. I haven't called my mom in a couple weeks. I lied about being sick for work last week so I could go to a baseball game. I took two Andes mints instead of one at Olive Garden.

*(pauses, waiting for laughter)*

Ok, ok. You're really going to make me do this?

*(pause, takes a deep breathe)*

I'm doing my best here, Father. I really am. Sure I make a couple flubs here and there but really, in the grand scheme of things, what are a couple of fuck-ups—I mean mess ups, sorry Father. I don't

know, it's just ever since Katie's started talking about a baby I...I just don't know. Is that a bad thing to say? I mean I know every dad has his doubts about being good enough for his kid but this just feels bigger than that. I know we all make mistakes and either way our kid is gonna blame us for everything anyway but why subject myself to that, you know? What, it's a moment of happiness at birth, four or five years of no sleep, a brief stint of adoration from your kid—so much adoration, sometimes, that you get sick of it—and then before you know it

*(snaps fingers)*

It's gone. Fleeting. And you're left with baggy eyes and a kid who's too depressed to look at you, convinced that your own insecurities are the root of all his own ugly parts or something. And for what? To carry on the family name? To keep a family together? To ensure that someone will take care of you when you're too old to do it yourself? Yeah, no thanks. Sure, I carried on the Walsh name but to what? I ain't no big wig. I have nothing to pass on to my son. My parents still got divorced and once they started dating again it seemed like I was more like a wedge rather than glue in their new relationships. And guess what, my old man died all alone because the older I got, the more I realized he didn't love me. He loved the idea of me.

*(pause, beat)*

But I suppose God knows a thing or two about fatherhood, eh?

*(thinking to himself)*

His only begotten son. Given to us only to have him hung up on a cross. A little fucked up if you ask me, Father. I mean, how do you let your own son die for the sake of humanity?

*(laughs, shakes his head)*

But hey, listen Father, I expect we can keep this just between us? I don't need Katie hearing about this. I mean every time I try talking to her about this, she just says it's my nerves talking, like I don't know my own feelings. It's like talking to a wall... No offense, Father.

*(pause)*

Father?

*(pause, pulls back the divider and finds the seat empty).*

*rhesus macaques*

Simon is giving a class presentation. Simon is neurodivergent.

SIMON

Did you know humans can only go two days without stimulation? Any longer and it starts to psychologically impair the brain. Psychologists figured it out by testing monkeys. So, I guess we don't know for sure since humans aren't the same as monkeys. But monkeys are always used in experiments instead of humans because their DNA is almost a 99% match to homosapiens. In 1932, Harry Harlow started doing experiments on rhesus macaques. That's a type of monkey. Most people don't know that and they always pretend like they do but I can tell that they don't so I just wanted you to know before I continue. The monkeys were separated from their mothers at birth and put in isolation. My mom always brings this up when she talks about adoption in her support group because I'm adopted and my mom is a therapist. She tells them about this experiment where the monkeys choose between two artificial mothers. One is made of wire and can feed the monkey through a bottle. She says this is the adopted parent. The other is a cloth monkey and it doesn't do anything. That's the transition object. My mom says transition objects are like blankets or teddy bears or pacifiers. I have a pacifier— no. I *had* a pacifier.

*(as if reciting from a textbook)*

Transition objects are extensions of a child's primary caregiver and help soothe them when they're upset.

*(beat.)*

Some kids don't have objects, some kids wet the bed, or runaway, or are really really violent. There was this one girl who threatened to kill her parents and stole all the paring knives from the kitchen— sorry. My mom doesn't like it when I talk about her patients. Which I don't think is fair because she talks about me all the time to her patients. I hate it when she does that, but she says it's different because I'm different. I'm special so I can help people.

*(beat.)*

In the study, some monkeys chose the wire mother at first but even the ones who did all eventually chose the cloth mother. My mom says adopted kids are like monkeys, they do the same thing. She uses me as an example even though I've told her not to. She says that I used to cling to my pacifier, that it was my cloth mother. She says that even though she was the wire mother, a source that could cater to my needs more than a pacifier could, just like the monkey, I chose the cloth mother instead of being practical.

*(beat.)*

But whenever she talks about me to her friends that she gets coffee with once a week she always describes me as practical. She talks about me to a lot of people because she wrote a book about me and how Harlow couldn't fix his monkeys but she did. Harlow's monkeys came out funny-looking and they had weird ticks. My mom showed me a video of one of them and it just kept rocking and rocking and rocking and rocking. But I don't do that. Because I'm different, I'm special so I can help people.

## SABBATH

Adrian is in the hospital waiting for his sister Hannah to wake up from a comma. He is her adopted younger brother.

ADRIAN

*(to himself)*

It's Sunday, the day of rest. And it's been three weeks, three days, and three hours since you've moved a muscle, you lazy bitch.

*(to HANNAH)*

I didn't mean that. You know I don't mean it when I call you a bitch. Just like you don't mean it when you call me a bastard. Well, I mean, you mean it but you don't *mean* it, you know what I mean?

*(a chuckle that turns into desperation and then a sigh)*

You know you missed my birthday. Again. Even though you promised you wouldn't cause you missed it last year too.

*(beat.)*

Do you feel guilty? Like, at all?

*(is about to start something but decides against it, tries to calm down)*

What I am saying, of course you feel guilty. I know you didn't do this on purpose. I know that.

*(shaking his head to himself)*

But I'm trying not to scream at you and yell and kick and punch you in the ribs. Because I know it's not your fault? I know you wouldn't leave me here, right?

*(looking around the room to distract himself)*

Look! Mom came and she left you your favorite flowers. Daisies. You love daisies so open your eyes and look at them and hold them in your hands and smell them.

*(looking around again, frantic to distract himself)*

And the nurses brought you a third pillow cause I told them about your bad back. It's red cause they had to take it from a different unit in the hospital. So you're laying on three pillows, one grey, one red, then grey again. Like a sandwich.

*(rapid)*

I think a rerun of Friends is on but it's your least favorite episode and I'll only change it if you wake up and tell me to. It's the one where Ross and Rachel get in a fight over a couch.

*(desperate)*

Can you hear me? Are you even listening? It's me Adrian, your brother, and I want you to wake up. Wake up and tell me to change the channel and to get you a grey pillow so it all matches and to bring you the daisies. Wake up and tell me "happy birthday!"

*(impatient)*

Wake up! Wake up you stupid lazy bitch, I mean it.





## After Freedom Shigraf Zahbi

*For my friends, M & J*

*Whoever purposely throws himself from a mountain and kills himself, will be in the Fire, falling down into it and abiding therein perpetually forever...*

*—Sahih Al-Bukhari – Book 71, Hadith 670*

When the writer climbed the last steps of the tallest building in the ghetto, a balloon-seller was playing his flute in the street below. Clouded by a yellow smoke, the sky could barely be seen. A lone red tunic, which gave the impression of a body hanging from a tree, fluttered in the wind on the long clothesline of the rooftop.

With a slowness of movement which is often a symptom of some great sorrow of the heart, the writer walked close to the parapet. Men in white skull caps were heading towards the mosque. He saw the scalp of an unveiled woman—a faint line visible from where she had parted her hair—and thought it resembled the crooked creases of his palms. Eagles circled the horizon where heaven and earth clasped each other like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Somewhere in the distance, a dog barked outside a butcher's shop and a baby cried in its mother's arms.

"What if I cook an egg on myself," the writer wondered, as the sun glared fiercely on the balding crown of his head, "And if there are two eggs, cracked side by side, the whites almost overlapping... but first some oil... and salt..."

A drop of sweat trickled down his forehead and produced an itch which he stubbornly ignored, partly to test his patience, partly with a vague conviction that something bad would happen if he moved his limbs.

"Half-fried...runny yolk...black pepper powder..." He tried distracting himself, now by squeezing his eyes shut, now by clenching his fists tight.

But despite these desperate efforts, the sensation took hold of him and reduced his entire being to the tiny patch of irritated skin on his forehead, and his soul—from whatever it had earlier been—grew into a massive, all consuming itch.

The change happening inside him was perceptible outwardly only by an unexpected hardening of his member. It reminded him of the erections in the dead bodies of men executed by hanging and he frowned as he pulled his trousers up to readjust their position on his waist.

"Don't flip... motherfucker... don't flip..." He muttered this in a single breath, as if speaking quickly and commandingly about the eggs would help him overcome the itch. Then, unable to restrain himself any longer, he scratched his forehead with such inhuman ferocity that bits of flesh stuck inside his overgrown nails.

In the meantime he walked backwards, his eyes fixed on the red tunic as if it were a hypnotist's pendulum. Swollen with air, it now looked like the corpse of a drowned man. He envied the tunic's capability of metamorphosing so quickly and wished he could transform himself with a mere change in the direction of wind as well; perhaps into a bat, or an ant, or an intestinal worm, perhaps into nothing at all.

"It must be done," he sighed, "And it must be done today."

Thereon, the writer produced from his pocket a small notebook, together with a chewed pencil, and in a final act of authorial assertion, he used the latter as a bookmark for the page on which he had written his last note. Then, with the detached precision of a bored physician, he closed his eyes and waited for the usual release of adrenaline that precedes such occasions. But the hormone deceived him and his muscles turned leaden. In its stead, a sensation, dull and erotic, settled on his navel, making him nauseous and urging him to run, to jump over the parapet, to be one with the cobblestones, to offer the dog outside the butcher's shop the gift of the congealed mass of his blood, to disdain the baby for the nipple it was sucking, to scatter the eagles from the lines of their orbits, to vanish into the yellow smoke of the sky.

As he rushed forward, the soles of his feet tickled in the same manner they did upon the touch of a barber's scissors on his neck. And when he placed his hands on the balustrades to lift his legs to jump, a thought crossed his mind that the passersby might disprove the disheveled state he was in. It only took him a second to drive the ridiculous idea away, but between that moment and the next, a creature, flapping its wings loudly, crashed violently against his chest. Taken by surprise, the writer lost his balance and fell supine on the hot concrete of the rooftop.

For a few seconds, he stared at the intruder blankly, and the pigeon, apparently wounded, stared back at him. The iridescence of the bird's neck seemed to him like a scarf his mother had worn when he was a little boy. "Had she sewed a spangled lace to the edges," he thought, absentmindedly digging his nose for a crust of mucus that had dried at an impossible angle. "It would have looked like a representation of dusk. And her face would have been the moon. And her hair, the approaching darkness of the night." But when he tried to recreate an image of her in his mind, all he could see

was a beak, a pair of orange eyes and wings as grey as the monsoon clouds—all swaddled neatly in the brilliant shimmer of the cherished scarf.

"I must be getting mad," he said, clutching his hair in despair, "The holes in my mother's socks are now in my brain."

Alerted by the sound of his voice, the pigeon fluttered its wings slightly, but unable to fly, it began limping along a distorted imaginary circle on the floor. And the writer, seized by a fear which fell on him like a blow, screamed shrilly into the void that was the sky. What his glands had refused him earlier, now coursed through his body in a wave, mingling with his blood and guiding his senses by a single command: escape. He crawled on all his fours, as far away from the pigeon as he could, and only when he reached what he considered to be a safer distance did his terror begin to somewhat subside. The bird, meanwhile, hid itself near the shoe that had come off his foot during the confusion. As the writer gained his breath, he noticed the kite-string that had slashed the pigeon's pinion for about half an inch from the right side of its body. A length of it still entangled its pink claws. He sighed deeply and leaning back on his hands, looked searchingly towards the sky.

He could see his seven-year-old self clearly through the yellow smoke. There, right next to him, his brother stood in a dirty vest, encouraging him by gently nudging his shoulders. Something had to be retrieved, he could not remember what. Perhaps a green cricket ball which had vanished somewhere in the backyard of their village house, between sweet gourd creepers and coriander beds. In the direction of his brother's pointed finger he saw something akin to the mouth of hell. He could not have pictured it as anything else, all these years later, but then it was merely the coop of his grandmother's broody hen.

"The thing most frightening to us is a mere shadow of some greater fear whose memory has been eroded by time," the writer quoted from a book he had read a long while ago, maybe on one of the many train journeys he had undertaken during the days of his youth, as he saw his thin arms stretch towards the coop. He saw the hen, wicked as devil, quick as a fox, pounce on him in defence of her eggs. He saw her puffed feathers and her beak pecking his exposed skin. And he saw nothing else.

"You," the writer sprang up suddenly, rubbing his arms as if remembrance could tear open even physical wounds, "You would laugh at me. 'You were going to die, why fear a harmless, wounded bird like me?' you would say."

"Why fear a harmless, wounded bird like you?" he continued, each sentence louder and more agitated than the one spoken before, "That is an easy thing to say when you have a brain smaller than your eyes. For who are you, after all, but a wounded pigeon? And what do you understand, in the end, of the hearts of men? What do you know, for instance, of a certain fear which overshadows even death? Of this fear which obliterates love, empathy, mercy and every noble attribute of a living, conscious mind; and begets, in its rise, the beggar, the thief, the murderer and the insane? What do you know of this fear which you invoke in me now? Do you think I could help you, a bird, any more than you could help me, a man? How can you expect me to be kind when I am afraid?"

"How can you expect me to be kind when I am afraid?" the writer sighed, lowering his voice to a sad, tearful whisper, "When you live, you do not know life and when you die, you are unaware of death. While I... I..."

He looked towards the sky again and sketched, with accuracy and detail, the outlines of the only room of his decrepit apartment in the ghetto. His mattress, greasy with dirt, was spread on the floor without a bedsheet. A brass drinking glass stood beside his slippers which had a hole each near the heels from where they had been worn-out the most. His clothes, wrinkled and faded, were hanging by the window which opened to a dark, mosquito-infested shaft. And finally, he pictured the papers, some blank, some covered with useless, hateful sprawls of ink, dwarfing and dimming everything else.

The image made him shudder and a strange, inexplicable emotion took hold of his being. It first built up in his chest, making him restless, and then travelled to the palms of his hands and to the soles of his feet. When it reached his abdomen, he felt a carnal emptiness creep slowly to his soul. For a long time he did not move, but stared fixedly and numbly at the pigeon.

The bird had closed its eyes partially and was dozing near the parapet with its feathers fluffed up. His attention went to the mud-caked sole of the forsaken shoe. It reminded him of something his father often used to say: Satan makes his bed on a shoe kept upside down and consequently brings

misfortune to the household. He realized—and was surprised why he hadn't realized it before—that the pigeon was Satan. This idea, which had occurred to him only in passing, became irrefutable as he thought about it again and again and he grew quite convinced of the creature's identity. The shoe *had* to be set right.

With his heart beating louder than the thud of a blacksmith's hammer, the writer walked stealthily towards the cursed object, which had been an innocent part of himself only a short while ago. He was limping slightly because he still had the other shoe on. Were a stranger to see him in this condition, he, without a second thought, would have taken him for a madman; a further confirmation of which would have been the fact that all through the venture he kept quiet as a mouse but as soon as his task was accomplished, he no longer seemed to be in control of his body. A short shriek escaped his mouth and his legs, acting by themselves, carried him away from the pigeon as fast as they could.

Ecstatic over his success initially, the writer wept copious tears of joy. "Oh God," he muttered gratefully between his sobs and smiles, "I thank you. I thank you, my Lord. Satan has been defeated. I have defeated him. I have defeated Satan, look, dear God...."

But the illusion of victory did not last for long and in a matter of a few seconds, the panegyric he was singing lowered, faltered, and finally diminished to a silent whisper. The pigeon had opened its eyes and was crouching by the shoe again

"God," he spat wrathfully on the floor, as if by this one human gesture he was bringing Him down to the level of a centipede, and, with his body trembling with fury, took off his other shoe and hurled it at the pigeon. Scared by the commotion, the bird moved in search of a shelter. And for the next few minutes, the shrill cries of the writer almost pierced the sky.

When he came back to his senses, God's meekest creation, the pigeon, had resigned itself to a corner. It seemed to him that he had lost memory of everything he had known till then and was looking at the world for the first time. The bird's wound, a red patch of bare skin, terrified him and he fell down on his knees with a thud.

"You wouldn't let me die," he said. "I cannot stop you from dying."

Then, slower than ever, the writer took out the notebook from his pocket and with similar painful efforts, got rid of the pencil and tore to bits the page on which he had written his last note, carefully and minutely, so that nothing of it remained. Satisfied with the outcome, he sat down like a man tired after a very long journey and watched them float in the hot air of the funereal summer afternoon. Beside him, the red tunic fluttered louder than ever, but all he heard in it was the sound of angry flames engulfing the body of a heretic condemned by some worthy inquisition.



## **Muntazir (the one who is waiting)**

### **Eiman Nasir**

chand roz aur meri jaan faqat chand hi roz

(a few more days, my love, just a few days)

zulm ki chaaon mein dum lene pe majboor hain hum

(breathing the air under the shadow of tyranny)

lekin ab zulm ki miyad ke din thore hain

(but tyranny's term is now due to depart)

ek zara sabr ki fariyad ke din thore hain

(a little more forbearance, and our days of complaint are numbered)



Jahanara tried. She tried, with every atom of her being, to find comfort in these words but the chairing at the bottom of the page just reminded her of Nazia, and how she used to keep her teacup in the most unusual of places, leave stains on them. She had also been the one to gift the copy of Faiz's poetry to Jahanara last fall. The tattered copy, with its cracked spine and chai stains, made Jahanara realize how much and how often she'd read from it to get it in this shape.

"Bari baji is calling you," Shahnawaz Chacha was lingering in the doorway. His eyes were wet. They had been that way for weeks. The bags under them were darker, the wrinkles on his face deeper, and his hair grayer. This was the longest his beard had gotten, and his kurta hung loose on him. Jahanara nodded at him, held his eye for a little longer than she normally would. So many unspoken things said in that brief eye contact: I see you, I understand your pain, we are in this together.

She followed him down the stairs, to the dining room, where her mother was seated on the mahogany dining table, sipping on fresh orange juice and eating buttered toast. Jahanara stared at her in disbelief. How could Amma just paint her lips red and sit there like nothing had happened?

"I am going to go with Chacha," she told her mom and then looked at Shahnawaz with a forceful gaze. "We'll go to Purana Lahore today."

Chacha looked at Amma with a strange desperation in his eyes and Amma squinted hers as if to say please. Chacha surrendered and told Jahanara that he would go out and get a taanga. On her way out, Amma gave her a bar of roasted almond chocolate that Shahid Uncle got from Europe some days ago, along with twenty rupees for taanga fair.

The horse was old and there was a wound on his front leg. His hair hadn't been groomed and his eyes, with a flicker of sun in them, carried so much wisdom and grief. Jahanara took a deep breath. "Mayo Hospital," she told the driver and got seated in the carriage.

The entire taanga ride, she looked out the window, as did Shahnawaz. There was an unsettling feeling in the pit of her stomach, enveloped in anger. Anger at all the scrawny children playing cricket in the galis. At the fruit vendors littering the streets with their bruised fruits, bantering with each other. At the Punjabi bachelors, standing in queues outside the cinema halls, barely able to keep it in their pants, knowing they were going to see Hema Malini on the big screen. The rush was

extraordinary, it was the weekend and Taqdeer had just been released. Pakistan Talkies Cinema had 50% off on the tickets. Jahanara knew all this because it had been on the radio the entire week. She was angry that the outside world hadn't changed a bit. That everyone was oblivious to her pain. She was angry at God, for making her suffer. She was angry at Nazia, for being so stubborn. Angry at herself for letting Nazia put herself in a dangerous situation.

They got off at the hospital. Jahanara asked the receptionist if there was any patient admitted, matching Nazia's profile: twenty-year-old, tall woman, with an upside-down heart-shaped birthmark right below her left eye.

"No," the receptionist told them. They proceeded to go to Anarkali Bazaar, asking every shop owner the same question, and all of them kept asking, "Apki behn hai kya. Is she your sister?" And with a heaviness in her heart, she answered, again and again, "Yes."

An old man with sunken paper cheeks shivered by the roadside. Flies nibbled at his toes. Jahanara noticed him and crossed the road to offer her shawl, which he gladly accepted. She asked him the same question. He smiled at Jahanara, "She is a brave one. I was there when it happened."

He told Jahanara that it was exhilarating marching with the women, but someone had soon broken through the barricade and things took a turn for the worse. There was a laathi-charge by the police, followed by arrests. The teargas had fogged his vision and he only remembered hearing the shrill cry of a baby and blood dripping down a woman's kameez.

"I woke up in a jail cell when I gained consciousness. I wish I could've given you more information, but my best bet is that the police is hiding something. People don't just disappear out of nowhere."

The call to prayer was given. The streets went silent. The night was drawing near and it was time to go home. Chacha called for a taanga despite Jahanara's protests. She gave a one rupee sikka to the old man and thanked him before getting inside the carriage.

"You're not trying hard enough. Don't you want to find her? She's your daughter, for God's sake," Jahanara cried.

"Beta, aik akeli larki, mahinay se gumshuda. An unarmed woman, lost since a month," his voice cracked, "Chorta hai koi? (Who lets her go?)" He took off his glasses, wiped his eyes on his

sleeve and cleared his throat. “This is the world of barbarians. We just exist. Ye duniya hai hi unki (This world is theirs). Intezar ki kashmakash hi alag hai (The dilemma of waiting is just something else). It asks nothing of you. It just tells you to sit and be. But at the same time, it demands everything from you. Every ounce of your patience, peace and sanity. I have to preserve whatever I have left. And I think you should too,” Chacha spoke, not meeting her eye.

Jahanara shook her head with incredulity and laughed, “No, you are right. Janay detay hain. (We should let go).” Her lips began trembling and her eyes glistened under the florescent lamp hanging from the ceiling of the carriage, “Janay detay hain.” The remainder of the journey was shared in silence and tears.

Upon reaching home, Jahanara went straight to her room, and jumped into bed, tears staining her silk pillow cover. She looked through the window. The moon was full, just like it had been that day, when Nazia had locked the door and climbed in next to Jahanara on her bed. The moonlight streaming in from the window had been enough for them to see each other in the blinding dark. Both of them had lain on their sides, under the thick comforter, facing each other and staring into each other’s eyes, in the silence of the night. Jahanara had leaned forward and planted a soft kiss on the tip of Nazia’s nose, hands gently working at her shirt’s buttons.

“I have news,” Nazia had said, with a smile as wide as the valley of Hunza.

“That I love you?” Jahanara had teased, making Nazia smile even wider.

The Women’s Action Forum was arranging a protest the next day, against the law of evidence which was proposed. It reduced a woman’s testimony to half of that of a Muslims man’s, in a court of law. Nazia had heard some teachers talking about it in her college.

Jahanara had shrugged as she caressed Nazia’s bare midriff, “What do we care? Let them do what they want.”

“I care,” Nazia had sighed in disbelief, “I care a lot, Jahanara. I am going tomorrow.”

“Are you crazy? You are not. I am not going to let you go,” Jahanara had snapped as she turned to lie on her back and stare at the unmoving ceiling fan.

Nazia closed her eyes, completely ignoring Jahanara, “It’s at Regal Chowk, I think. I don’t know. I’ll figure it out when I go.”

“Why do you even want to go? You have everything: an education, a home, good food. What do you care about evidence and law and stuff?” Jahanara had whispered.

“What the fuck? What everything?” Nazia scoffed. “I have an education that your dad pays for because he just happens to be a nice man. I have no fucking home, Jahanara. I have to wake up the minute the sunlight hits the room so I can unlock the door and go back to my mattress beside your bed, Bhenchod. I’m not gonna sit idle when I have the fucking chance to flip off the authorities.”

“I hear you. But it’s just not safe.”

Nazia sat up straight, laughing and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “It’s not safe either when I go to buy groceries, or some fucking cake when your suitors come to visit. Your parents send me, not you because it’s okay if the servant’s daughter gets beaten up for travelling without a male counterpart. Look beyond your privilege for once, Jahanara. It is unsafe for women every fucking day.” She had gotten off the bed and buttoned her shirt. Jahanara had opened her mouth to say something, but her throat choked up.

“I just remembered I have to wash the dishes,” Nazia said, shook her head, then slid out of the room soundlessly. That was the last Jahanara saw of her. Her mattress had been tucked under the bed, the curtains had been drawn, the windows had been scrubbed clean and the Afghani carpet had been vacuumed when Jahanara awoke.

It physically hurt Jahanara that their last conversation had been a fight. It hurt her that she had let Nazia go without telling her that the moment she looked most forward to was when they sat at the rooftop at night. Nazia resting her head on Jahanara’s lap, smoking the cigarette she’d stolen from the guard’s dabbi. Jahanara making Nazia’s braids, and singing her songs, until her mother would call for them to come down because it was getting late. She wished she had told Nazia that no matter how her day went, knowing it would end with Nazia by her side kept her going. That in those few moments each night, life felt beautiful and complete.

All Jahanara wanted was to cross sections of Nazia’s hair with her fingertips, to feel the curve of her head against her lap, to feel the warmth of her hand in hers, to sneak sloppy cigarette kisses under the midnight moon. Oh, how she wished she had followed Nazia to the kitchen that night and talked her into not going. It surprised her that a month ago, she was stopping Nazia from going, but

if a protest were to happen right then, Jahanara wouldn't hesitate to march the streets cursing Zia and his accomplices at the top of her lungs. She did not like being so aware of her emotions, of the pain and burning desire, which came in waves. She thought of singing. It always worked as a distraction. But in the moment, it felt meaningless without having someone to sing to. Sighing, Jahanara left the comfort and warmth of her bed, marching towards the rocking chair, ready to surrender herself to her thoughts.

She wrapped her shawl around her body, drawing her knees to her chest and resting her chin on them. She closed her eyes and said a little prayer. Quivering lips, pleading to God to give her a sign that everything will be alright. "Anything. Anything at all," she whispered. "Make the chair creak, make the wind blow, make the moon glow a little brighter, make the tree outside fall through the window, make my eye twitch, make the fan spin for a second, just anything Allah Miyaan."

She opened her eyes, expecting to see a tree on her bed, but nothing had happened. Nothing at all. She sighed and opened her poetry book to a random page.

Tanhai (Loneliness)

Phir koi aaya dil-e-zaar nahi koi nahi

(Did somebody come again, sad heart?)

No, nobody)

Raah-rau hoga kahin aur chala jayega

(It must be a wayfarer somewhere, he'll go away)

Jahanara traced each word with her fingertips. She had to read these lines over and over before she could continue reading the rest.

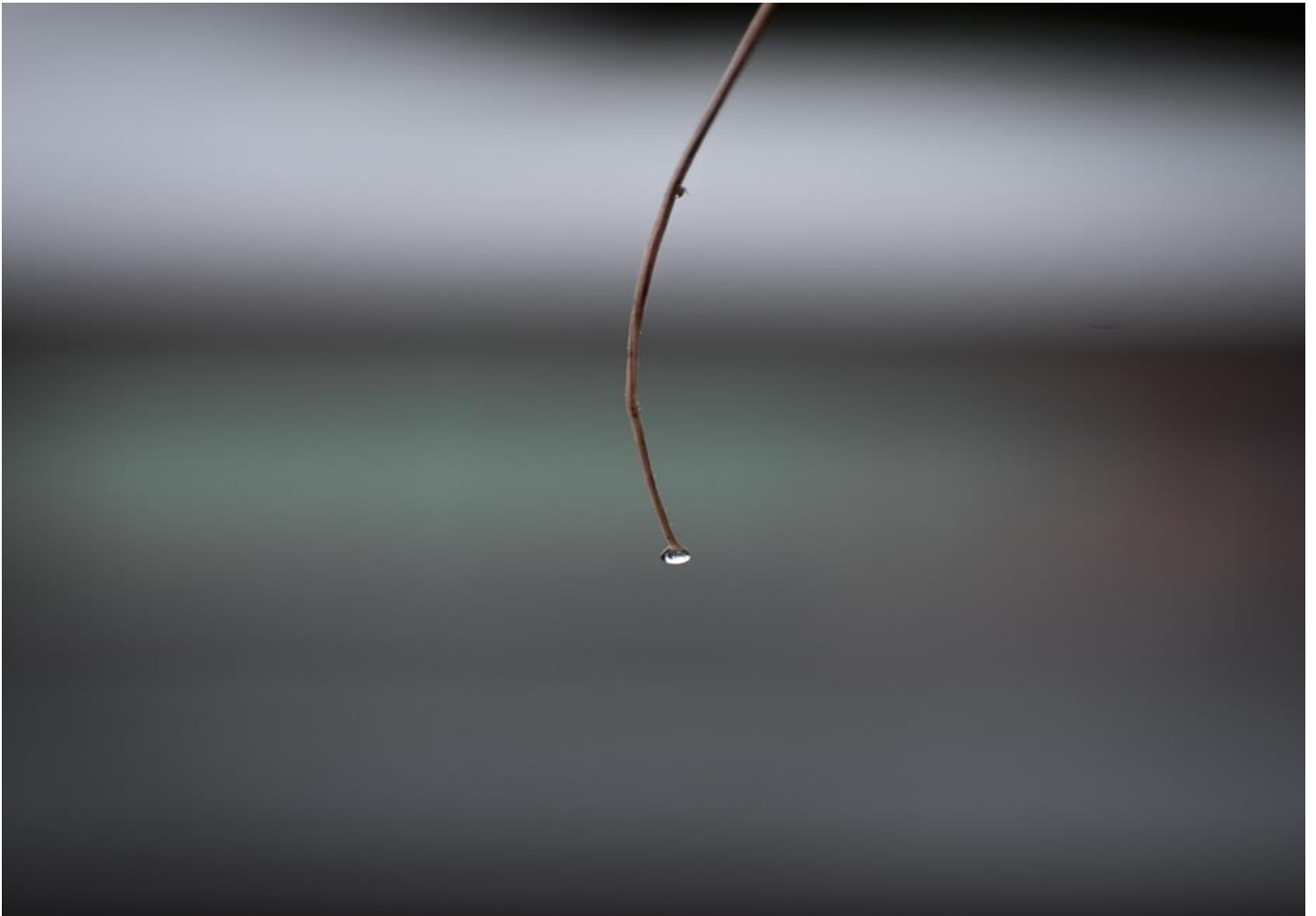
Apne be-khwaab kiwaadon ko muqaffal ker lo

(Lock your sleepless doors)

Ab yahan koi nahi koi nahi ayega

(No one. No one is going to come here now)

She kept repeating the last line to herself like some kind of mantra. “Ab yahan koi nahi ayega, koi nahi, koi nahi.”



## **The Lingering** **Fahim Ifrah**

The simmering heat of July burns dark lines into the crevices of my neck. The bookstore I work at is half an hour away from my dingy apartment building but I make do. I cannot afford to move. The road is old and battered, lined with crumbling brick buildings. They have stood here longer than my grandparents have. It is early so there are not many people out in the bazaar. I tell myself it is better this way. It is an improvement to navigate empty streets than those filled with clammy human bodies, hands, and feet pushing their way through the crowd and touching you in places only lovers are

allowed to. This morning the path is harsh but I refuse to travel in a rickshaw or taxi, just thinking about the jarring incident from a few nights ago sends shivers down my spine. I had barely made it out of the car, a panting-shivering mess, after having jumped out mid-ride. That road did not lead home.

It will happen today I tell myself. Today, the world will collapse and finally I will rest under the fallen debris. Alternatively, if the planet turns upside down, I will be on top of it. A long cold TMT bar finally slicing through my torso into my heart and out through my back. I do not care for the position I will be in as I take one last excruciating breath. I would be able to let go of the monotonous painful days I have lived.

My glasses refuse to stay in place. In strange defiance, I let them hang onto the tip of my nose. My brother hated them. “They make you look...you know...” He would never finish his sentence. But there was something he had always wanted to say. I could see it in the way his mouth hung open a second too long. My father would do it for him. Some days, I still hear him in the mirror; if I stare for long enough, I see him too.

