VOLUME 9
TALL TALES

FEATURING AN INTERVIEW WITH
MUSHARRAF ALI FAROOQI
# IN THIS ISSUE

## ABOUT VOL 9

## VERSE

The Lady of the Lake and Other Homeless Monsters  
*Asmara Malik*

Empty Shells  
*Noorulain Noor*

Immigrant Eid  
*Shabana Mir*

The Gods on Holiday  
*Edward Ragg*

Wang Ao and the Lobster  
*Edward Ragg*

War  
*Luu Trong Tuan*

## FICTION

Lipstick Bruised Cigarettes  
*Asmara Malik*

A Dream  
*Haseeb Asif*

Transmigration  
*Micel Di Capua*

Pax Samsara  
*Asmara Malik*

The Curious Incident of the Djinn Under the Shah’toot Tree  
*Moazam Rauf*

An Improbable Tale  
*Haseeb Asif*

Neuropea Part I  
*Omer Wahaj*

Neuropea Part II  
*Omer Wahaj*
‘How do you translate the concept behind Big Fish into a theme?’ wondered aloud our Creative Lead, in an online conversation with the editors of Papercuts.

Seconds later, we had our theme for Volume Nine: Tall Tales.

Think big. Think epic, fantastic, bizarre. With Tall Tales, we let our writers’ imaginations traverse from Poe to Gaiman to Isthiaq Ahmed to Verne and Wells and back again... the theme is all about questioning the values of boundaries in writing.

In this issue, you’ll find everything, from accounts of mythical monsters to a critique of the Sci-Fi genre... to a poem on what the gods really get up to when they’re not working so hard.

Stop what you’re doing. Dim the lights. Enjoy the read, and remember: just because it’s a tall tale doesn’t necessarily mean it isn’t true.

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.

Both DWL and Papercuts are not-for-profit projects, proudly run by a team of part-time writers purely as a labour of love. The latest issue of this online publication (as well as the submission guidelines) can be viewed at http://www.desi-writerslounge.net/papercuts/.

---

‘No Lady of the Lake rules anyone’s fevered nightmares now but mine.’ - from Asmara Malik’s ‘Pax Nirvana’, featured in the Fiction section of Volume Nine

With this issue, we bid farewell to our beloved Marilyn and ‘let down our midnight hair’ (paraphrased from Asmara’s The Lady of the Lake and Other Homeless Monsters) celebrating the stories we were told as children at dusk... the (not-so?) tall tales of monsters hidden under our beds or in our closets, of pichal-parees and bogeyman and things that are much, much worse.

The cover image of a barbie sinking open-eyed into still waters was designed by Maliha Rao, a Karachi-based designer and photographer par excellence. Inspired from the piece quoted above, it creates a dark ambiance of what lurks in the vast deep. The only thing left for you to do.... is swim.
EDITOR
Afia Aslam

POETRY EDITORIAL TEAM
Noorulain Noor, Osman Khalid Butt, Amita Rao and Hera Naguib

PROSE EDITORIAL TEAM
Shehla Wynne and Waqas Naeem

ARTICLES EDITOR
Omer Wahaj

GUEST EDITOR
Jalal Habib Curmally

CREATIVE LEAD
Osman Khalid Butt
THE LADY OF THE LAKE AND OTHER HOMELESS MONSTERS

ASMRAL MALIK

Tumble down these steppes, grass-stains inking chlorophyll lovesongs as scabs on your knees when you hurtle into my lonely lake, surface

breaking into breathing bubbles, silvery-gills opening as new mouths along the side of your neck. Your lips are so blue, baby, the water

is cold, I know. There could’ve been some song in the water streaming my hair upon your face-- listen-- but

my Sirens are long dead. Breath easy, inhale my leiotrichous locks with your last breath, taste the unsalt sweetness, these smoke-strands of dried tears, dire and dark, the epoch of a twisted fairy-tale (let down your midnight hair). Eat of my blackened cotton-candy

mane in this blue-deep. I wrap my pale fingers around your chest, listen to the thumping wardrum of your human heart, slow, slow

slow...

Stop.

Cough. Up. Your. Pretty. Heart. To me. Let me. Rake back the sweet arch of your neck. Lean in to me, let me plant the seeds for these poison-trees in your eyes. Go back and grow a monster-forest for me, darling, sing to this ghost-less binary world, be my leaf-eyed prophet leading them all to our valley-lake of homeless

freaks.

EMPTY SHELLS

NOORULAIN NOOR

They sit in callous circles, immersed in embellished comparisons:
varieties of lawn, imported China silk, old-fashioned Victorian lace doilies.

Like in Jane Eyn? I, too, feign an interest in frivolity.

What’s that?
A collective response.

There is an animal cry in the living room – the husbands, playing video games, eating chicken legs and flank steak smothered in butter and barbecue sauce with lightly oiled sourdough on the side.

They will never run on a green field with their growing paunches and thinning hairlines.

My daughter kicks inside my belly, ashamed at her mother’s impotence - at the deep wretchedness that lurks beneath each polite remark.

I am planning to spend my zakaat fund on the new Rahat Fateh Ali Khan concert; it’s for a good cause, you know.

I hear fat sputtering and sizzling as the cook fries kebabs while they sprinkle mortality, starvation into the conversation,
delicately,
like coconut garnish on chocolate cupcakes
laid on the oak dining table
in concentric rings of perfection.
They touch upon death,
by malaria, typhoid, hep C
as if sliding a finger across
ivory keys of the majestic piano in its corner -
death by simply being too poor -
like they could clean it with their antibacterial wipes,
wipe it from the faces of
dead babies -
by asking the maid to use a stronger bleach spray this time.

I close my eyes.
My daughter kicks me again.
And now –
there are kebabs on the floor,
I pound them to little pieces,
break all the fine china on the counters
with the hot frying pan flying every which way –
and reach for the knives.

My eyes are still closed,
my daughter probably sleeping.

IMMIGRANT EID

SHABANA MIR

my house is silent, husband at work;
i hear more sirens than usual outside.

this morning
i couldn’t get out of bed and go
to Eid namaz.
i really should push myself, i thought,
and go, but thought, then, go for what?
so my husband and i can part
at the front door of the building to go and sit
with our respective strangers inside?
so aunties in abayas can look
at my pants, because they’re shabby and
because they’re pants, and then look up
at my face unseeing -

when we’re done i come out and wait
for him in the cold parking lot
watching people hurry to cars
and segregated parties in their
tight little colour-coordinated groups-
while a bearded man in a jalabiya
stares at this female body jammed
outside in a twisting river of men.

when i got out of bed at last, i couldn’t stop crying
in the shower.
in Lahore,
Ammi has cooked two types of sivayyan
and put them out in glass bowls,
with carrot halva and Kashmiri chai.
my Eid outfit complete with sequins
has been ironed and laid on my maiden bed.
Auntie Shaista in the drawing room loudly
waits to see how my outfit looks.
Little Izza is knocking at
my door, asking when I’ll be ready,
moonsighting.com, and wrote an email -

eid mubarak exclamation point -
and cc’ed it to everyone.

I thought of calling Ammi to say
eid mubarak but I was afraid
my voice would catch, and she would hear
who I am here

and then I’d know for sure that she
was there, and there are no sivayyan
on my IKEA table, no halva
on the stove, no kashmiri chai
steaming in pretty china cups
no smiling niece outside my door
and no red kurta on my bed

when I will come out to admire
her pink sharara and bright new shoes

Abbu and Imran are just returning
in white kurtas from Eid namaz.
but here
in the fortunate First World
where I’m supposed to be bettering my life
and speaking English all the time--
where there’s no dust, there are no flies,
here, in the warm clean tiled shower,
I can’t stop sobbing

alone, with sirens screeching outside,
I prayed two rak‘ahs afterwards
with seven takheers
and seven tears hit the ja’namaz
and then I read some pages of Quran
and sent sawab to the Prophet, my pir,
my uncles, aunts, grandparents, like my Ammi does,
and then I said,
I’m sorry I didn’t go to Eid namaz

and I said please don’t be mad at me.

look, I’m here, and my outfit’s in Lahore,
and Izza’s knocking on the door,
and I have no sivayyan,
and my heart, the poor tattered heart
that I know You love
is broken today.

