

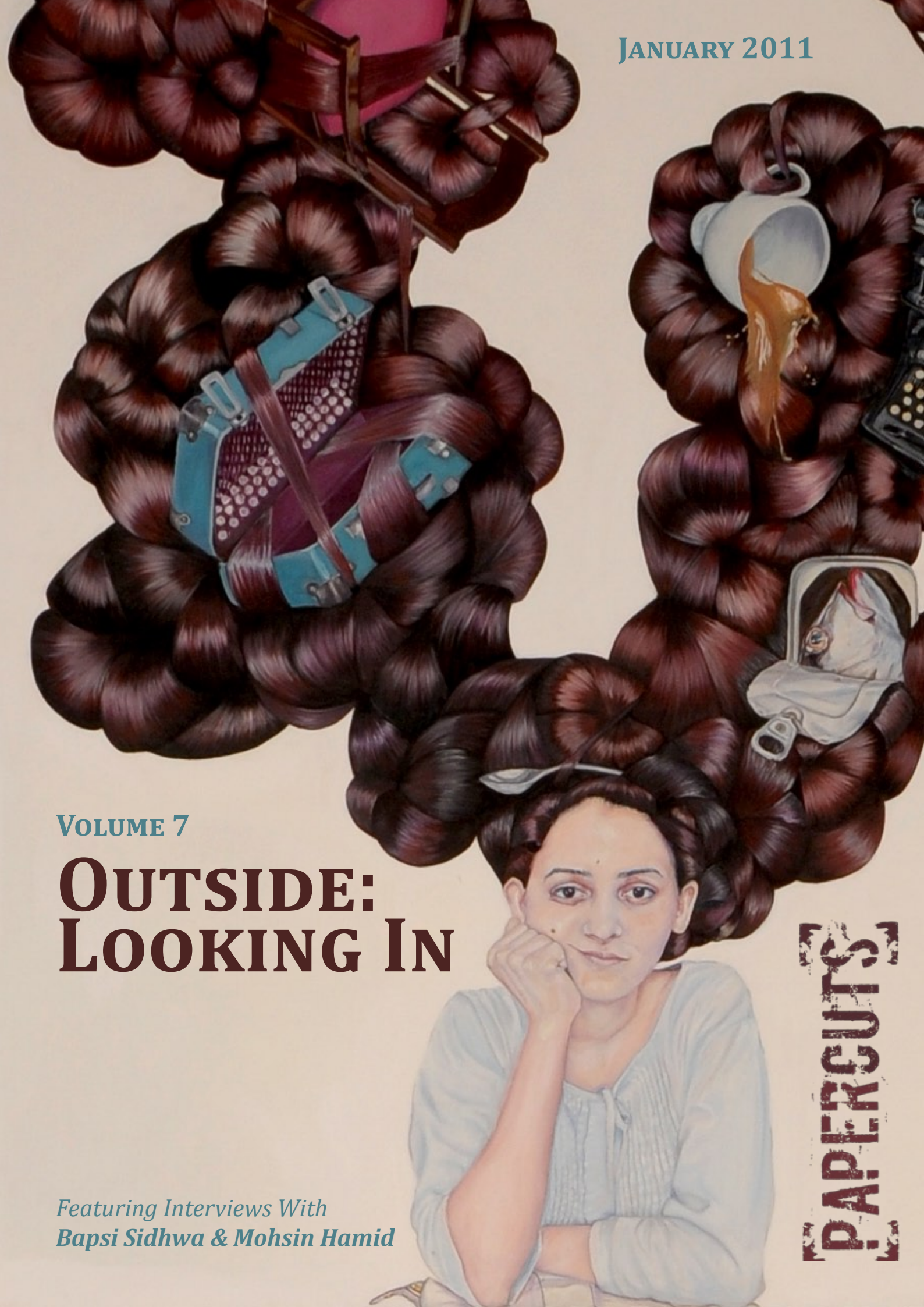
JANUARY 2011

VOLUME 7

OUTSIDE: LOOKING IN

*Featuring Interviews With
Bapsi Sidhwa & Mohsin Hamid*

PAPER CUTS





**COVER IMAGE FROM 'UNTITLED'
BY TEHREEM JAFRI, 2010. IN THE
COLLECTION OF KHAAS GALLERY,
ISLAMABAD.**

Layout Design
Sana Tariq Hassan

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ABOUT VOL. 7

Papercuts is the bi-annual literary magazine of **Desi Writers Lounge** (also known as DWL) – an online workshop for writers of South Asian origin and writing on South Asia. Volume 7 marks a dramatic new beginning in the life of this publication.

Traditionally, the magazine functioned as a platform for members of DWL whose work was selected over a six-month period from the community forums. Volume 7, the Winter 2011 issue, is the first in which guest contributors have been featured. The best work from the forums now appears in the Editors' Pick section.

Previously showcasing only poetry and fiction, the revamped Papercuts also includes articles, interviews, reviews, a 'blog' section to which our writers contribute, and audio-visual material produced exclusively for the Desi Writers Lounge channel on YouTube.

"I love the interviews and format of Papercuts: edgy and intriguing."
Purvi Shah, award-winning poet.

Unlike most publications of its kind, the editorial team at Papercuts goes through extensive editing with authors before pieces are finalised for publication. This spirit of communication and collaborative improvement is key to who we are. Both Desi Writers Lounge and Papercuts are not-for-revenue projects, proudly run by a team of part-time writers for whom this is nothing more and nothing less than a labour of love.

The latest issue of this online publication (as well as the submission guidelines) can be viewed at <http://www.desiwriterslounge.net/papercuts/>.

His telescope to the city had become a kaleidoscope looking in.
(Nazish Brohi, 'The Great Work', published on DAWN.com)

The theme for this issue is **Outside: Looking In**. As the title indicates, it is meant to inspire introspection, except in this case we did not just ask our writers to look inside themselves, but to reflect on their society as if they were outsiders. In doing so, they were compelled to step out of their skins and to examine (directly and obliquely) what it means to be a functioning member of a 'desi society'. Often, this led them to look at groups that exist at the periphery of the popular imagination in their home countries, be they glue-sniffing adolescents (Omer Wahaj, [Stuck](#)), homosexuals (Aparna Sanyal, [Tedhi Lakeer](#)), perpetrators of religious violence (Asnia Asim, [Love Synthesized](#)) or revolutionaries (Moazam Rauf, [Drink a Few Verses Today](#)).

The cover image for Vol. 7 was chosen in line with the theme. The artist as represented in this self-portrait reflects the quintessential DWLer: young, modern yet conscious of cultural roots, and struggling to define him/herself through creative expression. Read more on the artist and others like her in Saira Ansari's article [Three Blind Mice](#).





Editor
Afia Aslam

Associate Editor
Ayesha Sajid

Poetry Editorial Team
Noorulain Noor, Osman Butt and Amita Rao

Prose Editorial Team
Shehla Wynne and Sarah Abidi

Creative Team
Osman Butt and Omair Ahmed

Resident Geek
Hussain Kazmi

VERSE



PHANTASIES OF A MARRIED BRIDE

Sana Tanveer Malik

There's a guy on
my floor.
Should I have a crush on him?

You'd say
I'm married.
La Haula wa la Quwwata.

But you must understand
a husband is serious business:
counting holes in the pockets
pressing starched white
shalwar kamiz and calculating days
since the last time you talked
and must make that call
again to maintain
a long-distance marriage.

A crush, on the other hand,
is frolicking fun.

You'd say
have fun with your husband
then
and crush (over) your marriage.

But you must know
a crush is the gasp
inhaled and smothered
and your heartbeat fastening
like percussion in a symphony
crescendo
so that you wear bright pink lip gloss
and trim your mustaches
that usually fly with the icy
Minnesotan wind.
A crush is singing
Dil kya kere jub kisi say
and smiling a "WOW!" and saying
Astagfirullah every time you see him
so that you maintain your
vow to remain chaste and pure.
A crush is feeling gooey

over someone you know
you will never have.

A husband, on the other hand,
is had, baked, gotten, and laid.

OYSTER

Rukshani Weerasooriya

With your impossibly perfect
Fingernails, painted red,
Lipstick at 8AM, even when no-one is at home,
And you spend your morning
Proving (to the dust you rouse
With that wretched broom)
That you matter;
That it would settle without a fight
If you were not there
To oust it like an enemy.

You are the defender of a thousand wars
Waged against the life you wish you lived;
Eighty years is not long enough to know,
It seems, that things can change, leave you behind,
Age around you, while you stay young,
Impossibly supple, incorrigible like a small child,
With eyes that tear and hands that sometimes
Need holding.

There you sit on your single bed,
Always made, neat as a matchbox,
With your radio playing loud,
And your curlers in your hair,
A picture – full of sound –
I will always hold.



LOVE SYNTHESIZED

Asnia Asim

swimming in white kitchen light I saw
your suicidal face
wrapped in a disproportionate beard

a little boy trapped in a net of
unkind facial hair
a little boy mummified in bandages
long enough to suffocate time

I almost
strained the knife into my finger's quiet bone
when scientific voices rose from a tv blur

we can synthesize life now, yes
we can, he said
all we need is dna

can you imagine how
I almost
thought of a letter
to the spectacled scientist "not playing god"

a letter about the guiltless gap
between your creamy teenage teeth
about halle berry's poster still sleeping
in the boyish depth of your spiderman sheets
from which
will you believe

I almost
found an abandoned hair
sitting without you on your pillow
– a little black bottle of your genetic potion –
and do you know

I almost
sent it to the scientist with serious lips
glued a stamp with goeey drops
of blood thickening on my finger

I almost
told him how I wanted you back
in the wrinkle of my womb

synthesized as who you were meant to be
wearing bright beachy t-shirts
with faded numbers resting on your chest

smiling at jungles of forbidden dreams
through the metallic mist of your braces
wearing unislamic jeans
listening to some blasphemy in rock

I almost
materialized my steps to the office of post
wore the blue sweater you passionately hate
but then the scientist humbly
began to disclaim
it is not exactly 100% synthesis,
he said
it's not like we can bring dead sons back

he threw a long black look at me
straight in the eyes
his stare did not fade
even when

I almost
turned off the tv
and did not look at the neon stickers
patiently rotting on your door
even when

I almost
never cooked what you loved
even when

I almost
never cried



CHURAYL, CHURAYL

Asmara Malik

Yellow-cab man, hello, hello for braking so hard
right before my rain-damp feet, for this splatter of mud

on my white *shalwaar*. The fare to Lahore is just
beyond my means, humor me. You nod, I get

in. The engine is a tuberculous cough, cancer-black
ignition fumes belch from below the hood, you pump

the accelerator. Islamabad shudders, its malcontent trees
wave goodbye to me. I roll down the window, spit the last

of a 'Pindi *paan* out on Murree Road - red-red Rorschach
stain, fanning out a farewell to these gun-metal

streets. Slow, slow, Yellow-cab-man, hit Suri's Road
speeding, hit it so hard my nose bleeds, my ears shriek, rattle

past the poison-mirror-green sheen of rice paddies. Turn up
your Naseebo Lal, your Atif Aslam, let their voices roll

out. Silently, karaoke-scream to their strutting melodies;
such slatternly songs are sung in Punjab, count down

the heartbeats it takes for the Indus to fall swooning
into the Arabian Sea's arms. Out-race them - drive

beyond morality, mortality. Yellow-cab-man, forget
the streets of your Chakwal, it is futile to stop beneath

this apartment window, to stand beneath sodium-yellow
evening lights, watching: your woman

chameleoning, a silken silhouette upon
white chiffon curtains billowing in this

almost-*ishaa* breeze. Tell me, does she know
of your vigil? The *azaans* here are melodic, they sing

of salvation if only you'll come, if only you'll come to
worship. More and more, you catch my eye in your rear-view

mirror, hunted gaze glancing off mine. I touch

the back of your neck, press my lips to the sweet hollow
between your skull and your spine. I would tell you
not to fear me but my tongue is furred with the dust
of this road. This sickle moon is a monstrous leer, lunatic
witness to the death of myths. Ranjha's corpse
swings in the wind, these rational crows have plucked out
Heer's eyes. Such neon-lit urban nights-- they are not
my friends. Here, leave me here, if only you'll not look at
my feet, not cry *pichal pairee* with such tired resignation
in your eyes. Let us part as companions of the plains, part
as chance-met travelers on this Road that was here long
before Suri dreamt of it, floating, a sightless embryo growing
as a seed within his red-glow amniotic world. Here, stop
your cab, here. This abandoned bus-stand where
the knell of passing cow-bells will lull me to sleep,
my dreams will be ink seeping into the cracked asphalt,
my feet, growing roots into this road.



A SKEPTIC'S WINTER

Waqas Naeem

The air is high on solitude.
It whispers by
Like blanched lips singing a requiem for spring.

Orange yolk of the sun
Sets on this loneliness
Through bronzed branches of naked trees.

Not much rain this season
But parched fear hangs like vapor
In the paralyzed night,
And emptiness keeps pouring in.
In bucketfuls.

And,
Out there,
In the cold heart of politicking,
Surrounded by withering forests,
Chrysanthemums bloom

A festival of hope in the distance,
Or a circus
Of our apathy?

PROGRESS OF AN ELEGY

Syed Aadil Omer

A poem is coming:
oozing through a tiny opening
of the block --

a bullet hole
from the left
to the right hemisphere
in the skull of this *waziristan* child.

A poem is coming
wrapped in a blood-stained sheet
upheld in a *charpoy*
over the shoulders of the bereaved
of a drone strike;

is coming,
screaming to be heard,
staggering under crimson curlicues,
intruding onto the blank peace
of your apathy.



SONATA IN B(LASPHEME) MAJOR

Hussain Kazmi

Moonlight Sonata drifts through the open window;
Sinister passages of haunting beauty,
borne upon the night's argent gossamer;
The raven and the rowan
perched on a sill,
the only other audience to this performance.

Later still
Fragments of Orff
blaring melodies, destined to be recycled endlessly;
I whisper a prayer to Dionysus,
forgetting momentarily that wine and roses
music and idyllic bliss
are taboo in my homeland.

On reflection,
the way they created their respective autumns -
one bleak and desolate, deciduous;
the other vibrant and tender, sensuous -
makes me believe
more in Vivaldi
and less in god.

SCHEHERAZADE SPREAD THIN

Noorulain Noor

I met an old friend today.
Surrounded by
the sound of idle banter
I confined the last year
with you
In just half of an hour
and then
for the next three halves
you were
gone
in blissful gossip –
in troubles of other people.

But I come home to you now,
my senses shackled
inside this mediocre marriage,
cheap apartment,
strange city.
You forget
that I can reach beyond
this four-walled prison
of wifely duties; feeding both hungers
on your orders.


Your hands feel like serpents,
your body is lead -
cushioned by your mother's *parathas*.
You finish and turn over.
Disgusted, I
shrink quietly into my skin.

There is light filtering through the blinds,
clothes strewn across the floor -
always in a hurry, always aggressive.

Volumes of modern poetry tossed off the shelf -
a different kind of outburst,

because the *korma* gave you heartburn today,
and a hardworking man
deserves
a good meal.



A vertical illustration on the left side of the page shows a woman with her hair styled in several large, dark brown braids. She is wearing a light-colored, short-sleeved top and is resting her chin on her hand, looking towards the viewer.

I smell the potpourri by my bed,
cinnamon, apples, pine,
Christmas in a bamboo bowl,

you snore.

I have the urge to spit on your face.

A year ago, darling,
I could have lost myself
in the sound of your snores,
in the curve of your body,
in that small space
between your elbow and shoulder,
where my head used to fit perfectly,

perfectly,

before you decided to tie one of my legs
to your bed
and the other to your stove

and left me

spread-eagled.

SLEIGHT OF HAND

Moazam Rauf

The distance between God's left and right hand
is a billion light years of yearning, grief,
and a solitary moment of love.

Burn down the firmaments that adorn the west.
Bury in ashes the sun of the east.

He, who travels a million light years
can become the moth that burns the flame
but damned is he, who could tell
between love and a sleight of hand.



THE DREAM OF THE ATTENDANT ANT

Asmara Malik

These are worker ants -- warrior
insectslaves that laze, stretched out upon
such cultured grass, in this midday heat.

On their backs, they are shaded
by this pine which is without sneering
pretensions. It knows -- these worker
ants wearing no-color uniforms of paid
slaves, CAMPUS MAINTENANCE stenciled
across their backs, are darkly thundering.
They are waiting: storm-clouds, pregnant
with recrimination. Thus, this petite pine
remains respectful, remains hidden

behind
tall, politely demure shrubbery;
remains hedged in by routinely
clipped-shaped leafy barriers
setting these working ants
against fresh-breathed scions
of Queens.

*(sporting designer-eyeglasses
that render attendant insects invisible,
casting empty McFlurry cups in their wake,
"Jaani, her new Nokia is just too,
TOO common don't you think?"
"Yaa, I mean, y'know, everyone's
khala has one now, yaar!")*

These ants -- they may throw
furtive glances from beneath
no-color, sweat-stained caps
at faces that have never known
lives of quiet desperation. They
may even dream of better lives
some day. But

*(shears snipping, snipsnip
vicious strokes, violent snips
rebel branches, greedy weeds
falling dead at their feet)*

no,
I suppose,

by now, even
worker ants – held
hostage by paycheck –
know better.

BROWN ENOUGH: THE UN-LOVE POEM

Amita Rao

At first, we co-existed in that one-road, red-brick dust mottled town we call home,
You a part of me and,
I – chubby cheeked, more trust than fear,
Swinging from creaky colorful gates into coddling arms,
Flashing milk-coffee brown legs under jewel-hued petticoats –
A part of you, with nary a question as to our united destiny.


Then the ocean rose up in front of us.
Too young to understand, I assumed I made the crossing with you.
But, in the still-chill, May-spring air of JFK airport,
In the insidious whispers of my fourth grade class of “She stinks” and “She’s a
Hin-du” spit curses,
I found your embrace missing, with only my imagination
To transform snow-wet cement sidewalks into monsoon-steeped red roads.

Over the years, we played gossip tag, tab, kept tabs on each other
Through propaganda-addled words that broke both of us.
Those arms that once coddled now had grown tongues that sliced
Winter-dull tan skin through phone lines spanning oceans.
They said I strayed, that I betrayed, that I loved another.
And I—I grew cages around my heart.
I became not Amita, not Sanskrit imbued vowels meaning unlimited and friend-
ship,
But Uh-me-da, hard consonants that flayed the skin off of my bones.

Like little boys-and-girls at school playgrounds, we spat-and-hissed across back-
yards of nations—
Until we both grew up, paused, and took a second look at each other.
Maybe, it was the imprints of my bare feet once more on your red-dust road
That allowed you to forgive me.
Maybe, I stopped looking at your photograph and looked at you instead.
And you—you were so much more than a 10-year-old’s memories,
More than coconut-oiled, jasmine flower plaited braids,
More than bells ringing on camphor-perfumed temple fires rising out of cool,
gritty stone floors,
More than *Appa, Amma, Akka, Anna*.

You were the barrel-chested drumbeats of the *dhol* married to the bass of hip-hop,



The illustration on the left side of the page depicts a woman with her hair styled in several large, intricate braids. She is wearing a light-colored, possibly white, top and a patterned skirt. Her expression is contemplative, with her hand resting near her chin. The background of the illustration is a soft, warm tone.

The colorful skirts of *raas* swirling beneath tank tops and sheer shawls,
The quiet conviction glinting in Bhagat Singh's eyes reincarnated in your cricket
team,
The sisterhood-laced laughter spilling over fudge brownies and margaritas one
night, chai and chaat another.
Tumbling down the hyphen-strewn chasm, I fell back to those days
When our tongues twisted into sing-song words without accents
When ABCD, FOB and NRI were just alphabets.

Shifting from quarrel-some reality to Bollywood narratives,
Where *muguthees* glimmered, *sarees* glittered and kohl-lined eyes gleamed,
You and I—we shined.
Envious, they gushed, "Oh my gawd, you're so lucky! I have no culture at all!"
And as long as we held on to that façade, pretended
Nothing existed outside of our song and dance and laughter,
Yes; we were lucky.

But, behind closed doors,
There was a side to you that no outsider saw,
Where, ruled by upper-middle-class, wallet thickened hypocrisy,
You turned your backs on people not faithful to your personal ideology.
Fathers told daughters with bruised lips that no, you can't leave him.
Mothers told sons with breaking hearts that no, I want a daughter-in-law, not a
son-in-law.
Children were hushed by elders, dictating that that's not their reality.
Possibilities were crushed that weren't convenient to your model minority.

Honor meant silence.
And that—that, I can't do.
This author's pen will always scribble.
This poet's tongue will always rhyme.
So, go ahead. Pack your bags. Leave me to mine.
Because, in all this time,
I've owned my truth:
My skin will always be brown enough for me.

FICTION



IPSEITY

Priyanka Hemanth Uchill

“What is ‘normal’ other than our perceived notion of it? And what is acting ‘normal’ other than our pretense to do, so as to be considered ‘normal’. Now, normally I wouldn’t be ‘normal’. I mean, who would?”

Amy Birdsong

She was done for the day. She checked herself in the mirror, straightened out her clothes, smoothened down her hair, picked her stuff up and made her way out. At the exit, she hailed an empty cab. She couldn’t wait to get back to her comfortable single bedroom pad.

Her heart sped in anticipation of what was to come when she reached home. The very thought that this moment was still to come, had pulled her through all of last week. It was an unscheduled event. But intuition told her it was going to be today. She was undecided on why she wanted this.

He was only a kid. He had barely seen fifteen summers. And yet he’d seen enough. He knew he missed every measure of normalcy by a mile. He was proud of his deference from the norm. But pride, pride wasn’t enough. It was money he needed. There was no yardstick money couldn’t buy, nothing you couldn’t blindfold with green.

So he started doing small favours for big men. He charged them for the errands he did. And they paid him enough to stuff his mouth so it wouldn’t open. They needed him because he was good. He was good because he did it with his soul. He needed them as much as they needed him.

“That will be one-and-a-half madam,” the driver said.

She stood, undecided on whether to haggle with him or pay up and rush upstairs.

The phone could be ringing right now.

“How much?” she asked sternly.

“One hundred twenty-three madam,” he said coolly.

She opened the door with her set of keys. Marina’s bed was empty. The poor girl was still at work. Tehri was asleep. She felt the familiar upsurge of envy within her. Tehri was the epitome of all things feminine. She was everything Reeka couldn’t be, no matter how hard she tried. She was glad she was moving into her own flat very soon. She was glad she was leaving Tehri behind. She hated people who lacked the drive. A quick glance at the small digital clock on the wall told her it was two in the morning.

He knew it was time to make more money. It was time to go under the knife.

