

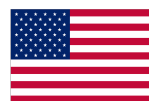
Multitudes

EDITED BY SIYANDA MOHUTSIWA



THE SUMMER INSTITUTE

CLASS OF 2019



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Introduction

Foreword

Peter Gerlach

I don't generally consider myself to be a pessimistic person. I am a realist who dabbles in idealism from time to time. As a parent, though, I find myself to be increasingly concerned for the future my children will inherit. Climate change is putting the whole of the globe on notice. Social media has created a pervasive culture of screen dependence. Political hyper-nationalism, instilling fear, hate, and division, has found a home in countries around the world. The chasm between the haves and the have nots widens. The list goes on and on. Indeed, these are challenging times. And yet, I am constantly reminded that the world is wide and wonderful and that love is in abundance. Again, I look no further than my children. They are my brightest hope for the many decades ahead. So, too, are the authors of this anthology.

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.

Peter Gerlach

Designed as a three-year creative writing and cultural exchange program, running in 2019, 2020, and 2021, the Summer Institute selects, in an open application process, 10 remarkable college-age writers from each of the three countries to the University of Iowa campus in Iowa City for an intensive two-week session of writing and learning.

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 empower participants by forging new lines of understanding across national, linguistic and cultural boundaries, promoting social justice, and foregrounding diversity, empathy, and community. Each participant 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 Iowa City in 2019. They wrote together and discussed their writing and the importance of being writers. They learned about and reveled in each other's cultures, lives, passions. More than this, however, they showed great love and empathy for one another.

Each day, for two weeks, they proved that the future is brighter when young people of common and uncommon interests, faiths, persuasions, intellects, and perspectives share space, engage in open conversation - at times, vigorous debate - and learn to care about and for their many selves.

As individuals, Aalia, Amna, Anna, Anna, Ashley, Azhar, Cherene, Darius, Fazila, Faizan, Gurmehar, Hafsa, Hafsa, Jishnu, John, KayLee, Mahnoor, Mariya, Martina, Medha, Nyeree, Omar, Payal, Sadia, Sandip, Sarim, Saqib, Suyashi, Tanvi, and Tejas are all impressive. Their applications were the first evidence, and brief conversations quickly confirmed this truth to me. We chose well for the inaugural Summer Institute. Together, though, I would describe them as exceptional.

Foreword

I observed them regularly exceed their instructors' expectations with the kind of critical thought, nuance, and complexity usually found in a graduate-level seminar. Intellectually, I delighted in the places they took classroom discussions. Emotionally, I took great comfort in the support and kindness they showed one another as they permitted differences of opinion and the airing of their own vulnerabilities and personal pains. I found this mixture to be quite rare, exceptional.

I believe, then - maybe I have to, as both a realist and an idealist - they left Iowa City a force for good, forged by the love they had for one another and using their talents as authors to make this world a better place. . . for themselves, for my children, for yours, for us all.

In the pages that follow, I see in their writing stories of the human condition. Stories that show contours of lives lived. There's love. Grief. Questioning. There's disquietude. And simple joys. Relationships. These brilliant young authors offer us observations of their worlds, of the worlds they inhabit through their stories. Collectively, the broader comment they are making is, in many cases, for you, the reader, to determine. I'd offer it is truth: lived, partial, multiple, contradictory, shifting, always complicated.

Ever grateful to read their work,

Peter Gerlach

Acknowledgements

Creation and execution of a program like The International Writing Program's (IWP) Summer Institute is no small feat. It would not be possible without the generous funding, support and guidance from the US Embassy in Islamabad; the cooperation and guidance of the US Embassy in New Delhi; the foresight of Christopher Merrill, Director of the IWP; the vision of Cate Dicharry, author of the Summer Institute grant proposal; the support and advice of Hugh Ferrer, Associate Director of the IWP; and the care and assistance of the IWP staff at large.

The inaugural 2019 session would not have been the grand success it was without the mentors, the instructors, and the resident assistants who coached the participants as writers, engaged them in the classroom, and made them feel at home in Iowa City. Thank you to Rochelle Potkar, Anjali Sachdeva, and Harris Khaliq. Thank you to Afabwaje Kurian, Aracely Mondragon, Dini Parayitam, Lisa Schlesinger, Fariha Tayyab, and Anam Zakaria. Thank you to Ben Bush and Ellen Boyette.

To all of the above, the most sincere gratitude.

Peter Gerlach and Siyanda Mohutsiwa

Contributors

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Contributors

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Contributors

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A book is like a garden
carried in the pocket.

ancient South Asian proverb

Multitudes

— 1 —

Dusk

Ghazal

Azhar Wani

Are faces landmarks of truth? Like crackling white of
ice?
You could never brew bad tea with your shyest sleight
of eyes.
You sang a chorus in the air; in it everything was promised.
Now
our sights pound — and music stops — in the air's
delight of eyes.
The brown of your eyes looks gorgeous in light. It
strikes off your
Blues The Greens The Reds - an iridescent candle light!
Of eyes!
In occupied irises, dilated pupils stink of rotting society
sobriety.
I never saw it coming, he sighs; relinquishing his birthright
of eyes.
The blind and the seeing are never equal in His sight;
but the seeing
fare worse: keepers of unmothered truth, they incite a
blight of eyes
Throughout history we found effervescence in mining
elements.
A heart wishes capitalist urgency now; O mine mine
graphite off eyes

Bargain Witchcraft

Tanvi Chowdhary

It was the off season when he came to her. There was a spurt of activity in August, usually related to class presentations. She had a good idea of what to do before he had even reached her. Jeans from Levi's – the shirt was an old one, but branded. Not the kind that had been bought from Majnu Ka Tila. The kind a mother had picked for her son while dragging him shopping. The kind of shirt he hadn't thought about twice before wearing. The ridiculous beard that was in style at the moment: the half empty variety. Full at some parts of the face and patchy elsewhere. The square framed glasses, and the even sillier haircut, shallow on the sides and full on the top.

She really wondered at what the youth found attractive, and then stopped herself from thinking like that. She was beginning to sound suspiciously like an old woman.

She lived on the corner near Hudson. There was nothing in particular that set her apart from the other shops in Hudson lane except that sometimes, when you looked closely, she seemed to be flickering in and out of existence. Like music was playing in the background and every time the beat was right, she was there. The shop was small, of course – as everything in North Campus was. Everything was sandwiched between the urgency and languor of college living.

North campus was like that – it worked in bursts. During the beginning of the year, when everyone was doing their best to make friends and not care about class, no work got done. The cafes would be stuffed with kids who had just tasted freedom from their homes and the roads would be packed with people huddling around the corners for momos. After a month of spending money at the Big Yellow Door, first year students would mill around Tom

Bargain Witchcraft

Uncle's Maggi Point for cheap noodles. Freedom always came with harsh lessons on spending – the autos may seem cheap, but by the second month everyone was walking.

This was when business was slowest for her. There was no end to the excuses students could find to avoid work. She usually waited it out – slow seasons were good for her craft. Mothers who wanted spells for their husbands to return home. Ginger teas that would cure tenants off their obsession with drinking and partying. Old bangles that had broken irreparably. She did her best, fishing out adhesives from the back of old bindis, scrounging for feathers from the crows. They saw her like that at times, chatting with some of the waiters after the evening was done, and trading old cutlery as if it was dangerous to be seen doing it.

Even the boy walking towards the shop was looking at her as if something about her didn't fit. The boy couldn't have been more than twenty. He had square framed glasses and looked nervous, as they all did when they first came to her.

She had been clashing with the ABVP over her shop lately. It didn't look wrong, but it certainly didn't look right – the spinning wheel in the centre, threads lined on the sides. No earrings or silver, but if you asked for a lucky charm – she had a box filled with old silver trinkets under her tables somewhere. This wasn't homeopathy, or allopathy, or anything with Yoga in it – in fact, she knew what they thought of her – she reeked of a lower caste someone who hadn't been able to take advantage of the reservations. She was bits and bobs and odds and ends, no books and no writing – nothing with Sanskrit in it, and it was widely suspected that her incantations were in Marathi. She didn't tell anyone of course that she sometimes mixed it up with the Urdu and Hindi she knew.

It was all very suspicious behaviour – but the slow seasons always, always gave way to faster ones.

November, December, March and April were a good time to find students out near her shop. Everyone thought to come to

her in the middle of the night for some reason, despite knowing full well that she was open through the day. In November and December there were demands for love spells, since the first years had had the time to stake out who they wanted to fall in love with. The desperation for academic help came in March and April – and if she was lucky, she was able to get payment in something useful. Sighs of love, toenail clippings, a little bit of hair. She didn't complain about the work she got, no matter how stupid – but she pretended to be irritated with small spellcraft. It made people think that she had better things to do.

Work was getting a little hard for her – she was over thirty, and her apartment hadn't changed from the dingy one room. She would never get married, but magic became harder when the space of your life hadn't expanded. When North Campus had started to become what it was now, she had worried. But like a cockroach, she persevered – through protests and political storms, through campaign elections and entrances, her shop stayed the same, a rickety little narrow room with little bits of her laced into the walls.

She was glad that he was coming to her shop – he looked rich, and she needed money. It was a difficult time at the moment, what with the monsoon having been so terrible – the prices had gone up. The heat had seeped into Delhi, and no one had come to her shop in a while.

She looked up from her book when he entered, pretending to piece his history within moments. She tried to play the part sometimes. She couldn't stand wearing anything but shorts and a shirt – which wasn't very witchy of her, so she tried to hide behind newspapers and books to look mysterious.

(Personally she didn't care much for books. She hadn't read anything that wasn't along the lines of a Chetan Bhagat and she liked it that way. But if anyone caught her reading *Five Point Someone* at the shop there would be an outrage.)

She raised an eyebrow, waiting for him to approach whatever he wanted answered. He fiddled with the strap of his bag.

Bargain Witchcraft

“Are you Ruhiji?”

He was using her name – but awkwardly. Someone had given it to him, suggested the shop and her name – probably told him to be polite and respectful. Or maybe he had made those connections himself. She looked back at her book. “If you knew better, boy, you wouldn’t use my name.”

“Oh,” he said. “Is it a secret?”

She flipped a page of the book without reading a word. One of Shakespeare’s. “It’s a silly name. Your name is equally silly, so perhaps I will give you leave to use mine.”

He looked taken aback, the way most men were when she spoke to them. Loose shirts, chappals and beaded anklets. Surrounded by what amounted to litter in her shop – and they were always surprised when she knew their names. She didn’t know how to tell them that names were the first and easiest to suss out, written on the front of notebooks and books, on the ID cards attached to wallets. This would have been a harder art once upon a time, but at the moment, a witch who didn’t know the name of her client was truly a disgrace. The women weren’t as surprised – but then, it was always harder to surprise a woman.

“Neeladri.”

She breathed his name, the way you’d blow over a spoon of soup to cool it down. It was something men enjoyed – a breath of a name, slipping through her lips like a coin between her teeth. The boy chewed his lip until it could bleed – that’s how nervous he looked.

“What do you want, boy?” she asked him finally, putting her book away. “A spell for love? For the midterm? For better nights? For tolerance to alcohol?”

He looked taken aback then. All the possibilities that money and well adjusted square glasses could bring to him occurred then, thinking up everything he could do within a span of a few minutes. He used a handkerchief to wipe his forehead and she

laughed to herself. It was always endearing when young boys used handkerchiefs.

“I – that is – I wanted –”

He stumbled. He sucked in a breath, and then began again. She watched it all through an amused smile and waited.

There was a test coming up apparently, but the teacher wasn't being fair. This was a second one – and for some reason, it had been made mandatory – despite their internal assessment already being done. The prof had promised that there would be only one.

He was just giving her details like the size of the class, the relative amount of studying and cramming everyone else had done and the amount of coffee that had been consumed when she stopped him.

“What do you want, boy?”

“Can you make him fall sick?” he confessed.

She assessed him, up to down. He wasn't going to be able to give her much – perhaps some money, maybe a notebook filled with notes that could come in handy. A pile of old shirts and old jeans, maybe. Women were better when it came to that kind of thing – they could give old noserings, childhood necklaces.

She tasted the air around him – despite his unremarkable appearance, she knew he had something stronger about him. The smell of asphalt was in the air, but there were also hints of lemon. Something like chillies maybe. She watched carefully – a bus drove by, and the gust of wind didn't touch the arrangement of his hair. And she couldn't smell any hair gel.

“Very dangerous, making someone sick,” she said, in a sly, soft little voice. She said it more to her toes than to him. “Difficult magic, for one. And hard to come by all the right ingredients – besides, it's a lot of trouble for me. How much are you willing to pay?”

His ears went red. “Not more than two hundred.”

She hoped her expression had conveyed what she wanted said.

“Three hundred?”

“Thousand,” she said crisply.

“That’s insane!”

“That’s business.”

“Five hundred.”

“Nine.”

“Six.”

“Nine-fifty.”

“Eight! No more.”

She grinned. “Very well, but I want a little more then.”

He looked wary. “What?”

She got up and motioned for his hand. He didn’t move to give it. “Only blood,” she cooed. When his hand touched her, his skin was soft. His mother had never asked him for help in the kitchen. His wrist seemed worn from typing, the knuckles of his fingers had been popped over and over obsessively. She could see him then in class, his leg shaking, his fingers unable to stay still. She could help him, but she suspected he didn’t know he needed help. A little focus, a touch of concentration – not a hard spell, and cheaper, too.

But magical blood was rare. Magical blood was useful.

She pricked his index finger quickly. He didn’t gasp or flinch, but she could sense his pain. She squeezed the blood out into a tiny bottle. She held it up in the light, so that she could see the bits that were magic – the specks that were a touch green, a little glowing.

“Is that all?”

“Pay up, bachha. Pay up and we can perhaps get started.”

She handed her the money but he didn’t seem happy about it. She pocketed it quickly into her cargo shorts and looked at him with a flashy smile.

“You cheated me, didn’t you?”

“Like a pickpocket in Chaandni Chowk,” she said. “But that’s none of your business.”

He looked cross. The frown gave away another set of stories. If she concentrated hard enough, she’d be able to see his mother and father – every frown, every scold, every time he felt like someone was angry. She didn’t tell him this, of course.

“When will you do what is asked, Ruhiji?” he said pointedly.

The bottle danced across her fingertips. “Let’s go, sweetheart. Put that magical blood of yours to some use. Today is a good day for spellweaving. Moon’s supposed to be full.”

She was lying. Today was a good day because it was a Wednesday, and on Wednesday, there was a sale on fruits and vegetables in Reliance Fresh. She had no idea if the moon was full or not – in her experience, no one had ever checked, and everyone was always impressed when she talked about the moon.

He followed her. Her chappals never fell on potholes, he noted – not once, not even when the scooters zoomed by. She walked into the Reliance Fresh and handed him a red basket. He watched curiously as she threw things in – a tin, a few tomatoes, mangoes, and a series of different leaves – dhania, pudina, palak, sarson. He wanted to ask her what this was for, but he had a feeling that he wouldn’t be happy with the answer.

“The spinach is for me,” she said. “I have paneer in my fridge that I need used up.”

And what about the rest, he wanted to ask? Were the mangos for the spell? Did all witches shop at Reliance Fresh?

“What is it? What are you thinking? I can feel it from over here,” she asked impatiently.

“Why are we shopping at Reliance Fresh?” he asked, handing her some toothpaste.

She grinned at him. “Do you really want to know?”

Bargain Witchcraft

He had a feeling she didn't tell the truth like to just anyone. He nodded quickly.

"A lot of witches recommend organic words, especially for sickness. Wordcraft is safe when it comes to casting spells on other people, but that requires maya glass jars. I use fruits instead, because they store words well too, and you can generally pull out the right word from the mess of colours. If you were really clever, you could easily use paper to pull the right word – but I'm not very clever, not with words. And mangoes are expensive in August. Best bought on sale days."

He took a moment while she put the tube of toothpaste in her basket.

"And why are we buying toothpaste?" he asked.

She seemed to have been hoping for that question, almost. She leaned in, and he had that feeling that she didn't exist – not here, not for a moment. Not while the rhythm of the song was this, not now.

"Miswak tree leaves are hard to find and expensive to buy."

She winked.

It was absurd that it made sense, but it did. She didn't bother saying anything after that, and only looked at him expectantly when they were billed. He sighed and paid, but he had a feeling he had pleased her. She looked like she was in a good mood – when they walked back, her chappals seemed to slap the asphalt of the road.

She drew the curtain over her shop and told him to sit. There was a small chulha in the corner of the room, and a tinier gas. She lit the chulha and put a sauce pan over it, and water inside. He waited patiently, feeling a little foolish.

"Some of the toothpaste?" she asked.

He tore the tube from its box and handed it to her. She squeezed the life out of it, steadily mixing with an old spoon he wouldn't use if his life depended on it. She opened her phone and

seemed to scroll through when music began to play. He didn't fancy Arijit Singh as much as she did: when he looked at her queue, Jugni was followed by Taake Jhaanke. Then again, perhaps she just really liked Queen.

She asked him to pass the rest of the bag. When she got to the dhania and pudina, she threw it in untouched, not even saving a little or crushing it at all. She was quick about the business, and when she took out the mangoes, he wondered if there was any skill to the process anyway. Was she was just going to chuck them in?

He had so many questions. He didn't know precisely why he had come to her, apart from curiosity. The test wasn't as bad as needing a witch – his grades weren't terrible, after all. But then Rao had looked so vindictive when he announced the test. So angry.

Something came to life in the background – mechanical gears, movement. He jumped when the threads of a spinning wheel moved of its own accord.

She opened a small box at the bottom of the wheel and shoved the mango in. She shut the door of the metal box on which the wheel rested; and locked it.

“Can't have the box opening,” she said. “Volatile spells, you know?”

He swallowed.

The smell of mango drowned the air. The threads coloured pink, then orange, then yellow – it started to smell of riper and riper mango, from the early ones of the season until the rotting taste of mango was in the air. The threads had become red with the tang, glowing just a little before she pulled at them and tossed them in the saucepan.

Everything was swallowed by the swell of movement. The leaves spun faster and faster, the water boiled and boiled. Sooner or later, she had pressed sarson into the spinning wheel and taken out a mess of green and brown – the colour of the potion changed. He noticed she was beginning to sweat, beginning to look tired.

Bargain Witchcraft

Her feet shifted unsteadily. He hadn't noticed, but even the music had stopped.

"Sweetheart," she said, although it was taking her effort. "Give me your hand?"

He looked at her searchingly. "Why?"

"Unbelievably," she gritted out. "I'm feeling a little weak."

He clasped her hand.

He trusted her. He didn't know why, after she had just cheated him, after she had made fun of him, beyond the fact that he didn't know her beyond the last few hours.

Her palms were clammy but he felt it then – the delicate spell written into her. She was doing something to him, seeping some of him when she did the spell. He gripped harder out of surprise.

"What are you doing?"

"I told you," she said. "Magical blood is useful."

His magical blood? His?

The pot wobbled intensely, the strength of the spell spilling. She left his hand then, and immediately the sense of connection was lost, the web that he had been part of. She hummed to herself and the boiling ceased, the spinning wheel fell silent.

She strained the pot and took out whatever was left. In her fist, the strings were crushed to dust. She opened the curtains to let the light in, and blew it in the wind. The world felt heavier then, like the weight of the spell had been cast.

"All done," she murmured.

She still looked tired. It was then that he noted that she was old, she was probably weak.

"Can you teach me?" he asked, finally.

She didn't look at him, as she put the saucepan in the sink. "You don't want to learn from me, boy. You want to go to Lodhi Colony. I know two witches who have a shop you'd like more."

He frowned. "Are they better than you?"

She snorted.

“Well then why them?”

“Put it this way,” she said, keeping the saucepan on the shelf above the chulha. “They don’t have to buy toothpaste from Reliance Fresh for their spells.”

“All due respect, Ruhiji,” he said. “I’d rather learn here. It’s closer to college. I don’t have the time to travel to Lodhi colony.”

It was the right thing to have said. She was smiling, even though he could not see it. “Alright. Saturday night, if your mother lets you go. I don’t want people knowing I’ve got a boy from Hansraj helping me with my spells.”

“I live in a PG, and I’m studying at Ramjas,” he countered. “You might as well get used to it.”

Again, it was the right thing to say. She waved him away, but he knew she was pleased.

—

In the corner near Hudson lane, her shop hid behind a single curtain. The spinning wheel spun sometimes, the beat of the city was correct – and she existed. Sometimes she could be seen reading books, her feet up on her tables, sipping aamras in the summer. They said she was a witch, they said she was a fraud. They said she wore anklets on her feet and never wore anything apart from shorts and a shirt, even in the winter. They said all sorts of things, about how she did her spells and how she would only help if she was paid.

The sidewalks of Delhi wore down, and the history of the city moved – but she never did. Delhi is a city of endurance, a city that demands you to negotiate at all times. Like everything in Sarojini market, she sold witchcraft at lower than the MRP.

The Godfather

Cherene Aniyam Puthethu

The Godfather. Not Al Pacino, but me. Five feet three inches tall, twenty-two years old. Me - Alfred Varghese Kurian. Standing in the sweltering heat of Kerala in July, my white shirt is slowly soaking with sweat. As I mouth the prayers being sung by the ten-member choir, I glance at the single rotating ceiling fan above. He's bigger than your average fan; working way above his potential. But he is simply no match for the sun, who taunts the two million inhabitants of this city. But she is in turn tamed by the stained glass above us. Through the blood-red and azure blue of Mother Mary's robes, she streams in, lighting up the entire church.

My sister-in-law tries to quiet her child with little coos and kisses, to little success. Standing beside me dressed in a crisp white shirt and gold bordered mundu is my brother, Jackson, cradling my screaming six-month-old nephew in his arms. The heat spares none, from newborns to near-death senile citizens. I hear the priest say "godfather" and the word starts to sit on my chest and strangle me. No, it forces me to gaze into heaven and stare at the powers above though it burns my eyes to look. "What do you see?" it asks me.

I don't know. I see a God above who put words in my brother's mouth so he would ask me to be his son's Godfather. I see a God who made me so averse to conflict of any kind that saying no to literally anything was an unimaginable proposition. I see a God who gave my sister-in-law a child two months into a job she had been dreaming of for years. I see a God who blinded her with maternal love or fear of my mother or the paranoia of turning into a negligent mother herself so that she would give up her job instead of going back to work after six months. I see a God who

makes her happy changing diapers and feeding and bathing instead of doing the job she aspired to all her life.

According to the Church, I am responsible for ensuring that this screaming, squirming, six-month-old baby is raised in the doctrines of our faith. Thankfully, the title is merely ceremonial. I met my own godfather only fleetingly. My indoctrination was carried out by various men and women who volunteered to teach Sunday School classes from kindergarten through high school. And my mother and grandmother, who dragged me to church every Sunday morning and Friday evening for choir practise.

The priest talks about the privilege of being born into the faith. The word “Godfather” smacks my head. I think of my childhood with its constantly empty house, recurring power failure and the roaring rain and thunder outside. Sitting by the little battery operated light, cowering in fear, growing notions of my own masculinity in deep crisis, my only refuge was the idea of the God the adults at Church taught me about. A God who they told me had parted the Red Sea, gave children to barren women, who healed the blind, the crippled and the leper, drove out demons, who defeated powerful armies and gave victory to small scared men who believed in Him. A God who made the world, with all the good and the bad in it. A God who I imagined had kept me safe, crouched beside the sputtering emergency light, thinking about who exactly He might be, while a neighbour’s house was burning to the ground after getting hit by lightning.

This baby is soon to be christened Jacob, after the Father of the Twelve Tribes of Israel. Jacob, who stole his brother’s birthright and then wrestled with God. The word “Godfather,” on the other hand, is wrestling with me. It reminds me of friends turning junkies, uninterested in carrying the weight of the world we were introduced to, after eighteen years at home, with our own personal gods and guides and guardians. Friends who braved to alter their senses and test their limits and laugh at mortality than bow to the weight of the world. It reminds me of the fear of disap-

The Godfather

pointing this God which held me back from experiencing the full, wide world. The reason why I graduated on time, to my parent's relief, despite my own disappointment at my uneventful college experience and got acceptance letters light years away from this wretched country with all its heat and hate and heartlessness.