He looked at me, with those quiet eyes
and said, yes, I know. I cried again
and said that Eid is Eid
only because You’re here with me.

they said it’s Eid today, but there,
on the rooftops of Lahore, young boys
saw a little sliver of moon that shone
through smoggy clouds and snaky cables
as an eagle swam across the sky.

here, I saw no moon, I saw
THE GODS ON HOLIDAY

EDWARD RAGG

That month, the oracle grew
Perplexed; the prophet delved
Into the entrails; sacrifices ceased.

Delphi was a brawl, but no one twigged.
Divining rods grew popular with hags.
Soothsayers were defeatingly prevalent.

Somewhere a panoply of figures
Relaxed: the clouds in
Valet-parking, the thunder bolts

With the pool attendant—
The pool attendant only slightly
On fire (an occupational risk).

An old codger with wind-swept beard
Runs naked round the pool pursued
By a nine year-old sparking

His finger-tips, proving once
And for all that holidays are cultural
Pursuits for the partially quick.

A goddess on a lounger reclines
With tomorrow’s cocktails, peering
(With modest self-doubt) through

Yesterday’s sunglasses.
Her tan is not what it could be,
But who cares?

A grandmother of five, by five,
Has finished her anecdote and
 Falls into an unconvincing slumber,

Dreaming of a world without
The tyranny of mortals, their
Incorrigible peeling after truth,

Murmuring, so they can hear her:

If only they could see what we’re really like.

WANG AO AND THE LOBSTER

EDWARD RAGG

Wang Ao, poet and translator, born Qingdao, sits in New Haven. He is about to cook a ten pound Maine lobster for his friends.

I

This creature, Ao, swims in the ocean of your sense
And continents. Not eccentric, not de Nerval’s
Poor pet who plumbed ‘the secrets of the deep’.

You read, stanza by stanza, a Buddhist tract
And then, with reverence, take the moment
By its tail, the cleaver shedding juice like

An idea of birth or ceremony, as if life
Were never sweeter, no, nor more savoury.
Your friends bicker over the dipping sauce.

II

Ambassador, you are stationed in New Haven
Mouthing characters from the Tang… translated,
Tongue-twitching English by return of Beijing,

Or back again, my own voice stroke-marked
And unfolded like a scroll. Give thanks:
The one, the other, the lobster from its tail,

Claw by claw, snapped, but not butter-dunked,
In steam-soft garlic, ginger slice, pronounced.
Our teeth are flapping crackers in the wind.
III

Years ago, at a fishery, a plucky one, unshackled,
Flicked the Rolex from a soft-shelled man and
Made as if it would splash to Switzerland and take
Its chances with the perch – even if watch
And lake meant death. Your lobster voyages
To the precision clock: Maine by Florida,
Key West by Panama, then the long soak
To Qingdao where, as a boy, you sucked his shell
And, now, this steaming moment, slurp again
Until the moons of your fingernails are
Orange-warm pink. Later, in clutch of books,
His pincers bask in the New Haven sun.
It reminds you of your prehensile state,
All baby-snappers and drooling; of what, even here,
In the shell of the place, you would grasp again.

WAR

A road
And an American soldier
Both converged
Into the cold –
Vietnam war.

That American soldier was I
Who, along that road, would hike
Along which
A little farm girl would drift.

Our eyes converged into serenity
In the midst of the Brownian motions of hostilities.

My fingers met her wrist
Felt her skin
And her pulse
Through the silk of the sleeve of a ba ba shirt(1)
We were being given a glance
I was sued for harassing a naïve girl
And Vietnam war for harassing a naïve land.

We American soldiers,
In our confession to God,
Were guilty
The dust storm of Agent Orange used to chase our helicopters
And have ever chased our thoughts
Burned rice fields and bodies have lingered in our snapshots.

We came
To harrass your green rice fields
By imposing buildings on their deaths.
To harass your civilization
By driving you to touch the literary semen of Anthony Hecht
And to be a slave to western knowledge.

I came
Not to harrass you –
A little country girl who taught me how to handle chopsticks
How to say “chao”(2)
And how to love the war invalids.

I held your arm
To sense
The tranquility in your capillaries
Under the epidermis
Of your ba ba shirt
And feel,
Through the noise of shells,
The peace in your villages
Behind the robust bamboos and myths.

(1) Áo bà ba (or ba ba shirt), a traditional Vietnamese costume, is a long-sleeved, button-down silk shirt. It is most associated with southern Vietnam, especially in rural areas.
(2) “Chao” is a common Vietnamese formal greeting.
LIPSTICK BRUISED CIGARETTES

ASMARA MALIK

A certain wolf-musk
Tasting
Of lipstick-bruised cigarettes.

Endless hours of exasperated waiting at candlelit tables in smoky jazz nightclubs have begun for this young man with the silver-streaked hair. He waits by the exit for his siren-voiced paramour to finish her turn on the stage for the night. She descends, golden in the glow of a thousand enraptured watchers. Her smile is reptilian. She blows him a kiss, cold breath unfolding like dragon-smoke from her lips. They walk out on the rain-wet street. His midnight suede boots clack against the pavement, blue-veined arm wrapped around her tiny elfin waist.

Her nightmare red dress is lined with gold thread. Long, sensuous sleeves cascade over her arms and beyond her wrists to froth over her long, long fingers. She lifts a cigarette to her too-full lips, revealing the rapacious white line of an arm. She exhales tendrils of baby blue lace to tie bondage-knots around his pretty neck.

She flicks her cigarette behind her.

We watch its fearful, glimmering arc end in a baleful sizzle-hiss. We watch them dwindle into the night.

"Don't look at her again," Israel whispers against my ear.

I pick up her cigarette from the rain-slimed cobblestones.

A DREAM

HASEEB ASIF

I stare at the reflection in the mirror but hardly recognize myself. Florescence changes you somehow. I turn the tap for what seems like an eternity but the gushing water is as relentless as the ceramic white of the bathroom walls. The sink is threatening to overflow; I was never any good at dealing with threats, so I step back and watch it become a waterfall.

Outside, the conductor asks me what I was doing. I ask him the same thing. Questions bore me, anyway. I want to sit down and stare at the other world. What other world, he asks. The one where foliage travels at the speed of light. Where existence is all a blur. My face is glued to the window; I look like a mosquito caught on the windscreen of a very long car.

A ticket? I don't have a ticket, I'm sorry, I'll get off at the next station. This does not satisfy him, but all of a sudden, there is movement in his bowels and he rushes off to the employee's compartment. Fortune is not against me today.

Pleased, I turn around to attend to my primroses. They smell a lovely colour: lilac. My ancestors used to breed flowers. When the rest of the world was busy building towering infernos, which reached up to the heavens and burnt even God's abode, my ancestors were breeding harmless, delicate, joyful flowers.

The conductor is back again, asking for the fare. I suggest we go outside and discuss this over a cigarette, like civilized men. He steps off the rampant locomotive and breaks his leg in three places.

Not that a perfectly whole appendage would do him any good, now that he's dead.

I stand there, shattered. I think about the six kids and the pregnant wife he might have left behind. I think about his poor old senile mother hanging off the balcony at the picket-fenced nursing home, an orderly at each side trying to throw her down as she's clutching on for dear life. I think about all the dreams and aspirations he might have had some day in the future when he would have finally woken up to the fact that he was a fucking railway conductor.