Like every day, the red-faced young boy passes by on his battered bicycle, the chain holding the front wheel squeaking and screaming with effort as he paddles away. Stacks of newspapers rustle behind him, tied with ropes and balance. He smiles at me and yells a greeting. I ignore him the same way his father does at the bar when he reluctantly places the little money he earns on the table and leaves to work his night shift.

I turn a corner into the narrow alleyway that leads up to the store; rust-eaten metal doors and filthy curtains provide little respite to the tiny homes lining the street, but they still stand in the doorway stubbornly, as if daring me to question their integrity. I nearly crash into someone and recoil as if scalded. The man towers over me, face twisting into a yellow-toothed sickening grin that coats my tongue in fear and bile.

“Be careful there, Shehzaadi. It’s easy to trip in these streets.”

My feet carry me at an alarming speed before my mind can squander and render me motionless. Soon, I am far enough to catch my breath.

One two three four    One two three four    One two three four



I chant the numbers like prayer until I can walk again, a tightrope walker on an unraveling cord. My dupatta is in place and my kameez hangs loose. My skin is scarred from years of acne and fatigue. I am not someone you would look at twice. I do nothing to attract this crowd. I scold myself as soon as the thought crosses my mind. I have spent too long unlearning to let my internalized misogyny resurface.

This happens often but I am startled every time. I tuck the memory away into my shabby leather bag alongside all the others; it festers at the bottom like forgotten candy. There is nothing that can push you off the edge when you are already falling.

The foil-thin shutter rattles and groans as I push it upwards. It disappears into the seams. The sign on the glass door now reads open. Behind the counter, I sit quietly and stare at the haphazardly mounted wall clock. It is broken. Ever since I have started working here, it has been this way; its needles, both long and short, stuck on twelve as if declaring an emergency.

“Run!” They yell whenever I look at them. “Get up! Stop staring and run Sitara!”

Too many things tail me for me to know the context of the caution. Do they whisper about my family? The father who has never looked at me the same way he has my brother. Or my mother who still boils and bubbles in front of the stove, tongue-tied as tight as the braid cascading down her hunched back. Is it about my friends? The ones who come and go as quick and fluid as aspirin in water. Or about the girl that sticks to my neck and murmurs anxiety and terror into my brain. Whose face is the same as mine?

After work, I go home and crawl into bed. I skip dinner. I have not had an appetite in years. The sheets are crisp and cold and I melt into them. My mind is blank as I stare at the ceiling fan. Its blades are filthy. The grease of grime and gazing stuck to them like a second coat of paint. The single light bulb flickers, casting strange shadows against the wall. They coil around each other like smoke. No, like maggots. Their writhing bodies crawling onto one another. My stomach churns and I close my eyes to keep from puking.

The bell rings, a shriek against the stillness of my flat. There is but one person that visits so I do not bother to get up. “Beta! Sitara! You came late today right? I made palak so I thought I would bring some to you. You like palak right? I think you do. You licked the container last time.”

She chuckles to herself at that joke. She makes it every time.

“Well I’ll leave it here then. Tell me if you want more!”

I will do no such thing. Yet she deludes herself for some reason. There is a faint clatter of receding footsteps as her cane taps against the stone stairs. She is nice. She believes everyone else is too. I met her once by chance when I had first moved here. Gray and shrunken from age, she stood in her doorway and her cheerful greeting had echoed across the empty hall. I had mumbled incoherently in response. Since then, every few days, I find meals at my doorstep. She means well. I do not know what well means anymore.

Minutes turn into hours, hours into days, days into weeks and weeks into years and I still lay there. Watching my chest fall and rise. I try to make an effort but fail the instant I start so I give up. I get that from my mother who gets it from hers. I inherit the hopelessness.

The food grows cold outside and I do not move. I am angry with myself for not being kind. But I do not know how to do it. You do not learn something you have never seen.

Everything changes. The books around me wither and turn to dust. The sky turns ginger then sapphire and then crimson. A million different shades of white explode onto each other until there is nothing but a blinding, searing light. Time and space warp until the shadows and the grime and the flickering lights all coil into one colossal nightmare. And when all there is left is pitch-black nothingness, I float in it endlessly and wait. Wait for death or for life. Wait for an end.



**(the absolute and immeasurable horror of a  
flawed creation)**

**Himangi Shekhawat**

fourteen hours at  
the desk—

a still,

close-mouthed, death-like misadventure.

in the market for

perfection  
but the production value  
of creation is error  
and the business  
is uncompromising.

every pen stroke  
cataloguing malice,  
every sketch  
dizzy, in love.

I put myself on sale  
hoping someone  
will care enough to purchase  
erroneous despair.

twisted, unrecognisable  
faces,  
timeworn, shopworn  
verses.

would you  
invest in stocks of rage  
trade it  
for more rage?

Rootless grief/ joy/ love—  
Sloppy negotiations;  
A reckless, ill-advised  
Enterprise; a lion-hearted  
Venture in mediocrity.

*(Please read the offer document carefully before investing.)*

*(Terms and conditions apply.)*



## **Undoing** **Shanza Sarafraz**

The day after my sixth birthday, my mother carefully arranged the new toys. She placed them in a custom-made cupboard, fitted with doors and shelves made of transparent glass. Each toy was placed strategically: the most expensive ones at the front and the cheaper ones closer to the back. It was odd

for me to see Elmo and Barbie sitting solemnly beside each other, kept the same way one would organize fine china. I watched as she slid the transparent door shut, and twisted the child lock into place. These toys belonged to me but they were not mine to play with. They were there for the benefit of the guests that traipsed through the penthouse. My mother wanted them to see that the toys existed, that she was providing the best for her child. In retrospect, like so many other things after, perhaps it was a fallacy to lay claim upon toys that I had never once played with, which had never even been unwrapped. After a while, I forgot about most of the toys and they faded into the background, except when fawned over by visitors.

But there was one toy that I could not forget. Big red letters on the box declared it the only bracelet-making kit a girl could ever need. It was illustrated with pictures of all the different kinds of beads and strings that you could use to make your very own bracelet—there were red, green, and blue beads, beads that tapered off at the end like an ice cream cone, and beads shaped like the wings of a butterfly. The beads could be rolled onto strings of all colors—pink, blue, and yellow, matte and glittery. This box was all I could think about. I pleaded with my mother to let me make one bracelet. Just one, I implored. I'll put everything back in the box just the way it was before. No one will ever know. But my pleas fell on deaf ears, and the box remained on the highest shelf in the cupboard, watching over the room with a haughty predisposition.

Years later, in a different city, I found the box again. By this time, it had traveled across the country, still unopened. The box looked like it had been shoved under heavy objects in the moving truck, jostled from side to side over the uneven terrain leading to Rawalpindi. The travel had worn it out. The sides were heavily marked with scratches, and the once-bright red letters had faded. My mother offered it to me then, smiling indulgently at her twelve-year-old daughter and graciously allowing her to play with a toy set intended for a child half her age. I accepted the box wordlessly and gave it to the domestic worker's daughter the very next day. Her happy squeals and my mother's palatable confusion put a wry smile on my face. In her confusion, she claimed that I was ungrateful, failing to appreciate such a beautiful gift. I wondered if she would ever realize what it meant to me as a child. For me, giving up the box was not a sad moment. It was not sad because by then I knew that the box had never belonged to me in the first place. It had always belonged to her, her perception

of performative motherhood, and to the guests that validated it. By the time the box became mine to play with, in my mind I had already given it up.

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That's what life had always been for me: a series of things I had to give up, things that were mine only when the world was looking at me, things that were snatched away as soon as the doors clicked shut. That is not to say that I suffered my fate quietly. Not at first. In my early teens, my mother and I would often engage in screaming contests. Our voices would reach a crescendo, inevitably cracking at the peak and eventually dissolving into a river of tears. When she looks at me now, my mother sighs with relief as she tells everyone what a difficult child I used to be. I threw tantrums when my mother signed me up for speeches that I didn't want to deliver. I puked all over the car on the way to the venues where I delivered said speeches. The tantrums continued when she took me to audition after audition, for everything you could imagine, from commercials to voiceovers. I cried in front of everyone who cared to listen, from my father who preferred not to get involved in the trivialities of parenting to the makeup artists who were just trying to make a nine-year-old look beautiful. To my mother, this was unjustified anger. To me, this was another instance of giving up. Giving up the chance to play with other children in the park, to wander aimlessly around the house, to exist as kids my age did.

Somehow, I always did exactly what she wanted me to do, gave up everything she wanted me to give up. This translated into hosting several international medical conferences starting from the age of twelve, appearing on live TV shows at the age of nine, and hosting my very own segment on a small, independent entertainment channel. It also translated to vomit splattered on the walls of the bathroom stall before the conferences started, and crying in the middle of a TV set, prompting the director to yell at me for ruining my makeup.

When she talks about it now, she skips over these parts. And she talks about it a lot. My mother can be found boasting to friends and relatives alike, usually in a fancy drawing room over a cup of chai. She tells them about every certificate on the wall, every trophy in the cupboard. She even tells them about my stout unwillingness, eliciting peals of laughter in exchange for anecdotes about my tears. The karak chai with two teaspoons of sugar lays forgotten in her lap, as aunties listen with



rapture to tales of her expert motherhood. When she's talking about these achievements, there is a subtle shift in her demeanor. She sits up just a little bit straighter, her eyes shine brighter, and her voice glows with pride. I tune her out when this happens, and in my head imagine quietly giving up my awards, surrendering them to her. These are yours, I tell her. They were never mine to begin with.

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When the time came, I didn't apply for the handful of creative writing degrees available in my country. Instead, I sat in front of my desk and stared at the thick, grayscale biology textbook, day in and day out. This was around the same time that I experienced my very first heartbreak. Forbidden young love, paired with the thought of giving up my love of writing proved to be too much for me one night. So I stormed downstairs, straight into her arms, and sobbed. I'm in pain, I told her. I'm in pain and you're causing most of it.

It was then she told me about the series of things she had given up, as if it was a ritual of womanhood as old as time. Fresh out of college, young and hopeful, my mother had been a bright student, aiming to apply for a doctorate degree in Pharmacy. Both of her parents had been busy with work throughout the admissions week. The process kept getting delayed due to the missing signature of a parent, and the last day of registration rolled around fairly quickly. As fate would have it, my great grandmother passed away on the same day, leaving the whole household in disarray. My mother beseeched her father, my nana jaan for half an hour to complete the registration. He refused angrily. How selfish of you to think about yourself on this day as well? And hence, the funeral went on. The clock ticked slowly, aching past the deadline and my mother watched helplessly. Her act of giving up was forced by the constraints of social etiquette.

The entire night my mother weaved the tale of her life as vivid as a wound still oozing fresh blood. With each relived experience, she said she felt lighter, that knowing her pain will make it easier for me to inflict the same wounds upon myself. With each relived experience, the blame I had placed on her for so long dissolved into a general disillusionment. It felt exhausting to exist in the same world that had treated her this way, the same world that had forced her to think that I could only be accepted if I endured the same pain as her. With the odds stacked firmly against me, I started to

believe that she was right. I became more and more resigned to my fate. Resigned to the fact that I could not escape the pain which had been written on the slate of my life.

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A few months later, I got accepted to a med school, packed my bags, and moved to nana jaan and nannan's house in Karachi. They had spent their entire married lives sleeping in separate beds. Nannan spent her days huffing and puffing, scornfully talking about nana jaan and the way he treated strangers with more kindness than he had ever shown his family. Nana jaan was barely seen in the house, slipping through the back door only when he needed a fresh change of clothes or an unused household item he could pawn off to help people who wouldn't do the same for him.

The coursework piled up. I slipped in and out of a brain fog induced by an increasingly dull routine and a concoction of sleeping pills. Halfway through the first year, I called my mother and screamed. "How could you? I spat out, wincing at the crack in my voice. How could you put me in this hellhole, and how can you go on pretending that you didn't do anything wrong?" She was speechless, if only for a moment. It was her dream, she told me, after the tiniest of hesitations. Her dream to make her daughter the woman she did not become, the woman that she had been forced to give up. The call clicked off, and neither of us felt any better. My mother was living her dreams vicariously through me, watching them materialize in the hands of someone who couldn't appreciate them. I was trapped in her dream, frantically searching for a way out, and realizing that it was too late, realizing that her dream had engulfed me whole.

All of this came with its own set of consequences. These included a suicide attempt, an official diagnosis of depression, and a few permanent stress ulcers. As the consequences of my childhood increased, so did the extent of my mother's denial. She was just trying to make sure I was the best version of myself, she insisted. So what if I couldn't move from the bed? She had met her friend recently, and she could just taste the jealousy dripping from her voice. Wasn't it worth it?

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That first year in Karachi flew past in a kaleidoscope of moments, swirling around at blinding speeds right until the moment they clicked, forming a pattern that was indecipherable mere seconds ago. There was no grand moment that preceded the gentle click of understanding, no cathartic

screaming involved. It was a simple revelation: The pain I carried in my bones, like everything else in my life, was never mine to begin with. It was theirs. Nannan's and my mother's. I had inherited their pain and had unknowingly carried it in my bones ever since I was a child.

And thus began the process of undoing. At least that's what it felt like. It didn't feel like I was achieving something new, but rather like I was undoing something old. Like opening stitches in my skin that had been left there far too long. I felt like a surgeon, painstakingly pulling out the black string and watching my skin recoil into place as it finally became free. It didn't look like much on the outside. I smiled more. I stopped hunching my shoulders in crowded spaces. I let people hug me. I danced without thinking about my awkward, flailing limbs. I stood on the sidelines and watched someone else take center stage for a change, and I cheered them on. The undoing was hard, treacherous. The undoing is still incomplete. I have dreams that are still difficult to think about, like a particularly painful stitch, and they are often thwarted by a rishta proposal from a well-meaning auntie.

I don't know if I'm strong enough to stand tall, knowing that my undoing makes me so different from everyone I love, from everyone who loves me. But what I do know is that with every stitch that comes undone, I belong more to myself than to anyone else. My shoulders stand straighter. When I walk in the hallways, my movements have become more deliberate, assured. My words no longer carry pain in their undertones.

I take these newfound traits home with a mixture of apprehension and pride, forging a path in my wake. I hope that my younger sister may find it easier to walk along this path, to reach a destination of her choosing. She has inherited some of my childhood interests, the most prominent one being bracelet-making. Watching her concentrate on her craft embroiders a bittersweet taste into my heart. She can often be found hunched over her desk in the corner of the room, with creases in her forehead, meticulously weaving pink, blue, and yellow strings into intricate patterns. Her bracelets have become a staple in my wardrobe. She saves some especially for me when I visit, picking colors that she knows I like. I wrap the bracelets around my wrists, and every time I look down they serve as a reminder of how far we have come and how far we still have to go.

At the end of the day, I put the bracelets in a bright red box that my little sister has painted for me. This box makes a home out of the transparent glass shelf in the cupboard that still watches over my room. The cupboard has moved with me across cities and through the years. The toys no longer occupy the shelves where they first started out—most of them were thrown out or given away. Instead, I have decorated the cupboard with pictures of my loved ones and lamps bought from the Sunday market. When I sleep at night, the lamps cast a soft red hue on the faces of everyone that I have loved and lost over the years. As my eyes flutter shut, the red hue seeps through my eyelids and morphs into dreams, and this time, I don't have to give them up.



# On this Day

## Ayesha Sadiqa

On this day, I cannot die  
when the sky pours glee,  
sun showers all the love,  
autumn gust hugs me.

On this day, I cannot die  
For I have to say salam,  
to my mother  
                    who prays for me,  
smiles and laughter  
                    she puts in heart,  
bury deep down  
                    the light in me,

On this day, I cannot die  
The fireflies flutter above myrtle  
that rustle with the gentle strikes  
of wind - I must have to see,

On this day, I cannot die  
The exclusive words I write for you,  
the words that make no sense,  
So,  
            I have yet to write

the best poem that offers love,  
to the readers of my own sanctuary,

On this day, I cannot die  
I am waiting for my nightmares  
to withhold  
and bright dreams to catch.  
The blue tint is all I get.  
While I bow before God  
it gets too late,  
to carry the pain

On my knees,

On this day, I cannot die  
As I put dreams in heart  
Like a kid puts fairy tooth  
beneath the pillow to expect something.  
In return, I seek a reward,  
but it's getting too late,  
for God to answer my prayers  
to wane the pain,  
on my knees,

On this day, I cannot die  
for I have to wait a little more,  
to offer the rituals and spread love,  
for my coffers to fill with opulence,

to live a life less shackled,  
to live a life unabashed,

And

    On this day,  
I don't want to die.





## **The Green Dhaaba** **Minahil Abideen**

The people through the green lights of my small dhaaba always look abstract. Like fog they diffuse in and out. Ghost shaped people, devoid of human color, nothing on their faces but a patriotic green, with no story to tell but one, and that is a nationalist success story. It is a story about Pakistani government's successful mission of eliminating Indian spies from within the holiest of the nation states.

A police officer, with a bulging belly, the mustache of a historic white British man, and a face painted, walks up to me as I am making chai for two gentlemen sitting and waiting for the Pakistan vs. India cricket match to begin showing on television.

“I have good news, Mr. Ali,” says the man, without greeting me.

I smile. I do not remove focus from my chai making.

“You are gonna be rich.”

He has my attention. “How so?” This all could be a joke. So many pranksters in this fake age.

“Help me catch a rat. I will give you twenty thousand rupees tonight.”

“A rat?”

“You know what I am talking about. These Qadiani rats are siding with the Indian government to make our country secular and communist.”

“Okay, first show me the twenty thousand.”

He instantly flashes a bundle of fresh newborn notes in my face, and when he notices my excitement, places it in his pocket, and takes out from the same pocket a picture. It is of a clean-shaven man reading a book.

“If he comes here, let me know, will you? I will love to flog him, and I am sure you will love the money.” He says before getting up and walking away.

I commence making chai. The match has not yet started, but it would in fifteen minutes, and a fog of ghosts will enter, and with them a traitor, the only one rooting for India. I have to report this traitor, for I need the money to fund my son’s education.

~~~.

The match has started now. Lots of men come in with their happy green faces. Some have painted their faces green themselves; some have had their face painted by my green lights, but it’s impossible to tell the difference. It’s all green.

All men naturally want to sit as close to the cricket world as possible. There is a lot of noise, of cheering, hooting, and the annoying screeching sound of chairs moving against the floor. It’s not just hard on the ears, its hard on the eyes too. I try to watch the match, but since I am much farther, I can’t see the scores. My sight is occasionally blocked by a man abruptly getting up and sitting down

again, for God knows what reason. I finally give up figuring out the scores, and resolve to guess by how hard the people cheer. The louder they are, the better we are playing.

I try to scan for the clean-shaven man in the midst of this anarchy. The rats are clever, but also alive. And because they are alive, they sooner or later come out of their hiding, for chai shops and TV matches. I will find my rat too. The predictions of police officers are only rarely wrong. Clever righteous folks they are, police officers.

“One Chai please.” A voice startles me out of my thoughts.

“Yes, sir,” I say obediently without looking up at the voice. I only look up when I have put water, tea, and milk in the saucepan. And its him. The rat.

“I have heard you make great chai, my brother,” he says, with enough eloquence to grant my respect. He is surely educated.

“y-y-ess”, I struggle to speak.

“Sugar?” I whisper.

He comes closer, as if making out my words out of the thin green air that exists between us. “Oh, yes, two spoons.”

He looks at the television screen with a passion that matches the frequency of everyone else, the same regular anxiety, and the same regular relief. When the crowd is silent, so is he. And when the crowd cheers, he jumps in excitement.

“Pakistan really needs to win this and it will, inshallah,” he smiles at me, with the innocence of an oblivious child. For a moment, I mistake him for my son, and then as my spine shivers at this mistaken thought, I mutter Astagfrullah, and start mixing his tea.

“It will. Pakistan will win.” I say, as I hand him his cup.

He sips. Satisfaction flowing down from his mouth into his entire body and radiating through his eyes. With those eyes high on life he looks at me and says,

“I missed desi chai so much. Thank you, brother.”

I nod, return his smile and say, “I will be back. Stay here. Let’s see the match together.”

“Sure, I would love that,” he says, and I walk out of my chai shop into the real world.

At a safe distance from my chai shop, I take out my cell phone, dial the police officer's number with my trembling fingers. He tells me to stay with that rat. I sigh and walk back into the green colored war.

~~~

The rat is still there, happier than before. It seems we are winning. Pakistan, I mean. He looks at me, and points me to a chair next to him. I sit there, drenched.

“You are the only one not cheering. Is everything okay?” he asks.

“I think I have caught the flu and all this green is making me sick,” I say.

He nods, then diverts his attention to the match, leaving me in the dark. Soon he jumps up from his chair with an energy that knocks the chair backward. Pakistan really is thrashing India pretty bad.

The crowd and the drunk numbing color and the claustrophobia of it all is really getting to me. I want to throw up, but I don't want to lose sight of my twenty thousand rupees, so I sit there, closing my eyes, as the world revolves and shouts and jumps and drowns all around me.

A gentle push wakes me up from my one-minute slumber, and I look to my left to find the rat at the exit of my chai shop, struggling. The police officer has a strong grip on his arm and is pulling him out, but he is trying his best to stay in.

He is eyeing the screen and shouting to both me and the police officer, “Let me see the last ball.” The police officer's authoritarian mustache dances as he laughs at the absurdity of this demand, and he looks at me, expecting me to laugh too, but I am too exhausted and confused to show any reaction.

The police officer loosens the grip on the rat's arms, and for a moment, all three of us, the rat, the traitor and flogger, turn to the television to watch the last few seconds of the match, and when Pakistan is announced as the winner, all three of us do that excited childish jump.

Soon after, the flogger and the rat walk away peacefully. A subordinate police officer hands me the twenty thousand rupees and all I feel is relief. Now, I can afford my son's school fees.



## **milk teeth: an elegy in three parts**

**Nidhi Krishna**

*i*

it is summer. the first one to fall  
brings delight. the second brings

responsibility – this is the beginning of the world.

we are six and invincible.

we compare empty gums like  
battle wounds, bloodied smiles like  
diamonds dripping from bone.

whose was larger? whose was cleaner? who was first?

we are not scared; new ones will grow.  
they will fill into our mouths like leaves  
and shudder when the wind blows.

*ii*

the beginning of the end.  
each leaf drops from jaw,  
memorialized in  
scarlet and ochre and brown.

the inevitability of decay,  
the invincibility of inevitability.

summer doesn't return with the same smile.  
the wind hurts.

*iii*

we collect our grief in  
five-rupee jars like

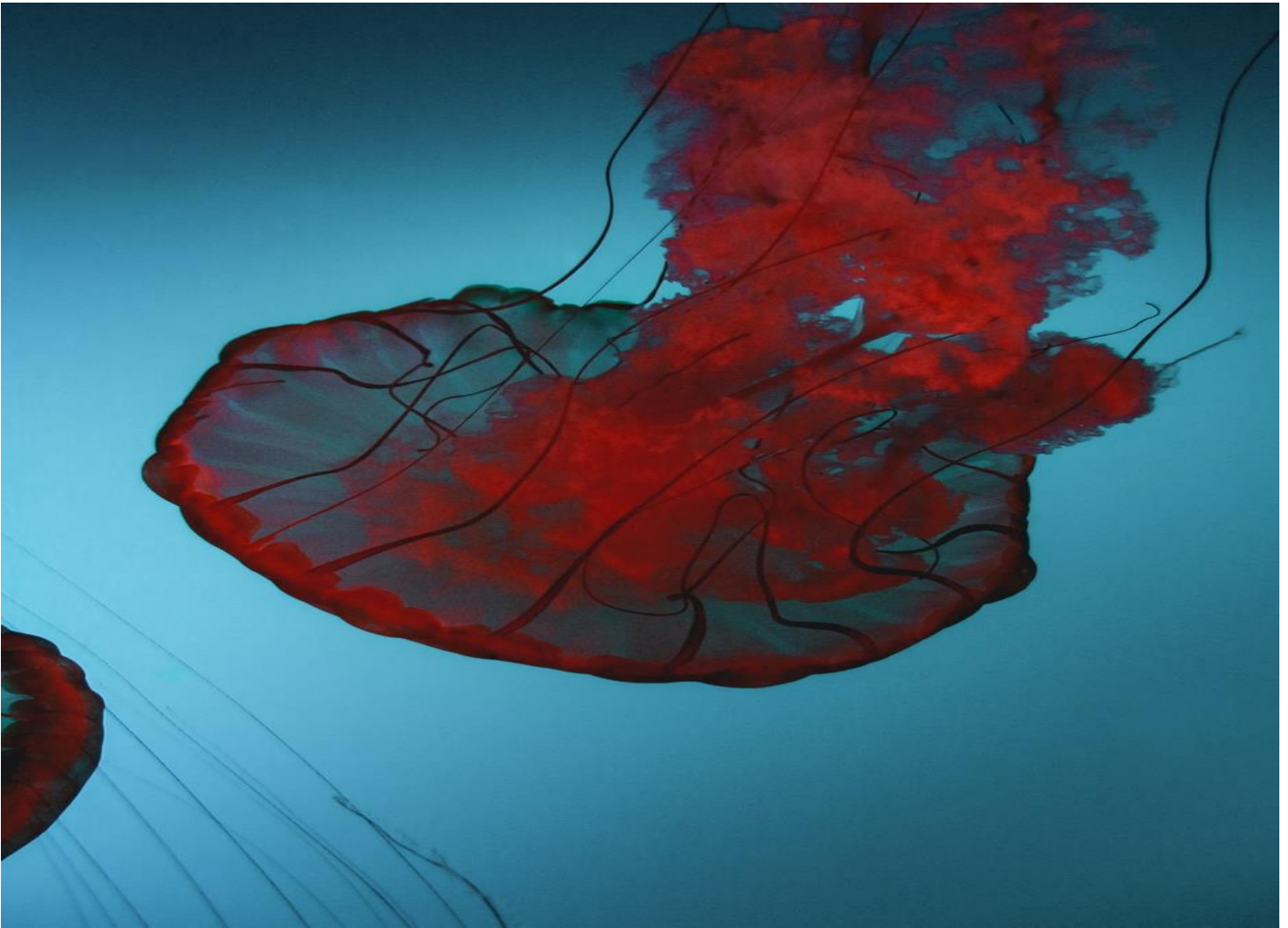
milk teeth, crusted silver.

whose was larger? whose was cleaner? who was first?

time is cruel but the  
teeth are memory, pressed  
warm against bone during the  
harshest of winters.

the inevitability of forgetting,  
the invincibility of inevitability.

at the edge of the world, a  
graveyard of child-ghosts;  
shuddering in our jaws  
whenever the wind blows.



**Angsty Queer starring in *Angsty Queer*  
*Monologue*  
Nidhi Krishna**

*Spotlight. A figure on a stool.*

ME:

In my last life, a husband and children. Family dinners, neighbours who slipped past begging women to ask me about my vacation, a brittle world; flushed in the distance, hemorrhaging before you.



The next life?

*(Frowning:)* an unknown variable. Lawless land.

Futures *brimming* with girls and cats and vines bursting in hair! Sometimes there are boys (*shrugging:*) but those futures burst into thorns when touched.

*She walks down the steps; the spotlight follows her. Her face dapples, contemplative.*

In the in-between I trudge down winding paths that

divide and dissolve,

halve and           and halve again,

whole

disappear as they appear on screen, backtrack into walls at family dinners, appear in recollection and loneliness and the softest corner of my bedroom, visible to every part of my body but the naked eye.

*(Her gaze holds the audience; a moment of heaviness:)* I have visions of possibility, only memories of reality.

*She walks back to the stool, settles, knees hugged into chest. The spotlight silvers, softening blue. She pauses, her arms unravel. She speaks, again:*

Shelved in our bodies are endless roads that

divide and dissolve,

halve and           and halve again,

whole

visions of possibility, memories of reality, trickling out of the softest corners of our bedrooms.

*(Smiling, gently, reassuringly:)* In shame,

they begin, in respite, they

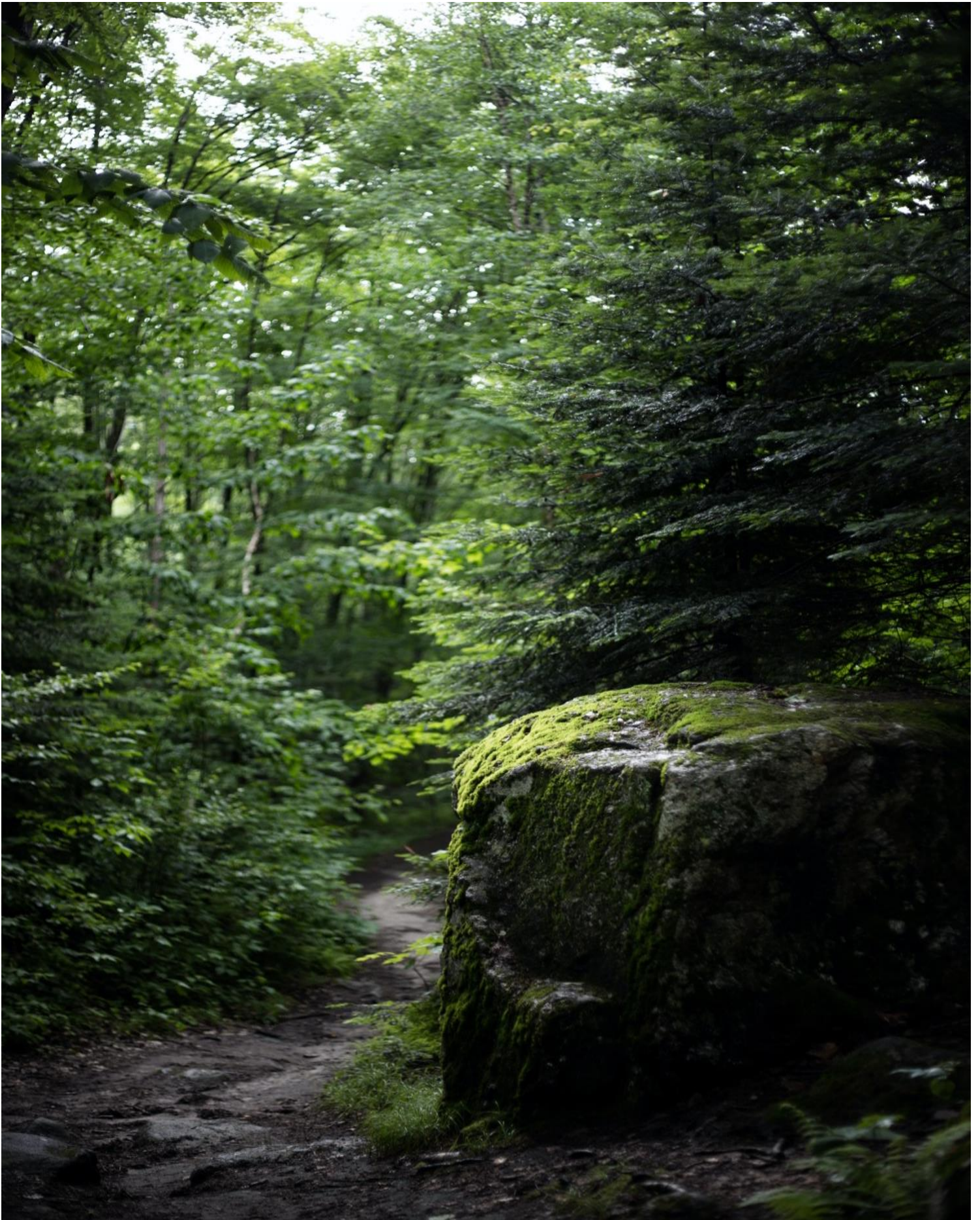
bloom and swell, like

multitudes they wander into existence

wherever there is

space to become.