Jacob, would he wrestle with God? Or would he want to have nothing to do with stained glass churches with its tainted history of corruption and sex abuse scandals and hate-mongering and be swept away by the modernising brush of the seeming ridiculousness of believing in a God who turned water into wine? Would he be allowed to contend with a seven-day creation story where an all knowing, all foreseeing God makes the heavens and the earth, the birds of the air and the fish of the sea, the beasts that roam the land and finally man? Will he believe the Book when it tells him that He was made in God's image? Will he be grateful for a world that even the Lord saw as so good that he chose to rest on the seventh day instead of adding to his handiwork? Or will he have evolution introduced to him - March of Progress charts on Kindergarten walls? Is his first view of the world going to be one where the little Jacob he sees in the mirror is made in God's image or the version where Little Jacob was once a microorganism, swimming in the seas until it valiantly fought its way through multicellularity, breathing on land, bipedal locomotion, language development, wheels and fire and social living? Will he learn to marvel at human ingenuity and perseverance in spite of a world that moves too fast and burns too bright? Will Jacob grow up believing in the benevolence of God or the resourcefulness of man?

I step forward. I repeat oaths after the priest, one shaky hand laid solemnly on the baby's head. Jacob, true to his name, who is currently wrestling with his father's strong arms. I declare on behalf of this barely sentient baby, his lifelong commitment to the teachings of the Church. Me, on whom the teachings of the church were lost sometime during childhood, declare a lifelong vow

Cherene Aniyah Phuthethu

on behalf of an infant whose biggest achievement so far is being able to babble incessantly.

As I make the vows, guilt washes over me. Jackson winks at me as soon as the priest turns around to step into the altar. We grew up together. He always somehow knows what I'm thinking.

Baby Jacob. I want to give him a world filled with happiness. But I cannot lead him to a world I never managed to find.

Fair is Lovely

Suyashi Smridhi

In India, fair is lovely, so much so that a whole brand of cosmetics meant to lighten skin colour is actually, really called 'Fair Lovely'.

Aah! I can hear the snicker in your voice, see disbelief wrought on your eyebrows. I wish I could say I am only joking, like I joke about everything else, a habit you find profoundly annoying.

But go on, look it up.

Satisfied? I thought so.

So, in India, I am what they call fair, or Anglo-Indian, a more refined word meant to dissolve my roots and draw my lineage to the English.

Bless colonialism!

Belongingness lies at the back of my cupboard like a crushed white shirt waiting to be ironed for my next job interview. But why on earth would I need that? I am fair which means I have a fair access to jobs, jobs where I am guaranteed to fare well, all because of my skin colour!

Oh, don't worry. I'll put in a good word for you with my boss. But please remember to use Fair Lovely. *Twacha murjha si gyi hai*¹, we want you glowing at that job interview, don't we?

*Twacha murjha si gyi hai.*² Now where did I last hear that phrase?

Oh yes. My grandfather passed away recently. Thank you for offering your condolences. It really was a difficult time for me.

Now at funerals, you meet a lot of people who claim to have known you when you were a little kid, barely out of her crib.

¹Your skin looks dull.

²Ibid.

“Pehchana kya³” was a question I was asked like an incessant chant, the significance of recognition more important than any expression of grief. My mother glared at me from the corner whenever I defiantly answered, “Nahi”. Instead, I settled for the mellow, “Haan chote mein dekha tha⁴”, my brain at three much sharper than it is now.

Now this, this is why I believe I am a child prodigy. I wonder what Einstein would have to say about my IQ.

Oh, I am sorry. I can see you’re getting impatient. But what do I really do, in order to progress, I must digress. And guess what. I can get away with it, because?

Yes, you guessed it right. I am Anglo-Indian, both by heritage and vocation. You got me there.

Anyway. Back to the funeral.

So, there I was, in a South Delhi flat, surrounded by grief, doling out recognition like a humongous packet of kaaju. As I sat down to rest, a woman walked up to me, her head covered with her pallu, her eyes moistened with tears. “Arrey beta! Tumhein Pehchana nahi. Saloni ki beti ho?⁵” Upon confirmation, she bellowed for my mother, her desperation more acute than any I had seen so far. “Saloni! Iska rang kaise kamm ho gya, ab byah kaise hoga ?⁶”

And there it was. The question of my marriage, looming large on every relative’s head since the minute I turned eighteen. Being fair in India means being most eligible for marriage, no matter your education and achievements. The sun, therefore is my enemy, because the marriage market is supposed to be my friend.

“Isko dhoop mein mat jaane dena. Aur kaali ho jaayegi. Aur dahi iske chehre pe zaroor lagana. Rang saaf hoga⁷” By now

³Did you recognise me?

⁴Yes, I remember seeing you when I was younger.

⁵Oh kid! I didn’t recognise you. Are you Saloni’s daughter?

⁶Saloni! How has she grown darker, how will she get married now?

⁷Don’t let her go out in the sun, she will only grow darker. And make sure to apply curd on her face, her skin will lighten.

you would've thought people would be more creative about remedies for fair skin than staying away from the sun and pouring curd all over my face.

So how many gharelu nuskhe have you heard about? From "isse raat mein haldi ka doodh dena"⁸ to "mirchi mat khaane dena"⁹ to "Raat ke 3 baje uthkar Saraswati ke 5 chakkar lagana"¹⁰, I've heard about roughly 700. I know. Because I counted.

At international airports, I am often pointed out for not being 'Indian' enough. In line for security check, someone always asks, "so, half Indian?" When I respond in the negative, they lose interest and move on, disappointed that I won't allow them access to a filmy Bollywood scene, where my English mother meets my Indian father at a famous European university, only to passionately fall in love.

At local airports, I am looked at ravenously, a giggling gaggle of boys working up the courage to enquire about my history. "Madam, ek picture please", because a photograph with an apparently white stranger validates your travel itinerary.

But my favourite is the railway station.

On a recent visit back home, a coolie charged me 500 because I looked frangi.

When I settled down at my berth, a woman in my compartment, in her early fifties, looked at me intently, mentally vowing to take care of me throughout the 14-hour, tedious journey.

Slowly, she weaved her way into a conversation as the train lulled forward, curious about my heritage and my education. She listened gravely as I explained my interest in graphic novels as a serious medium of art, a co-mixture of art and writing, a commix instead of a comic. I talked of *Maus* by Art Spiegelman, for its

⁸Give her turmeric infused milk at night.

⁹Don't let her eat chillies.

¹⁰Get up at 3 in the morning and go around Goddess Saraswati 5 times.

ability to help me reconcile with my part Jewish lineage, which is so much more than a crooked nose I inherited from my Dadi¹¹.

After my one hour, deeply passionate lecture, she quietly interrupted. “Beti, ab toh jaan-pehchan ho gayi hai, umar kya hai?¹²” Perhaps by enquiring about my age, she tried to gauge my grandmother’s age, wondering if she too suffered at the hands of Nazis.

“I will turn 22 next month”, I replied, happy to acknowledge acquaintance-ship with her, and answer any questions about my family after such sympathetic listening. “Arrey waah! To aisa hai ki hamra ek tho ladka hai. Gormint mein kaam karta hai.¹³”

She paused, smiling sheepishly, expecting a subtle nod of appreciation.

Meanwhile, my heartbeat quickened, my mind infuriatingly chanting, “RUN! RUN! RUN! Why do you always try to befriend aunties on a train? For the love of God, can you not quietly snuggle in a corner and read your book? Abort mission! Abort mission! Go back to your berth. RIGHT NOW!”

But it was too late.

She continued, her smile laced with affection, “kya kehna hai, shaadi ki baat chalayein?¹⁴” And there I was, back to marriage once again.

¹¹Paternal grandmother

¹²Daughter, we know each other now, what is your age?

¹³Oh wow! So, here’s the deal. I have a son. He works in governmental services.

¹⁴What do you say, should we start talking about your marriage?

— 2 —

Night

golden shovel ending in outer space

after *fleetwood mac*

Anna Sheppard

been meaning to ask if the Congaree songbirds'
hymns our first day on the river are
what you're always singing
when your mind's windled like
the august river burning our cheeks saturnial, if they
hurt the way i remember. i didn't know
your curls well then, and so can't explain the
way your name obliges melody to the day's score.
but the river sang too as it drifted our kayaks safe down the river and
at the same time hid the rock which gave someone else's its final breath. i
think this image has something to do with love,
that sometimes what carries you also hides what could ultimately break you
and here is where i meant to talk about space, what i
know of it, which is that even the sky, which does love
the stars, can become, without effort, that bottomless midnight mess you
spend eons pulling stars back out of. & i
know: i hurt you when i don't mean to & love
you when you don't know but remember what you
said, that day the moon eclipsed the blessed body of the sun: it's like
she doesn't know what she's doing. god, may she never
have to. may her craters soak deep in the sun's rays, a heat they've never felt before.

What I Look To When Holdin' My Tongue

Darius Christiansen

Palm trees, moss, oaks, banana bushes, trumpet flowers,
 crepe-myrtles.
Apple cores held by black hands,
 black hands held to July's skies, and
tangerine rinds age like ya dirty-red skin,
 plum-sticky mouths
speak to the projects, the projects
 be filled wit scents of pickle-meat and alligator tail.

Mr. Okra got cantaloupe today, and speaks in jazz
 couplets, and
a weeping willow does its dance alone in a rain-waxed
 night,
dogwood and snapdragons take off in the wind.
And I light blackberry incense
throughout my house, while you
throw yourself onto the couch,
and pigeons question me from a dew-matted garden
Is this it for you?

Sandalwood

Amna Shoaib

My husband brought home the scents of all his mistresses. I only had to take a whiff of his body to know who else he had carried into bed with us.

On Tuesdays, it was a tacky strawberry-like scent from a body spray picked off the shelves of Walmart by a low-paid waitress with no taste. On Thursdays, it was a nose-tingling high note of a strong perfume that had no personality (definitely a middle-aged mother of two who sneaked out before her husband returned to be with her vulgar lover).

I suspected that on Fridays he went to his favorite one. It was a gentle sandalwood fragrance that only revealed itself when his pores flowered open from sweat. It grew slowly in strength and soon, both of us were enveloped in the odor of his lover.

In my head, I liked to plot his day with his favorite one. On Friday, he left the factory early to go to her apartment in a posh part of the city. He never took flowers, just his ever-expanding self. This one was different from the rest. She had money and class and a vial of sandalwood perfume that was a gift from her mother. Or a former lover. This one had porcelain skin and racks full of clean, soft lingerie.

In bed, my husband chastised me for being the whore he feared I would become. Outside the bedroom, he chastised our son for being like his mother. Of course, he did not mean this as an attack on me: I was an ideal woman.

Rahul was like me in ways boys are not allowed to be like their mothers. He had a soft face with no stubble to harden it. His voice, too, sounded curiously like mine but so different on him. He had a sad, mousey squeal that disappeared every time my husband growled. It was strange for my husband to berate Rahul for his

Sandalwood

voice; Rahul rarely spoke in front of his father. He stayed in his room, reading his comics or playing his games or staring at the ceiling fan. This behavior seemed to antagonize my husband even more who, first muttered under his breath, then loudly proclaimed, that our son was like them.

“Like who?”

“Like the men who paint their cheeks crimson and stand out there for everyone.” His hands flailed, as if, like an angry god, he could conjure the men he talked of out of thin air.

Fury swelled in my chest, and then hardened into a familiar spite.

“Teach him how to be a man, then,” my voice glowed like embers in my throat.

My husband never listened to my suggestions to take him out for fishing or hunting or to the factory where they molded liquid fire into iron. In the end, I think, he did not really care at all. In the end, he left home for his whores to return with their stench on his body.

Soon enough, his favorite woman had replaced all others. She, with her sandalwood perfume, had leeches out all other fragrances out of his skin. I laid in bed and listened to him breathe. I had never once asked him what held him up at work all day, but he murmured his excuses in bed sometimes. The boss is a slave-driver, who keeps him on his toes all day. He couldn't leave the job, no, it paid too well. And, so it was.

Rahul had moved out for college by then. My husband had barely taken any notice of his only child leaving. His not-yet-old body was crumbling, in the inevitable way bodies like his did. It seemed as if something had collapsed in his back, and he doubled over when he stood. His breath petered out every time he walked for more than two minutes. He continued to eat and drink as he always had, wasting a little bit of himself with each day. He was away on the weekends, and I understood that he was still welcome in the sandalwood-scented bedchambers.

It was a Monday morning. It was a heart attack. Apparently. He had jolted once in his sleep - his face souring in bitter shock – and then slumped . The next day, there was no-one to say that he was gone too soon. If anything, I felt he had dragged his and my misery for far too long.

Rahul said he had to prepare for his exams; I did not insist that he attend the funeral. The entire day, I sat up straight, keeping my head up a tide of emotion I could not call grief. His living, his transgressions, his hate had not fatigued me, but with his death, my body seemed to want to coil inwards. People streamed in, a hesitant sympathy tainting their faces.

I answered their “What an incredible loss” with “This is what God had willed.” The entirety of the funeral, I waited for one of his women to walk in, sobbing into her tissue, her sandalwood scent trailing behind her. She did not come. I felt a tinge of betrayal on my husband’s behalf. His boss, who introduced himself as he held my hand, was gracious enough to attend. My husband never had a kind word to say about the man, but he looked genuinely upset over the death. It is only fair that a man should have one person to mourn his leaving.

The daylight lingered for one long moment, and then dissolved into evening. Even as guests left, his boss stayed back, talking to the caterers. He drummed his fingers on his jeans, and then came to say goodbye.

“Your husband was such a hardworking man. I – we, will feel his loss immensely.”

Silently, he took my hand.

“This is what God had willed.”

“How are you, now?” His voice was gentle, his hand warm. We sat. He put his arm around my shoulder.

“Please let me know if there is anything you want. . .”

I was so tired, I just wanted to rest my head somewhere.

“ . . . anything I can do.”

His shirt was soft against my cheek.

Sandalwood

“It’s okay, it’s okay. There, there.”

He rocked me gently and loosened his tie. I burrowed my face in his neck. His shirt smelled of stiff linen, freshly ironed. The warmth of the day had accumulated just beneath his throat. Under his collarbones, I imagined he had hurriedly dabbed on some cologne. I burrowed deeper. Such a soft, sweet scent, yet so hard to recognize. I inhaled. A wave of fragrance wafted out: Subtle, sandalwood. I jolted up to look him in the eye and he froze.

Hermanita de la Mar

KayLee Chie Kuehl

The sun sinks behind a bright sea. The smells of the shoreline: fish, salt, and sweat waterfall into a bright green living room. Muffled voices echo through an open window of a slender, blue house. Puerto Rican music plays a light tune. Prints of pink flowers and women decorated in braids, twists, and Bantu knots compliment the room. There is one photo of a man offering a kiss to a woman's cheek. There are no photos of mothers. There are no photos of fathers. Only women. Only flowers.

Hermanita stands next to the open window. Wearing a cherry skirt and a white scarf, she smiles. The breeze blows through her hair, woven in waist-length microbraids. She hangs her head back. Her neck is orange, glittering under the sun.

"Tal Belleza." She sighs. "I'm lucky. Very lucky." Hermanita turns from the window, twirling and giggling. A light tan line stretches over her left finger.

"¿Te gusta?" You stand in the kitchen, your face smooth and solemn. No smile, no laugh, no wrinkles crease your skin. Your eyes are round and glossed with a thick, dark shine. Watching Hermanita's bare toes tap the floor, you spread your hands across the cool surface of a marble counter. You think back to the first moment Hermanita's number brightened your phone two years ago. You had been sitting in the dining room with red wine on your lips, ignoring phone calls from your divorce lawyer and scrolling through old photos of you and Mother before they were deleted. You remember settling on an image of the inside of a chocolate shop. Mother stood in front of a tall tray of vanilla fudge, smiling with an open mouth. Her hair was big and curly, a dark frame hanging above her yellow hoops. As her lips closed around half

Hermanita de la Mar

a stick of caramel, the words, ‘sister,’ from an unknown number flashed on the screen.

Pasta and chicken boil on the stove behind you. The scent of fish mixes with wheat and sauce steam. You inhale, glancing at you watch. “¿La musica? Is it okay?”

“Si, me encanta.” Hermanita claps her hands and laughs. “You have great taste.” She reaches out her hand to you. “¿Quieres bailar? I know how to salsa.”

You flinch. You remember Mother’s slender ankles and her golden slippers spinning on grey cobblestones. You remember her hugs, bouncing in her arms as she danced around every flower. You remember her skin, soft and warm— like the earth. You remember her kisses, and her laugh.

You shake your head, rubbing your hand behind your neck. “No. Gracias.”

Hermanita frowns. Her heel squeaks against the wood floor and her bottom lip presses against the top, twinkling. “Can I keep speaking Spanish?” she asks.

“Por supuesto.” You turn and stare at the stove clock. “You said you wanted to get better, right? Tu español es muy bueno. Me gusta.”

Hermanita presses her palms against her cheeks, which squish as she smiles. “¡Muchas gracias!” Giggling, she pauses in front of a circular picture frame. A woman with honey eyes stares back with a plum, closed-lip grin. Brunette faux locs twist in two buns on top of her head.

Freckles sprinkle over her nose pierced silver, like cinnamon. Her neck and chest are painted in turquoise gems. Next to the photo, a glass bowl full of dead rose petals sit.

Hermanita brushes her fingertips over the glass. No dust sticks to her skin. “I . . .” She touches the edge of the bowl. “I was afraid that . . . you didn’t want to see me . . .”

You sigh, pulling a wooden spoon from the cupboard. You grab the pepper and salt, shaking it in the cooking pasta. “¿Por

qué?”

“Hm?” Hermanita gazes out the window. A purple shadow from the shoreline highlights her face and the face of the woman behind the golden frame. The ocean’s song is a slow drawl. “¿Por qué... Por qué lo que?”

“Why would you—” Your jaw clenches. You don’t understand why this conversation is so tedious. You don’t understand why you don’t have patience. You should be more affectionate, like her. But you aren’t. You aren’t her. “Por qué piensas que no quise ver a ti?”

“¡Oh!” She blushes. “Perdon.”

You glance at Hermanita, catching her smile. It glimmers like golden slippers. A breath catches in your throat. “You have...” Your stomach drops. “You look like Mother.”

“I—” Hermanita’s chest is splotched red. Your eyes meet. “Thank you.”

You glance at the bowl of roses, and turn your back.

Hermanita looks down, touching her hands to her stomach. She smooths her skirt, staring at the woman behind the frame. “I didn’t hear from you for a year, you know.” She says. “Then suddenly I get a message from you about a visit. I— I thought you didn’t want to know me... before... But now”—Hermanita smiles, resting her fingers on the frame. “Estoy aquí. Contigo. Mi hermana mayor.” She picks up the photograph. “Who is this?”

You turn your head and drop the wooden spoon and your heart. They clatter on the floor. “No!”

Hermanita jumps, holding the frame to her chest. You watch her begin to shake, her eyes wide and overflowing.

“I’m sorry.” You say, picking up the spoon. “No toques eso por favor. Put it back. Please put it back.”

“Oh,” Still trembling, Hermanita places the photo back next to the bowl of dry petals.

“That woman... in the frame...” You laugh. Rubbing your forehead, you think about the years that have passed since

Hermanita de la Mar

she's returned your texts. "She's the reason I got divorced twice." You rest your hands on your hips. "Mother never liked her. Mother never liked any woman." You sigh. "No importante. Olvidarlo."

Blue and black begin to cut across the sky as the sun lowers. On the beach, two women dance in the sand. They twirl around each other, holding hands, throwing dirt with shells and flowers laced in their curls. Behind them, an older woman decorated in two breeze-bruised fish-tails claps for the dancing women, who reach to embrace her. Their laughter bounces off the walls of the living room in soft echoes.

Hermanita smiles, leaning her head against the window frame. "Me encantan tus casa."

"Gracias."

"¿Has vuelta tierra?" asks Hermanita. "A Puerto Rico?"

"Fecuentemente. Visitar mi Abuelita."

Hermanita pulls at the end of her braids. One comes loose from beneath her white headband. "¿Te siente...." Her braid dangles against her cheek. "¿Te sientes seguro aquí? With everything happening?"

"I have money. Of course I feel safe here." You remove the pasta from the burner. You flip the chicken. "Do you...do you go to Asia?" The chicken sizzles in the pan. Fat oozes from the meat. "Dijiste que tienes familia en China?"

Hermanita swallows. "Tibet."

"Oh," You slap the meat. "Y India?"

"Nepal... Eh, un poco en India, mi bisabuelo de Kathmandu, pero mi abuela de Batang— but Kham is no where near Nepal and Ancestry.com is, just wack, so"—

"Wait"— Your chest tightens. "You said... you said Kathmandu? Your... great-grandfather was from Kathmandu?"

Hermanita rolls her fingers in her hands. "I... I think so... I don't"— Her eyes begin to twinkle, but she rubs their glimmer away. "I don't know anything except for what DNA tests have tried to tell me. And it's never the same." Her voice is quiet,

embarrassed. “I just get. . . lines pointing to invisible faces. Or some guesstimation of heritage—I don’t even know anymore.” She closes her eyes, rubbing the tan line on her finger. “You’re the first real thing I found. You had a name. . . a picture. . . You weren’t a guess. You really exist.”

You press her fingertips to your temples. Colors flicker in your head—pinks, blues, whites. You’re a child again, playing with the feathers and beads hanging above your bed. Mother sits with you as she fingers the half-moon sewn in the middle of the ornament. Cupping her hand around yours, Mother tells you of the beautiful, yellow lights and captivating, velvet nights of the city her ornament was brought home from—Kathmandu, only one of the many stars lighting a country called Nepal.

“Hermana?” Hermanita calls from the living room. “Are you okay?”

Your tongue sticks to the roof of your mouth, and you feel sick. It peels off too slow. You’re happy the ornament was burned with every picture of Mother and your childhood.

“Sí.” You reply, removing the chicken from the stove. “Forget it. I’m fine.” You grab three red plates from the cupboard. You hesitate, putting the third off to the side. “¿Quienes es tú marido?” You pour the noodles unconstrained in the sink. Steam rises towards the lights. “¿Estás embarazada, si?” You give a small smile. “Felicidades.”

“Um,” Hermanita scrunches her nose. “¿Embara. . .?”

“Pregnant.”

“Oh!” Hermanita’s eyes widen. “How did you. . .?” She looks at her stomach, slightly curved at the top of her skirt. “Estoy mostrando?”

“Una poca. ¿Quién es el papa?”

Hermanita says nothing. She rubs her stomach.

You eye her from the kitchen. “¿Estás casada?”

“Married, right?” Hermanita laughs, touching her left hand. “Sí, estoy casada.”

Hermanita de la Mar

You scoop a handful of pasta and set it on the plates.
“¿Cuantos meses?”

“¿Embarazada? Semanas, en realidad. Diez.”

“Temprano todavía.”

“Yeah.” Hermanita walks towards a white sofa decorated in fluffy pillows. Her bare feet squeak. “¿Puedo?” You nod.

Hermanita drops herself on the sofa. She closes her eyes, gripping the blanket. “I was married. . . after five years of knowing them. We’ve been married for two years. Estoy casada a mejor amigo. They’re still my favorite person. Pero, um...” Hermanita rubs the tan line on her finger. “I left them.”

You glance at Hermanita, and look out the window. A pearly black blanket sweeps over the sky. Small dots of velvet poke at the thick spread of beckoning night. On the beach, the three women walk side by side along the shore. They bring two fingers to their lips, kissing the ocean goodbye.

“¿Que hago?” Hermanita squeezes the grey blanket. She curls it to her chest. Sparkles swell in the corners of her eyes. She weeps. “Sobre todo? Hermana, what do I do?”

You wave the steam billowing from the sink. Picking up the two plates of fresh pasta and chicken, you walk it over to the sofa. Sitting, you watch Hermanita’s tears spill over her skirt.

Slowly, you tuck a loose braid behind Hermanita’s ear, cupping her neck. You put two fingers to your lips, and press them against her nose.

“Don’t worry, Hermanita.” You hold Hermanita’s hand that grips the blanket. Your eyes meet. “You are loved.”