2:30:29 a.m.

She sat at the edge of the bed with a cup of coffee in hand, shaking her left leg vigorously, impatiently. She sat staring at the clock.

2:55:24 a.m.

Sitting Indian style, with the empty cup of coffee in her hand, she continued staring at the clock. Sleep evaded her.

3:15:15 a.m.

She sat propped up against the pillow, alternatively staring at the clock and the phone. She wondered if she'd miscalculated.

3:20:11 a.m.

She turned her back to the phone and the wall and made a vain attempt to fall asleep. She promised herself she wouldn't look at the clock until it was time to wake up.

3:30:09 a.m.

Her resilience broken, she turned to check the time. Time? Clearly, it was time to forget. But she'd been so sure.

She tossed and turned in bed as she fought back her tears. She hated the feeling of hot fluid on her face. She hated the comfort that came with crying.

5:55 a.m.

The phone rang. She was wide awake but she let it ring a few times before she picked it up.

"Hello?"

"Hey."


"Hi."

"I'm sorry. I know it's kind of late."

"It's ok."

"No, it's not. Well, in my defence, I was a little busy and I didn't want to rush this through."





“Rush through what?” She knew the answer already. Suddenly she didn’t want it anymore. There was silence at the other end. She couldn’t have been more grateful for it.

“I want to marry you Reeka.”

She closed her eyes. She wanted to savour the moment. It took her thirty seconds to get back to who she was. She had too many questions now.

“What is it that you feel for me? Pity? Don’t tell me it is love. I don’t understand love one bit. People buy it off the stands these days. I charge people for love and any distorted notion of it that they may hold. If I were you, I’d want a family. A family’s uncomplicated and more practical than love. But I’d choose from better options. I wouldn’t choose me. So, what is it that you feel for me?”

“You are as empirical as they come, you know that? And four times as hard. So much so that you’d snap into two if you got any harder. I care for you, feel protective about you. I want to stop you from breaking. I’m as incapable of loving anybody emotionally as you are. It drives any understanding I have of the word into oblivion. I have my own reasons, very selfish ones at that, for wanting to spend my life with you, your past notwithstanding. You understand me. You accept me for me, for my thoughts, ideas, opinions et al. You come with no baggage. I’m one half of the equation Reeka, a very selfish half. Reason enough?”

“Hmmm. What about my work? As in, after marriage, in case we end up there?”

“What about it? We’ve discussed that. I don’t like your work.”

“Talk about dignity of labour!” *I’m one half of the equation.*

“Your work. That’s all I ask of you. I have enough for both of us. Think about it Reeka, with your most analytical cap on. It will be your foray into a life understood as normal by most. You can have a real family. What’s more, you can lead a normal life. How’s that for a deal?”

She closed her eyes for a minute. She wondered if she was ready to enter the world of weird people. This life, this world of Marina and Tehri, was what was normal in her eyes. *They* were unreal. *They* wouldn’t accept anybody who was different from them, anybody who owned a head. The stakes were too high. Entering the stove circle would cost her her identity.

“So, what are my chances?”

“I wish you’d never asked.”

He used to love men. They gave him utmost satisfaction. Now he’d give them what they wanted. With the knowledge only man can have about man.

With a woman’s body.

STUCK

Omer Wahaj

“*Tu dekhna beta,*” Abid says in a sticky, wayward voice. “*Mein baray hokay Shah-rukh Khan banoonga.*”

“*Pagal ho gaya hai sala,*” Guddoo replies with his eyes closed and head in between his knees, his back against the outer wall of the *mazaar*. The air echoes with the laughter of children sitting around him; the joint in his hand looks like an ashen snake, dead and petrified.

A few minutes later, Abid is writhing in agony, holding his aching head in his hand as the heady vapors evaporate from his mind and let the pain take over. It feels like a thousand needles are poking his brain from all sides. He wishes that he could get rid of the wretchedness and begs that sleep comes quickly. But the sounds of cars on the street next to his bed, the people all over the *mazaar*, and Guddoo’s high-pitched storytelling next to his head keep him awake.

His energies are soon spent and thoughts of what is to come the next day invade his head. *Think about tomorrow and how you will be high again. Think of all the fun you will have after sniffing some more glue.* This brings an invisible smile that subdues his thoughts of the agony that he knows will follow.

*


Nothing like a rush of distorted sight, sound, and thoughts, Abid hears the voice in his head, a voice speaking louder than the muezzin’s call for the evening prayers. He walks stiffly through the park behind the *mazaar* towards the beach. His body is sore after spending the whole day going through garbage dumps looking for a glass bottle here and an aluminum can there. Today has not been a particularly good one. All he has managed to find are a few empty bottles of beer and *Rooh Afzah*, and some heavy cardboard and plywood that he traded in for twenty rupees. *Just a small tube of glue would have to do today.*

Sitting on the wall near the beach, staring out at the open ocean, he digs a crumpled Red & White out of his pocket and tries to light a match in the strong wind. He tries another match, which fizzles out almost immediately. The third match stays lit long enough for him to light the cigarette. He inhales deeply and looks around for a familiar face, beckoning to Chotu as he spots him.

“*Abay oye Chotu, idhar aa,*” Abid says in a hollow, reluctant voice filled with anticipation. “*Jaa, jaa kar aik chotee tube Samad Bond kee ley kar aa.*”

The little boy quickly puts some *niswar* into his mouth, takes the money and runs off to the nearby market to buy a small tube of the commercial adhesive. Abid does not know his real name but everyone calls the boy Chotu. He is new to their





group. Tariq and Guddoo had found him lying bloodied and beaten near the sewerage pipe after the kids from the other side of the park had ambushed him and taken all his money. It was his first lesson of being alone in Karachi. But Abid's group is different; they accepted him as their own and told him what he needed to know to survive on these brutal streets. They don't pity him or feel sorry for him; they do not steal from him either. They need more people in their group; otherwise, they would never be able to stand up to the hooligans from across the park.

Taking the last drag, Abid throws the cigarette away and starts to walk towards the water. He has almost reached the ocean when a pair of arms land on him heavily from behind. He turns around to see Guddoo's baring his teeth at him.

"Bara paisa kamaa raha hai tu," Guddoo says. Abid laughs and tells him that is not true. He had only made Rs. 20 today. *This won't do for long! Try to find better treats tomorrow, like that old metal toolbox that you found last week, or when you found that coil of telephone. Iron and copper mean more money and more money means more glue.*

The older boy pulls out some hash from his pocket and tells Abid to roll up a joint. Guddoo is the unspoken leader of the group. All the children look up to him because he is fearless and always ready to jump into a fight. He has his own way of making his living and has had all sorts of jobs; from cleaning cars to selling flowers to begging. Best of all, he does not have to rely on finding work to make his money; if he couldn't find work, he would steal.

He is never scared of the police either. The police occasionally pay the children a visit; harass them by asking for money and threatening jail if the *bhatta* isn't paid. It makes sense, then, for the boys to run away and hide when they see those gray and tan uniforms. But not Guddoo. He always stands his ground. Sometimes he gets beaten up. He has been to jail on many occasions, and every time he has come back defiant, ready to share stories about his time in jail.

They all want to be like Guddoo because he is like an Indian filmy hero. Guddoo plans on making it big in the world by falling in love with a *maim sahib* with a big car. Sometimes his plans of grandeur involve joining a gang and becoming a drug dealer. Other times, he thinks of turning into a successful businessman who rose up from the depths of poverty, becoming the richest person in the world.

Guddoo also always has the good stuff. Abid finishes rolling up the joint, hands it over to Guddoo, and offers him a lit match. He looks expectantly as Guddoo inhales deeply and waits for him to pass on the joint. Both of them smoke the joint until it is nothing but a small butt of brown paper. Abid's lips burn as he takes the final drag that scorches the filter. *Better not waste any of it.* Guddoo smiles as he sees Chotu running back towards them.

"Chotu ko bhee laga diya is kaam pe?" Guddoo laughs asking Abid if Chotu has also started sniffing glue. But Chotu hates doing any kind of "hard" *nasha*. He is happy with his *niswar* and an occasional cigarette.

*

Chotu has not been on the streets as long as the rest of them. He walks around all day with a dirty rag in his hand, waiting for people to pull over in their cars, hardly giving any thought to his life at home that he has recently left behind. He asks the people in the car if he can clean their vehicle; most of them know he is only going to make it dirtier. A few of them still give him some money for his concern. No one stops to wonder why he is on the streets. This anonymity suits him. No one cares about him, but no one beats him up and shouts profanities at him all day either. Over here, he is another vulnerable insect in a concrete jungle.

Just a few days ago he had come limping up to Abid, tears gorging gullies on his dirt covered face, holding his torn shalwar in his hands to keep it from falling off.

“*Kya howa?*” Abid had asked him what happened.

Through his sobs and snivels Chotu had told him how he had been walking around, trying to find a car to clean. How a man in a blue *kurta shalwar* and *topi* had come up to him and told him he would pay the little boy fifty rupees to clean the cabin of his truck. How the brute had pushed his face into the filthy smeared mat on the cabin’s floor and closed the truck’s door behind him; had kicked him and torn his clothes off. How, after he was done, the pig had thrown him out of the truck.

That night, as he watched Chotu cry, Abid felt the boy’s fear. He knew that Chotu would not be able to sleep that night and that he would be shitting blood for the next couple of days. He knew that advice was useless because he would only learn by experience, which meant many more painful and sleepless nights. And if he didn’t learn soon, Chotu would need a crutch, not for his battered body but for his shattered mind. *Don’t be sad. It is good for him. It will make him forget all his pain.*

*

“*Chal, le soongh!*” Guddoo is shouting while holding the little boy down, trying to force him to sniff a piece of cloth laden with glue. “*Acha hai, maza aaye ga.*”


The little boy is squirming with his eyes squeezed shut and his mouth tightly closed, moving his head away from the cloth, clearly with no desire to see what the effects are.

“*Chor de ussay, bhenchod,*” Abid yells out angrily. “*Rehnay bhee de.*”

Guddoo looks at Abid with surprise. *What is wrong with you? Why did you say that out aloud? Why are you trying to stop him?*

“*Kiya bola tu? Demagh tau naheen kharab ho gaya hai tera?*” an incredulous Guddoo asks Abid why he is interfering.





Get up and make it better. Abid quickly sits up and walks wearily yet rapidly towards the two. Guddoo still has the frail kid in a headlock. Abid stands there, torn between wanting to rescue the little boy or letting it be. He likes Chotu but he knows that he will get in trouble if he goes against the honcho.

“Kuch nahee,” Abid says in a sanguine tone. *“Ghaltee se mein kuch bola. Yeh ley.”*

Abid grimaces, and wincing, takes the cloth from Guddoo, holds the little boy’s head in his hand, and shoves the cloth right into his face. Chotu tries to escape by holding his breath.

“Saans tau lega yeh abhee, sala,” Abid laughs in an almost alien voice, as his heart breaks silently inside his chest. And a few seconds later, Chotu inhales, as tears fall from his eyes and he opens his mouth wide open to cry.

Abid shoves the cloth into the boy’s mouth as a last attempt to prove his loyalty to Guddoo, who slaps him on the back and offers him his cigarette. In a matter of moments, Chotu stops crying, as the nauseous toxic fumes engulf his brain. *He will be better now. Everything is going to be all right.*

Abid leaves the little boy alone with the cloth still in his mouth and joins Guddoo, Tariq, and the rest of the gang who are sitting by the urine soaked wall of the park, smoking hashish, and talking about trying out some new pills that they just found. They are very powerful and are supposed to make you sleep for days. Abid gulps down a couple of the pills, hoping that they will make him forget about Chotu and starts to pour some more glue into a piece of cloth. After a few sniffs, Abid turns to pass the cloth to Guddoo but Guddoo is not there. Abid looks up to and sees a black car parked on the side of the road. Guddoo is standing near the driver’s door, talking to someone sitting inside the car. A little while later, the man opens the passenger door and Guddoo sits in the front seat. The last thing Abid sees is the car driving away, as the pills take over, blurring his vision to sleep.

*

It takes him a while to open his eyes. He hears the sounds of all the vendors on the streets, selling everything from cheap jewelry made out of seashells to hair clips for little girls to bogus fortunes told by a random envelope drawn by a parrot. A rickshaw goes by right next to his head, blowing black smoke in his face, almost deafening him with its typical rumbling rattling sound. He wakes up with a start realizing that he has slept through most of the day and that he will not be able to scavenge much. He gets up hurriedly and looks around for Guddoo.

Guddoo had been getting into some trouble lately. As days had gone by, his appetite for drugs had gotten bigger. It was not long before he had discovered heroin, the *raani* of all drugs as he called it. Of course, heroin was much more expensive than glue or *charas* and Guddoo had to find new ways to make more money.

A few weeks ago, Guddoo had come back to the group, all sullen and quiet. Abid had run up to him and offered him a joint, but Guddoo shrugged him off and went to sleep. The next day, Abid had seen the bruises on his face and arm in the sunlight and asked him about it. Abid soon found out where Guddoo had been going for the past few nights. Guddoo had told Abid that it makes good money and that he should not be worried about him. The clients paid Guddoo as much as five hundred rupees to let them fuck him. This money came easy and it bought Guddoo a whole lot of drugs, especially heroin. Some nights, however, Guddoo would end up with a violent and aggressive client and he would return with a few dirty notes and many bruises all over his body.

"Liken set hai. Meray paas yeh hai na, yaar," Guddoo had told Abid in a laughing voice and showed him a packet of heroin that he had just procured. *Yes. That will take care of all kinds of pain.*

*

It is almost nighttime and Guddoo is still nowhere to be found. *Don't worry. He is a big kid. He can take care of himself. He will be fine.* Satisfied with this, Abid starts rummaging through his large jute bag to see if he has some glue left over from last night. He does not have enough money for a new tube and he needs to arrange for some sort of a *nasha* before dark. His head has started to hurt and he knows that the only thing that will make him feel better is some kind of intoxication. Some glue would be perfect, but even a sleeping pill or a small piece of hash would do.

Abid is still looking in his bag, when he sees some of the kids from his group running towards the park. One of the kids yells out that they have found Guddoo.

Relief floods over Abid, as he runs behind them. Guddoo would know where to find something for the headache. Abid keeps running and soon sees that a crowd has gathered up ahead in one of the corners of the park behind the *mazaar*. *Guddoo must be up to his old antics,* Abid smiles.

Abid pushes his way through the crowd and falls down hard on the ground when he breaks through.

A needle is sticking out of Guddoo's right arm, and his lips and nails have turned blue. *He is only sleeping.* Abid wants to believe but this time the lie fails to convince his mind. Anyone who takes one look at Guddoo can tell that he is dead.

Abid feels sick. It feels like he cannot breathe, as if his father has kicked him hard in his stomach. All the sounds around him retreat into the background. A part of him wants to think that everything is going to be all right, but the other part tells him otherwise. A loud siren sounds nearby, signaling that the police has arrived.

Come on, let's get out of here before the police starts to harass us. Abid grabs Chotu's hand and pulls him away from the scene, running back to the alleyway





where they all sleep at night.

Abid is moaning loudly by the time they get to the street behind the big walls of the mazaar. He throws up once again and this time does not bother to wipe his mouth. The world seems to be spinning around him and he starts hyperventilating. All of this is making Chotu very nervous. *Calm down. Relax. There is nothing you can do. Except some more glue.*

Abid looks at Chotu and before he can say anything, Chotu pulls out a tube of Samad Bond from his pocket. Both of them sit down on the floor, pour the glue on their own pieces of cloth, and start inhaling.

*

Everything is flashing in and out of view and the sounds of the city seem like they have all been contained within a single seashell. Clasp the shell upon one of his ears, Abid moves through the strobing lights of bulbs and reflections. Someone shouts at him and he shouts back, realizing a mere second later that he does not remember what he has just said. The smell of the glue presses harder upon his mind, squeezing his brain and his head starts to ache. He takes another long whiff at his glue cloth and his eyes roll up into his head. He sees darkness inside his head illuminated by a bright stage surrounded by people cheering for him. *You can be anyone that you want. You are immortal and you will never die. You will never die like Guddoo has just died.*

Someone taps him on his shoulder and he turns around to see a man in front of him. It is not a man. It is a bird. No, it is a man; it is a man with the head of an eagle. Abid's heart almost stops. He covers his eyes and turns his head to the side, waiting for the thing to stab him with its talons and eating his head off. But the birdman does not move. It starts talking to him in Guddoo's voice.

"Don't worry," Abid believes what the birdman is telling him. "I am going to be all right. You have to take care of yourself now. You have to take care of Chotu. Here, take this. You will need this."

Abid looks down and takes a small plastic bag from the birdman's hand. It is filled with a brownish-white powder.

"*Abhee na jaa,*" Abid cries out, begging Guddoo the Birdman not to go away.

"I have to go," the birdman replies. He jumps on the wall behind Abid and squats down at the edge like a man, as if an eagle perched high on a ledge. "Remember, without your *nasha*, you are nothing."

And with that, Abid finds himself alone, cowering at the edge of a garbage dump, his head in his hands.

"Fikar naa kar, Guddoo," he says aloud to no one, as he takes out the heroin from the plastic bag and snorts some of the powder. *"Tu dekhna. Mein baray ho kar Shahrukh Khan banoonga."*





BANAL COLLOQUY

Fatima Hafsa Malik

It is raining today; the perfect weather for tea.

I put on the kettle and also decide to make *pakor*s. I want to alter the classic recipe that I have inherited from Ami slightly. I quickly add the salt, red pepper and zeera from the original ingredients to the gram flour and potatoes. After a moment's thought, I also put in some tamarind, chopped green chillies and a dash of rosemary. As I break in two eggs in a separate bowl, remembering some cooking tip buried in my subconscious about how one bad egg can spoil the entire dish, I marvel at what a contrast the bright yellow egg yolk and white make.

And even though their boundaries are so distinct, I am enchanted by their fluidity.

I let the faucet run a little, so that the water comes out cool. As I mix all the ingredients with a wooden ladle, I breathe in the aroma of this new fusion experiment. The batter looks tempting and promises to bring surprising flavors. I can almost taste the smile on your lips. You enter the kitchen as I pour a third spoonful into the scalding oil. A few drops jump out of the pan onto my skin.

You shake your head and wag your finger at me.

I know you can't resist *pakor*s in rain.

There are many things that you don't know; details that you don't see, because you are not me. We are not the same person despite us both liking Chuck more than Grey's Anatomy and staying in bed for several minutes after the alarm goes off.

There are so many layers that you must unravel to reach the person that I want you to see; to get to the girl that I want you to love.

I wear black thinking you will notice your favorite color on me. You tug on my hair and comment on the rain instead.

We both dress in silence. You swap the striped black and white tie that I have laid out with the grey one I abhor. But you don't know this. I wear some transparent gloss in front of the full-length mirror as you absent-mindedly brush your hair. I curl my fingers into tight fists to keep from touching the nape of your neck in the pretense of straightening your collar.

I hand you your coat and you smile.

I foolishly hope for you to see through my weak attempt at humour while I run through the conversation in my head.

“Can you call in sick today?” *Stay and talk to me.*

Hope still flickers while you reach out, pull me toward you, kiss my forehead and say,

“You amuse me.” *I want more.*

An instant later it dies, when I realize that you think there is nothing more to be said.

I hear the door shut behind you. I wave to you and you blow me a kiss.

I start getting ready for work when all I want is for you to change your mind and come back through the door.

I constantly tear down walls and constantly rebuild them.

You do not come.

I am examining an old lady with arthritis when you call. I excuse myself and sigh when I hear you say hello.

“I have a meeting that I can’t get out of; rain check on the dinner? You probably have a lot of patients to see; you missed a week when we visited your parents.”

It is our anniversary.

I bite my tongue to keep the disappointment from my voice and try to be playful.

“Another day, another time.” *Another lifetime.*

We hang up with the routine I love yous.


I put the phone which is my birthday gift back into my bag. I remember your excitement with the gadget which is hideously expensive. I read the note which came with the phone for the millionth time.

“For my wife,” it says simply.

Yet it makes me yours. Different views of indulgence.

The day goes by quickly as days do when you want to hold on to something and catch your breath.





I return home to find you in front of the TV watching a Seinfeld rerun.

“The meeting ended early but I thought I’d let you get some work done.”

“I’d have liked if you’d called.”

“You said another day and I thought I’d catch some TV.”

Simple, really. Yet not very circumscribed at all.

I shower and change and start dinner while you doze off for a while.

You come up behind me and put your arms around my waist, resting your chin on my shoulder. I lean into you and let go. *Just this once*, I think.

Just this, once again.

THE LUXURY OF A PENSIVE MOOD

Madeeha Ansari

I'm not sure where I'll go, because my eyes are tired of the places I know. If I continue down this road, I will get to Baker Street. I have already seen the large vacant lot beyond Kings Cross and am not brave enough to venture in the direction of Camden Town at night. As for Southampton Row – well.

So I stop before the war monument in front of Euston station, and look up at the stone officers looking down. They look a little wistful, and one of them has a long nose. The wreaths of poppies below them flutter a little as they lie among the moss and brown leaves.

I move on and look for the cardboard sign that had been in the green patch a few months ago. The one that said, "Here sat old Charlie and his dog. He will not be forgotten."

But it is no longer there, and there may have been no mention of a dog.

A woman who may have been Charlie's friend stands with her crutches, laughing so I can see her teeth. Perhaps the man on the bench made a joke, but I didn't hear. I also did not hear the man standing with the streetlamp strapped with bouquets for sale. I think he shouted something at me, but there are headphones in my ears and the only things rattling in my pocket are the keys to the flat. It is easier to think he meant someone else.

It feels good to walk. The wind blows into my face and I push on against it, shaking off the lethargy of a day at home. It has been a while since I walked without talking, or thinking of things other than what is around me.


Two people, holding hands, one freshly showered. Three girls from out of town, dressed for a night in the city. Me in my red flip flops, hiding in a hoodie.

I do love Gower Street. Someone must work in each one of the little box-like rooms - academics in blue cardigans, I think, with the interests of the world at heart. Someone must also live beyond the doors under the cherubs with their flared nostrils and that funny look of alarm.

Then there comes the great domed library. I stop to soak in this – the feeling of absolute autonomy.

I can sit on the steps or on the grass, I can have a sandwich and never move. If I come early, I can sit in the Law Department, or Archaeology or German or Finnish or Norwegian. People around me don't mind sitting alone, or in groups. I can sit here and scribble nonsense, with nobody peering over the page.



A vertical illustration on the left side of the page depicts a woman with her hair styled in several large, dark brown braids. She is wearing a light-colored, possibly white, top and is shown from the chest up, resting her chin on her hand in a contemplative pose. The background of the illustration is a soft, light color.