*The lights dim. Silence.*



## **Days of Youth**

### **Fatima Sajjad**

She walked over to the bay window overlooking the forest. It was an expanse of banyans and palms, interposed with flaccid shrubbery. A trellis of overgrown magenta bougainvillea was nailed onto the side of the window, and the soft petals swayed in the wind, visible to those who looked through. The city was a haphazard conglomerate of dusty buildings, ceaseless bridges and indifferent roads. In that moment, the old woman was overcome with gratitude for her corner of nature in the relentless metropolis. The forest was hand-cultivated, of course, and barely measured a quarter of an acre. Strips of white and red paint adorned every tree trunk. To call the forest verdant would be a mild overstatement, but to the old woman, it represented vitality and hope. In a way, it was her only friend in the city—as the years rolled by, sometimes with torpor, but mostly in whirlwinds of febrile activity, the forest had acquired a kind of sentience. The old woman was confident she could whisper her secrets and the trees would conceal them within their trunks, and guard them jealously. The forest understood her.

It was a stroke of luck that Aqeel Sahab had chanced upon the plot. Barely a month after its Hindu owners left for Mumbai, he scrawled his name across pages of yellow paper. Within a week, the property was his. For this alone, she would forever be thankful to him. She knew his coterie of nephews and nieces envied her. It was pointless, since they would inherit the place anyway. Would they raze the ochre residence to the ground, slash the trees and build a slew of high-rises in their place? Or would they sell it to one of those moneyed yuppies that would ultimately all but destroy the residence from within, and erect a new-fangled monstrosity in the name of renovation? It wasn't as though they could all live there in harmony, the picture of 'joint-family' bliss. For one, there were thirty of them without counting their spouses, and she had since long-lost count of the young ones that would surface every month.

~~~

Aqeel Sahab adored children. When he was alive, every Saturday, he'd telephone his siblings, demanding they leave their children with him. He'd chase the boys across the courtyard, chanting their names in a mock-baby voice, with Arifa perched on his shoulders. It made her laugh, a taciturn gentleman like himself, reveling in the reenactment of childhood. Arifa's older sister, Aasiya, would plant herself in one of the bamboo chairs in the kitchen, her mouth pursed, unimpressed by the jejune antics unfolding around her. Aasiya was supercilious, but the old woman had loved her all the same. She was a beauty, with her rosy lips and her gazelle-like lashes.

They were nearly the same age, too. Then Aasiya was seventeen and she nineteen. They used to converse enthusiastically about the things they liked. They both loved the short stories Ismat Chughtai had penned (whilst swearing they would never let anyone else know), and agreed that Noor Jehan blew all of her rivals out of the water when it came to singing. It was her desire, back then, to bear a striking resemblance to her favorite niece by marriage. They really did have similar features, to think of it: large eyes, full lips, and thick hair. But while Aasiya was dubbed a fairy because of her peaches and cream complexion, the old woman was a deep, uniform brown, a predicament that had afflicted her mother with years of worry. In 1946, the University of Agra had decided to bequeath thirty students in the United Provinces with scholarships, contingent, of course, on their matriculation marks. She had done well in the relatively short course of her academic career then, well enough to find a place among the thirty. She would study Sanskrit. The language fascinated her, the rhythmic cadence of its words, the script more Arabesque than the language to which the adjective owed its origin. Her grandmother had claimed, that at the age of twelve, she could speak better Sanskrit than most Brahmins. By the time she'd complete her degree at the University, she would have mastered the Upanishads and the Vedas. A fascinating occupation for a Muslim girl indeed, her father would remark wryly. Meanwhile, her mother contracted her eyebrows. It was not proper for a young woman to leave her home; it was unbecoming of her to leave her parents behind to study at a varsity so far away. Propriety forbade her to leave the confines of the Faizabad home without her parents in tow. "You would do well to forget all that nonsense," her mother said sharply. She strode across the living room to her daughter, and thrust a bowl in her hand. It contained a viscid mustard concoction, not quite liquid, but solid enough to adhere to the sides of the bowl. "That's

henna, turmeric and yogurt,' her voice softening to a sage whisper. 'Does wonders for one's complexion.' She had followed her mother's advice, gingerly applying the paste to her face every night. But the deep brown never changed hue.

Aqeel Sahab's family proposed marriage a few days after her seventeenth birthday. His father, although twenty years older than her mother, was her mother's nephew. Aqeel Sahab, with a BCom degree tucked under his arms, worked at a bank in Chittagong. They would make a lovely pair, her mother's nephew insisted. Aqeel Sahab was twenty-seven, the youngest of ten siblings. She could summon from memory, at will, their first solitary interaction after marriage. She was wearing a kurta made of red brocade fabric, and the red gauze of her dupatta obfuscated her vision. She lifted her veil to meet his gaze—no, it was a stare. He was surveying her with what appeared to be mild distaste. Or was it mere indifference that she had misconstrued in her state of bridal neurosis? The two years they spent together did little in the way of revealing what he truly felt about her. When she'd think about it now, she would realize that it was probably a mixture of the two. She'd wake up every morning, taking care to butter his toast and adding a dollop of cream to his tea, just the way he liked it. In his absence, she would read, and write letters to her mother. When he would come back, he would eat, peruse the newspapers and sleep, in that order. In one of his rare romantic overtures, he'd taken her out to the Chatenga Beach, where they spent the balmy evening strolling along the promenade. He laughed suddenly, and voiced his observation: his wife wouldn't go amiss in, his words, a crowd of 'dark, ugly Bengalis'. She had played along sportingly, responding with a twinkling laugh, playfully nudging his shoulder. But she spent the entire night thinking about it. The jab at the Bengalis was unnecessary, cruel. It wasn't as though all of them were dark. The old woman admired Padma Devi, who was light-skinned, and as ravishing as any girl she had seen. It was no wonder she was a matinee idol, cherished by the masses. Would he care more, if she looked like Padma, if she were more like his former fiancée? Beena, she was called, a 'modern' girl, her sisters-in-law would mutter disapprovingly. But she could tell that Beena was beautiful, even though her photograph was weathered, and the blacks and whites were fading to blend into an ashy grey. Not just beautiful. Even through the inadequate photograph, her charm was coruscating, she was, simply put, majestic. Her hair was styled in an impeccable bouffant, and her slender frame carried her sleeveless sari with

languid ease, every inch the classy lady of high society. She had broken off the engagement because, in Aqeel Sahab's words, Beena considered her beau unworthy of her, due to his swarthy skin. A belle such as herself deserved someone who matched her in every department, from looks, to social standing. The old woman had doubted this. Her mother knew the girl, and had spoken highly of her manners. She knew her mother well. She was not one to dole out unnecessary praise, especially to someone who was, for all intents and purposes, a rival to her daughter. The other possibility was strangely tempting: Aqeel Sahab as the jilted lover, misrepresenting a valid, harmless reason to appear sympathetic. It was perhaps perverse to think so, but she rather liked her husband in this role. It excited her to think that he could feel such deep emotion.

But then, Aqeel Sahab began to pepper his vocabulary with adjectives similar in nature to the ones he had employed at the beach. As their frequency grew, the old woman would feel her heart hardening against him. It was so patently absurd though. Aqeel Sahab was much darker than her. In Karachi, they would occasionally have dinner outside in the forest, and the night sky would render him invisible, the white of his eyes speckled with red, his overly large pupils and his blue shirt gleaming. He looked like some sort of clown ghost, if such a specter even existed. She would often think about how their children would turn out. Hypothetically, they could have been fair, four out of eight of his sisters were. When she'd think of her unborn children, her daughter would always have Aasiya's face. Would Aqeel Sahab have loved her if their children were fair? Sometimes, her heart tightened when she recalled how he left earth devoid of his progeny. He wasn't a terrible husband, all things said and done. The remarks were something every wife had to endure. It wasn't as though he'd strike her every night, although once, they had argued about something silly, probably money, and he had gripped her, his fingernails digging into her shoulder blades like talons. She had winced, and just when he seemed to have relaxed his hold, he pushed her, sending her flying across the room. Still, she wished him contentment wherever he was.

After Aqeel Sahab's death, she enrolled herself in a local university. It wasn't Sanskrit she would go on to study, though her command over the language never waned. She wanted to teach it, but there was no use for Sanskrit in Karachi. It was nothing like the erudite Persian the aspiring poets

avored, or Arabic which was always in vogue. English always reigned supreme, and these days, Chinese and Turkish were all the rage. Never Sanskrit, though.

She couldn't remarry either, even though her brother-in-law, Abid Bhai, floated around a variety of proposals. He never masked his impatience. He simply wasn't a good enough actor. But unctuous smiles had ceased to sway her anyway. The house was not negotiable. So she would teach unruly schoolchildren Urdu on weekdays, and every Saturday, she would rise with the sun, toil in her kitchen, welcome her husband's relatives, and entertain their children.

~~~

Night fell upon her forest, and she stood up. Old age had bestowed her with the pallor she had craved as a young woman. She decided to step out, to survey the neighborhood. The local reprobate was carving into the mailbox with a knife, and upon spotting her, his head jerked up, and he dropped the knife in an exaggerated, but probably truthful manner. He bowed as she walked ahead.





## **53 Dunbar Street By Tiana Wilder**

It was Friday evening and Blue just walked through the door. Peach sat on the couch, her feet tucked underneath her as she half-watched a rerun of *Family Feud*. The other part of her brain was currently occupied by the incessant craving for a greasy plate of fried eggs from Lem’s diner, courtesy of the tiny invader trapped in her stomach. Her adopted child, Lucas, was in his room, allegedly doing homework, but Peach knew he was more than likely playing games on the computer.

Blue stepped onto the green carpet. His bad leg dragged against it, a reminder of the car accident that happened almost two years ago now. Peach turned her head, just enough so she could see her lover out of the corner of her eye, and said, “Hey, Hon. Derek working you to death?”

“Halfway,” he replied, before bending down to plant a kiss on her forehead. “Remind me to get my boots off the porch tomorrow morning.”

“Mmhm,” she said before standing to make a beeline towards the kitchen. Her shift at Piggly Wiggly, the only grocery in town, ended earlier than usual. This gave her time to finish cooking dinner just before Lucas got home from tee ball practice. She fixed Blue’s plate, giving him a hearty helping of smothered pork chops and field peas. She put the plate in the microwave for a few minutes. As she waited, she listened to the electric hum of the microwave and the manufactured cheers from the television.

She grabbed a cold beer from the fridge, along with a fork, and brought it all to Blue, who was now settled on the other side of the couch.

“Thank you,” he said before digging in.

“So, anything interesting happen at work?” Peach leaned against him, the rough fabric of his blue work uniform rubbing against her dark skin. “Termites? Roofs caving in?”

“Nope, just had to put some flooring down in Miss Mullen’s house. You remember her? She taught English 201 and smelled like cigarettes.”

“Yeah, I remember. I saw her a few weeks ago in the store. She asked about you,” said Peach. She decided to omit the part where Miss Mullen asked if Blue had proposed again. She didn’t need him thinking that it was yet *another* sign that they should get married.

He took a swig of his beer, “I hope you told her good things.”

“I told her you knocked me up.”

Blue laughed dryly. “What’d she say to that?”

“Said it was only a matter of time.”

This time Blue laughed for real, the crow’s feet around his grey eyes growing deeper as he smiled. Peach loved his smile, the way he showed all his teeth, including the silver ones. It made her feel warm and safe, even after all these years. And whether it was due to her love for him or her

pregnancy hormones, she felt an overwhelming wave of affection for him. She kissed his cheek, and then his temple, her hand reaching up to disturb the neat bun that he had tamed his curls into this morning.

Blue followed her lead, placing his half-eaten dinner on the coffee table in front of them. He wrapped his arms around Peach and pulled her close. She tilted her head back and kissed him, his stubble scratching her skin. They kissed again and again until Blue pulled back. “I—Baby, you know I love you, right?”

Peach scooted over a bit, her brown eyes narrowed in suspension. “What did you do?”

There was a moment of silence before he spoke again. “I love you and I have loved you for almost fifteen years now and-.”

“Blue Damen Hyde, what did you do?”

He avoided her gaze. “I started looking at houses again.”

“You did *what?*”

Blue gulped nervously. “And... I picked one out. We have a showing with the realtor tomorrow.”

“Blue I can’t believe you!” shouted Peach. “How many times do I have to tell you I don’t want a new house? I’m perfectly fine in *this* house.” Her arm swept around the room to emphasize her point, causing Blue to look around the small trailer, the very house that Peach was raised in. He caught sight of the peeling wallpaper, the outdated popcorn ceiling that leaked in the summer, the funny spot where the floor was starting to cave in near the back door. He knew that she didn’t see these problems. She instead saw the happy memories of her childhood, the bad ones blocked out by her rose-colored glasses.

“Peach, I know you want to stay in this house,” Blue said. “I know Marie left you this house and this is one of the few pieces of her that you have left. But you’ve gotta be realistic about this. We’re going to have a baby. We need to move to a bigger place. A place that doesn't have the floor caving in.”

Peach deflated, just a bit, at the mention of her deceased aunt, but it wasn’t enough to fully quell her anger. “No, we don’t. We can make this work,” she protested.

“How?”

“Well, the baby, of course, can sleep in our room. Lucas’ old crib will work just fine.”

“Okay, what about when she gets older?”

“He. And *he* can share a room with Lucas.”

“Peach, a teenager isn’t gonna want to share their room with a toddler.”

“You did when you were young,” she shot back.

“And it was hell,” Blue said. “You know that.” Peach thought back to Blue's childhood home, the cramped three-bedroom house where Bo left her twelve kids to fend for themselves. “I don't want that for Lucas and the baby.”

“And if, God forbid, you or the kids fall through the floor, Marie would come down from Heaven and kill me herself.” Blue took her hand in his. “Just trust me on this, baby. When have I ever led you astray?”

Peach scoffed. “Well let’s see. There’s that time you convinced me to steal that pack of cigarettes, hotwiring that bus, getting me pregnant-.”

“Peach don’t start,” he snapped. Peach crossed her arms and huffed.

“I wanna do right by you on this *one* thing. Please.”

Peach eyed him cautiously, something she wished she did more often in her youth. Blue gave her a soft smile. She turned her away from him briefly, before turning back to face him again. He was still smiling.

“Fine, Blue! Fuck!”

Blue pulled her back towards him, grinning from ear to ear now. “It’s a good house. It got a big yard, a nice master bath, and it’s in the same district so Lucas won’t even have to change schools.” He placed a kiss on her forehead. “Trust me.”

~~~

Lucas yawned, his head rattling against the window of the truck. “Did we have to go so early?” he whined.

“We did, kiddo,” Blue said. “But you can sleep in tomorrow.”

Peach yawned soon after, silently agreeing with her son. She had stayed up all night tossing and turning, her mind filled with worry. And once she did fall asleep, she was back up an hour later, throwing up the little bit of dinner she had managed to eat.

As they approached the street the house was on, Blue repeated, for the tenth time this morning, “It’s a really nice house.”

Peach focused her attention on the road ahead of them.

“I think you’re gonna like it,” he said in a sing-song voice.

“Whatever, Blue.”

A few minutes later, the truck came to a stop in front of a house on 53 Dunbar Street. Peach looked at the building for a moment, her mind turning. The house wasn’t...*bad*. In fact, it was almost cute (though she wouldn’t admit that to Blue). Just fifteen minutes away from their current place, sitting on a piece of almost empty land, stood the little cottage that Blue had told her about the night before. It had white siding, blue shutters, and a matching blue door. Light pink azaleas sat against the front of the house in perfect rows, shrouded in the shade by a large oak tree in the corner of the yard. It was the type of house Marie would have loved.

Peach sighed and allowed her gaze to fall on the realtor. The girl was standing on the porch, her purple suit-skirt making her stand out. Peach figured she couldn’t be more than twenty years old, give or take a year.

They all got out of the old pick-up truck, Blue steadying Peach as she stepped down. He then helped Lucas, despite his protests of being big enough to do it on his own.

The young woman beamed at them as they walked toward the porch. “Hello, Mr. Hyde! It’s so nice to see you again!” She reached out and shook Peach’s hand. “And I’ve heard so much about you, Mrs. Hyde. It’s a pleasure to finally meet you.”

“Ms. Davis. We’re not married,” said Peach sternly.

She smiled, but it failed to reach her eyes. “I truly apologize, Ms. Davis. It’s just—from the way Mr. Hyde talked I had assumed—” she trailed off.

“It’s fine,” said Peach, though the young woman could tell it wasn’t fine at all.

The realtor bent down to meet Lucas’ eyes. “And this is...?”

“This is my boy that I was telling you about, Lucas.” Blue clasped Lucas’ shoulder. “Say hello.” Lucas looked up at the woman and gave her a soft smile. “Hi.”

Peach noticed the realtor’s gaze flicker between Blue and Lucas, before finally landing on Peach. Peach noticed the look of confusion on the realtor’s face, one that was quickly schooled back into a dazzling smile. “Well, it is *so* nice to meet you!” The realtor shook Lucas’ hand

She stood up straight, her ponytail swinging as she did so. “I’m Jennifer Wayne, but y’all can call me Jenny.” She turned to unlock the door. “Now, I’m not trying to butter you up or anything, but I think Mr. Hyde has picked the perfect house for y’all.” She shot a quick, winning smile at Blue. Blue smiled back and earned himself a glare from Peach.

Jenny swung open the door, letting the sunlight pour into the house. Peach tried to control herself but was soon overcome with awe. It was—*nice*. Too nice. It had hardwood floors, white baseboards, *stairs*. It looked like it belonged in a magazine, not little old Clemence county.

“This house has three bedrooms, two and a half baths, and a very spacious backyard. You’ll definitely have a lot of space to practice baseball out there,” Jenny said as she winked at Lucas. “And because this isn’t in a subdivision with a HOA, you guys are free to make any changes you want. Fencing, adding a pool, changing the color of the house to hot pink.”

Jenny led them into the kitchen. It was bigger than the one they had at home and was decorated in the “country chic” style that Peach often saw in Southern Living. White, wooden stools with gingham patterned tops at the island counter, wooden counter tops, and vintage style appliances that would scream “This house is a rundown hovel!” if they were in a trailer. “The previous owners renovated the entire place before selling, so everything is brand new. Except for the vintage touches, of course.”

Blue leaned over to whisper in Peach’s ear. “See? Isn’t this nice?” Peach grunted in response.

“There’s the built-in pantry to your left and over to your right is the door leading out to the backyard, but we can circle back and see that later,” Jenny said as she took them into the next room.

Jenny ushered them through the living room, noting that the space was perfect for an L-shaped couch. As her heels clicked against the hardwood floors, Jenny showed off the tiny half bath, gushed about the windows, and talked about potential decorations for the house.

“I mean, you can keep the country chic look,” she said as she led them into the master bedroom. “But I honestly think it’s a bit tacky, especially since we already live in the country.”

Jenny opened the door and Peach had to stifle a gasp. The room was huge, much bigger than the room in the trailer. At home, her full-size bed took up most of the room, so there was no dresser, no T.V., nothing extra. Just a bed with cotton sheets and deflated pillows. When Lucas was a baby, his crib took up a good bit of space as well, forcing Peach to squeeze through the room to go to bed at night.

In this room, she figured she could easily fit a queen-sized bed, a full bedroom set and a vanity if she placed everything at the right angle. Maybe they would get fancy sheets from TJ-Maxx and some decorations from the thrift store.

Peach caught herself and then proceeded to scold her own thoughts. She didn’t *want* to be enchanted by this stupid little house, no matter how badly she wanted to buy fancy sheets. She crossed her arms over her chest, a frown appearing on her face.

“There’s a walk-in closet in the master bath, which has double sinks and a separate shower and tub,” Jenny said.

Peach poked her head into the bathroom, taking note of the tile flooring and blue walls.

“You at least like this part, right?” Blue asked. “I won’t be in your way in the morning.”

“Sure,” grumbled Peach, rolling her eyes.

Jenny led them upstairs, Blue trailing behind slightly due to his bad leg. She showed off the loft, listing several possibilities about how they could use the space. “I think the previous owners had a foosball table up here for their two sons, but you could put a small sitting space here, or maybe a library.”

Blue nodded; Peach stewed silently.

Noticing Lucas was particularly quiet, Jenny turned her attention to him. “Let me show you your room, while your Momma and Daddy look at the other room.”

“Okay,” Lucas said as he took Jenny’s hand. When Jenny and Lucas went into the room on the right, she asked him what he liked so far about the house.

The room on the right was a decent size, and they would be able to fit a nice nursery set in it. On the left wall was a window, which allowed the natural light to seep into the room. This room was carpeted, a stark contrast to the wooden floor downstairs, with beige walls. Blue wrapped his arms around her waist, his hands caressing her stomach. “If Lucas likes the other room, then this could be the baby’s room.”

Peach said nothing in reply.

“We could put the crib on the other side of the window,” Blue continued. “And we can paint walls, maybe even switch out the light in the ceiling. Just think about it.” She felt him stroke his thumb across her stomach, his chin resting on her shoulder. “Please, Peach?”

Peach closed her eyes. And she could see it. She could see the white crib, the matching changing table and dresser. She could see the rocking chair in the corner and the bookshelf next to it. The cute, playful decorations that would be more for her than they were for the baby. She could see Lucas on the floor, reading to the baby, his voice soft and full of love as he stumbled over a few words. She could see Blue sitting in the rocking chair, holding their baby like they were the most precious thing in the world. But what scared her was that she could see herself standing in that perfect room, on the second floor of this perfect house, holding a perfect baby. Committed, settled, and ultimately, happy.

“Blue?”

“Yeah?”

“Why?”

Blue frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Why?” she said curtly. “Why a house? Do you want me to settle? Is that it?”

“What? No, never.” He turned Peach around in his arms and looked her in the eye. “I just wanna do right by you.”

“What does that even mean to you?”

He thought for a moment. “Take care of you. And love you. And know that you deserve every star in the sky, even when you think you don’t.”

“Blue, shut up,” she said, pulling away from him. “You sound like a kid.”



“I’m serious.” He took her hand, his rough palm rubbing against her skin. “Deadly serious.”

Peach looked at him, recognizing the serious expression on his face. It was similar to the one he used to wear in high school, a time where he was still Blue: the baseball star, the town’s golden boy, the one guaranteed to leave this place behind. But there was a certain softness to it, like reality had finally settled in for him, and he was no longer Blue in big letters and shinning lights, but rather Blue, the fixer, the father, the one who was ready to settle down in this town, once and for all.

“I want you to be happy and safe,” he said. “And if that involves bringing every crazy beanie baby, every half-finished quilt, and that stupid money tree with us when we move, then so be it. I know you don’t like change. But this will be for the better. I promise.”

Peach nodded. He was right and she would admit it (in her head, silently, of course). She had so many pieces of Marie still with her, still in her, that it would be impossible to ever forget her aunt’s loving and eccentric ways.

She closed her eyes again, still afraid, but not as much now. Peach could see her aunt now, standing out in the yard with her hands on her wide hips, salt-and-pepper sisterlocks falling over her shoulders, light brown skin looking almost golden where the sun hit her skin. And she would turn to Peach with a big smile and say, “Well, I’ll be damned. Baby Blue picked out something nice for once.”

“I’m not trying to make you settle,” Blue said after a moment. “I know I could never tie you down. You’re too much of a—”

“A wild child?” Peach said.

Blue placed a kiss on her forehead. “Nah, more like a stubborn pain in the neck.”

Peach rolled her eyes, but Blue caught the subtle smirk on her face. “Fine,” she said, “I’ll *think* about this house thing.”

“Thank you.”

“And I do like it,” she said, looking around the room once more. “It is a pretty nice house.”

“We would have to take out a loan, though,” Blue said.

Peach hummed, a happy hum.

“But we can always keep looking,” Blue said. “It doesn’t have to be this one.”

“I *may* have heard about a house on James Street,” Peach replied with a smile.

Blue kissed her, first on her cheek, and then her forehead, before finally reaching her lips. When he pulled back, she was still smiling. It was a sweet smile, the type of smile that showed off her dimples and made her brown eyes sparkle. The type of smile that she wanted to share with Blue over and over again.



## **Tuesday**

# **Sidney Savannah Wollmuth**

I ask for God's shadow  
and a cockroach appears  
in the bathroom.

I watch the Glee episode where they  
try to convert Kurt to Christianity  
and sing along.

People don't seem to mind if God

watches them in the shower,  
but their grandmother's ghost  
is a different story.

*What are your grandchildren like*

I ask the medium while I hang clothes  
in a department store.

My old boyfriend appears in my mirror,  
an apparition.

*It's always the Psych Majors.*

I delete my Facebook search history  
and try again.

I call a stranger "honey,"  
and survive Tuesday  
with only two dishes in the sink.  
I fall asleep on the floor  
with headphones still in my ears.



## **A Mourning of Two Villages**

### **Moachiba Jamir**

In the beginning was my name, and my name was with my great-great-grandfather, and the name was Imnamangyang Aier. Sometimes I cannot even say my name aloud without choking up because—and I am sure some of you will empathize with me when I say this—I am repulsed by it. Perhaps my grandmother was right in fearing that I could not bear the weight of my own name.

As I shuttle around in the Hyderabad heat with my delivery packages in tow, my thoughts often travel towards a different permutation of my life if I had just been named differently. *Tajungkaba* would have been good; it had a nice ring to it—a no-nonsense SBI banker perhaps. Even *Takosashi* would have been acceptable—a genial shopkeeper in Dimapur with a smile that greeted *Welcome, what would you like aunty?* But sometimes the name *Mhokuolie* wafts into my ears and I find myself having to stop the scooter then and park for a while before my visor gets too misty.

Mhokuolie- Tenyidie: *victory over dreams* OR *a dream come true*

*Mhokuolie*, my mother announced, breathless and horse, but with a smile. Only her Tenyidie-speaking tongue could adequately pronounce that soon-to-be-whispered name without the greedy biases of Ao. The nurse, Onü Sashi as I called her—who had battled the rain for seven kilometers to reach our old house in Mokokchung where I was born—was irritable. Her ire was goaded further by my mother’s insistence on holding me even before I was rubbed clean of the blood and bodily fluids. Despite all that, about forty years later when I ran into her during my father’s funeral, Onü Sashi, trying to distract my mind off of the recent death, recounted the story of my birth with a certain hefty cadence, betraying her attempts to hide her awe at my mother’s boldness in naming me right after my birth. She named me the minute I was pushed out of her, as if I was a dismembered limb that needed to be reattached immediately otherwise I would shrivel up and die.

She named me as if I was truly hers, as if nobody else had the right to claim me. As if her husband was not waiting outside to take me away and showcase me, a glorious son, to the eager family members, salivating over what they would name the new Aier boy in their family.

The anger was popping along the surface of our rain-soaked walls and my mother held me tighter. *Leave my Mhokuolie alone*, pleaded the spaces within the comfort of her tired arms.

Tebu – Ao: *term of endearment for male children*

I don’t remember why but even after my great-great-grandfather’s name was given to me, most of my neighborhood friends and family continued to call me tebu. I didn’t mind it as much, but as I grew accustomed to my subtly balanced world, I came to realize the venom embedded within that seemingly endearing name. The venom that silently festered inside my mother’s relationship with my father, and his family, which would eventually become the impetus she needed to do what she did.

By the time I screamed *My name is not tebu! Don't call me tebu!* to my childhood neighbor Temsü, it was too late. But I had to try. This un-naming of course meant that *tebu* could only live to a quarter of its lifetime

My father's mother was the one who burdened me with that name. I can almost envision her entering the dimly lit room where I was born and stealing me away from my mother, who could only whisper *Mhokuolie* under her tired breath. Even if she had protested, my grandmother's Ao-saturated ears couldn't have understood my mother's Tenyidie or Nagamese pleas. The stealing was marked by a heavy pulling away, as if they were holding the opposite ends of a two-handed saw and my mother was too tired, too subdued, to pull it to her side. The heaviness was also a sniggering whisper escaping from my grandmother's old arms, clasping my infant body, declaring, and maybe even conceding: *At least you were able to bear me a grandson.* These arms still foreign upon my new skin prompted me to cry. It was the beginning of the chafing that would eventually cut off my connection with my grandmother years later. But for now I was sternly swaddled and carried out, away from my mother's arms, waiting to hold her son again.

*Tebu* my grandmother would occasionally coo into my ears as though saying it aloud would make me hers. My infant body had no choice but to allow the quarter-name to stick, and my grandmother continued to spread it to the rest of her family, laying her roots inside me until she could plant deeper and stronger three days after my birth, when it finally came the time to officially name me. Even my mother had to call me *tebu* in front of my father's family because I hadn't become Imnamangyang Aier yet, and *Mhokuolie* was a name only she could enunciate under the solitude of her breasts, to me, her only audience, as I sucked furiously, understanding—as infants often do—that this connection was bound to be severed soon.

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*She has untethered herself from our family,* my father informed me the year I turned eleven in the same tone that one would say, "The dentist took care of that bad tooth of mine." I couldn't fully understand the implications of someone *untethering* themselves from the family, and my father's tone did not provide me much cause to worry either. I rushed to their room then and saw that her clothes were still there, neatly tucked inside the same rickety drawer of the wardrobe as it had always been.

This fed me hope. She hadn't really left, she hadn't *untethered*; she was just out for a morning stroll down the road and would be back in time for breakfast. But my grandmother, who came to visit us a few days later, promptly burnt all of the things that my mother had left behind. As I watched the blaze consume her possessions then, I felt an urge to be burnt along with them. And maybe some part of me did burn that day. My whispered name was never uttered in the house again after this incident, which came to be referred between Temsü and me as, the burning.

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Only the rancid smell of her immediate absence lingered within the interstices of the forgotten nooks of our old home, and I remember going on all fours trying to sniff out her scent from these niches but was soon beaten out of that wild habit of mine. Then I began to see her absence in the kitchen, hear her silence from the clothesline. Some nights I jerked awake, feeling like she had only just left the room, and I could feel her imprints upon my skin. Strangely, I never dreamed of her; instead, I *experienced* her absence one sensation at a time. She felt far-away, absent yet present, all at the same time.

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Whenever I naively asked my father when she would come back, he would give me the strangest of looks. It wasn't exactly disgust, but a kind of affected pity that seemed to say *you poor motherless child, too bad she left because of you*, after which he would proceed to beat my mother's name out of my lips, just like he had beaten me out of my frenzy after the burning. And for the longest time I believed him. I was the reason my mother had to leave. If I had not fallen down that day two years back, the accidental naming wouldn't have happened, and perhaps my mother wouldn't have had to *untether*.

~~~

My mother was always careful not to call me Mhokuolie in front of anybody else. Of course Onü Sashi knew that I was named something else at birth, but it had dissolved in her memory with disuse. My mother never explicitly mentioned it, but the whispers always made me feel that Mhokuolie was a secret that only I shared with her, and I felt immensely proud of myself for keeping it a secret. It was the one thing that guaranteed my connection with her, and I felt it my responsibility to guard it



from prying ears. As such, I remember feeling unreasonably betrayed the day my whispered name accidentally spilled out of my mother's mouth.

Other than the biding silence, my memory strangely retains the hues of that day. I remember that the sun was an overzealous red, as if it was only just painted, prone to rouge the palms of careless artists. Almost all of our neighbors were out and about basking in the redness. My father was reading the newspaper, sitting right outside our kitchen with his chair strategically positioned below the edges of the roof. At the further end, my mother was hanging our laundry in the clothesline, while keeping me in sight as I ran around the yard with Temsü and his younger sister. My ears were so unused to the name *Mhokuolie* being shouted, and when I tripped and fell, for a split second, I felt as though some else was doing the falling, not me. The fall was bland, like the putrid colorlessness of sweat.