— 3 —

Midnight

Table Etiquette

Ashley Hajimirsadeghi

when the moon draped over us
like tapestries father brought back
from Iran sister told us a story
while we sat our dinner table

mother had made ghormeh sabzi
with too many lemons
our plates left untouched
lest the sour taste linger,
prickling our tongues quietly

but at the end of the affair,
we were left bitter at our cores

it was told like an epic poem,
details twisting and turning,
the female protagonist finds
treasure after being cooped up
among terracotta buildings
of southeastern Tehran

but instead of gold
she found a man

her story ended
with a plate screaming
as it scraped past her ear
and shattered against the wall
the cooked lemons stuck,

Ashley Hajimirsadeghi

slowly drooping downwards
like the remains of our father's smile

I ate a spoonful of sabzi—
I'd rather be sour inside

Sapphirical Slick

Darius Christiansen

when Manny got shot, I made the sky cry
rocks.
and when I looked in the mirror
that night,
I tried to face my interior,
but i just saw somethin too black, somethin
like
my brudda, who has the face of our father,
who has the face of Cousin Butch,
who all have a face of a gazelle just
snapped up in some tiger's jaws,
who is yet full.
And I consumes buku,
just like any animal that is yet full:
bad meats, bad sex, toast, even a lil swig of liquor
and when that shot go down—
give me, two claps and a ric flair and my magic'll be
back
to fill
them bulletholes with palm trees, my back be like
wagon

my back like
wagon drippin palm trees
and there's joy too, yea lappin somewhere at my ankles
in the form of a styrofoam cup,
in the form of a man,
sweetened rye
wit good rhythm inside

Darius Christiansen

risin higher and higher 'bove the crowd as the music
from the speakers skids 'cross the cement —
air for them wings on he eyelids
baby on one,
and made of flesh,
and bone,
he spits on the ground
speakin earth to river, I mean earth begettin river,
I mean river

forgettin earth and how sweet and lawless,
them caged boys in Orleans sound when they sing

anyways — there's a storm threat'nin,
i'm drunk drunk,
death is dancin me ragged,
and the frontlines is always ready
to swallow

Almost Over

Mahnoor Imran Sayyed

“I’m surprised that you’re here,” Mehrunissa said as her hennaed fingers gingerly spread the scarlet curtains apart.

Sunlight streamed in, bringing with it the promise of dusk. Its sudden appearance stung Shahista’s eyes, which had just become accustomed to the darkness of the little room. She blinked twice, pausing in her work. Upon opening her eyes, she found her adversary watching her, a soft smile playing on her sensuous lips.

They were sitting by a window in Mehrunissa’s cramped apartment. It was hot but only just. As April inched into May, the heat escalated – each day bringing the unbearable Punjab summer closer and closer. From outside, Shahista could hear the fruit vendor call out to people on the street. She had met him earlier when she was attempting to navigate her way through the narrow and suffocating passageways of Old Lahore. It was he, in fact, who had assured Shahista that she was in the right place. He had even left his half-loaded fruit cart unattended to escort her through the mazelike alleyways to this small apartment, hidden somewhere in crook of a nearby street. In retrospect, she realized, he was probably hoping for some kind of financial compensation but Shahista had been so nervous about the outcome of this meeting-her heart pounding in her chest-that such a possibility had skipped her mind entirely.

She had stood at the door, running her unsteady fingers over its rough, mustard exterior. The journey to it had been a frustrating one. Not just so because Shahista was in a part of Lahore completely unfamiliar to her, but also because she had been second-guessing herself at every jammed traffic junction, seeing ominous omens in every skewed fork in the road.

Even now, she was overwhelmed by the flood of emotions that coursed through her. She had known of the existence of this small apartment and of the woman who dwelled within for almost over three years but only now had she gathered the strength, or rather been forced to do so, to come here and meet her husband's infamous prostitute wife. She willed herself now to take calming deep breaths, to steady her racing pulse and answer the woman sitting in front of her.

"Yes, well, he asked me to come." She finally replied. Her voice sounded hoarse and unused even to her own ears. A strike contrast, she thought bitterly, to Mehrunissa's own. She felt like a fool and regretted saying anything in the first place. Her hands fumbled with the soaked washcloth and she tried to focus on the task at hand.

She had been struck by disbelief when her husband had directed her to visit Mehrunissa. In spite of their prolonged animosity, she had never even entertained the possibility of meeting the other woman. Last night when he stumbled in drunk after midnight and told that he wanted her to tend to Mehrunissa's injuries tomorrow, she had nearly balked at the prospect. Previously, he had told her in the midst of intense arguments and beatings that she was not even fit to kiss his beloved's feet, let alone lay eyes on her. So much so that Shahista had begun to see Mehrunissa in a godly sort of light, as an untouchable Madonna. It had been the fear of what she would find in that cramped little apartment in Old Lahore that had always deterred Shahista from visiting the other woman.

She had been unable to sleep the night before, tossing and turning in her bed. She was unsure of how to feel about this new development, unsure of what to do with the plethora of emotions, from rage to envy to delight, that it had evoked. She finally had the opportunity to meet the woman who had taken everything away from her, the woman who was supposedly her antithesis. Presently, she had laid out all her old medical instruments on the chair beside

her. Their metallic skins gleamed in the sunlight and Shahista shot occasional glances at them to glean a sense of familiarity in this alien territory.

She reached down to dip the washcloth again in the small container of water. Mehrunissa's daughter had dutifully fetched the basin at her command. A pang of envy and longing had filled Shahista as she watched the child waddle her way forward with the water. Shahista had no children of her own and after a decade of marriage and one deadly miscarriage, she had given up hope on motherhood entirely. She derived great pleasure from the fact that Mehrunissa too had been unable to provide her husband with any children. The daughter her husband brought up every so often to taunt Shahista with praises of her adversary's fertility-was not his. Thus, Shahista harbored no ill-will towards the little girl who had inherited her mother's wide curious eyes and seemed to possess a mild and dutiful temperament. In fact, she had been disappointed when Mehrunissa had sent away the little girl from the room with a gentle turn of her hand and a dismissive "Go next door and play with Rubi Khala's¹ children."

Her hand drew out the cloth slowly and she allowed herself to examine the woman in front her at leisure. Shahista had been painting a portrait of Mehrunissa in her head for what had seemed like ages. Her husband said he had been struck by her beauty from the first moment he saw her somewhere in these gallis² four years ago.

Like most Pakistani men of his class, he had been faithful to Shahista in the first few years of their marriage. They had been blissfully in love and she had happily given up a career as a nurse at their local hospital to become his wife. Yet as the years piled on, Shahista found that she could no longer sustain her husband's interest as she used to and unlike other couples, they did not have

¹Khala is an urdu word used for maternal aunts. It may also be used more casually for a mother's female friends and extended female relatives.

²Urdu word that translates loosely into streets.

the opportunity to bond over their children. When she had first found out that he was seeing women in Lahore's notorious red-light area, she had thrown a fit and demanded that he cease his philandering or else she would leave him. He had, in turn, gotten down on his knees, tears streaming down his contorted face and begged for forgiveness, promising that it would never happen again. However, within a mere week of this dramatic display, he was back to his old habits.

It was five years into their marriage, after Shahista had made her peace with these sporadic visits to Heera Maandi³ and his drinking, that she discovered that he had actually married one of those dirty, kanjiri⁴ women. Shahista still remembered the humiliation she had felt when she had realized the extent of her husband's disloyalty through the chattering of her annoying next-door neighbor. All of this had been going on right under her nose when she was finally pregnant with their child!

When her husband came home that day, she had thrown yet another magnificent fit. Yet this time, it seemed to have no effect. He stood there coldly watching her break down and reminisce about their early years together. She had cradled her then blossoming womb, heavy with their unborn child and begged him to be loyal for its sake, the child that they had both waited so long for. After she was done, he held her by the shoulders forcefully and told her that he would never leave Mehrunissa. He spared no time in reminding Shahista of her duty to him as his wife and now the mother to his child—she had to stand by him at all costs. He had then threatened to throw her out on the streets if she ever objected to his behavior again. That's when Shahista knew she no longer enjoyed the luxury of complaining.

With passing time and the miscarriage that followed, her husband grew more and more short tempered with her, using the

³Heera Mandi is Lahore's famous redlight area. It is located in Old Lahore.

⁴Kanjari is an Urdu curse word that translates to "prostitute."

smallest of excuses to beat her while exalting the virtues of his “other wife.” Shahista had come to associate Mehrunissa with the blinding hot rage of her husband, with flashes of helpless humiliation and with the bitter saltiness of her own tears. She was everything as her husband put it, that Shahista was not. A woman of great beauty, she had been told, so she had envisaged her as such with a long, thick oiled braid and prized fair skin. In the many hours that Shahista was forced to spend cooped up alone in her house she had often tried to picture the colored, almond shaped eyes, rimmed with kohl, the painted lips and the voluptuous body that might belong to the woman her husband claimed to love more than anyone or anything else in the world. She had imagined under Mehrunissa’s name, an array of ravishing raven-haired seductresses. Whenever she would encounter beautiful women in the streets or see one on TV, she would paint her under the guise of Mehrunissa, imagining them in her husband’s passionate embrace. She was so completely sure of the ideal in her head that when she had embarked on today’s adventure, she was certain that when she actually met her husband’s other wife, she would not be surprised by her looks. She had been wrong.

When Mehrunissa had swung the door open earlier today, Shahista had found her breath caught somewhere in her throat. The woman in front of her, dressed in plain but bright red, bore no resemblance to the archetype “beautiful woman” that Shahista had come to associate her with. She was thin, painfully so. Her skin was a dark shade of brown, the color of fertile earth. With her slim frame and dusky skin, she was the opposite of all that was considered ideal in their culture. In spite of this, Shahista could not deny the strange beauty that shone through Mehrunissa’s sharp features, through the proud arch of her brow bone and the perfect bow of her lips.

There seems to be a natural grace about her, Shahista observed now, glancing at the figure before her as she continued to rinse the washcloth. Mehrunissa sat with her legs facing Shahista,

her shalwar⁵ was raised above her left knee to reveal an angry red bruise. A kurta⁶ hung loosely on her slender frame, only filling out around the curves of her modest breasts. Her face was turned towards the window, an arm curved against the windowsill and on it rested her chin. It occurred to Shahista that Mehrunissa's beauty, though not as obvious, was much more enchanting than that of the women she had conjured up specifically because it was not immediately apparent.

Shahista wondered what Mehrunissa thought of her, in her drab white clothes with her graying hair and worry lines deeply etched into her forehead. Shahista had known that she could not hope to match Mehrunissa in youth or beauty...yet sitting here, her own inadequacy and gracelessness felt all the more obvious.

Mehrunissa had caught Shahista staring several times but said nothing. Their eyes met once more for the briefest of seconds as Shahista re-placed the wet washcloth on Mehrunissa's leg. An emotion she could not place swelled within her as she rubbed the cloth in slow circular motions over the bruise.

"I did not mean to take him from you." Mehrunissa broke the silence.

Shahista froze midway. Her fingers clenched the washcloth. The novelty of the situation was beginning to wear off. The mention of their uneasy predicament brought forth the all too familiar feelings of blind hatred and jealousy that she felt towards the other woman and they took over her. Her voice was thick with emotion when she replied, "But you did all the same." Mehrunissa opened her mouth to reply but Shahista continued, "He loved me once, as impossible may it be for you to believe right now. We were happy." She found herself blinking back tears as she spoke, a surprise because she had long since thought herself content with her

⁵an altered form of Harem pants that are worn as everyday wear by women across Pakistan.

⁶A loose long shirt, worn as an upper, used as everyday wear by women in Pakistan and the subcontinent.

husband's infidelity. "He used to bring me presents, compliment my cooking...he...we planned a future together for our...children." She reminisced, bringing forth the memories from the early days of the marriage. Memories, she had believed herself to have lost all fondness for. A tremble crept up into her voice. "But now, he does all that with you while I sit at home and wait."

"I'm sorry." Mehrunissa replied.

Shahista froze for a moment realizing that the other woman looked genuinely forlorn and apologetic. Yet, the emotions that Shahista had kept at bay for so long would not be deterred by such a succinct apology. She felt the fear and frustration that overtook her whenever she served her husband cold dinner. She recalled the familiar taste of humiliation when she was serenaded her with compliments of Mehrunissa. She relived the helplessness of his nightly beatings and of the torturous ritual of having to bear his body on hers. The emotions that she had kept so tightly in check since she had first arrived, rather since this whole debacle had started, hidden somewhere deep within where she had banished them for fear of her own safety, burst forth and ran free. They clawed their way up her throat and were out into the world in the form of vicious words.

"You filthy kanjari! Have you no shame? Do you realize what you have done? You have ruined my life!" Her voice rose to a roar. "How dare you think that you can sit here and make up for all the things that you've done...all that I have lost because of you?"

In her fury, she threw the washcloth to the floor and stood up, grabbing Mehrunissa by the shoulders. "How dare you speak of forgiveness with that impure mouth of yours? I lost my child, my future because of you and yet you have the audacity to..." Shahista paused for a moment, shaken by Mehrunissa's unflinching and unmoving gaze. Her hold on Mehrunissa's shoulders loosened and she stepped back, her head in her hands.

“What happened that night,” Mehrunissa answered in a disquieting, even tone, “was not my fault.”

“Was not your fault... WAS NOT YOUR FAULT?” Shahista was hysterical now, screaming at the top of her voice. Tears flowed down her face unabashedly and her hands shook with years of pent up rage. She found herself reliving a plethora of horrific memories. Her husband’s fists colliding against her cheekbone from when she had cursed at the mention of Mehrunissa. Being pushed down face first and breaking her nose the one time she had dared to quarrel with him drunk. And, the most terrible of all, waking up in the middle of the night, pregnant and in a pool of her own blood.

“Had he not been with you that night. . . I wouldn’t have had to suffer alone.” “My child. . . he. . .” she rambled, “my child could’ve been saved. But he was with you, while I bled out on our marital bed screaming in agony, my husband was with you!”

Blinded by rage, Shahista retreated to where she had been sitting, while Mehrunissa continued to watch from her place, suddenly alert and cautious. Shahista fumbled with her instruments until she found a pair of long, heavy scissors. Before Mehrunissa could fully come to terms with what was about to happen, Shahista pounced, pressing the silver sharp edge against the other woman’s throat. Her body rested on Mehrunissa’s own, her weight pulling the other woman down, preventing her from moving. Shahista strategically placed her knee over Mehrunissa’s injuries, slowly applying pressure.

Panic filled Mehrunissa’s eyes as she struggled to no avail. Her eyes darted around the room as she considered her options. Her daughter was next door and even if she screamed for help, she would be dead before anyone got to her. Shahista noted her look of resignation as it finally dawned on Mehrunissa that there was no escape.

She smiled weakly at her opponent and leaned in. “I lost my child then but now I will have my revenge,” Shahista whispered softly into Mehrunissa’s ears. But the expression of fear and

panic on Mehrunissa's face failed to elicit the sweet ecstasy she had thought she would experience. Instead, memories of that fateful night clawed at her. It felt like she was back there again, on that rickety bed, alone and in endless pain. As she relived the anguish of losing her child, Shahista began to cry. Her tears fell across Mehrunissa's face in small splatters. Though the weapon remained positioned firmly against her throat, gleaming silver in the dying light, Shahista could form words no longer; her long gasping sobs filled the silence in the room as she relived once more the excruciating pain and grief of the worst night of her life while Mehrunissa watched her silently.

"Allah hu Akbar."⁷

The familiar call of the azaan being sounded at a nearby mosque jolted Shahista back to reality. She leaned in to the woman before her and raised her other arm. Her hand met Mehrunissa's face in a resounding slap as she said, "Why won't you say anything, you stupid bitch? Say something! Atone for all the terrible things that have happened to me because of you!"

Mehrunissa who had until now been quiet turned her face slowly back towards Shahista's own and fixed her with a furious glare. A red mark had begun to bloom on the cheek that Shahista had struck. The silence that followed, as the two women looked at each other, was deafening. Then just as Shahista was about to speak, Mehrunissa threw her head back and laughed. It was a loud musical laugh, filled with genuine amusement. It caught Shahista by surprise and she opened her mouth but Mehrunissa interrupted her once more.

"Why won't I say anything, you ask?" Mehrunissa answered, her voice laced with fury. "When has it mattered what I say or what I want? Did it matter when my father forced himself on me when I was nine? Did it matter when my brother began to

⁷The starting phrase to the azaan, the regular call to prayer for Muslims, that is sounded by mosques before every prayer time. This Arabic phrase translates to "God is Great."

pimp me out at 14?” Her body swelled forth beneath Shahista’s own as her voice rose with passion. “Did it matter when I was forcibly impregnated? Did it matter all those years I worked in the Heera Mandi? Prostituting myself out to a new man every night to keep my daughter alive? Did it matter yesterday when our husband beat me black and blue for wanting to send my daughter to school?” She paused for a minute letting the impact of her words sink in. “You ask me why I will not say anything? It is because I know,” she continued bitterly, “that it doesn’t matter what I have to say.”

Shahista watched quietly as Mehrunissa’s face crumpled. She felt Mehrunissa’s hands reach forward and pull her closer until the only thing separating them was the deadly edge in between. “So do it.” She said with a slight tremor in her voice, “Kill me here and now because it makes no difference.”

Taken aback by her words, Shahista looked up to see Mehrunissa’s face. She saw a line of tears slowly making its way down her chin and onto Shahista’s own lips. As she pressed the sharp edge of her scissors down with greater force along Mehrunissa’s neck, it occurred to her that her tears tasted a lot like her own.

Ward SSK 37: Eric

Medha Faust-Nagar

I watch him glare from the shrink's vinyl chair. So convinced of his aloneness; I sit at his feet while his blood runs into my cupped hands. Rubies slipping and dripping between my greedy fingers. This is, after all, all he will ever give me, as far as he will ever get.

Scars from old surgeries and guzzled gasoline mar his liver. And my face—that I cannot press into the cold curve of his neck—he says my face brings the sun. The nurses watch, eyes on us like vultures' (it's true we are the dying) ready to swoop at the sign of my quivering hands on his sallow scowling self. I do not know what they fear. The two of us are dying for them by design, but still they keep our nails clipped like a caged bird's wings here.

It doesn't matter. He doesn't want warmth from my shrinking skin, he wants the burn of moonshine in his lungs. And, honestly, he doesn't *really* want to drink the shine from the moon, he wants to shoot back the poison tears from his mother's eyes. Saline cupped in weighted crystal tumblers, like the whiskey he knocked back when the gas cans were confiscated.

Honestly, he does not really want to shoot whiskey.

*slippery slope—
bodies limp beneath
warm water*

— 4 —

Small Hours

Altar

Altar

Nyeree Boyadjian

When the world is birthed the soles of human feet grow out of branches. We callous our hands helping each other separate from the soil. To prevent the regression of connection, our subconscious instills a discomfort with dirt and the tactile sensation of the walking insect.

When the world has been around for millions of years I die in a house with no neighbors. My body composts on the living room recliner. Microbes multiply on grey iris. The flies are loudly belching. While sleeping on my draining chest, the bloated belly of the bug expands.

In Wyomissing, Fungi collects on toad skin and cracks the pineal gland of the swamp. Psilocybin mushrooms grow in manure and when the fawns nibble at them they learn to balance half their mothers breast milk in their mouth, to deliver to the others who are orphaned or ill.

In Wyomissing, I am a seven year old holding an AK47, watching my babysitter swallow the stems picked from the poppy field. Some deeds may only be done by the sentient with opposable thumbs. No neighbors or narcans for miles.

*doe tendons swell
seniles stench-
in land so open*

Capital

Nyeree Boyadjian

Today Pangea others itself. Sternum cracks. The mouth swallows Xanax for the split. The continents shift into two halves. Start out as bits of sand till the absorption of tear water. My lover left for war on Thursday and my pores loosely juggle chlorine. My mucus tie-dyes by the time I spit it to the bottom of the staircase. I am watching a queen bee sting a wooden table. She is threatened by the chips.

“There’s a spider on your face”

“The star is going to kiss me”

You never say enough

Taxi

Jishnu Bandyopadhyay

A gush of monsoon breeze blew over Bihan's face, ruffling his greying hair. He realised he had been staring out of the taxi window for way too long. It was an unusually starry night. Bihan had never seen such a clear sky on any of the million sleepless nights he had spent alone in his one-room studio apartment in the city. He had also never felt this lonely despite being alone most of the time.

As if knowing that his attention was up for grabs, the cracked screen of his phone lit up with a notification. He lifted his phone from the seat. Never before had he kept his phone anywhere other than safely in his pocket. Lack of disposable income and the Bengali middle-class mentality of his had taught him to hold on to the little he had with dear life. But today was different.

He swiped up on the notification. It was a message sent on the "Creative Team" group by the producer he loved to hate: "Let's have a meeting about the final episode tomorrow, it should be epic." To Bihan, every episode was epic, and every character was a protagonist in their own stories; every script a promise that things will get better for the characters that are suffering.

As the busy nightlife of the city of Kolkata flashed by him, unhindered and unbothered by his heavy heart that seemed to have stopped beating, his vision went blurry. Growing up, he had learnt that men weren't supposed to cry. His father had told him so and Bihan had never gathered the courage to ask him why. How did those tears manage to well up then? He wondered by himself.

"Where to now?" the taxi driver said, drawing him out of his head.

Bihan directed the driver to take a left. The driver pressed a button on the dashboard and took a turn in the right direction.

Looking out of the window again, Bihan saw her. A beautiful curvy woman with rush of auburn hair flowing from her head like the water of a fountain in Rome. She ran on the path that lead away from where the taxi was going.

“Looks like Antara, doesn’t she?” said the driver. Bihan heard him whistle too.

“Antara! How do you know about Antara? Nobody is supposed to know!” Bihan’s face turned a hue lighter than the coldest blue.

But as if realising the pointlessness of his surprise, he looked closely at the driver’s blurry silhouette against the lit concrete roads of the city. Of course, she knew Antara! At this point Bihan noticed for the first time that the driver was a woman. Had he not met other women fans of his daily soap before? The show that he had created with his blood and sweat: “Thunderstorms of a Lonely Night” was such a hit! One time, he even considered visiting one of those celebrity press conferences for it

And Antara! Oh, Antara. What character she was. Bihan’s proudest creation to date. A traditional Bengali woman of such grace and elegance that a generation of mothers-in-law had tried to make of their sons’ wives, a clone of this lady. Sometimes, however, Bihan felt a bit of guilt hiding under his pride. He felt that Antara had done so much for him and was left wondering: what had he done for her? Made her run away from home? That headstrong, responsible, mega-hit character? Bihan had always felt this kind of ownership towards the parts he wrote but what was wrong with that? After all, it was he who created the character in the first place; wasn’t that his right?

“You do not speak much, do you?” she asked, her hand steady on the steering wheel.

Bihan snapped out of his fantasy world, the madness that he had created inside himself and looked at the sky outside. It seemed darker, bloodier shade of turquoise than usual if that makes any sense. There were minor stars and grey clouds that had

Taxi

crowded over the glistening moon, as if to protect her from the evil eyes of the earthlings. There were not many cars on the road now. Time seemed to have morphed into a translucent membrane between the real and unreal. Like something guarded one against reality, yet the imaginary was way out of reach. The bumpy roads of the city had turned buttery smooth somehow. Bihan felt the taxi was levitating through time and space

And at that moment he was sure he could jump right through that membrane and get himself to the other side of the world. The imaginary part, or maybe the 'actual' reality. His hands trembled to catch hold of his creations, for one last time. The stories, the people, the places, the emotions all came rushing towards him at once, and yet he could not catch hold of them. They passed through his icy hands like poltergeists.

Bihan had gone through so much just for this show. Day after day, night after night, sitting on his laptop as a slave to the screen. Give all he had to his stories, to the script, all for what? To be paid months later and the nuances in the story made into bland feedback notes from people who actually ran the show.

Those imbeciles. They work half as hard as Bihan yet get paid so much more. Their families live in the city; they could have afforded to study at infamous film schools and taken summer trips to the south of France. What did they need money for? Their billionaire parents were there to support them no matter what. He NEEDED money. For his sick mother in the village, for his brother who was still flunking at Jadavpur University, to marry Bimala. He really needed money.

"CUT" someone yelled in Bihan's ears almost. He was so familiar with the word. Thousands of hours spent in the studio or shooting floor crouching behind the monitor to see how his stories played out in real life was fascinating to him.

Fade to black.

Cut to.

Where was the city? The roads? The taxi or the driver?
Where was he?

He opened his eyes to what looked like an endless field of California poppy. Under a single apple tree in a meadow full of countless yellow flowers that seamlessly vanished into the horizon.

He stood up within the shade that the apple tree. Everything around him was so tangible, yet it felt like it was a simulation or a dream. Like everything was created just for Bihan. Like all of this was pre-decided for him. Bound to happen. He turned around to comprehend the environment and saw his father standing a few feet away from him.

“You could have studied commerce, you know, maybe Science even. You were not a developmentally disabled child. You know what you are doing is not correct”.

Bihan’s ears had not heard that baritone voice of Ramesh for a long time now. As much as he admired his father, Bihan despised him more. His eardrums tingled as if remembering all the terrible memories associated with the sound, and some of the good times too.

He looked up to answer when Ramesh spoke from behind.

“Nothing is real; Nothing is unreal. What goes up must come down.”

A chill went down through Bihan’s spine. He wanted to say so much, blame his father for all his hardships, for being such a scary thing when he was a child. Nothing came out of his mouth except a puff of light smoke.