It may never be like this again. There will always be some expectation to meet, some watchful gaze to live up to. An appreciative glance from that beautiful boy and suddenly I am self-conscious again.

I wonder, still, about things that could have been. The mind wanders to dangerous territories beyond Economics and Houghton Street, before newfound loyalty reins it in. Then it drifts towards things that can be, if - and there it stops.

Far better to drift nowhere at all, to sit here without breaking the sense of completeness. And then to get up and stride on.

On to the School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, where “Health Minister Chamberlain” placed an inaugural stone. People who I wish I knew are standing outside a newly opened art gallery, still more outside the University of London Union. I wonder if I will ever try the gym, or make any conversation if I did.

Just before hitting Southampton Row, there is a church with tall red doors and a tangled back yard. I think fleetingly of God – and then there is that too-familiar sight of things that look just this way in just this light, just at night.

There are many things on this route that I would like to photograph before I leave.

RAAGAS

Amita Rao

I question the present, but never the past. The past has been carved into my body, half completed, half undone, partially destroyed, partially worn like the old stone temples of Belur, Halebeed and Hampi. Carved in the time of kings and wars, these homages to the past still stand, quietly humming the history they witnessed for those willing to listen.

The thin, wiry man with the easy smile that my cousin brother had commissioned walks up to a set of stone columns. The musical pillars of Hampi, he intones, such perfectly pitched stones, used to spill forth symphonies of beating *tablas* and *raagas*. Now, after years of wear, the Indian government has decreed that these pillars will no longer be allowed to sing so their perfection may be maintained for the next generation of tourists. The tour guide moves on to another part of the temple, to another carving on its body, to another ruin, educating me on my own history. But, my mind is still stuck on the forced silence of the temple's song.

"Ammu, why do you scream when someone accidentally brushes past you while you're sleeping?"

The *poori* half-way to my mouth, I freeze, staring across the table at my father's younger brother's wife, my Chickamma. I sit at her table for breakfast towards the end of my two month long visit to India after a six year hiatus.


As Chickamma speaks, she looks across the kitchen table, where her 21-year-old daughter is cutting up vegetables for lunch. I take the opportunity to shove the *poori* into my mouth and chew fastidiously, staring at my *poori* and potato *baaji* laden steel breakfast plate. As I chew, I silently pray. I pray she moves on to another topic. I pray she pursues her line of questioning. I pray I know what to say in both instances.

Chickamma continues over my head, speaking to her daughter, "I went to see if she still had a temperature this morning but the minute I touched her forehead, she woke up screaming. *Ay-yo!* I got so scared that I patted her back to sleep."

Illla amma. Illa. Yenu aglilla. Malgu. No, sweetie, no. Nothing has happened. Sleep.

Pausing the see-saw of the knife, my cousin, just four years younger than I, picks up the story from there; her quick smile reminds me of my own, but her eyes, with unquestioning trust always brimming from them, remind me of the person I never was.





“Hunh, Amma! She wakes up so quickly if someone touches her while she’s sleeping.” Deepa gestures excitedly with the knife she held in her hand, “Last night, I went into the room and saw that her *lengha* had ridden up while she was sleeping. When I tried to cover her up with a blanket, she woke up so suddenly.”

Yenu illa, Akka, yenu illa. Malgu. It’s nothing, big sister, it’s nothing. Sleep.

The conversation passed over my head again, Chickamma picking up where her daughter left off. “And the other night, when she was sleeping next to you on the floor, I was crossing over both of you to get to the cupboard when I stepped on her. I step over you sleeping kids all the time and you don’t wake up! But this one—she sat up like something had bitten her,” Chickamma exclaimed. “When I was coming back, I was so careful that time.”

In the middle of listening to the re-telling of my own story, I had taken my attention off my breakfast, allowing my gaze to fall on Chickamma. Unexpectedly, she caught my eyes and held my gaze. “Why, Ammu? Why do you scream like that when someone touches you while you are sleeping?”

The questions poured over me, swift, inexorable, water rushing to meet air at the waterfall’s edge. “Did something happen in America? Tell me, Ammu. Did something happen?” Her eyes pierced through me, expecting answers to questions the family had previously ignored for fear of the answers.

Yenu illa, Chickamma. Yenu aglilla. It’s nothing, Chickamma. Nothing has happened.

As I held her eyes, those thoughts grabbed me by my throat and shook me. *Say it, say it* they chanted. To protect her, to protect all of them, I instinctively tried to keep up the façade.

But, I didn’t. I couldn’t. Many things I might deny, but not this.

Once again staring at my breakfast plate, I said, “*Adu haagey, Chickamma, adu haagey.*” *It’s just that way, Chickamma.* It’s just that way. It wasn’t a denial, but neither was it the battle-cry of truth.

Months later, when I am cocooned once more in my apartment in NYC, away from that kitchen table and on my own couch, I am on the phone with my mother. With darkness pressed against the other side of the window, I see my reflection in the window panel opposite me. The woman in it stares back at me, phone pressed to her ear, eyes guarded. “So, Pappa’s visiting India?” I query, making an attempt at being casual and failing.

I am haunted: the eyes in the window’s reflection morph into my cousin’s. The trust in her eyes leaches, overflows with pain, reflects betrayal and then turns accusatory, blaming me for my silence. Like our smiles so easily echoing each

other's, I fear my eyes becoming hers.

Amma hears what I don't say and tells me that she had called Chickamma, to tell her to be careful, to watch over another girl. Clutching the phone desperately to my ear, I ask, "And? What did she say?"

My mother's words finally allow me to escape the blame in my own eyes and breathe.

"Chickamma asked me 'Why? You think he'll do what he did to Ammu?'"

I am transported back to the middle of the silence of the old temple. The soft pads of my bare feet press into the carpet now, but feel the rough texture of the granite temple floor. My fingers trace the air, the smoothness of the carved statues, the roughness of the edges, the bumps, the dips, all retained just below the surface of my fingertips. The surface of the stone carvings they had caressed months ago live in my skin's memory, existing alongside the memory of other touches, ones that never should have taken place, jagged wounds carved into my body, never to be undone.

Even with the enforced silence, these temples of old still stand, telling their story, if only one wanted to listen.



ABLAZE

Batool Habib

An old man coughed in the night. His hacking could be heard two houses down in the stillness of winter.

A strand of hair fell on her face; impatiently, she brushed it away.

Her hands were getting blue with cold. Lost in thought, she stared down at them and wondered what she was doing. Her right thumb was painfully swollen from where she had been chewing, biting the cuticle down to the quick. "Why am I even here?" she thought, looking at the lingerie models with gleaming thighs and bright smiles. Washboard stomachs bathed in sun-kissed skin, modeling exorbitantly priced, flimsy little nothings. She tried to picture the same thing on a plus-size model and smirked despite herself. The 'cheeky' must get swallowed right up between them cheeks.

A writer must be writing the script of her life. Yes, that must be it. Why else would she be subjected to grapefruit-like cellulite on her thighs? It just didn't fit. A kooky writer must be writing one of those "10 ways to drive a man away" books. She looked down at her wobbly tummy.

Her aunts had tried to scare her into doing something about her 'baby fat', as she liked to call it. (*If you don't lose some weight now, this is what you'll look like on... you know, 'that night!' ... Haan haan, you go on telling yourself you're ok with how you look! We'll see who's laughing when he turns away in disgust! Sheee! Stubborn chhokri!*) Heat rose in a ripe, red blush to her face, lips ruby with being bitten in nervous contemplation.

She'd felt confident then, all bravado and many chins puffed out. She did not feel so confident now.

"Tell me what you want, na! I'll get you all that you want from abroad!" friends had urged. This is how she'd come to be here, enthusiastically searching styles that might flatter her curvy figure. Now she just felt like an excited piggy with bulging eyes and a persistently runny nose, gleaming in the glare of the screen. What had made her think she could ever lose enough weight to make a difference? What had given her the right to look at 'thin' people?

Shame directed her dutifully to the plus-size section. Nervously, she clicked on the Valentine selection. The page began loading. She prepared herself for the worst. A black and pink teddy popped up on her screen. The model had wide hips, and fat but toned arms. This wasn't so bad, she thought. Underneath the thumbnail it read, 'scroll over to see back'. The little cursor glided over the dimpled buttocks, the undulating waves of fat, the shimmy shammy of jello on a plate, not moving - never, ever moving. A wave of repulsion lurched from inside, and her mouth

filled the bitter aftertaste of acidic vomit. Is this what he would see? Is this what he would want? What if he turned away? The shame brought with it tears in big gasping sobs.

She fled the room before the first light of sun came up and displayed what she so desperately wanted to hide.

-

In the deep recesses of her closet, she had hidden a halter dress. In the darkness, her hands shook as she brought out the slinky but flimsy one-piece. A lone light shone from above. No one was home. Finally, a chance to try it on.

With fumbling hands and nervous glances at the locked door, she attempted to wear her treasure. One deep breath. Come on. One fell swoop. That's all it'll take. Her heart was coaxing her mind to do what she knew wasn't physically possible. Frizzy hair framed blood red cheeks, strained to the hilt with the effort of holding her breath in.

Tug.

Tug.

Tu--

-rrriippppp!

Whoosh. It had come down. She let out her breath. Her gaze was fixated not on how it looked, but at the big tear in the side, where the fancy ruffles used to be. One tear slid down, a silent sadness for her loss. Her one prized possession. Slowly and carefully, she tried to slip it off. It moved half an inch. Prying it off like a second skin, millimeter by millimeter. Sweat trickled down her face, into her cleavage. Tickling. Itching. Anger came. Fury ripped the dress upward, not caring about the damage done.

Bang, bang!

She jumped.

"Wh- Who is it?!" she asked sharply.

"Baajiiii," her brother sang, "we're hooome! We brought you ice cream! Come, come quickly!"

Her brows automatically knotted together, looking at the mirror, and then the door.

"Baaaajiiii," his plaintive whine went on.

Her eyes darted frantically, looking for a way out. She spotted a pair of scissors. Her mind paused for a split second, as if seeking permission to do the inevitable.



A vertical illustration on the left side of the page shows a woman with her hair in several large, dark brown braids. She is wearing a light-colored top and is looking towards the right with a thoughtful expression, her hand near her chin.

Her heart nodded a sad, sad yes.

Snip, snip, snip. Off came her sheath.

“BAAAJI!!! What are you doing!! It’s melting!!”

Her wrath brought down the pointed scissors and carved the things she craved. The things she wanted. The sin of what she wanted. Cruel thoughts ran a marquee in her mind. “Condoms? What’s the need darling? He’ll never make it!” “Sex? You’re too funny, janu darling! He’ll go inside you and snap!” “Oh come on, come on - be realistic. Don’t bother with the body wax or anything. They’ll run out! (*muffled laughter*). We all know he’s only marrying you for your ‘green thumb’ - or should we say ‘Daddy’s green fists’”

Stab. Stab. Stab.

Blood. So much blood.

“Put that bowl down outside my door and GET LOST! If I come out there, I’ll smack you!” she shouted. A vein in her forehead pulsed angrily. Her brother began to throw a tantrum. In between his taunts and rants, she heard the ‘thunk’ of the bowl against the door.

She opened the door carefully, and snatched the ice cream in. She fell against the door and ate, gobbled, inhaled the entire liter in its royal blue packing. Eyes closed and panting; an inhuman wail filled the air.

It was coming from her - and she couldn’t stop.

STOLEN MOMENTS

Amlan Goswami

In the evening, I dream the city from my window. I feel the dream all the way from my bones to the river bank, the way the grandfather clock feels time. I find the dream in the black-and-whites on the walls. The dream lives in those cheerful faces, their laughter, those fine delicate legs. I dance with it in lithe steps. It whirls with me. Silent as the gramophone, where are they now? These chairs, leather strapped, still wait for them. How the floor heaved when they danced! These shiny wine glasses still clink for them, 'Drink me, drink me!' The food sizzles, the laughter tinkles.

When I scratch my nails against the dull cream walls I see pink, ultramarine, green, orange. These walls are so thick. I need to see the sky. These walls - why can't they find some other colour to live in?

In the evening, like those nights, the banana skirts and shorts are out pirouetting. The young ones are too busy catching each other's eye.

I am the grandfather clock, with the Roman numerals - I am here.

And you?

There you are, among the black-and-whites! Don't hide now! Here you are, gently painting with your one able hand - 'The Tree of Life' you called it. The banyan roots towards the sky, dancing into the heart of the green leaves, pitter-patter.

I trundle down the old passageway looking for you. I find a strange man holding a banana, staring at me. Here I search for you and there he throws me a ditty: "Turn me back, high and low, I exist and so I show." Then he bends forward and whispers in my ear, "Fill my glass with the old sweet dream, tomorrow, it may not be."

I turn around and find the darkness turning. Dawn is on the other side. When I sleep, I find you walking and when I awake, I need to find you.


"Really?" you ask me.

There you are, back again. You startled me!

Let's pry together. Keep your ears close to the walls. Shh. Walls might hear. Listen to the music. A distant hum - it's that boatman song again - 'oh le chal paar, mere saajan hain us paar.' Even I know that one. It's Nutan in Bandini.

For a while, nothing happens. Then tears start gushing out.





You need food, not music? There's nothing in the kitchen, dear. We need to get something fresh and hot - a Chole Bhature soaked in oil, once the shops open. Let's go out. Get out of the kitchen. The world is bigger out there.

Wait, wait, hang on, wait! Not now. Not yet. It is too early now. The shops haven't opened. Wait. All right, all right, have it your way, I am coming. Quiet. Everyone is sleeping. We need to tip toe!

The sun will say hello now. Good! Walk with me dear, don't scurry away.

Do you remember where you lived before we met? Yes, that cottage by the river. I would wait outside. You could see me, couldn't you? From those dark latticed windows, you did see me. A peep! I always knew that! I would come in my Sunday best and wait by the river, looking busy, looking away, waiting for you. You would come out, no you won't. You would look at me, no you won't, *yes you will!*

One day, you laid your tiny feet beside mine in the waters. There was a low silence to the river that day.

Let's go to the river! Let's look for our faces in the water. You can find your face in a rainbow even when it isn't raining. You said that.

Why, shouldn't we be sitting on a park bench? Lovey dovey, lovey dovey!

No, see the guard outside, gun slinging on his shoulder. He has a moustache like walrus teeth. Doesn't he look menacing? Hello there!

He is shouting at us. Oh. Park is closed. Fine, we will go away. Don't bother us and we won't bother you. Go away walrus. Walruscal! Nothing, nothing.

It will not do, it will not do at all.

Wait, wait! Where are you going? Wait dear. Not so fast. I am getting on. I know, I know.

Oh you are hungry, yes I forgot. Sorry, really sorry. The jalebi shop has opened. Let's go there. Garma garam jalebis and samosas! Yes, two samosas and two jalebis please! Good. Look at him take it up and pour it down. Garma garam jalebi. Now our faces will be as round as gulab jamuns.

Stomach full, we are free to roam again. Where do we go now?

Yes, let's find that man. Yes, the shaven headed, dark fluteman. He was blind, wasn't he? He would play the flute and tap his feet outside the dazzling HMV shop that sold colour televisions and cassettes. Yet we liked the fluteman more. Why?

Because he would tap his feet and tilt his head and play his tune.

Where he had stood, an old woman sits, selling oranges in a tokri. Her twig basket is full.

Where's the flute player?

Fifteen rupees, a kilo? Old woman, all wrinkled. Her eyes light up when I want to buy a kilo. Juicy, sticky oranges, sticky as the hands with jalebi!

How do you just keep going on and on? Don't you tire? Let's sit. Let's see the sky, the colours changing, blue and orange, purple and red. And then all black.

Let's rest a while.

It is turning, this sky. It's going black. Where are we?

The lights hurt my eyes. Oh the traffic honks, they hurt my ears so. I am tired, tired, tired. My breath, oh so slow, so slow, I wish I could walk on like you do.

Yes, let's go home. Which way do we turn? Left or right?

That shop looks familiar doesn't it? Yes, that's Das Pharmacy. It has the wooden door planks. You can fold them like clothes. Then you can open them.

Of course, of course, we know him. Let's say hello. Remember, that's where we took our injections. Yes. Das, good ol' Das, with that cream shirt never tucked in, that bald head. He never hurt me, remember? His injections were like magic. They went straight in and you didn't even know.

'What, father?' The man inside looks at me as if he has just seen a ghost! He looks like Das, doesn't he? Only younger, see his black hair gently fraying? Is Das growing younger?

Shh. Yes, look at him. Don't laugh! Shh. Don't giggle now.

'What brings you here? Time for your shots?'

Why does he look so worried?

Looking around, yes, the familiar furniture, the dry smells, the medicine reek. This is like a hospital. No point talking to him.


No, he looked differently at me now, Mr. young Das.

Come, give me your arm. Come, let me take you home, come.

Hey hey, don't hold it so tight. It hurts. I am not running anywhere. Heh heh!

Where are we going? I steal a glance at your dark black eyes, kajol lined. Beautiful.





Where are we going?

Inside the car, music is playing. It's not Bandini. It's not even Hindi. I don't understand it.

What music is this?

Hip Hop, they play hip hop here.

Like hopscotch?

Like hopscotch.

There we are. Our house, the old house with the cream coloured walls!

I hear all kinds of voices, noises, shouts, crackles, laughter, tears, sighs and finally, silence. Then I see the snapples and the tin cans. 'Eat me, eat me!' Who said that?

Turn away all clocks? I said that.

We were looking all over for you. Where were you? Oh father, don't ever do that! Who was that? Where did you go? We were so worried. We we we. Wollopollopol-lowollowweewe. So many voices.

I look around for you. Where are you?

I go inside. There! Your paintings! All fake Rembrandts, Vermeers, the Tree of Life too! There is a Van Gogh as well, so fake it looks true. There you are, hiding in one of those stars! Stars thick as street lights. I see you there. A clear eye is all it takes.

You look so beautiful. Your eyes deep and hard, you dancing inside the moonlight, you, smiling with the kids, you trying a new dance step. What fun! What fun! Where do we all begin? We do not have to go far. It is all here. A party right here - the jalebi wallah, old Mr. Das and the orange seller are all here, all inside. Even the flute man, see him rushing with his flute. He is coming too! See how I do it. Put a finger to it, that's all! See my fingers touch your painting, see me fly, see me on the street, see us dancing. There we all are! The house is turning green again!

FOND REMINISCENCE

Saroosh Shabbir

It snowed today.

It's the first fall of the year. Perfect pink light, permeated by falling flakes, floats into my dark room. Outside the window, I can sense the presence of pure white, untouched, pristine snow.

"You know what it's called ..." a little while back, from the direction of black eyes, gleaming as if their possessor had just arrived at an absolute truth.

"Virgin Snow."

To which I, silently, "Looks like you're on a row."

The silence necessitated, or so it seemed then, by the natural presence of a third.

London hasn't seen a fall like this for years. For a world without a higher order, without first cause and final effect, it operates rather comically, conspiring sometimes for the express purpose of causing events that complement one's personal history. "The best in town, Troy Restaurant," said a leaflet that a probably emaciated brown or yellow hand slipped under my door this morning. Must I be haunted into remembrance then?

I capitulate...

"Sculpture has memory," he says, while we talk about the abstractness of music and my Muslim heart gives in to musings of Hindu mythology.


So it was with the flute that Krishna so lovingly held close to His lips. The hollow bamboo reed also suffered. It underwent the agony of being pierced. Seven holes were the result. And those holes produced Divine Music when they came in contact with the Divine Breath of the Lord of Lords!

For days I walked with that phrase reverberating in my head, awed by its eloquence. *Sculpture has memory*. Then months passed, reverberation subsided, displaced by other words.

Now I am quietly waiting for the catastrophe of my personality to seem beautiful again, and interesting and modern.

I realized afterwards, the phrase was eloquent yet technically incorrect. Growing up affords one to marvel at such contradictions, to revere them. Sculpture cannot have memory because it is purely spatial - has no time-dependence. A sculptor instantaneously envisages his composition as a whole, and what is once





constructed stays true to touch. Music, on the other hand, has only the dimension of time. The note exists as long as the moment, and is as intangible as time itself. Putting together a musical composition is harder because of time delay in conceiving its parts. The transition from *alaap* to *antra* is laborious, while *Nataraja* doesn't metamorphose; he is frozen in motion.

So now, there is a fondness in reminiscing about those moments, the same way an old sweater of a loved one is breathed in deeply, or a photograph touched with the fingertips without any consciousness of time, until one is shaken by the peremptory reality of now.

A cold turbulence in my pink fabric. I get up to re-latch the window.

There is virgin snow outside.

*It may be the coldest day of
the year, what does he think of
that?*

Based on Frank O'Hara's Mayakovsky

PURGATORY

Moazam Rauf

She said that she loved Lahore for its red brick structures and sly winter nights.

“If cities have hearts, Lahore has a big one; it keeps safe so many secrets within its red veiled walls,” she would often tell her husband wistfully.

“Cities do not have hearts, my dear! Besides, a heart is not a safe place for keeping secrets. It always gives!” he would sneer back at her.

Such reasoning, Sabeen knew, would no longer allow her to love Yasir. She knew that love had nothing to do with reason. And reason had nothing to do with love. She could never reason with Yasir. She could no longer love him, either.


She *had* loved him, though; however passionate, it was not the kind of love that enflamed her heart in her youthful days. That love had a preternatural quality to it. It was as absurd as life and as promising as afterlife. A frivolous vanity, indeed! Sometimes she remembered her first love like a historian tries to trace a lost civilization. She no longer remembered its language or frontiers, but she knew that it had existed and its memory would linger on like the memory of Eden.

If love were something as physical as an island, she could imagine it dissipating into the dark waters of time, like a waning winter moon dying by the late hours of darkness. Sabeen hated such blunt ends. She would rather have liked her heart to explode into a million tiny fragments and pelt over her red bricked city like a monsoon rain.

She hated ruins and ghosts and their persistent memories and now her dreams consisted of nothing but such frailties. She knew that it was no good. For what good is an object of longing if it is merely reduced into the shadows of past; even if it did once exist in as sublime a form as love? Ten years ago she had loved another man. Strangely, she had not thought about him for many years until last Friday evening, when the sky had turned red; as red as bricks. Sabeen could read omens. When she was a child, her grandmother had told her that the sky picks up the color of red brick floors when the Lord lets a dying man live on in a non-human form. That is how the stars in the firmament keep increasing. The lord wouldn't allow a soul enflamed with overwhelming passion to enter the eternal world until it loses its burden. Close to the great judgment day, there will be so many stars over the firmament that it will eventually crack open because of their weight and the stars will start falling over the earth.