But the pain sharpened my senses, and I suddenly realized what my mother had done. It must have been only for a second or two, but those were some of the most oppressive moments of my young life. I cried, partly because of the pain and partly because I felt utterly betrayed. My father stood staring at my mother as she ran towards me with fear in her eyes, for me first and then for herself. They didn't speak to each other that whole day and for three days after. I knew then, that something irreparable had been broken.

I was not acquainted with my father's anger yet. He had put a leash on it and only occasionally let it bite my mother and I. And so when he finally erupted after the silence of the third day, it came as an unrecognizable shock. It helped me understand why my mother had to whisper *Mhokuolie* and why the name she gave me was the only thing she carried away with her when she finally *untethered*.

Imnamangyang- Ao: *A mourning of two villages.*

I like to imagine that it was a quiet affair. My grandmother and father off to one side with the rest of the guests: my father's brother and his wife with her daughter saddled on her back, all of them pampering me with attention as they squeaked *tebu* with their indulgent voices. My mother, sitting alone with her still swollen belly, a reminder that she was part of the family now, occasionally looking up and smiling at the guests, hiding a monstrous longing as she looked at me sleeping soundlessly in my grandmother's arms.

This was the third day after my birth and I had already been stamped with two names, one secret and the other quarter. My third and official name was to be pronounced that day. My grandmother for her part had not been idle during the three days prior. She had phoned her husband and all her important relatives, enquiring about the prospects of my name. It was to be a prominent name seeing as I was the first-born grandson in her family, but it should also be subdued enough, befitting the family's status. She wouldn't have minded a name like Linukkumzuk or Chubayanger, but her excitement was short-lived when she remembered that my mother was an orphan, and an orphan's son could hardly carry such names. So she had surrendered them painfully, left to be scavenged by more deserving children from the village.

With her own suggestions running dry, she turned towards my grandfather, who had offered two names over the phone: Merenyatet and Imnamangyang. *Merenyatet*, he had said, *should be proper for the boy, but Imnamangyang sounds right. You see Imnamangyang was a name that first belonged to the body of my grandfather. He was named so because of the sad circumstances surrounding his birth. His mother had died giving birth to him and his father drowned just one day before his naming ceremony. Even before her mourning had stopped in her village, the mourning began in our own village for his father. His grandparents did well in naming such a poor child.*

Before my grandmother started to protest about the ill-omens surrounding the name, my grandfather, expecting her response, placated her: *but despite his bitter circumstances he was raised strong and brave by his grandparents and grew to become one of the strongest warriors of our village, a man who could boast of having taken three female heads. I see a similar fate surrounding that grandson of ours. Name him accordingly.*

*Name him accordingly.* It sounded so final, not so much a suggestion but a decree. My grandmother had doubted then, that perhaps Imnamangyang was too heavy for me to bear. That my name might weigh me down and restrict me from living a fulfilling life. Keeping my circumstance in mind she pointed out that perhaps Merenyatet would be more apt. But ultimately it was my father who would decide and he would not let his manhood be challenged by silly superstitions of senile old women. So he obeyed his father and gave me my great-great-grandfather's name. I, that tiny baby cocooned inside layers of cotton and human flesh, was to face life with a name that had been a remnant of two deaths for its previous owner.

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Imnamangyang Aier was nine when the accidental naming happened, nine when the silence of three days gave way to his father's wrath. His mother had anticipated that his father would eventually start talking and she had prepared herself to act as if nothing had happened when he did, but she wasn't expecting her husband to switch from his long silence to a sudden yell, *how dare you give Imnamangyang another name, you fatherless bitch!* It wasn't really his vulgarity that brought her down to her knees, but the stark contrast between her expectations and his reaction.

*I-* she began, but she wasn't going to get to speak yet, he had three day's worth of silence to expunge. *Remember where you came from, you miserable slut! If I hadn't taken you in, you would still be out there, birthing children of dog-pigs. He is Imnamangyang Aier, my son! Not some Angami bastard you bore before coming under my roof! If you ever use that name to address him again, trust me, that pig-trading uncle of yours will have treated you very kindly compared to the things I'll let you go through. Do you understand me, woman?*

She was prostrate in front of him, thanking him for not hitting her. Of course she wouldn't call Imnamangyang another name again. It was only a mistake. She would never disrespect her husband like that—*would you like me to prepare the table for dinner, dear?*

When he saw all this playing out in front of him, Imnamangyang Aier felt something inherent bubbling up inside him. But he couldn't let it pop in front of his father. He bottled it up for a whole year, fermenting it inside his stomach, and sometimes bringing it up only to chew it like cud, unable to spit it out. It was almost comical the way he finally screamed at Temsü, *Don't call me tebu! My name is not tebu!* When all he wanted to do was shout at his father. And even though he was sure that his name *wasn't* tebu, he wasn't sure what his name actually *was*. His aim then, was to un-name and then rename himself with a name that everyone could say aloud, even his mother and himself. But he wasn't able to rename himself because of how things began to deteriorate.

What he had inherited from his father was revealing itself and Imnamangyang could feel his mother's gaze changing over the next year. Even though she still whispered *Mbokuolie* to him, he knew that her eyes saw Imnamangyang Aier when she looked at him now. He recognized the fear in her eyes because of what she saw within him, the something inside him that could make Imnamangyang burst any time. Their conversations used to be so full of life before, but

Imnamangyang could sense her distance every time they talked now, as if a part of her had already gone ahead, leaving her body behind to follow later.

A week before the burning, the day before she *untethered*, Imnamangyang was sitting in the verandah with his mother, unaware that this was the last time he was going to be with her. She was strangely talkative that day, and Imnamangyang Aier felt as if things were going back to normal again. They were chatting about all sorts of things when he saw something hanging from a branch in the distance.

*Why is that bird hanging down?*

*That's a bat, Mbokuolie. They're sleeping now. But come night, they'll be flying up and about.*

*How can they fly when they're upside down?*

*They don't always remain upside down. When they know it is their time of the night, they turn upright and take flight.*

~~~

She just disappeared, as if she had never even existed. And it took me eight years to come to terms with that. Eight years had been a long enough silence. Eight years after my mother's *untethering*, I realized that it was time to disown my family. For the nineteen-year-old me, the decision felt like a stream carving its path down to the base of the mountain—inevitable.

Though there was no reason for me to believe that my mother was still alive, I clung on to the hope that she was and that I would be the one to find her. My resolve pushed me towards Guwahati first, then to Kolkata, Mysore and finally Hyderabad. But of course, it wasn't like it was in the movies. I didn't see her face in the train-stations, I didn't put my hands on her shoulders only for her to turn around and reveal that she was a random woman. Her absence was so complete and silent that I just knew she was present somewhere else where I wasn't. But by then I was twenty-seven and slowly starting to accept that perhaps she didn't want to be found, only hoping that she was content wherever she was.

~~~

I was forty when I got the phone call. I didn't expect it, didn't even know how they got hold of my number. *Your father has expired.* Like a bottle of cough syrup shelved for too long, they told me that

he had *expired*, and that I should attend the funeral if I can. It was a woman's voice, his second wife perhaps. She had a fairly thick Ao accent.

*I don't want you to feel obligated to come, but it felt right to let you know.*

*Yes I understand, thank you for informing me. I will attend the funeral.*

*Tebu*, she continued in her perfect Ao, the name my mother always pronounced crookedly. But before I could respond, I realized that she was talking to somebody else on her side of the line, her son perhaps. I could hear their hushed conversation. It seemed important, some overlooked detail regarding the arrangement for the funeral. And as I waited for the conversation to end followed by her apology for the interruption, I couldn't help but wonder whether this other son would have been able to bear the weight of Imnamangyang Aier.



# All That Remains

## Loretta Rodriguez

I'm stepping out for my secret nightly smoke when I spot her. She's standing in the park across the street from our house, unmoving. I notice her, not only because of her stillness, but also because, even from a distance, I can tell that something is wrong with her. I stop in my tracks just outside the front door, and I swear her eyes are on me.

It isn't too late at night, but the sun has set and all of the kids who usually scatter the park have gone home. The swing set beside her is as still as she is, as though no one has touched it for years. I wonder how long it's been since I've played on the swings. I remember crossing the street as a kid, running straight for them, anticipating the irreplaceable feeling of flight. I used to love the lucky days when an empty swing awaited me, and I would hop onto it and begin to thrust myself into the sky with my legs, proud that I needed no one to push me. I kicked the air until my toes touched the clouds. My stomach floated inside of me, and I felt as light as a baby bird.

Tonight, the hot South Texas air dampens the back of my neck with sweat. As I reach to pull my hair up, the woman waves at me, and although I have never seen her before, I decide to wave back. This kind of interaction isn't uncommon in Texas—here, people make small talk with strangers in the grocery store checkout line, open the door for each other at the gas station, smile at people in nearby cars while waiting at red lights. I figure she's only being friendly.

I feel for my pack of cigarettes in my pants pocket and the lighter I've tucked in my bra. I've been sneaking smoke breaks ever since I moved back into my parents' house, afraid to show them any signs of weakness. I can tell they still worry about me. It's only been thirty-six days since I left the facility, and although they're supportive, they're always on edge.

I start stealing away to my hiding spot in the park when the woman begins to walk in my direction. I realize she must think I'm heading toward her and she's trying to meet me halfway.

“Hey,” she calls out, waving.

I do not know this woman.

She picks up her pace. She doesn't seem threatening, and I'm almost sure she isn't, but I can feel my heart inching toward my throat. I can tell something is wrong with her. I debate avoiding eye contact and ignoring her, but something compels me to look at her instead. She's wearing a black pantsuit, but her hair is a mess.

"I used to live here," she says, pointing at our house. I follow her gaze to our front door. "I lived here when I was a little girl, until I was maybe ten years old."

She stands only a few feet away from me now, and I guess she must be in her thirties, about ten years older than I am.

"Really," I say. "My family has lived here for as long as I can remember."

"We painted the door that navy blue color," she says.

She turns to look at me, and I get the sense she's waiting for me to say something, but I'm not sure what.

"I live in Austin now," she says. "Just visiting. My dad passed away, so I flew down for the funeral."

I start to give my condolences, but she stops me.

"It's okay," she says. She looks at the house again.

I realize what she wants me to say.

"Do you want to come in?"

She whips her head toward me. "May I?"

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Inside the house, the woman introduces herself to my parents as Sarah, the daughter of the previous homeowners, and shakes their hands. They make small talk and invite her to look around. She takes slow steps through the living room, pausing to admire our wall of family photos. Her eyes linger on a candid one of my parents when they were young. The frame is shaped like the sun, and they're kissing.

"You've done so much to the place," Sarah says.

"We remodeled the kitchen," my dad says, "and repainted all the walls."

"Different furniture, too, of course," Sarah says, laughing a little. "Different feel."



After only a few minutes, I realize Sarah isn't exactly sure why she asked to see the house. I can only guess she's trying to paint a picture of her dad's life in full, even the parts she was there for but can't quite remember.

When I was in rehab, I met a woman named Elena whose father had died. The grief sparked a relapse that landed her in the hospital. She told me that when she got the news about his death, she found herself thinking it was only a matter of time. Her father's body had been aching for years, worsening his insomnia and leaving dark circles underneath his eyes. He told Elena several times that he could hardly stand it anymore, yet he refused to see a doctor. During their frequent video calls even in his last days, he seemed normal enough. He still cracked jokes only he could understand, and he complained as usual about the news and the weather. Elena said she'd always remember him this way.

I imagine Sarah receiving a call, packing a small suitcase of black clothes and shoes, and booking the next flight from Austin to McAllen, our town on the southern tip of Texas. I can see her sitting in silence on the plane, convinced that the empty seat beside her symbolizes everything she's lost in life up until that point. She tries to make a mental list of it all, but when she closes her eyes, she only sees her dad as a young husband and father, painting the door of their first home navy blue.

A few moments later, Sarah thanks us for our time. She smiles as she walks out the door, but I know she's only being polite. I watch her cross the street and eventually lose sight of her silhouette somewhere in the shadows of the park.

"She was sweet," my mom says, and nothing more.

My parents retire to their bedroom for the night, and I slip out the door, still itching for a smoke. I start to head toward my hiding spot by my favorite tree in the park, my thoughts floating back and forth between what I know about Elena's pain and what I'd never know about Sarah or her father or the past life they once led in our house. I think of how strange it is to walk through a door so vaguely familiar and enter a life so unlike the one you used to know.

I wind up on the swings, the same ones that once made me feel like I could fly, and I rock myself slowly back and forth with my heels on the ground. I wonder if Sarah felt like a giant stepping

through our door, its frame much smaller than she'd remembered. I imagine she's standing somewhere in the dark, regretting ever trying to relive the past.



## **Nonsensical Popsicle**

### **Anita Zehra**

I first met him when my brain had tripped itself into another realm. Meeting him did not help. The morning before I met him, I realized that I did not want to be a human being. I did not want a body. I did not want a name. I wanted to be nothing and so I was. If I were to vanish right now, I would be nothing. All I needed to do was halt my whirlpool of responsibilities. I wanted to be morphed into a butterfly, one that could still eat fruits. Unlike Gregor Samsa, this epiphany deserved a

celebration. I decided to be in the company of nobody. I sneaked my way out of the apartment while my parents snored in reverie and marched my way to a park.

Aram Baagh across my building is a patch of green with an iron fence claiming to be something as are all things paraded in Karachi. Back when Aram Bagh was a fenceless place, Ram Ram had camped in it like his one-night resort, right before he scavenged his way to Hinglaj. A religiosity of nothingness. Now, which spot did Ram Leela sleep at? I looked around. All this while a crow had been cawing at me with such intense, witch-like screams. I suppose it doesn't matter where I sat as long as it was far away from this vengeful crow, plotting to poop on me. And so I lay under a tree that did not matter. I called it the shade of nothing. A nobody sitting under the shade of nothing baked in sunrays that peaked on to nothing.

That's when he came in.

First his name—I will name him Younus for now, although that is not his actual name. Maybe, someday, he will read this. Then I don't want this to appear as a lie. He is partly his grandfather, in spirit at least. Perhaps he will guffaw when it clicks in his head that it is, in fact, him, Younus the third. Third in his family and third in the descendants of nothing. It starts with Ram, then came I, and then he.

Anyways. Younus.

He walked into my nothing radar like a veritable tornado—one that swept leaves as it circled my tree. He jumped atop the branch above mine. Like a pigeon that settles onto a wire, he sat with his back against the bark while one of his legs dangled in the air. He started writing in his red notebook. His shadow hovered over my body like something and somethings are never supposed to cover nothing. So I picked up my fruit bag, my nothingness, and walked to the other tree.

Comforted by not a thing, I sat with the humdrum of the void. Younus, however, like a gum clinging on to the edge of a shoe walked his way to my tree. I did not need the epiphany, which, for me, was a germinal glimpse in my tenure as a human being. People are made of flesh and bones, with minds that have at least once dipped inside poisonous rivers. It isn't news that their tongues are like snakes. Surely Younus was hiding venom inside of him. A threat to my radar but I let him be.

After a couple of minutes, he peaked from above; his legs twisted around the branch like a rope. As if this was a bunk bed and he was my lounging partner. His acrobatic stunt did not faze me because I was nothing. To ignore his irresistible attempts at being the center of attention, I started to peel my anaar. At, which, like a puppy, Younus jumped down and sat next to me. He did not need a tail for me to know he was wagging it. So I finally looked at him. His face looked befitting for an angelic nimbus. Younus looked like the froth of a freshly warmed coffee cup, which sat bubbling into thin air. He was not a puppy, nor a pigeon. But a sporadic nomad looking for the shelter of another nothing. He needed my blessing because I was The Lord of nothing and as my grace wills, I decided to be enamored of him. I nodded and said,

“We must only speak nonsense but nonsense that must make some sense.”

“Nonsensical popsicle,” he replied.

I think he understood.

“What is your name?” Younus asked me.

I take it back. He did not understand.

“Today, I am nothing,” I reply.

“Okay, nothing. You can call me nobody. Can I have some of your anaar?”

The same anaar that were rolling off my fruit bag and onto the grass. They were my precious Ruby stones, jewels of nothing.

“What do I get in return?” I asked.

“I can read to you what I wrote in my notebook. Something about anaar.”

“Fine, it better make no sense.”

He opened a page from his notebook and read,

“What if anaar could grow as big as watermelons and the seeds inside weren’t pea-size? What if they were gigantic and each one inside could be served per person? That means each bite would fizz out aril juice like a soda can. It would tint your shirt and claim over your clothes. I have heard stains of a pomegranate rarely wash off. They would soak in and sit like stubborn invaders, so I suppose people would come up with ways to eat anaar in a 'civil' manner. You would have to make a tiny hole, insert a straw and suck on its juice or maybe deform it and extract it all into a water bottle,

but everyone would protest against it. There would be chaos because who wants anaar to be a tamed fruit? It lives on being a scattered mess. Right now, if you peel one open, a little army of shiny red prisoners will rush out like they are escaping, some will trickle down on the floor, some will roll under the table and some will squish into a blotch of red color. An anaar-chy”

I chuckled.

“But what if someone invents watermelon-sized anaar? One For you and one for me. Then like mangoes, we would eat them dirty. We would clumsily devour the juice, let it drip and soak from our shirts into our chests so that later we would walk off looking like murderers.”

Even though Younus reminded me of a rice paddy in the middle of a rainstorm, he spoke like an expert in the language of Nonsensical Popsicle. I handed him a hand full of anaar, like gold coins.

One, two, three, we counted and at once filled our mouth with these tangy fruits. I looked at the rich seeds of anaar and then at its leather-like outer layer that was peeled off. I looked at the flies that swarmed around it and how ill-fated they looked.

“I think its funny that anaar grow inside bags,” I said and laid my head on the grass, while Younus settled himself next to me.

“Bags? What do you mean?” Younus asked.

We stared at the banyan tree above us and the wind making its way from the leaves to the sky as if politely asking them to excuse it.

“Anaar comes wrapped inside a red pouch. What a delight it is to know that they exist devouring us in the process of peeling before we devour it.”

“In that case, they murder us into nothings,” he said. “No wonder they have blood of royalty.”

“Murderers of fruits” I said. “I like that. What do you think about bananas? Are they the criminal fruit?”

“Nonsense!” He giggled.

“I mean what if eating them mushed the brain cells into a banana-driven energy?” I added to the muse.

“Did you have a banana for breakfast?” He asked me, suspicious.

“I had two, actually,” I claimed proudly.

“So what is it that the banana-driven energy desires?”

“It desires the butterfly to reverse itself into caterpillars. It wants to be a caterpillar, like you. A caterpillar that has its own funeral to attend. You know like before it becomes a butterfly. It wants to exist like the kundi on the gates of this park. And yet it wants to be the center of that skating rim. It wants to waddle like the three ducks on the corner of this park. It wants to be the Araam in the name of this baagh.”

“What is it right now?”

“Nothing,” I replied.

“Nothing,” he repeated.

I sat myself up. We danced our eyes around the park. Looking at all things we managed to ignore in our bubble of nothing. In the grand scheme of our lives, being able to do nothing was an achievement. We had escaped the ogling of the uncles, the gossiping of the aunties, and the mocking of the bacha parties. And so like drunkards, we sat under the shade of nothing and dwelled on licking nonsensical popsicles. Until my mother came out of my apartment and screamed my name, my actual name that I had forgotten. The one stitched to my face, the face that was the counter of nothing.

The next few days when I felt like nothing, I scouted Araam baagh. I found solace under a shade. I waited for Younus to join me in the tales of Nonsensical Popsicle. However, a nobody only stays a nobody until he has a name. Now I have decided to leave anaar in the middle of nowhere. Hoping they seed into the nothingness of Ram Ram, and devour the tales of Younus’s anaar-chy.



## **The Lost Son**

### **Jeiliany Pizarro Rodriguez**

He recollected the first time he spoke with his tree family. He was ten. It had been a long day at school and when he got home, no one was waiting for him. His parents were at work and he was an only child. He usually spent hours making the same dinner, waiting for his parents to come home, and when they did, they were so tired and paid no attention to him. He longed for someone for himself. So that day after school, he decided he would run away. He packed a bag with peanut butter, jelly, and bread, everything he needed to survive, and embarked on a journey. He went searching for his home. The trail from his house to the woods was not long.



Soon, he was already deep into the majestic greenness of the redwoods. Resting his tired little feet, he sat on top of a mossy rock. He could've sworn it looked like a chair when he first glanced at it. He observed a leaning tree with finger-like branches extended towards him while he was rummaging around. No one had held his hand before, so he took it. The tree showed off the little boy to the rest of his tree family. The trees liked the boy who enjoyed sitting at their base and climbing their branches. When nightfall arrived, the boy grew worried about his parents. What would they do without a child? The trees told him he was welcome to come back whenever he wanted.

So every day after school, the boy ran towards the woods without fear and returned just in time to welcome his parents home. He never stayed long in the woods out of duty to his parents. But the trees were his family, they taught him what was most important in life, how to love. Day after day he fell in love with having a family. On his fifteenth spring, he bleached his hair green and trotted out towards the forest to show his tree family. When the moment was right, he took his first girlfriend to meet his family. The trees loved her almost instantly. The time came for him to leave for college.

Four years later, he married Laurel, a girl he met at college. He had a human family for some time, but his wife Laurel could not bear children. When she got sick, he found himself alone and at his old house. He no longer felt like a man. He could almost hear the bus leaving his ten-year-old self on the front porch, his backpack trailing the ground after him. A peanut butter and jelly sandwich later, he was in front of the woods. His hands felt thin, smaller even. His chest relieved of the pressure that had encased it for far too long. The air smelled five decades younger, clouds smiling down at the lost son. He could hear the trees welcoming him home.



## **Surviving a Pandemic**

### **Mahnoor Zubair**

Mounds of dirt are gathering across the concrete, and small plants have created cracks in the pavement. Bushi is busy fixating on the cracks, creating a scenario in her head in which the brave plant warriors are forced to fight their way through hordes of concrete to achieve their freedom.

One of the plant sprouts is particularly prominent, towering over its smaller comrades. Bushi decides that this one is the leader of the tribe, in charge of vanquishing enemies and leading the others to victory. The daydream reaches its peak, with the plant leader getting cut down in the throes of battle and his son, a somewhat smaller shrub no one had previously believed capable of leading the tribe, stepping up to take his father's mantle. The son regathers the plant tribe successfully, and they are at the cusp of victory as they cut down hordes of concrete warriors in the epic final battle. Intense as the current scenario is, Bushi almost doesn't notice the piece of cloth fluttering across the pavement, directly into her field of vision.

*“Oye!”<sup>1</sup>*

Bushi jumps at the sound and looks up, eyebrows creasing with annoyance. It's the other street kids, trying to make their way across the road excitedly. Bushi makes eye contact with Simra, a Pashtun girl with freckled skin and big green eyes that manage to coax even the most stubborn passersby of their coin. She is pointing towards Bushi.

*“Pakro, Pakro, Pakro!”<sup>2</sup>*

This time the cry comes from Manzoor, Simra's scruffy little brother. They are both trying to come towards her, but the fast traffic of the main road keeps them at bay. Bushi wonders what all the hassle is about when she glances down at the pavement and focuses on the lime green patch of cloth lying on the pavement.

*Mask!*

The traffic comes to an abrupt stop as the signal closes, and suddenly the two siblings are running towards her with their eyes on the prize—the mask at her feet. Before they can even make

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<sup>1</sup> Urdu word used to call out to someone, like “hey!” or “listen!”

<sup>2</sup> *Pakro* is the Urdu word for “Get it” or “Grab it.”

it halfway across the road, Bushi swoops down, grabs the mask, and takes off in the opposite direction, stopping only to look back and stick her tongue out at her pursuers.

*Mine.*

The discarded green mask in her hands is more precious than people think. Bushi runs through the narrow, winding streets until she is certain that the street kids are no longer chasing her. Then, discreetly as possible, she doubles back to the main road. The Pashtun siblings are nowhere to be seen. Hopefully they got lost while trying to find her in the streets. Looking back down at the mask in her hands, Bushi almost skips with joy. Uncle Ismail is going to be so pleased!

Simra and Manzoor had caught on a few months ago when they had seen her collecting the discarded masks and stuffing them into the little handbag that Uncle Ismail had given her. Uncle Ismail was a street seller, dealing mainly in sunglasses and toys. He always took Bushi with him and encouraged her to wander around nearby, begging for money while he went from car to car, person to person, trying to sell his goods. When news of the coronavirus had reached Uncle's keen ears, another idea for business had struck him. Instead of begging, Bushi was now tasked with collecting the discarded masks from the streets of Islamabad.

Every day at 9a.m, for the past few months, Bushi and Uncle left their rickety house in the town of Golra Shareef and got onto the motorbike. This was Bushi's favorite part of the day. She liked how the wind ruffled her curly hair, and how the narrow, unpaved Golra streets transformed into the lush greenery of Islamabad's suburbs. She always had the front seat on the motorbike, while Uncle Ismail perched behind her, his strong arms surrounding her and keeping her small frame from tumbling off. The back of the bike was allocated to the mask stand—Uncle Ismail's proudest creation to date. A week of hammering nails into wooden planks had resulted in a stand that was nearly double her size. A thick vertical plank made up its base. Four horizontal planks spread out from the base like a multi-armed giant giving its limbs a good stretch. On this stand, Uncle Ismail would hang all the masks that Bushi collected from streets, only after they were thoroughly washed of course.

These days, the plain masks, like the one Bushi had snatched from underneath Simra and Manzoor's noses, sold for ten rupees per piece. Sometimes, Bushi would find black masks, which would sell for twenty and even thirty rupees per piece, depending on Uncle Ismail's bargaining skills. Bushi's proudest finds were the white cloth KN95 masks, which Uncle Ismail carefully washed and refurbished before selling.

The other street children, like Simra and Manzoor, had spotted her collecting masks a few weeks back and realized that it was a quick and easy way to make money. It became a race to see who could get the discarded masks first. Despite the thrill of it, Bushi was starting to get annoyed at the sudden drop in masks she could find. None of the other kids could make sales like she and Uncle Ismail did. They grabbed the dirty masks and washed them in equally dirty *nalas*<sup>3</sup>, they didn't even bother to stitch them up and carefully hide the imperfections!

Clearly, she and Uncle had the superior product. No matter how dirty the mask Bushi picked up was, when they took it home, Auntie Rukhsana and Bushi would sit together and wash each one by hand to get rid of stains and debris. Each mask was washed twice and was put through a careful sniff test by all three members of their tiny family afterwards to make sure that it smelled completely new. If any of the strings of the mask were snapped or broken, Auntie would sit late into the night stitching them up.

As their little business idea made more profit, Uncle started buying brand new masks for the purpose of reselling them as well.

Bushi reaches the end of the main road, right at the intersection that runs parallel to the main market of sector G-11. Uncle Ismail's motorbike, complete with the mask stand he had skillfully attached to its back, sits at this intersection. He selected this area because of the number of rich customers who pass by in their fancy cars.

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<sup>3</sup>A nala is a stream of water that runs through cities, it is usually polluted and dirty due to urbanization.

Even now, a car has stopped by Uncle's mask stand. Inside is a well-dressed man with ruffled hair and a hurried look. He asks Uncle for a mask's price. Bushi watches as Uncle makes a subtle, careful evaluation of the customer. He has taught Bushi to look for the signs; a shiny, bigger car is the most obvious of them. The man's buttoned up shirt, ironed and washed by hands that aren't his, is another. The wallet, which he has out as he hurries to get the payment over with, is full of thousand-rupee bills. *Jackpot.*

"Thirty Rupees!" Uncle declares, as his split-second evaluation ends.

The customer is disgruntled, but he needs a mask to enter whichever building he is headed to. A university or office maybe

"It can't be worth more than twenty," he says, glancing from the mask to Uncle's face, which is completely neutral.

"There's a shortage in the market, Sir." Uncle says promptly. It's his go-to excuse for charging higher prices.

The customer casts one last look at the mask. There's no other mask stall nearby. If he wants a cheaper mask, he'll have to find parking in the market, get out of his car, and go to the nearest pharmacy. He's late enough as it is and he can't afford to waste that much time. What's ten extra rupees, anyways, to a man whose car is worth thirty *laks*<sup>4</sup>? Bushi can sense the victory already building up in Uncle Ismail's eyes.

"Alright, I'll take it."

Bushi grins and approaches Uncle Ismail from behind as he accepts the payment and the customer drives off. Uncle turns and returns her smile. His warm eyes crinkling in the corners when he sees her feels familiar and warm.

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<sup>4</sup> A lakh is a unit in the Indian numbering system equal to one hundred thousand.

Bushi can barely remember her own parents. Memories of a cold and distant father remain at the back of her mind, but there is no memory of a mother. Uncle Ismail says both of her parents had died when she was three years old and that he was the only living relative willing to take her in. She never bothers to question him any further. Their house in Golra is a cramped, two-room affair. Before Uncle had set up the mask stand, money had been scarce, and food fell short on most days. Times were hard but Bushi still savored the days she went to sleep with food in her stomach, under a *chaddar*<sup>5</sup>, in the same bed as Auntie and Uncle, huddling as a family to keep the cold out of their bones.

As the mask business began flourishing, economic anxiety became less of an issue. Uncle bought himself a smartphone! He even promised to save up money and send her to school. The thought of that made Bushi feel funny inside—all the rich kids went to school. It was supposed to be important for making money in the future, but Bushi had her doubts. What could school possibly teach her that she hadn't already learned from Uncle Ismail?

“Bushra *meri jaan*!” Uncle Ismail exclaims at her, breaking her out of her thoughts. She frowns at him for using her full name, which only makes him grin more. Uncle Ismail has managed to retain a surprising amount of playfulness for a man who is now approaching forty. Bushi is only eight years old now, but she rarely feels the lack of a playmate her age. Uncle Ismail has always been the only friend she needs.

“What have you brought for me, Bushi?” He points to the bag clutched at her side.

“You won't believe it Uncle!” Bushi gushes. “I snatched this from right under the noses of the other street kids.” She pulls out the lime green mask and shows it to him.

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<sup>5</sup>Urdu word for “blanket.”

<sup>6</sup>Urdu word for “my dear”

“And this one, someone threw it out of their car window, and I got it from the middle of the road before the other cars could run over it.” She pulls out a blue mask this time, another ten-rupee treasure.

“Oh, and these were all from the back of the clinic. You were right Uncle; they threw so many of them out back. The guard didn't even notice me when I shifted through the trash and stole them.” She pulls out a bunch of white masks, which had probably been used by doctors and nurses at one point.

Uncle Ismail is watching her with a pleased twinkle in his eye. “Well, someone’s had a productive morning.” He takes the masks spilling out of her small hands and tosses them into a cardboard box tucked away behind his mask stand.

“Indeed,” he says, “my *Beti*<sup>7</sup> is going to be a successful saleswoman when she grows up”

Bushi nods vigorously in agreement. Even now, Uncle lets her go forward and offer masks to customers. He’s taught her what to say to convince them. *Don’t be too persistent, many people get annoyed when street sellers harass them for too long, you can’t risk them calling the police on you. Just say a few catchphrases about the product. Tell them why they need it. You’re a young girl, a lot of people will buy your product out of sympathy. Just remember that this won’t last forever, so you need some kind of advantage, you need to know exactly what people need. Be there at the right time to offer a pen for seventy rupees to a university student who forgot his bag at home, and he’ll have no choice but to buy from you. Be exactly what the customer needs.*

Uncle lives for this. Auntie sometimes still complains, asks him to get a job as a driver or a laborer so that they can have a consistent salary. But Uncle prefers this lifestyle. He may not bring any money home on the bad days, but on his best sale days he’ll have enough to take them all out into the city for some delicious food. Uncle is made for this, and so is Bushi.