He looked down at his hand. He was holding a burning cigarette. The smoke from the cigarette clouded his view a little. He saw himself standing outside his first office. He always wanted to become a journalist before he became a screenwriter, and this job had been like a launching pad for a small-town boy like him. Nobody was around. It was like he had landed in this city of ghosts. There was a pin drop silence.

Taxi

He recollected how he had been forced to resign by his bigoted boss when he had wanted to write a story about a hate crime committed against a homosexual man in the city. After his resignation, he had never gone back to this part of the city. He quickly stubbed his cigarette and walked up to the winding stairs of the old colonial house that had been his daily terminus for almost a decade. He walked up to the floor where his desk was. He still remembered the alleyways and corridors like the back of his hand.

He pushed through the main door and looked at the wooden tables and chairs with substantial boxy computers. Hadn't they renovated the place? And who even uses these computers anymore? He walked towards his desk. Just as his fingers touched the Maplewood desk, the office came alive.

Like a boom box had been switched on, the disturbing noise of the hustle and bustle hit Bihan's ears like bullets. He swiftly removed his fingers, and the office went dead, like before.

He quickly wiped the sweat off his wet forehead with a cotton handkerchief.

"To Bimala, with love, Your Bihan," a voice read out.

"Who's there? Who is it?" screamed Bihan. He had tolerated enough. His body was limp, and the dizziness was getting worse. Before he knew it, the handkerchief in his hand was a stack of letters. He could recognise those rose washed envelopes in his sleep. Bimala had given them to him. Gently blowing the dusty stack clean, he unwrapped the bundle. Bihan could visualise the day his mother had found out all about his high school sweetheart had burnt all of this "dirty letters" that girls belonging to good families did not send, but his girlfriend had. He had begged so hard, promised that he wouldn't talk to Bimala ever again if he were allowed to keep the letters.

"I'll make sure you do not talk to her regardless!" his mother had said.

Years later, Bihan had based the character of Antara loosely on Bimala. Nobody but his mother and himself knew. But

why was he thinking about this now? About the things that do not matter?

And suddenly what seemed like the most crucial truth of the universe, occurred to Bihan.

HE WAS THINKING ALL THIS UP IN HIS HEAD. ALL THAT HE WAS EXPERIENCING WAS FAKE, HIMSELF INCLUDED.

Like a lightning bolt striking his skull, an idea jumped right out. Wobbling around in front his eyes in blobs of blue, red and white they made sense.

“AND WHAT IF, YOU ARE NOT?” they questioned. And right after the blobs said that they divided again. “LIAR,” saw Bihan written in bold neon letters in front of his eyes upon total darkness.

What will happen to his mother? And his city lifestyle was not inexpensive either. How would he keep up? Where would the money for all this come from?

After all, maybe he would go back to his village and live there. That way, at least the daily expenses would be cut down.

The produces would take his laptop away now for sure, now that the project is over. Bihan saw a folder on his computer screen. His unfinished book. Without the computer, how would he work the remaining chapters?

All these questions rushing through Bihan’s mind, a blinding pink light engulfed him. When he could open his eyes, he saw an ivory white ceiling. Looking around him, Bihan saw himself lying down on a bed with flush white linen, like the ones in hotel rooms and BnBs. All the veins in his head throbbing with a sound that was irritating him to no end.

Bihan stood up. He somehow felt much lighter than usual, like he had lost fifty pounds all at once. Everything around him was different shades of white. The monotony of the colour blinded his eyes every time he tried to open them wide.

Taxi

The walls around him were all made of the glass. He could see the world outside, clear as crystal. His room was on an elevated platform several stories more than the streets and the mainland. Thousands of people were standing around the base of this platform. He could imagine the number of people by the muffled cheering he could hear through the glasses. Were they cheering his name?

Oh...yes! They were indeed!

Bihan would have liked to have believed that he was famous amongst them for all the right reasons, but the anger that their voices portrayed was proving otherwise. As the platform lowered down into the ground and he came closer to these people, he realised they were not any random group of individuals. They were all characters he had written throughout his life. His heart filled up with warmth and sorrow all at once. These characters that he used to be so proud of, each one created with his blood and sweat...were booing him?

His sorrow quickly transformed into anger. And before he knew it, Bihan was banging on the glass windows like a lunatic. The windows must have been made of a different material than glass. Fibreglass maybe, because they did not seem to nudge even a little bit. The crowd outside got louder and louder until he could hear nothing but static noise. His head started buzzing as the windows seemed to no longer filter the sound. It was like they were shouting in his ears.

Head buzzing. Heart throbbing. Louder. Louder, Louder.

It was all outside, yet it was all inside his head at the same time.

Bihan could hear his own voice over the noise say calmly, "I must be dreaming...I must be dreaming or it must be the stress." Bihan made a mental note to see a therapist.

Like the set of a sci-fi movie, the darkness engulfing him pixelated into what looked like a studio green room.

Blockbuster heroine Nihar was getting ready for her infamous role: Urmimala. Yet another of Bihan's creations, he looked proudly into the mirror, at the reflection of Nihar. What he saw was a horrific sight. Nihar's face was butter plain; no features no creases, nothing. Just plain skin. Nihar's featureless face turned towards Bihan and stared at him with the eyes she did not have.

Bihan's whole body went numb except his head. The pain take over his mind completely. He couldn't move a muscle, and his limbs and joints felt like rocks. It felt like his mouth had disappeared and like Nihar, there was only a flat surface where his lips should have been. He couldn't utter anything except a monotonous muffled moaning noise.

The lights in the green flickered and the more Bihan tried to gain control of himself, the harder his muscles got. What was this eternal purgatory he had fallen into?

And then he saw it. Wrapping themselves around his arm, like cold reptiles, were hundreds of lines of alphabets of the Bengali language. Some forming words, some even sentences, some just by themselves: meaningless yet significant.

The alphabets were heavy and cold. All of Bihan's body hair stood up straight, and he had goosebumps all over him. He was barely intimidated or scared of anything in the world...but for some reason these words, sentences and letters of an alphabet felt scarier than anything in the world!

The letters slithered all over his body and then sunk into him. They were embossed on his skin like tattoos. All over him...just letters.

And there was Bihan. With a lot to say, not much to write. Motionless. Speechless. Still.

For an eternity, he stood there, with his life flashing away right in front of his eyes: from the beginning till the present day. He saw again and again, what he wanted to see the least.

Bihan's mother was sitting on her jute mesh bed in the village with a stack of cheap bond sheets on her lap. Her faded,

block printed saree wrapped around her fragile body. Her wrinkled, veiny hands were holding tightly onto an antique fountain pen with an eroding nib. And she was thinking. She was writing all the characters that Bihan would later come in to pick up. He would take those pages of literature, make copies, type them out and edit them into bite-sized episodes for the commercial audience.

It was not like Bihan didn't take care of his mother. He just did it in exchange for this nominal price: one new original story or a couple of new unique character profiles every month.

Bihan was nothing but a medium through which the original content of Asha, his mother, reached the mass.

He finally had to face the lies he had been feeding the world...and himself. These weren't his work. This wasn't his doing. This money, the apartment, this lifestyle he leads, he deserves none of this!

Asha does. And yet while submitting his first work – another edited version of Asha's originals – Bihan had conveniently decided not to mention the name of his old mother and her contribution. The producer wanted a young person's perspective, and Bihan had provided just that. Not quite though.

Like an over shaken fizzed up soda bottle that had just been opened, his emotions took over him and with a sudden jerk shot right out of his heart. He had realised his mistake.

The letters, words and sentences all over his body unwrapped themselves slowly. His joints were movable now, and he could finally open his mouth.

Like a robot who had been programmed, his mouths murmured a poem. His mother would recite to him when he was a child.

*The world is asleep on this starry night,
My child is sleeping on my lap,
The clouds are getting darker; the sky isn't bright,
I can hear the thunderclap.*

Jishnu Bandyopadhyay

*My child is my strength and my only weakness,
My child is sweet like a flower, full of sweetness,
Like nectar and honey,
The similarity is uncanny,
With my child here, the world will soon be bright,
On this starry night.*

And like a glitching video game, all the pieces of reality fell back together. The night sky and the taxi. The driver and his phone with the cracked glass all reappeared. His hands were twitching with guilt and shame, Bihan opened the group where the producer had sent the text about the last episode a lifetime ago, or so it seemed.

“I would like to request a name change in the title card of the final episode,” he wrote, “and may we call the last episode *To err is human; To forgive divine?*”

The taxi came to a halt in front of the turquoise three-storeyed building that Bihan lived in. Without saying a word, he took out his wallet from his back pocket and paid the driver.

Shutting the taxi door behind him, he thought about how happy his mother would be to see her name written in bold on the title card of her favourite soap. The one she had been secretly writing for Bihan all this time.

“Ashalata Roy.”

She had managed household chores, run errands, taken care of her husband and children. The woman had done so much, yet got nothing in return. This time she would.

As Bihan climbed up the stairs of his house with heavy steps, the taxi driver smiled to herself. Just as she was about to restart the car, a middle-aged woman with icy grey hair came rushing to the taxi window “Salt Lake City. Will you go?” she inquired in a hurry.

And as this one man in a one-room flat dialled his mother’s landline, the taxi took another woman on a ride through her wrongdoings.

Taxi

Magic persisted in the city of joy.

Intruder

Amna Shoaib

I can tell this is a dream because your face is bleeding out of its boundaries. In your palm is something that glints.

“Look,” you urge.

The crystallized, scarlet eye of a bird stares back. You affix the eye atop yours. Later, I, too, hold it in front of my eyes. The loosened pupil within swings. From behind the eye, our entire world swirls in a color approaching red. For a brief moment, I think, I see the world as you do.

The next morning, your face contained in form, eyes behind your red-tinted shades, you leave without a word. I scrape the eggs off the pan, salvage the bread still in the toaster, wipe the milk off the counter top, eat in silence.

It is strange how the house cowers while you are here. The air in the living room is constricted, rugs fold in on themselves, clothes in wardrobes shrink to not brush against each other.

It is as if your presence is a terrible secret this house wants to keep from me.

Once the chokehold of your presence is removed, this place unfurls. The assortment of tubes on the sink still singe from your touch, the pores of linen flower open to reveal your scent (Victoria’s Secret Rose Mist, Neal’s Yard Remedies Elixir, You), a trail of fallen hair betray your routes around the house.

It is as if your absence is a vortex that hurls me towards your presence. For the time that you are not here, you are briefly by my side.

You are more upset than usual when you return. I know because you complain aloud. On most days, your fury is quiet, simmering:

Intruder

You mutter under your breath; you occupy your spot in our living room, gaze moored to the wall; you tap your restless foot on the ground as you watch TV.

Today, though, you are more upset. Who the hell, you wonder angrily, moves your stuff when you ALWAYS put things where they belong?

I stay out of the way and marvel at your brain. You are the messiest person I have lived with. Your sheets are always undone, the dishes in the kitchen haphazardly stacked, the books by your bed always in a disarray. Yet, your brain can intuit every time someone disturbs the reassuring squalor of your life. It's almost as if this house tells on me.

Later in the night, you call that friend, Heena or Hannah or whoever she is. Your voice is quiet. At some point, you also sob quietly.

I wonder if I should leave forever. Get up in the dark of the night, take one last look at your face, and never return.

Soon though, you fall into a deep sleep. I go around the house, vigilant to the sounds of the night. The kitchen cabinets creak under excessive weight; I might end up breaking them one of these days. I hear the familiar, cottony rub of your feet against the linen. A spectral, unexplained sound typical of the night, like a hiss breathing across the floor, creeps up on me. The plates clank with a deep sonority. A sound stirs behind me. I am a steadfast man. I would not have moved; it's the terror of sound that compels me to turn.

You stand behind me. Your mouth is agape like the skies out the window. Your face looks like it did in my dream, finally breaking free of the depression of form. For a moment, it looks like you are about to collapse. I reach out to hold you.

The Reflection

Fazila Nawaz

“The reflection of the creator is present in man if someone wants to find him then first of all find out a human.” These words stroked my ear drum and then they stroked my heart. Among the sounds of laughter and murmuring in the market crowd, I heard these words floating in the sac of a vibratory voice and my eyes started searching for that great heart who felt this, for that clever mind who decorated this philosophy in a sentence and for the lips whose movement let these words escape from the prison of inner terror.

When I wandered around I found an old man, in a clumsy outfit, seated in a corner of the footpath, holding the praising beads in his right hand. In front of him there were mirrors of different sizes. His watery eyes were staring at the mirrors and he was speaking to his image that was formed in the mirror.

The people passing by the old man were busy looking for the best product for them. Some ignored the old man and some of them heard what the man said but preferred not to get into his business. The old chap was busy talking to himself. When I took some steps towards him abruptly, without moving his eyes from the mirror he said:

“Some heart beats are beating the silence.
Do they want to search me more?
In order to get the wisdom’s licence.
Confuse your mind and don’t be sure.”

After hearing this I was amazed and scared. For a while I asked myself whether it would be wise to talk to the old man. But I was curious to find the old man’s perspective about life and humanity. His shaking hands, white beard, the wrinkles on his forehead and a secret smile on his face seemed like the expression

The Reflection

of the amazing world he was living in his mind. The words he spoke contained a philosophy within themselves. His sentences were containing multiple colours and could be interpreted with multiple angles. I stood still and waited for any change in his facial expression or in his posture.

“My watery eyes can observe the invisible things. A mind in front of me is full of question marks but let me tell it dig more and more to get to the full stop.” Finally he looked up and moved his right eyebrow to an extreme position as a clue for me to understand that he was talking to me.

“How did you get this skill? Is this the old age or a life lesson which gifted you the skill to read others?” When he showed that he was aware of my perplexed thoughts I started putting the question marks in front of him one by one.

“Life gives lessons to everyone according to the person’s personality and according to his acts. Age is the time period you can’t hold it and age is dwell in the life. Both are attached, you can’t separate them. They teach you together.”

“What is the relation between human and life then? Is life resides in human or human resides in life?”

“The human face is an enlightened screen
Buy a mirror to see what does it means.”

In a poetic way he said this. He then picked up a mirror in one hand and took his bowl in the other hand. I took the mirror from his hand and put two hundred rupees in his bowl and went from there. When I got into the other street I stared at myself in the mirror and started asking myself if it was a trick to sell the mirrors or is this mirror is really going to reveal some secrets of life to me. I put the mirror in my bag and rushed towards the bus stop to start a new journey in search of a new lesson.

— 5 —

Dawn

seasonal

seasonal

Anna Sheppard

i like those flowers, hannah says, they look alive.
we're in the garden off devine street, which used
to be called divine street, back when our city
was more than an industrial stomach ache
with trafficked intestines digesting sunrays
into sidewalks, starlight into streetlamps,
and back before we knew to love it anyway.

i like those flowers, they look alive, but
the secret is it's december, the garden
a graveyard messy with the bug-sized blooms
whose corollas must be consumed by nightmares
as they're blinded by the grip of a season
that would rather see them perish.

i like those flowers, so i should have mentioned
their color: the red of a bitter cherry, the red
i tried to dye my hair bent over a dirty bathroom sink
in a new house on an old road,
the red blood dries into on lace, claiming our bodies
are working okay, which they aren't, and this
we know, and we cherish them anyway.

i like those flowers, they look alive;
imagine being loved for what you are not,
imagine your whither disguised
as wonder, your shame hiding as sanctity.
imagine a coffin. a body painted pristine
into the plush. a soul barely inside

Anna Sheppard

doing what water does on hot concrete
while outside the skin is soft and clear
and women lay flowers in a still fertile
bedding of hair.

Hurricane

Ashley Hajimirsadeghi

Before I die, I lay in the emerald
eye of the storm, smothered
in coarse bonfire smoke & putrid
yet tender cigarette ashes,
constellations hanging crooked above.
Out of tune Bollywood hits from
the eighties buzz in the distance.
Beauty is helpless here; it withers
with each lash of wind. There is
nowhere I can go as the ashes flit
away and into Hestia's hearth;
the world has been lit ablaze. I drift
with each memory of flames, of
wreckage—here I exist within
a single breath. I do not pretend
to know these quiet acts of devastation,
nor do I quiver in fear at the stillness
of grass. This merely is my reality,
like a childhood lost or runaway
memories—I think it's delightfully
strange. And it is here, in the drumming
of a storm's heart, I wonder if I was
loved in this lifetime, if with
the following breeze, the next gasp,
I will be remembered.

Home from The Hospital

Medha Faust-Nagar

You set down the duffle bag that holds the life you've led for the past three years. The floor of the house that you've always called home is wood. You'd forgotten the rich hues of golden brown that make up shiny varnished maple. Your beat-up duffle bag, frayed strap and torn pockets, looks alien on rich caramel. It belongs on scuffed seafoam green tiles that measure one by one. It belongs in the locked cabinet of restricted items—these years it's just been emptied and taken away. The woven nylon strap strong enough to cut oxygen flow, the waterproof compartments too easy to suffocate in.

Your duffle bag does not belong on the floor of a home. A home filled with things you haven't seen in thirty seven months and three days. Things you've been taught to forget. To stay away from. Home feels like an exam you're not sure you'll ever be able to pass.

You stand frozen at the back door, bag at your feet, and your mashi watches you worriedly from her spot by the stove. "Beta, do you need help? Bag rakh doon tere kamre mein?"

You shake your head, voice caught in between the cords in your throat. It hurts to swallow; how can you speak? You open your mouth, but think better of it. No one wants to hear the wheezing of you trying to form words. The loudmouth is out of words, you assume is the juicy gossip in the meaner parts of your mashi's mind. The kinder parts surely startle and wonder where your voice went and who stole her away.

When you were little, you'd sit on the kitchen floor for hours telling your mashi stories while she stirred dal or cubed winter squash. You'd chatter on about how the navy blue crayon and the red marker got married and adopted a child—the green colored

Home from The Hospital

pencil. She never asked you what happened to the green pencil's birth parents. She would just laugh, ruffle your hair, and tell you to call your uncle in for dinner.

The navy blue crayon's older sister, Cyan, married a yellow pencil, and they had Little Green. They were happy, but one day Cyan got snapped by the child coloring with her. She didn't make it. A few months later the yellow pencil rolled under the radiator and was lost forever. Little Green got adopted by her mashi. Little Green never quite fit in after that. You could have told your mashi the countless ways Little Green tried, every day, to get snapped or lost under the radiator. But dinnertime always came first. The next day you would start the story from the beginning.

Pulling the corners of your mouth up as best you can despite the tightness—despite cracking skin that burns and tastes like blood at the seam of your lips—you give your mother's sister a makeshift smile, you pick up the bag by the strap you couldn't be trusted with, you walk to the room that had always been yours. Cheesy bead curtain rippling down from the frame of the door. The cold multicoloured plastic rattles gently as you step through and you pause, bead strings caught over your shoulders, you close your eyes and breathe in the smell you'd forgotten was not a fantasy.

It is dust, and cedar, and summer, and dog, and some sweat, and sun through the windows when it's snowy. It's sweet like golden leaves made soggy by the rain, and the sweets you snuck into your dresser drawers as a child. It's pencil shavings and damp cotton. It's anything but the sterile bleachrubbingalcoholnitrile-gloves smell of the last three years.

As a teenager, you crushed Little Green into a thousand splinters, sending you spinning and shaking into that padded white fluorescent light, but you're back. Standing in your room. In Mashi's house. Tears burn your eyes, but you smile despite the blood in your mouth.

Passing

Aalia Waqas

His smile was home in ways I did not notice until it was too late. It was breathtaking and beautiful, being around the permanent firecracker of his existence. He was the warmth in December mornings, he was the lasting echo of a laugh. He was grace and poise and charm personified. He was the twinkle of mirth behind heavy, spectacled eyes. He was the life breathed into a dwindling campfire. He was the foundation of a phenomenal home.

He was at the core of an astounding story.

*Drying ink
A room abandoned-
Incomplete.*

The Way Things Are

Anna Magana

“Lucy.”

“Hmm?”

“Can I have an M&M?”

“No.”

“Seriously?”

“Alex, I asked if you wanted something from the vending machine and you said no. More specifically, you said ‘You really shouldn’t eat so much sugar.’ And yes, it did sound that condescending.”

My brother’s pronounced frown makes him look childish. Not like a 30-year-old man sitting in the driver’s seat of an old Chevy Trailblazer. I picture him with chocolate carelessly smudged on his face, legs not long enough to reach the pedals. “Okay, well you know we’re predisposed to diabetes; I’m just trying to look out for you.”

I roll my eyes at that. “You don’t have to do that. Don’t be so dramatic Alex.”

We had been in this dimly lit parking garage for about five minutes or so; both of us fiddling with our phones and not saying much. Now, he huffs at my response and goes back to his phone, leaving us in silence again. Distantly, I hear a car door open and what sounds like a man and woman laughing in conversation; the sound fades as they walk further away. I wonder if they are happy long-term or short-term. If they’re listening to the echo of their own laughter against the concrete and pocketing it away for later when they can’t find any more. After pretending to check my email for the third time, I clear my throat.

“Hey, can you just drop me off at my place?” He sighs, before giving me a sad look. “Fine.” As he pulls out of the parking

garage, I'm faced with the harsh sun making its way through the windshield; Alex turns on the radio. It's still early and this is a nice part of town; people walk along the grassy areas, glad for a chance to get outside. I spot a couple walking with a toddler swinging between them. The little girl laughs as her parents lift her no more than two feet off the ground, their hands intertwined with hers.

I'm hit with a flash of childhood; park swings and skinned knees. Pushing Alex a little too hard on the release; drying his tears and promising to give him my Hershey's bar if he abstained from telling anyone about it. He never did tell anyone. I look over at him now; his glasses are slipping down his nose and he juts his lip out in concentration as he drives. He drums his fingers to the beat of a Fleetwood Mac song and the angle makes the sun reflect off his ring. The glare hits my eye and I have to squint. He and Gloria had scheduled the wedding for next June. It's been postponed.

I opt to think about other things besides my little brother getting married, like the plants I have to water and the time I have to make up at work. Chocolate melts in my mouth and Alex switches the radio station.

It isn't long before he pulls into the street by my apartment building. The car is parked, but I don't make a move to open my door yet. My eyes are fixed on the stop sign at the end of the road.

"Lucy?"

My gaze is still trained on the red shape in the distance.
"Yeah?"

He hesitates, and his reluctance to speak is palpable. "... Are we going to talk about Mom?"

I look at him and the seat belt rubs against my neck uncomfortably. "No, Alex. Not now."

His brow furrows and his right eye is slightly more closed than the left. It's the same look he gave me when he was seven and I threw his Batman action figure onto the roof in retaliation for him pulling my hair.

The Way Things Are

“Alright, if not now, then when?”

“I don’t know,” I shake my head, “later.”

“Lucy, we don’t have all the time in the world. You know that. You can’t just ignore this like you do with everything else. This is different.”

Instead of giving him a response, I turn and open the car door. “Lucy! Hey, stop!” I hear his voice behind me, but I choose to ignore it in favor of speed walking to my apartment. Once inside, I dump my bag on the living room table and plop down on the old green couch to catch my breath. My hands smooth over the worn fabric and I’m comforted by the sensation. I try to commit that comfort to memory.

Mom got me this couch. She said I needed at least one nice thing in my new apartment, and I didn’t have the heart to tell her that the vomit green couch she found at a flea market wasn’t exactly the pinnacle of home décor. Plus, she looked so excited when I agreed to take it. Like I was doing something pride-worthy just by abiding by her wishes in that small way; I liked that.

She’s always liked green in her house, says it makes her feel like she’s outside even when she isn’t. Back when dad was alive, the two of them would spend hours sitting in the sun porch looking at birds and making ridiculous plans for the garden. I don’t feel that desire for “earthiness” that she does. Alex is more like her than I am, always has been.

I shouldn’t have left the car without speaking to him; it was unfair of me. He’s my little brother. I know that and I still won’t be the one to call first.

My eyes have been closed for a few minutes, and I make no effort to open them. My breathing has evened out and I note the faint scent of pine that lingers from the candle I burned yesterday. In the distance, I hear police sirens somewhere in the neighborhood. The sun is not as strong now, and the few rays that come in from my living room window make me sleepier than anything else.

I don't spend a lot of time thinking about why taking a nap alone at 4 pm on a Saturday as a 32-year-old woman might be troubling before removing my shoes and laying down. I curl up into the fetal position and lay my head on the couch pillow for a few seconds before shifting slightly so my ear isn't pressed directly to the fabric. Since I was young, I've never liked to have my ear pressed to the pillow; it lets me hear my heart pumping blood through my veins, and I'm afraid that if I listen for too long, I will hear it stop beating.