The following night she dreamt that the man she had loved ten years ago was delivering a sermon on a roof top, the floor of which was built of red bricks. She recognized the place well. It was the roof top of her parents' house. Ten years ago they use to meet there, each night, for seven months. She recognized him instantly





in spite of the fact that he had aged. He sat over the wall that separated his house with Sabeen's parents' house. He held a cigarette in his left hand that glowed like a firefly resting over a bush in complete reverence. As Sabeen approached him, she realized that he sat stark naked over the wall, which seemed more like an altar now. He seemed more illumined and beautiful than he had ever been. She stopped inches away from the wall and squatted down, close to the base. He leaned towards the base of the wall; craned his neck towards her and whispered: "Love is to haunt and to be haunted."

He was a ghost now and he had returned to haunt her.

It was an exceptionally humid Thursday evening and Yasir managed to return from his office earlier than Sabeen had expected him to. After opening the entrance door and exchanging casual greetings with Yasir, Sabeen headed back to the kitchen, which oozed with the aroma of caramelized onions. Yasir knew that it would take Sabeen another twenty minutes to prepare dinner. He headed straight into the bedroom, with an intention to rest awhile. He was about to open up the bedroom door when he heard a resounding thud over the main entrance door. The sudden sound of force against the steel gate made him shudder momentarily. He rushed towards the main entrance and unbolted the entrance gate. There was nobody there. He took a few steps outside the gate into the vacant alley. A gush of wind met his face and he knew that he had just become a victim of yet another practical joke that the *muhalla* kids had devised to irk him.

He stood there uttering loud curses. "Those little pranksters... fiends... bastards! And so are their parents!"

Irritated, he returned to the living room, where he began to search for the newspaper. He had decided to delay his siesta. Locating the newspaper over the cupboard top, he picked it up and started rummaging through it. Half an hour later, there was another sudden thud over the entrance door accompanied by a great cacophony. The windowpanes of the living room started to convulse. Yasir realized that the first monsoon rain was not too far away. He put aside the newspaper and tiptoed towards the kitchen. He creaked open the kitchen door only to find it vacant.

Sabeen always loved the monsoon rains. She loved the crisp tang of the parched soil that the wind carries just before the rain comes.

"It is the greatest smell in the world. It is God's dinner bell for all the hungry poets and lovers," she whispered while caressing Ahmed's hair.

They were both perched over the red brick wall that separated their houses. It provided a good hide-out since Ahmed's house was the last one in the *muhalla*

and he lived alone. The spot provided a beautiful view of the abandoned path towards Jamya Mosque, which was no longer in use and thus had become an abode for numerous *chambeli* bushes that grew abundantly across the hedges. They sat there quietly, viewing the many fireflies that surrounded the bushes.

“Could this be forever, you and I at the threshold of eternity?” Sabeen broke the silence.

Ahmad nodded with a gleeful smile.

“But I’m afraid that there is no forever,” Sabeen replied.


Ahmad knew that she was right, so they remained silent until the wind grew stronger and clouds invaded the sky, providing a magnificent tangerine cover for their clandestine meeting. Moments later, it began to rain and Sabeen stretched her palms forward to feel the first drops. The rain created a million intersecting circles and from those circles emerged bubbles that swayed and danced across the red brick floor to the whims of the wind. Ahmad’s left hand found the small of Sabeen’s back and his tongue found a way into her mouth like a virulent serpent that had finally broken into Eden. The serpent of love was clever enough to enter through the gate of mouth, into the heart, piercing it into two perfectly equal halves. She had known that well. She had known it the day she first found him stealing glances at her. And she had confessed to the inevitability of the original sin a thousand times.

“I love you! You are the most beautiful man I have ever known,” she whispered.

But as the clouds began to drift apart and the rain began to abate, she felt as if it was all coming to a sudden end. By the time the moon had sailed out from the veils of clouds, she knew that it had all been a semblance of love. A beautiful lie, but a lie nonetheless. She looked at Ahmad and he seemed to her a feeble ghost under the pristine light of the moon. Passionless. One to be pitied rather than loved. His eyes reflected the loneliness of an aloof wolf, and she couldn’t dare gaze into them for long. She instantly jumped from the wall and ran off inside her house without saying a word. She knew that she would never see him again.

But after ten years, he had returned as a vengeful ghost and had completely taken over Sabeen’s senses. The day the first monsoon rain of the season poured in, Yasir couldn’t find Sabeen inside the kitchen. She stood lost in the veranda, holding a sharp kitchen knife waiting for Yasir as a predator waits patiently for its prey. Her eyes blazed in a strange passion and bulged out from her whitened face. Yasir had spotted her and he had also recognized the sudden change in her countenance. As he went close to her, she hissed at him and tried to stab his throat. She missed, but left Yasir absolutely startled and a little bruised at the neck. Yasir had to tie her with chains that night. She would remain captive for the following weeks. Yasir knew that his wife was either possessed by a Djinn or struck by the malicious



A vertical illustration on the left side of the page shows a woman with dark hair styled in intricate braids. She is wearing a light-colored, possibly white, garment. Her hand is near her face, and she has a contemplative or distressed expression. The background of the illustration is a soft, light color.

magic of jealous relatives.

Day after day, Sabeen's condition worsened, and she became more delusional. Her eyes became blank – brown, sunken into their sockets – and she stopped blinking them for hours on end. She would talk blasphemy and consistently demand an explanation as to why God allowed the serpent to enter the Garden of Eden, when He claims to be an all-powerful, good God. At times she would incessantly utter words that made no sense, and she would laugh for hours without any good reason. She convulsed so violently some times that Yasir would fear for her life. But there were also times when she was calmer, almost perfectly lucid. Yasir knew that he, too, was going insane with her. He had left no stone unturned. Doctors, mullahs, faqirs, all seemed to have a theory about what went wrong with Sabeen, but none had the cure. Just like death has no cure. Or perhaps death was the only cure.

Almost a month passed.

Then one night, when the cloying smell of *chambeli* flowers had filled the air and the wind had just started to sway branches of trees in the garden, Sabeen's bedroom had been invaded with pristine moonlight, and when the clock had struck 1 a.m., she started to call out to Yasir repeatedly.

She beckoned him to come close to her and in a rare moment of sanity, started shouting loudly, "It is not a Djinn or the ill influence of black magic that ails me, but love. Love... love... love."

REPORTAGE



JOURNEYING BELOW THE LINE

Asnia Asim

When income disparity, in its entire ghastly splendor, begins to climb high on the walls of nations like India and Pakistan, people growing up between those walls lose the ability to raise vital questions like the ones India's Aravind Adiga and Daniyal Mueenuddin from Pakistan have dedicated their debut novels to. Like any region carrying millions of offspring in its womb; when tragedies such as extremism, poverty and illiteracy raid the weaker children of South Asia, it silently aborts them to the hands of fate without anyone ever hearing their cries or remembering their lives. In recent years many gifted young South Asian writers —bitten by the ambition to bring this complicated tragedy of the region to life and to give it an identity beyond simplistic emblems like Taj Mahal and War on Terror—have received enormous attention in eminent literary circles. Adiga and Mueenuddin are a part of this clique of subcontinental talent. In this article we compare Adiga's *The White Tiger* and Mueenuddin's *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders*.

Both authors belong to a category of curiously suspended outliers who studied in the chichi-est schools of the West but never quite lost their empathy for the predicaments of the Eastern countries they belong to. A winning combination of personal lifestyle and poetic talent has enabled them to spray light on the many hopes, aspirations, and vicious dilemmas of the colossal but dangerously quiescent low-income South Asians living below the poverty line. Reading these books, it seems that anything that drops below that line loses its ability to make a sound. Mute and useless, it surrenders to the financial and political prowess of those walking above this ill-fated boundary. Hallelujah though, to talents such as these young men that now some of the mute have a voice, albeit again mostly in the chichi circles of the world.

Still, someone somewhere is flipping through the pages of their stories and peeking into the colorful aspirations of Husna from the seedy Old City of Lahore trying to be the dying multi-millionaire K. K. Harouni's ultimate mistress or the almost schizophrenic Indian driver Balram's maniac ambition to one fine day be his own master. The writing styles of the books are tremendously different, but the uncannily identical themes – that make the reader room for a few days beside the poorest of the poor South Asian menials - easily allows for shelving them in the same fiction genre.

Adiga's protagonist, *The White Tiger*, also known as Balram, is a complicated character who screams of all that goes on in the silent mind of a non-entity driver who cleans your Honda's windscreen with his spit every night; and who tries to resist the temptation to kiss your magnificently spoiled American wife when she sits in the car with her cruel short skirt. He has dangerously naive ambitions of becoming as rich as his owner one day, but more than that his vivid daydreams—puddles of paan expectorate on a road talking to him about either being moral or becoming a murderer; Ganga carrying deathly dirt and darkness in its mane but


everything next to the ocean in Maha Bharat being lit up in hopey happiness—force you to see India the way only a poor man like him, always dangling below the line, sees it. “The dreams of the rich, and the dreams of the poor - they never overlap do they?” he asks, baffling one about the sad and profound pithiness that is masked behind an otherwise invisible tool like him. His acute insight into what poets like Ghalib and Iqbal truly meant when they loftily praised the bulbul or flowers is almost scary and his mastery of words like “cannonades” and “articulated” is bound to raise a shrewd reader’s eyebrow more than once.

The story, however, has “refreshing” written all over its juicily perplexing start that adamantly grips you and often takes you into uncomfortable scenes. Scenes that might leave you scarred by the time they are done showing you the nasty political mysteries of this below-the-line galaxy. Situations like the one where Balram takes you into his master’s feet as he washes them and shows you how “The chatter of coal and China got mixed up with the aroma of whiskey from the glasses, the stench of sweat rising from the Stork’s feet dipped in the warm water, the flakiness of his skin...” make you instinctively wrinkle your nose and nod in strong assent when he ends the page with “after you have massaged a man’s foot, the smell of his old, flaky skin will stay on your skin for an entire day.”

Mueenudin’s characters, on the other hand, stay on the surface of the reader’s general sympathetic capability. They do not penetrate your day with the force and murderous zeal of Balram, but then they are loosely connected pawns in a volume of short stories and Balram is not what they want to be to begin with. They hang like a string of pearls - worthless, murky, frantically scratched - connected to each other, without knowing, with the careless cord of the positively wealthy landlord/businessman K. K. Harouni. One by one each bead makes its way into your hands, starting with Nawabdin the entrepreneurial yet vengeful electrician and ending on the most unfortunate *Spoiled Man* of a gardener who falls in love a little too late. Each of the pearls through its thoughtfully constructed character gives you an intimate view of the scratches on its surface, the gashes on its soul. Midway through the story of Saleema the maid who easily slept around with other servants, you know all the angles of her disparate insecurities and insatiable craving for love. When she marries a boy who “looked so slim and city-bright, and soon proved to be not only weak but depraved.” you understand well why “These experiences had not cracked her hard skin, but made her sensual, unscrupulous - and romantic.” Through such delicately built details of fate and character Mueenudin manages to educate even Pakistanis about the sadness that lurks in the souls of their timid employees.

Another creative aspect of the book is Harouni’s disconnected character. Like a fruit sliced in slithers and spread across different tales, glimpses of him appear: his old-age vulnerable liaisons with Husna the greedy, ambitious low-class mistress to Helen the circumspect Yale undergrad almost-engaged to his wannabe poet nephew in Paris. *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders* is one of those rare books that keeps piecing together (after the book is done with), the fruit of its self, its seemingly disconnected and brief protagonists, and the powerful man who is to serve as glue but mostly remains dry and invisible. And later it makes you smile





when one day during the most mundane of tasks you figure out the Harouni-link between Lily the non-conformist who fell for a man about whom she liked how “he had well-used solid things, [a] car, the gun, and binoculars...” with Zainab the housekeeper whose secret husband day dreamed that she wanted him “to find her there, caring for the child. [In] The darkness of the house, its dampness, the expectancy of the salt and pepper shakers carefully aligned on the table and the sadness of the toothpick holder...”

Slowly digesting the masterfully dispersed slices of Mueenudin’s lonesome fruit; or consuming the runny, nauseating gravy of unfairness of the rich begetting unfairness in their poor that Adiga has placed in our mind’s mouth, there is no question that one leaves the table feeling satiated, indulged, and maybe a little dyspeptic. Horace, the prominent Roman lyric poet from the time of Emperor Augustus made judging the worth of a literary piece easy. He said any collection of words excels its purpose when it both delights artistically and is useful for raising moral questions. In that regard then, both these stimulating desi works succeed as they are aesthetically delightful and also inspire a tingle of useful moral curiosity in even the most hardened reader.

TEDHI LAKEER

Aparna Sanyal

“It was evening. About 8. A Wednesday. The date was 19th May, 1993.”

Vijay paused, a shy smile playing on his lips, a blush threatening to burst forth. He looked down at his perfectly manicured hands and looked back at the camera.

“That’s the first time Naseem and I met.”

Vijay looked at me and collapsed into a fit of giggling. “Cut! Cut!” he commanded.

It was the summer of 2002. A year ago, the Naz Foundation, a non-profit organization working on AIDS and sexual rights in India, had filed a case in the High Court of Delhi. The petition challenged a nearly 150 year old law which criminalized homosexuality in the country – left behind as part of their legacy by the British. It was a bold move to make in a country very uncomfortable with anything queer. The Foundation was up against not just a conservative government, but also a people who preferred to brush such uncomfortable, supposedly taboo topics under the carpet.

Self-righteous indignation, along with other absurd positions, was quick to come right in. That this was ludicrous – in view of the rich legacy of homegrown folklore, mythology, literature and even historical facts about queer men and women within South Asian culture – seemed obvious to just a few. Self-appointed guardians of ‘morality’ and ‘Indian culture’, often at loggerheads with each other over matters of religion, caste and class, became unusually secular over their distaste for homosexuality. Being gay, they said, was a ‘western’ phenomenon. It was ‘unnatural’ and not in keeping with our common South Asian/ Indian ethos. Certainly not something that they’d want ‘good’ Hindus, Muslims and Christians to be thinking about and – horror of horrors – practising!

“We come from an old royal family... a good family... from the Chandni Chowk area”, said Agarwalji, “Brahmano jaisa parhej karte hain... hamare ghar mein koi mutton nahi khata... hum shudh shakahari hain”[1].

His wife came in, carrying cups of hot tea, the kind that is made by boiling the leaves with the water and the milk mixed together. His daughter-in-law followed, carrying little plates of Marie biscuits, pakoras and potato wafers. Agarwalji looked at them, indulgent pride written all over his face.

“My daughter-in-law also comes from a very good family. Convent educated. BA in





English. But very cultured. Very respectful.”

The daughter-in-law adjusted her pallu[2] so it covered her head properly. She tucked one end of it behind her ear.

“My friend arranged the marriage. He did so for all my children! Infact, I have no idea how to marry off one’s sons and daughters. My friend and his wife have always taken on this responsibility.” Agarwalji’s wife smiled and nodded her head, “I don’t know what we would do without Bhaisaab and Bhabhiji[3]”.

That summer Amrit, Arunima and I were asked what we wanted to look at in our final graduation documentaries. How would it be, we wondered, if we looked at two gay men or women, who were quintessentially Indian? So ‘Indian’ – and it was, and still is, a loaded term – that no viewer would again claim that homosexuality was a foreign import. Veritable sons and daughters of the soil.

It wasn’t simple. For starters, while everyone was quite happy to admit to their gay side to us in private, talking about it on camera scared everyone off. Women were especially conspicuous by their absence. We had access to many articulate, English speaking men and women – some of them intrepid activists of the queer movement – but we just couldn’t find anyone who was comfortable only in the local language and came from a conservative milieu. Someone who could not be accused of having been influenced by ‘foreign’ values.

Ordinary men and women with not-so-straight lives.

Rotund, bald and swarthy. Affable. Worldly, wise. With a way with words. When we first met Agarwalji, it was like we had run into the owner of the neighbourhood corner grocery store. Someone who could advise one on which brand of cooking oil to buy, discuss politics over the counter, overcharge at times and give unexpected discounts too. Someone who could shout at the store-help one instant and smile at you the next. The quintessential friendly neighbourhood ‘uncle’. As it happened, his own reality wasn’t very different from the image he portrayed. He was the proud owner of a small grain store in the wholesale market area of Sadar Bazaar in Delhi.

Our first meeting was at one of the weekly anonymous gay group meetings we had started attending regularly. Already in his sixties by then, Agarwalji was the oldest amongst the group. With his easy manner and sense of humour, he was also the favourite.

For some reason, he took to us. Adopted us, took us under his wing. I now realize that the eventual decision to shoot with him as one of the central protagonists of the film wasn’t ours alone. That he would be part of the film was something he

knew and took for granted long before we did.

But the film seemed incomplete with just one story. We needed another voice, a younger person perhaps? Another perspective.

Much later, when we screened the film at various festivals, viewers commented invariably on Agarwalji's story, expressing their surprise and delight at seeing a man his age proudly proclaiming himself to be gay. One of our favourite lines from the film, for instance, was him declaring, simply and with touching dignity, 'I am 110% gay!'

Our choice of Vijay as the other central protagonist, though, was often questioned. We were asked why we had chosen to go with the 30 year-old queer man who identified himself as a '*kothi*'[4], when other stories could have been found. People also asked us if we weren't stereotyping gay relationships, and gay men, by featuring someone with seemingly feminine mannerisms.

During the course of research for the film, we met many people. The stories we heard were moving. There were stories of not being accepted, of leading double lives, of compromises and of frustration. But what we also started to realize was that most gay men from the backgrounds we were looking at had found a simple way to buy peace at home (and they lived invariably in large joint-families in little, cramped homes), while also continuing with their gay relationships – they would simply get married as per their family's diktats.


Getting married meant that their sexuality was no longer up for speculation within their family or community. It ensured being looked at as 'normal'. It gave their parents a new daughter-in-law who could, in keeping with tradition, look after them.

When we asked them how their wives felt about the arrangement, they'd be unbelievably nonchalant about it. The wives 'understood', they'd say. They 'supported' them, and their gay relationships. I especially remember one person, married and with two kids, who told us how his wife helped him dress up in drag. She had, as he put it, 'no problems' with his sexuality. A rare honest man told us the real truth, '*Shaadi ke baad, joru ko aadmi ki baat manni hi padti hai. Woh kisko kya batayegi? Badnaami to ussi ki honi hai.*'[5]

It was as though a cycle of repression, unleashed through a societal lack of understanding for alternate sexuality, had led to a new narrative of subjugation and domination.

Vijay was a rare man who had broken through that cycle. Despite considerable familial pressure, he had not just refused marriage with a girl, but was also one of





the few men who spoke out vehemently against, as he put it, cheating an innocent girl.

Vijay was also one of the few people we met who had come 'out' to his family. It couldn't have been easy, given that his widowed mother was a simple, illiterate, first generation migrant to the city, who'd provided for the fatherless family of 6 by selling vegetables. Of course, his family was devastated at the news of his being gay and tried to talk him into getting 'treated' for his condition. But secure in his work as an outreach worker with the Naz Foundation, he was able to hold his own. He had also celebrated his gay relationship with Naseem, his partner of six years, with a wedding that was witnessed by their friends from the gay community. It was a rare 'public' event, low-key enough to not attract attention from the police and guardians of morality, and high-key enough to make a splash within the community.

There was no doubt that reaching out to unknown men at bus stops, train stations, parks and other public places and talking to them about safe sex practices had toughened him up. It was a difficult job, with the police frequently troubling him, and people unwilling to listen to anything on a subject considered taboo. He told us stories of workers like him being roughed up, abused, insulted and called names. Raped. For in the hierarchy of things, men like him, the *kothis*, were just one rung above women.

A casual conversation with Vijay wouldn't ever give one an indication of his depth, his convictions or his incredible, quiet courage. In fact, he came across as rather vain; proud of his looks and confident of his ability to make men fall for him. He experimented with his hairstyles, followed fashion closely, got his eyebrows plucked and his arms and legs waxed. He made eyes at men on the street, was an incorrigible tease, gossiped with me about who he flirted with, shared secrets about his love life. Once, in passing he naughtily told me not be afraid of him stealing my guy away from me! Of course, he was actually head-over-heels in love with Naseem.

Vijay was fun to hang out with, despite (and perhaps, because of) all our cultural differences. He had a sense of humour and took particular delight in shocking us – the three English speaking filmmakers with, as he put it, hopelessly colourless lives – with his talk and behaviour.

Agarwalji, on the other hand, was much more 'proper'. 'Meri bachi ke saath tameez se pesh aana,[6]' he'd warn Vijay and others, and then turn and warn us in a fatherly, protective, almost patronizing way, 'Ye abhi bhi nadaan hai. Bhool jaate hain kaise logon ke saath baat cheet ki jaati hai[7]. Not surprisingly, his own love story too, was carefully conducted in a 'proper' way.

It was an incredible story. A chance encounter at the neighbourhood pan shop, a few meetings and then, that light-headed feeling of being in love. It wasn't the

easiest of emotions to feel for another man in conservative India 40 years ago. Agarwalji was married by then, in the way that men and women who reach a certain age in India find themselves to be. But the power of what they felt for each other – an irrational, compelling need to be with one other– brought and kept them together.

It was a strange, intense love. A few years into the relationship, Agarwalji got his 'friend' married. 'I had children, I had a family. But what of him? I didn't want him to feel lonely at a later point in time. And the way times are changing, there was no guarantee that my children would look after me in my old age, let alone him. I didn't want him to be without a support system'.

The two lived together with their families in the same house in the great Indian tradition of joint families. The wives brought up each other's children. The children grew up as siblings. The two families lived, ate and prayed together for 14 years. To the world, and indeed to their own families, they were an example of 'brotherly' love. Their friendship – that innocuous word – was upheld as a model to be emulated. 'Brothers do not share the kind of love we have for each other,' Agarwalji would say, 'nor do sisters share the kind of affection that our wives share'. It was duplicitous and honest; beautiful and tragic.


The families don't know the extent to which the two men of the family loved each other. Agarwalji and his friend prefer it that way.

A few months after their wedding, Naseem married a woman. He told Vijay he had been forced into the relationship by his dying mother. A year later, his wife had a baby. Vijay's family advised him to get married too. Instead, Vijay broke up with Naseem.

In 2009, the High Court in Delhi announced its verdict on the case filed by the Naz Foundation filed 8 years earlier. Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code was 'read down'. A consensual physical relationship between two men would no longer be penalized by criminal courts. Agarwalji and Vijay could love freely.

We had asked Agarwalji and Vijay how they thought their lives would change if Section 377 were to be amended. 'I don't think it'll make a difference in my life', Agarwalji said, 'I have lived my life. I don't want to upset the cart now. Our lives have gone off well. We have all been happy. If our families were to learn the truth about us, it could create rifts. It may not too... who knows? Life is strange.' He was less ambivalent about where we could screen the film, though. Film festivals were fine, he told us. So were screenings meant specifically for the gay community. Television, with its ability to enter homes, was not. Nor was any kind of attention from the media.