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<sup>7</sup>Urdu word for “daughter”



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Bushi and Uncle Ismail are about to wrap up for the day when it happens.

Bushi is once again lost in her thoughts, this time staring at a pair of daisies across the road and contemplating a narrative which involves them being married to one another and having small daisy children. Her thoughts are interrupted by a crowd of street children running past, urgently jumping over obstacles and heading to the nearby thicket of trees that they always use for cover. It can only mean one thing. Bushi swings around and runs to Uncle.

*“Police!”*

Uncle snaps into action, gathering his masks and gesturing to Bushi to get on the bike, but they are too late. The kids have reached their thicket of safety when the police bike rounds the corner. Uncle immediately stops trying to escape and tries to act casual, leaning against the mask stand and pretending not to notice the officers. It’s futile, for the bike stops right next to their stand. *Maybe they just want some masks?* Bushi thinks hopefully.

“Sir!” There are two officers on the bike, and the first calls out to Uncle as he dismounts.

“Officer.” Uncle acknowledges the man. “Would you be interested in buying some high-quality masks?”

“I’m sure there’s nothing I want that you have.” The officer says. He has taken off his helmet, revealing a disdainful expression as he regards Uncle. He has greasy looking black hair and an equally greasy handlebar moustache, the type that you’d expect to see on a movie villain.

“Surely that’s not true, sir!” Uncle replies, in true salesman fashion. “We have the best masks in this area. This box of ten reusable masks is perfect for your entire family and will last several months-”

“Enough.”

The second officer has dismounted from the bike and approaches without his helmet. His face is surprisingly plain. Unshaved, with a mouth set into a hard line. But there is not much else that is memorable about him. His eyes meet Bushi's. She looks away and tries to be small.

“That one belongs to you?” Greasy Moustache asks, gesturing towards Bushi.

Uncle Ismail puts a protective hand on Bushi's shoulder. “Yes,” he says firmly. “This is my daughter, Bushra.”

The second officer looks towards the thicket of trees where the street children hide. “The rest of them must be hiding by now,” he says, rolling his eyes. “Anyways,” he focuses on Uncle again. “We're here because we've had a complaint about your little...business.” The way he lingers on the last word as though it's a sour taste in his mouth fills Bushi with anger. How dare this man belittle their hard work?

Without warning, Greasy Moustache pushes past Uncle and begins inspecting the mask stand. Bushi sits still on Uncle's motorbike, hoping to god that they won't open the cardboard box next to the stand and see all the dirty masks that she gathered.

“I'm sorry officer, I don't understand what the problem is. You can't just search my property like this without an FIR<sup>8</sup>—”

The officer with the hard mouth cuts him off by pushing past him a well. Uncle is skinny, so the bump by the other man almost sends him sprawling. Both officers are now inspecting the stand. *Please, please don't look in the box...*

Too late. Greasy Moustache lunges towards the box with a malicious glint in his eyes. “Aha, found it!” He gestures to his partner and empties the contents onto the ground. Bushi watches her

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<sup>8</sup> First Information Report (FIR). It is the written document prepared by the police in Pakistan when they receive information about an offence.

hard work of the past few days spill onto the floor. She wants to cry with frustration. Why are they doing this?

“Sir,” Hard Mouth says to Uncle. “You’re selling used masks here. Are you aware that this is illegal?”

“I only sell new masks.” There's a tremor in Uncle's voice now.

“Liar,” Greasy Moustache spits out. “The evidence is right in front of us.”

“You’ll have to come with us to the station.” Hard Mouth drones like it’s not the first time he has had to say these words today.

“No!” Bushi cries out before she can stop herself. Hopping off the motorbike, she runs to Uncle and hugs him. “You can’t take him. He’s all I have.” Her eyes are getting blurry with tears.

Hard Mouth is unmoved. “Bring the girl too,” he says. “The complaint said that you’ve been employing her as a beggar. It’s a crime, a *doh number aadmi*<sup>9</sup> like you doesn't deserve to raise a child.”

“THAT'S NOT TRUE!” Bushi yells. She turns to Uncle, begging him with her eyes to back her up. To her surprise, Uncle does not look very upset. Instead, he is gazing intently at her, as if trying to tell her something. He gets his chance when both the police officers begin searching the other boxes surrounding the mask stand. He quickly gestures to the hard-mouthed officer's left pocket, from which the bulge of his motorbike key is protruding.

Bushi suddenly understands. Her and Uncle had previously discussed what they could do if the police cracked down on them, like they did on most street sellers. *A distraction*, Uncle had said, *that's all I need. Do you understand Bushra?*

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<sup>9</sup>An insult which roughly translates to “Second-hand man”, suggesting that the insulted person’s character is questionable and dishonest.

Bushi dashes forward with a practiced, quiet gait. She sneaks behind Hard-Mouth as he is kneeling over a box of Uncles goods. Her hand slips into his pocket and grabs the keys. For one glorious second, she thinks that he might not even notice. But the man is quick with his reflexes, he twists around and grabs her hand, swearing loudly at her.

Bushi doesn't let him speak further. With her free hand, she scoops down, grabs a handful of sand, and throws it straight at the officer's eyes. The man howls in pain, giving Bushi enough time to break free of his grip and take off in the opposite direction.

There's nothing left in the world but the rush in her ears as she runs. Over and under any obstacles, dodging parked cars and twisting into the narrow streets, no lack of energy can keep her from moving forward. Vaguely, she senses that both the officers are chasing her, that fancy police bike of theirs is worth too much to them. *Perfect.*

It's the same route that she had taken when running from Simra and Manzoor in the morning. She silently sends a prayer of thanks to the two annoying siblings; running from them on multiple occasions has given her enough practice to navigate the streets. Left, right, left again, and a final right. There are narrow, unpaved paths between the towering houses that allow her to almost lose the officers, but there are two of them and only one of her, so she knows she cannot stop running.

The path she takes doubles back to the main road. She bursts out just as the signal opens. Ignoring the cars, she takes off running to the opposite side of the road, where she knows that Uncle Ismail will be waiting with his bike and mask stand already packed and ready to go.

The cars stop and honk at her as she runs past, their drivers are no doubt swearing at her. The sight of Uncle on the other side of the road is the biggest relief to her.

*"Ajao Bushi!"* he yells.

Bushi jumps on and wraps her arms around his waist, her heart pounding louder than the engine of the bike as Uncle takes off at full speed. As they flee the scene, Bushi catches sight of the

policemen crossing the road towards them. With trembling hands, she releases her grip on the key and throws it towards the officers. They try to catch up, but Uncle's bike leaves them in the dust. Within minutes, they are already on the road towards Golra, heading far away from the accursed city.

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Her heartbeat finally calms down as the overly manicured roads of Islamabad give way to the rougher, livelier streets of Golra Shareef. Bushi lets out a shaky laugh, suddenly thrilled at her role in their grand escape. Uncle stops at a junction and turns around to give her a beaming smile.

Sandwiched between the mask stand and her Uncle, the chilly autumn wind bites at her cheekbones and at the tip of her nose. It brings with it the taste of freedom, the right to carve their own path through life. No policemen and no government can stop her and Uncle from securing their livelihood. Ha! Bushi will always be one step ahead of them. Uncle taught her every skill she needed to survive, and there is nothing holding her back now.



## Confessions of Saint Swalalala Shehzor Mujthedi

When they branded the first man  
who lay with his mother  
They ended up ruining  
a perfectly functional animal

I was there when they first recorded human voice

in my right bicep I felt a light

The man couldn't sing worth shit

Bullets have ended great men

And some had other exit (holes)

Milk and piss poured down the stairs

when Humayun slipped

Quarantined with a boy

who thought he could change the world

Bloodletting made sense to me

He was fifteen years old

He didn't like to talk

except when they brought in Spiderman.

When we weren't resenting each other's lives

we came together to imagine an end(credits scene) that satisfied

I respected that

Branding ended most apes

Bullets were taking the ones left

Now we're out of fire and lead

I don't know why we're worried

Life finds a way



## What do Narrow Lanes See? Abhiram Kuchibhotla

6:10 AM.

Ah yes, wonderful. Welcome, sir, welcome to Kashi. Give me your bags. I hope your journey was enjoyable. There must have been a lot of insects in the bus, right sir? Boxes? No, sir, these buses are coffins on wheels. I'm surprised you survived. Only two bags? Give me a second, sir. Scat, shoo! *Hatt, saala*. Let me get my slipper off, I'll teach them a lesson. There they go. What, sir? The dogs? No, they're not a problem, sir. It's my competitors that are, the filthy bastards! Who am I? Why, sir,



I'm your guide. Your one-stop answering machine, here for all your doubts. Oh no, we'll discuss the terms of my fee once you're fed and refreshed, sir. The cold at this time of morning burns. Even my monkey cap cannot save me. Auto! Auto! *Brr*, why are bus stands always on the outskirts of the city? Come, sir, please stuff yourself in. What? That's outrageous! Not you, sir, I'm talking to this rascal, he has no meter for the fare. Pay him what he asks? That is how they make their ill-gotten gains, sir, bribes and foreigners who are willing to be exploited. Forsooth! Sit, sir. Hagglng is something that you will hone to a fine art in our great nation. Oh, I'm sorry sir, nice to meet you too. Yes sir, I'm a local, born and raised in Kashi, I know these roads like the back of my hand. There is no one in this city who can tell you more about the Vishwanath temple. Move, sir, I have to put your luggage in the back. I suppose you are looking for a good hotel? Hrnh, this is a heavy bag, huh? I'll have none of those suspicious looks, sir, your luggage and you are safe with me. I am an honest service-provider, the lifeblood of this country! Scoot in, sir, don't mind the posters on the sides, they're very famous actors in Bollywood. Why are their photos here, sir? Because the auto driver wants to have a life exactly like theirs.

Go faster, *chalo bhai*. What are you waiting for, a *muburtam*? And stop mumbling about the fare, you buffoon, I can hear you! Ay! You! What, did your father build this road, you arrogant prick? Ahem, ah-choo! Cough, sorry... *thoo!* Sorry, about that, sir. The pollution makes my throat hoarse. This cold weather isn't helping either. What do you mean, I shouldn't hang out the doorway? What doorway? Oh, you mean the auto? There is no door, haha! No, I just peeped out to scold that motorcyclist, sir, you saw how he was driving. The traffic is bad already, and all of these vendors on the streets add to the trouble. Sure, we use space very efficiently, you should see us in a train, sir, but one time there was this rampaging cow that knocked a chilli vendor's basket right onto me when I was passing by, and my body burned for three days! There, speak of the devil. *Gaumata*, please chew your cud somewhere else. Sound the horn, *jaar*. There she goes. Breathe through your mouth, sir, it's just the smell of natural cow dung, you'll get used to it. Put your arm inside the auto, please, my friend lost his pinky on this same street to a fakir who was brandishing the sword he was going to swallow. His outstretched hand hit the sword, and bam, no more asking the boss for permission to pee without

crying. So sad.

Did you not bring madam along, sir? I could have shown her the best saris in Kashi! You're not married? Strapping fellow like yourself sir, you should have had four children like me by now! You are old enough. Twenty-five? So am I! One minute, sir. *Bhai*, slow the auto down, that's my mother's brother's son-in-law's friend there. Now I must stand up again. Here, grab the roof frame like I do, sir, you'll be as stable as a rock. That is my cousin, you see. *Bhai! Kaise ho?* Wave to him with me, sir. Wave, he sees us. People should know that I've bagged a *gora* today. Keep smiling, you jealous bastard, ha-ha. I'm sorry, sir, what were you saying? Yes, this is a very fast auto. Listen to that humming engine. What blue fumes? Oh! That's the kerosene, sir. The government took all the petrol and gave it to the tourist buses, like the one you came to Kashi on. Their union is paying more for it. Also, it is used to brew some potent alcohol, sir, you want some? It is like a, a horse's hoof to the head? No? Okay. Great, here's the hotel, sir. Deluxe Star. Pay the man, sir. Go on in, mind the open sewer. This is a three-star hotel for only two thousand rupees. Let me go get the key from the owner, sir. Raju, keys. What do you mean, which fee? The one which I get for creating opportunities for you. And what should I do if there aren't many customers this season? Tell you what, be ready for dinner tonight then, it's on you. Give me the keys. Sorry, sir, did you hear all of that? It's just a bit of extra money, sir, and this room is a steal, so I don't feel guilty at all. I wish; room 12, room 12 – there it is, I wish I could stay in a room with so many drawers and appliances, sir. Don't look at the hair under the mat, sir, you can see how many families have used this room this week. No customers, my ass. Soap, sir? You did not bring any? I'll go get soap and shampoo for you, sir, wait right here.

Sir, are you in the washroom? Here you – *haye bhagwan*, what are you doing?! Don't do that, sir, why are you using the towel? Look at the lice on it. My fault? Sir, this is the best hotel near Vishwanatha Galli. You get warm water and air-conditioning. Wi-Fi too! When do you get these facilities? Can't you hear the *puja* bell tolling, sir? The entire city will be at the morning *aarti*. But don't worry, this is only a one-hour power cut. The workers will have their breakfast after the *puja* and get back to work. Until then, rest on the bed, sir, and flatten any lumps. I thought you were an experienced traveler,

sir. Some eti-, uh, etiquette you should follow at least. Nobody uses the hotel towels. It is okay, sir, we all have to learn some things. I will go eat, here is my card. Call when you want to go to the temple, timings are 12 to 7. You need anything else, sir? Okay. That's my number right there, right beneath the picture of the famous goddess - which goddess? Why, that one, sir. One of some. Call me after you take a bath and get ready.

**8:32 AM.**

Hello! No, sir, I came back after having breakfast. I was waiting for you while battling with the other guides, they're gluttons for a good foreigner, but I won't let them exploit you, sir. You want some chai, sir? It's good. Babloo *bhai, ek aur*. I'll tell him to cool it a little for you, sir, you'll love it. Completely hygienic, sir, the flies just buzz around. Here sir, enjoy. I'll finish this newsrag while you drink, the politicians seem to have forgotten the lube for the country's scheduled pounding again. What happened, sir? No sir, sit back down, he is not bleeding – that is masala, sir. Uh, spiced tobacco. Lots of citizens like him, sir, they work hard to edit all these posters, covering the public walls orange with their spit. The cows are free, the free are cows, what do you expect, a clean country? No, sir, you get strong digestive system from the environment here. I'm sorry sir, I didn't introduce Babloo *bhai* did I? This great man, wave to the sir, Babloo *bhai* — yes, good, has been making chai at this very corner since before I was born. This rusting iron table with its stale confectionaries serves as a cheap tobacconist's as well, and has remained a monument to the dedication and industriousness of Indians for over thirty years. Oh, will you look at the sky, it's going to be a smoggy day. They must be burning a lot of bodies today. We should start the tour soon. You want a selfie with him, sir, before you pay and we leave? He is very popular on all the posts, he looks very ethnic with that moustache of his.

Okay, sir, now we start the tour. Come, sir, let us travel. What can I tell you about Kashi? The *pujas*? The elaborate rituals that waste tons of precious dairy and water? The orthodox militancy and the disappearing Muslims? Wait, sir, this important monument is also another triumph for Kashi. Look here, this is a temple built on the banks of the Ganga, sir, one of the oldest constructed granite

structures of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, with bronze dioramas and arches of sandstone. The friezes here pre-date many others in the West. So charming, so full of bird droppings. There was a grand idol inside, but nobody can tell which God it is anymore. Built hundreds of years ago, sir, now it is in a state of disrepair. Oh, the renovation for all these temples happened when I was a boy, sir. The *mandirs* were very good-looking back then. Yes, sir, Hindi for temple. Now put some money here, sir, in the *bundi*, you are very clever, sir, donation box, yes. Oh, that is for the Pundit and his seven boys, sir, not for the temple. I can't help but call you sir, sir, I am after all a subaltern Indian. He is a powerful and genuine priest though, a guru, he sacrificed his only daughter to receive a boon. Yes sir, of course it worked, now he has a lineage with only male children in it. He's a maker of miracles. He restored a girl's hymen after spending two days with her. The point is, sir, this is a pulsating city of zealots, and a giant, jealously protected shrine for Hindus, where the wooden *ghats* murmur chants from the scriptures to the populace every day to lull them into a raptus. People come here to become ash or to see someone else become ash, like that kid on Dashaswamedh *ghat* who's watching his, uh... grandmother I think, burn, you see him, sir? Get in the boat, sir, we'll visit fourteen more temples, one fort and a bazaar for fun on the way. Now, sir, remember to remove your slippers when we go in, sir, and whisper, don't talk too loudly inside. You might see people rolling around the temples, so get out of their way when you see them, because their eyes will definitely be closed. Yes sir, it's a tradition, you roll around the temple a hundred and eight times while you stretch your arms out in supplication. Who knows which God will help? You look tired, sir, are you tired? We haven't even shopped at the bazaar yet. Made-in-China products at low prices, that's what Kashi bazaar is famous for! I understand why you're tired, sir, you must be hungry. Here is a *dhaba* I love, named after the most prominent deity here, Shiva - of course the spelling is wrong, sir, there are hundreds of *dhabas* with the same name on the same street, but *Newe Shivshankar Khana Khazana* has better *lassi* than *Shivshankar Khana Khazana*. Come sir, hold my hand, we'll cross the road. Avoid the holy cow, sir. It's protected by the bald guy in the saffron kurta drinking chai there. Yes sir, it is holy shit, good joke. Scrape your sandals against the road if there's some on them.

Sit, sir. Here you go, the menu. Ah, hello Rani, how are you, dear? Exams going well? You'll join

high school next year, right? Good, study well. Go get your father. O! Ramesh! *Chaar parathe idhar*. That was the owner, sir, and his daughter. She's getting married to a nice, fat landowner next month. She'll be set for life. After all, her name does mean 'queen' in English. Mm-hm, you hear the sizzle of those *jalebis*, sir? You've never had any? That's unacceptable, sir, let me get you a plate. Mithu! *Do plate idhar*. It's a famous dessert, sir, it'll play hell with your bowels, but if you haven't had Indian desserts - what have you had? My mouth's already watering.

### 11:45 AM.

Wash your hands, sir, they must be sticky from the *jalebis*. Holy *Parameshwara*, would you look at the time? Come on, sir, let us go. We have to rush, sir, we have to get *darshan* at the main temple. Don't make eye contact with the vendors, they'll swarm you like the fleas in a rishi's beard, sir. The trick is to look them straight in the eye, and they'll submit immediately. *Haye bhagwan, darshan*, sir! The blessing of one of the triumvirate - of Vishnu, Brahma and Shiva, elite Hindu gods, the main thingamajig you're here for! Careful, sir, the streets are narrower now, deep breaths, listen to the mantras blaring from the shops and relax. You don't need all those flowers and capitalist *malas*; *malas*, sir, garlands for the godly idol, ignore them. No, sir, keep walking, the roads are super, very low number of potholes. Speaking of pot, sir, there's a licensed *bhang* shop right there. You want some *bhang*, sir, the elixir of Shiva? Have one glass with me, sir, it's good for your health. *Ji, babaji, namashkar*. How is the drink made? Well, you roll the ganja on your palms till you make a ball of the paste of the finer molecules on the flowers. Then you mix it in cold milk and drink! Easy-peasy. Have you paid, sir? Cheers, then!

Of course we will walk sir, walking is good exercise. Autos don't go into the main temple's entrance lane; the police officer on duty has hiked his prices, only the filthy rich can go. Oh, sir, you are so lucky. Look at that woman, sir, yes, the gnarled tree stump with a face. She's a legend around these parts. Her heart runs on faith, not blood. She comes here every year after walking six hundred kilometers. Limping along in that austere, sun-bleached, ripped-up white sari. What a lady. Her son left her to go work as a driver in Mumbai, and now she lives on the chants of the holy and the alms

of the roly-poly, sir. I don't know when she gets back home, when does she have the time to do something before starting the walk back here? Ah, she's crying, look at those streaming tears. Such devotion, *wah*. And you're complaining about this small walk. Hello, look at the time again, my fault sir, at this rate we'll never get there in time to cut the line. Follow me, sir, we'll get my scooter. We can park it near the temple's backup power generators and jump the wall. It's not too far now. Duck into this lane, sir, avoid the hanging power lines. Welcome, sir, this is my house. No, not the bungalow sir, this shed next to it. That bungalow belongs to one of the temple's trustees' sister's sons, sir, fine people they are. My eldest guards their home, we're also their security. There's my scooter, parked outside. That is my wife, sir, she is cooking. No, sir, haha, the house is not on fire. Look at the right corner of my rectangular home, you see the *chula*? An honest-to-goodness wood fired stove, sir. Let me grab the keys. Oh, she won't wave back, she is not allowed to look at you through the veil covering her face, sir, society's rules, and I am but a humble follower! Come out, sir, let us go. Bye, Sita! The license plate? Oh, that fell into the sewers years ago, sir, but my license is still laminated though; it is in a frame there. You see it on the wall? It's the one next to my diploma. The one next to it? That's Sita's M.A degree, sir. Come, sir, we should be off. My neighbors will be shitting on the streets soon. Sit on the pillion seat and hold tight. Keep your foot off the silencer, sir, your expensive shoes might melt. The duct tape? It's for the dent that my beautiful scooter got when that drunk crashed into me a year ago, sir. Of course people drink here, do you think that man in the gutter is there of his own volition? No, sir, the guy next to the sewage cleaner. No, it's not a great job but he's from the Valmiki caste, sir. Here we are, sir, there's the wall. What is caste? Its privilege swaddled in theological justification! Now you jump over, sir. Come on, if we run now, we'll only have to wait for three hours in line. Mind your step, sir, lots of beggars around. You have any coins, sir? Thank you, these are enough. Oop! There we go, fight, *saalo*, fight! Let's go, sir. Ah, that is a good question, sir, I speak English because I studied diploma, sir, but no use now, no jobs. Not a lot of English-speaking people in this city, which is just one big temple. It needs guides for foreigners, and I've cornered the market.

This is a good spot to watch the Ganga from, sir. Of course, every holy city has a corresponding holy river, but bathe in this one and all your sins are washed away, absolved sir. Our MLA was forgiven

by the teenager he raped because he jumped into the river from the bridge he was being chased on. He took her to that priest I talked about, remember? And her hymen was restored, she can get married without any issues now. Oh yes sir, it looks like soup, no? Soup made out of ashes, decomposing organic waste and thousands of coins. People love being burned, I mean, cremated here. The ash, the residue of their entire being is mixed into the purifying waters of the Ganga directly. We respect our dead very much, sir. We pay lakhs to make sure their souls attain peace. Great, the line's short today. Wait here, sir, I'll be back soon, don't move or let anyone take your place in the line. They'll stare at you, sir, but don't feel awkward, okay?

### 15:55 PM.

I'm back, sir, run, phew. Are you okay, sir? *Haye*, the *bhang* must have been too strong for you. But we have no time for this, sir! We have to cross the bridge to get to the VIP entrance. Here, hhn, your papers, keep running, come on, there's the line. Stop, sir, you can't enter with footwear on! Put your shoes here, sir, and hope they don't get stolen. Not in the open, sir, keep them next to this statue in the corner. Hide them. Let us go into the outer courtyard. Sir, put your hands on the railings when we get inside. Right and left, sir, good, defend yourself inside this steel maze. It's forcing us into a single file, but we're setting a good pace. We're at the second last mini-temple before the Vishwanath *mandir*. Don't drop too many coins at these checkpoints, the investment should be in the main *hundi*. See, you can almost see its spire up there. Don't let the pundits smear vermilion *tikas* on your forehead, sir, you'll have a bastard of an itchy rash in the morning. Never accept a *puja* from a *pujari* who doesn't set his terms down on paper first, sir, that's my advice. What, sir? What did you say? The washrooms? What washrooms? No washrooms in a temple, sir, hahaha, it is disrespectful to the divine. You'll have to wait till we get back to the hotel, it's better that way, believe me. Oh, they're opening the gates, hold my hand sir, here we go, fight for your space, sir, fight for it, be the East India Company sir, conquer! I will get these idiots off your back. *Hatt, saala!* Can you see the idol? Back off, barbarians! The bells will make noise, sir, they're the only instrument they can automate – they don't even have to pay artists anymore! Finally, sir, there is God, look and do *namaste*, sir, fold your hands. Bow your head, close your eyes. They're pushing the others, but they'll give you a few

seconds more.

**16:21 PM.**

Let's go get the *prashad*, sir, it's very tasty here. So you got the blessings. How do you feel now? Well, yes, those twenty seconds were what you came here for. It's a long time in comparison to the others, sir, you must feel great, what with the *bhang* too, eh? Eh? Look at your eyes, ha-ha! Do you want me to book another appointment for you tomorrow on the temple's website? And there he is, right on time, my cousin's husband on my scooter. Ram, did you spill milk on my seat? Well, sir, this is goodbye, I've shown you all the major attractions in our holy city. You absolute drunkard, do you need a *puja* to get that engine started? Go! Oh no sir, I didn't forget, go, Ram, speed up, don't reach for your wallet, no payment needed. I insist, sir, because this is your wallet, isn't it? Haha! Come, run behind, you rich bastard! Shyam! What did that Frenchwoman say to her friends at the docks when Rao was stalking her? Ah, yes, *bon voyage*, sir! *Bon voyage*!





## **As for Myself, a Fatal Longing for Home**

### **Kritika Dixit**

Sunlight arrives in my latest room in three acts: first, the soft glow of dawning light leaks through the window, and the sharp noon enters in a column of iridescent dust, and then the oblique blades of the setting sun fractures the wall into half light, half shadow. As it turns out, not much has been said about this fragmentation or I would have a language to explain how I am at once inside my home, and in search of one. What they don't tell you about having lived in ten cities in twenty years of your life is that you inadvertently start living the irony of movement as stability.

My birthplace—a small town outside of Dinjan, Assam—exists only in paper. I was six months old when my father got transferred and we had to move, never to return again. The earliest memories

of my life are of Mathura, the third city my family lived in after I was born. I remember the spindly bamboo blinds in the verandah of our house, our dog, Gabbu—named after Gabbar Singh, a classic Bollywood villain—the smell of chlorine on my skin, overripe java plums splattered on the cement of the driveway, and saying the first of many goodbyes to a best friend.

This is how I have experienced time thus far: two years in each city as a unit, the first six months spent settling in unfamiliar neighborhoods, and grieving the loss of a home, the next six in convalescence—a slow healing process that brings with it a developing sense of stability, budding friendships, and a new self, and the latter half of this unit of time spent in urgent indulgence of life, certain only of its expiry. For the longest time, the only truth I have allowed myself to manufacture is that this cycle of movement has given me friends across the country, a chance to travel, and the overall ability to adapt. Oscar Wilde in “De Profundis” writes: “With us time itself does not progress. It revolves. It seems to circle round one center of pain.” The other truth, this one centre of pain that I have been ignoring, is that much of my childhood has been spent in various performances of identity, a waltz routine of fitting in, a relay race to belongingness, and then never quite reaching the finish line.

The other day I found an old diary of music notes. In Trivandrum, my father enrolled me in a Carnatic classical music class led by an old Malayali lady. Neither of us could speak or understand each other’s languages, so we communicated only through musical instruction (jotted down meticulously in the diary after she had learned how to write notes in the Roman script) and performance, and the bare minimum selection of several essential words. Take, for example, the Malayalam word for water, vellum, and at every “Ma’am, vellum?”, I would be excused from the room to drink some water from the brass pitcher and a glass kept on the table in front of a small aquarium in the entrance hall. My teacher, like many traditional Kerala households, boiled water with red sandalwood, traditionally known as pathimugam, which gave the water a red tint after being cooled down and stored. I remember the slightly spicy, metallic taste of the water and the feel of brass, cool against my tongue, the sounds of harmonium drifting from the music room. We only lived in Trivandrum for two years, and after having moved to several places since then, my memory

and practice in Carnatic music has faded away, contained only in the yellowing pages of the diary, the smudged, soft scrawl of my teacher's handwriting, and metallic aftertaste in my mouth.

One of the inevitable functions of constant movement is its instruction on how to make a home anywhere. Train journeys from Trivandrum to Kanpur, the place closest to being called my hometown, where my parents were born, and where my grandparents live, took around four days. In all that time, forced to stay in the train cabin, my sister and I would make a hammock with the spare bedsheet we smuggled out of the adjacent cabin before it got occupied by other passengers. Tying its ends to the two upper berths, we would fit our small bottoms in the concave folds of the fabric, bare feet dangling in the air, and spend lazy afternoons swinging like our lives depended on it, watching as vast acres of green fields and cattle herds rolled by the windows, a strange solace nestled between the rhythmic sound of the speeding train. I have often found nostalgic familiarity in physical journeys. Even now, when I board the metro for my daily commute to the university campus, I feel at once comfortably lost in the constant hubbub of hundreds of nameless commuters travelling to work, college, visiting friends, or going to the airport. I feel the most at ease in my liminality, between the places I am supposed to leave and the places I'm supposed to arrive at. It is dependable in its predictability, its only function being that of linear progression, holding off the unfamiliarity of what's to come for a little longer, and moving away from whatever I considered home at the time.

When I think of 2008, I think of the November snowfall in Srinagar, the first realization that making a snowman in real life is much more difficult than portrayed in cartoon shows. I think of drenched gloves and footprints disturbing the pristine white of fresh snow, and a wild fox wandering to the residential areas from the forested hill nearby. I remember the spine-chilling fear and awe at being face-to-face with a wild animal I had never seen before, and the giddy, frank excitement of being eight years old, in the middle of an adventure, and unaware that in a few months we would be packing up our home and moving across the country.

The houses we lived in were mostly nondescript, government quarters, receiving new inhabitants every few years. I would find several traces of this strange, anonymous lineage when we first moved into a house: faded glow-in-the-dark star stickers on the ceiling of my room, a shed in the small garden that didn't originally come with the house, a broken potted plant that the previous

family didn't see fit to either take with them or throw away. In turn, when it is time for us to move and the house is empty, save for trunks, boxes and packed furniture, I would leave marks of my own for my successors to find: some beads buried just under the surface of the flowerbed, a sticker inside the topmost shelf of the closet; or, once, the incandescent bulb switched with a tacky red LED bulb inside a lamp. I remember all of these houses, the vague choreography of my feet as I roamed alone in them during the late hours of the night when everyone was asleep, and all the ways in which these houses had been made into homes and then stripped of them, over and over.

As with most things, I deconstruct this only in retrospect, folding back this battered gaze that has settled upon so much, a vital retreat, to turn inward, and realize I have been living as a tourist, roaming inside a museum, seeking to catch my own reflection in the glass display cases. My school life was a long chain of arrivals, departures, and finding ways of belonging in the middle. Each new place was an invitation for me to reinvent myself, to present a version of myself that would suit each culture best: I wanted to be a cosmopolitan extrovert in Delhi; a distinguished artist in Lucknow; and an aspiring academic in Bhopal. The common denominator in all these experiences was the near-constant presence of my tag of "the new girl" in the city, school, or a friend group. Looked at from outside myself, most of my attempts at fitting in can be seen as a performance, self-aware of its theatricality, of cyclic rehearsal, and (re)presentation of a self that I thought best described me. What does it mean, one should then ask, to fit in, anyway? It would suggest containment, like folding yourself, or spreading yourself out in a stencil. It would suggest a body, and space that is finite. To fit in would suggest a circumference, and it would seem that all my life I have been moving along its tangents.