When I wake up, the room is dark. My limbs feel stiff and it feels awkward stretching them out on the too-small couch. The taste of sleep is heavy in my mouth. The apartment is quiet, and it makes me aware of my own breathing. I reach into my bag to pull out my phone and see that the time reads 8:32 pm; I also have 6 unread messages from Alex and it's safe to assume that each one is about a paragraph long. Instead of reading them, I toss my phone onto the couch and fumble my way to the wall to turn on the light switch.

There's a large rectangular mirror on the wall that I bought a couple years ago. One of my work friends mentioned that a plain mirror can make a space feel larger, and in an effort to make the apartment feel more "adult," I splurged on a nice one with an oak frame. Turning the lights on abruptly has me squinting at my reflection and I notice the red splotch left on my cheek by the pillow.

I examine one side of my face, lifting my hand to smooth over the agitated skin. Without much thought, I press into my cheek and move it downward like putty. I do the same with the other cheek and stare at my sagging face in my reflection. I am getting older. It seems obvious all of a sudden; my dark brown hair is no longer completely brown, there are hints of crow's feet by my eyes, and I can't complain about my hands hurting without my brother nagging that I probably have carpal tunnel. When did I get older?

The Way Things Are

My phone rings, interrupting my thoughts and making me feel silly for standing in front of the mirror for so long. When I pick it up, I know that it's Alex, but I don't have the energy to come up with an excuse to not answer.

As soon as I pick up he says: "Are we going to talk about today?" He speaks gently like he's talking to a child and his tone makes me grit my teeth involuntarily.

"I told you I don't want to talk about it."

"And I told you that we have to talk about it. Dr. Moreno said it's better if we make the decision sooner rather than later. We shouldn't drag this out, it'll just make it more painful."

I smooth my fingers over the patch of wall behind me, searching for damaged paint to chip at. I don't say anything, but my skin is getting hotter.

"Lucy... please don't put this on me. You're her family too."

Before I realize it, my free hand is swinging up to come back and hit the wall. I wince at the slight pain before hitting the wall again, and again. I need some power; some hold over something. I am so tired of feeling incapable and patronized. At the same time, I want to shrink; small enough to float away, not tethered to anything and not responsible for everything. These desires bump together into something clunky and angry and this conversation isn't helping. I'm her family too? Is he serious?

It's too much; my palm is sweating, and I tighten my grip on the phone. "Alex, you don't think I know that? Damn right I'm her family she's my mother. And I know better than anyone that she deserves to be alive, she wants to be alive so there's nothing to talk about okay?"

"Lucy," he's lost the soft tone and he speaks to me more firmly now, "first of all, it's not about what she wants. It's about what she wanted. Past tense, okay? She can't tell us what she wants now because she hasn't been responsive for months. You have to accept that. And you and I both know that she wouldn't

want to live like some vegetable, constantly hooked up to some machine.”

There’s a lump in my throat now that prevents me from saying anything for a moment and I slide down the wall to crumple on the floor. Every part of me is shaking with a different feeling. I know Alex can hear my choked breathing over the phone, but he doesn’t speak.

While at the hospital this morning, Dr. Moreno advised us that at this point, we should consider having Mom’s breathing tube removed. It’s been a year since she got the diagnosis.

Six months since her organs started failing. Three months since she was last responsive enough to greet us; that’s when the tube was put in. At Dr. Moreno’s words, my brother looked at me with tears in his eyes, expecting me to say something. I curtly told her we would think about it and gathered my things to go. We didn’t talk about it on the elevator ride. We didn’t talk about it on the car ride. I don’t even know if we’re talking now.

Tears run down my face and I know I don’t sound collected when I finally answer him.

“That machine is keeping her alive. Are you really telling me you want our mother to die because what—she didn’t like technology?”

“That’s not what I’m saying at all and you know it. Christ Lucy, this is difficult enough already, don’t make it worse by trying to blame me in some offhanded way. You’re not the only one who wishes they didn’t have to do this.”

I know he’s right; Alex’s life has been on hold. He should be the happiest he’s ever been and it’s unfair that he’s not. But I don’t have the capacity to sympathize; I only have room for my own sadness, and it only grows as I unearth it from beneath anger. “Alex,” my voice sounds small even to me, “I don’t want to lose her. And who are we to decide that she dies?”

It’s too hard a decision, there’s too much consequence.”

The Way Things Are

At this point, I can hear him sniffing over the line and I wonder if we'll start bawling in our separate apartments. Having the moment of catharsis we should have had when we first learned that our mother was no longer our mother, but a heavy weight we were trying to keep afloat. "I know... I know it's unfair that we have to make this decision. But we do. I'm sorry."

The hospital looks the same when I stand in the lobby a week later. There are still people sitting in chairs with worried expressions on their faces, there are still doctors and nurses approaching families with trepidation, and there are still splashes of color on the white walls meant to make us all feel better. Alex steps through the doors and looks around for a moment before spotting me by the vending machine. He walks up to me more quickly than is necessary before pulling me in for a hug. I reciprocate it before standing back to look at him. "Ready?" I ask.

He takes a deep breath and nods. The walk to my mother's hospital room is a long one.

Everything around me feels heightened. I'm hyperaware of the sound of the little girl laughing in the hallway, and of Alex's shoes scuffing as he walks alongside me. Most of all, I can feel my heart thudding in my chest and the sound rings in my ears. I didn't think I'd ever be asked to pull the plug on my own mother. This happens on *Grey's Anatomy*; it's not supposed to happen in real life. It's not supposed to happen to me, to us.

When we are finally standing in the room, and things are being explained in layman's terms, and documents are being signed, my brother looks at me before taking hold of my mother's hand and gesturing for me to do the same. I pause. Her face is peaceful; it's been that way for a while. There is no crease in her brow, and her greying hair is pulled back from her face. The light blue hospital gown makes her look paler than she is; I wish I could see her in her favorite color instead and imagine that she'd picked out her outfit.

Anna Magana

The breathing tube obstructs my view of her mouth but for my own sake I imagine that she is smiling. I take her other hand in mine and squeeze, hard. Just for a moment, I won't be gentle. I'll take what I need from her. Strength.

I use it when I hold my brother a few moments later and let us cry the way I should have before. I use it when I place a flower on her casket and dust my hands off on a black dress. I use it on afternoon talks with my friends about why things are the way they are.

I use it and I use it and I use it.

House Key

Martina Litty

“Jesus, why did you want to meet here, of all places, Deon? Too cheap to buy me a cup of coffee?” Jasmine looks out of place in a skirt and blue blazer against the backdrop of yellow grass and distant bleachers of the high school football field. That’s what she wanted, though, right? She picked that outfit, knowing we were meeting here. Jasmine doesn’t do anything on accident.

She shifts on her feet a little. I have no idea how her heels haven’t sunk into the dirt.

“You work there still?” she asks.

She gestures up and down at me—at my work uniform, the blue jumpsuit with Greene Repairs on the breast, the stains on the fabric, the grease under my fingernails.

“I own it now. Clyde passed shortly after Dad did, and besides him, nobody knows the place better than me.”

She looks surprised. I can’t imagine why. She was still around when I was learning the trade, and it’s a good job. Maybe she thought I’d “rise above” Dad and go do something else, but, no, that can’t be it. It’s not like she ever expected anything from me. I didn’t flunk out of high school, sure, but I was never a bright kid. Too stupid to know better than to put Momma’s church heels on after seeing Jasmine playing dress up in them. If Jasmine could do it, I could do it, too—what a joke.

I shrug.

“I couldn’t be trusted to go to college.” Not like you, I don’t say. “I had to earn a living somehow. Dad taught me everything. Maybe he thought it would straighten me out.”

I don’t know why I say maybe. There’s no maybe about it. But I can’t take it back now.

Jasmine flips her braids out of her face. They make her look younger and older all at once. Older, because she carries herself more confidently—she flips her braids out of her face like a woman on a mission. Younger, because it reminds me of when we were kids, even though there’s no beads in her hair now. Either way, it’s more flattering than the flat-iron look she’d been sporting the last time I saw her, which was, what, six years ago? Seven?

“I didn’t come to Dad’s funeral because I was in the hospital having my daughter,” Jasmine says. She must be thinking something along the same lines as me, about not having seen me in a long time.

“I know. Momma told me. I had a dream about fish that very morning, you know. Momma thought I had gotten some poor girl knocked up. You should’ve seen her face.”

“I’m sure she was thrilled about the idea of a baby before marriage,” Jasmine huffs.

I don’t tell Jasmine that Momma had been thrilled, that she’d thought I’d fallen for a woman and gone straight. She might get all self-righteous and go on some tangent about double-standards, or she might agree with Momma and think that would’ve been better.

“Do you remember when we snuck out here to smoke for the first time?” I ask.

“First time?” Jasmine says.

She raises an eyebrow. She doesn’t look like herself with her eyebrows done up like that. I can imagine her taking time out of her morning to comb them or something. I remember when her eyebrows used to stretch over the bridge of her nose in an almost-unibrow, like they were trying to hold hands with each other. She must wax or shave that spot now.

“Maybe it was just the first time for me,” I amend.

“Yeah,” she says, “I remember. Summer before seventh grade. I thought you were gonna be on punishment the whole summer, and I got sick of hanging out by myself, so we snuck out.”

House Key

“That was when I was on punishment because they caught me kissing Jamal.”

I watch her expression as I say it, forcing myself to make eye contact with her. It’s difficult even after all this time.

To her credit, she doesn’t look disgusted. Her eyes get a little wide and her jaw goes a little slack, but it’s not disgust that’s on her face. Surprise, maybe. I caught her off guard.

“Jamal Hargrave?” she says. “Why him? Didn’t he used to beat on you at recess?”

“Not until we got caught kissing.”

I can see the moment this information clicks into place in her head and aligns with the childhood she remembers.

“What?” I say. “Surprised it didn’t take them longer to figure out I’m gay?”

Now she makes a face. It must be at the word.

“Come on, now,” I say. “You’ve heard worse. You’ve said worse.”

“I didn’t come here to fight,” she says.

“I know,” I say. But I can’t help myself from needling at her. When I first got here, all I could think about was the last thing she said to me, and I kept thinking that I’d catch hell from her today, but now I’m on steady ground. She can’t say anything new to me, right? I’ve heard it all from her before, and from Momma twice over. I’m steady. I can’t lose my balance in the dirt.

“You didn’t invite me to meet her,” I say.

“Who?”

“Your daughter.”

“Kim,” she says.

When it doesn’t look like Jasmine is going to say anything else, I say, “Yeah, Kim. I haven’t met her.”

“Quinton didn’t think it was a good idea.”

“Don’t put it all on your husband,” I say, and it takes everything in me not to raise my voice. I’m needling, not jabbing. “You didn’t think it was a good idea. Say it.”

“That’s right, I didn’t think it was a good idea,” Jasmine says, and when she looks at me, her eyes are bright and angry. There she is. There’s the Jasmine I remember. “I didn’t think it was a good idea, and Quinton didn’t think it was a good idea, and Momma didn’t think it was a good idea. Yeah, that’s right,” Jasmine says, and the way she looks reminds me of a wild hog right before it charges. “I invited Momma and not you.”

I force myself to breathe.

“I knew that,” I say.

“But you didn’t know that she told me not to let you see Kim,” Jasmine says. “She called me and told me, and she told me again when she visited herself. Your kind and kids—”

“My kind,” I say. Hearing it from her shouldn’t be a shock. I’ve heard it from Momma enough. But for some reason I thought Jasmine was—that Jasmine wouldn’t—

I don’t want to know what I look like. This was a mistake.

Jasmine’s shoulders drop as she deflates, the vitriol leaving her.

“Maybe I was wrong,” she says. “I know I should’ve had you up there. But I didn’t. And that’s the way it is. I won’t say I’m sorry because I’m not. But maybe I was wrong.”

“My kind,” I repeat.

I shake my head. Jesus H. Christ.

And now she’s mad again. “Don’t look at me like that,” she says. “Don’t act like this is some big shock. Wouldn’t you do anything to protect your kid, if you had one?”

“You don’t need to protect your kid from me,” I say. “Christ, Jasmine, it’s me. I’m family. As much as you’ve tried to forget it.”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me,” I say, because it’s easier than screaming at her about how I know she was ashamed of me growing up, how I know she didn’t call Momma much while she was in college—and that she was still Dad’s and Momma’s favorite even though she

House Key

practically abandoned us—and how I know she can only think about how it kills her to be back here. She won't even bother thinking about how I never got to leave at all.

"Fuck you, Deon," Jasmine says, and she turns and starts walking away. She wobbles a bit in her high heels, but she's doing it, she's leaving, she's walking to her car parked at the edge of the field and she's not turning back around.

Christ. This isn't how I wanted this to go.

"Wait," I say, and I'm so tired that the words barely pass my lips. "Wait, wait."

She stops and turns around to look at me, crossing her arms. I expect her to fall over, having turned around so quickly, but she's lucky in her footing.

"What?" she says.

"Catch."

Jasmine snatches the house key out of the air.

"Don't get a hotel," I say. "Waste of money. Just stay in Momma's house. Take whatever you want from her stuff."

Her expression softens. I hadn't thought it would, but, well. Just shows I'm making the right call, I guess.

"You're not living there?"

"I've got my own place," I say. "Me and—well. One queer was bad enough; two queers, she would never have put up with. I didn't even ask. Just moved out."

Jasmine nods. She starts to walk away again, and then she pauses.

"So you've got somebody now?"

"I do," I say.

"Is he coming to the funeral?"

"Jasmine—"

"Because I think he should," she says.

All I can do is stare at her. I can't find any words anywhere in me.

Martina Litty

“Two queers,” Jasmine says. She says it slowly, like she’s trying on a new pair of shoes. “Won’t that make Momma just spin in her coffin?”

Jasmine gets into her car before I can think of something to say. I watch her pull out of the grass and back onto the road, kicking up dirt as she goes. She practically flies away when she hits the asphalt.

I take a moment to pray she doesn’t get pulled over, speeding that fast in a car that red. I pray real hard. Then I walk back to my truck, climb in it, and drive away just as fast.

— 6 —

Noon

Absence

Hafsa Nouman

There are tears of love
And sadness breaking my heart
I have been covered in guilt
And you know what, I only deserve to drown
You see he left her too soon
Left her in this world
She deserved a lot more time
But there was none enough through which she could
 learn
Her innocence was taken advantage of
Her frank friendly demeanor looked down upon
You see, there is only so much a girl can take
Given only a few days
And now she is a woman.
5 children
She has to keep them together
But they are growing up
Apart
Daughters live far from home
Sons refuse to live at home
They fight and refuse to consider
Their mother's fragile heart.
To see them like this,
She misses him even more
Knowing well enough
How different would all be if he was around.
But he is not around
Things are growing worse
They fought

Absence

They have sold
The home
And have constructed houses for themselves
Yet they do not talk
Live under the cloud of guilt and hate
Unprotected and yet they feel safe
But they are not the only ones to blame.
You see there is myself
My family to blame too
There have been past quarrels which have not been put
to rest
Hence I have not visited her in awhile
2 years
Perhaps 3.
The second year I wanted to visit
But was not welcome
Why would I be?
I am the daughter of a man whom they hate
And I am the daughter of the their sister whom they
ruined
You see these men
Their absence and presence both
Have made life difficult for us women
They leave without warning
Or they don't forgive past mistakes
Carrying them along into the present
Which starts to become hell.
They are unforgiving
And hence they are weak
They run from emotional pain
Drowning us instead.
The bodies of these women have been damaged too
many times
Yet they don't learn.

Hafsa Nouman

Perhaps our deaths will be the answer
Perhaps our absence will create the need of our presence
Perhaps then they would learn
When we leave them alone to the world.

Six Months

Payal Nagpal

The old man winces as he sets his cup down. He washes out the bitterness of his tea with a gulp of water and sighs theatrically. He's finished scanning the newspaper for the third time: Kareena Kapoor's son is having a birthday party, the economy is failing and there's been an earthquake in a country he hasn't heard of. Inconsequential. All of it.

The muffled tinkling of the cuckoo clock a room away informs him that it's late, and that everybody has probably left the house. "Bobby," he calls, almost instinctively. "Bobby, come here."

There's a knock on the door almost immediately. "Can I come—"

"If I call you, there's no need to ask to come in!"

"Sorry," Bobby mumbles, bending over to set his tattered green broom down. His hand-me-down Lacoste shirt sticks to his back in sweaty patches. "Sorry, Dinesh Sir."

"It's fine," Dinesh Sir spits. He grunts, watching veins pop out of Bobby's muscles like little iver snakes.

"Shall I bring you your blood pressure medicine, Sir? And then your heart medicine, that you will have to take in the afternoon. Lunch is laukhi and phulka, by the way. And Mona Ma'am left a herbal drink mix for you. It's supposed to build your immunity."

"Hokey-pokey," the old man grumbles. "That's all my daughter believes in."

"Sir?"

"Go." Dinesh's voice is piercing. Bobby flip-flops away softly and the Lenovo K8 Mona bought him last month—rather proudly, in fact—buzzes.

Mona: Sorry papa, couldn't say bye before leaving.
Rahul and I are going out for dinner with friends
after work so you'll probs be alone tonight. Do
you want something?
Dinesh: No, beta. What time will you be back?

He digs the phone into the bedsheet, creating a little crevice he traces with his yellowing fingernails. Dinesh hates his phone. Mona bought it exactly twenty-seven days ago. The fifth of February. Six months after her mother died.

He didn't tell her that he thought buying expensive things exactly six months after someone died was horrifically inappropriate. Anniversaries like these only warranted mournful poojas and hushed condolence calls. But six month anniversaries, apparently, aren't noteworthy. At least not to anyone who isn't sixteen-and-a-half, falling in love for the first time.

He tries to swallow the thought, shuddering, but it stays lodged in his throat. "Bobby," he finds himself screaming. "Bobby, get me that book, *The Flight of Pigeons*."

There's a gentle rap on the door. "I... I am sorry, I don't know which book."

The old man sighs, "Of course, of course. You can't read English."

"I can read a little—"

"It's brown."

Within seconds, Bobby returns with three books—two brown and one beige, each moth-bitten and frayed. Dinesh gestures for him to leave them all on his bedside table, and his fingers inch hesitatingly to the book in the middle. He allows himself a little sniff, twitching his nose as he holds the back cover to his face.

It still smells of Geeta.

She's still embedded in the paper. He almost considers prying the book open, just to see if her smell might be more potent on the inside. But the pages are too heavy for his hands, they

refuse to separate. So he turns on the TV instead. A Hindi remake of *The Bold and the Beautiful* is playing. The screen keeps getting brighter and the words sound fuzzier. It's not even 9.30.

He tries to swallow the urge to do it, but "Bobby," he ends up screeching. "Bobby, come here." Dinesh winces at the sound of his own voice.

Bobby arrives, frazzled and pit-stained. "Yes?"

"Bobby?"

"I'm here, Sir," he pants.

"The kitchen must be hot." Dinesh's voice is flat.

"Sir?"

Dinesh looks at the floor, searching for a reason. "I need a bottle of water."

Wordless, Bobby points to the lime green tumbler at the foot of the bed.

"It's been out too long. It's not cold anymore." And so Bobby replaces it with a repurposed wine bottle. But in a minute, the room turns still again.

Silence hangs heavily, casting shadows over the sunlight streaming through the window. Dinesh turns the TV on again, but time is excruciatingly slow. As exhaustion plasters itself over his body, he rolls onto the Geeta-shaped depression on the bed. He can't help but run his finger across her pillow, pause as he touches an age-old mascara stain.

All at once, it's a little colder.

The vacuum in his stomach expands. "Bobby," he finds himself calling. "Bobby, come here."

Yes, You Are

Hafsa Ghani

Dear Wahida,

I hope you're well. Or well, I hope you are. That you exist somewhere beyond the soil we buried you in. I hope you found all the answers we spent all night asking each other, about life, the stars and the moon. Remember how hard we would laugh at the absurd realities we would paint together? Of course you would remember. We would hide under the covers and stifle our laughter while Chachi made rounds to make sure we're sound asleep. I'm pretty sure the ghosts she spoke of were just the noises we would make the second we were out of her sight. I wish we would have confessed and lessened her suspicions. I wish we knew what was to become of you. Of us, and our friendship. Maybe then we could've done something together. Hatched up a plan. Like we always did.

Can you believe they kept another dhamaal? Yeah. "For your memory", they said. This one was huge too, not like the ones you and I attended. It was this big green tent, almost covering the entirety of the block. Your parents even called these guys from a shrine in Sehwan who are really good at cleansing the soul from bad spirits. Whatever that means. Me and your younger brother distributed the flyers in the neighbourhood. It was nice. I see a lot of him in you, you know? The same freckles on the apples of the cheeks, same almond shaped eyes. He even had the same mischievous grin when we slipped a flyer under Mohsin Baba's courtyard. We ran as he accused us of polluting his sacred home. Poor guy. He even yelled out your name, thinking you and I were behind this. Why wouldn't he? We were his most despised "devil children", as he would call us. It was my first visit since you left us. Call me crazy, but I think Mohsin Baba didn't even yell at us

Yes, You Are

that much. I like to think he missed the teasing. Just how I miss you.

The festivities started Friday night. Auspicious day and all. The entire neighbourhood was buzzing with the news of the grand dhamaal. I think I heard announcements from 3 different mosques, informing half of Lyari about what's to happen. Everyone was very ecstatic to see the men from Laal Shahbaz's shrine. It was like they were Shahrukh Khan. God. I remember bursting out laughing at that thought as everyone bowed down their head for prayer. Chachi looked like she would kill me just with her glare. It was a bad joke, I admit. So bad it felt like you whispered it to me.

The men sat on a stage made especially for them inside the tent. Large speakers on either sides so what they say could be heard far and wide. We started by remembering you in prayer. I could hear wailing and soft sobs from everywhere. Even from people I'm sure you have never met. I know you always were the kinder one. I know you would have said that maybe it was cries of empathy at the loss of such a young soul. I know that you would have found some sappy excuse but you're not here and I can't dismiss that no one helped you when you needed it. And so I stood there, fists balled and my face heating up by every empty wail I heard. I wanted it to end. But it was just the beginning.

They lit the bonfire. Young men jumping back after dropping logs of wood which made the fire more intense. The tent was filled with smoke. I clenched my eyes shut, feeling tears trickling from the side of my face. Almost like a ripple effect, more tears poured down my face, but not from the smoke. The ground beneath me vibrated with every beat of the drum. It was slow and steady, but amplified on the speakers. They chanted hymns and the drums picked up pace. Faster. Louder. More intense. I sat down next to Ammi and held her hand. I

couldn't do it again, Wahida. I tried to. For your sake. You would've urged me to entertain our families wishes. I was trying, I promise.

The chanting and drums got louder and before I knew it, a woman dropped behind me and let out a scream. I instinctively wanted to tend to her. See if she's okay. But Ammi held me back. "Let it happen", she said. And so I did. I watched. I watched as more people around me withered in pain. I heard them scream and groan and ask for help while the hymns and music got louder. I felt my heart beat race and my vision blur from all the tears. The heat of the fire and the intensity of the crowd around me grew ever passing minute. But I felt numb. I remember you asking me to let myself feel at peace. I was trying.

I was back in your room. I could see you withering just like them. I remember. I remember begging your parents to let me call the ambulance. You needed a doctor. I knew you needed a doctor but I was escorted from the room while the Pir sprayed more holy water on you. You needed help. You would've lived. You could've been here. But you're not. And there is no higher power and no amount of dhamaals which will ever bring you back.

On Air

Aalia Waqas

I switch the flip myself tonight. The “On Air” light flickers before settling on a dull glow. I sit there in red tinted darkness and stare at the equipment. I’m used to looking at it from the other end. I push the seat away and shift my wheelchair into the booth. It feels wrong to be where he was. In his space, to have my hands reaching for his headphones, to adjust the mic half an inch lower because I’m shorter than him. The boards in front of me look scary instead of inviting. He was supposed to be here. He was supposed to guide me. It was supposed to be a slow transition.

My phone buzzes, the screen lights up. I ignore the alarm and let it vibrate and until it goes over the edge of the desk and falls to the floor. The dull thud jolts me even though I knew it was coming. I hear Nico’s voice, “Hurry up, Alex! Can’t keep the people waiting.”

I blink and see him rounding the corner of the hallway. His jacket disappearing and his laughter echoing between the empty walls. Like he did a week ago. Like he won’t anymore. The sound of his voice fades to a ringing that gets louder. My phone lights up on the floor again and I squeeze my eyes shut. The ringing gets louder still. I see flashes of white light, then an actual flashlight. Then the “Step out of the vehicle, hands above your head. Slowly.”

Nico’s unwavering voice, “Yessir.” a deep breath, a phone discreetly turned on to record, he nods his head to it slightly “I’m turning off the engine now.” Silence. “I’m going to open the door with my right hand.” A click. “I’m stepping out.” I pick up the phone as he steps out. I try to find an angle.