Vijay thought differently. 'I want to celebrate my love,' he said. 'Don't I have a right to live the way I want to? Why should I hide who I am? If the Section is amended, I will be able to live freely. India got its independence in 1947. Isn't it time I won mine?'

The film, 'Tedhi Lakeer – The Crooked Line' was screened at film festivals across the world, and I was told both Vijay and Agarwalji gathered a fan following within the gay community, and not just in India. In the years that followed, I stayed in touch with Vijay and Agarwalji intermittently. Vijay came with his troupe of friends for my wedding. Agarwalji would drop into my place of work every now and then.

But a misplaced phone, lost telephone numbers and mundane preoccupations of everyday life have since got the better of us.

I did catch a glimpse of Vijay on television in the celebrations that followed the High Court verdict though. He was dancing with gay abandon – the centre of attention. And then suddenly, he realized he was on camera. He smiled that smile I had come to know so well – mischievous and bashful, provocative and innocent-looking at the camera, and commanded, 'Cut!'

[1] We are as strict in our customs as the Brahmins. Nobody in the house eats meat. Only vegetarian food for us.

[2] Pallu – The free end of the saree, which is often used to cover their heads by women in conservative families.

[3] Bhaisaab and Bhabhiji – Used to refer to an elder brother and his wife. Used as a mark of respect.

[4] Kothi: A term used usually in Northern India within the local queer community to identify the supposed 'female' in a gay partnership. Kothis dress regularly in drag. We were also invited to the community Kothi beauty pageant, which incidentally, was won by Vijay, our eventual second protagonist.

[5] What choice does a woman have but to do her husband's bidding after marriage? What can she say to people? It is her reputation at stake, after all.

[6] You'd better behave with these kids.

[7] These guys are a little raw. They don't always conduct themselves as they should.

FILM, MEET BOOK - AN INTERVIEW WITH BAPSI SIDHWA

Afia Aslam



This is the first part of our special feature on cross-pollination between genres of storytelling.


Scores of books have been made into films, but it's rare for a screenplay to be adapted into a novel. We interviewed the legendary Pakistani author Bapsi Sidhwa at her home in Houston, Texas, to understand the process by which she novelized 'Water' (2005), the third film in Indian director Deepa Mehta's famous Elements Trilogy. The second part of this feature (Book, meet Film) will include an interview with an author whose work is being adapted for the big screen.

Bapsi Sidhwa's entire body of literature – a topic of much discussion over the decades for its nuanced portrayal of women and minority communities in the Subcontinent – is wonderfully relevant for our theme for this issue of Papercuts. 'Water', in particular, casts a poignant look at the marginalization of widows in Indian society. The discussion on the book also provided the perfect impetus for the writer to share some excellent tips on writing and characterization for the aspiring author.

A.A. What was it like to write a book on a movie?

B.S. Deepa Mehta sent me a rough edit of the film from Canada together with





some books on Hinduism and widows to persuade me to turn the film into a novel. She wanted me to explain the harsh laws that governed the lives of the widows. Since this was a sensitive matter, Deepa had been attacked by extremists when she first tried to shoot the film in Banaras. They destroyed her sets and equipment and said they would never allow her to make the film in India. Five years later, she quietly made the film in Sri Lanka. Her idea was that people would not believe just the film; if I could write a novel and add some research to it, it would be more believable. I found the best way of getting information was from hinduwidows.com.

A.A. There's a hinduwidows.com?!

*B.S. Yes! These are the laws of Manu, an ancient prophet. He made all these very harsh laws for the widows (especially Brahmin widows) and the *achhoots* (the untouchables). I studied them and wove them as information into the story.*

Anyway, I had seen the film about a hundred times by the end of the book. I have never worked so hard - I would get up at dawn and get to the computer with sentences already formed in my mind and work late into the night. She wanted the book ready in three months, to time it with the release of the film.

When Deepa adapted my novel 'Cracking India' into the film 'Earth (1947)' she totally absorbed the book and then carved her cinematic vision of how she would produce the film. She used my language in the script and then I worked with her on it - we had a very strong rapport going. When she sent me 'Water', it was the reverse process. I had to totally absorb the film to be true to it and be able to elaborate on it. And that was how we bounced off each other in making her film into my novel and vice versa.

A.A. How important is authenticity when you're writing this kind of book?

B.S. The setting was the Behar-Bengal border, which I don't know at all, although I did visit Bengal afterwards. I'd read a lot of books and seen films and through these I got a much more natural feel for the lives of these poor villagers and the atmosphere in which little Chuhiya was shown growing up. I had to absorb the culture so that the action flowed naturally. Nothing kills a book as chunks of research. In all my books I read a lot, absorbed the information and then left it aside, letting the knowledge work itself out into the right words, the right scenes and the right opportunities; otherwise the research becomes so obtrusive that the book becomes boring.

A.A. Clearly that's a product of being an observant person.

B.S. No. People keep on saying writers are observant. I'm the least observant person. I absorb information through... a silent osmosis. What is going around just gets absorbed into the subconscious and comes out when I'm writing.

A.A. So when you're working on a story and you come up with a character and you

have to flesh that character out...

B.S. Well, I don't have to. If you feel compelled to do anything, it shows and the book becomes boring. I was totally driven to write 'The Bride'. It was the first time I was writing. I had a strange energy pushing me to write and to write. I'd heard about this incident in the mountains and when I came back, I wanted to tell this girl's story. It reflected the lives of so many young girls in the Third World, with no control over their lives. As I was writing, I realized this girl couldn't have existed out of nowhere. She had to have parents. How did she get together with the old tribal? That was the creative process. In creating that, I very soon discovered I was writing a novel without meaning to.

Going back. That's the process I find mostly happens. The story around which I wanted to fabricate it turned out at the very end, but by the time I reached that, the novel had been created.

A.A. *So for you it's about what's coming out instinctively.*

B.S. Writing never took precedence in my life... everything else did. I took out snatches of time to write. When I came to America, I found my writer friends were working diligently, working from 9 in the morning till 5 in the evening, and I thought how wonderful that they can do that. But one of them said, "Bapsi, you have no idea how much paper we throw away. And you've produced more books than I have."


So I realized that I wrote only when I had the compulsion to write. And most of the time I did have the compulsion. Only once - and it startled me - I could not write. It happened for about a day. That thing that clicks in when I write wasn't there and I couldn't even write one sentence. I knew all the words. But the unconscious that places the sentence in the right place, with the right words, and by right words I mean 'the', 'that', 'of' (every little thing counts, you know)... that didn't come. That gave me a jolt. I realized that if I try to write deliberately and rationally, I can't. It has to be a natural process.

While you're writing, what you read is very important. If while writing something serious, you only read something funny, it won't work. Unconsciously, it does influence you; one does build on the shoulders of other creative people in a way. Because I didn't go to school because of my polio, I used to read a lot. If I'd gone to regular school it would not have been so easy for me to write.

A.A. *That's one of the things I was interested in because this was a significant departure from what you were normally writing about, specifically the Parsi community, and one can tell that that material comes out of your own experiences. I'm interested in how your own life fed into your writing.*

B.S. Because I was isolated as a child due to polio, I hadn't had much experience of life. But when I wrote, I felt that some inherited knowledge or inherited memory comes out, which we call the muse or what you like, and your subconscious





plays a part. I wrote things that I was surprised I knew about. Basically where you come from in your writing is what you have experienced yourself, have internally absorbed as part of your adventure of life and I think that's the best you can do... is writing about things that you know intimately.

In the beginning of 'Cracking India', it's what I went through as a child but the child is not me. I've given the child the circumstances of my life: the constant being with servants and adults, not going to school and so having the chance to observe what's happening around her and hear adult conversations. It acted as a very useful ploy for the book. My gosh... a child's mind is so curious – you can't deprive it of knowledge by not sending it to school! That's why I read, read, read to make up for the slack. I had an Anglo-Indian lady who taught me very light geography and light history, but no maths (because I had no aptitude for it). She gave me 'Little Women' when I was eleven. That was what transformed my life. I had developed the ability to read and write by that time. The story fascinated me and after that I couldn't stop reading.

A.A. Do you think that what appealed to you in 'Little Women' was the inherent strength of the characters that contrasted with the limits on your mobility?

B.S. Certainly. Whatever book I read, those characters became my role models. I adopted their traits, I drew strength from them. When I read the English classics, I was totally transformed into those characters. I read a lot of Victorian novels. The stronger the character, the more I was influenced, but without realizing it. I've only realized it now that you've mentioned it.

A.A. What's next?

B.S. Five novels is a hell of a lot of writing, so I don't have another novel in me. I've written a collection of short stories and it's with the agent right now. Let's see what happens.

SINGING TO THE CHOIR: COKE STUDIO AND PAKISTANI IDENTITY


Sanam Maher

Last September, bookshops in Karachi found themselves sold out of the American Vogue on the first day the magazines hit the shelves. With their hefty price tag, magazines usually linger in the shops well into the next month, when fresh copies replace them. Francis, who works at a bookshop I frequent, pulled me aside to explain conspiratorially, “All the designers, they have bought all the copies. Because this time, they have been featured in Vogue, you see.” Fashion journalist Carla Power’s coverage of Pakistan Fashion Week in her article *Revolutionary Style*, gave good face to some of the most prominent Pakistani fashion designers and models, lauding their courage in a country that is projected as a place of bombs, burqas and bad government. When I finally got my hands on a well-thumbed copy of the magazine, despite the hyperbole of the article, I felt a sense of pride. It was the first time I had seen Pakistan in those glossy pages, sandwiched between paeans to fashion and design heavyweights; reports on the latest accessories and clothes (which, if you’re lucky, you’ll spot on only the most well-heeled of Pakistani women); and work by some of the best photographers in the business. I felt a sense of belonging, of recognition and a (somewhat misguided) feeling of affirmation.

I experienced the same emotions while watching the first episode of Season 3 of Coke Studio, as thousands of boys swooned over their first glimpse of Meesha Shafi singing *Alif Allah Chambay Di Booti*, and thousands of girls thought, *she looks just like us* (albeit thousands others probably thought, *I wish I looked like that*). Since its inception in June 2008, the show has fostered and encouraged this sense of recognition and community amongst its viewers, whatever their age. In addition to wide coverage on radio and television channels across Pakistan, Coke Studio’s music and videos are downloadable through the show’s website, while you can request songs straight to your mobile phones during episodes. It has become standard practice to hear snippets of songs on calls to mobile phones. English subtitles added to YouTube videos of the songs have only escalated their popularity, with millions of hits and shares on Facebook and other social networking websites amongst both Pakistani and diaspora communities. The official Coke Studio website also encourages fans to download the show’s logo and branding and tweak it to express their creativity and ‘make it their own’. Fans can also download ‘I heart Coke Studio’ and ‘I love Coke Studio’ support badges while bands and musicians can download ‘Watch me on Coke Studio’ badges to be displayed anywhere on the internet.

The show embraces a multitude of musical expressions – sufi, rock, devotional, pop, modern and so on. It suggests that as Pakistanis, we are cultured, rooted in tradition, while also straining at the leash of conservatism – the music reflects our curious nature as straddling both Eastern and Western culture. As Haniya Aslam points out, Coke Studio is ‘the perfect way to reach out to the world with our cul-





ture and remind the world that we're not isolated, we're linked.'

Producer Rohail Hyatt's brainchild has been applauded for its ability to seamlessly bring together two generations of Pakistani viewers – Amanat Ali's rendition of Noor Jehan's classic *Ae Watan Ke Sajeelay Jawanon*, for instance, is a bittersweet refrain from 1965. While speaking to an older generation of listeners, the current adaptation of the song has a poignancy for younger viewers of Coke Studio as well – as Louis 'Gumby' Pinto says, "I played this song with a lot of pride," while Amanat Ali dedicated the song to the thousands of soldiers currently fighting for Pakistan.

Coke Studio's YouTube channel offers video-blogs and blooper footage designed to suture the viewer further into the studio experience. The format of each episode gives audiences an intimate behind-the-scenes glimpse into the production of each song – cumulatively, such access to artists not only gives unprecedented insight into the creation of music within the Pakistani industry, but also serves to highlight the level of professionalism and technical expertise of the men and women behind the scenes. While as a nation we may be flailing in various arenas, Coke Studio offers a refreshing image of Pakistani art and culture as thriving despite the odds, flirting with experimental forms and attracting the attention of millions across the world. It remains to be seen, however, if the show continues to straddle the fine line between presenting popular artists in a fresh light and showcasing new talent or more traditional forms of music that may be ignored by music channels and radio stations across the country.

"If it doesn't come on television, it doesn't mean it doesn't exist," pointed out Tina Sani, when discussing the traditional forms of music present on the show. Ms. Sani's pronouncement is apt when considering the model of Pakistani identity adopted and catered to by Coke Studio – this identity may not be present in the faces of those we have become familiar with on the daily news, but it is a far more malleable, flexible face, ever cognizant of the changing times and Pakistan's precarious position in our world today.

In July 2010, when an organization called the Pakistan Peace Builders held the first New York Sufi Music Festival in the city's Union Square, Abida Parveen, Mekaal Hasan Band and Zeb and Haniya's lyrics underscored a message often repeated amongst those labeled Pakistan's 'educated elite': this is our true face, this is our nature. A diverse line-up of musicians from all four provinces, ranging from Sindh's Soung Fakirs to Balochistan's Akhtar Chahal Zehri, emphasized the multi-faceted nature of the Pakistani identity. Aunty Disco Project's Omar Bilal Akhtar pointed out a similar presence of such diverse voices within Coke Studio, saying, "We've got so many different artists and they're all coming together on the same platform and it's something you don't see very often." He further suggested that the show presented a positive model in that 'if we can do it in this industry, it sends a great message to everybody that we can bring so much diversity together and make it work.'

Eschewing the politics of provincialism, Coke Studio seemingly endorses Arif Lohar's belief that 'Hum Pakhtoon, na Punjabi, Sindhi na Balochistani hain. Aik Khuda aur aik nabi, hum saaray Pakistani hain.'



THE OTHER GLASS CEILING

Hussain Kazmi

Prejudice is as old as man himself; its history includes racial discrimination and xenophobia in medieval and dark ages and culminates in the Apartheid, Holocaust and prevalent anti-Muslim sentiment after the turn of this century. Narrowing our scope down to the kind of prejudice prevalent in Pakistan, one would expect that the educated people of our country would know better than to discriminate and stereotype. And yet, it is in this intellectual setting where we find evidence of the most damaging prejudice in our country, on the basis of what language you speak and how you speak it. This discrimination manifests itself in forms as varied as forwarding racist jokes via email and text messaging to rejecting and discriminating against equally qualified applicants on the basis of some prejudice. These prejudices are mostly ill-formed and based on some form of stereotyping, but when and how do notions like these creep into a society?

To discover more about the cause of these prejudices, I interviewed a number of academicians. The viewpoint of Asma Khan*, a professor of oriental languages at a university in Rawalpindi, Pakistan, presents an interesting insight into the causality that evidently lies behind the existence of prejudice in modern Pakistan. She believes that this might be a variant of the Stockholm syndrome, whereby the conquered race begins to identify – and later revere – the language of the conquerors as the language of the elite. Pakistani society might serve as an example to add weight to this hypothesis: most parents from the upper echelons of society consider English to be a social requirement and in many cases, actively encourage their children to learn it at the cost of other national or regional languages.

Needless to say, sometime before our generation came of age, the transformation from regional languages to Urdu was already taking place in large parts of the country. Today, in the more exclusive circles, the migration from Urdu to English is almost complete. This divide has provided our already fragmented society with another cause for prejudice. The English speaking population regards the other two spheres as socially inept relics of the past; the regional language speaking majority brims with outrage or cowers, and the urban Urdu speaking population remains suspended somewhere in between. But it's not prejudice that is the primary common factor in all three classes, it is confusion: none of them is entirely sure of their identity. This brings us to the most damaging aspect of this prejudice, which occurs in workplace environments.


Recent graduates might have come to terms with the fact that academic achievements do not take them quite as far as they had hoped in the recession-hit job market. Being successful with your job application often boils down to having influential contacts or outstanding interpersonal skills. While it is fine to regard interpersonal skills as a valuable asset in any person's repertoire, it becomes a little confusing when communicating fluently in English becomes the sole measure of efficient communication. The situation becomes even more complicated

when this preference stretches to technical fields such as computer programming and other engineering related jobs. Most of these engineers and programmers are generally tasked with either writing code scripts or communicating with local clients, mostly confined to one office cubicle, requiring little or no social interaction with the clients. Equal opportunity employment has been flaunted as an emblem of forward mindedness over the last decade, but in their haste to be as progressive as possible employers have become enamored with the glorified image of the corporate suit, communicating freely in English, even in cases when this adds nothing to a person's job skills.

Talking to a number of recent graduates revealed that this is indeed the current scenario of the hard-hit job market in our country. Nadir Malik*, a junior-year student at National University of Science and Technology, Pakistan and member of the outreach initiative, has already come to terms with the ugly face of prejudice. The outreach program is designed to admit students from underdeveloped areas; NMR originates from one such remote village in Sind. Despite being in good academic standing to date, he has been unable to secure an internship because he is not fluent in English. Considering that most undergraduate interns are, at most, required to show up at work and do menial chores, this discrimination in accepting interns is surprising. Similarly, Saad Riaz*, a design engineer working at a multinational company is disillusioned with his job because he feels that he has been passed on for a promotion only because his competitors communicate more fluently in English. Mansoor Nazir*, a graduate from UET with excellent grades, recounts his job interviews, which were mostly conducted in English, with a grimace. He believes that his distinct Punjabi background and upbringing force him to translate his ideas from Punjabi to Urdu to English, creating a lag in his communication. While his English speaking skills have nothing to do with his job application as an application developer, he has been rejected a number of times because of this language barrier.

Significantly, maybe it is just human nature or perhaps a hint of disillusionment, but the grass on the other side of the fence doesn't appear as green either. Asim Raza*, a graduate from an Australian university, shares his experience of working for a local data analysis setup. Communicating in Urdu can be a hassle for him, by virtue of having studied in an English medium school even before moving to Australia for education early in his life. He explains that getting a job, with his foreign qualification and accent, was not much of a problem but complains that it sometimes becomes difficult to communicate with his peers since he is mimicked for his accent and ridiculed for his general lack of Urdu knowledge. Sameer Faruk*, a prospective graduate from an Italian University, agrees, admitting that people who have a dominant English upbringing are often stigmatized in traditional Pakistani work environments because of their different background. Co-workers shun and often mistrust them, and thus the rift between the two perceived classes widens. At the same time, he also claims that an education in an international environment has helped him gain a new perspective into our national language prejudice debate. He cites the fact that most academic institutions in the world have swallowed their pride and, as globalization reaches new levels, are beginning to offer courses in English in addition to their national languages. French,



A vertical illustration on the left side of the page shows a woman with her hair styled in several large, dark brown braids. She is wearing a light-colored, possibly white, top and is looking towards the right with a thoughtful expression, her hand resting near her chin. The background of the illustration is a light, neutral color.

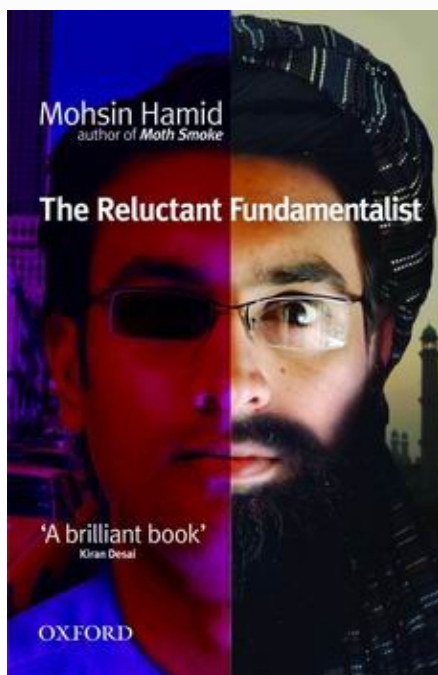
German, Italian, Scandinavian and many other international universities have already migrated to English as the medium of instruction, and others are following suit. The important point to keep in mind is that most of these countries are still offering courses in their native language simultaneously.

Perhaps it is time that we set similar limits on our usage of languages. For the preservation of the social fabric, and taking into account how being proficient in more than one language opens new avenues of thought, we need to persist with learning local and national languages instead of disregarding them as out-of-fashion garb. English might very well be the unified language of the future but Pakistani society is bound together by a number of languages, not least important of which are the regional languages spoken by the rural populace which make up the majority of our country's population. Instead of adapting English as the language of the elite and Urdu as the successful bourgeois, perhaps it would be apt to devise solutions on a policy level. Creation of laws intended to discourage language prejudice by imposing penalties and fines on offending organizations would be seen as a significant anti-discriminatory initiative. Prospective employers could also be required to define criteria for interviews, with legal protection available for job candidates allowing them to challenge any perceived prejudice. Achieving full closure on linguistic prejudice is something that would require extensive coordination between local and central governments to regulate and protect people from different language backgrounds. The proposed measures might only appear to address the implications of language prejudice in the job market but they can also prove to be the first steps in the direction of removing bias from society at a deeper level.

** Names have been changed for the sake of anonymity.*

BOOK, MEET FILM - AN INTERVIEW WITH MOHSIN HAMID

Afia Aslam



As promised, we are back with the second half of our special feature on novel and film adaptations. One of the most anticipated big screen adaptations of the coming year is Mohsin Hamid's 2007 book, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, which is being directed by the incomparable Mira Nair (of *Salaam Bombay!* and *Monsoon Wedding* fame).


On a first read, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* appears to be very much a book of its time. Set in New York and Lahore, it documents through a Pakistani immigrant's eyes the change that America underwent after the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center. The issues that Hamid picks up, however, are more far reaching and enduring than the political events of a specific era or country. He focuses as much on changing conceptions of home as he does on the ability to forge new

connections in a world with increasingly fuzzy borders and boundaries. At the end of the day, this novel is about identity issues and deciding who you are, and that is what makes it so relevant to our theme.

A.A. What is the process by which this book is being turned into a movie? How involved have you been and what has it been like for you as an author to see it happening?

M.H. Mira contacted me shortly after the book was published in 2007. She was in London for the screening of *The Namesake* and took me out for lunch to discuss this project. She was full of enthusiasm for the book and was very charming, with a real love for Lahore, for Pakistan, for Pakistani music. The biggest impression I had of her that day was that I felt I trusted her. She seemed very sincere and well meaning and that put me at ease. She was making *Amelia* at the time, which was her first experience with a big studio film. Now she wanted to do a smaller film, one that she had complete control over and was more to her vision. She also wanted to do a film on Lahore and I think she was personally quite interested in this issue of Americans, Muslims and conflict. Her husband is a Columbia University professor who's written a book called *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim* in which he's explored exactly these issues.