Death always makes me thirsty. The bar is a splendid thing of ornamental beauty. A waif-like waitress glides on the wooden floor, her cotton skirts chasing her silken hips; I place my elbows on the maple-stained fruitwood counter and ask for the finest wine known to mankind. She turns around, and gulps down the contents from an Emerald jug. Then asks me to drink from her mouth.
The conductor is back once again. This time from the Hereafter. He looks like a fright, but he’s still in uniform, still asking me for a ticket. Is this it? Is this all that happens when you die? Your hair gets frazzled and your skin takes on the translucent properties of lampshades? Is there no escape from your rank, your class, yourself?

The passenger in the next seat is snoring loud enough to cause the great quake of 1906 all over again. I want to get up and slap him but his wife has read my thoughts and is staring at me with murderous eyes. Her red dress and pale skin and raven hair all meld into each other, until she becomes a wriggling white blob. This is me erasing her from my memory. A coping mechanism.

Fine, I didn’t pay my fare: I won’t trouble you any longer. I’ll leave.

I let go of my weight and drift towards the copper plated roof of the carriage. By the time I hit the ceiling, I am completely intangible. I weave through its molecular gaps and emerge into the lusty autumn air as a vapourous being.

I dance upon the wind, soaring higher until I blend in with the clouds. I spread myself like a cumulus, and cry with joy at the vision I behold; untarnished meadows and silvery, snake-like mirrors glistening in the sunlight. My tears must seem like rain to the people down below, a solitary cloud pelting them with warm and salty droplets, a cloud gone mad.

Suddenly, He plucks me from my irresolute form and makes me solid again. He says He has something to show me. We traverse the Milky Way on a beam of light and come to nestle in the shadow of a derelict star, whose ashen surface is steadily disintegrating into space debris.

From this niche of the universe, I espy millions of glowing, glaring orbs engaged in a seamless waltz with one another, in perfect harmony, gracefully following invisible directions, like a phantom troupe. For every ball of light that is snuffed out a new one emerges in some distant corner of this living darkness.

I ask Him what all this means and He simply says, “This was not a scheduled stop.”

I circumambulate the Earth. I pass the moon on many occasions. It is pale and sullen, and the uneven contours of its surface tell me to keep my distance. I extend my arms and start rotating like a satellite.

For many eons. Then one day, golden fire rains down on that familiar blue globe and devours about a quarter of it.

The shattered thing falls off its orbit and prepares to extinguish itself in a glorious burst of colour and light. The moon and I keep revolving around an imaginary mass, Earth’s ghost, for many more eons. The moon is less sullen now that people don’t stare at it. Brighter even, healthier, almost a golden brown. Algae and fungi grow freely on it, and on me.

When the Word comes, it is deafening. Everything stops. The moss on my face dissolves back into the blackness. Mars, producer of strife, bellows bile into the hearts of the other planets. Gargantuan Jupiter rises from its stupor and floats magnificently out of the galaxy. Ostentatious Saturn with its rings of gold and silver, accompanied by voluptuous Venus, follow. Neptune moves like a tidal wave. They all migrate to other crevices of the universe, some other galaxy, abandoning the Milky Way, leaving just Pluto behind, because it is too little to be separated from its mother.

The sun is not pleased, all the same.
TRANSMIGRATION

Michel di Capua

Shalini’s father’s younger brother – or her chacha, to make use of Indian genealogical vocabulary that cuts finely enough to afford unique labels for each type of uncle based on their point of entry into the family tree – is a psychiatrist. He specializes in treating patients who are contending with the mental echoes from their past lives.

I met him on an overnight train ride from Delhi to the far west of India. Shalini and her husband Amaresh are dear friends who had invited me to join them on the occasion of her brother Saurabh’s wedding to a woman from Rajasthan. I was in the company of nearly a hundred family members for this journey. The operation of boarding the crowd into the train and tending to their needs over the thirteen hours was administered by Shalini’s father, the president of a steel company. I had never been under this man’s employment, nor could I understand a word of his Hindi, yet whenever he spoke, his voice orotund and authoritative, I wondered if I shouldn’t make myself busy smelting iron ore – or whatever it is that workers at steel factories are supposed to be doing when their boss is watching.

In the lavatory of the train, making unsteady attempts to urinate through the hole in the floor between my feet while I swayed to the train’s clatter, I momentarily raised my head to catch sight of the advertisement affixed to the back of the lavatory door: “Guaranteed hot stock tip! Think big, strike high! 5,346 millionaires made with our jackpot tips! Email now: Indian-share-tips.com.” I slept in the train on an overhead cot, elevated above, as if emanating from, the prostrate body of a snoring Hindu priest.

The night before the train ride, the family gathered for the sangeet, the traditional ceremony before the wedding in which friends and family entertain the soon-to-be couple with performances. Shalini and Amaresh had written a comic play about Saurabh’s courtship of his bride. They asked me to play the role of an iPad-bearing astrologer who studies the heavens for propitious signs of his marriage. My character was a mute (Shalini and Amaresh’s tidy solution for my deficiency with Hindi), so I was accompanied on stage by a spokesperson lackey, played by Shalini’s garrulous, amply-sized cousin Ankit.

I can’t say much about reincarnation; Jewish people try to believe in different things, and in different endings. But if the Hindus have it right, and if there is some profound verity to Shalini’s chacha’s claim that the iterations of our past lives make themselves somehow manifest in our present incarnation, then I suppose I could do worse than to have once been an Indian astrologer.

Not just any astrologer, however. I like to think I would have been known across the land, from as far down as the Dandaka Forest to as high as up as the insurmountable Himalayas, and throughout the kingdoms that drew their life from the holy Ganga as it flowed to the sea, as an especially wise and gentle mystic, proffering penetrating, if also sometimes enigmatic, words to the pilgrims who trekked great distances to seek my counsel.

“Less vegetables for him,” I would advise the concerned parents who had brought before me their prematurely malcontented boy. “Beware of girls born under skies with an ascendant Moon…,” I would caution a desperate romantic who confessed to having had fallen in love too many times, “…or, for that matter, a descendant one.” To a crestfallen farmer who had seen his crop of papaya spoil that season, I would say, “The day will soon come when the bodyless dragon Rahu will consume the Sun. Start not your new plantings then, but on the morning after.” And then, unthinking, the words parting from me as the reverberations of a memory whose source I cannot quite place, I would add, “Remember, think big, strike high!”

Once an astrologer, now resurrected as a skeptical tourist – these ruminations had begun as the train shot through nighttime in the desert of northwest India, on our way to the wedding. I find myself still clinging to this thought a week later, in a hotel room in Houston, where I had come directly for a business meeting after my vacation in India.

I’m standing on the scale in the hotel bathroom. If ever there was a trip that would result in a weight gain, this one – in which I had spent a week coping with the instruction that it’s rude to refuse when members of the bridal party offer to feed you buttery sweets directly from their hands into your mouth – would be it. Yet I’ve lost three pounds. “There are truths on this side of the Pyrenees,” wrote Pascal, “which are considered falsehoods on the other.” Outside, on this early December night in south Texas, the temperature is in the fifties, and Jupiter is in transit through constellation Pisces…

May we all live in auspicious times.
If you look at the glimmering surface of Hunnah Lake long enough, you can see the chaotic prose of its dark face begin to form almost coherent narratives, some story almost discernible in the whispering waves that come to rest against its shores. But no one looks to the Lake for stories any more. No Lady of the Lake rules anyone’s fevered nightmares now but mine.

If you asked, you would find that no one in the city of my childhood remembers the story of the woman murdered in Hunnah Lake. The young woman, you might persist. Which one? They would respond. Even the Lake might not remember how many daughters it’s claimed. It’s been around for so long, you see. All the thousand stories of its drowned women – I only know of one, though. One tenacious ghost-monster which refused to drown quietly in its sleep.