“Hands above your head!”

His hands move up, palms facing out.

“You.” The flashlight shines in my face.

“Sir, that’s my friend. He’s disabled.”

Friend? The word buries itself deep in my heart. The flashlight shines in the backseat, he sees the wheelchair then points it to my legs like that’ll show him what’s wrong.

“You got a phone?” he asks. My mouth is dry, I’m worried if I open my mouth my heart will drop from it. My tongue is dry. I can’t breathe. “Son,” he says, louder. I nod, shaky.

“Can you call someone to pick you up?”

Another nod.

He turns back to Nico, shoves him onto the bonnet and grabs his wrist, holding them against his back as he handcuffs him. I see Nico wince. I reach for the door. Nico shakes his head imperceptibly. He makes eye contact: ‘Don’t.’

My heart drops, I yell, “He didn’t do anything wrong!”

I open the door, swinging my legs to the side, “Officer!” He’s not listening. “OFFICER!”

Nico smiles at me, winking as the man throws open the backseat of the police car and shoves his head in. I hold on to the door and force myself up, dragging my foot as I try to move forward, “YOU CAN’T DO THIS!”

By the time I’m standing upright, the car’s speeding away. I’m still gripping the phone. My legs give way.

The red light flickers off. I’m in complete darkness again. Instinctively, I reach for the lamp string. The desk is bathed in the yellow glow of the bulb. I flip the switch again and the “On Air” comes back to life.

I turn on the PC, flip all the switches I’ve seen Nico flip a hundred times. I flip one more and we’re properly on air now. I am. . . not we. Just me.

“Hey, Party People,” my voice cracks, I take a deep breath, “this is Alexander coming to you live from The Ruins of Atlantis. I know I’m not the guy you tuned in to listen to – but I’m the one you’ll have to listen to for the foreseeable future. Nico Miller has disappeared. He was arrested on Friday last week for no apparent

On Air

reason and has not been located since. The authorities are 'looking into' it but the police car that he was shoved into has disappeared. Let's talk about rebellion."

The Safe Side

Gurmehar Kaur

“Trash please.”

“Trash please.”

“Trash please.”

“Ma’am, do you have any trash?” The air hostess bends down over the two passengers sitting on the aisle and the middle seat to nudge Sohini who was leaning on the airplane window, her head covered in a duppata with soft music playing in her ears. Her mother used to play Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan in the house when she was a baby and since then he has been the only lullaby she listens too, even now at 40 years of age.

“Ma’am.” The air hostess now held her shoulder and gently shook her.

“Oh what,” she looks up startled, slowly lowering her scarf from her face as she pulled out her earphones. “Ma’am, can I clear your tray table?” the air hostess asked her politely with a smile plastered on her face, a performance that she has been trained for months to perform, but one could see a swelling agitation in her eyes. It was a long flight and the poor woman had been walking back and forth in the aircraft refilling tiny plastic glasses with whiskey for the groups of men scattered around the plane who were hell bent of making the most of the free booze offered on the flight.

“I’m so sorry, here.” Sohini handed her the empty travel sized wine bottle and packets of peanuts. Sula. She looked at it and smiled. It reminded her of her college days in New Delhi. She had just moved from Pune to the capital to study journalism in one the most prestigious colleges in Delhi University, which in those days was known for its liberal feminist values. Memories of her college only remained sweet for a few seconds before her mind jolted her into the present state of the same institution that she once revered.

The Safe Side

Hers was the last batch that graduated before the new principal slowly began changing the system, suddenly there were curfews in the girls hostel— a shocking decision for a college that once prided itself for producing young women who went ahead to question and challenge the patriarchal system in all fields. Initially It was only limited to the weekdays and then soon it extended to the weekends as well. Those were the first signs and all she could do was read about it from her Mumbai office while she worked on the other stories. As she looked back things had begun changing even while she was around.

“Passengers are requested to tie their seat belts. The plane will begin descending and we should reach our designation Veer Savarkar International Airport, New Delhi in about 20 to 30 minutes. We have reached before designated time. The distance from London to New Delhi was covered in 8 hours 40 minutes. I hope you’ve had a comfortable and safe flight. We thank you for choosing Air India. Jai Hind. Bharat Mata Ki jai.”

Sohini’s hands gripped the hand rest tighter. She had left in 2014, the year the Hindu Janata Party came into power. She didn’t know then that it would be fifteen years before she returned to India. She still remembers the NCW chief dropping her at the airport with five delhi police personals escorting her not just through the security but till she reached her designated seat in her aircraft. Air India. They promised her that she would be brought back in as little as a two weeks if things settled here sooner and the threat on her life reduced, and if not then “maybe a month max.” But back then no one including Shweta Sahiwal, the chief, could have predicted what would eventually go down in the country.

One month passed and then another and then another. When her visa reached a point of expiration, she went on her laptop and booked herself on the first flight out of Heathrow and called Shweta and announced: “I have had enough and I’m coming back. You cannot dump me on a flight to London and just leave me here

without any updates. India is mum country. It is my home. I spoke up for it and now I'm being punished for sharing the truth? Maybe I should have kept my mouth shut, just like everyone else. Raghuvendra is out on Bail. He is contesting the elections in three months. There is no punishment for the powerful but in the name of security I've been made to rot away in this empty apartment for six whole months." She realized she was yelling into the phone.

Six months of living in anticipation was more than enough for her. What was she waiting for? When would it ever "get safe?" She had to be home.

Sohini was 25 when someone attempted to kill her for the fourth time. Though she never quite believed that someone actually wanted to murder her. She was sure they just wanted to instill enough fear in her so that she would never speak up in the court. The day she stood witness against Raghunath Singh, the chief minister of madhya pradesh, she was flown out of the country as he was being taken to jail for inciting communal violence and instigating riots between Hindu and muslims that lead to 50,000 deaths in four villages. It was Sohini who did the sting operation and caught a conversation between Vijay and him on tape where they discussed their plan of action now that they had successfully pulled off the riot. "The votes will be divided. The Hindus are in majority and will vote for us because they believed we supported them by importing the bandook. sir Chief minister ban ne ki tayari karo."

They told her that her surprisingly prompt departure was a preventive move especially since four attempts had already been made. "To be on the safe side," they said and she agreed. That day after Sohini's furious phone call, Shweta weighed the options and gave in. But when she began preparing the force for her protection, information leaked from the Delhi Police headquarters to the Home Ministry. Friends from the party who had formed the government in the centre informed Raghunath, now the Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh, who was out on bail, of the movement on

The Safe Side

this young girl who sent him to jail for 3 weeks, orders were sent to his people to prevent her return at any cost. Not before the Lok Sabha election in nine months. It seemed he was thinking.

Sohini ran around her relatives' small apartment in London collecting her things and shoving them in her small bag. Three-shirts, two sweaters and a jacket. When she had first come here she believed It would last only for a few weeks. As weeks turned into months her two shirts turned into five and she added another jacket to the mix and now with her heart full and mind slightly agitated she tried to decide which piece of clothing to take with her and which to leave behind. 6 hours before her flight her phone rang displaying the New Delhi phone code, she ran to get it hoping it was Shweta calling to give her the details of her security and who she should look for when she arrived at the Indira Gandhi International Airport, when it was still called that. She guessed it right, it was Shweta on the phone except she could barely understand a word coming out of a panicking Shweta's mouth. "Don't come. I'm faxing you the letter Raghuvendra's men sent. Go to the embassy and extend your visa. I will arrange for it from here, but do not board that flight. You need to understand." As soon as she hung up, Sohini's fax machine began whizzing in the background. What came through was a photo of the terminal gate she was to arrive at with the camera man holding a pistol in the frame. It was a warning. Raghuvendra was out on bail and he did not want to take chances with this woman. Sohini knew he wouldn't kill her because the suspicion would go on him automatically, and with elections being only a few months, he couldn't afford the bad press. But she also knew it wouldn't be unlike him to have her picked up silently from where she was and make it seem like she had never returned from London.

Her extended 6-month visit soon turned into 15 years and today she was finally coming back home. Delhi was geographically the same, but its soul was wretched out of his heart and replaced.

In 2019, Raghuvendra's Hindu Janata Party came into power with a majority in the lower house and the upper house of the parliament, and since then they had taken full liberty to bring amendments to the Indian constitution. It wasn't the first time they had come to power. They briefly held the highest office when Sohini was a small child and she would hear her parents joke and call it the name-changer government, as opposed to the game-changer government they claimed to be. In that short term they changed Mughal and British names to Hindu ones. A decade in power since the election in 2019 held a few months after she was sent off, their government had gone ahead and changed Buddhist, Jain, Sikh names as well. Will she recognise the street she grew up on or along with the names and history of her home even her memory was tampered with? She wondered.

The airplane tires hit the runway and jolted her out of her thoughts. It was 15 years since she first left. The government had changed. It was a revived Progressive Party of India that came back into power with a strategic alliance with independent and state parties. Her phone rang on the day of the election result. It was Shweta. Sohini could hear the 60 years of life she had lived in her voice— exhausted and tortured: "It's time to come back home."

She took a deep breath and walked out of the aircraft along with everyone and moved towards the immigration desk. There was still going to be a security force waiting for her. Allahabad was still Prayagraj and the Airport was called Veer Savarkar International Airport. The country had changed and then changed some more, but she was back now. She was ready to build her country back from the ashes.

— 7 —

Afternoon

Another Rainy Day

Sarim Mehmood

Heeding the Pale Blue Dot,
Beguiled in sickening red joy,
God wells up once again.

He lets loose a warning,
Anguish wrapped in a bolt,
Asserting his majesty.

Dismissed! the crack echoes back,
From the terrestrial realm,
Tinged with doubt and dishonor.

Denounced by his own design,
Cursed with singularity,
His grief knows no bounds.

So, on fleecy grey couriers,
Gliding across the ebony coliseum,
He sends his laments.

Another Rainy Day

Drop after drop, sparkling,
Falls the plea for recognition,
Onto dwellers and nomads alike.

Pity the uncomprehending who,
Alien to his association,
Hole up under dripping ledges.

In the deserted Garden of Eden,
Littered with stubs and swizzle sticks,
A sulky sigh resounds.

Once upon a Time, When Fishermen.

Sandip Baidya

How my skin glimmers like
coal speckled peppers near the lake
where my ancestors have lain
waiting, soaking, fluttering, basking

with their fishing nets sprawled
out of their still eyes across a baked lake.

A humid day pushes saline
beads down ridges of
their shoulders and ribs
where muscles are happily
hollow with the absence of
adequate food.

The fishes are jumping out of the water
the fishes are slick with flicks
some have learned how to fly.

Once upon a Time, When Fishermen.

A salty wind catches up when
a Hilsa wings its fins.
It passes exactly through
the middle of the nose & the lips.

They smack their lips and
wiggle their noses.

The moustache catches the whiff
turns the silver to black,
with youth filling the hollows housed
in old charred bodies where
gods once lived.

They bring in,
fish in bits
bamboos
herbs
tomatoes, potatoes and cherries.

Soon funny smelling limbs walk in
slashing through woods
with a bobbing English head
everything they touch
rots, and
falls into a slumber of ruins.

Neelum

Sadia Maqsood

In the outskirts of Korangi stands a small but neat little house. No matter what time of day you enter, the whirring of a sewing machine welcomes you. You always find a middle-aged woman with thick glasses and a brown round scar on her cheek, bent over the machine, her eyes focused on her work. This grand-looking and old-fashioned machine is her most prized possession. She is known all over the area as Neelum Bibi.

Women who saw it, eyed it with a mix of admiration and envy which they concealed well between flattery and jabber. When Neelum first received the sewing machine, all those decades ago, as dowry from her mother, she covered it with a shiny red velvet cloth and tucked it away. She was afraid that merely touching it might cause the beautiful thing harm. But shortly after she had given birth to five children, her husband lost a long and bitter battle against cancer, and Neelum was left all on her own to raise their children. It was then that she decided it was time she brought the old thing out and put it to good use and so Neelum started sewing clothes for women all over Korangi. Her sewing machine was now her only support in the world and the only means to feed her children and provide for them an education.

Before her, it had been a possession of her mother, Rahat begum, whose fate had been no better, if any different, than Neelum's. Rahat, after being divorced, found herself a single mother responsible for raising six little children with only a few hundred rupees that she had managed to save during her lifetime. She, like her mother, had never attended school and so was in no position to get a job and earn. In such desperate times, Rahat resorted to the one skill she had learned from her mother: sewing.

Neelum

With whatever money she had saved and some more that she received from relatives and women in her colony as an act of financial support, Rahat purchased a sewing machine. And the rest of

her life was composed of days she spent sewing for women of the colony and thus making a living for herself. She passed the skill to her only daughter, Neelum, so that she could stand on her feet when she faced her dark days.

Neelum always has the company of women in her house. They come to get a kameez or shalwar stitched, or to get a nice dress sewn for someone's wedding, or to get quilts or covers of pillows sewn to decorate their simple, whitewashed homes. Sometimes, second cousins and sisters-in-law also accompany these women just to meet Neelum. At evenings, a large group of women gather in her house to watch her sew and exchange stories and events of the day. Her brilliant skills in sewing and stitching combined with her warm character attract a lot of customers towards her house from the vicinity and beyond.

Most of the women remark that Neelum has inherited her extraordinary skills from her late mother, but Neelum simply believes it is a result of a lot of practice. She tells the women she has been sewing since the last twenty years or so just like her mother and that is her great secret. "I can teach your girls, too, if you bring them here every day."

So over many cups of tea and a lot of talking and sewing, Neelum Bibi's mornings, afternoons and evenings go by. Women who visit her always bring interesting bits of gossip from around households of Korangi.

"Do you know why Khalida has not been coming here since so many days? Her husband is very sick, and doctors have given up hope. Poor soul! I got to know from my little son who is friends with her son." All faces immediately wear an expression of utmost concern and the subject of discussion becomes Khalida's sick husband.

One particularly fussy woman is Zareena. She is a widow and childless. She spends her evenings at Neelum's house, mostly criticising things. All the women know about Zareena's sorry past and circumstances and pity her. Hence, they only nod their heads in agreement whenever she speaks nonsense, and respond with, "You are right, Zareena baji. You are right."

She is the kind of woman who never lets a chance slip to criticise women's freedom and education. "Women should not leave their houses," she says the same thing every day. "Girls are born to raise a family, not to earn a salary. I am warning you again, Neelum: you should stop sending that older daughter of yours to school. It is time that you marry her off. Education makes girls lose sense. Haven't you seen those educated girls of rich families? They roam on streets and bazaars in short clothes and heads uncovered. They feel no shame, tauba!" In response, the women nod their heads and say, "You are right, Zareena baji" while Neelum stays silent. She heaves a sigh of relief when someone changes the topic to Aasiya's new daughter-in-law.

When Neelum was a little girl, she loved to read alphabets and numbers. Her mother, seeing her daughter's fondness to read and write, insisted on sending her to school but Neelum's father was reluctant. If he sent his daughter to school, the other men of the muhalla would kill him with their sarcasm and taunts. Young girls in uniforms with books in their hands heading to school was not a common sight in the muhalla. Finally, they decided they would send their little girl to Qaisar, the only literate woman in the neighbourhood.

Qaisar lived three houses away from their own. A few other kids of the neighbourhood who, like Neelum, were lucky were sent to Qaisar's house instead of schools. Qaisar was a very well-mannered and well-spoken woman and Neelum inferred it was a result of her education. She vowed to herself she would get an education and become like Qaisar one day and teach the children of Korangi. But fate won against her dreams. She was married

Neelum

off at a very young age and left to take care of a household and manage a family.

Her own dreams shattered like millions of fragments of sugar glass, Neelum gathered the broken pieces and built a new castle: a new dream for her children. Despite the circumstances, she is determined to educate them. Her own mother had given her a future that was built on the foundation of hopelessness. It was as if she had always known that Neelum would be a seamstress because she was incapable, and perhaps even undeserving, of anything better.

Years down the lane she was living the future her mother had always predicted for her.

Her own daughter, Neelum resolved, would not live her life in the company of a noisy machine and chatty women. No, Nimra would grow up to be an educated woman like Qaiser and craft the life of her dreams.

Things would have been a lot easier were her husband alive. Not that he brought home a lot of money as a car mechanic, but at least he gave her hope. Now stuck inside her tiny house with a sewing machine and five children to feed, the castle she built of broken pieces is what keeps her going.

Life is tough but so is she.

Naseer

Sadia Maqsood

The only vivid memory Naseer Ahmed has of his childhood is his father teaching him how to ride a rickshaw. He was roughly twelve years old when his father whose hair was turning grey decided it was time that he trained his son to do the job he had been doing all his life.

“But I want to join the army, Abba.” Little Naseer had said with hope in his eyes and a longing in his voice. All this little boy knew from whatever he had heard from others was that the uniformed men of Pakistan Army would rather lay their lives on the border than turn their backs on the homeland. And it had become Naseer’s dream to be one of them one day. This is what he wanted to be: brave, unstoppable and a man of honour.

But Abba shook his head. “This is what I have done all my life, Naseer. And this is what you will do too.” he said.

He did not tell him that he could not bear to lose his only son in the battles of the army. He did not tell him that he was his only joy in the world. He did not tell him that he was not even his own blood but his brother’s. There was a lot Abba wanted to say but he saved his words for a better time in future when Naseer would be old enough to understand things. Right now, he was a little boy who ran barefoot in dusty playgrounds with boys his age and counted stars on the sky every night. Abba did not want to rob him of his childhood.

Maybe Naseer would have been begging on the streets today, clad in two straps of cloth. Maybe he would have been standing with his head high, a badge displaying his name shining on his chest, dozens of men saluting him as he walked by, a proud army man. Or maybe he would have

ended up a rickshaw driver after all, something fate had written for him, nothing more, nothing less.

He could have been many maybes.

And it was because of all these maybes that Abba never told him anything after that day. He gathered his words in his large sack of secrets and took it to his grave.

So this was Naseer Ahmed, the man who could have been many Naseers if not for those maybes that haunted his father all his life. This Naseer Ahmed was a rickshaw driver.

He spent his days and nights riding the noisy vehicle all around the city that has become his home. He knows every nook and corner of Karachi. He knows the places where the rich live in their big and lavish houses with security guards on doors all day and night; he knows the places where the poor live where curtains hang at doors and children play out in the dirty streets; and he knows places where people who are neither too rich nor too poor live.

He knows short routes to every place for passengers who seem to be in a hurry to reach their destinations and he knows long routes, too, for children who seem to enjoy the ride in his dilapidated rickshaw. He knows the roads where gutters overflow and he knows, too, places where traffic is dense. Karachi has become his home, his world. If there is a world beyond Karachi, Naseer does not know and he does not care for his own is enough for him.

With time, he has developed a love for his job and his ramshackle rickshaw that he calls his 'daughter'. The other rickshaw drivers often laugh at his silliness and Naseer laughs back. They do not know the stories that hide deep inside his chest; they only know that he is a poor rickshaw driver who lives with his sick mother in a small house.

Naseer does not feel any shame in admitting again and again that his rickshaw is his daughter. Of course, nothing in the world can ever replace his own little daughter whom he lost several years ago due to malaria. Back then, he did not have enough money

to buy her medicines and when he begged the doctors to save her life, they just pushed him out of the room, saying they had more important things to do than listen to his whining. Naseer watched in agony and helplessness as death consumed her slowly, little by little every day.

Now, living in a one-room house with his old and sick mother who has no one to look after her but him, all Naseer asks God is not to take his rickshaw away from him, his only hope, his only support. In return he promises he would do everything that God asks him to do.

Naseer keeps his promise. He is a faithful Muslim who prays five times a day as soon as he hears the call of azaan. He fasts all thirty days of Ramadan never complaining to God about the scorching summer heat that bathes him in perspiration. Although he can hardly make both ends meet, he is very dedicated towards charity. He knows every spot in Karachi where the homeless and the hungry covered in two scraps of cloth spend their days and nights in misery. He gives away whatever he can from his monthly savings to these men, mothers and children who have been abandoned by humans just like them.

There is only one more thing Naseer dreams of: to go with his old mother to the Holy city of Makkah, for Hajj and wash off all his bad deeds, and purify his soul before he too ends up in a grave like his father and daughter. Once this desire is fulfilled, Naseer would die peacefully. But what with hardly any money to satisfy his hunger and look after his mother, Hajj seems a distant dream. Distant but not impossible.

Often women clad in burkas with little children beside them bargain too much. But unlike the other rickshaw drivers who refuse to listen to anything, Naseer lets them in. Most of the times, he does not take fare from the elderly and the young girls who, frustrated and tired after long school hours want nothing more than to go home. The elderly passengers go on and on with their

Naseer

rants as if there is no one in the world to listen to them but him, and Naseer listens to them patiently.

At night, this man whose hair is slowly turning white finally goes home to his sick mother who has been lying in bed all day staring at the ceiling and listening to the noise of rickshaws rattling outside. He takes her to the doctor and buys her medicine. Then he kneels in front of God in prayer and lets the deepest whispers inside him scream.

But when people gesture to him in the middle of the road to stop his rickshaw, all they see is a poor man with wisps of grey hair in his beard, not Naseer Ahmed: the man who could have been many stories, the man with a universe inside of him.

Will

Tejas

Hummingbird-sized sparrows in transit from the ground to the sky, some so small against the rain-laden clouds that they are unmoving specks against the expanse. For a moment, if you followed the lower hand of the boomerang they formed, it seemed to point to the largest of the sixteen gopurams in the town, golden white trapezoids. Let your gaze descend step by step over the gods and goddesses, over the yakshas and yakshis, and get down from the feet of Jaya and Vijaya who menace you, fangs at the corners of their mouths. Come back to this realm, let the white statues frozen in their beautiful postures be, and focus on the coffee shop. People in lungis or the early temple-goers in veshtis, the latter mostly old men with tufts of hair hanging behind their otherwise bald heads. Now the shopkeeper gapes at a man with broad shoulders and a grotesque face, all aquiline nose and curly hair, stubble. He looks like an American tourist but with Parachute oil in his hair, flowery shirt and cargo shorts. Skin just a little lighter than the milky filter coffee he asks for. Foul mood, fumes like froth in spilling over the rim of the tumbler.

“Enna thalaivare? No will for you?”

“Velaiya paaru pa. You’ll find out soon enough. No one here keeps their mouth shut anyway.”

Vendor’s yellow teeth each one going every which way. Incisors sharp enough to cut diamonds though he has touched not a single egg in his lifetime of five decades and a half. Grotesque grin. “Leave our poor amma alone. She’s living with one kidney, she’ll survive this hip fracture too, you wait and see. Aama, how are you eating?”

“You gave the coffee, no? Mind your own business.” Others in the shop smile at each other. College students excepted, they have no time to glance away from their friends books

40kbps torrents and cigarettes. Midlife-crisis stricken uncles have followed the story of the one-kidney lady for forty years now and they could not but be amused by the descending vultures. The town was small enough that marrying within the community would be incest in a generation or two. Fortunately, the college generation was eloping young. Negative externalities followed, though — they left crabbier and even more maliciously gossiping parents behind, stuck in tradition that would never allow them to accept their children’s choices, and stuck with children who would not accept tradition as a choice.

Mohanan transferred the coffee to a plastic cup and walked back home after paying for it. At the doorstep he saw his Sheela glowering at Rajiv, their son, who was sitting cross-legged in front of the old woman’s bed. He stuck his head in and whispered to her, “Paati will likely write you off the will for that, no way your son is going to net us anything by his pathetic singing.”

He went out again before he could hear her reply. That was one less embarrassment for his son. Time to time he felt guilty for putting his son in this judgment scenario and choosing between mother and father. At the same time, it was also something he could use to tease her, a contest they both had been involved in ever since they got married.

In the room, Lakshmi and Saraswati in two dimensions on the wall, in three dimensions on the table that doubled up as the prayer house and mini-temple, with Vishnu, Garuda, Krishna, Hayagreev, and many others for company. One would think it was a sculptor’s or an art collector’s house. The lady of the hour (and to most, hopefully a few days only) sat on the bed in living room, looking up at the ceiling, veins sticking out on her neck. “Paadu, pa, Mohanu.”

“Manni, that’s his father’s name,” Sheela intervened gingerly. Sheela had started calling her by the inaccurate term of manni soon after her marriage, when she had not known all the members of Mohanan’s family well.