Detachment comes easier than it has any business to be, and much of what has remained of my childhood friendships are lists of names I used to write in my journal after every move, titled "My Best Friends". To look at these names and will myself to remember all the ways I have been loved, was to acknowledge all the ways I have been forgotten. When I say I long for a home, I mean I want every goodbye to be an *I'll miss you*, and every "Hi, nice to meet you! Are you new here?" to be an *I have missed you*. To miss someone without anticipating return is to allow absence, and I don't want to live a life in a series of lack thereof. All this is to say that I often think about what it means to belong.

Why does one belong to a place, or belong with a person? Does my belongingness exist on its own, without signifiers other than myself? Why can't I belong in the same way I love and hurt—unconditionally?

On my last day in Bhopal, before I shifted to Noida for college, I walked to my favorite place, a rickety tree house built inside the golf course near my house. It overlooked a small, artificial lake dugged out a few years prior, which housed a flock of migratory geese every year during the summer. It was a warm May evening and the lake was alive with movement: fleets of white birds swimming, bathing, and perching on the small islands in the lake and the heavily wooded banks. I remember holding a golf ball I had picked up as a memento on my way through the Rough of the course fields. The upcoming move felt significant, as if it would provide what I had been seeking for so long. I wanted a self that I had been chasing to stand with welcoming arms outside the arrival terminal, waiting for me to finally come home. *What an adventure you've had*, I would say to myself. *Let's go home*. The water in the lake sparkled deep blue-green in the lowering sun, and I thought of wet color stains, of pathimugam vellum, and of slushy snow on a certain November. More geese arrived as the sun dipped. They flapped their wings against the breeze in soft homecoming. A home they would stay in for three months before leaving. Standing there, the feel of the air on the precipice of light, the darkening water against the gleaming white bodies, and the spectacle of a home being made, it felt like a sacrosanct ritual, a firm insistence on belongingness, so sublime, and entirely too familiar. I almost looked away.



## **In Kashmir**

### **Junaid Manzoor**

The Land that grows nothing

Grows weed.

Weed on walls, weed on streets

Weed in gardens, weed in dumping sites

So essentially,  
Weed is in the air  
That's why  
People who visit Kashmir  
Call it a "Paradise on Earth"

In Kashmir  
If people aren't jealous of you  
Then they don't appreciate you  
The spark in you  
Burns them inside out until  
You ignore them and  
They vomit your praise  
To placate their shrinking heart, as  
All big hearts get exported  
All big eyes were imported

In Kashmir  
Things don't expire  
They simply rot or else  
Rats cut them apart, if not  
Then fungus turn them into a reek  
In all cases, enquiries are ordered  
Pleadings and trials are setup  
Fungus are decorated  
Rats caged in granary  
And things are just declared things

In Kashmir

A crime is not a crime

Even if it is a crime

There are no reasons

To the reasons that exists

Even if you thump your chest

The thumping would be danced upon

Some would milk money out of it

Some would push projections into it

Some would lend you their cloak

In Kashmir

Everything has two versions

One Kashmiri and otherwise

Even hens, rice, oil

Love, too has its versions

One expressed, one withheld

Not all people who

Express it, live

Not all people who

Hold back, die





## Chase

### Luke Reynolds

*\*CONTENT WARNING: explicit sexual content (including masturbation by a minor), homophobia/homophobic bullying, dubious consent in a sexual context\**

Chase is four when his mom notices the dark spot staining his sweatpants.

“Did you have an accident?” she asks. She sets her Harlequin paperback down on the dining room table.

“Maybe,” Chase replies. “I was rocking against my fingers in the bathroom, it felt good, and then I wet myself.”

Chase’s mom’s eyes go big. Her cheeks flush red. “You what?”

“I said, I was rocking—”

“Oh, honey, I got that.” Chase’s mother bats her hand against the air. The other rubs against her forehead, at the gentle creases developing in her skin. “I’m just surprised this is happening so early.”

“What’s happening?” Chase cocks his head.

Chase’s mom sighs. Both hands settle in her lap. “Don’t worry about it right now, honey. We’ll talk about this when you’re older. Go upstairs and take a bath. You can change clothes afterwards.”

“Okay.” Chase draws out the word like he’s stretching out gum with his fingers.

As he walks away, his mother calls out his name. He glances over his shoulder.

“One more thing,” she says. “And I need you to promise me this: don’t tell your dad about what you did, okay?”

“Why?”

Another sigh. “He has enough to worry about, sweetie. I’ll draw the water in a minute.”

With that, she picks up the romance book and starts reading again.

Chase wonders about his mother as he walks up the stairs. Why was she being so weird? Why couldn’t she tell him what was going on? Why couldn’t he talk to his dad about whatever was happening to him? Should he feel bad about it? Was he supposed to?

At thirteen, Chase rocks against his fingers until he releases whatever comes out of him. Out of curiosity, he pulls back his waistband. White globs stick against the black fabric.

A hand claps over his mouth, stifles his sobs.

~~~

It’s playtime at Montessori Valley School. Each kid finds their own corner of the classroom to frolic in. Ms. Clover, a teacher, oohs over Melanie and Zach’s dinosaurs, colored in with fluorescent crayon

scribbles. Rose leads a tea party, dresses thrown over her and her friends' heads. Boys run toy trucks against the carpet, wheels cutting into the fiber.

Chase pulls open a drawer and sees his favorite clip-on earrings. He studies the heart-shaped pieces of plastic, the curved edges and scratches through the pink coating. The earrings pinch whenever he puts them on, but the pain fades away eventually. Besides, Chase felt like a grown-up whenever he put jewelry on.

He digs through the trunk, fist closing around the earrings and pulling them out. When they're in front of his face, he picks one up, presses down on the clamp to reveal the heart's divots, and sets it on his earlobe.

The earring stings when it bites into his skin. Chase doesn't mind. It subsides as he puts the second heart on. Then everything's okay.

He runs over to a floor-length mirror propped up against the wall, striking a pose he saw on a magazine cover: hand on cocked hip, lips pursed. His free fingers dance against an earring. He smiles. He feels like that model on the magazine, all poise and confidence as the camera flashed. He tries another pose, sitting on the floor, back straight, fingers tapping against his jaw.

"Whatcha doing?"

Chase freezes.

Black socks materialize in the mirror.

He doesn't have to turn to see who it is.

He knows.

The black socks walk closer.

Chase keeps his eyes on the glass as Max crouches down to his level, disheveled brown hair framing a mischievous freckled face. "Earth to Chase? Did you not hear me? Whatcha doing?"

"N-nothing." Chase holds onto his pose for dear life, despite his body's urge to become a ball and roll away.

"Doesn't look like nothing." One of Max's fingers brushes against a pink heart. Chase shudders. "Why are you wearing these? They aren't meant for us."

Chase knows what Max means by “us”: boys. He never understood why toys got shoved into boy and girl sections at the store; he wanted to play with whatever he wanted. If it happened to be dolls and things advertised for girls, so be it. It had gotten him into trouble before; Chase’s attendance at a prior tea party had been reported to Ms. Clover by Rose’s mom.

“I’m not comfortable with my daughter being around a boy like him,” Rose’s mother had said. Chase was in the hallway, on the way back from the bathroom, when he heard the woman’s sharp voice coming from Ms. Clover’s office. He stopped, craning an ear to listen. “Why does he have to interrupt their time like that?”

“He was invited, Mrs. Beaumont,” Ms. Clover replied. “And besides, we know how he is. He’s different. There’s nothing wrong with that. So what if he’s interested in having tea parties with the girls? Let him attend. It isn’t hurting anyone.”

“But you know what’ll happen to him if this continues. He’ll become...how do I put this? He’ll become gay, Ms. Clover, and I don’t want him around my daughter.”

Chase hadn’t heard the rest. He’d run back into the bathroom and cried, wailing loud enough for Ms. Hass, another teacher, to knock on the door and ask if everything was okay. Chase couldn’t respond, not with the word “gay” screaming in his head, not when it felt like Mrs. Beaumont had stuck his hand in a fire and watched it burn.

He doesn’t know how to respond to Max now, so he shrugs, mumbling, “I like them. That’s why.”

“Really?” Max giggles, but the sound is wrong. It bites instead of floats. “You’re funny, Chase. No boy does this kind of stuff. Who are you?” His other hand reaches for the second pink earring, and with a tug, he pulls both earrings off. Chase winces as the edges scrape against the soft tissue of his earlobes.

“You’re a boy now,” Max says. “But with these and everything you do, it’s like you’re not even human.”

Chase doesn’t know how to respond. His mouth opens, but nothing comes out. All he hears, sees, feels is static, the pop, crackle, and buzz ringing loud. His brain connects the dots between Mrs. Beaumont and Max’s words, and he understands what it all means.

He'll become gay, Ms. Clover, and I don't want him around my daughter.

No boy does this kind of stuff. Who are you? You're a boy now. But with these and everything you do, it's like you're not even human.

Salt replaces the static as tears slide down Chase's cheeks.

"Now you're gonna cry?" Max laughs. "What'd I even do to you? Loser."

Through blurry eyes, Max gets up and strides over to Melanie and Zach. "Check this out. Look what Chase put on his ears."

Melanie and Zach look up from their coloring pages, and all it takes is the quirk of a mouth for Chase to bawl, fingers pressing against his tears, trying to push them back into his eyes.

As he becomes a ball, Ms. Clover yells, "Max, you knock that off right now!"

"But I'm not doing anything!" Max snaps. "I'm just showing Melanie and Zach the—"

"I don't want to hear any excuses, Max. We're going to my office. Now. Wait here while I grab Chase."

While Ms. Clover reprimands Max, Chase's mother picks him up. When they leave, Chase's mom promising ice cream on the ride home, Chase looks back at Max. His teeth dig into his bottom lip as his gaze locks on the wall, face a burning scarlet.

~~~

On his nineteenth birthday, Chase walks to a tattoo parlor to get an ear pierced. When he settles into the black leather chair, he thinks he sees the ghost of five-year-old Max leering next to him, his hand revealing what he took away.

Then the piercing needle pokes through his flesh, and Chase is surprised by how painless it is.

~~~

It's Track and Field Day at Chase's elementary school, a day when the upperclassmen participate in athletic events at the high school instead of having class. Chase hates it, especially this year. Sweat from his temples drips into his eyes as he and another boy, Gus, stumble down the football field, one of Chase's legs tied against Gus's in the three-legged race. When they cross the finish line, Chase trips over a clump of turf; it sends him and Gus to the ground. Tears pool in his eyes, the reflex that never breaks.

But then Gus laughs.

Chase's tears dissipate.

He finds himself chuckling alongside Gus as the other boy pushes blond hair off his forehead, the wet strands gleaming in the sunlight.

Chase ignores the way his heart leaps in his chest at Gus. He ignores it on the bus ride back to Washington Elementary, blue t-shirt sticking to vinyl as he and Gus talk about their new favorite cartoon. He ignores it when he steps off the bus, trying not to notice the way Gus's tongue sticks out in concentration as he hops onto the sidewalk. He ignores it when Mr. Buckingham suggests the boys change out of their sweaty clothes and into clean ones, Gus walking up to Chase and asking if they can stick together to change. He ignores it when he grabs his knapsack with his change of clothes from a hook on the wall and follows the mass of boys to the restroom, the air filled with fart imitations and roaming chatter.

Then Chase's sneakers hit the bathroom tiles, Gus peels his shirt off, and Chase catches glimpses of fair skin.

He can't ignore his heart now.

The stall door slams behind Chase as he latches it. He feels like collapsing, but he can't. He has to be strong, he has to be—

“Hey, Chase, why aren't you out here?”

Chase gasps, nails digging into his knapsack as his eyes squeeze shut. He doesn't want to answer this question, especially from Scott, the boy who the girls from another class once made fun of just last year because he ate Play-Doh. Now, though, Scott's voice is cracking, and he's grown a little, gaining the confidence to flirt.

The girls let Scott be now, turning their backs on Chase, the boy they once accepted as their own, leaving him to fend for himself.

“You know why,” a familiar voice replies. Max. Of course. He never left Chase alone. He followed Chase like a ghost, creeping behind him everywhere he went, disappearing as soon as Chase turned around. “He's gay.”

Chase chokes.

“Oh, that’s why!” Scott shouts. The words dig into Chase like the scraper the dentist used to clean the plaque out of his gums, making him bleed. “What a weirdo.”

“There’s no need to be scared, Chase!” another guy, Jeremy, yells. “C’mon! Why are you scared? We’re all guys here. Well, most of us.”

Laughter. Chase tastes salt at the back of his throat, but he waits to let it out until he swears the last sneakers have squeaked out of the restroom. Then he cries.

When he gets back to class, clothes changed and eyes puffy, Gus won’t look at him.

~~~

At thirteen, Chase plugs his earbuds into his phone and watches a video of a bodybuilder ripping off his shirt. His fingers duck under the waistband of his jeans.

~~~

At fourteen, Chase gets his first girlfriend.

Her name is Tina, a peppy redhead with purple glasses and a contagious smile. They meet in the cafeteria, her chatting about some Disney Channel show with her friends and him nodding along, slurping on lukewarm tomato soup. They exchange numbers not long after, and one night, while he’s staring at the tiles on the bathroom floor, he gets a text.

**wanna be my boyfriend? LOL <3 ^\_^**

They never go on dates, although in Tina’s mind, the Valentine’s Day dance and the eighth-grade formal count. She swirls around the dark gym at both, flitting from boy to boy she tells Chase not to worry about, he’ll always be her number one.

At the formal, as Tina dances with a tall boy Chase hardly knows, Chase wraps his arms around himself and looks at the ceiling. Happy couples float around him, girls in pretty dresses and guys in button-up shirts. His eyes come back to Earth, focusing on the shirts and their creases, the muscles developing beneath the fabric’s surface.

He shakes his head.

Maybe Max was right. Maybe Chase is gay. Maybe he wants a boyfriend, not a girlfriend. Maybe he wants to be cocooned in a guy’s arms like the girls around him.

He smiles at the thought.

Then he feels someone's hands on his own.

Chase refocuses to see Tina, beam luminescent. "Let's dance, Chase!"

Chase nods once, mind made up.

After the dance, he breaks up with Tina over text.

**Hey. Can we break this off? I don't think I'm the one for you when you're dancing with other guys.**

She doesn't take it well.

**are you sure?**

**this is pretty sudden.**

**i mean, i get it. but you have to believe me, chase. i'm your number one.**

**chase?**

**OMG you'll never believe it but Victor is my new boyfriend LOL <3 ^\_^**

~~~

In his second semester of college, Chase attends the presidential ball with a group of friends from his first year seminar class. They dance in a crowded hotel ballroom, Chase shuffling along to 2000s pop music beneath strobe lights. He doesn't mind the people, the noise, the dots forming in his eyes. It's nice to be swept up for a little while, and the people are friendly. They offer him a flask that he declines, and they cheer him on whenever his shuffling picks up speed.

When he walks out of the ballroom and into the lobby to get punch, someone calls out, "Excuse me!"

He turns to see a guy around his age, tall and slim, wide black glasses framing brown eyes. His hair is the same color as his eyes, glimmering with gel, and a mole on the beige skin beneath his bottom lip makes him look cuter than he already is.

"You dropped something," the stranger says, and Chase looks down to see his wallet brandished between two fingers. He blushes as he takes the billfold.

"Thank you," he mumbles.

"Anytime," the guy replies. "Nice moves out there, by the way."

Chase scoffs. "I wouldn't call them 'nice.'"



The stranger shrugs. “But you’re having fun out there. That’s the most important part.”

Chase starts to speak, but then he stops.

Instead, he shakes his head. “I guess you’re right.”

“Of course I am.” The stranger puts his hands on his hips and grins. “I know things when I see them.”

Chase sputters before laughing.

“The name’s Jared,” the guy says. “Want me to walk with you to the punch bowl?”

“Chase,” Chase replies. “And sure.”

~~~

Chase first comes out in his high school’s gay-straight alliance.

He knows the question is silly, but he can’t help but ask, “Is it all right to be gay?”

The president, a boy more interested in leading Devil’s Advocate discussions than supporting his queer peers, grins. His teeth are sharp and predatory. “Yeah. There’s nothing wrong with it. Is there something you’re trying to get at, Chase?”

“Yeah,” Chase replies. “There is.” He breathes in, out, stares at the nine expectant students waiting for an answer. “I’m gay.”

The relief is instant, gratifying. It brings his shoulders down, clears his head, lets him smile. There’s no need to hide anymore. This is who he is.

The students give him a small bout of applause before they continue discussing intersectionality. When the meeting ends, everyone shoots Chase a look as they leave, the faculty advisor even coming up to him and saying, “I’m proud of you, Chase. Thank you for sharing.”

Chase shakes his head. “Don’t mention it.”

But now that Chase is out, he isn’t done. He’ll need to do it again and again, a cycle repeating until the end of time.

The next people in line are his parents.

That night, as tines scrape against plates with steamed corn and poached chicken, Chase looks up from his food and stares at his mom. “Mom, Dad, I need to tell you something.”

“Of course, Chase,” his mom replies, stabbing into a cube of meat.

His dad grunts, a noise Chase associates with agreement despite the furrowed brows directed at the table.

Chase sucks in a breath through his nose, and as it leaves his mouth, words rush out with it. “I’ve been going to the GSA after school and I’ve been learning a lot of stuff and it turns out I’m gay.”

A few moments of silence pass before Chase’s dad murmurs, “I should’ve known.”

Father and son lock eyes before father glances away.

“Miles, don’t say that,” Chase’s mom sighs.

“Well, I don’t know what to say,” Chase’s dad snaps. “Congratulations, son, I’m happy for you?” He’s gay, Chelsea. It’s not like he’s getting a medal.”

“But this is big news,” Chase’s mom argues. “The least we could do is be there for him if he needs our help.”

“How can we help him? If we do one little thing, we’ll harm him. That’s what all of them are saying we’re doing these days, anyway.”

Chase’s breath hitches, anger and fear curdling inside him.

“Miles, I swear to god—”

“You know I’m right, Chelsea, don’t bitch—”

“I’m right here,” Chase says, the interruption loud, sharp, enough to quiet his parents’ bickering. “You can talk to me if you need anything.”

Chase’s dad and mom turn back to him, eyes wide. Chase’s eyes narrow until he can see the curls of his eyelashes.

Chase’s dad clears his throat. “Excuse me.” He scoots his chair back and picks up his plate, a little food left on it, before leaving the dining room, not looking back.

Chase stares at the porcelain holding his dinner as he forces yellow kernels into his mouth, even though he isn’t hungry anymore. He notices a splotch of water on his plate. Another joins it with a blink of his eyes.

He’s crying.

“Oh, honey.” Chase’s mom gets out of her seat and comes over to her son, wrapping him in a hug. “Don’t worry about him. You know I’ll love you, no matter what. Dad does, too. He just needs to come around.”

“But what if he doesn’t?” Chase asks, voice cracking from the tears he’s holding back.

“He will. I’ll make sure of it.” There’s an intensity in Chase’s mom’s eyes that he hasn’t seen before. “I’ll talk to him later, okay? You finish up eating and worry about homework.”

Chase nods, warmth pooling inside him. He feels like a kid again, snuggled between his parents, watching some animated movie they never liked but Chase loved.

They would do anything for their son.

He didn’t know if that was the case now.

Chase’s mom pulls him back. When she takes her plate into the kitchen, the sound of clinking dishes and frothy bubbles is the soundtrack to his tears as he finishes his food.

After Chase clears his plate, he sets the porcelain against the Formica before sprinting up to his room. He cracks open his Psych textbook and buries himself in a chapter on cognition.

The next day, Chase’s dad looks at his son across the table and grunts out an apology before leaving for work. When Chase gets back from school, a wrapped book sits on his bed. When he pulls back the brown wrapping, *The Joy of Gay Sex* reveals itself. Tied to the cover is a note written in Sharpie from his mom.

**Dear Chase,**

**Dad wanted me to pick this up for you. Not sure why he wanted you to have this over something else, but maybe it’ll come in handy when you start dating someone you love.**

**Best,**

**Mom (and Dad)**

~~~

Chase remembers the oral sex tips two years later, when he blows the guy he tapped on Grindr.

~~~

Lyric is the one who convinces him to get Grindr.

Chase is hanging out with her in the freshmen dorm lobby with other people from their FYS class, and when he mentions his sexuality, she brings up the lesbian dating app she's on and offers to get Chase situated.

"It'll be fun," she giggles, clicking the icon that downloads the app. "We're in college now. Go off!"

Chase shrugs. "Sure."

Something deep inside him ignites.

That night, after he and Lyric set up his profile and Chase looks through the men not locked behind the subscription fee, he finds a guy he's never seen at his school before. His name is Darren. They're the same age, but Darren looks older, more intense. His black hair is shaved down to a coarse buzz cut, blue-gray eyes piercing through russet skin. Chase finds himself double-tapping on the flame icon, filling it with vibrant orange. He gets a message a few minutes later from Darren, a "hey" and a wink, then they start talking.

That weekend, they're sitting across from each other at the coffee shop down the street. Chase startles every time he looks up from his cup because of Darren's cheekbones. Chase wants to feel one under his thumb, but they look sharp enough to cut.

"What are you looking for, Chase?" Darren asks, a faint smirk on his lips as he sips on his smoothie. "I can be anything you want me to be: a friend, fuck-buddy, lover on the side, boyfriend. Whatever floats your boat."

Chase hums for a second, eyes locked on Darren's lips as they press down on his plastic straw. "I'm not sure. I just want to love someone, feel what that's like. Does that make sense?"

"Yeah." Darren nods and leans over the table. Chase smells the musk of Darren's deodorant and finds he can't breathe. "You call the shots here. I'll provide what you want."

When the two go back to Darren's dorm, they make out on the futon in the center of the room. Chase sits on Darren's lap, relishing in how sloppy their kissing is, the warmth of Darren's fingers squeezing his hips.

Darren pushes him and Chase forward. Chase winces as his back hits the stiff cushion of the futon. Darren gets up to throw off his shirt and grab condoms and lube. When he returns, his eyes lock on Chase's.

"You good?" Darren asks. He frowns as his knees settle on the futon. "If you're not, we can stop."

Chase shakes his head. "I'm good," he says, but the words taste rotten in his mouth. Darren's frown means he wants to do this, and if Chase can't follow through, he would be a disappointment, a wasted opportunity, no matter how much his voice weighs in this decision. Darren is making time for him; doesn't he deserve only the best?

Darren smiles. "All right." He sets the condoms and lube beside him and kisses Chase. "Remember what I told you, okay?"

After they make out some more, Darren pulls down his briefs and jeans so Chase can give him a blowjob. Darren's dick is thick enough to make Chase's jaw pop, tongue brushing against salty latex. Chase almost gags at the force Darren puts into his hip thrusts, and it takes all Chase can not to cry.

When Darren fucks Chase, groans coming from within his throat, Chase's cries quietly, the greasy smack of lube making him wince through his blurry eyes.

Chase tries to find the part of him that wanted this in the first place.

He can't find it.

Did he even want it at all?

After they both come, Darren pulls out and stumbles over to a trash can where he can throw away his condom. He crouches at the edge of the futon and asks Chase, "Well, what did you think?"

Chase replies by running to the trash can where Darren's come sits in latex and vomiting into it.

Darren isn't too thrilled by this, especially as Chase blubbers through his tears that he isn't sure what he wants anymore.

"But you wanted this, didn't you?" Darren's voice is hard. All Chase can do is wither beneath it and leave.

He doesn't stop crying for the rest of the day, even when Lyric apologizes over and over again, even when he deletes Grindr before passing out in bed for twelve hours.

~~~

When Chase turns twenty, Jared makes him a Pillsbury Funfetti cake, and his mouth after they've devoured it tastes like frosting and every good thing Chase has ever known. They snuggle beneath Jared's sheets, kissing each other until they both fall asleep.

~~~

Inside a gay bar, Chase turns twenty-one.

Jared threads their fingers together as they migrate to the back of the bar, slumping into bean bag chairs in front of a mirrored wall. Chase finds his reflection amidst the pulsing blue light and dim glow sticks, watching the metal of his hoop-shaped piercing gleam. Jared's hand travels up to the wheat-colored locks of the man in the mirror.

"This is awesome!" Jared shouts, the dance music doing its best to swallow his voice. Chase can still hear him, though. "Thank you, Lyric!"

Chase nods. He doesn't want to attempt talking right now. Basking in the Britney Spears remix blasting through the speakers, Jared's fingers combing through his hair, is enough.

A few minutes pass before a voice rings out through the bar. "Chase Mansfield?"

Chase freezes. He recognizes that timbre, the bark subdued with age, deeper than it was when the two were at Montessori Valley together.

Max walks over from the bar, a smile on his lips. His hair is no longer brown but bleached, his roots growing back in and creating an ombre effect. At his side is a person in a long, wavy purple wig, their black bodycon dress shimmering beneath the strobe lights.

"It's been a while," Max yells. "We haven't seen each other since elementary school. How have you been?"

Jared must feel Chase stiffen beside him, because his hand travels down from his hair and to his leg.

"I'm good," Chase says. "And you?"

“Couldn’t be better.” Max turns to the person next to him. “Lee, this is Chase. We went to school together when we were kids.”

Lee nods. “It’s nice to meet you, Chase.”

“Hi,” Chase replies. He wishes his voice didn’t sound so stiff.

“My name’s Jared,” Jared cuts in. “I’m Chase’s boyfriend.”

Max nods. “Good for you, Chase. I’m glad you’re happy.”

Chase doesn’t know what to say, but before he can even formulate something, Max and Lee have said goodbye and left.

The Britney remix ends, and in that brief moment of silence, Jared asks, “Who was that?”

Whitney Houston starts up, to the raucous cheers of people in the bar.

“My childhood bully,” Chase admits. He shivers a little, and Jared’s hand moves to rest against the small of Chase’s back.

“Chase, I’m so sorry,” Jared yells.

“Don’t be,” Chase replies. “You weren’t there when it all went down.”

The two go quiet for a minute. Whitney sings about wanting to dance with somebody.

“If that was his way of extending an olive branch, that was certainly a way,” Jared says.

“Yeah,” Chase agrees. “But he looks like he’s moved on, so maybe I shouldn’t worry about him anymore.”

“No. No, you shouldn’t.” Jared sighs. Concern is etched between his eyebrows. Chase wants to wipe it away, but he isn’t sure how. His gaze falls on the mirror across from him.

Chase’s four-year-old self sits behind the glass, staring back at him. His pants are stained with the come that he wouldn’t know about until nine years later. That old shame burns through him, his promising Mom he’d never tell Dad, that it was their little secret, all that it led up to throughout the years, whether it was a factor in Chase’s coming out or not.

But Chase doesn’t cry.

Instead, he blinks. His four-year-old self disappears, and just like that, the shame is gone.

“I’m okay, Jared,” Chase says. His voice barely crests above a whisper, but he knows Jared can hear it, because he scooches closer. “I know you didn’t ask, but I’m okay. I love you. Thank you for being here.”

Although the strobe lights are obnoxious, Chase makes out the flush in Jared’s cheeks; he’s caught off guard, for once.

Jared clears his throat and smiles. “I love you, too, Chase.”

Jared shifts closer. Chase does the same. They kiss, the taste of Jell-O and alcohol still potent, still sweet.

And just like that, everything is okay.





## **Tales of Kashmir**

### **Irram Andrabi**

The sun shines upon my face, as I sit  
on the bank of Dal Lake.

A grey-beard holding a fishing rod,  
caresses my ears with long lost

Tales of Kashmir. Breathe my child,

the fragrance of love, poured in liquid—  
from the samovar[1], the saffron kahwa[2]  
garnished with crushed nuts. My thoughts  
sway, as I watch the water splash  
aimlessly over the edges of Shikara[3]—  
a ride for us and bread for many.  
My hands tremble, as I touch the  
carved gates of Dargah[4], where  
my mother has tied many knots for  
her prayers to be heard. I belong to a place,  
where the belief of my people travel silently  
from shrines to saints. For their calm lies  
within the ones who have paid their duties  
rightfully to God. My ears echo the wanwun[5]  
of women, who fought the other day—  
for they promise each other  
the days to love, and to live.  
Unexplored passions, long lost visions  
in this tremendous fight of survival,  
I find a place to hide under my  
mother's Pashmina[6]. But  
there is more to it than just this—  
the Dal Lake where the old man sits,  
repeatedly, mourning with a fishing rod  
looking at the body of his beloved son.

**Notes:**

[1] [a large traditional metal container used to

make tea]

[2] [traditional tea served with spices and nuts]

[3] [a light rowing boat, seen as a cultural symbol over the lakes of Kashmir]

[4] [a famous shrine in Kashmir]

[5] [group singing by women, especially during  
weddings in Kashmir]

[6] [a very expensive fine-quality fabric]



## **Lichen: A Fairytale**

### **Maya Goel**

As an old woman, they expect me to be familiar with loss. They think my soul as weathered as my face, my mind a pair of bright eyes glinting in the dark. They find what they seek. But they do not know that beneath this grey robe, my skin is still smooth.

I am the old lady in a cottage by the woods. But they no longer believe in woods. They think they have laid waste to the world, uprooted its spirit and burned the last tree. Those that remain they call manicured parks. They mourn our passing and weep for our loss. Yet, I am still here.

Time is deep and so is place. Our lives are entangled with that depth even as we skim its surface. I was a young girl filled with memory and longing. I soared with the Kites. Flew hard and almost brought down an empire. Almost.

Once, I even considered a lover. Some flawed soul whom I would rescue from himself. He would despise his own petty manliness and worship my largesse. Then I decided that a manchild was too much work. Why not do it the traditional way; I would rather be rescued instead. But from what? I always knew that there was a darkness inside me, and I lavished my affection on the demons who guarded it. There was so much to feel if you did not need to know. The more I ran through the fields, the more I dwelled in myself. I was the earth and she was me.

When I dusted the terrace, there was glitter in the air.

I believe in patterns and tropes: a fallen leaf, a single rose. But these times, the birds tell me, are said to be uncanny. Time is out of joint they say. Still, I wonder, when was time ever in its joint? All my life I have waited for the exceptional, for a story to happen. What now?

My cottage is made of lichen. Its walls were once stone, but lichen ate the stone away. It grew, layer upon layer, becoming stone itself. You tell me that this is impossible. And yet, here I live.

The garden is overgrown and the cat went away. He just walked off one day. The puppy is a nuisance. She eats, sleeps, and cries. Sometimes she harasses the owl. I feed the owl these days because the mice are all gone. They say that rats are the first to abandon a sinking ship. If this ship went down, I would be its violin – an echo on the waves. But nothing sinks here. Not even a plough. The ground has turned hard. And still we are alive; we have lived so long that we can no longer die. Even the most wretched are afforded the dignity of death. But as long as the moon burns and the sun startles and coyotes stalk the night, there is reason for me to live.

But come, now, you have listened too long to the mutterings of a distracted old woman. You want to know where she keeps her broom, what spells she knows, how she sees things. Follow. I will show you.

At the bottom of this garden, a girl plays with her puppy. She has forsaken all her friends. Her heart was broken once, by a girl who abandoned friendship. The scars dwell in her body but she is whole again. She still dreams of her friends, although she wishes she dreamt of flying instead. But

she is not ready to summon the Kite. Her skin is still soft, like parchment. It spreads with veins of fine ink. I think she will learn how to write.

The puppy chases spirits that none of us see. She was the runt of the litter and she likes to chew moss. Moss is intricately woven with water and light, but I'm sure you already knew that. The sun glares humid; clouds quilt the sky. Something ancient stirs underground. Fungus spreads like silent smoke. The owl finds a dead mouse rotting in the basement. The puppy pounces on its bones. There are things that only mirrors know and there are tunes to which rivers flow. There are ages in which lichens grow. And here on the footpath, a red, red rose lies crushed in glinting snow.



Image credit: Binu VP

## Two Cups of Cherandi Ice Diya Isha

Arifa hears about her wedding mistakenly, while eavesdropping on her parents and brothers. She is standing by the door, holding the steel bowl with the chunky dough in her hands. She wants to ask her mother if it is soft enough. Her father had called, forcing her mother to rush to the bedroom that wasn't too far from the kitchen. It is her first time making chapatis, and the scraggly bits of flour demands more water, but her mother's voice tugs her from nursing the dough with the steel jug's uncoordinated splash.

"He wants to meet Arifa before the wedding," she drops the dough on the terracotta floor. The bowl screams like a pressure cooker as it dances. She didn't want to meet any more of them.

"Oh," her mother whines as she opens the door slightly, leaving little space for Arifa to enter, "Arifa!" Fatima cups her chin as she looks at her husband: "Can't even knead dough. Who'll marry her?" The skin on her mother's hand was chipping away. She fed her skin to the dishes. Arifa reached out to touch her skin—

"What are you doing? Pick up the dough!"

Arifa bends down to scoop the dough back into the bowl. "Don't throw it out. I'll fix it." Fatima looks down at her daughter. Arifa's brothers walk out the door for a game of cricket, careful not to burn their heels with rejected dough.

"We're going to the Stadium," they say as one of them hastily opens the door like a child unwraps candy. They didn't wait for an answer from their parents, and a curfew did not accompany them.

The last thing Arifa sees before her mother slams the door is the rage that flickers her father's glare.

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"I can't afford to pay her fees anymore."

Arifa carefully turns the page of her science textbook, afraid that its binding will come loose. Her mother had told her that the printing press store was closed, but her brother has harboured textbooks he knocks to grab her attention. Arifa uses leftover rice grains to cover her books in old newspapers. They couldn't afford a glue stick.

"He isn't asking for a lot..." The walls are thin in their house.

"So what? They want to invite the entire neighborhood. We need the money." The voice pauses hesitantly. "Why don't we sell your necklace?"

"Uppa bought it for our wedding and I was hoping—"

"What?"

The other voice takes a while to respond. "Your medical fees, that you'd increase the rate. You charge your patients little to nothing—"

"It's a poor neighborhood. We must help."

"Ahmedka, the boys want meat every week, and—"



“Enough. It's either your necklace or that school. Allah knows it's been costing us a lot!”

“Please...let her study—”

Arifa's anklets tinkle as she walks towards her parent's room.

“Umma?” She calls for her mother quietly, embarrassingly, like a child who has wet her bed.

She hears nothing for a minute. “Umma!” Arifa's voice rises like the dosa dough, fermenting with impatience.

“Why're you yelling?” Her mother asks, tying her pallu around her waist.

“Should I cook the chicken?”

“At night,” her mother says. “When Ahmed and Basheer are home.” Her mother's hand begins to close the door. “Umma?”

“What Arifa?” Fatima closes the door behind her, looking at her daughter as though she had set the curry on fire.

“Can I save the bone marrow for myself?”

“No, Basheer likes to suck on it.”

The next week, the thick gold chain around her mother's neck disappears. When Arifa looks at the sagging skin around her mother's neck, she can't help but think about the chicken's throat that bleeds at the butcher's cleaver.

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The Stadium sits only a little distance from Sacred Hearts, Arifa's school, and between the intersection of these two places, you can always find a dilapidated food cart with broken display cases. A hand-operated ice machine took half of its surface, and glass jars of poppy seeds, salted peanuts, and pink and green tutti frutti occupied the rest of the space.

Behind the organized mess of ingredients stood the Cherandi iceman, grabbing ice from the portable cooler, water dripping down his palms, wetting his sandpaper skin. He slides his crystal onto the tray compartment and rotates the wood handle attached to the wheel that is as big as her school bell's gong. A weight slumps the ice block, stabilizing it, and he turns another wheel to shave the ice. This man creates snow on the hottest days in Thalassery.

The rusted wheel with boils on its surface cackles like a witch when he twists it. It reminds Arifa of the black wheel on her sewing machine; she never pushes the paddle fast enough when she sews. Her mother lines the wheel with oil to tame the witch's moans.

Arifa's classmates always crowd around the small food cart, their petite hands clasping a five paise coin that would buy the perfect ending to a school day. She has never had cherandi ice, but at the end of each school day, she stands at the corner of the school gate, watching the Cherandi iceman.

He makes each glass as though he will run out of time, but never out of the sugary syrup he douses the layers of peanuts, tutti frutti, and tadpole-like seeds. The bottom of a glass of Cherandi ice parodies the sunsets you can find at the shores of Muzhappilangad beach. A glass of shaved ice is an upside-down seaside with ice for sand.

Today, Arifa doesn't have enough time to look at the Cherandi iceman. Her father had told her to get home just after school. "Don't loiter today," he said, as he saw her closing the front door behind her. She didn't have to look at him to know that he was reading a newspaper sitting on his wooden resting chair in the veranda.

"Arifa!" he shouted. Ahmed hadn't seen her nod.

"Did you hear me?"

She turned back and nodded again, adjusting her snagged dupatta on the oiled, plaited and middle-parted hair.

"Go now," She had scurried off like a free mouse.

Now, she has to rush back to the cheese trap. It hurt to run. Her father can't afford the rubber slippers most people at her school wear, so the gravel and her bare sole had become angry relatives who had no choice but to share their ancestral home.

When Arifa reaches the path towards her house, her feet slow down, and her hands adjust the dupatta, calling for the grace she had lost when her feet rebelled against her femininity.

Her father has on a shirt he wears on special occasions and he is pacing across the front porch. He stands still once he sees her. "Get ready, fast!" He says, watching her until she disappears through the door.

Inside, her mother is waiting in the room, wearing a mauve saree with a matching long-sleeved blouse. Her pallu sits on her thinning hair, and a light dusting of talc powder is evident on her face, along with eyes lined with thick homemade kajal.

"Wash yourself quickly and put these on," she says, pointing to the blue chiffon saree and blouse lying on the bed. Arifa wants to ask why, but she nods, afraid that any question will lead to a slap. She heads towards the lavatory outside, and returns when she realizes that she'd forgotten to grab a few thin strips of rag.

"Still bleeding?" Her mother says, still adjusting her calculated pleats in the front of the mirror on Arifa's almirah.

"Can you buy me pad—"

"Basheer's uppa doesn't like it when we talk about this."

"But—"

"Arifa!" Her mother says sharply. Arifa knows that the conversation has to end there.