Afternoons in the Quetta of my childhood were a strange gold-infused no-time, slow siesta interludes, when the air felt like the sajji cooking mellowly inside the belly of a particularly large goat roasting on an open fire. The slowness of it all made you think you could walk almost to the moon and still be back in time for post-Maghrib chai and samosay.

When you’re nine years old, you’re built a little closer to the ground. You learn to notice things in the immediate vicinity of your feet – the way the black tar of the street gloams in the mellow afternoon sunshine, the tiny heliographing lights that flash from the ground as you walk towards them, morse-coding messages to the sky. You notice the way the shards of coloured glass from broken bottles flash with a mystical inner fire when the light hits them just right.

Do you see what I’m trying to do? I want you to see that time, that world, through my eyes. I want you to remember the ineffable beauty of being that young so long ago, of knowing once you, too, were only four feet or so tall and the only way an adult could see from your point of view was if they would kneel. I want you to remember what being that young was like because now you can consider the truth of your death. Your inevitable entropy – the first white hair, the first root-canal, the first ache in your knees, the first wrinkle on your face. Everything decays.

Now, with my own demise setting in, the sight of the afternoon sun blazing a blinding path on the west-facing roads of Quetta makes me reminiscent – it’s as though all the darkly gloaming particles I remember glinting up from the streets of my childhood have coalesced to become this celestial road that leads to fiery furnaces of our lone solar inferno.

Sometimes, if I feel guilty enough, if I feel nostalgic enough, I wish so hard for that road to materialize, to feel my feet lift effortlessly off the solid ground onto the molten-gold surface of that stellar highway, to smell burning hair, skin, tears, regrets – everything. Until only ash is left.

My sister used to love the story of King Arthur receiving Excalibur from the Lady of the Lake. She would ask me so many questions about that story and I, a born liar, would spin stories out of thin air for her. My baby sister believed every single word – why wouldn’t she? I was her Big Sister, the All-Knowing, the All-Mighty, Appointed Protector and Patron of Younger Sibling. Even if she occasionally irritated me enough to make me happily choke a rainbow coloured unicorn out of her, she was still my kid sister. I loved her. I did. I do.
When Daddy took us to Hunnah Lake, it was a Saturday, the sky was overcast and the wind was a shrieking banshee demanding immediate reunion with some demon-lover. In the grey evening light, the Lake looked like a cataracted window in a condemned house through which anything could be staring back at you – anything at all.

I watched her walk to the edge of the Lake and kneel by the shore, her 5-year-old hands star-fishing blurredly in the murky water as dampness crawled up the sleeves of her shirt and the frayed knees of her jeans. Her dark hair spilled all around her face, inky blackness that obliterated her features for a moment before a gust of wind screamed past her, streaming her hair behind her, dark-darkest banner on some unimaginable battlefield. She seemed transfixed by what she saw in the shallow water.

It was the look on her face that froze me in my place.

If only I’d known then that not every Lady of the Lake comes bearing gifts of noble weapons. Sometimes they just come for your heart – your warm, bloody, relentlessly pumping, bleakly hoping heart. And when they’ve got it, they don’t like giving it back. They like to chew on it for a while.

I know ours was a one-armed monster. Slimy and eel-y. Slit-eyed-snaky. I know because I saw what twisted up my baby sister’s arm and pulled her screaming towards the water.

Before her head went under, my sister got one coherent word out, one word that finally broke my paralysis:

Mama.

I ran. I ran as I’ve never run before in my life. Not to my sister’s aid, no. Away from her.

She’s still there, of course, my monster-lady, stretching languidly on the floor of Hunnah Lake, bubble-shaped words emerging from her baby-soft lips, dark hair floating around her pale heart-shaped face, her voice an indigo Doppler-distortion, singing words you think you can almost understand, almost fathom, if only you could be closer to her. But getting closer to her is like a fly romancing a Venus Flytrap.

The jagged sounds of raised voices keep waking me, upstairs. I pad softly down the steps, stopping midway. I hear Daddy’s sister shouting something. I lean forward and see Mama’s head bent over her plate, dark hair falling forward, obscuring her face. Daddy’s leaning back in his chair, arms crossed. I can’t see his face from where I’m standing. I take another step down.

Daddy’s sister has her back to me, she can’t see me. She keeps yelling something about money and mouths to feed. Daddy’s too focused on her face; he doesn’t see me either. Then, Mama looks up, looks straight at me. Her lips are pressed tight into a thin line, eyes blazing, rim of bright hazel against the dark circles of her pupils, double-eclipses.

Her lips part, pale and perfectly heart-shaped. Go, she mouths. I shake my head. To me, no time at all passes between this moment and the next when Daddy’s sister is ripping my arm from around the banister of the staircase. There is only the rising shrillness of her voice and then silence as Mama reaches back her hand, the brittle sound of her slapping Daddy’s twin sister across the face. Then Daddy’s there, Daddy’s really there for the first time in years, silent and impossibly male. Daddy’s sister touches her face, blood spilling from her lips, congealing on her chin. She holds out her bloody hand to my father – all the accusations she would ever need.

I can’t remember her face any more, nor the sound of her voice. Daddy’s sister, who my every nightmare. The woman my Daddy shared a womb with, who looked so much like him, who had his square vein-y hands – dark mirror image of my father who still stalks my dreamscapes so silently.

I never really figured out why our father took us to the Lake on such a dreary day as that. The road was apt to get mucky if it rained and it would’ve been hard driving the way back in our car with the tires as bald as they were.

Our father. Strange, dark man with his brooding eyes. He must’ve known. He must’ve known what would happen that day. That’s why he had that gun packed in the glove compartment of his madly male brown car. The car that always smelled of cheap cigarettes and cheaper aftershave; that had the ninety-nine names of God inscribed in silver on a piece of velvet, suspended from the rear-view mirror, frayed silver tassels hanging limply from its edges. Daddy-car, where hair brushes and ponytails were forbidden, where a single discarded candy wrapper would land you in more trouble than it was worth.

He turned to me as I ran screaming up to him, infinitely slow, as if he was some jellied creature moving...
imblessly through glue. My father saw me, saw through me to the edge of the Lake where my sister was and he smiled.

He was still smiling as he reached into the glove compartment of the car and took out his gun. His oddly handsome lopsided smile, the kind that makes you wonder if maybe you’ll have that same smile when the muscles of your cheeks are at their leanest at the height of your youth, when men might look at you, see your smile and fall in love. The same way that my mother must have fallen in love, I suppose, with the slow one-sided curve of his lips. People are inherently lemming-ish in their deep-seated desire to fling themselves off cliffs. They can stare Death in the face and as long as he smiles prettily, they’ll fall right into his cold arms.

Mother, father and everything in between them that was so unholy.

Her face is wreathed in shadows, darkness pooling in every crevasse. Daddy's sister stands behind him, just as tall as him, just as wraith-like.

Mama is on the floor beside me at the foot of the stairs where Daddy's thrown me, pain racing electric through the bones of my face, my arms, my legs.

((Water))

I watch Daddy fist his hand through Mama's hair and slam her head against the banister. I watch the slow descent of a single drop of blood from Mama's forehead pool like a tear on her inner eyelid then trace a ruby path down her cheek. Daddy begins to drag Mama by her hair but it rips out with a gristly snarl and Mama's head drops, face down to the floor.

Daddy contemplates the dark strands caught in his hand. He walks out the door, his sister following him, their slight shapes merging and becoming one in the chancy moonlight. The roar of Daddy's car as it shudders to life.

((Fish die without water))

I drag myself to where Mama is, hook my hands around her, inch by hellish inch, drag her leglessly towards the bathroom down the hall. Mama's body leaves a trail of blood behind it, black and somehow, damned. The smell of it, coppery and sizzling, rises all around us.