She pretended not to have heard, and waited, still staring at the ceiling. Rajiv sang with his teeth clenched, with eyes that he thought burned with fire turned on his mother. With the return of the gaze, he discovered that fire could indeed be put out with fire. Two plus three make zero. Teeth unclenched, lips parted, and magically music came forth from the chit of a boy. Or so his mother thought, her mind on vacation along with her, checking out of here and checking into the future where their sofa would be black leather with cushion so soft that it would seem that the Bustards had migrated to her house. Seen only by the poor boy, Paati passed a hand over her hair to smooth it at the sides and deftly removed her hearing aid. In blissful silence, she pretended to sway to the music, turned her neck this way and that, and noted that the boy had a weak chin and even weaker eyes. He would cry any moment now. If he were her own grandson, she might have felt like cheering him up, sit him on her lap and feed him and tousle his hair. No, that wasn’t the reason, she was just tired, and was determined not to die and give this crybaby and his mother her jewellery and her houses. Pathetic, really, he was thirteen almost and still being bossed around by that lady. Ten-fifteen years ago maybe she would’ve been proud of his obedience, but now she was tired of children.

She made a show of showering affection. Eclairs, maybe expired, from her Malaysian handbag that her now expired husband had bought. The boy rejected it, being used to much better. Dairy Milk, at the very least. She shrugged. Rajiv was disappointed. She rummaged again in the bag, brought out some forty rupees and gave the crumpled notes to the boy. “Go buy Fanta.”

“But Paati, I like Coca-Cola better...”

“For me da pakki.” She chuckled inwardly when Sheela made a disgusted face. She was boring, really, and today was the first time the old lady had been able to get to her. Paati was known to be a lion in her kitchen, a Stalinate lion at that. Don’t touch this! Not with that hand! Wash your hands first you savage. Aiyo appa, didn’t anyone teach you how to behave, don’t behave like an autokaran, keep the curd in the fridge. Enna, eating like a sudra. A few younger ones recoiled at the last one, but most of the elders took it with equanimity. No caste-hatred in those words, they thought, just bone-deep prejudice. Sheela was worse than her when it came to the purity of the kitchen, wouldn’t step into it without a bath and didn’t let anyone in either.

Paati had walked into the kitchen in her maxi once in the middle of the night, dirty white hair almost touching the vessel in which she was boiling the milk for the coffee. She expected to send Sheela, who was visiting, into a dead faint. Instead, she came in, pale-faced and afraid, and led her by the hand back to her bed. Later that evening she heard her tell Mohanan, “avare, maybe we should take your mother to the hospital, she’s behaving strangely. . .”

Paati slapped her forehead and laughed to herself. The boy had made things easier though, and after he was born Sheela’s facade was a bit easier to crack. Paati was satisfied that on her purported deathbed she had gotten the better of her goody-two-shoes wife-of-the-nephew. When she bounced back it would only be that much more enjoyable to annoy her nephew and his wife and spoil Rajiv once in a while, and make his parents rage and squirm.

She never knew why she did it. It wasn’t that she disliked them. On the contrary, she loved the bustle and the crowd and the little disagreements that followed when they came. It delighted her to play the sisters-in-law off, tell Sheela that Pramila had called Rajiv a nitwit, and then Sheela giving Pramila the cold shoulder for no reason. Pramila had thought that Sheela’s new job and her eighty thousand a month salary had made her too haughty, and

she spoilt her own daughter when were in town. Little Garvita left behind diarrhoea, vomit stains on the ancient carpet, crayon squiggles on the walls, and a medical bill that paati had to pay in part – no ATMs for the city people to use.

Nonetheless, she was hurt when the sisters-in-law reunited and refused to talk to her. After a few months of letting her pride go, she rubbed her forehead, distorting the srichurnam on it, and set up a hue and cry.

In the city, where they took her for treatment, she declared she was feeling better, but needed rest and not hospitalisation. And so for a month each, Pramila and Sheela hosted her at their homes, much to their irritation and that of the others in their families, except the children, of course. Around this time, Sheela's rapid promotions were the talk of the maids and the watchmen and the superannuated gentlemen and ladies of the apartment complex, leading to much unwarranted, unintended, character assassination. Mohanan, irritable by nature and rendered insecure by the fact that his wife was earning more than him, was loath to have his aunt at home. Old age had only sharpened her tongue, and increased her tantrums. The least she could do was let him inherit something.

When he heard she was dying, then, he rushed, with a hastily packed suitcase, and a quick leave application to a boss who was understanding for once. Sheela said she would join him in a day or two, if the situation worsened. Rajiv went with him. On the bus, he watched the palm trees, grapevines, the shitting villagers, and silently watched. He was a strange child, Mohanan often thought. Spent his time on the Internet, learning scripts of languages no one spoke anymore. As if to remain true to that, he didn't speak much either. The stars appeared and disappeared as the bus rattled on through country and towns alternatingly, and it was late in the night when he saw the incongruous LED white on the old temple tower through bleary eyes.

Father and son had to walk ten minutes or so through empty streets, so deserted and so dedicated to saving electricity that even the streetlights were turned off. Mohanan stood at the door hesitantly, wiping sweat off his massive forehead with a complimentary white napkin he had taken from a hotel. He knocked twice, not too loud. Footsteps, then the top-latch opening, then the latch at the bottom, then finally the main one. Only Pramila was so paranoid. So the sly woman had made her way here before him. No matter, he thought, he was happy to share.

“Va da. Keep your bags in the room. Sheela didn’t come?” There was a slight accusation in the last sentence.

“No, akka. New job, you know, leave problems...” he said, smiling weakly.

“That’s true. Did you have anything to eat?”

“Only in the morning. Rajiv, want something to eat? Rajiv, unna thaan.” The boy was at the door, staring at god knows what. “Rajiv,” he said, voice slightly louder.

“Huh, what? No, I’ll eat in the morning...” Sluggard, Mohanan thought. What would happen of him in college he didn’t know. Who is so dreamy eyed at fourteen years? He shook his head, and felt a moment of righteousness at the patience he had.

Pramila and he talked in hushed voices for a while. “Venky hasn’t come? And Garvita?”

“He’s sleeping inside,” she said, “drove here in a record three and half hours. She’s also here, though not very thrilled about it.”

I’ll buy a car too, you wait. Sheela isn’t too fond of gold, we’ll sell the ornaments and buy a car on EMI. Of course you brought your daughter with you, soft power.

They slept at one in the morning, Rajiv staring at the clock, Mohanan at the creaking fan. Narayana, let it not fall on me, he prayed. And rid me of this fear of death in the process.

He woke up to the sound of Suprabatham, the smell of malli flowers and incense and of Sheela’s cologne. He made a bee-

line for the bathroom, then remembered this was a new house. The older house had a hole in the ground surrounded by walls, a structure called kakkoos, and city boy Mohanan would not deign to call it a toilet, bathroom or the most sophisticated washroom under any circumstances. After freshening up, as his father always said, he put on his naamam, with the white U on it because it was an important day and went and flattered perima¹², quickly finding out from Sheela whether she had had a safe trip since it was an overnight bus, and how she'd gotten leave. "You'll be another man altogether the day you are able to take care of yourself." She patted his chest and smiled at him. He didn't know whether to be flattered, feel loved, or insulted.

He had woken up late. Perima had already been bathed, and according to her strange whims, had been dressed in a madis-
aar, which seemed unimaginably stuffy and just wrong for a sickbed, but well you never knew with a woman who walked the sandy temple courtyard at nine in the morning, barefoot. Sheer madness. Garvita was already being scolded for playing mridangam on the oxygen tank that stood tall and rocket-like on the bedside. Pramila and Sheela, competing as usual, had formed an uneasy alliance in cooking. They would later declare, quite subtly and congratulatory, for perima's benefit and judgment, which dishes who had cooked. "Oh, taste this, perima, Sheela cooked this."

Mohanan went and made conversation with Venky, Pramila's husband, whose orthodox ways and foisting of conservative lifestyles upon his children he hated. Sheela often had to stop an argument between the two with a stern glance directed Mohanan's way.

Reuben, or Rooban, that religion-bending driver, walked in and stopped in his tracks, smiled the widest smile he had in years and rushed around the house greeting everyone. "Venkat-achalapathy saar! How are you?"

"Venky is enough, pa. What is this, we trust you to take care of our perima here and you let her fall sick like this," he laughed.

“Aiyo illa ne what happened was that day I dropped her home and was just going to my cycle after parking the car and I see paati amma lying unmoving on the sofa. . .” “I’m joking, appa, you’ve taken good care of her, thanks for calling us as soon as you did. Though it seems you can manage very well without us.” Pramila gave him a sharp glance.

“Enna saar, don’t you know paati amma has lots of gold. And this house too. Why do you want to play with madam’s ambitions?” He grinned. Venky felt himself blush, and turned around and pretended to be busy. A blush flanking a walrus, ridiculous, he thought.

He relaxed when Reuben went into the kitchen – did that make him a Rooban with finality, then? So hard to know these things these days. Or maybe paati amma had grown more lenient in her old age.

He went back to the room and then to his laptop. Let the cooking and politicking remain the domain of Pramila, as it was de jure. He earned enough to be above all this, not like that Mohanan.

Meanwhile, that Mohanan had fallen into conversation with perima. In her own den, the lioness’ teeth were less sharp. She told her about the neighbour girl that ran away with a boy that they had all known about but never spoken about. Mohanan chuckled to himself, secretly glad for the girl, but he put on a show of disapproval. Quite abruptly, he said, “Perima, what did the doctor say? Ellam okay va?”

“Illa pa, he says most organs are on their way to failure. I have only a month or two according to him. I feel fine, though, you know. Not like last time, when you hosted me so well. I still thank perumal for that.” How she covers her bases, he thought. Now that we’re here, she’ll talk as if she’ll live forever.

“Don’t put the blame on us, perima, we aren’t going to answer to perumal for keeping you from him. Seri, did you settle

the issue with that moneylender that was coming for your husband's loans?"

"I told him, *inga paaru pa*, I'm an old widow, you can talk to whoever is there after me. I have sugar and BP, if you show me too many *kadan* papers, I will get a heart attack. *Vaikuntam* is destined for me very soon, don't hurry it. *Appidi cholluten*, and then he ran away. No morals, *en thalaezhuthu*. It's my fate."

There was a small transfer cost involved, then. A smaller car. Pipe-dreamed for a few more months.

"Have you written your will, *perima*? I'll be very straightforward with you. We don't want to fight after. Distribute your things however you want, but write it down clearly in paper."

She smiled at him. "Always so sincere, but so bad at this. I just have to sign it, leaving it open for a few revisions I'm not so sure of."

"One minute, I'll just pour the decoction and get the coffee, I've kept the milk on boil." She stuck her tongue out a little with the effort involved as she turned slightly into a more upright position. He got her a tumbler and poured himself only a little. "En pa, *davara enga*?"

Embarrassed, he ran back to the kitchen and got one. She kept her tumbler in it, and poured the coffee back and forth with a practiced hand. She had a sip and closed her eyes with enjoyment. "Super coffee." She said coffee, not *kaapi*. Took him by surprise, where was she getting her pronunciation learning from in this late age?

"BBC cooking serial," she said wryly, pointing at the TV. Clearly, his face was not very secretive.

He spoke to her for a while more, and left, satisfied that she liked him.

Pramila fretted, wondering whether *perima* would take it the wrong way if Venky was being himself. Sheela cooked. For her, it was a holiday like every weekend before the new job. Mohanan

Will

helped her as much as he could. He couldn't cook very well, but he was an excellent help.

Rajiv went with the younger Garvita, ostensibly to show her the temple. He did do that, but he also introduced her to mushrooms, chicken and attukaal soup. The girl had the best day of her life, far away from parents who didn't allow her to wear jeans.

Evening came, and Rajiv barely escaped Mohanan at the bread-omelette kadai next to the famous coffee shop. Back home, he was enduring the torture of singing for his deaf great aunt. At dinner, both the women set forth their efforts of the day. Perima declined to eat. "Doctor has advised only idli and thayir, pasan-gala. Rooban got it for me from the Iyer's shop. You should've told me before making all this, no? Anyway, I will have little bit of everything to make you feel less disheartened." She asked who made what, and made sure both of them were happy and felt well-liked. Later, she asked for the will, and with Rooban as witness, signed it.

That night she died in her sleep, declared as dead in the morning by little Garvita who saw multiple flies sitting on her face.

After her rites had been done, the adults sat down to looking after her affairs. They opened the will with the family lawyer present.

"My jewellery to go to Mariamma, wife of Rooban..."

"...the house on...street to my nephew and niece Mohanan and Pramila, to be inherited in equal portions..."

Garvita and Rajiv, unfortunately, don't talk anymore. The house stays there, and the siblings try every few years to set aside their differences and sell it off. The moneylender still comes and looks at it wistfully once in a while. No one has come to it ever since paati amma died. He shouldn't have been so polite, damn it. Should've asked for his money before the thirteenth day itself.

These city people, he thought. He waved a desolate good morning to Reuben, who, despite wishing he had had more am-

Tejas

bition and gotten paati amma to give him the house, was a half-content man, trying to make his way inch by inch to the city and to city life.

— 8 —

Happy Hour

Letter to Badshah Jehangir II

Omar Chowdri

Your Highness,

I write this letter to you not as your representative, nor as Mahaldar of your Royal Zenana. You and I have known each other since we were both children. We have shared uncountable experiences with each other. I know things about You that no one else in the Royal Zenana knows. Likewise, Your Wisdom has enabled You to understand me better than I perhaps know myself. Keeping our rich history in mind, I pray You will allow me to speak as a close confidant outside of my official rank. The things I have learnt thus far here, I cannot share them with You without indulging in our personal relationship. If this report is to be honest, then there will be a lot of clandestine and base things that I must reveal and I think You would rather they are not spoken of in an official capacity. With that said, here is what I want You to know about my first day here.

What is this strange land You have sent me to? It does not seem to know what it wants. You, the Great Timurids, have ruled Hindustaan for hundreds of years. You are as constant as change is within this nation. Yes, that is what it likes to call itself, a “nation.” The people insist it is different from our empire, and trust me when I say it is. Yet, it is also bizarrely similar in remarkable ways. It is almost as if the people know that they are an empire, but desperately want to pretend it is not. On top of this, their obsession with detail would put the craftsmen of Sheesh Mahal to shame. It baffles me, to be honest. Alas, let me begin recounting my brief visit to the American city of San Francisco on this month of Dul al-Qadah, or in the month of June according to their calendar.

Letter to Badshah Jehangir II

As soon as we docked at the harbor, representatives of the Great American Wazir greeted me. I was worried they were going to ask me his name, which I could not recall for the life of me. They are always changing the Wazir here, so it is difficult for me to keep track. All I know about the new one is that he has bizarre, yellow daal colored hair. They took me in a car straight to my hotel, which is not that far from the location where the “Pride Parade” will commence tomorrow. On the way, one of the representatives in the car told me that they were a “lesbian,” and that they were happy to have me there to represent the “LGBTQ+ community” from India. I was confused by what this “LGBT” was, so I asked them about it so I could know how I represented it. Perhaps the answer will allow me to represent it better? At this, the representative – her name was Karen – was confused, and said that their ambassador to You had told them that I was “transgender” and would give “Americans a different perspective on gender and sexuality.”

Now, Your Highness, I was as confused by all these big words as You are, so I will explain each of them one by one – but it is very complicated, so please grant me Your patience. The Americans like dividing everything into neat categories with the help of science, and that creates a lot of confusion. First, “gender.” Gender is basically how a man behaves or how a woman behaves. Simple enough? Not quite. Apparently, this gender is taught to us from birth, but it might not necessarily be who we really are. In all honesty, I was still confused about how this worked. How can you not be something that you were raised as? Are you not but a product of your upbringing?

So I pressed Karen more to get to the bottom of this. She explained that when a child is born in America, depending on whether they have a – please excuse the crudeness – penis or vagina, they are raised differently. For example, remember when we were children, we would see all those American toy commercials on the television in the Royal Quarters of Your Mother, the late

Maharani Jahanara? Shelve after shelve stacked to the top with every type of toy imaginable? Remember how we wondered why only boys seemed to appear for some commercials and only girls for others? Apparently, because American boys were taught to play with certain “types” of toys from those huge selections, and girls from the others. I am still not entirely sure what she meant myself.

After this, to better explain gender to me, Karen said that I am what Americans would call “transgender” – somebody who does not “identify” with the gender they were raised as. According to her, I was raised as a man, but when I realized I was not a man, I became a woman, which is my true gender. Finally, I began understanding what she meant, but it was still a little confusing to me. So I asked her if she was talking about my *zenana roo*, and she said she was not sure what that was. I thought hard and managed to translate it as “feminine spirit,” but she still did not understand me. She asked if I felt I was not a typical male. I nodded my head in agreement, but now it was my turn to be confused. Obviously – do I look like a man? She smiled and said that meant I was transgender. I was amazed how well this foreign woman understood me – not at all like that rude Englishman who called me an abomination. I asked if transgenders also go through the *nirwaan* surgery and get their genitals removed. She said that many do because it helps them feel more like a woman. Yet another similarity. All these similarities were getting me excited, but tragically, this did not last for long.

I told Karen I was surprised Christian hijras, or transgenders as they call them, also did the *nirwaan* to rise above sexual desire and become closer to God. At this, she gave me an odd look, and said that transgenders only did it to identify with their female self, which is basically the *zenana roo*. I realized my words had offended her, and I quickly fell silent. I should have known better than to discuss matters of faith so immodestly. An awkward stillness held the air in the car. She seemed to have picked up on it, too, and broke the silence by explaining “sexuality” to me.

They have this word for men having sex with men, which they call “homosexuality.” It seems fairly straightforward to me – men will be men. Put them together, and they will end up having sex. This is true for every city in the world, and true for every village in the world. So I did not understand why this was such a big deal. It is no secret the condoms and lubricant Your nobles distribute among their army men are mostly to keep them all safe from disease as they sodomize each other. I have a lot of experience with these matters Your Highness, so trust me when I say I’m sure it’s the same in the American army. That’s just what is in their nature. But then, she explained what being “gay” was.

Now Your Highness, I must warn You that what You hear next will shock you. According to Karen, gay men were men who had developed romantic desires for each other. So far, I still did not understand what was unique about what she was saying. When two people have sex together, romantic desires inevitably arise. What is so unusual about that? She then said that you could then take these romantic desires to the next level and actually marry the person. I know, I was as amazed as You must be when You read this. How can two men marry each other? When a man eventually marries, they always marry a woman because that is how it is supposed to be.

So I asked Karen how it is possible for two men to marry. She explained that in America, everyone is equal before the law – which, as I am told, does not descend from the Wazir, but rather from some document called “con-something.” I don’t quite remember the name. Anyways, since everyone is equal, they must be treated equally. So if a man wants to marry another man, they can. Now, a part of me wanted to ask her how this was possible. How can an American nobleman or priest be equal to an American serf or Dalit? But at that moment, I was so amazed at the idea of two men marrying, I could not think of asking her these questions.

Perhaps judging by something she saw in my face, she explained that this means that even hijras like me can marry a man

or woman. That caused my thoughts to become even more erratic. Me, marrying another man? I asked her how. She said in America, everyone is a citizen – an equal. Hijras are free to do whatever they want. We have the “right,” which is basically something everyone is supposed to have no matter what. We have the right to not just have to be courtesans, advisors, entertainers, or saints. We also have the right to be doctors, soldiers, or merchants. However, personally, I could care less about all these options. I wanted to know more about how I could marry another man – so I asked her.

She said that it is simple, I just have to submit some documents to the government with my soon-to-be-husband or wife, and they will recognize us as a married couple. After that, we will be able to live the rest of our lives together. I had so many more questions about this to ask of her. For instance, if the government recognizes us a couple, does everyone else in the nation automatically follow suit? But alas, I could not. The car had arrived at the hotel, and so this conversation had to end. Though, I fully intend to pick it up again as soon as I can.

Nonetheless, Your Highness, spending hours in this room, thinking of my speech tomorrow, my thoughts keep on drifting away to this “citizenship” thing. Based on what Karen told me, if everyone is equal before the law, and that means we hijras and khwaja siras, we all also have the same “rights” as everyone else, does that mean we could marry someone too? You and I share a bond that is indescribable. I am afraid that bringing this up may anger you, but I must for it is relevant to the topic at hand. Since before my nirwaan, we have indulged in erotic desires together that have helped foster the beautiful relationship we currently share. And while everyone in the Royal Zenana knows about us, nobody daresay anything about it. It happens, every other night, and life goes on without any mention of it.

However, what if that changed? What if we did not have to live like this anymore? Your love for me exceeds any that You have for Your wives. Why must I be the one who serves them while

Letter to Badshah Jehangir II

they denigrate me for supposedly taking You away from Them? Why can I not be treated as someone worthy to be the Empress, serving our subjects alongside you? Why do you deny me my rights?

I wish you were here with me, so we could share the glorious view outside this hotel room together. Why must I always run around the world to do your errands – represent the empire – and then return, only for you to quietly lead me to your private quarters for our moment of intimacy? Everyone in the Palace knows about us anyways. Nigh, everyone in Delhi knows about us. So why do we hide it? Are you that afraid of what others will say? Or are you afraid that in recognizing my equality to you, you will lose your status as the Badshah?

Jahangir, you are my Badshah. I will always worship you. I wish you were here with me. These Americans scare me sometimes, with all their big numbers and big ideas. But they try to see me as someone who is their equal with equal “rights.” They genuinely do. These are all people I have never met, ever, yet they believe I am an equal citizen. In their eyes, the only difference is that I am a citizen of Hindustaan and not America. But the problem is that I am not a citizen. I am your subject, and you have chosen to put me beneath your uptight, adulterous wives.

I wish you were here with me so I could beg you to see me as your equal and present me to the world proudly. I don’t know what will happen at the Parade tomorrow. I want you to come experience it with me. If I have anything new to report, I will. But for now, I want to experience all this that I am telling you – what it feels like to be seen as someone capable of everything and anything. I don’t know how exactly to describe this strange feeling of freedom. I’m still not sure if I should trust the Americans or not. My heart yearns for your presence, but I know you will not join me. Your pride would not allow it. Still, I will beg you to come join me. Meet me here in San Francisco. Please, and perhaps you will feel what I feel here.

Omar Chowdri

Your Love,
Anara

Ghar

Suyashi Smridhi

Look here, then. I, Saadat Hasan Manto, have found the occasion to be a free man in free India, oops, I meant Pakistan, after my fifth trial. I have learnt to be obsccener, a claim Pakistan will attest to, for it has labelled me as an ‘unwanted person.’ So here I was, in Karachi, the fine for my crimes finally paid, the judge too eager to establish me as an eminent writer of Pakistan, the pride of his country. To humour him further, I agreed to meet him outside the court. A meeting was fixed; his willingness to remain sober overpowered my desire to be intoxicated and at four in the afternoon, I cursed my way to the Coffee House, the tonga heavy with the anticipation of unwanted praise.

But how was I, Saadat Hasan Manto, to remember the other ways of being wanted? Afterall, I had learnt to be wanted only for the repeated crimes of carrying obscene stories in my pockets. I, however, wanted to be wanted, wanted in a way that meant loved, wanted in a way that my house huddled inside my home, a home I had left behind in Faras road, Bombay. As I pondered about wanting and being wanted, the tonga lurched to a sudden stop. The horse neighed in despair, its desperation a scurry for things that were and things that could have been.

As I jolted back to reality, drops of uncomfortable perspiration lining my forehead, the driver, between soothing commands of control, quietly apologised. “Sorry, Saheb, he gets agitated whenever he sees his old home.” There was that word again, ‘home,’ like a whiff of Safiya’s shammi kebabs in Bombay as Ismat and Ashok, Noor and Naushad laughed heartily, their jeers a doorway to our house. The scenes pulsated through me like a black and white film, its reel stuck on what home felt like. Oh, what a sentimental fool I was!

As the sun shrieked higher, the heat clung to my clothes, unwilling to let go. Without meaning to, I hear myself ask, “So, where is his home?” The driver turns to take a better look at me, his expression a mixture of surprise and respect, as if no one had previously feigned to even care about his horse before. “It’s right here Saheb, Mohatta Palace. Sahiba didn’t have time to look after Jehan, and here he is now, my own gift from God.” And suddenly, I found myself in Bombay, the garden replaced by the sea, the breeze oozing with relief, the pigeons flapping their wings around the domes.

“Oh, but you are mistaken, that is not Mohatta Palace, that is the Taj Hotel,” I say, laughter releasing from the corner of my eyes. The illusions of nation making had finally found a way to seep back into delusions. Taj was here, and so was Bombay, on the side of the border it had never seen before. “Arrey no Saheb! That is the Mohatta Palace. Ask anyone here,” says the driver, the distress of misrecognition coursing through his veins. “No, no, this is the Taj Hotel,” I say, unwilling to open my eyes to the reality of bordered memories.