After that, our main challenge was to write a screenplay. Mira was finding it dif-

A vertical illustration on the left side of the page shows a woman with her hair in several large, dark braids. She is wearing a light-colored top and is looking towards the right. Her hand is near her chin.

difficult to locate a screenwriter who combined the knowledge and expertise of a corporate environment in New York with a Pakistani and Lahori experience. She therefore suggested that she, her assistant and I co-write the screenplay. It was going to be difficult and delay my next novel but it would teach me how to write a screenplay. We spent several months writing the first draft.

A.A. What was it like for you as a novelist to write a screenplay?

M.H. As opposed to one person and their prose, which is what writing a novel is, co-writing a screenplay is about working collectively. It's very different and quite fun. It's about sitting in a room, writing a scene, laughing like crazy. We'd come up with some absurd thing that obviously none of the characters would ever say in the real thing (Changez says to the American, "HEY! Aren't you my long lost cousin?") and then we'd all crack up. I enjoyed it. On the other hand, it was challenging because as a novelist my novel was exactly what I wanted, but as a film it had to change. I had to think of it more as trying to realize Mira's vision while also trying to create my own. That was very unusual.

Eventually, Mira retained another screenwriter called Bill Wheeler, who's an American based in LA. We had a joint session in New York, talked about the screenplay, came up with ideas and now they're taking things forward with him. For me, the journey this far was worthwhile and I learnt a lot, so maybe for my next book I will also try to make a film. I feel now I understand how one would do so.

A.A. Is this book autobiographical?

M.H. Changez is not meant to be me and is fundamentally different from me in many ways. It wasn't my intention to write a character named Changez so that a person could read what Mohsin Hamid thinks.

When I create a character, I try to imagine being that person. In Changez's case, I tried to imagine what it would have been like if I had been younger, more volatile and more caught up in the post-9/11 scenario. Now, my innate nature is that pluralism and hybridity are good things. I'm not somebody who thinks that being absolutely clear or not having any conflict within yourself is good... I couldn't imagine being that. So I'm okay with saying there are some things about America that piss me off and some things about Pakistan that piss me off. I've spent time in America, so I'm Americanised in some ways and I've lived in Pakistan, so I'm Pakistanised too. I am me.

But Changez is someone who feels that he *should* be one thing. I wanted to explore this character because I feel that this tendency is latent in all of our natures and if you take it to an extreme, it can become quite frightening. So I wanted to take a character who wasn't religious (because I don't think any of this has anything to do with religion, it's all about politics) and completely absent the issue of religion; also completely absent the issue of violence. No one in the book is violent and no act of violence takes place.

A.A. And yet there's this undercurrent of violence...

M.H. Exactly... and yet there's this feeling of violence. I think that because we have violent feelings right now we look at the world as a violent place and we many times perpetrate that violence. So if you ask me are Changez's views my views, I say no. Changez's views are views that I can imagine as a way of exploring one side of things in my own head, but to a much greater degree.

A.A. How do you write a book and why has it been taking you seven years to write each one?!

M.H. I write and rewrite and rewrite my books over and over again. I tend to write a first draft and then a second draft, third draft, fifth draft, seventh draft... about a draft a year. After I've written the first draft, I'll write a second one on a new Word doc without looking at the first. Usually, there's nothing in common between the two.

A.A. Are you serious? And it doesn't bother you that one of the two will have to go?

M.H. No. And the first one goes.

A.A. I would die if I had to throw away my previous work. I work too hard on it.

M.H. Oh, I throw. I also work hard, but I throw. If the voice isn't precisely what you want it to be, you can't tweak it, I think. You have to write a new voice. If you don't want to be third person now, you can't just change the sentences and make them into first person. I have the first draft, I'll refer to it and I know it because I'll have read it out loud to myself so many times. I would say that out of all my time in a day, at least one hour is spent reading stuff out loud. I read every sentence, every page, a hundred times, an infinite number of times. I need to see how it sounds and when I listen to it I can say, "Okay, this word is not working." My eyes can give me a sense of plot arc and structure, but at the sentence and word level, I use my ears.

I think that writing is about speech. We don't just think the way that we write, we speak like we write. For me the novel has to be able to be spoken and wherever the speaking of it is awkward, the writing is awkward. I do know that when I read a book and I like the voice, if I read the voice out loud, it does have a real rhythm and cadence and sound.... It *feels* like a voice.

A.A. What're you working on these days?

M.H. (grins) Book 3.

A.A. You don't say.

M.H. (laughs) I don't like to talk about work in progress. I can tell you it's a novel and it should be done in about two years.



THREE BLIND MICE

Saira Ansari

Every year hundreds of students graduate from art schools in Pakistan with degrees in fine arts facing a critical decision the minute they step out of school: will they earn from their art professionally or will they pursue other complementary, but commercially viable, professions?

The art world of Pakistan is a rapidly growing entity and the demands of its influential denizens – the galleries, collectors, critics and curators – have a direct impact on the institutions that are educating and training the next batch of artists. The pressure to deliver, therefore, is understandably colossal. Fresh graduates step outside of their institutes with varying levels of degree honours and attitudes to match. What most of them are not armed with is the knowledge to survive in the brutal world of the art market.

For this article I interviewed three recent art graduates from across the country, who have excelled in the field of visual arts. Specifically, I have looked at how these three –Tehreem Jafri, Naqsh Raj and Imran Channa – developed their style and practice in art school and what their plans are for the future. Of particular note is the fact that these three artists belong to comparatively smaller cities –Taxila, Quetta and Shikarpur – respectively, and not Lahore or Karachi, two art centres that are the predominant focus of art reviews. All three have, at one point or another, received instruction at either of the two campuses of the National College of Arts (NCA).



Tehreem Jafri graduated with a distinction in Fine Arts from the first graduating batch of the National College of Arts (NCA), Rawalpindi Campus, in January 2010, making her the most recent graduate being discussed in this article. I found Tehreem an interesting artist to look at, both in terms of her skill, as well as providing an insight into the workings of the infant branch of the main NCA.

Tehreem's work investigates the theme of self-discovery, identity development and contemplation on an inward journey. Although Tehreem's illustrative style and treatment is unusual and exciting, the theme itself is a very natural course for students in their thesis year. Natural because this is the first time that they get to spend a large amount of time and energy on one thought process that they are very passionate about. Often this translates into personal probing or a visualisation of certain quirks, traumas or peculiarities that the artists feel define their life.

Tehreem's work is oddly enchanting and disturbing at the same time. One senses an almost Alice in Wonderland kind of stretched out time quality to it. However,

Tehreem dismisses any element of fantasy fiction, film or literature, as being one of the influences. Instead, she talks about the residue of a past that lingers on – baggage that everyone carries from their previous experiences, regrets, secrets, untold truths or just times gone by. The paintings are almost nostalgic in their yearning and yet the images are pulsating with movement.

One of her large oil on canvas paintings, **Untitled**, features herself sitting atop a pile of packed suitcases, bursting mysteriously with bizarre objects, while voluminous folds of braided hair float at the top of her head, defying gravity, with all sorts of oddities wedged in it – a tea cup spilling over, an empty suitcase yawning wide, a curiously lipsticked fish staring glassy-eyed out of an open sardine can. The vocabulary is witty and the connotations many. Fish have featured again and again in her works, sometimes as objects of metamorphosis, and at other times as deadpan centrepieces. Symbolically fish have come to mean different things in different religions and cultures, but they have also been popularly known to be associated with change, fortune and foresight in a broader sense. Tehreem seems to find bits of herself within this imagery.

An exceptional feature of Tehreem’s body of work is her willingness to work with different media. Alongside these enchanting and extraordinarily painted canvases, Tehreem has also produced works in video and installation art, and expressed equal comfort in either of the forms. This confidence, perhaps, is a reflection of the more open-minded attitude of the young faculty at NCA Pindi.

Tehreem’s degree show also turned out to be commercially successful with almost all of the pieces selling out. Two of the sales were made to the principal (now retired) and a prominent faculty member from NCA Lahore, who expressed an interest in her video. She feels that so far she has had a good response and her exposure to the outside world during her study has helped her maintain ties and receive a good response from the galleries. She is currently working towards a solo show in Islamabad.

Naqsh Raj is a gold medallist in Painting from the Balochistan University in Quetta and currently practices in the cavernous studios of the MA (Hons.) Visual Art program at the National College of Arts, Lahore (NCA), where I have been observing her for the past 2 years. This article provided me an opportunity of sharing my fascination with Naqsh’s work, which is strongly informed by the turmoil and instability of her surroundings, yet is strangely calm and disconnected visually.



In Quetta, a school-going Naqsh saw spates of growing violence and dissent in the protests against NATO’s bases being set up in Balochistan. The situation worsened over the years, and adding to it were the matters of civil unrest, murders of Balochi leaders and the ethnic attacks on non-locals. Naqsh’s artwork took on a very personal visualization of the religion and politics that surrounded her, making her question loyalties and leadership.



At college, Naqsh was primarily painting in a western classical style and making mural scale interpretations of famous paintings in her thesis year. Her **Third Eye** was an appropriation of Leonardo Da Vinci's famous **The Last Supper**, in which she painted Osama Bin Laden replacing Jesus as the central figure surrounded with a bevy of world leaders from numerous nations.

Unfortunately, Naqsh was accused of not working on this painting independently – charges that were proven false later – and was forced to submit something else for her thesis exhibit. With little time left she started working on another version of The Last Supper, titled the same, painting herself as the central figure with shadows of people standing around her. At one point she thought of demanding that she be allowed to show Third Eye. However, when in a tragic case of local violence the Vice Chancellor was killed by assassins, Naqsh was forced to change her mind. She proceeded to finish her degree and made her way to Lahore to continue her studies in a safer environment.



The Third Eye, 6x18 ft, Oil on Canvas, Naqsh Raj, 2008

Since her BFA graduation in 2008, Naqsh's work has changed significantly. The culture shock of moving to an immeasurably different city has channelled into enquiries of the aesthetic and technical kind. She is currently exploring the originality and reproduction of an image. Naqsh has also had to learn about the complexities of the art market. Although she has participated twice in Alhamra Art Galley's annual Young Artist's exhibition, and bagged the 1st prize in 2009, she has found it hard to show elsewhere. Numerous efforts of corresponding with galleries have terminated in a dead-end. One art gallery rescinded their offer to show her work when Naqsh decided to keep it NFS (not-for-sale). She has quickly learnt that unless her work is for sale and conveniently sized, she will get little to none offers for display. Also, her aversion to attaching more political meanings than what is popularly sought has also translated in certain publications losing interest in dialogue they had initiated themselves.

At the end of it all, Naqsh refuses to let such demands of stereotypical imagery and concepts affect her work, and remains true to her own enquiry into the aspect of image-making. Her strong willed personality shows through in her work and she is confident of the path she has chosen. Her MA degree show went up in January 2011.



The third artist, **Imran Channa**, is someone I selected who helps sum up this review very soundly. My editor felt that he didn't quite fill the criteria of a fresh graduate since he graduated with a BFA degree from NCA Lahore in 2004. But I disagree because Channa's artistic development, and the career that's followed, has only taken off after he graduated from the MA programme at NCA in 2008 under the guidance of artist par excellence Lala Rukh.

Channa hails from a small town in interior Sindh and his has been a journey of self-discovery in more ways than one. For the past few years Channa had been working on images of memories and blurred moments. Academic discussions with his tutors and his reactions to their feedback propelled him to question established notions of identity and the fixed history lessons that he was taught at every stage in educational institutions. This was reflected in his MA degree show, where he challenged the notions of hero worship in political history; the epitome of which lay in his work titled **Find the Real Jinnah** – a take on the mythical status attributed to a 'God-like' persona of Jinnah. Channa's work didn't seek to villainize Jinnah, but rather humanize him and portray him as a regular individual with a multifaceted character.



8 Portraits with Different Caps, Graphite on Paper, 30x40 in (each), Imran Channa, 2008

On an academic front, Channa's work was well received and has continued to receive accolades nationwide and across the world. He has already displayed his work in many international forums. His solo show in Geneva, Switzerland this year, and a feature in the Venice Biennale Publication are the highlights of his young career. Presently he stands shortlisted for several awards.

The reader would naturally assume that Channa has probably also enjoyed great commercial success but this has not always been the case. Channa reflects back to the limbo years (2005-2007) between the BFA degree exhibition and the commencement of the MA education when he had a hard time getting shows. He contacted several galleries but no one was interested in showing him and he felt abandoned because he didn't belong to any group or lobby that would project him further. However, he feels that the few group shows that he did participate in were good choices in terms of curation and quality of artworks displayed. The choice to join the MA programme had spiralled out of the need to get out of a financial slump and get further education rather than resort to leaving everything





and going back home.

Now, in 2010, when his name is recognized, Channa has a completely different battle with the commercial galleries. After making good sales initially, the money box has locked itself. The galleries feel that his digital prints aren't financially lucrative artworks and so their interest has dwindled. This has obviously meant limited showings and sales. Yet Channa perseveres and keeps producing digital prints, because he feels their physical state forms a large part of the concept that deals with matters of identity and history, especially in image-making.

It is no small wonder that Channa, whose art is his means of living, has not caved to the demands of the commercial market. This is especially unusual considering the advice that has been doled out to him by some of the bigger names in the art world today: to leave aside conceptual drudgery, produce purely commercial art work and make some hard cash.

In the professional world of the artist, the trials and tribulations are as many as those in other specialized vocations. The only difference is that artists have to first prove to the world how worthy their career choice is. The path to success, material or personal, has many obstacles and temptations and it is for the individual to decide if they want to wait for the bigger reward or not.

The competence and doggedness of these three artists should be applauded and I hope that they, and others like them, retain this wonderful energy that sets them apart from generic market artists for as long as is possible.

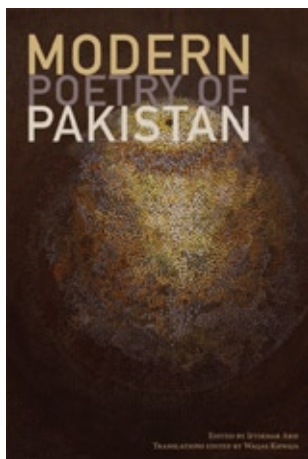
DRINK A FEW VERSES TODAY: A GHAZAL NOW, A NAZAM LATER

Moazam Rauf

Munir Niazi, one of Pakistan's landmark poets, defined poetry as: "a cat that, on facing the wrath of the jungle, becomes a lion."

Anyone who truly desires to understand the subtleties and complexities of Pakistani society must try to seek answers within the country's rich vein of literature. Pakistani poetry is known not only for the sheer beauty of its lyricism but also for ardently addressing the political, economic and spiritual concerns of a dynamic society. As a matter of fact, poetry has played a vital role in nurturing the ideological conception of the nation.

Pakistan's turbulent political history has been marred with arid periods of oppressive dictatorship (with and without mainstream democratic forces) and trends of internal colonialism. Urdu, spoken by only 7% of the population, enjoys the status of Pakistan's national language. English, reminiscent of the country's colonial past, is accepted as an important indicator of sophisticated, urbane upbringing and remains the official 'working' language of the country. Proficiency in these two languages ensures numerous social and economical advantages. Consequently, there is a sharp decline in the progress of regional languages.




Pakistan's regional poets, along with their counterparts in mainstream languages, have always been at the forefront of an on-going war against social injustice and political oppression. If a poets' account of Pakistan's history were to be compiled, then, the true challenge would be to give all the (major) regional languages fair representation. This important task has been undertaken by renowned Urdu poet Iftikhar Arif, in collaboration with educationist and writer Waqas Khwaja, in an anthology titled *Modern Poetry of Pakistan* (Dalkey Archive Press; January 2011).

The collection includes a wide variety of contemporary poems from Urdu and regional languages, all translated into English for the benefit of a global audience. Selected works of the following regional language poets appear in this publication:

Sheikh Ayaz, Janbaz Jatoy, Tanveer Abbasi, Sehar Imdad and Pushpa Vallabh (Sindhi); Hasina Gul, Ghani Khan, Gul Khan Naseer, Amir Hamza Khan Shinwari and Samandar Khan Samandar (Pushto); Taos Binhali (Kashmiri); Ata Shad (Balochi), and Ustad Daman, Sharif Kunjahi, and Ahmed Rahi (Punjabi) and Janbaz Jatoy (Siraiki).



The illustration on the left side of the page depicts a woman with her hair styled in several thick, dark braids. She is wearing a light-colored, possibly white, garment. Her right hand is raised to her chin, with her fingers resting against her cheek, suggesting a contemplative or thoughtful expression. The background of the illustration is a soft, light color, and the overall style is that of a traditional or folk-art inspired drawing.

The anthology boasts a complete plethora of varying themes and styles; however, an observant reader would identify that all poems essentially spring from a unified and resonant stream of experience and tradition. Despite differences in cultural and ethnic practices, the poets seem united in their experience of the divine and mundane. Even greater similarities appear in terms of form and style: partly because all languages of Pakistan draw significant influence from Persian, Turkish and Arabic poetic traditions.

Most poems in the anthology are in *nazam* form, although *ghazals* (odes or sonnets) have their fair share of representation too. The *nazam*, written mostly in free-verse or blank-verse form, has a greater significance in modern Pakistani poetry primarily because it is more conducive to experimentation. In modern poetry, almost all the anti-imperialistic, non-capitalist, humanitarian, revolutionary and existentialist sentiments are expressed in this form. Such poetry takes a departure from the traditional, subjective themes concerning beauty and love and implies greater focus on objective philosophical musings, serving both satirical and didactic purposes. The *nazam* selection in the anthology reverberates with a singularity of experience that is representative of the general concerns and frustrations associated with Pakistan's socio-religio-political dilemmas.

Jinnah, the founding father of Pakistan always desired Pakistan to be a secular state. In spite of many political debacles, Pakistan remained a relatively secular country until General Zia ul-Haq seized power in 1977. Zia, in order to strengthen his illegitimate regime, joined hands with the religious right and created his own brand of an Islamized state. It was an arduous and unnatural transition for the people of Pakistan, because their religious education had come from a completely different tradition: a tradition of mystics and poets.

Sufism permeates the collective conscience and religious experience of Pakistani society. Classical poetry written in almost all Pakistani languages finds its roots in Sufism. A mystical tradition of Islam that is widely accepted as the epitome of spirituality, Sufism treats God as a transcendent reality and treats the annihilation of self as an end for claiming divine love. However, a Sufi also considers it his utmost duty to act as an agent of social change. Sufi poetry does not merely celebrate the pleasure of union, but also addresses existentialist concerns like the human condition, suffering, and man's place in the universe. A true Sufi, therefore, must not only seek personal salvation but rebel against social injustice, status-quo and religious bigotry.

Zia's era marked the birth of militant Islam in the region. Religious intolerance and violence started to tarnish the essence of Pakistan's social fabric. Pakistan's ethnic minorities, intellectuals and poets sensed the imminent dangers posed to the society and formed a formidable opposition against Zia's hegemonic, 'Islamization' policies.

Ustad Daman, a stalwart of Punjabi poetry, was widely recognized as the people's poet. He bitterly opposed all forms of hegemony and dictatorship. Not surprisingly, his fiery poetry was considered 'dangerous' and thus Ustad Daman was jailed.

Following are the verses from one of his most popular poems:

*My county has two Allahs,
La ila and Martial Law!
One lives high above the skies,
The other on terra firma lies;
One is simple called Allah,
The other is named General Zia,
Three cheers for General Zia!
Bravo! Bravo! General Zia!*

Gul Khan Naseer, also recognized as a popular poet of Pakistan, spent almost fifteen years of his life in prison, paying for his rebellious views. The following verses represent his concerns and disposition quite well:

*I keep a close eye on predators
I uproot injustice and cruelty
I am my motherland
Free from bondage
I am a rebel, I am a rebel
Workers must remain united
The wealth of life I am willing to sacrifice
I am rebel, I am a rebel.*


Pushpa Wallabh, in the following verses, represents the true teachings of Sufism, which have a greater relevance to Pakistani society than the mainstream puritans' Islam:

*Beneath all colors, hearts are the same,
In everyone, the same emotion,
The same kind of thoughts.
Wound them, and the color of their blood is the same,
In grief, the color of their tears is the same.
In every heart,
the same Allah,
the same Ram,
the same Issa.*

For many observers, Pakistani society stands at the verge of disintegration. The chasm between different social classes is rapidly increasing. The modern capitalist culture doesn't allow a fair distribution of power, wealth and meaningful education. There is a widespread impression that the increase in poverty at a national level is leading to higher crime rate, suicides, and acts of terrorism. That is a dangerous, half-truth: the real problem lies at the heart of social justice (or lack thereof).

Pakistani poets have been raising these concerns for a considerably long time. Sharif Kunjahi puts it beautifully, in the following verses:





*If I say that you and I are born of the same Adam,
why then should one suffer in labor and the rest in ease?
If I say that no one should be homeless in the world
or that no one forced to drudge and grind in the old age,
if I say that we should all share whatever coarse food and salt we have,
that we should be as arms to each other to ease our burdens,
if I say that we should put away all matters of conflict and quarrel,
resolve everything through discussion and not render ourselves mad and breathless.
then I am the wicked one, the liar, my words strange –
virtue retails at your store, truth likes by your side.*

Pakistani poetry indeed has the quality of a lion; it has roared against the wrath of the jungle and found a way to vanguard the aspirations of its people. It will continue to lift the spirits of the downtrodden masses of Pakistan and entice them to rise against the forces that keep them shackled in misery. More importantly, Pakistani poetry will keep reflecting the true spirit and beauty of the country it emerges from, which is imbued in its great diversity. Pakistan's Urdu poetry has always been admired for its rich emotional content and vivid imaginative quality. Now that the regional poetry of Pakistan has (partly) been granted its due exposure in this anthology, this country of many conflicts may well be recognized as the potential 'El Dorado' for its rich poetic experience.

YOUBLOG



A vertical illustration on the left side of the page shows a woman with her hair in several large, dark brown braids. She is wearing a light-colored top and is looking towards the right with a thoughtful expression, her hand resting near her chin.

COMING HOME

Sonya Rehman

I'm not ashamed to admit how ignorant I was before I departed to the US for grad school. Now don't get me wrong, my experience abroad wasn't a 'coming of age' journey. I'd already dealt with my fair share of 'life experience' prior to my departure. Abroad, on my own, as a student, didn't give my psyche a complete makeover. But, it did perhaps numb the edges of a utopist, carefree, mindset and did, perhaps, dull the feral optimism that comes full force like a tidal wave into one's teenage years (and which carries itself well into one's twenties!).