~~~

Arifa hates wearing sarees during her period. It's not her first time wearing a saree, but the pallu never sits right on her head. The last suitor rejected her because she didn't cover her head. The news itched her family like the rough rags that sit on top of the crotch of her underwear. Fatima had knocked on the toilet door, asking her to use the new rags she had cut out of an old saree. The new ones are rough on the skin. The blouse that sits on her chest is no different. It sat loosely around her breasts, mocking her little curves. She wears her mother's earrings, which are too big for her earlobes. And her mother attempts several times to secure the shoulder pleats with a safety pin, and Arifa winces when the pin pricks her.

"Don't smile, okay?" She reminds herself that her mother doesn't need a pin to prick her. Her mother cares only for the coveted prize: a husband.

"Open your eyes." Her mother holds a broken piece of clay pot wrapped in the black paste, and she runs her ring finger across Arifa's waterline. The kajal is cooling, and she blinks to stop the tears from smudging it.

“He’s your Uppa’s nephew,” her mother says. “Naseem’s son. He first noticed you when you were young.” Arifa flinches. She realizes that she’s met this stranger. She was seven then, and he had pinched her until she bled. Fatima’s finger pauses across the edge of Arifa’s lips, but the frown on her face resists the beauty spot.

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The stranger sips on the cup of tea she’d bend over to hand him. In his silk shirt, he looks like a plump tomato with twigs for legs. His pants flare from his knees as though both his lower legs were wearing skirts. Arifa thinks about the cowboy in the Mills & Boon book she had borrowed from her friend. Fatima told her she must not read books like that, tearing the copy.

"Did you hear me?" Rashid's to-be-bride shakes her head. She wonders if he will kiss her tenderly or rub perfume wax on her neck. But with the inflated balloon he hides under his coarse shirt, he looks nothing like the cowboy in the novel.

“Your teeth are pushing forward,” he says, as the smell of his attar and sweat begin to nauseate her. He slurps the last drop of the milk tea from his cup, creamy residue greying his moustache. Arifa doesn't remember the last time she had milk.

"We'll get you braces before the wedding. Visit Dr Hussain. Do you know him?"  
She shakes her head in response.

“He’s been my doctor since you bit me when we were young,” He laughs.

She grins sheepishly, careful not to show her teeth.

“He’ll recommend a dentist,” he says, handing her the cup.

His fingers linger on her knuckles, slithering towards her wrist.

“You’re too thin,” he observes, dropping her hand in distaste, combing his fingers through the little hair left on his head.

He rises from the stool Fatima had placed in Arifa’s room, dusting off crumbs of Mysore Pak. “As-salamu Alaykum,” he says.

“Wa‘alaykumu s-salam.”

Arifa stared at the steel plate he had left on her desk, a jagged piece of Mysore Pak sat on it patiently, like a bride waiting for her groom to lift her veil. She pops it inside her mouth.

"What did he ask you?" Her mother asks, smiling as she runs towards the window in Arifa's room. She watches as Rashid slips into his father's white Hindustan Ambassador. Arifa has never seen the car before, she has only heard about it on the radio.

"You're so lucky!" Her mother says, pinching her cheeks, forgetting that she hasn't heard her answer to the question.

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"Is it painful?" her mother asks, wincing at the sight of the metal bars that surround Arifa's teeth like impassable barbed wires. Her mouth resembles a property Rashid has in Wayanad.

"Yes," she says, licking her gums, pushing her books into the sling bag.

"It's nice he paid for it himself." Arifa hums, sipping water. The wires told her not to comment.

"What do you think of Rashid?" Her mother asks. She's making tea spiked with cardamom pods for her father. Tea with milk. Arifa craves for a sip.

"Can I have some milk tea?" she asks, ignoring her mother's question. What good would an honest answer do anyway?

"I only bought enough to make four glasses, Arifa," her mother sighs, straining the tea.

Arifa nods, slinging her bag on her shoulders, heading to her room to grab her black dupatta. Her brothers had an early class at their college, Brennan, and she took her sweet time in the bathroom. She didn't even have to heat the cauldron for the hot water.

"As-salamu Alaykum, Uppa," she keeps her head down as she leaves the house.

Ahmed mumbles a 'Wa' alaykumu s-salam', distracted by the newspaper that covers his face.

"Arifa!" Her feet pause and she turns her body towards her father.

He hands her a ten paise coin. She opens her mouth in surprise. "Buy yourself some milk," he says as the fingers of his other hand press her lips into a tight line.

~~~

In school, Miss Merle is walking through the space between each row of desks and benches. When she notices the empty desk in front of Arifa, she asks where she'd left her textbook. Arifa can't answer. Her braces pull on her tongue, like a rider reins a horse.

"Do you not have a mouth?"

Arifa opens her mouth to invite an 'Ayye' from the girl in front of her. Angela, breaks into laughter, orchestrating a string of laughter from the rest of the class. Arifa runs out of the classroom towards the bathroom. She slumps against the stained wall of the bathroom door, biting the insides of her cheek, unwilling to cry.

After a moment, she slips out, walks towards the crowd of students surrounding the Cherandi iceman as though he's a film star.

The condiments in the glass jars appear brighter up close, and without even realizing, Arifa fishes the coin out of her usually dry pond, reeling it out with her fingers—the food cart is bait.

"One glass," she says. Amidst the loudness of her voice, no one notices her braces. The iceman plucks the coin from her hand, gives her a five paise coin in exchange, and dips a used glass into a bucket of water to clean it.

Arifa is no stranger to what follows, but the sound of the spoons clinking against the glass, the sight of ice crushing against the stabilizing disk, and the sweet smell of nannari syrup is new to her. The iceman harmonizes the layers quickly: peanuts, tutti frutti, soaked poppy seeds, scooping large portions of shaved ice to give the glass frostbite.

He places a silver spoon onto the ice, his flag on the summit, and then hands the tiny mountain to Arifa. She scoops herself some snow, letting it melt, unresisted.

A few minutes later, she buys another cup.



## Abandoned Pleasures Hunaina Khan

She stepped on to the soft layer of sand, watching her feet disappear into the earth and then emerging again, like a jewel being extracted from ancient soil. “Do not rush, o *Khuda*, just do not rush!” She repeated the mantra silently, lifting her green eyes overshadowed by a trail of long, thick lashes. She searched afar for a facet her feet could find solace on. After several minutes, her face darkened with exhaustion, and she lowered the coarse, empty *matka* from the curve of her naked waist, and began to swing it back and forth, quickening her pace.

It was the same route taken by Dadasada, the village's herdsman, who lead his thirteen cows into the Rujpa River. He was old, but not once did he repeat the colour pattern of his clothes. Yesterday he chose to wear green, today he wore a pink *kurti* with brown stains around the collar and a surprisingly spotless white *lungi*. His grey mane which had a few black tresses moved with the torrid wind as if nature itself had taken the responsibility to style them. The crown of his head was adorned with an orange and red *pagri*, which he had tied himself no doubt, because a man's self-esteem was a reflection of his *pagri*. A man without a *pagri* might as well be impotent in this village. His eyes, black as coal, made it impossible for anyone to decipher what this man was thinking, but it was known that his judgement was never to be questioned. His ebony neck was never not graced by a beaded necklace with a skeleton of a Scorpio as a locket. It was said that it was the Scorpio he had thrown at his drunkard of a father to paralyze and kill him. The reason did not matter. The action was devious enough to make him a household name. There was not a woman in the village who possessed earrings of the same fine quality as the ones worn by Dadasada.

That day, when she sighted Dadasada, she stopped swinging the *matka*, grabbed a fistful of her *ghagra* in her left hand, slightly raised the skirt to avoid slipping on it, and then dashed off. She did not want Dadasada unveiling her darkest secrets. She did not stop until she reached her destination: the village well.

She walked nearer to the well, adjusted the rope around the bucket, and threw it in to draw the water out. Her bare feet managed to maintain the friction against the ground as she pulled with all her might, until the bucket full of water reached her. She laughed at her dedication when she saw that the bucket had tiny holes in it, causing most of the water to leak.

She was so engrossed in the unbroken flow of this activity that she did not notice Bera Laal ride up to the well, put his all but dismantled cycle aside, and lean against the rusty rod of the well. Startled, she immediately stood straight and had nearly let go of the rope.

"What?" She rebuked. "Can't you see I'm doing something important? I would have hit you with a stick if this last bucket fell back into the well!"

Dumbfounded, Bera Laal, her brother's friend, mumbled, "I did not mean to."



She eyed him for a few seconds, huffed, and continued to draw the water from the well. She bent forward at the rim to reach out to the last bucket. She glanced at Bera Laal, only to find his gaze rooted to a particular view. She followed his gaze to her chest and realized that the edge of the well was pressing against her chest, revealing her breasts. She did not assume an upright position or attempt to cover herself. Bera Laal's lustful guise caused her to smirk. She parted her bow-shaped nude lips and started to rub her chest against the rim of the well. The bucket remained midway in the air, as she neither pulled the rope nor lowered it. Her attention was solely on making herself look desirable. Bera Laal was only a few years younger than her. She knew he was innocent, unlike his older brother's who patronized sex workers.

She smiled when she noticed Bera Laal cover his visibly hardened member, but she quickly masked her triumphant twinkle, and decided that the boy had suffered enough. She pulled the rope until the bucket reached her, straightened her back to fill her *matka*, all the while keeping an impassive look. She looked at Bera Laal for the last time, and without shifting her eyes, secured the *matka* on the left curve of her waist with her left hand, and raised her right hand towards her head, to untie her *jura* and let her long hair fall down without any fret. She stood up straight and turned around with a faint smile on her face.

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Rama was warming up *sarso* oil for Keko Mai, when she felt something hit her bare back. She was about to scream when she noticed who the culprit was.

She ran to the window, grabbed her friend's earlobe and twisted it. "I think your father doesn't beat you enough, because if he did, you would behave yourself!"

Laali scoffed. "I am the only one in this entire village who can tolerate you, so you might as well appreciate my existence."

"What do you want? Amma is sleeping, so don't do anything to wake her up," Rama said hastily.

"Forget Keko Mai! We are going to meet Chhavi! She's waiting for us at Baori Nagar. So get ready!" Laali said with an excited gleam in her eyes.

"Really?"

“Yes! Now hurry!”

Rama quietly raised the curtain that divided the kitchen and the area where two torn mattresses were lined parallel to each other, and peeped to make sure that Keko Mai was asleep. She then quickly hurried to her mattress, arranged the *gao takiya* and the sheet, both gnawed by mice from several sides, so that it looked as though someone was asleep on the mattress. Satisfied by her crafty skills, she blew out the flame in the lantern, took off her *paꝛeb* to avoid any unnecessary sound, covered her head and face with her *chunni*, and jumped out the window with Laali’s help.

Both the girls ran in the uncertainty of the dark starless night.

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Baori Nagar was the oldest fortress in Rama’s village. It was so medieval that the villagers swore that the fortress had been a witness to the evil caused by humans throughout the centuries. At night, the structure looked possessed by malevolent forces as the mud brick walls rumbled with mysterious howls. Dead and barren trees surrounded the fortress, their leafless branches casting disfigured shadows on the walls, playing tricks on the human minds. Some of the elders of the village claim that the trees were once gallows and for every person that was hung on a branch, a tree would lose its soul. The wavering mist revealed the eerie picture that dared a passer-by to enter the fortress, but the peculiarity of the fortress was what fuelled the inquisitiveness of Laali, Rama and Chhavi.

Chhavi was sitting underneath the lifeless black tree, which was beside the entrance of the fortress, when she saw two girls climbing over the remains of a crumbled wall.

“Ten more minutes and you girls would’ve found my frozen body,” Chhavi said.

Rama found a small tree bark to chew, while she observed the night. The clicking sound of the beetles in the distance and the cold air had a strangely calming effect on her. She noticed a red bruise above Chhavi’s pale collar bone.

“Why don’t you just chop off the dicks of the men who hurt you?” Rama asked, tracing the bruise with her fingers.

Chhavi laughed humourlessly. “I get paid to get fucked. So this pain is nothing compared to the one felt by my conscience.”

Rama closed her eyes. After a few minutes, she felt a soft nudge by Chhavi.

“Hmmm...”

“Keko Mai found a son-in-law huh?”

Rama knitted her eyebrows. “Yes”

“How old is he?” Laali asked.

“Just old enough.”

“Are you ready to become a birth machine?”

“She has to first know what it is like to be truly satisfied.” Chhavi mumbled.

“Rama! Do you want to know what it’s like to be happy?” Chhavi said, fingers digging into Rama’s skin, eyes gleaming with an unspoken emotion.

“What are you talking about?” Rama asked.

“You need to know what it feels like! You need to know yourself and your body!”

“How can she when Keko Mai watches her like a hawk? You don’t expect her to make herself happy in the same room as her Amma sleeps in.” Laali shook with laughter when she realized what Chhavi was suggesting.

Rama felt a cloud of dejection linger over head. Her imagination and flirty encounters with the village men ignited her desire but never satiated it.

Chhavi examined her friend for a long time, before grabbing her hand.

“We are going to my chamber,” she said.

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“Take your time and let yourself go in the moment,” Chhavi said in a voice low and deep.

Laali squeezed Rama’s hand as if silently begging her not to reconsider this chance at freedom.

Chhavi slowly walked up to the bed on which she shared heartless kisses and nights with the village’s policemen, husbands, inexperienced virgins. But tonight the bed looked welcoming, untainted with selfish pleasures. She took Rama’s hand, guided it towards the young girl’s intimate part, and held it there.

“Don’t be afraid.”

Laali kissed Rama’s forehead and took Chhavi outside the chamber. She was happy. Tonight, her friend was getting the solitude she had been deprived of.

Rama sat on the bed, exhaling heavily. She untied her blouse and pinched her nipples. She then raised the *ghaghra* to her hips and began caressing her legs. This wasn't the first time she was touching herself in this way, but it was the first time when she wasn't stopping. Her fingers trailed down her breasts, around her navel and finally towards the region of her vagina. She twitched. She sucked in air, as she made small yet pressurized circles around her clit. She was so close, so close. She covered her mouth to stifle her scream. Her forehead was covered with sweat and her heart hammered against her chest. She smiled in satisfaction, closing her eyes.

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She opened her eyes, clenched her jaw, and tightened her body.

Her throat felt dry and the thought of swallowing her spit forced the food she had eaten earlier to rise up to her mouth. She prayed to the lord to give her the strength she needed to suppress her sickness. Her husband, who was on top of her, busy immersed in his pleasure, had his eyes closed.

She blinked when she felt a weight shift off of her, but she waited. She waited because there had to be more to it. But her anticipation was met with Jheela Ram's snores.

When her husband had slapped her on their first night together as she touched herself, she had been sure it had something to do with her body's position or her method. He had punished ever since for that inadequacy and had taken it upon himself to pleasure her the right way.

She sighed and rose from the mattress. Stumbling while dressing herself, she reached for the lantern and stepped outside the house to go to the nearby squat toilet, surrounded by a brick wall.

As she crouched to wash her vagina, she winced in pain. Something sticky covered her fingers. She couldn't help but compare the blood to the white fluid she felt between her legs the night she spent in Chhavi's chambers.



## **The Traditional Customer**

### **Ali Khan Yousafzai**

They were sitting in the guest room. The old woman had come to see the girl for her son. She had been searching for a daughter in law for a while now. The girl's mother had strictly instructed her daughter and her other siblings to behave well in front of the guest, who had come to see if the girl was suitable to fit her criteria of a good daughter in law. The old woman had an inspecting look in her eyes and was continuously staring at everything; from the dishes—which she was served along with tea—to the walls and curtains around the room. While speaking, she had an inquisitive tone and her conversation with the mother of the girl was rather an interview than normal conversation. She kept on asking about the family history and the girl's education background and her past as if she

was sent from a government organization to gather record of the subject. The girl's mother seemed comfortable with this as it was the custom of all the old ladies, who often came to their house looking for a rishta (marriage proposal).

After serving the tea to the old woman the girl sat quietly in the room. The guest was talking to the mother about her family, particularly about her son. After she was done with the endless praising of her son, her focus shifted to the girl.

The old lady checked her out from head to toe, she sat exactly the way her mother had earlier instructed her to sit; with her hair covered in her dupatta and her eyes lowered. She was sitting like a robot to let the woman examine her appearance and that made her feel rather like an object than a human being. The old lady seemed to her like a customer who had come to buy a commodity for her son. She knew that this customer was checking out her skin color, the appearance of her face, the structure of her nose, just like people check out a car they wanted to purchase, or as in the olden days people would examine slaves at a slave market. She felt exactly the same. She felt like a car. She looked at her mother and fancied that she were her owner and had set her up for sale, just like a person gives forth their most dear object to a pawnbroker.

The old lady, while not looking away, asked her questions; if she knows how to make bread and paratha for breakfast, and how much she earns. As though she were looking for a cook or a maid, or an ATM machine. An object which would be used for pleasure like a sex toy. She didn't want a future where she would be used as a pleasure toy, and as a maid who would be put to labor free of charge for the rest of her life. For her, marriage was not a settlement to have sex and reproduce, in fact, she regarded sex as the most animalistic instinct. She believed that humans did not indulge in sex, but they make love to each other. She wanted a real human connection, she wanted a spiritual and mental oneness with another human being, a partner who could understand her and who would never use her as material, but rather treat her as a human being; as a loving companion, as a soul-mate, as a friend. In short, she wanted magic, she wanted love!

She looked at the old woman and then back at her mother. The whole idea of this tradition, of being chosen for another person that you never met, seemed absurd to her; it seemed to her a

murder of her identity, her innermost self. In fact, it felt worse than that, for she knew that it would be a slow death that she would have to suffer every day, for the rest of her life.

She looked at her mother with contempt and anger, but helpless as she was, she had to answer all the questions of her buyer, and bear her impersonal appraising stare, which had made her uneasy from the moment the old woman had started looking at her. She was scanned with a curious, searching gaze which convinced her that this old woman had X-RAY vision.

Her rage and uneasiness were precariously close to breaking her usual threshold of tolerance (and that was saying something, since she was the most patient girl in her family). She had thought that she would have gotten used to her regular condition of objectification, by now, since this wasn't the first time that her family had put her up for sale.

In that moment after a minute of silence, the old woman still looking with her scanning, searching eyes said, "You look so much like my eldest daughter." The girl looked up at the old woman, completely surprised. The aunty smiled for the first time since she had arrived, revealing the deep wrinkles of the age around her eyes, and said in a soft warm voice, "She died a few years ago."



## **Over Heights** **Qazi Akash Ahmad**

I gave up the sense that joy grew from age  
To unveil the shine and betray the trembling rage  
At dawn my dreams broke, though it was night in my eye  
My sense was nocturnal, and my soul failed to lie  
The rain tasted like typhoon yet tender I stayed  
But his word urged my pace and the grit of my soul's trade



The red dress mimics my blood  
For life is a race, a rising flood  
My sense is like shallow shades and dark abodes  
It shakes my blood and clears my eyes off odds  
So, I walk out lit with eternal pride and shiny pun  
I eat, I conquer, I play, and all is fun

The marks of my soul are tied with the dew which whispers hope  
And the heart, obeying, awake, and clear to top  
Oh, grin of my choice! To part with me is not your choice  
Forever into my soul must you peep for a rhythmic voice  
Over heights rests my flight and far off is my reach  
Because my play is my slave and death is a meet to preach



## **A Boy and His Sword**

### **Talha Khalid**

It wasn't the life he had wanted to lead. It wasn't what he had wanted to do. But it was his, whether he wanted it or not. Absent-mindedly, the young man put the sword in his hands through some practice motions. The blade was heavy, but it hardly bothered him anymore, as it swept in an upward arc. He was used to its weight. After all, the sword was his, and had been his for some time now. Somewhere along the line, it had become part of him, almost like an extra limb. And he learned to both love and hate the thing, but he knew that he had long ago lost the chance to lay it down. His own sense of duty denied him that. It wasn't, as one might think, that he resented the duty that the sword represented, the duty was right. He didn't even resent the sword. it was just that, somewhere

in the back of his mind, he knew things could have gone differently. There was joy and a sense of accomplishment that came with the weapon which hummed in his grip. He wouldn't be who he was without it, and surprisingly, despite it all, he was more content with himself than he'd ever been before. He was stronger, in more ways than just the physical. And there were his companions, with whom he was closer than he'd ever dreamed possible, all because of what he'd become when the sword first laid in his hands. Few people knew the truth about him and the sword, they saw only the part of him that he allowed them to. But he was their protector, whether they wanted him or not, it was a role he'd taken upon himself even though it brought no accolades with it. They could survive without him, he knew that from the one time he'd sheathed the sword, but it was easier on them when he kept the task he'd set himself, and if he were being entirely truthful with himself he was well past the point where he could give it up. It was, in many ways, who he was, and giving it up would be like cutting off a part of himself. He had dreams before, dreams involving the stars, dreams he'd consciously chosen to lay aside in favor of new dreams. And he had made his peace with that. The old dreams had become part of the fluttering, wistful 'could have been'. He worked towards the new dreams now. For the most part he was content, but every once in a while, he would stare up at the night sky and wonder if in some other time and place it could have been different. The sword stilled in his hands, and as he looked out over the homes of those he'd sworn to protect, he knew that tonight would not be one of those nights. Still maybe the day would come when he could revisit old dreams.



# Children of Lesser Gods

## Tanya Singh

*after the 1984 Sikh genocide*

At night, the quiet rubbed. It ached so full of ghosts, bodies scattered like crumbs. Your dead friends find you in the middle of nowhere. You put your hands where you were last seen and you disappear. In the thick of the fog, stinging, you sing with your mouth closed. You remember god of ruins. Your bed covered in faultless lines, the mirror framed with dirty golden. You never spell death, but you mean it every time. *Bastards, they're all bastards*, the rioters say. In the afternoon you find yourself a thick skull on the street. So naturally, you pick it up and bring it home.

~~~

Somewhere five foot above earth, I stand awake and lifeless. In my hands, a soft goldfish, slowly dying. To love then I think is to die slowly. Outside, In the streets, men march with torches, burning everything in sight, they are *hungry for life* or whatever that means. To be hungry then I think is to come like light, passing limb through limb. This time we're hiding inside the neighbor's house. *What will you do if you make it alive*, you ask boldly. The end of your every sentence is a mouthful of kerosene. And I only know how to run.

~~~

I came ugly into this world, but I know I could do much worse. My mouth stitched. My legs bent to let the light pass through. My arms waving from enough distance, it begins to look safe but really isn't. I reached for my guts but could only find the root of a tree named after a shipwreck. I'm hungry for love to let us back into the house we always wished was ours but never quite. At midnight, we hid under the table. It was so quiet I could hear my father crying. There is a story my dadi never told me, but I could see it in her eyes. This story held her at night, and she couldn't sleep without praying to god first. She placed so many men in her grief. She said they looked into her eyes but did not

hesitate, not once, not at all. Does evil come from god, too? Does evil die? I'm afraid I might already know the answer. I'm afraid the light at the end of the tunnel will consume us before we even see it.

~~~

Is there anything in this world so lonely, so untouched by death? The faces of dead people shine, bright, in front of your eyes. You are at the podium, inside the church, confessing. You laugh too loud, your hands mouth an apology.

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I look apocalypse, hands formidable. The doorway opens up to wounds. I cry myself to sleep. When I wake up, I'm more beautiful than I was before. I can't remember when it happened but it was unnecessary. The news tells me I should've remained gone. This is the first sign, the cops wind up like ants to sugar. I come flood, I come crashing. I slept with a knife inside my mouth, my tongue a nest of blood calling every song *holy*. I was already dead when they came looking for dirt.

### Notes

The title of the poem "Children of Lesser Gods" is inspired from the title of the play "Children of a Lesser God" by Mark Medoff.



## Going Megan Steblay

The child was last. Her weary feet parted the sea of grasses, which were quick to obeisance but quicker still to straighten. *Step. Bow. Lift. Arise.* She left no trail. No one had, not in all these god-forsaken years.

The mother watched the small feet fall in rhythm. Three days had passed since the husband told the child to walk. Six weeks since she had last perched atop the oxen, leathery feet resting on leathery hide, windblown curls fondling her forehead, her face to the sun. An image to look at, to gather strength from, when all sense evaporated. *Incessant screams of insects. Never-ending heat.* The mother swatted at the sun, at the slicing grass. And then, there, the child swaying on the beast. One could

almost understand the infinite harmony of the insects, the passion of the sun, the hardiness of the grasses.

“Put your bonnet back on.”

At the husband’s order, the child covered her face in shadow, but not before the mother heard a small sigh escape her lips.

Even her slight weight was too much, now. The husband was confident that their pace would hold, but the oxen, too, were growing fatigued. Around the fire the previous night, they had split a sheet into bits, the mother and the child. With gentle hands, she wrapped the poor beasts’ feet, silently beseeching them to be brave like the child. The husband, the uncle, and the grandfather idled on the ground around a roughly sketched map. The grandfather passed a bottle around.

Now, in the blinding daylight, the uncle squinted in pain. His trudging barely kept him ahead of the child, but every time he stumbled, he tossed an easy grin over his shoulder. She laughed and the mother smiled. But the smile faded at the sight of the husband and grandfather ahead, pushing sternly on through the heat.

When the sun was at its highest, the grandfather wobbled. He sunk to the ground, swallowed in plants. The husband sprinted to his side.