As I jump up in joy, my sickness is lulled to sleep, at least for a moment. I see the driver lost in confusion over his mad horse and his mad passenger, our intertwined exclamations of happiness and remorse a sight of great ordeal. Later, when he returns to his one room flat, he would sigh a relief and tell his wife about the drama of today: “Jehan has finally found his match. As he stumbled around in sadness, our Saheb jumped up in happiness.” Over a plate of roti and daal, both husband and wife would laugh at our fumbles and mumbles, their everyday life coloured with the extraordinariness of shared love.

But till then, I had finally found my home in Pakistan.

Evergreen

John Lyons

There are these dotted circles they show you. I first saw mine when I was five years old. And if all goes well, as they show you these dotted circles, speckled and vaguely resembling a Petrie dish full of rainbow bacteria, you'll be able to respond with, "7, Q, 8," etc. For me, a five-year-old barely big enough to fit his feet off the optometry chair's seat, I responded, "Nothing, Nothing, Nothing." In each circle, there should have been a number or a letter. This would be the case for anyone, apart from one group: the colorblind. The doctor pulled the card and circles away from me. And sure enough, I was. The numbers were made of colors I couldn't see.

"Red-green deficiency," he called it, facing me but truly speaking to my mother. "It's the most common type. The specific kind you have is Protonomoly. Though, we might classify yours as severe. You have three cones in your eye. Red, Green, and Blue. Your Red cone is non-responsive to red light, and oversensitive to green light. You'll still see color, just inaccurately."

My mother always guessed I had malfunctioning eyes, as my oldest brother had the same diagnosis. Red-green. They first brought him to a doctor when he asked,

"Mommy, why are they called evergreens if they're brown?"

That was evidence enough that something was amiss, and sure enough, after putting those Petrie dishes in front of him, the doctor was able to offer an explanation. Red-green. As for me, my mother first saw signs of my malfunctioning eyes when I was playing a color-matching game as a toddler. I thought I'd matched the blocks to their colored, square footprints well, but my mother looked at her bumbling baby and laughed her heart out: every single one was in the wrong space. My brother stormed in at

the sound of the laughter, frustration built up in his nine-year-old march as he exclaimed, “No! No, John, you got it all wrong!”

He fixed the blocks for me.

“That’s better,” he said with a puff of his chest.

In his triumphant eyes it was solved, but little did he know, he’d scrambled them worse than I did. A blue cube in a purple box, a yellow in a green, a red in a brown. From day one, the world we saw was different from those around us.

Kindergarten came and I always had a fun fact to share about myself during introductions.

“Hi, my name is John, and I’m colorblind!”

It was nice to say at first. People found it fascinating. Blue plums, brown evergreens, grey lips, orange hair. People wanted to know how I saw things. But I was also teased about it from time to time, which wasn’t as fun. The teachers were usually made aware of my situation, especially in the younger grades, so that they would understand why I might act confused when asked to sit in the “purple” section of the carpet or if I were to draw green bread on a food pyramid.

They would say things like, “This is red.”

And I’d see yellow.

Or, “This is pink.”

And I’d see grey.

But sometimes they would say, “This is Jesus.”

And his skin would be green. I went to a Catholic school, as my mother worked very hard to raise us Catholic, and in first grade, I was criss-cross applesauce directly facing a green Jesus. I hadn’t seen anyone with green skin before. It was the style of artwork that caused my confusion, the old, medieval kind with aged paint. And the aging made Jesus green as peanut butter. Was it because he was God? Does God have green skin? Aliens do. Was Jesus an alien?

I asked my teacher about it and she laughed.

“No,” she said, “His skin is the color of yours and mine.”

It sure didn't look like it. But I took her word for it. After all, she could see things right, and I couldn't. I guess that's what Jesus looked like.

The green Jesus incident followed me into the fourth grade when I made an unfortunate error, yet again. We were each asked to draw a picture of how we saw Jesus for an Easter assignment, filling in the colors of a colorless outline. The teacher wanted us to use pastels. I hated pastels, because most in my grade school didn't have color labels on them like a crayon or a marker would. And I was always too timid to ask for help. But, I did what I was told and got to drawing. And sure enough, I accidentally made the same switch up. Green Jesus.

"John, what are you doing?" A giggling fourth grader asked me. His name was Joey. He was popular. "Why is he green?"

I didn't respond verbally at first. I'd been there enough times already, even at the age of nine. I looked at my paper, frowned, and too embarrassed to make eye contact I quietly said, "I'm sorry. I'm colorblind."

Joey laughed some more, "You drew Jesus green!"

"What color is he supposed to be?" I said.

He giggled some more. "Skin colored!"

That didn't make much sense. That color didn't exist. Nevertheless, I said, "Okay. I promise I'll fix it. I'll make it look good."

I was awfully embarrassed. I could feel my face flushing grey. I wanted to fix it. My Jesus looked different than everyone else's. By this age, it felt like a sin to draw Him wrong. It felt like I was disrespecting God.

I walked over to my teacher, because I knew she wouldn't lie to me if I asked for a color. As a joke, kids would sometimes tell me things were one color when they were, in fact, another. In all truth, adults still do that to me. I don't mind so much now, but it was very frustrating as a kid. It's less funny when you're the

one having to redo all your art projects. But my teacher wouldn't lie, that much I knew. I presented my tray of pastels saying, "I'm sorry, but I can't tell which one of these is skin colored."

She plucked one out and handed it to me saying,
"Here you go."

It didn't look right, but I trusted her. Revelations said Jesus had "feet *that* were like unto burnt brass" (1:13). But she had handed me a pure white pastel, as white as pasta. Once again though, she could see right and I couldn't. Maybe this is what brass looked like. So I made my way back to my desk and did everything I could to delete my mistake.

I coated that paper with wax. The green didn't seem to be coming out. I pushed and I pushed, and rubbed and rubbed, putting my whole weight into my mistake, until I couldn't see anything but the color. The color I thought was wrong. The lines of his face, the expression, the crown of thorns, I couldn't see it past the pastel wax. And despite my efforts, that green wasn't going away. But I had to turn it in. It was hung up beside the other Jesus's. Mine stood out, like the black abdominal gash He received on the cross. It was objectively ugly, colorblind or not.

Sometimes, on top of the colorblindness, I heard things differently too. Though, no more than most. I misheard things, as kids do. I didn't know certain words. But some I thought I had nailed. Of course, spaghetti is a hard one for many at that age, and it took me until 12 to roll my R's, but the words I memorized perhaps before any others were those in the Our Father.

A 1st-grade John would say,

"Our Father, who are in heaven, hollow be my name. My kingdom come, I will be done, on Earth and also in heaven."

I went on mispronouncing that for years. And the line that got me thinking was, "I will be done, on Earth and also in heaven." I was being taught that when I die, I would go to heaven. No need to think further than that. That's the final destination,

the big orange stop sign. But the words Jesus gave us say very clearly, "I will be done on Earth and also in heaven."

I will be done on Earth is obvious enough. I'll die. I'd seen enough Lord of the Rings movies to know what that's like. My body goes into the ground, and I end up with Jesus. But what about, and also in heaven? I will also be done in heaven? That didn't make sense. I die in heaven? What then? What's after that? A second heaven? What would even kill me in the first heaven? Old age? No, you don't age in heaven. That's only on Earth. So would God be the one to do it? What happens when I'm done in heaven?

As I thought and thought, a seven-year-old John led himself to bawl in his bathroom, my eyes sore and grey. Because I was scared. A thought was planted in my mind at that young age. The thought of uncertainty. I'm going to be done in heaven, and I wasn't told what was after that. And what if it was nothing? My teacher had said heaven is the final stop. So if you die there, as I said I would every day during the Lord's Prayer, there aren't any stops left. There's nothing left. Nothing.

I went on missaying that prayer for years without telling a soul. And I felt different from the students around me. Here I was, staring at a version of Jesus no one else saw, saying words no one else said, thinking things no one else did. Not because I was profound, in fact the opposite. I was silly, and made a couple of silly mistakes. But it planted the seed, and it grew.

Many years later, I went to a Catholic High School. In fact, it was the same Catholic High school my mother attended many years prior. I regret to say there weren't too many Catholics in it. There were plenty who said they were, but not many who acted like Jesus. And I was fairly certain that was the overall point.

"I believe," my mother told me upon my hinting at religious doubt, "That you think a lot. But when it comes to your faith, I believe you'll learn to put heart over head. Don't let bad

Catholics make you think the whole thing is wrong. Only they are.”

I went to church. I said my prayers. I went to confession. But I never did learn. Yet I never did anything to come across as different from the others in my class. I grew better at differentiating between colors as I aged, though. I still make mistakes fairly frequently. But even though I grew better at compensating for it, I still saw things so differently. Brown grass, blue eggplants, and yes, green Jesus.

But I no longer believed in him. I no longer believed in any sort of God or afterlife. I attribute that to the seed that was accidentally planted in my seven-year-old brain. But despite that, I received the Holy Sacrament of Confirmation at age 16. All of my loved ones were in attendance: my parents, grandparents, girlfriend. I was seeing things differently throughout the whole process, but just like with my colors, I didn't want anyone to notice. I covered my beliefs with a thick coat of pastel wax. When we got confirmed, we had the oil dumped on our heads in a single file line, one after another, saying the same words, bowing in the same way, returning to our same seats in sequence. It was a holy conveyor belt, and a well oiled one at that. But when I had the yellow oil poured on my head, I knew I was in the middle of a lie. And I felt guilty about it. But I couldn't bear to watch my family, my mother, my peers, see me as a malfunction.

As I was blessed, and the priest instructed me to accept the joy of the Holy Spirit, my body tensed in an effort to fend off what I truly felt, which was nothing short of a broken heart. This was not what I believed. Exodus 20:16. “Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.” I was lying.

I calmly went through the motions of the sacrament, but rather than walk straight back to my seat, like the others, my malfunctioning eyes caught my mother in the pews. The anxious sparks in my mind relocated themselves to every section of my hippocampus dedicated to her. I remembered why I had done

this in the first place. Why I had disobeyed the commandments. Because if I didn't, she might think herself a failure. And she was so, so far from that. After all, is someone who wanted me to be saved, someone who dedicated this life to ensuring I'd have one after it, someone who wanted me to see colors, a failure?

Something told me to walk to her, without a plan, but once we were face to face I saw the joy in her eyes, the affection. And even though I drifted over there without thinking, it became clear that I needed something from her. It wasn't complicated or profound. What I needed was a hug. I needed a way to tell her without saying it: Mom, this is for you.

We embraced, and I heard the audience give an aw.

In her mind, over her shoulder, I imagined she was seeing this spectacular rainbow of my faith. I imagined I finally got the colors right. Blues, reds, purples; colors I've never seen flashing in front of her, forming this gorgeous painting so different from the ugly ones I'd made all throughout my life. And that she saw the bright flames and vibrant fireworks of the Holy Spirit. She saw things I'd never see. A rainbow. Genesis 9:13. "God set *His* bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between *Him* and the earth." If she saw just one flash of color from God, it would have been worth it. Because I knew I never would, and I wanted her to experience what I couldn't. So I did my best to paint it for her, knowing I'd never see the painting.

Over her shoulder, as I looked into the pews, I saw grey, and I saw nothing. I waited and waited and waited until I was finally alone, so that I could cry. It was in the church bathroom. I tried to pray in that moment. I tried so hard to speak with Jesus. But I saw grey, and I saw nothing. And I knew it wasn't Him, because Jesus isn't grey. He's green.

2:54pm: A Parade

Mariya Khan

“I’ve been coming here for 60 years. My husband Jim and I moved here a week before the festival, so we thought it was the best way to meet people. It’s such a small town, so I figured that some sort of big event like this would be fun. Sam and I met Louise here at the orchard. Well, Louise and her late husband Dave, God rest his soul. Louise here dropped her whole basket of apples and I helped her pick them up. So many bruised babies. But Louise here, don’t you remember Louise, Louise said to me, ‘Oh, don’t worry. I’ll make some pie when I go back. No one can tell the difference.’ and Louise sure did. It turned out that Louise and Dave, God rest his soul, lived down the street from us. She rang our doorbell the next day carrying the best pie I’ve ever tasted in my life. I don’t know how Louise does it, I think it’s butter brushed on the crust or something. She makes three pies every Sept, and every year we fill up three baskets each from the orchard.” – Melanie Parker, 85 yrs.

“This parade is the funnest part! That’s my best friend Angelica up there w/ her older sister! Their mommy spent eight hours making their outfits putting on all those jewels. It looks so sparkly. I said that she looks pretty. She’s so glittery on that apple float. It only looks nice because it is sunny. I think that the rain clouds would make it ugly. We practiced her wave so that she’d look like a princess. Like Princess Sophia. It’s her first year doing this. We like playing the apple games over there, but she’s doing the parade. Mommy said that I can be on a float in the next parade. Maybe she can make me an apple outfit or I can look like Tinkerbell. Do you think I look like Tinkerbell? She’s my favorite

2:54pm: A Parade

fairy in the movie.” – Shelby Hicks, 9 yrs.

“I live, like, 45 minutes away. Yeah, I know it seems like a lot to just come for apples. Hell, back home, Mama wouldn’t let us go 30 minutes away to a mall that had the only Claires w/in a 100 miles. Oh, my home? Way down in VA, in a town so small that this feels like New York City to me. I know, that’s crazy. Just like my love with these apples. But they’re so good! Just the freshest apples you’ve ever eaten in your life. That snap crunch when you bite into the apples is so loud, I love it. Let me tell ya, that’s when you can tell you got a good apple. Each of the kids get their own bucket to take home, so our kitchen is always overflowing w/ apples. I take a bunch to work everyone in the office loves it. I don’t even need to bake them into desserts or anything, b/c everyone just grabs them. Then for the next few days you just hear those snaps crunches in the office all day. Music to my ears, let me tell ya.” – Wanda Shelby, 28 yrs.

“I grew up near Chicago, here you just really feel a strong sense of community. There’s a huge Desi community downtown, but I lived in the suburbs where I was one of the few non-white people in the neighborhood. I loved the community in downtown Chicago, but when we moved I barely had any friends. No one wanted to be around me if it wasn’t for school projects. But here is different. I don’t live in this town, I’m a professor at Middlebury, but whenever I come here I always feel like I’m back in downtown Chicago. Everyone seems to know each other it seems like some families have been here for generations. I love it. I don’t know, it feels like everyone belongs here. it’s not just white people here, it’s a whole slew of diverse people that it just makes me feel happy to be around them all. I wish I had festivals like this growing up. I bring my kids here every year, even now when they’re starting to outgrow it, b/c I want them to experience what I didn’t. Even though they are fine at their schools, I want them to come here

Mariya Khan

feel like everyone at the stalls the orchard knows their name, that they feel safe comfortable here. Yeah, you're right, like a little safe haven. Or something like that." – Mariam Ahmed, 41 yrs.

"It's not the same as it was 50, 55 years ago. When I was a kid, they didn't have the parade. I guess it's a way to bring more people here. B/c I'm sure people from neighboring towns are coming even though they're not from here. That's why it's so crowded now. What happened to just going to the orchard picking those apples? At least the apples look taste the same. You know you've found a good one when you can see the shine all the way from up in the tree. I remember my youngest daughter, Sadie, always found the good apples. She doesn't come anymore. I don't know, she's somewhere in the Midwest, in Ohio I think...she doesn't talk to me anymore. Says she got her own life is working all the time doesn't have time to come visit me. The other kids are the same way, you know, but sometimes they still come with my grandkids for the festival. Not every year, mind you, but just enough so I don't feel too lonely. My wife got cancer six years ago, so it's just me at home. I don't know why Sadie doesn't care." – Jason Crews, 62 yrs.

"It tires the kids out. We let them run around the orchard, pick the trees they want to pick the apples from, play the kids games. We make it a whole day for the kids. There's just this parade, then we'll go home. We've been here since the orchard opened at 9, so I'm not sure how long we'll last in this sun here. But the festival always tires them out. They usually go to bed at 8, but w/ the festival they're out at, like, 6. It's great for us. One year, though, it rained during the festival, it was horrible. I mean, the kids had fun. They wore rain boots, but their boots clothes were covered in mud b/c they jumped in too many puddles. But can you imagine the chaos when we got home? Never again. I told my husband that if he wanted to do that again, then he'd be taking

2:54pm: A Parade

them to this festival, not me.” – Janice Clement, 35 yrs.

“We never get a break from face-painting, so this is nice to relax. I’ve been out here since 10am painting. It’s just me Jeffrey here, we’ve been working this stand for 20 years. I went to college at the art school in Burlington I grew up in this town. The mayor was golf buddies w/ my dad. But yeah, it’s nice. We usually have two long lines filled w/ kids waiting. I’ve done it all – butterflies, zebras, pandas, mermaids, unicorns, cats, dogs, frogs, bees – you name it. I love working w/ the kids talking to them while I’m painting their faces. They’re usually really nice kids, little chatterboxes really. They could talk for hours if there wasn’t a line behind them. I don’t have any grandkids, but this is what I imagine having grandkids is like. I’ll be painting their faces all the time like here.” – Roland Hayes, 47 yrs.

Airliner

Sheikh Saqib

On July 21, in The Airliner, 22 South Clinton Street, I got a chance to present the tattered image of my homeland, Kashmir. This was the first time I was doing so. I was twenty and never had I thought of a day when I would be privileged enough to talk about Kashmir in a public space and that too in the United States of America.

The event was supposed to be an open mic where students would be talking on different issues concerning them or the places they come from. It was 7 PM and as soon as the event kicked off, I realized that I was surrounded by extremely talented and exceptional young writers, my mentors - who guided me throughout the program and pushed me an extra mile in terms of writing - and others who joined in the session and listened patiently to all the speakers. I must thank them all for bearing with us.

To cut the long story short, as Ben Bush, the moderator of the session and also my resident assistant, called on my name, the crowd inside had already grown. The hall was packed with people to capacity. My body was shivering; this was the first time I was going to speak in a public space and that too in front of experienced writers and speakers. As soon as I grabbed the mic and eyed the hall, I could hear my voice on the speakers saying,

I live in the breathtakingly beautiful valley of Kashmir- the foothills of the great Himalayas. Since the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947, my region has been the subject of dispute between India and Pakistan.

The region was ruled by non-Kashmiri Dogras who had bought over this land under the infamous treaty of

Amritsar with the British. But what the sellers and the buyers forgot was that Kashmir was not real estate.

Millions of human beings inhabited this land. Dr. Allama Iqbal described the deal in his Persian couplet, “Dehqano oo Kisht oo Joonvoo Khayaban Farookhtan Qoomay Farookhtan Chi Arzaan Farookhtan- Peasants, fields, streams, flowerbeds were all sold, how cheaply the people were sold, the nation was sold.”

Today the northern and western parts of the state of Jammu and Kashmir are administered by Pakistan.

The valley itself with eastern and southern parts is controlled by India. There is a line of control drawn between the two countries splitting the state into two militarized zones.

Today, my valley lives in fear and hopelessness, pocked with check posts, bunkers, armed soldiers, landmines, insurgents and counter-insurgents.

Our spaces to come together, meetings to exchange opinions and basic freedom of association and expression are snatched by the government. Drugs and illegal money is being used to silence those who are not silenced by the bullets. Today, we are dangling between being a spectator or an actor, between being vocal and being silent.

There are collaborators among us who betray, and there are those who continue to fight.

In these years of yearning to be a free man, I have learnt to think critically. I have read about wars that brought destruction and suffering. There is no utopian solution. The cycle of violence can end and ordinary Kashmiris can live without fear only if the issue is humanized. It is not about the territory but the beautiful people who inhabit this breathtakingly beautiful land.

Amid cheers and hooting, I stepped off the rectangular stage and towards my chair in the second row. And in a moment

Sheikh Saqib

or so, I stood up to go out for a very small and quick walk, so that I could think about my performance and feel it once again.

— 9 —

Bonus: *Currier*

Goodbye For You

Martina Litty

The rain, in sheets, graying and spraying goodbye for
you,
pouring over airplanes, delaying goodbye for you.

I held you in the water, palms to shoulder blades,
you floating, me in lake mud, claying goodbye for you.

I chew zinnias and butterfly weed. I'm clutching
petals of cyclamen, bouqueting goodbye for you.

Market mangoes and bags full of bell peppers for
Atlas, who lifts his hands, weighing goodbye for you.

Eyeliner, fireflies, bathing in twilight—someday
someone might sit seven days, praying goodbye for you.

A microphone and a mouth are parallel lines—wait,
listen, the musician is playing goodbye for you.

I'm lighting the match; I'm watching the wires melt;
there goes
the Blockbuster window displaying goodbye for you.

God got kenneled, his teeth like stationary, his tongue
dripping. There, like a dog, I'm baying goodbye for
you.

There's too much talk about the grave dug up. How
many

Goodbye For You

days will I carry this decaying goodbye for you?

Under an umbrella, we're reading Shahid's ghazals,
the deluge a prelude to saying goodbye for you.

Let Me Tell You Where to Look for Love in Iowa City

Sandip Baidya

in a city spilling in daylight and rising in nights, holding
a big moon in its jaw.

through hallways half lit by teeth, munching on classic
yellow Lays.

in chasing bunny tails while eating lightning with you,
feet dancing on streets drumming away in driz-
zle.

in faces held together at mega tables, filled with too
much dessert too much bland salad too much
bakwass chicken.

in crossing the river that calls to kill.

in clubs where you're 19-20, 21-22 but shots snake through
you, a world of touches open and left ajar skins
will exchange touch will exchange tingles but
know it won't all be of good kind that is when,
those faces will save you.

bodies bathed in mascara bending in twerks, happening
in salsa, up n down. up n down.

to tongues exploring foreign toppings on tacos welcom-
ing ticking flavours.

Let Me Tell You Where to Look for Love in Iowa City

or a place by the river where eyes will water when winds
find way through bodies hidden under a sun,
such was the sun.

in a sex shop where we touch dicks for the first time
and the last time laugh when things will vibrate
taste lube, that tastes like breakfast.

into a mic, our hearts pour. in an artist's house, desi
karaoke unfolds, drinks spill on backyard grass and you
walk home, with mouths throwing cig smoke 'round
the city

smoke that feels fresh, unlike when gulped in a Delhi
just born in queer. Just last year.

Let me tell you where you let go, of love

in rooms no more cluttered door knobs locked with a
click cars parked outside, bags halt. Wind stops
at Clinton street daisies won't jazz, clouds won't
glide, or even hide.

into warm arms, our bodies held tightly and we cry, cry
and cry so much. we'd say "I got you, shhh I got
you. I love you, I'll miss you."

in bodies walking far away to each their terminals, we
then become goodbye paintings of specks. Air-
ports turn orange, white to red. then brown.

It rains still, like it ever will but the summers were
something else.

Sandip Baidya

I'm no expert but this is how love happened to me. To
us.

A Prayer For Your Flight to Karachi

John Lyons

“InshAllah”
you whispered when
we looked eyes up
star gazing at
the space between
earth and god hoping
They’d hear from so far the
“God Willing” filling
that gap us
flat on our backs
hands on our hearts knowing
you’d be in the sky soon
somewhere in a plane yet
you asked up so far for
quiet knowing the space
soon between us
but in that space beyond the sky
maybe you and i might meet
i could pray you say
for a day when we bridge
the barriers the
seven thousand
six hundred and
thirty-five miles i’ll
be watching between
you and i or
maybe when we went
there are no more goodbyes
and space is somewhere beyond the sky

but i can't pray
like you so
i say the hopes
throw the parts pin
to the page
parts of me made
between you and i
i pray to you about the
sparks hands holding
time still with
soft breaths to breaths
with whispers or
wonders for
days and days of
would have been's
could should
so i'm alone and dreaming
of what would:
a wish
but stars are somewhere beyond the sky
this will reach you
at the speed of light
our hearts moved
into each other's
whispers at 343 meters
seconds minutes days like
months it was years
when the departing door closed
as i memorized
the lines
of your face
like watching a space
shuttle and forgetting
which country sent it

A Prayer For Your Flight to Karachi

but remembering the way
the fire once far
made it a star
and god is somewhere beyond the sky
but when i looked up with you
They felt here
when i looked into you
i felt home
and how when i was from
across the globe did
our sparks come so close
despite the miles millions
billions of people on the planet
and i was next to you
but now you're somewhere beyond the sky
something beyond the touch
someone beyond beloved
but i hope
because love sometimes stops
to travels to memories
and charges back when
we're married, loved,
parents, poets,
old, dying, gone,
going, sitting
at my 7 am or 2 pm yours
and making breakfast
hearing a noise
seeing a star
and feeling a fire
from so far
but all the while
through young to old to gone
to changes in mind body brain

John Lyons

heart
a part of me will always be
you
a part of me
in Karachi
InshAllah

End