I let the water run in the bath, let Mama sink in it, limb by limb, the water turning rosy-pink then arterial-red. I know it's too late, my fairy brothers are dead.

I sink down into the water beside her, screaming as the coldness of it seeps into my broken leg, bloodied water gushing over the edges of the bath. I put my hands on Mama's desolate womb, watch my hand blur into a vague starfish.

I rest my head against Mama's bosom. The running water lulls me to sleep.

My father walked slowly down to the edge of the lake where my baby sister was screaming wordlessly, the tentacle drawing huge bloodied welts on her slender arm, her hair vortexing in the insane wind.

"In a second, precious," said my father calmly, wrapping his broad-palmed hand around the base of my sister's skull as he knelt beside her in the water. "Just a second, baby."

He put the muzzle of his gun against the kneecap of one of my sister's thrashing legs and pulled the trigger. Her head jerked viciously back on her neck. I saw her eyes roll back into her head, a tiny beadlet of blood clinging to her eyelashes. The monster-arm seemed to freeze in place, then withdrew at a hissfull speed into the water. I fell to my knees.

And still my father smiled, jagged white bone-shards gleaming from the ichor of congealing blood painted across his face.

He moved his gun to her other kneecap. I saw the world turn into treacherously swimming mirages before my eyes.

The second shot rang out across the eerily placid surface of the Lake. The wind had fallen still so suddenly it was like a door slamming shut on a room with padded walls, leaving you trapped in its cocoon-shaped silence.

"Come out, darling," I heard my demon-daddy say, “You can't touch me, can you, you bitch?” His hand, cradling the fragile cranium of my baby sister, her tiny body hanging limply against him, her blood pooling darkly around him. Tendrils of her long hair floated listlessly on the water.
“I’ll give you your child,” he screamed suddenly, veins pulsing in his neck, muscles pulled taut in rage.

In the arc of descent that formed my father’s arm pushing my sister’s head, face first into the water, beads of bloodied water flung like infernal jewels from the tips of her hair, her black hair radiusing into a dark fan, closing in on itself as her face sank into the water, I felt a thousand eyes opening in the back of my mind. A thousand eyes, suddenly lidless, and in them I saw what I had forgotten.

The ninety-nine names of God blink sleepily at me, the silvery brightness of shiny tassels framing them, glowing in the mellow evening sunshine. I look out from my window at the sun hanging suspended above the horizon, impossibly huge, fiery flames banked to an amber light that faded out as I count my heartbeat in time to its descent into the horizon over the Lake. One, two, three...

My baby sister, perfectly tiny, perfectly fairy-shaped, sleeps placidly in my mother’s arms; pale, slender arms lightly dusted with freckles. My father’s hand rests against the steering wheel, elbow jutting out the window.

I feel anger pulsing red in the car, a lecherous cat biding its time before it rages in a frenzy of claws and feral screams. I count down my heartbeat. The sun sinks into the fiery water.

((Four, five...))

Another daughter, he snarls. She looks out her window. His voice, rising, cursing her. She says nothing. His foot stamps down on the brakes. I feel my head hit the back of his seat, his door opening and slamming redly. The sun holds my gaze. If I look away I will turn to stone. I know this. My eyes widen until all I see of the world is an endlessly fiery circle.

I hear my mother’s door flung open, hear my baby sister’s fairy form wrenched from my mother’s arms, hear their screams, shrill, impossibly female.

((Six, seven...))

Out of the corner of my eye, I can see my baby sister’s limbs kicking in futility in the seat, the place where my mother’s jasmine-scented perfume still hung like a shroud.

I hear water splashing, frenzizing, my mother’s wordless screams, jagged and crystalline shards burying into my ears, slight frame moulded against the dark shape of my father. Inside, I hear the whisper of a thousand eyelashes closing over all-seeing eyes.

In the fiery circle of the sun, I see my father hold down my mother’s face in the water, her arms twisted behind her, her legs thrashing, water vortexing around them both.

((Eight...))

I see my mother’s body stilling, my father’s hands relaxing. I see him look down at her as he stands waist-deep in sunset-tinted water.

I see the circle sink beneath the horizon. I hear the crunch of gravel as my father walks back to the car.

((Nine...))

The ninety-nine names of God shudder as my father starts the engine. My sister’s gasping sobs echo bleakly in the emptiness of my mother’s absence.

I close my eyes. In the darkness behind my eyelids all I see is the blind eye of the sun.

Ten.

I feel myself rising to my feet, a hellish clarity informing the world. The eyes of a thousand murdered daughters regard me from all around the lake. I feel their eyes resting against mine, as they stand silently, still as the air, faces veiled, expressionless. A thousand daughters watch me rise.

One mother.

My mother.

My monster-lady.

I am standing in the water behind my father, my hands suddenly eel-y, silken slither-y. I look down on a body no longer mine. My skin is no longer my own.

I am my mother’s daughter.
My father’s head is still turning to face me as I wrap my deep-sea claws around his neck, his one eye facing me, widening as capillaries burst beneath the clear surface of his cornea, bloodying and reddening against the whiteness of his eye. He tries to twist around. My baby sister’s body floats face down in the bloody water. The Lake turns her over to face me. Her eyes are locked on mine. I see her lips, my mother’s heart-shaped lips – blue with shock – part. Blood and water stain her mouth. In the neverness of this Lake, her eyes see everything.

My/Her/Our hands tighten around his neck. We feel the delicate snap of small bones beneath our hands, the concertina collapse of our father’s suddenly spineless body, his mouth locked in the approaching snarl of rigor mortis.

My/Her/Our hands relax. We watch our father’s body float on the water.

I look at my sister’s eyes. They are closed. I watch a pale hand rest below her head, a tentacled monster-arm cradle her slight, 5-year-old body.

My monster-mother holds my baby sister in her arms as she rises from the water, her skin alight with a million tiny gems of water, glistening with a pale fire. Her hair, darker than my sister’s, streams behind her, cascading blackly. She towers over me, my mother. My father’s body floats between us.

I push him aside.

I walk on water to her, shedding her skin, becoming lesser, the blandness of ordinary life permeating my pores again. My mother understands. She lowers her arms to me. I look down on my baby sister’s face. I kiss her pale blue lips. Her eyes open, blinking wearily, an eternity of pain encapsulated in her young eyes.

“Home...?” she whispers.

I nod.

“Love...” she sighs, “love you...”

The wind rushes past us, blowing my pallid hair into my mother’s face. I look up at her. Her eyes are unfathomable. In a way, she was more than my mother ever was yet somehow she was less, as well.

She was mine but not mine to have. I was hers but not wholly hers. Not like my sister. That’s why my mother touched her first on the edge of the water so many eternal hours ago. Mama’s little fairy-baby.

Impulsively, I press my lips against my mother’s monster-hand, blood spurting from my mouth as soon as my skin touches her. She says nothing. She does nothing. I feel her move away from me, further and further, the water rising around her. Her face changing, contorting to become all gnashing canines and incisors. She stretches her leathery neck, jaws crushing Daddy’s body between them.

I watch the waters rise around her. Here at her hips, here at her waist, here at her shoulders, her neck, her mouth, her cold eyes. The waters close above her head with barely a ripple.

Monster-goddess.

Mother.

The day closes around me. I look around. A thousand murdered daughters look back at me. Then close their eyes. The wind shrieks past me in an infernal scream.

I walk back to the car, Daddy’s car. I open the door; sit for a moment with my head resting on the steering wheel. The ninety-nine names of God spin insanely in the banshee wind. I reach up and pull the velvet cloth off the rear-view mirror. I get out of the car and walk.