“Get water.”

The mother followed his command, hurrying to the wagon, when a snake slithered around one of the wheels. She froze in horror, but it disappeared back into the grasses. Her fingers shaking, she scrambled for the jug in the back of the wagon. It was not as heavy as it had once been, so she carried it with ease. Cradling the grandfather, the husband lifted a bowl of water to his lips.

They rested that day. The grandfather made a show of brushing off their assistance, but his muscles rebelled against any action. So, he laid in the shade of the wagon, and the mother saw the relief in his eyes.

With leisure suddenly sprung upon them, some forgotten energy surged into the child and the uncle, who crouched gleefully behind a wheel of the wagon, waiting. The child bounced about the prostrate grandfather but then bounded off in the other direction into a patch of wildflowers, her skirts flapping. A merry sparrow.



The uncle waited in anticipation, a contorted figure, his neck held stiffly at an odd angle. The mother met his eyes and laughed. He playfully glared back and then dropped to the ground in exaggerated defeat.

The mother took pity on him. “Come here for a moment,” she called.

The child skipped back towards her and was abruptly swept high into the air. The clear peal of laughter cleansed the world.

Ignoring the play, the husband pored over his map. His brow furrowed as he stared forward at the emptiness. The mother fingered the notches carved into the wagon frame and watched.

That evening, the husband contemplated the pile of objects in the wagon, his eyes lingering on the rocking chair and the plow. He dragged the chair out, and in the open space in the bed of the wagon, he spread out blankets and their one goose feather pillow.

“He needs to ride.”

“But what of the oxen?” The mother whispered sharply.

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In the morning, the grandfather was lifted into the wagon. The mother held the child’s hand and watched. Their progress was slow that day. And the next. And the next.

“We are too slow with the extra weight,” the mother pleaded. “He is gaining strength.”

But the husband insisted.

The grandfather began to chatter throughout the day, cheerful in his ignorance of their slowing pace. The husband and uncle walked alongside the wagon, stories flowing between them and, occasionally, laughter. The mother walked behind, next to the child. And the child grew steadily quieter, her eyes on the straining oxen, her shoulders beginning to sag.

At each vexing slice of a grass blade, the wailing insects seemed to intensify. And, especially with the looming darkness of evening, the noise was deafening.

The husband nodded at their progress and led them to a stop. After rubbing down the oxen, feeding them, setting out the bedrolls, and serving hot mash, the mother held the child. Her slight frame was listless as she leaned back into the warmth of the mother. The mother rubbed her blistered

feet and watched the laughing men relaxing around the wagon. Its bed slumped slightly under the grandfather's weight.

The child was bundled to sleep, the men soon began to snore, but the mother's eyes were locked open. Her hand clenched and unclenched her blanket as her gaze strayed to the wagon. The insects shrieked and the wagon sagged. She flew upright. Creeping from under her blanket, she grasped the grandfather's boots, carried them to the edges of the firelight, and tossed them down on the grass.

"Are you there?" she whispered into the darkness.

In the morning, as the mother was busy tucking things into the wagon, the child ran to the grandfather, his boots clutched in her fists. "You mustn't forget your boots!"

He smiled and gingerly pulled them on. Then, a howl, wilder than anything they had yet heard, echoed through the air, and the old man began writhing and kicking on the floor of the wagon.

The child backed away, terrified, as the others rushed in. As one of his boots flew off, a snake slithered from it and disappeared into the grasses.

"Stupid, senseless child!" The grandfather wailed and thrashed. "It is your fault! Your fault!"

The mother pressed the child's face into her apron with trembling hands.

There was nothing to be done. The uncle kept the child outside the wagon and paced, his face haggard. The child shivered, her arms around her knees.

That evening, when the last breath left the grandfather, the men grasped long-idle shovels and dug into the soil. It was not long before the grandfather was swallowed by the ground.

When day broke, the husband packed the wagon as usual. "There is room for the child," the mother murmured.

"We have to make up lost time," the husband growled.

The only one to look backwards was the child.

The oxen made better time for several days, but a heaviness pervaded the air. The husband kept his map in a pocket, pulling it out to stare first at it and then the expanse every few hours. A small, inked cross now marked the map behind them on the trail.

Every morning, the uncle woke up earlier than the day before, his eyes darting wildly across the landscape. Carefully, he scooped up each of his boots, first shaking them vigorously and then peering inside. And once they were deliberately tied around his ankles, he crept to the side of the sleeping child. Gingerly, he picked up her small boots and did the same. He sat with them upon his lap until she opened her eyes.

“Morning.” The uncle smiled and helped her into her shoes. And only once she was up and about did he take a sip from the bottle stowed in his pocket.

The mother ran her finger over the growing number of notches on the wagon, watching the uncle with the child and the stern husband.

“The flour is already half gone,” she whispered to the husband.

“Then make it last. Once we reach the river, just another week to town.”

*The river.* In the grasses, one could imagine it snaking, oh, that refreshing spring. Rippling waves of purple and sky, twisting together into an infinity comforting to behold. And the child would dip her tired feet in it and splash drops of diamonds upon them all.

But the river did not come into sight.

The oxen plodded; the people did the same. Every hill brought only the sight of more grass. So, this was true existence, then, the eternal momentum of steps overlying the harmony of the wild. One rhythm stretched to infinitude until there was nothing to think of or do besides fall in.

The child’s stomach rumbled, shifting the melody, and the mother jolted to alertness.

The mother ate less that evening, piling her extras in the child’s bowl, but both the husband and the child only picked at their food.

“Here, have one more bite,” the mother pleaded. But the child shook her head.

As they walked, the husband and the child shivered under the sun. The child whimpered, but the husband relentlessly pushed onwards.

“We must rest,” the mother implored.

The husband growled, his face twitching with pain. “Reach the river and we’ll have time to rest.”

For two days, they staggered on. The uncle grew more wild-eyed every time either the child or the husband stumbled.

The mother grabbed the husband's shirt. "If you will not stop, at least let her rest in the wagon."

Blood rushed to his face. "Don't you tell me what to do." He wrenched out of her grasp and, reeling, urged the oxen to greater speed. They rolled their eyes and strained against their harnesses.

The mother spat and spun about, but the uncle only stared helplessly at the scene. She strode back to where the child tottered and hefted her into her arms.

Not two hours after, the husband collapsed beside the panting oxen.

So, finally, they could breathe.

The uncle was no help. His hands shook so hard they could scarcely lift the husband. The mother left him to stand watch over the oxen, his hand rubbing their backs where their harnesses had sat. And the husband and the child slept fitfully on the ground, wrapped in blankets.

She rummaged through the wagon, searching for the medicine chest. Something fell against her leg. A drooping bag of salt. She paused in her search. A half-empty sack of cornmeal. Some flour. Her hand distractedly stroked the notches on the wooden frame as she stared at the powerful frame of the husband now lying helplessly in the grass.

The medicine chest was stored in the shadowed front of the wagon. She knelt and unclasped the lid. Her fingers brushed across the cool, glass bottles. The insects wailed.

She filled two bowls with water, and, in one, poured a spoonful of medicine from the bottle. She fed the plain water to the husband with a gentle smile.

That night, she stayed curled around the child, every few hours forcing a drop of medicine down her throat.

Soon sunlight struck the mother's face, and she hurtled to her feet, casting about wildly. The child lay next to her, breathing soundly. Her hands flying to cover her mouth, the mother shook as tears of gratitude coursed down her cheeks.

Then, her gaze fell on the husband. He lay in his blanket without breath, his skin ashen.

The mother froze. The screaming of the insects swelled until it filled her mind.

She rolled up her sleeves.

At the sound of her shovel striking the soil, the uncle startled awake. He heaved at the sight of the body, but then stumbled to help.

The shovel strikes echoed briefly across the plains before being absorbed by the grasses.

Before they dragged the husband into the grave, the mother reached into his pocket and slipped out the map.

The wagon moved ahead, the child tucked into it, a blanket wrapped safely about her. She slept, and the mother kissed her cool forehead.

Make it to the river and the journey would be almost over. The child would rest, and they would make it to the river.

The mother led the oxen now with steady strides. The uncle dragged farther behind, lurching occasionally with a laugh. He would be of no use in following a map, and, besides, she wished to glimpse the water first.

The wind rippled purple across the grasses, and what looked like flat ground suddenly, surprisingly, dipped into valleys. She strode out before the oxen, as the husband had sometimes done, and lifted the map. There was nothing upon that paper that could encompass the sight she was faced with. The unrestrained sky. The sense of smallness.

She folded the map.

The day passed without a sign of the river. And, soon, it had been days of nothing. The uncle monotonously shaking out their boots every morning, his hands trembling, the oxen slowing despite all her cajoling, the scantier and scantier meals. Nothing changed.

Except for the child. Each day she sat up a little longer and the mother's limbs filled with strength. Each day she smiled a little more and the monotony shimmered with beauty.

They reached the largest hill they had yet trekked up, and the mother's heart quickened. She hastened to its crest and was met with yet another endless expanse of grass. A cry of frustration ripped from her chest. The uncle met her at the top of the hill, sluggish. She stormed back to the wagon, lifted the child out, and set her gently by the uncle.

With a shout, she tore their shovels from the wagon bed and threw them back the way they had come. Her breath heaving, she dragged out the prized cast steel plow and tipped it into the grasses, spitting on it, then a chest of clothes. The ground was soon littered haphazardly with the gutted interior of a home. The uncle and the child watched without a sound.

She only left what was necessary. She reached for the crate of bottles that had once belonged to the grandfather. But the uncle stumbled down to her.

“Please,” his watery eyes pleaded.

She tucked the crate back among the remaining food supplies.

They all huddled together in the emptied wagon that night. The uncle dragged his tongue about his bowl to capture every morsel of dinner and then asked for more. The mother frowned darkly.

In the light of day, they started out again. The oxen quickened their pace under the lighter load. They plodded through the grass, and the mother stayed by their side and felt herself sink into the endlessness. No matter how far they traveled, they would never be done walking. *Step. Lift. Step. Lift.*

A flare of light blinded her, boring into her eyes. She dropped the oxen’s reins and covered her face. The wind and insects screamed into her ears — *stop — stop —* and then, a burbling. Rushing, rinsing freedom.

The mother listened with every part of herself, her eyes squeezed closed, and felt a space open in her chest. Slowly, she let the sun back through the slits of her eyes.

At her feet, muck sloped down a sudden embankment to meet roiling gray water. Not the purple sunset river of dreams, but a thunderstorm of a river, pounding into the earth. But it was here. The river was here.

The oxen planted their hooves and lumbered down the slope, coming to a slow stop on the bank. They all stood and stared with weary eyes, the oxen, the mother, the uncle, the child. The river raced, moving, moving, flicking them with spray, and they flinched but none of them moved.

And the mother realized, of course, *of course*, there was no bridge.

She could not force a crossing. Not yet. Let the child rest.

As she unharnessed the oxen, the child and the uncle sat upon the damp ground in silence, a tenseness gone from their shoulders. The mother clambered into the back of the wagon. Something crunched under her foot. “No, no, no,” she breathed.

The bag of cornmeal had tipped in their descent. The mother scrambled to swipe up what she could from the floor, but it kept slipping through the wooden planks. For several minutes, all was still in the wagon. Then, the mother carefully piled together the food they had left. A whisper floated through the air. “It’s not enough.”

That evening, the mother ate hardly a bite. Her eyes stayed on the uncle as he spooned his food with wobbling hands towards his flushed face.

She did not sleep with the never-ending rumble of the river covering all else.

The mother watched the river all day, waiting for the imaginary lull in its movement. When it came, she was ready.

They tucked the child into the center of the wagon. The uncle sat behind her, knuckles white, his eyes darting frantically towards the water. The mother held the reins. The oxen rolled their eyes in terror, but they moved forward when urged.

As the wagon hit the river, it careened on an upward swell. The child gasped and the mother shifted. She glanced at the uncle’s red face and a strange emotion crossed her face before her foot shot out, knocking into the crate of bottles. It skidded across the bed of the wagon and dropped off the front. With a splash, it disappeared into the grayness.

The uncle bolted upright, a wild cast to his face. He lurched towards the opening. The wagon rocked. The child yelped and reached for him.

“Sit down!” The mother barked.

He leaned over the side, fishing for the crate. The child turned to look at her mother, her arms still grasping outward.

“SIT DOWN.”

The river jostled the wagon, the child fell to the floor, and, with a cry, the uncle toppled over the side. The child screamed as the uncle splashed about in the water, gulping for air, spraying them

with shimmering droplets. The wagon tipped up and down, the oxen struggling and then surging forward through the wake.

As the wagon hit the opposing bank, the oxen scrambling for footing, the mother leapt out, wading into the river, a sudden trembling overtaking her body.

There was only surging water.

The oxen shivered and a piercing wail emitted from the wagon. The mother dashed to the child, scooping her up tightly, rocking her back and forth.

They had made the crossing. *Thank god*, they had made the crossing.

And there, leading away from the bank, were wagon ruts.

The mother constructed a fire. She and the child stripped and lay their damp clothes out to dry and swaddled themselves in blankets.

The child huddled upon her lap, quiet. The mother's hand trembled on the child's head as she stroked her hair. Soon, this journey would be finished. The child would be finally happy.

They fell asleep curled around each other.

~~~

“Oh!”

The pitiful cry jolted her from dreams of purple skies and gleaming curls. She sprang to her feet. The child stood dressed by the exhausted fire, frozen in the act of pulling on one of the small boots that had been drying there. The mother flew to her side and ripped the boot off. A snake tumbled out onto the grass.

The mother screamed in rage and kicked the snake, over and over, until the creature lay mangled on the ground. In the air floated the remnants of the grandfather's voice. *It is your fault. It is your fault.*

She swiped at the air around her face and swept the child up, kissing the flushed face. Frantically, she sucked at the bite mark on the little foot, but the child's body had already begun to shiver. She wrapped the child in a blanket and tore through the medicine chest, pouring one liquid down her throat, another on the wound.



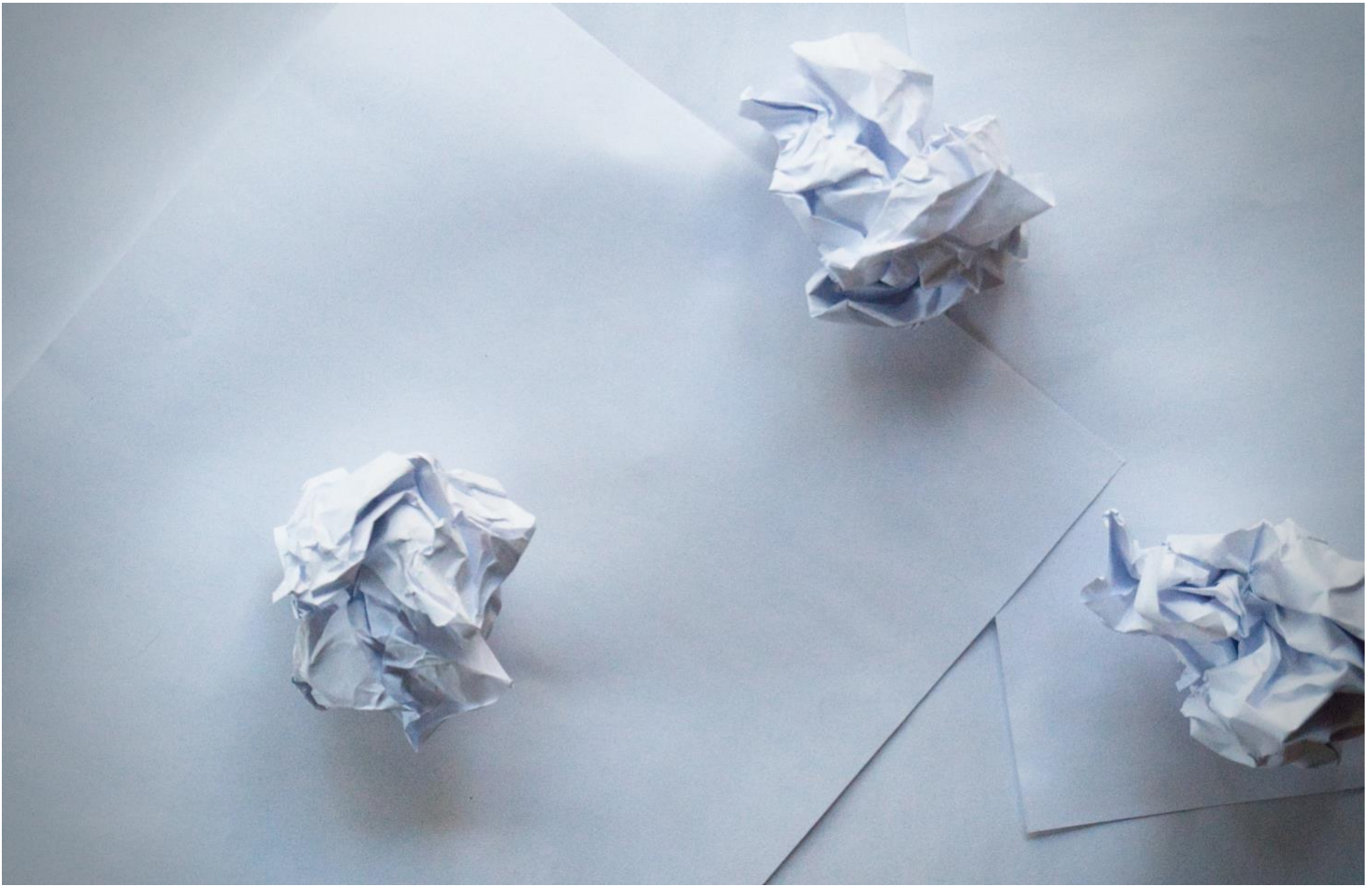
And when she could think of nothing else to do, she clutched the child and listened to the insects sing.

She sat with the child for hours. And then, with wild eyes, she carried the little figure into the grasses, searching.

In a patch lush with wildflowers, she lay the child down.

The woman turned and retraced her steps to the oxen. She did not look back.

As the oxen plodded on, following the wagon ruts, she felt it in each of her bones. The eternal, inescapable rhythm beating down the world.



## **Making Headlines**

### **Sophie Kim**

originally published in *SING THE BIRDS HOME* (2019, Penmanship Books), written while serving as 2018-2019 Los Angeles County Youth Poet Laureate

I've been screenshotting every doomsday headline  
in hopes of making a poem  
from our nation's  
flatlines. Scanning centerfolds of threats  
hot off the press,

my morning coffee taken with a shot  
of whatever they've brewed up in Washington  
to chase down every sleepless night  
with safety on the run. Been making blackout poems  
from every TV screen turned off  
because fifty deaths in one day  
was just too much drama  
for anybody, my sonnets love songs  
to every faulty gun. Is there such a thing? On TV every bullet hits  
its mark  
like the first line of a poem  
at the downtown open mic  
I'll never go to. Not because I don't believe  
in screaming  
through the burning. I believe poetry  
is the strongest prayer  
when said in places  
where we didn't use to pray, that every screenshot  
in my phone  
could be the beginning line  
of a better tomorrow, if only I could finish  
the verse. I wish I could write CNN, Fox,  
and NYT, that unholy trinity,  
into one good lyric,  
because at least  
we'd have a eulogy  
for watching our last words burn.  
But the newsreels just keep telling me

how impossible it is,  
to write beauty  
into life, when every reporter  
is taking bets  
on how you're going to die.



## Dear Diary Zain Ahmad

*Dear Diary,*

*I would never have made that decision if I knew what would happen. I hope you can understand that.*

I put my pen down and draw in a deep breath. The cold air rushes in through my nostrils carrying a cocktail of flavors—the smell of soil drenched from rain, the wet mango leaves, the jasmine flowers and the dirt. I stare at the sunset, tranquil and vibrant, drifting clouds turning orange and lilac and the trees in the distance forming a silhouette, posing like a stretch of mountains across the horizon. A flock of sparrows fly through the sky in the moment, continuously morphing their form

as if painting something, and in the distance, children chase each other, laughing, while their mothers walk around the park. It is indeed a beautiful day.

I had lost myself for a moment there. As a drop breaks off from the pool of tears cupped in my eyes, I come back to myself. What was I thinking about? I don't know, yet everything about this place drifts me away into my thoughts. It almost feels as if time has promised not to move since that day. It punishes me to live in that moment over and over again, yet everything has a way to remind me of it passing. The grass feels the same, soft and smooth. The trees had grown a bit taller and the jasmine buds under the mango tree had just bloomed. The rust on the legs of the bench had crawled all the way up to the seat and faces in the park had changed. It reminds me that I had made my move a long time ago and there is no going back.

A reminder that always looms in the back of my mind, digging deeper until it scrapes against my sanity.

*Would I be able to forgive myself? Would you if you had done it?*

I know I have no control over what has happened. If I could, I would travel all the way back in time and undo everything. It is the only wish that I truly want. Nothing more, nothing less, just the way it was before the deafening sound reached my ears, the day sky went dark and the white jasmine flowers turned blood red.

The wind begins to howl and caresses against my cheek. It is cold and has an unpleasant feeling to it. The sun gets shadowed by the clouds and it starts to pour. Mothers and children hurry out of the park with their hands above their heads desperately trying not to get wet. Birds fly back to their nests. I put my diary in a plastic bag that the wind carried near me and placed it under my head as I lay down on the wet grass. Puddles form quickly and the sky fades to grey. I put my hands behind my head and close my eyes.

I was tired of carrying the boulder of shame on my back. I longed for the punishment for my sin. My eyes swell in pain and a cry escapes my mouth as the rain of shame slaps my face a million times over. I weep and scream at the sky as if calling god to unleash hell on me already.

Disappointed and tired, I turn my face to the ground and scratch the soil with my fingers, uprooting the grass and clasp it tightly in my grip. The mud squeezes through my fingers as I tighten my grip. The rain drums against the back of my skull as I lay there in silence. The humming of the million drops falling together is serene. As my eyes close, the humming gradually starts to fade.

*The heavens cried and the earth trembled. The mountains crumbled like carded wool. The sky went black and the moon lost its glow. The stars lost their soul and I lost myself*

*Pull me to the heavens and then drop me. Shatter me into pieces like my heart is  
If not enough, then pull me again*

*And drop me again*

*The clouds roar their might*

*And the heavens weep*

*The flowers rot and the birds lose their voice and I sit here wondering when did it happen?*

*Do you not see me unfit for this world? Untouched and undisturbed in this chaos. Unleash your wrath upon me*

*So that I may belong to where I dwell*

*Rain shame upon me*

*And curse me for eternity*

*I need to belong, I need to belong*

I wake up to the sound of *azāan*. I am drenched and patched with mud. I wipe off what I can with my sleeve. I look around and find a few bearded men on their way to the mosque, gazing at me, some with pity, some with disgust and others with bewilderment. Embarrassed, I pick up my diary from the ground and head out of the park.

*Was this part of the punishment? Or did it end? If it was part of it, I would embrace it and take the shame upon me without any hesitation but if it was not and the punishment was over, it was not enough, I'll return again another day, waiting under the sky for more. How much of it was enough to pay for the debt of my sins? Another day? Another*

*year? A lifetime? I don't know. I will be searching for more unless I get satisfied. It is the only way I can get over it, by remembering it again and again till I forget it, if the way exists. It had to; otherwise the torment is too much to bear.*

As the streetlights start to flicker and turn on, I pick up my pace. As I enter my home, the squeaking sound of the netted wooden door announces my entrance. Putting my head through the doorway first, I looked inside. My eyebrows jump when I see my mother standing at the doorway. My body soon follows my head and my shoes spurt water out as I step inside. Disapprovingly, my mother lowers her spectacles and looks at me with disapproval. She walks up to me and hugs me. Her warmth thaws me and her smell makes me feel at home. The feeling of guilt wells up inside me at that moment. I don't deserve this much love. It is so pure and I, so sinful.

*Was I cursed? Will it keep on haunting me even when I am in my mother's arms? Is there any respite? Do I deserve any respite?*

My mother sits me down on a *charpai*. She brings me *yakbni*, blows on it to cool it, and then brings the spoon to my mouth, all the while reciting *bismillah*. I give her an exhausted smile. The taste makes me shudder, and my mother finds this amusing. She laughs and I join her. I snuggle close to her and she wraps her arms around me.

It was love that I felt this time. Perhaps, there is a safe place for me after all, I think. Perhaps, the way to make things right is not by dwelling on the past, but by forgiving myself. I hope I can do that for myself someday. Right now, all I want is to fall asleep in my mother's arms.

*Dear Diary,*

*My pen weighs like an iron blade and draws blood with every stroke that I make. To pen down my nightmare is to breathe life into it, an act which wrings my heart and burdens my conscience.*

I sit in my bed wearied and let out a sigh as I start to dig into the past.



*The guest's faces brightened with delight as they saw my sister enter. She lifted a cup of chai in her petite, delicate hands and offered it to a young gentleman. His honey brown eyes didn't miss a sight of her face for a moment and his cheeks turned rubicund in confession to his feelings as he held the cup from her and lowered his gaze in embarrassment. My sister couldn't help but smile from the corner of her lips, reckoning the impression she had left on him. Her heart fluttered and cupid's arrow left its bow.*

I was thinking about when I was looking forward to being *sarbaala* for my sister's wedding. Fairy lights decorated our house, sweets swarmed everywhere, and the gifts piled high in rooms. Days of celebration were almost home.

Eight years older than me, Roha was caring and forgiving like a mother, always cleaning up after my mess. A selfless soul radiating motherly and sisterly love alike, and yet, she was innocent at heart like a child matching my enthusiasm on little things. She must have been tired of filling the shoes of a mother and a sister at the same time.

*One afternoon, as I returned home from school, I spotted her making chai in the kitchen. With a goblin-like grin on my face, I tiptoed behind her and shouted "BOO!" and scared the daylights out of her. At that moment, her dupatta had caught the saucepan's handle and flung it into the air. Her mouth let out a cry as the boiling chai fell on her hand. A gleaming stream of tears left her creased eyes and her lips folded in an effort to not let the pain out. As she trembled, I started to cry watching her bear the suffering of my idiocracy yet again. At that moment, she wiped off her teary eyes from her dupatta and put on a brave smile for me. "It's okay, I'm fine" she said, as she bent down and cupped my cheeks in her palms. She grinned as bright as the sun and her eyes smiled at me. "Dumbo" she said gently, "Let's get some ice-cream for the crybaby". As much as patronizing the word "dumbo" would sound to a ten-year-old, it meant the heaven to me. It comforted me. Occasionally, it was accompanied with a light smack on the head; however, it let me know she had forgiven me.*

*We walked, holding our hands the entire way to the neighborhood market. The shopkeeper, chacha jee as we used to call him, lowered his spectacles on his nose and let his blue pearl eyes, settled in antique brown paper skin, greet us lovingly. "Let me guess... chocolate ice-cream?" he uttered in his kind voice. I grinned softly at him and nodded*

enthusiastically. Out of the cold foggy freezer he pulled out two ice-cream cones and placed them in my hands. As my sister reached for her purse, I dashed towards the nearby park gaining a head-start for our traditional race. "Cheater!" she exclaimed, hurriedly paid the money and started to chase me as chacha jee chuckled behind her.

Roha finally increased her pace and caught on to me just before we reached the red iron bench under the mango tree canopy. Although we both knew she had won the race, I never admitted to it as to let her get the satisfaction. It didn't matter who won, we would call each other a sore loser for a while and then decide to have a rematch next time. That's what kept the tradition alive and we both knew it without saying it.

We sat on the bench in the park, swinging our feet and watching children play in the distance as we licked ice cream and let it slowly melt in our mouths. The breeze picked up gently and caressed against my skin, gentle like a mother's hand. The sun shied behind the mango trees, turning all shades of red and orange. The sky soon picked up the colors too, with underlying shades of cotton candy pink and purple. A flock of birds flew in the sky, as free as I felt in the moment. The whites of the jasmine flowers had turned warmer in their colors. Roha had let her hair down and let the wind run its fingers through them. She faced the sky and closed her eyes letting the setting sun rays seep into her skin. The lively sounds of little children playing began to fade away as the sun approached the horizon. "Let's go back home now, we don't want to get mother worried," Roha said, breaking the trance of serenity. "A bit longer" I replied, licking the ice cream. As time passed, the park grew empty and silence started taking over as we sat there. "Let's go now," she said with more authority this time. "At least let me finish my ice cream," I protested. The sky grew darker and the wind slowly picked up its pace, whipping Roha's hair onto her face. Roha stomped her feet and stood up in frustration. She pulled me by my arm meekly and said, "Enough now, mother would be worried. We have to go." Her voice quivered and her tone was unsure of itself, trembling on the edge between begging and commanding. "Fine! Don't pull me, I'll get up." I whined as I jumped to the ground. Noticing my open shoelaces, I knelt to tie them as Roha grew more agitated and nervous. As I stood up and turned about, my gaze fell upon a bearded face standing right behind me. My neck folded at an uncomfortable angle upwards to see a pair of abyss black bulging eyes. The eyebrows thick and furrowed arched upwards creasing his forehead. Pallor grey lips stretched to reveal a chipped incisor and pale yellow teeth. Almost like a demonic creature but in a man's skin. His kurta arched over his bloated belly and his rings squeezed his short chubby fingers.

My fingers begin to crush under the weight of the words they write. My sweaty palms tremble in fear and refuse to write further, sorrow clenches my heart and yet I know I have to bear this pain so I can forgive myself.

*The ground seemed to slip away from underneath me as I stumbled backwards, caught by the sudden appearance of the man. The sky abandoned its vibrant colors and put on a gloomy cloak. The wind howled like a wolf and the distant sounds of azaan echoed. He wrapped his broad callous fingers around my ankle and jerked me towards himself. Screaming in agony, my eye caught Roba struggling in the arms of another man, clenching her tightly against himself and laughing hysterically. My eyes reddened in rage and filled with tears. My teeth grinded into each other as I repeatedly beeled his calloused hands. I gripped the rusting leg of the bench as he yanked my ankle; not letting him have his way with me. Annoyed of me, he pulled out a pistol. My heart skipped a beat and my hands gave up their grip. Everything around me hazed into darkness and my vision tunneled to see the demonic darkness inside the barrel peering into my soul. His finger sat on the trigger, slightly squeezing it. My body became lifeless, gave up before I wanted it to. I closed my eyes and laid my head back on the ground waiting for the bullet to leave the barrel and sink in my skull. The azaan echoed in my ear and my heart pleaded "let me live", yet I laid there unmoved, lifeless and given up, anxiously waiting for... "BANG!".... A deafening sound, much more brutal and monstrous than what one would expect and yet nothing stung. With the last leftover courage that I scraped up, I dared to open my eyes to see Roba leaned over this man's hand, her dress dripped with velvet red blood. He pushed her away from himself and she plummeted to the ground like a dead load hitting the ground with a hollow thud. Pulled out of their frenzy and in disbelief of what they had done, the men panicked and ran.*

*I sat there on my knees in utter shock, watching her drown in a pool of her own blood. Everything unfolded at a pace strange to my eyes. The deafening sound of the gun kept ricocheting in my head and the dripping blood kept flashing in front of my eyes. A stream of blood flooded the crevices in the ground, staining red the white of the jasmine flowers. Roba's fingertips grew pale and her chest remained uncomfortably still.*

*“Let me live?” What was I thinking? Was this god’s way of answering my prayer? What a foolish way! The clouds roared in their might and the heavens started to weep. My eyes barely held tears from falling out. I peered through the clouds searching for god’s face but he seemed to have turned his face, refusing to bear any burden. My gaze fell back down upon me, iron laden with the burden of sins.*

It was a sin of an ice cream too much. An eternal curse which I am reminded of again and again and again.

**THE END**