Abroad, I wrote articles for a local publication (The Friday Times) back home about my experiences, and on slow Sundays, I documented little observations about the city, and quotes by fair-weather friends at college in a thick, lilac diary that I bought at Barnes & Noble on a whim, on a sunny day. It was twenty dollars well-spent, even though, it only carries fifteen pages worth of entries and now sits in my drawer atop a shoe box of old cards and letters.

Now, when I re-read those published articles, and those scribbly diary entries, I am almost hurt, betrayed even, that my optimistic outlook on life has left my heart. I am not who I was, and yet, I haven't changed. Does that make sense? Is this what 'growing up' is all about? Adulthood – is this it? To think 'responsibly', to act 'rationally', and to let one's mind override one's heart? I still find myself at conflict, and oscillate frequently between a solid, indifferent approach to life, and then towards an emotional, empathetic approach. I don't find balance between the two. But is 'balance' even necessary? Who cares for rudimentary normalcy anyway?

But inner transitions come and go when you least expect them to – in fact, they neither have a beginning nor an end. Like endless, silver kite string unraveling itself, over many years, you'd be lucky to catch the reel just in time, just to figure out what changes are beginning to take place within you.

Five months and counting. That's how long it's been since I walked through the dusty glass doors of the Allama Iqbal International Airport in Lahore, and straight into my mother's arms. Everyone told me once I arrived; I'd feel like I never left Pakistan.

But I felt like I had left. For many, many years.

That's the thing: never believe a word 'everyone' ever tells you. Because 'everyone' isn't you and you're not 'everyone'. Our perceptions, like our finger prints, are unique; no one views the world in the same, uniform way.

Therefore, on the drive from the airport to my home, I knew – inherently – that life would not quite be the same. That I would not quite be able to play the same

role that I've always played in my life, in a similar fashion, all those years, preceding my temporary departure from 'home'.

Reacclimatizing to life in Lahore has been a long process. Longer than I had imagined. Because abroad, Lahore felt like a distant, syrupy dream, far off... unreachable, unattainable. I longed for it, many times.

But even when I had four months left before I returned to my birth city, it never really hit me. That one day, I really would leave this mad, wonderful city – New York. It only hit me when I actually, physically landed in Lahore. That I was home. And yet, the home that I had just left, was my temporary fix, for a few months, thousands of miles away, in another time zone.

Life is so transient. I feel it now. Love and death. Entrances and exits. No permanence – ever. But that's the beautiful contradiction of it.

Life – a contradiction. Makes sense.

Journeys whether long or short, always end on a note of assessments. It's when you begin to start re-evaluating your relationships with people; friends, old flames, peers, acquaintances. You realize where you went wrong and with who, you come to terms with some pain, some loss, and then you also begin to realize where and how you can foster love and affection in your life again and with who. But most importantly? You begin to better understand what you'd like to derive out of relationships. If you've learnt well, and learnt wisely, you allow yourself to break free from old patterns. You rid yourself of negative, complicated relationships. And for a while, you become a bit of a social hermit. Journeys do that to you. Especially long journeys - out of your comfort zone.

And when you arrive, you realize that circumstance has quietly taken you apart – bit by bit, and then handed bits of you, back to you; to put back together...sensibly, slowly, and carefully this time around.

You remain your own guide, your own lighthouse in this transition process, even if at first, this newfound inner autonomy can be disconcerting. But you let it happen...you let the tidal wave in, and you swim, in the thick of it.

On the outside, looking in, all I know is this: that I remain a sinew in this paradoxical, pulsating city, Lahore. And that it was always my home and always will be – irrespective of its dark, and at times, cruel facets.

But, I do admit, I can only now appreciate my city's beauty after I left her briefly. I see her for what she is now.

And, perhaps, I see myself too, for the very first time; for what I always was, and for the person I've become.



ON THE DOCK

Jalal Habib Curmally

In which the author revisits his first love (toilet humor), reviews Greek philosophy, has fun with a thesaurus and answers the pressing questions of our times just because he can.

The days of being a bathroom philosopher are not behind me I'm afraid.

We interrupt this piece to get the obvious out of the way. Ahem...

Wow! You must have been a shitty philosopher!

What a crappy philosopher you were!

Way to use your head, Jay!

And etcetera etcetera.

I had to do that.

Right.

Moving swiftly on. I have attempted therefore to apply the ancient technique known to the ancient Greeks (*It's so old that even the Greeks looked at that technique and said, E FUCKIMUS MEUS DAYUM-US! THATSHITUS IS ANCIENTUS*), called the Socratic Method. Simply put, or for those without the benefit of Wikipedia, the technique or method is an investigative technique whereby the truth is arrived at by asking a succession of guided questions. It goes something like this:

"Mommy, Mommy. Is he really my daddy?"

"Errr...Ummm...Why do you ask?"

See? This way the teacher does not actively 'teach' the student anything. By asking the student a question in reply to a question, the teacher instead encourages the intellectual growth of his charge. Right up to the point where the student gets fed up and whacks the teacher in the GROINUS TESTICULOUS.

Ridiculous.

But well. Never being content, and thinking that the ancient Greeks were full of shit and that I am not (*I'm on the John! Duh! Why do you think YOU sit on the John? To fill UP with shit???*) I have applied this question to the most pressing philosophical, social, cultural and political issues of our times and hopefully, arrived at some enlightening answers.

Mind Boggler Number 1: How long will it take the readers to get the image of shit flying UP their asses from the John to get out of their heads?

Sage Response: Why would I want it to?

Eternal Enigma Number 2: Why do Pakistani women always look like they sucked a lemon before they left the house?

Astute Observation: Have you seen the expression on the face of who they wake up to every morning?

Erudite Dictum: Have you seen their daughters?

Scholarly Truism: When was their last orgasm?

Ancient Puzzle Number 3: What does it mean to be a Pakistani and/or a Muslim in a world that grows increasingly hostile and xenophobic towards Muslims?

Incisive Retort: What is a fish?

Accurate Insight: So how long does it take to process a green card?

Tentative Query: How do you spell Ass-I-LUMS?

Learned Truism: Have you accepted Jesus as your Lord and Savior?


Convoluting Riddle Number 4: What is the secret behind the phenomenal pop culture success of Twilight?

Sarcastic Sagacity: What do I look like? Fucking Einstein?

Acerbic Prudence: How much does that franchise suck anyway? (Get it? Suck?)

Learned Dictum: What is the speed of hormones running through teenage girls at the speed of 'eek'?





Modern Mystery Number 5: Why are men such pigs?

Wise Inquiry: If a bitch is slapped and there's no one there to hear it, does it make a sound?

Scholarly Axiom: Where's my dinner?

Puzzling Paradox Number 6: What is the essential nature of 'Denial'?

Precise Post Mortem: How old is Meera?

Cultured Criticism: Is Meera married?

Difficult Dilemma Number 6: How do we get rid of Asif Zardari?

Concise Conundrum: How long will it take for his teeth to eat him?

Pristine Puzzler Number 7: What is the essential nature of 'Courage' and 'Moral Rectitude'?

Deductive Adage: Did you just say rectum?

Cerebral Corollary: Can you see Uranus?

Quintessential Question: What is a computer screen?

Prototypical Probe: What is the color of black when your eyes are closed?

Questing Query Number 8: What is the cure for all that ails Pakistan?

Precise Pondering: Can you say Vee...Zaah?

Backbreaking Brainteaser Number 9: How do we end terrorism?

Incisive Inquiry: How long is the traffic jam at security check points?

Penetrating Paradox: What is the sound of silence?

Measured Musing: How does one live in fear?

Wanton Wondering: If a body lies burning on the road on Geo TV, does it make a smell?

Modern Mystery Number 10: What's really going on??

EDITORS' PICK
Poetry



A vertical illustration on the left side of the page shows a woman with her hair in several large, dark braids. She is wearing a light-colored top and is looking towards the right. The illustration is partially cut off by the left edge of the page.

THE STORY OF SIX COLORS

Rabab Khan

My opaline life reflects
All the colourful moments
On a dark canvas.

Remnants of cherry embraces
Encrusted on my carpet;
Flaming tangerine sighs floating through
The bedroom windows every night;
Fumbling emerald lips,
Dripping Eu-de-Nil melodies,
Embedded in the couch;
Cerise flushes linger
Where your soothing caresses flowed;
Your amaranthine glances
Still cling to my pillow,
Casting shades of indigo
On my tearless eyes.

You vanished,
From my story
Of six;
Vestiges of your colours
Remain.

SODOM


Osman Khalid Butt

And he said: It is the Shepherd who is strong. I am weak. *I am weak*. In fact, I have a thorn in my flesh (*dramatic pause*) a Satanic defect. And he asked the Lord for compassion, without seeking repentance or absolution from his depravity and decadence. But God showed him no mercy; oh no, His vengeance was just, and absolute. Praise the Lord!

– An excerpt from a sermon at Daughters of St. Paul Church.*

A brier in my throat; a stigma insistent
upon my navel, I
remember our last – a lover's handclasp, though he
did not know then, kneedeep in the salt of his own suffering.
We embraced once as we met, and my tongue grazed
the small of his neck; one tenth of a second it took to unravel me
into the welcoming folds of the exiled, to a religion taught not
at Sunday Mass.
As I cradled him through his divorce under a waning sun and influence of
Single malt whiskey: *a Christian's drink*
I noticed his complex skin hidden beneath a patchwork of black; bronze
pleated now with melancholy –
His cheeks like a bed of balsam, banks of sweet-scented herbs;
His lips, lilies
Dripping with liquid myrrh, or so reads the libretto
In the Song of Songs – and though the night ended in bathos,
In my carnal awakening
I've had thoughts of him rampant since; *chimeral coitus*
he'd take me then
Into the night where the moral and meritorious fade into obscurity.
Under sheets of black we'd embrace as lovers do
Nontraditional paramours savoring every inch of the others' skin
tongue-tied savages toasting a more radical god
between every push and pull. He would lead us
into temptation and deliver me from a barren wife who holds my secret
at the edge of her tongue
who sleeps now under linen resentment.
Shame swallows me; ten painkillers taken
And deliria renders me pink and blue; a multicolored sinner with his personal
Brimstone and fire:
I hold a scissor in my right hand; thumb and index finger the only constant
In an otherwise quivering, unsettled body that craves strange flesh;
I am
Naked
from the waist down.
The land mourns and pines away,





God grant me courage
Lebanon is shamed and withers; Sharon is like a desert plain,
For what I'm about to do next.
And Bashan and Carmel lose their foliage. [Isaiah 33:9]

** The excerpt is fictional*

SECRET RECIPE

Noorulain Noor

It was deceptively simple
like scrambled eggs for breakfast
on a lazy weekend morning:
an understated friendship.
We cooked it different ways,
poured ourselves into the mix.


It was more than just two eggs,
yolks whisked as if by magic
or a competent hand
into a frothy pale yellow mixture
of uniform consistency,
and then cooked into salted chunks in
vegetable oil.

It was I who added the cream,
giving texture to the eggs,
introducing fluidity between
acquaintances -
some fluff and flavor, a little substance -
creating the freedom to share memories
best left forgotten.

The butter to replace
vegetable oil
was your contribution,
and it slipped through our fingers
like time,
slowly melting on the nonstick surface,
sizzling,
turning golden,
the smell of dreams cooking -
savory.

Cumin and jalapenos for a kick,
spicy -
I wonder why we craved that sensation
that both satisfies and wreaks havoc
on our tongues.
For variety, perhaps
like giving you a pen name -
an insult of endearment;
or, to surprise,





even awe, ourselves
with that explosion of taste,
a face-lift for the usual
salt-and-pepper brand of relationships.

I would have still called it scrambled eggs,
but it was the final flourish,
the gourmet inspired garnish,
a yours-and-mine endeavor,
that gave us our very own breakfast menu.
Chopped mint and three kinds of olives
with just a hint of lemon zest -
a contrasting array of quarrels with
a medley of reasons,
an overstated apology
like the aromatic herb,
and the citric shock of silence.

ALONE IN THIS ROOM, AGAIN

Areej Siddiqui

You've left your glasses on the bed
stand, next to a picture of your wife -
you told me
she died romantically, her head in your lap
on a trip to the alps or some other cold
place.

I've been waiting naked in this room
for a while now - you said
it would take some time for
the pill to work.
Your bed
smells of cigars and a female
scent that I did not bring to the sheets

This isn't the first time -
I know my way around this house,
I know your wife
still breathes her clothes hang
in the wardrobe,
her shoes are never in
the same place,
you leave jewellery on the table,
unnoticed, in your rush to clean
up before bringing me home -

the chain slinked on the picture-frame today
is one I gave her
after we first made love
a year ago, in your absence.



REQUIEM FOR A SPRING NIGHT

Moazam Rauf

Under the mild heat of early spring air,
I remember you as you were
when we walked across golden fields, leading to
tombs adorned with rampant worship.
Threads tied to these holy shrines
are like firmaments still, and burn in the delirious light
of many a passionate lamps,
ushering caravans of barren prayers,
some mine, some belonging to the faceless throng;
while I dance in a ruined tavern
under the reign of the harvest moon
with a desiccated heart, half-moon eyes,
Hafez's verses, and a broken cup of wine.

EDITORS' PICK
Prose



A CERTAIN LIQUIDITY

Asmara Malik

There is a tiny mirrored cabinet just above the large white bath. Inside it are many, many tiny bottles with silver stoppers. They are filled with arrogantly aromatic oils - jojoba, jasmine, lavender, rosemary - exotic hair-oils that he has spent a fortune collecting. But money itself does not bother him. As long as the final masterpiece meets his exacting standards, he has no objection to spending millions.

He lets a few strands of her hair slip through his skeletal fingers. Jasmine, he judges by its fine, silken texture. He pours a little of the precious oil into one cupped palm and raises it to his face. He inhales. Deeply. A smile, a hint of a smile on his face. He massages the oil into her hair, beginning at the temples, languid strokes moving up to her forehead, unhurriedly down to the nape of her neck.

Her head moves with a certain liquidity along the movement of his fingers. Her slender arms overhang the edges of the bath, her knees bent to keep her long legs inside. Arterialbright dew-drops hang from her fingers, ruby gems in this twilight of dim torches. A drop grows heavy. Falls. He catches it on his palm, quicker than quick, relishing the taste - metallic and sweet - finer than any wine. The bathroom floor is no place to waste such delightfulness.

He oils the whole length of her hair, bringing out its fierce burgundy luster.

Finished, he settles against one cold tiled wall and waits for the oil to settle. Later, he will wash her hair with scented water. Then with his sharpest blades he will skin the scalp - carefully, carefully so as not to waste, not to damage a single precious hair. Then he will arrange the hairs into another expensive hair-piece. So singularly expensive that only the kept women of his city, with their ivory-handle fans and simpering pastel gowns, will be able to afford one, courtesy of their influential men; straight-backed, fine upstanding gentlemen in blistering Hessian boots and intricate neck-clothes.

By noon tomorrow, when it becomes known in whispers amongst certain quarters of the city that his shop has acquired a miraculous new wig for sale, it will already be gone, being gloated over by some wealthy man's light o' love.

But.

For now, there is nothing but the innocent scent of jasmine playing hide-and-seek upon his senses and this taste of coppery blood on his lips. In the silence of his own twilight, he begins to sing until it is dawn and he, God's loneliest child, can sleep.

CHOCOLATE CAKE

Talia Shahbaz

In a real story...

The train station is dusty. Flakes of dust are dancing in the sunlight, and everything - the people, the stopped train - has a preternatural halo of dust and light, like whirlwinds dancing around each object.

It seems to be a day like any other, yet somehow the light is brighter; if his hopes are dashed again, he will describe it as a hateful glare. But if, only if... if what?

Something else... any other possibility exists, he will say the light that day was a holy glow around everything...

So much hanging in the balance as he steps off the train, feeling dirty, old, his heart in his throat. His eyes search the few people at the station - and then...

A woman, different from the rest, walks across his view. He forgets the small details for a second or two, so convinced is he that this must be her. He wants it to be her. But she keeps walking away.

Cursing himself for being this foolish, foolish enough to expect anything, he takes a few steps forward. That's when he sees Her, standing still, waiting for him just a few paces away. A heavy, lumpy figure of a woman in a scruffy black coat, a papery face lined with wrinkles. There's a rose in her lapel, like they decided. His heart sinks.


Of course, this is what would have happened anyway, he consoles himself. The world never does make sense. He is someone who has just returned from a war, not from a different world - why does he expect anything else? The man feels weary of life, the light is the hateful glare of a circus show, and the figure in front of him is clownish. Good God, you've done it again, haven't you? He keeps his bearing strong and proper, shoulders erect, though they threaten to slump - though now, when the war is over, he is crumbling inside. They may have won the war, but he has been tricked by the real enemy: Hope. Maybe that is what they all were, instruments of Fate - the Nation - God; like ants scurrying across large distances, all for the collective purpose. What he, one man alone, may have wished - why should it matter? He knows he'll chuckle over this later, but right now he is absurdly close to tears.

He wanted to put a beautiful face to the beautiful words. That is all.

Chapter 1

Why is there an inherent tragedy in a doll's face? The wide plastic eyes, the lashes, the perfect nose and mouth - is it the sadness of being unable to control one's



A vertical illustration on the left side of the page shows a woman with her hair styled in several large, dark brown braids. She is wearing a light-colored top and is looking towards the right with a thoughtful expression, her hand resting near her chin.

life? Why also, is this same inherent look of tragedy so irresistibly attractive in a woman?

The modern ideal of Beauty: models walking down the runway, like merchandise, like dolls, each a different variation of the other. Some of them more like robots than dolls.

I feel stumped. It seems as if pleasing others is a basic survival tactic but one I was born without. In my mother's womb, the fairy godmothers must have waved quite a few wands - I'm intelligent, I have an appealing symmetry to my face, I have a strong and brave spirit - but then that last fairy, and I think she must really have meant ill, arrived in the delivery room and said with an evil laugh, "I give her the gift of Honesty: no matter how much it may please anyone, this girl will not be able to lie."

The other fairies must have been bored and puzzled but turns out the evil one really knew what she was doing; here I am, all grown up and utterly bereft of the knack of wanting to please others. It sheds a negative light on all my other good qualities.

For example, fashion. Or fitting in. I suck at both. I don't even want to be good at them. That's how much I suck. It's a complete lack of motivation.

Sometimes I feel that the world we live in is a masque parade, and here we all have to wear beautiful dresses and decorated masks. Anything to cover, beguile, deceive. And then I walk in, in my undies. I might look better than all the rest, sure - (thank you, one of the good fairy godmothers) but it causes a problem blending in. Or getting what you want. I'm never quite seen as Us, always an alien - in a good way or a bad way.

Sometimes I feel as if I was born without a face. Any face at all. And no one knows me, because I don't remind them of anything they know - the real me is unrecognizable, utterly. I wish someday someone comes along who does see me - but more than that, someone who recognizes who I am. Not as a projection of something they like or dislike, not as a comparison to some doll's face, or model's, or a robot's - but me.

Maybe that was what Hollace Emanuel was thinking.

Chapter 2

She saw him descend from the train, and he was everything she had hoped for. He looked like just the man who would write those letters...

She knew she was crazy. She knew she shouldn't, but she just had to see. So she forced herself to turn and walk away from him, barely glancing at his face. And it was as if every nerve in her body was pulling her towards where he stood.

She did not turn around to see what happened next. She knew, if this world made any sense, any sense at all - then she would see him again, in the restaurant where she had told the old lady to send him. But only if he approached her and introduced himself.

She quickened her steps without realizing, because she couldn't bear to slow down. If she slowed down, she might change direction - the temptation was too strong.

She sat at the table in a haze, feeling as if she had walked away from everything she wanted. That was the kind of thing she did, a lot. Crazy Hollace, her friends called her. She never wants what other people want.

But she did! And how sorely. She did.

She just—and this was the part that was hard to explain, even to herself - she just wanted it differently. How could she explain herself?

How different would it be, if she had simply walked up to him, and introduced herself: "Yes, it's me, Hollace Emanuel, the girl who's been writing to you all along. Nice to meet you, finally."

There were two things that were wrong about that scenario. Firstly, it was too simple; it went against her nature. Secondly, it reduced her to being just another girl, a face and a name - Hollace, Holly, Molly, Jane - and it would take precedence over all the things that had been shared between them, suddenly. Her face would matter more than the words she had written, the words that had arisen somewhere inside her being. She needed to know that it was the words, not the face - or whatever expectation of it he held in his mind - that drew him to her. She needed it to be just the words.

Crazy Hollace, isn't that right. I'll sit here for fifteen more minutes to be sure... but already her heart was sinking.

What man in his right mind would walk up to that old lady?

She let out an involuntary giggle at the thought. But inside her heart was breaking.


Because it was too good to be true. He would never come.

Chapter 3

I find it hard to recognize myself in dreams.

Later, after I wake up and stand at the mirror, I am forced to accept the figure in the dream as a reflection of myself. But when I'm dreaming, I see myself as another





er girl somewhere, doing this or that. Sometimes I observe the sweet smile on her face, or the fear in her eyes, or something else, but it's me looking at her - from the outside.

I've always been fascinated by heights. I'll sit on the roof, looking out at all the tops of the houses before me, and behind me and around, and then I'll think: in each house there are different rooms where different human beings go to sleep every night, just like me. In our sleep, in our dreams, we are no longer a contented housewife, nor a resentful one, nor a maid who cleans the bathrooms every day, nor a child who goes to school in the morning, nor a husband or a grandmother or a...

When we sleep, when we dream - somehow we forget our waking roles. The waking roles get blurred, lose importance - and we're all equal. And no matter how different that male chauvinistic husband across the street might be from me, or the beggar on the sidewalk, in our sleep, he is the same - same as me. A human, asleep, entering the land of dreams.

We breathe, we sleep, we dream, we shit.

And this is what convinces me that equality is a truth. All the treasures that lie behind the veil of consciousness - somewhere in that subterranean terrain of dreams - God made them available to all. He did not exclude even one person. No thief, murderer, rapist, Britney Spears, disabled person, beggar, or the Queen of England - no one is bereft of it. We all escape to a place where we are free of earthly cares.

We all sleep. We all die.

Chapter 4

There are many possibilities for what could have happened, and they'd all make entertaining stories. The Major, descending the train and noting the ugly old woman, could have run in the other direction. He could have assumed that the rose was a coincidence, refusing to believe that THIS was Hollace Emanuel, waiting for the real Hollace to show up.

Maybe he would've wanted to forget his foolishness.