I walk until my shoes are tattered phantoms of their selves around my feet. I walk barefoot until my feet bleed. I walk until the mountains of Sulayman become a distant mirage.

I walk but the baleful grin of Koh-e Murdaar is never far from my mind.

I walk but the still silence of the eyes of a thousand murdered daughters is never far from my mind.

I walk. I walk to become another phantom upon the ancient roads of Balochistan. I wish I could. But in this I am my father’s daughter. I bleed and bleed and bleed but I do not die. My mother and my father won’t let me die.

Even when Ordinary finds me and gives me a home and tames me and tells me what is expected of me in life, in my head, I’ve never stopped walking away from my family, the only one I’ve ever known.
You can never choose the people who are bonded in blood to you. Neither can you escape them. Their eyes are your eyes. The bones of your face are the same as theirs. The ancestral echoes ringing in your ears are the same as what they hear in the deep of the night when the boundaries we draw between ourselves and our fears is thinnest.

At 5:00 a.m. Amma heard a great thud. Later, she told me that the thud was followed by a little wooden sound: dharam, thaq thaq!

By 5:10 a.m. she had thoroughly inspected the veranda and the garden; and by 5:15 a.m. she was sure that we were completely doomed.

She was wailing and banging on my room’s door with her favorite frying pan. I woke up in alarm and for a very brief moment — unwittingly — thought that Khala London had finally decided to die. Amma had told me last night that Khala wasn’t feeling very well.

I opened up the door and embraced my grieving mother.

“Amma! We mortals cannot really interfere in matters of divine providence! Besides, Khala London was an old woman. She’d lived a much fulfilled life. May Allah bless her soul and grant her a special place in Paradise, where the great springs of Pepsi Cola flow and desi kukkar grow on trees.”

Amma stopped sobbing and quizzically squinted at me. “Who is this Khala London?”


“Your late sister, Khala Walayat... in angrezi she becomes Khala London. Ah! Poor soul, she was so fond of desi kukkar and Pepsi Cola. God will reward her fairly...”

“Haye haye! What happened to Walayat?” Amma’s eyes rounded with shock.

“She... didn’t pass away? You were howling at this hour of the night... day, I mean... I thought she’d... slipped away.”

Amma, like an expert sniper, unleashed a deadly slap that precisely landed at the centre of my left
“Have they unleashed the nukes, Amma?” I shuddered at the thought.

“No, no! It isn’t the Hindustan-Pakistan feud. Our personal enemies: yours and mine... they have unleashed a Djinn on us.”

“A Djinn, Amma?” I looked at her incredulously.

“Yes, a Djinn!”

“You mean a fellow made out of scorching fire?”

Amma thought about that for a moment and then nodded in the affirmative.

“Amma! You must be imagining things; please go to sleep.”

“O nai Puttar! There is a Djinn lying down under the Shah’toot tree.”

“The same Shah’toot tree where, according to you, various demons come for a little romantic rendezvous, each evening?”

“Yes! How many Shah’toot trees do you think we have in our garden, idiot?”

Technically speaking, it wasn't exactly our Shah’toot tree: it had its roots in Chacha Kukkar's house; but its branches gravitated to our little garden. Amma never really liked that tree. She always thought that there was something terribly evil about it. She claimed that she'd seen black threads tied to some of its branches — an ultimate sign that our house was under the ill effects of black magic.

“We have enemies, Challya! Why don’t you understand? Someone is after our lives.”

“I liked the idea of having enemies, but I could never fathom why someone would like to be enemies with us.”

“Amma, important people have enemies. We are not important. Not ever since Abba died. We don’t have enemies, and black magic practices cost a fortune. Why would someone waste it over us?” I tried to reason.
furiously. After a few deep breaths, I started applying logic to the whole matter.

“Amma! I think it is Chacha Kukkar’s doing. I guess I was skeptical about his skills for nothing.”

“Hein?”

“Amma! I had a... a bit of an argument with Chacha Kukkar the other evening.”

“What sort of argument?” Amma asked impatiently.

“Woo... he was telling one of his chaylas that during his Zia-ul-Haq days he had mastered the art of bending air. Hence, he could alter the course of aircrafts — large or small. I thought of a brilliant business idea: I asked Chacha Kukkar how much money would he demand for altering the path of a stealth air craft.”

“Acha... then?” Amma asked.

“Chacha went into a trance, his face turned pale, and he started shaking his head violently. After about 5 minutes he lifted his head, stared at me with his bloodshot eyes and said: “Rs 5 lakh!”

“That greedy toad…” she murmured.

“I offered him Rs. 15 Lakh each for the destruction of American drone planes that attack Waziristan regularly.”

“Hein? And how exactly did you plan to pay those Rs. 15 Lakhs?” Amma asked bemusedly.

“That greedy toad…” she murmured.

“I offered him Rs. 15 Lakh each for the destruction of American drone planes that attack Waziristan regularly.”

“Hein? And how exactly did you plan to pay those Rs. 15 Lakhs?” Amma asked bemusedly.

“I am sure the Taliban can pay more, Amma. For an American drone, surely more...”

“Was that a joke?” Amma looked genuinely confused.

“Well it was a serious business proposal but I think Chacha Kukkar took it as a personal insult. He just cracked and started threatening me.”

“What sorts of threats?” Amma’s face contorted a bit.
“The regular ones.”

“Explain!” Amma demanded.

“He said that I was trying to be naughty and he’d unleash a Muakal Djinn on me: the naughtiest creature in his possession.”

Amma’s face turned pale and she gave me a murderous look.

“How many times have I told you not to meddle with Chacha Kukkar?”

I decided to look away.

Chacha Kukkar was a popular man in the neighborhood. We called him ‘kukkar’ because he looked like a desi kukkar: dark, loud, and always a bit cranky. More importantly, he was our most immediate neighbor.

His fame peaked in 1981, when General Zia-ul-Haq commissioned a secret task force of scientists, who were to scientifically prove the existence of Djinns. The only problem was that most of the scientists involved in the project didn’t know much about Djinns. Hence, they had to hire experts on the subject. Chacha Kukkar was one of those experts.

Chacha once told me that General Zia-ul-Haq took a very keen interest in the project, and most of the funding for such projects came directly from the holy lands. According to Chacha, General Zia-ul-Haq RehmatUllah, was a true Mard-E-Momin, with a grand vision. He wanted to create a formidable military jihadi wing that comprised of Djinns and monkeys and train them to perform suicide bombings. Unfortunately for Pakistan, and the whole Mulsim Ummah, the Americans learnt about his great ambitions and martyred him in the plane crash. Inna lillahi wa inna illaihi raji’un! That was that: the end of the project.

Until now, I always thought that Chacha was a charlatan, a maskhara, a phund! I never thought that he was capable of becoming such a ruthless enemy. Only a day ago, we were friends. We had been friends for years. After Abba’s death, he helped me understand the world. We had spent numerous hours discussing alchemy, mathematics, religion, music, politics, and pigeons. Only a few years ago — when flying kites was permissible in Lahore — we use to be a team. Chacha taught me how to maneuver the kite in mid-air, how to strike it onto the opponent’s kite, and how to use the string to maximum effect, without injuring your fingers. We were the most formidable team in the Muhalla.

“Lukh di laanut!” I cursed Chacha and craned my neck to the scene of crime for a fresh perspective. The light had improved. I could see the Djinn trying to move a little. It seemed to be struggling.

“Amma, maybe this is an accident. Perhaps the Djinn just malfunctioned and crash-landed,” I whispered after a bit of reflection.

“In that case, it is more dangerous,” Amma advised, wise in the ways of the Djinn.

“Amma, please bring the water pistol that I bought you to shoo away the cats.”

“What good would that do?”

“Well! It is very logical: these creatures are made of fire, and a water gun can actually be a deadly weapon against them. Also bring me an empty bottle.”

“Waaah! MashAllah! I always knew that my puttar was very intelligent. I’ll bring the gun and the bottle in a minute.”

A few seconds later, I had the water gun tightly clasped in my right hand, the empty bottle of Pepsi Cola clenched in my left hand, and a definite plan in my head: this was my chance to get even with Khala London and Chaudry Billa. All I needed to do was enslave the Djinn in the empty bottle.

Chacha Kukkar once told me that it wasn’t very hard to do, “You just have to recite the Char Qull and order the Djinn to enter the bottle and become your slave.” I recalled Chacha’s instructions distinctly.

“Amma stay here. I’m going to approach the Djinn.”

“Na puttar! Don’t go near that thing. I’m not going to let you do any crazy stunt.” Amma seemed to be at the verge of tears. Again.

“Amma, just stay here and keep reciting Ayatul-Kursi. You are my ultimate line of defense. With the grace of Allah, I will overcome this monster.”
Later Chacha told me that his father-in-law was very fond of Shah’toot, and that morning after saying his fajr prayers, he decided to climb the tree and enjoy a bit of early morning fruit-picking. Unfortunately, his ladder broke, and he fell right into our garden – and thus the sound: Dharam, thaq thaq!

I nodded sagely, all wise in the ways of fathers-in-law, and asked Chacha, “Now, about those stealth drones and Djinns…”

Without staying to hear any further arguments, I crouched and started creeping towards the Djinn. As I reached closer, I saw some chunks of what looked like a broken wooden ladder.

It was too late to make sense of it all. I took aim and shot the first volley. The water splashed over the Djinn's head. Its bloodshot eyes twitched a bit. My knees started to feel weak and shook violently. I wanted to run away but my legs were stuck in an invisible quagmire.

The empty Pepsi-Cola bottle slipped from my hand, hit the ground, and made an unnecessary ‘pop’ sound. With every passing second, the Djinn was getting more and more active.

I tried to recall the Char Qull, but my memory has a proud record of failing me in the most crucial of times. So I decided to cut short Chacha Kukkar’s prescribed way of enslaving Djinns.

“In the name of Allah, the beneficent, the merciful, I order you to enter this Pepsi Cola bottle right away… please… and if you act defiantly, I’ll burn you. If you try to escape, I’ll burn you. If you…”

“Oh Puttar-mein-dig-gea-see,” the Djinn cried.

“Say another word and I’ll burn you.” I pointed the now violently trembling water gun to its forehead. “Enter the bottle now, merdood!”

The Djinn looked very confused and showed no signs of moving. I was confused. And Amma had her eyes shut tight.

The confusion didn’t last long though.

“O tera baira gharaq, Kukkara!” came a curse in familiar dulcet tones. Chachi (Mrs. Chacha Kukkar) had launched a full assault at her husband. It didn’t take me long to sort out the whole mystery then.

I helped the Djinn get to its feet and I offered him the water gun if he needed some water. He looked at me thankfully and took the water gun.

The Djinn was Chacha Kukkar’s father-in-law, and Chachi was already blaming Chacha for his mysterious disappearance. I led the poor old man to Chacha’s house, where he was received with much relief and joy.
He woke with a familiar blur in his eyes, got up from what he thought was his bed, staggered, then opened the door to what should have been his toilet. It was a closet, instead. This annoyed him in two ways: firstly, it was obviously not his apartment and secondly, his bladder was just about to lose the battle against propriety.

He stared at the off-white walls for the outline of another door. The one he tried next led to a sparsely decorated living area. Turning around would have been too painful, so he relieved himself on the Afghan rug below his feet. The feeling was excruciatingly pleasant.

Another night of heavy drinking?

He tried licking the inside of his mouth to feel for the taste of vomit. Nothing; he could neither feel his tongue nor his teeth. He was numb inside. He went into the kitchen, poured himself a glass of water and gulped it down. It shot back up his throat and splattered the floor.

Blood. What the hell? What happened yesterday? Why couldn’t he remember?

Memory proved to be beyond his reach for the moment; he had to get out of that apartment, escape the stale air that was sedating his senses and get some sense of place and time. Outside, the suffocatingly narrow corridor went from a windowless wall on one end to an elevator on the other.

He pressed all the buttons he could make out on the elevator panel. They turned from a dull grey to a bright crimson as he waited. A bell dinged and the doors parted. He stepped inside and nodded when the lift attendant, a freckled youth sporting a jacket and tie inquired, “Ground floor?”

The machine lurched, and so did his guts. His green and yellow puke smeared the attendant’s sleek black shoes.

“Will you kindly let go of my tie, sir?” came a raspy voice after a while, the words all clipped at the end as if the person uttering them was being choked. He looked up and saw himself dangling from the boy’s neck. He let go and his arms fell in a heap.

He heard the grinding of worn out gears and the doors parted again. He stepped out into the lobby. Specks of dust spiraling indecisively in the ambient light prompted more nausea; this time he keeled over on a dirty maroon carpet and lay prostrate before the reception desk.

A pair of strong shoulders heaved him from his bizarre worship and he stumbled on as if nothing unusual had happened. The glass doors of the main entrance gently got out of his way like wayfarers encountering tumbleweed. Outside, the glare of the afternoon sun blinded him and he put a hand over his head, turning his face low to one side. When he opened his eyes again he saw a swathe of arms dangling briefcases and purses.

Must be a working day.

He noticed, for the first time, the state of his dress. He was wearing a beige shirt with sleeves that were rolled up to his elbows. He had no shoes on and there was a slight bruise just below his right knee, which glowed an angry red.

It seemed fresh; he must have scraped it on the way out. Wait, why could he see his knees? Where were his pants? The plain white briefs over his crotch shrugged sheepishly in reply.

Fuck. He had to get out of here, he had to get back home, he thought.

Fresh waves of nausea. His subdued attempt at calling a taxi only caught the attention of a nearby pedestrian.

“Are you alright, friend?”

He replied with empty eyes. Why was the taxi driver wearing a goddamn suit?

“Forgot your pants?”

Pants? No, I don’t want pants, I want to go home. Please take me home.

“You look like a fright, you know.”
He had met somebody the other day, who had offered him all the riches in the world, or at least twenty thousand in the Queen's currency. That man had lied. Or had he?

"Are you drunk or something?"

He sure talks enough to be a taxi driver, but something seems out of place.

"Hey, what's your name?"

Name? What was his name? Something... something beginning with a gasp and ending in a sigh...

What? He'd never had memory loss from drinking before. Or even if he had, he didn't remember it. What the hell was this shit?

OK, relax. Calm down. This is nothing a couple of dozen aspirins can't fix. Just get home. Remember where that is, right? Not on these virile streets, which vaguely resembled the Southall area of London.

Where the hell was the taxi he had called, when was it, yesterday?

Maybe he needed to move closer to the road. Towards the middle of it. Yes, from here he could see lots of taxis. In fact one was headed right for him. At last, but why was it blaring the horn so loudly, why was it not... wham!

He saw explosions in front of his eyes, a lot of yellow and grey, and the memories came crashing back like a train wreck.

It was almost impossible to sift through the debris and see if anything had survived.

A green-eyed man, a maroon velvet cloth and the overwhelming smell of chloroform. Three remnants rescued from the terrible rubble.

Promises of money, yes? A chance meeting, or perhaps something more sinisterly arranged? A man of medicine, a healer?

He was broken and needed healing. Or perhaps he had been whole and needed breaking.

"Somebody call an ambulance, he looks really out of it."

A dimly lit room. Hushed voices. The taste of stainless steel. Something wrapped in a maroon velvet cloth, sitting on the table at the end of his bed. Somebody speaking to his ear in hushed whispers, telling it he was sorry.

Sorry for what?