But one possibility. The one in which it struck him - it's not the form that matters, but the substance; not the vessel, but the quality of what it contains. In this possibility, he looked at the woman, and realized her face didn't matter - it was the consciousness behind the face. He gave one passing thought to the beautiful woman who had walked past him a few minutes before, and realized her beauty, too, could fade. Is the earth really so much worse than the rose? The rose too withers, and disintegrates, blending into the earth one day.

He walked up to the the ugly old woman in the black coat, and introduced himself.

She gave him directions to where Hollace sat, waiting for him.

In the café, Hollace felt a twinge of hope. The young man framed the doorway, and in that moment the sun's harsh glare turned into a sacred glow. Everything changed.

Chapter 5

I don't know who I am. Today, I was sitting in the middle of a room full of wives and fiancés, all one half of an important coupling, and I felt... such an imposter. I felt empty.

I don't usually feel this way. But today, noticing the clichéd yet genuine, radiant smile on my pregnant friend's face, I felt hollow. Watching another woman fuss with her toddler, I felt hollower still - she might be fat, her figure might be ruined, her face may hold no attraction to the objective eye; but it was the face of someone who belonged to someone else. Someone who knew where she belonged, and with whom; someone who, in other words, knows who she is.

Or so it felt to me, at that moment. For a while, I too wanted to belong. To be valued rather than window shopped - you know what I mean?

I'm the kind of girl men are always window-shopping. The fantasy fuck; the girl you hit on because good taste implies one should, etiquette even. According to this guy I know, I'm everybody's taste. Like the yummy looking chocolate cake that everyone likes. One may dabble in the chocolate cake but of course, one's real favourite food is something else; at the end of the day, one buys what is necessary to sustain oneself, and the chocolate cake is simply a good dessert. An after thought. A side meal. Something one has on weekends. Not *real food*.

That's how I am. Everybody's side meal. Everyone's dessert - that is, when they're not watching their weight or something.

Amidst all the wives and a few children, I was struck with some realizations. Yes, I may get attention from more men in a day than any woman here...


Yet...

None of them really wanted me for keeps, to put it bluntly. If the chocolate cake even entertains the thought of being the main meal, you'd probably just laugh at it, right?

Maybe this is why I always eat my dessert first. An old habit. In fact, I mostly just eat dessert, and forego the main course. But for most people, gorging themselves only on chocolate would just make them feel sick. And fat (not everyone has amazing metabolism).

We sat in a V formation. I was the single point at the farthest end; on both sides





were women that formed half a part of a couple, and nearest to me sat a girl who was part of a couple, but not married, not truly blessed but not damned either. We attempted conversation, during which some vague urge made me enquire if she knew of a certain person.

She did. Both had attended the same university.

And then she said something like, "Oh, so, when's he getting married?"

It might have been, "So, is he married?" but I'm not sure because my ears were ringing a little and I was feeling a little sick.

This man had used a word to describe me. It was 'random'. Usually, I appreciate honesty. That night, I actually cried. You see, something had happened; something, of some sort, had happened. Unexpectedly. Between us.

And. This. Is. What. He. Had. To. Say. About. It.

That it was random.

For once, I had actually wanted not to be chocolate cake. And let me tell you, being chocolate cake is fun. But for once I didn't want it anymore... I just couldn't go back to being that flippant. Truth is, no one wants to be chocolate cake all the time. I wanted to be meat and veggies... with chocolate sauce on top.

A time comes when you want all the things everybody else wants. Just like Crazy Hollace. But there are people like the man mentioned above, who never forget to remind you that you are just some silly dessert. When you try to avoid them, they come back again and again, in different forms, with the same words, "you are random... temporary...". That's it.

This may be a pointless rant to some. But to all the chocolate cakes out there I want to say, *I feel your emptiness*. All those extra yummy calories that people salivate for, that haunt men's consciousness, yet they're scared of taking more than three bites for fear of weight gain or something. Chocolate cake, the tempting yet fearsome burden of humanity.

I feel your hollowness. At the moment that I smoked my cigarette, thinking this, some guys were hungering for chocolate, but forcing down veggies.

Poor jerks. Hypocrites. They are pathetic, the ones that can't see beyond surfaces; to whom the taste of something sweet isn't sacred.

Chapter 6

Why is it that so many people will only consider those things nutritious that taste bad?

Why is it that people are afraid of what's delicious... afraid of pleasure, of being alive?

Why is it so hard to trust the power pleasure has over one?

The man who told me the story of Hollace Emmanuel was old and alone, but not lonely. He was a man who had lived his life honoring the sacredness of all that's sweet.

He felt his own story was finished, and it almost convinced me. Then he told me this story. It was his way of telling me that my story hadn't even begun yet.

So I prefer to rub out the minuscule details of my history, and focus instead on what I've imagined must be Hollace Emmanuel's version.

And... I feel a twinge of hope. In this moment the sun's harsh glare turns into a sacred glow, and everything changes.



TO GATHER ALONE

Faraz Mirza

He is not lost, which may be why he isn't smiling.

Everything that surrounds him he has passed by countless times. He knows this road- take the first right after the signal and he'll be a roundabout away from his favorite cousin; take a left, and he will be three hairdressers away from his reliable hairdresser.

And two blocks away from the hairdresser stands his house.

Familiarity can be such a bitch when one wants to be lost. He wishes he could travel endlessly on a straight, route-less path and wonder with abandon whether the sky stretching boundlessly above him was a shade nearer to blue or gray, and whether the sky was indeed limitless as it always seems.

Infinity is a delusion, he decides. The birth of a mild throbbing in his temples gives him direction for the moment: he needs Tylenol. He directs his car towards the dingy drug store on the left.

Shaking his head slightly - as if to empty his pulsating temples of her - he enters the store and asks for Tylenol. *God bless the man who made Tylenol. Or the team, really.*

Team...

"This does not feel like a team anymore," she declared, with visible heat on her forehead. Too many lines in red.

They were dining together after ages. His imaginary friends were busy tonight.

He sighed. Heat fell only to spread to her ears and cheeks. Her eyes never did give in easily to scarlet.

"You look beautiful," he observed audibly, touching her cheek.

"Oh my GOD, you cannot do this!" she exclaimed, her hands expressing exasperation more effectively than her face.

He withdrew his hand.

But she really did look beautiful. "Do what?" he asked, smiling, wishing the heat would travel below the belt.

Snort. Just the word, not the action. As always.

"This. You cannot touch my face when I'm about to pronounce us a failure!"

"Failure?" He agreed.

"Well..." she hesitated, the lowered volume confirming slight fear.

No love-making today, then. Drama time.

"So you think us a failure?" he demanded, no syllable loud.

She gazed at him intently, knowledge flickering visibly in her eyes. Drama wilted; it had grown old.

"Yes, I do," she smiled. It was not a sad smile and he hated it.

"You're smiling. And you used 'pronounce,'" he commented, grinning; long ago a very attractive girl somewhere had told him he had a very persuasive grin. Or was it seductive? Whatever it was (he was sure it was something, though), he was suddenly aware that it wouldn't work anymore.

"You know I-"

"Yes?" it was important to cut across her.

Her eyes blazed.

He blurred his focus, smiling at a painting almost abstract now. Every feature of the painting was embedded in his memory, anyway.

She searched his face for a minute longer. Then, "I'm tired. And I'm going to bed. It's late."

Very late. The already deserted dining table knew it. The unoccupied side of their awaiting cotton-sheeted bed knew it. The uninterrupted pour of Sigur Rós in her room knew it. The unspoken words, now forever destined to remain hovering disconnectedly above these two grayed poets knew it.


"I'm going to step out for a bit," he called after her withdrawing figure.

He was unbelievably certain that she wanted to call back with an "of course". And he was just as sure that she wouldn't.

Couldn't.

A foot out of the door, he wondered-- perhaps for moments with which he could console himself later-- if it could be repaired. But he knew. He knew that they could both run of out of the home, maybe even together, but the roof would collapse over





them, anyway.

He shut the door very slowly, but the hinges still announced his departure.

Fucking, stupid door.

Sitting on the steps outside the drugstore, he still feels tension in the shoulders. There is an uncontrollable urge to shrug. Instead, he cracks his neck and pops another Tylenol in his expectant system.

In the abyss of literature within him, he knows an ephemeral quiet.

THE LAST BUTTON YOU PRESS

Omer Wahaj

It's raining slightly as I come out of my house and start walking towards the diner. The street is empty except for a long queue at the teleportation booth at a corner of the intersection up ahead.

"Good morning, Zed," Elle waves at me cheerfully from the line, as she moves one step closer to a red rectangular box that looks like those telephone booths from the old 2020's movies. "Haven't seen you around for a while."

"Good morning," I reply and nod at her without slowing down.

"Walking again?" she says. "It sure sucks to be stuck in the rain. I wish I'd worn my mack."

"The diner is just a few blocks down," I reply. "The rain doesn't bother me much."

"All right," says Elle, stepping into the booth and searching her bag for her credit card. "See you there."

"Okay."

"You know," Elle peeks out the open door just before she presses the button. "These things don't kill you."

Yes, they do, I think to myself but nod at her, a grimace pressing my lips together. *Every time you use them.*

I reach the diner and see that Elle is already seated, drinking from her glass of orange juice. She sees me and motions for me to take the chair next to her.

"Can you believe this?" she slaps the newspaper down in front of me and points to a column. "They're raising the electricity prices again. This is going to affect everything, especially teleportation rates."


"Hmmm," I manage to sound, as I look at the menu and raise my hand to catch the waitress's attention.

Elle shifts in her seat and looks at me with an uneasy smile. I can sense her restlessness through the menu as I order some poached eggs and salmon. I know what's coming. She asks me the question as soon as the waitress leaves.

"Why don't you use teleportation booths like everyone else?"

"I just don't like them," I reply as I place the napkin on my lap.



A vertical illustration on the left side of the page shows a woman with her hair styled in several large, dark brown braids. She is wearing a light-colored top and is looking towards the right with a thoughtful expression, her hand resting near her chin.

“Oh come on. Who doesn’t like them? You can go anywhere you like - any place, any city, any country in the world. At least anywhere they have one of those booths set up, and I think they’re everywhere now - well, everywhere that matters anyway. You know I visited my sister in Madagascar the other day for lunch and was back home for dinner. It might be a little expensive, but it sure beats the hell out of spending 8 hours cramped in an airplane seat.”

I look straight into Elle’s eyes and I know she is toying with me. I gave up long ago trying to convince people of what I believed about these teleportation devices and why I didn’t use them. Giving them the straight answer never works. For one, most of them never believe me. Or if they do believe me, they continue to deny it, because the truth is just too hard for them to accept. It would be for anyone. And those who do believe me and accept it have a bad habit of going mad. You would too if you found out that you have been killing yourself every time you stepped into one of those damned machines.

“Well?” she prods.

“Let’s drop it,” I tell her. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“But I do want to talk about it,” she smiles at me. “I want to know why you avoid the booths and why you insist on walking everywhere. Everyone thinks you are mad, you know. I might think so too if you don’t tell me.”

“All right. But you won’t like it.”

“Lay it on me.”

“Ok. Do you know how these teleportation devices work?”

“Yes. You get in one of the booths, swipe your card, enter the destination number, press the send button, and it teleports you there.”

“That is what you *do* inside the booths. But do you know exactly how your body is teleported?”

“Well, no. Not exactly.”

“Let me tell you. When you press the send button, the device penetrates your body with various rays that scan every single one of your molecules. The machine then sends the scanned data to the destination booth, where a perfect copy of your body is synthesized. Your body at the entry booth is instantly vaporized. You cease to exist. The person that emerges at the other end has exactly the same body, mind, and memories as you did at the time you were disintegrated. Your copy walks out of the machine thinking it’s still you. But it’s not you. You die as soon as you are scanned.”

“What?” Elle says, her smile fading. “That’s not what happens.”

“Yes. That’s exactly what happens. Have you ever sent a fax? It’s the same principle. Only in this case, the original is destroyed in the process because the machine can’t scan the molecules inside your body without completely tearing it apart – literally – piece by piece, molecule by molecule.”

“Wait a minute. So what you’re telling me is that when I went into the booth this morning to come here, I was killed, my body disintegrated, and a completely new body was created? And this, me, sitting in front of you is not me from the morning but a copy the machine created inside the diner?”

“Yes, exactly.”

“No. That can’t be true. I am telling you, I am the same person that you saw entering the booth in the morning. I remember exactly what happened. I remember everything before that, my childhood, my life. This is the same me, the same Elle.”

“This is what happens. Your mind is also transferred into the new body. The data that the teleportation device sends includes all your memories, right up until the point when you are scanned. Your copy comes out with all your memories. It thinks it’s you. It believes it’s you. And it continues to believe it’s you until the next time it steps into another one of those machines. And then it dies too. Another copy is made that also believes that it’s still you. Just like you do, sitting right here in front of me.”

“No. I can’t accept that. What about all the feelings I remember? What about my soul?”

“Your soul vanished the day you first stepped into the machine and teleported yourself. It was left there without body or mind. It’s gone forever. We are all just carbon copies of our former selves, vacant bodies wandering around empty and soulless.”

There is a pensive silence as my words sink in.

“When did you realize this?” she slowly asks me.

“After I’d teleported myself a few times,” I tell her as the waitress arrives with my breakfast.

“No. You are wrong!” she shouts, standing up and walking away from the table. “I don’t believe you. It’s still me.”

I take a sip of my coffee and look up to see Elle heading towards the exit. She pauses in front of the teleportation booth, looks at it for a few seconds. Then she quickly walks past it, out of the diner, and up the deserted road towards her house.



LIGHTS THAT BLIND

Rabia Kazmi

I can't seem to see them anymore.

They are here, and I feel them around me, but somehow it's never been so easy to feel so alienated. Where once all I had was them, it now seems as if I am talking to walls, listening to silence and looking at space. It's the emotional void that confounds me. No matter how much I try to feel something, anything for them, it withers away and comes apart, because I know that they are there. There but not here, like memories past or ripped up photographs or fallen stars.

I have spent nights explaining this to myself. I have reasoned with my logic, convinced my mind that I am wrong, doubted my intuition. No matter how much I insult myself with this delirium, I know that this is because my thoughts are now skewered and upset, turned right side wrong and inside out. I can trace this confusion, this restlessness in my mind back to the moment when things changed, and I know that it has been there since you left. It takes everything, is everything and I can't deny it.

There is a part of me which would die to make these feelings go away; it is the part which questions what I know my heart knows, and whether any of this is even real. This absence leads to this newness, this reaching over to grab cold, solid air, this falling over that proves it. When I talk to them, it's like talking to a dying man; words become redundant and stories feel frozen because there is an issue which is so hard to address. But if they're still alive, still here, still with me, if they're ... real, how can I feel this way?

For you, there is despair. You left, and I felt the worst pain I thought possible, because you wouldn't come back... because even if you did I wouldn't have you. For you, I have saved up the smallest, most bitter chambers of my wasted heart, the corners where the lines between loneliness and schizophrenia merge and mix. Where love becomes obsession, and hollow spaces become shrines of resentment. That is my heart, and if I could I would rip it out and offer it to you, heartless as I am.

For them, there is abject overwhelming emptiness. They never left, they changed, and in some way that is a worse betrayal. I cannot say I miss you; but for them, there is an ache in the absence of laughter and the end of something that was never on eggshells. You and I were on the rocks half the time, they were forever. They were supposed to be forever - but you changed that. I am entitled to hate them a little for this, but you, I will never forgive.

Madness takes over me. I say to myself, it is probably this delusion that distorts my vision, fetters my mind and chains my thoughts. But you wouldn't know how that is, would you; you are not me, and you left. You know less about me now

than the stranger who passes me by on the street. You were not here to see who I became, so you wouldn't recognize that I became a divided person after you. It feels so strange to have to explain this to you; there was a time you knew everything about me, even the things you didn't experience - so close, we were almost the same person. So yes, forgive me, I never expected to be touched this way by a person I thought recognized me, understood me, loved me.

Somehow, you, I understand. I don't like it. I don't want it. But somehow I accept it. You're like a deep cut, a gash, on my body that I just can't ignore. But them? No. It's not so easy with them. I don't understand what I did to merit this, and how come I'm the only one at fault? Why am I the pariah here, and can I really believe that this is all because of you?

Yes. Because the only answer I have is you. You left, we don't talk, but you're the ghost in our conversations, the one which sits with us and stands with us and somehow makes everything I learned before you - forgetting and moving on and letting go - so much harder. I look into their eyes and they're not there anymore; it's like empty sockets, or eyelids with pupils painted on. I feel like I've disappeared and they talk to me out of habit, because they don't know how not to, and now that we're not us anymore, but me and you, they don't know how to deal with it. Since I need to explain myself to you now, I should tell you that this is the strangest I have ever felt. There is loneliness, a deep, dancing despair - and then there is claustrophobia, like the walls are closing in on me.

So here I am, walking through the night, on oil-drenched roads and shattered glass. Because I can't see myself in the eyes of the people who were once my mirrors. Because all that I am is becoming all that I was. Because you are the shadow that follows me now.

I'm not sure of anything anymore, except that where there was you there is now a dark, raging fire. You set me alight and you can't change it, at least not now. Is it, then, that the haze in my mind is not imagined? It's real, and it hurts and brings pain. It's real. It's all real, and so are ghosts of you, but I don't see how you can be everywhere, everywhere, everywhere. And if I could, I would fall. I would fall and beg, forget myself and only, only want you. Over and over again.

I know I won't ever do that, because I can't; there's an unspoken, universal reason. It's the same reason that I can't stop wanting you, no matter how much I want to. So I want you and I don't want you, I want you, I don't want you, I want you... and I wish I didn't. I'm glad I had you and I wish I had never met you ... so yeah, it wouldn't be wrong to say I'm fucked up.

I might. I might forget you. I might. I might want you all my life.

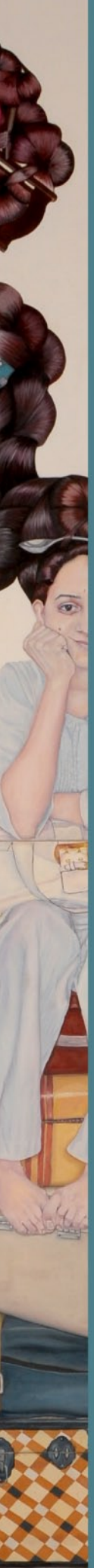
I'll stand here. In the middle of this road and I'll wait. Maybe my last memory will be of huge white lights, like eyes. Like their eyes. Maybe. Or else, they'll swerve past me. Or those lights will blink, stop and tell me to get the hell off the road.



If that happens, I'll move. I'll go on.

So... I wait. I stand here amid fog. And I wait.

I wait.



FORMALDEHYDE WOMB

Asmara Malik

He opens his eyes and the first thing he hears, as always, is the steady beepbeep beat of the heart-monitors lined up parallel to the beds in the ER - strange, blank-faced sentinels, with their oscillating, almost jump-rope-like pattern of green lines. Up-down-Uuuuuup-DOWN-up-down. He shakes his head, only marginally clearing the cobwebs of indistinct dreams still clinging with sticky cloud-fingers to his mind.

This is not really happening. None of this is really real. If I can hold on to that I can put up with this insane façade where supposed healers chew diagnoses and lick spit-shiny biscuit crumbs off each other's moustaches while a tumor grins balefully from within the shinyshiny brain-scan of some poor bastard's skull.

(O sir such a precise work up sir o sir you're so right sir sir the patient's blessed to have you for a physician sir doctor so-and-so is no match for you sir)

"Doctor?"

The duty nurse looks up inquiringly at his pale, drawn face, her eyes resting thoughtfully at the shadowbruises beneath his eyes.

"Can I get you a coffee, doctor?"

He nods, his head already sagging back on his neck, shoulders drawing up in the tired hunch of a soldier emerging from the trenches after a long day of bombardment.

The cup trembles a little in his hands, subtle coffee wave-fronts lapping against its porcelain edges. He thinks about the words his last girlfriend - who'd fancied herself a poet - had scrawled in red lipstick across the tiny refrigerator in his ratty apartment the day she'd left him: Pathology is not your bitch, you poor little wannabe god.


This late July afternoon, setting his half-empty coffee cup down, he's thinking, *hey God, how about a normal end to this day huh whaddaya say huh?*

He settles back in his chair at the nurse's station. Next to him, the nurse who gave him coffee is speaking in hushed tones into the phone.

"...when this woman cradling a big jar sat down right next to me. And I was biting the insides of my mouth and something inside my head just started to buckle and twist..."

Please, God, he moans inside his head.



A vertical illustration on the left side of the page shows a woman with dark hair styled in intricate braids. She is wearing a light-colored top and is looking towards the right with a thoughtful expression, her hand resting near her face.

“There was a baby,” she whispers, fingering the crucifix around her neck, awe and fear giving an unspeakable, almost pagan, flavor to her voice, as she re-lives her moment with the unnamed woman and her baby floating placidly in its formaldehyde womb.

“The woman looked beyond tears...”

Eons of endless seconds elapse.

Somewhere, in the chasm when his heart is utterly empty and dark, its mouths closed - not receiving, not giving - he turns to the nurse, her face contorting to become the featureless countenance of the woman with the baby-jar.

You should bury him, he says to her, only he knows they are not speaking in words. They communicate like mute fish, amphibians stranded tongueless in this shadowland of muffled heartbeats, rasping breaths and dying eyelights.

How can I? she replies. *He was never really born. Only the dead belong in the earth.*

He was born, he says. *He came into this world. He wore his prison of flesh for the time that was given to him.*

He pictures her free hand reaching blindly out for his. He pictures pulling her close, close, closer to him, the formaldehyde fairy-monster staring through cataract-white eyes up at his face. *Daddy*, it'd say, the word bubbling from its pale heart-shaped little mouth. He sees himself prying her fingers away from the jar, watching it fall, slow, slower, slowest to the ground, as he traces the delicate hollows of her eyes, his lips resting against her ear.

We'll bury him, his voice a husk of a whisper. *Beneath a tree, an old banyan with deep roots, some place warm beneath its cool shade, some bright patch of earth where the sun manages to shine all day long.*

“Doctor?”

He jerks awake. There's a crash as the cup supernovas into bone-white shards of nebulae and iridescent leftover coffee droplets.

“It's alright - I'll get it,” she says, compact and competent, already on her knees beside him, putting the broken pieces into the waste-bin near his feet.

He feels some apology-shaped word emerge from his mouth. She smiles like a cat, nodding, sympathetic, holding his hands and telling him to get some rest, she wouldn't tell a soul he'd left the station when he was supposed to be on-call.

Please, God. No more.

He shakes his head. Later, he says.

Moment by moment by moment, he feels the darkness receding from his mind.

Not much.

But enough.



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