A struggle. Raised voices. The cold essence of skin on steel. Something missing from his person, a vacuum in his being. A large illuminated mirror at the end of his bed. Somebody still hushing their words with whispers.

Sorry for what?

Mirrors on every square foot of every wall. Eyes peering out from each one, looking at him, looking through him, some glumly, most cruelly. Eyes peering out from the mirror at the end of the bed. Eyes violently, menacingly green.

"Young man, are you okay?"

A lurch, a limp, a sway and he was in front of the mirror at the end of the bed. His face was not his face, it was coarse white and broken up in lines.

He found a clothing outlet nearby and entered the shop with the air of an important customer. He followed some sense of where the dressing rooms would be. A steward attentively took stock of his situation and hurried to the cubicle with no less than six pairs of pants draped over one arm.
He had no interest in the pants but took a few with him so as not to upset the establishment. Inside the cubicle, in front of the three-sided mirrors he looked silly from every angle. Covered in nudity and grime.

He noticed some blotted stains below his neck, but his face, his face was there. No cuts, no bruises, pupils a little dilated but otherwise fine. That aristocratic nose, all crooked and bent to one side, his pouting lips looked brittle and parched but unharmed. He smiled.

Behind them there was still that full set of teeth… wait, something about the teeth. Something about the mouth…

The store clerk outside heard strange gurgling noises coming from the changing booth, followed by the dull thud of somebody falling against the door. Probably trying to force himself into a size too small, he ruminated, with a smile.

II

The unfortunately named Mr. Nigar stared in the mirror at the unusually happy visage of his old friend and companion: himself. His rotund nose spread itself wide over his face in between dimpled cheeks and above the glistening white of his teeth; he hadn’t smiled like this in seven years.

Mr. Nigar was tall, very dark and had been fond of cycling once, until the age of twenty-two when a freak hillside accident and surgical inadequacy left him without that red, muscular organ we all take for granted in our lives: the tongue.

He had, however, kept his chin up, or whatever was left of it after the reconstructive procedure. He had finished his software engineering degree at college and managed to land a data entry job at a local firm through their disability quota.

He was given a cubicle next to the gas main in the basement and his life had been uneventful and suffocatingly silent since. Until now. Standing in front of the mirror, he felt like a new man.

His mouth felt a bit parched, so he licked his lips, and that’s when it really sunk in; the soft, moist appendage against his skin. The salty taste. Taste! He could taste again.
battered old white (now grey) Mini. At the exit, the security guard tipped his hat as he raised the barrier.

Nigar rolled down his window to say hello.

“Take your sweet time, fish face, no rush here, I only have to go sign in at a dead end corporate job, we can’t all be as successful in life as a pleb.”

The stunned guard stood with the barricade raised for a good five minutes after Nigar had departed, trying to figure out what just happened.

What on earth was wrong with him? Had he hit his head on something this morning? He did not just say what he think he said… did he? No, it wasn’t possible.

“Denial is not just a river in Egypt you know,” his mouth suddenly spoke.

What? How could a mouth speak without its owner’s permission?

“Owner? You don’t own shit, you brown, immigrant turd. Other than a lousy apartment, a lousy car and a lousy sense of direction. We just passed the turn to work.”

He was hallucinating. He must be. What other explanation was there for… this?

“If so, you’ll be the first man, and I used the term loosely here, in the history of the world to hallucinate from a couple of painkillers.”

It was more than a couple! Wait, why was he arguing with a… tongue?

He brought his Mini to a halt, and looked at himself in the rear view mirror. This could not be… real, surely? Yet there he was, getting late for work on account of his mouth.

It’s just your imagination, really, what’s gotten into you?

“You’re too dull to imagine something as delightful as me, pebble brain.”

Should he go back to the doctor… but, work! He had never missed a day in half a decade of it, a habit acquired from being the most expendable part of a work force. But how could he show up to work with a renegade mouth?

“You were going to cause a furor either way, you human latrine, people tend to notice little things like new tongues.”

Well, all he had to do was go down to his desk in the basement. He’d only have to cross reception for that and nobody ever bothered talking to him anyway. Then he would figure this all out. It was definitely his imagination, he reassured himself.

In the parking lot to his office, he thought it better to cover his mouth with one hand.

“Hmmph… oi! Fwhat do fwink fyou’re doing!”

His tongue kept churning out indignities, but only faint mumbles could be heard. He took the backstairs to the basement, purposefully avoiding the lift. The yellow strips of paper and red signpost at the end of the stairway almost broke his heart, “unscheduled maintenance – concerned employee is requested to report to the main desk.”

“Now we’re talking!” the tongue exclaimed as he momentarily lost grip on his face. He went upstairs towards reception, clenching his mouth tightly this time. The woman behind the desk asked if he was okay.

“Fwooi’m…okay enufff fwor…you…honey!”

She assumed he had a cough and told him the managing director had asked him to use his office on the third floor and kindly not go running to the press over the minor matter of a leaking gas pipe, even if it had been leaking for half a month. He nodded and briskly walked to the elevator.

The doors opened, empty. Good. He made his way to the director’s office without incident.

Where’s the sign-in sheet? Where’s the sign-in sheet.

“Ah, Nigar. Just in time. My secretary had to run some unexpected errands down at marketing, make
out, then remembered he had a fear of heights.

“That… was unexpected. Regardless, I am paid to adapt to unexpected situations, it’s how you make a career in management, Nigar, not that this advice will do you any good now that you’re fired!”

“You can’t fire me! I’ll sue for discrimination, you sanctimonious shit stain!”

“You can talk; no disability, no disability employment. We don’t make quotas for jerks! Now, you may fuck off. God, I’ve wanted to say that for six years!”

The tongue kept flapping wildly in his mouth but his larynx was so constricted by the choking sensation in his throat that Nigar could not even let out a mournful, inarticulate protest.

“I see that’s made you mute again. Get out!”

So that was the unceremonious end to his first, and only, job. He roamed the streets for a while, crestfallen; he couldn’t even remember having smiled that morning.

After a while, he walked into a place of religious worship, the Shree Ram Mandir, and trawled over to an ornate black idol. He knelt down, let his mind go blank and through the power of his furrowed brow tried to hold communion with the deity.

“Yes, cry out to that one, I’m sure she’ll give you a hand seeing how she’s got so many of them.”

Shut up. Shut up. Shut up.

“Aaaaargh. Fucking demon tongue! I’ll go back to that doctor and have you ripped out. That devious green eyed bastard! It’s all his fault!”

“Now, now, don’t be so melodramatic. I may be hard to stomach sometimes but at least I’m articulate. You don’t want to go back to being a gagging, mumbling mute do you?”

The silence would be a heavenly reprieve.
“Look, you treat me nice and I’ll treat you less badly. I’m burning up inside your wretched throat, let me taste a cold ale, will you?”

Shut up. I need a cigarette.

“No, no cigarettes. They make me feel ill.”

Be quiet!

“Like you all those years, you mean?”

I am going to cut you out. Entirely, even the parts that were mine, lest they were infected with your malice. Then I’m going to grind you up and feed you to the dogs.

“What dogs?”

Some dogs. Any dogs!

“Oh please, you don’t possess the testicular fortitude to do any such thing. I have an idea, let’s go to a primary school and molest little girls. We’ll tempt them with my natural charm. And ice cream.”

I will need a clamp of course, to hold you in place…

“…And a serrated blade. It helps with the fleshy chunks in the middle. You think you can actually go through with it? Who are you trying to fool, you ingrown scrotal hair.”

I’ll do it. You’ve ruined the best day of my life. I spent every last saving on that horrible surgery. You’ve ruined my life.

“Cry me a river, build me a bridge and fall off of it. You won’t be missed. You’re less useful than a used tampon.”

Why can’t you shut up? I’m going to kill you. I’m going to kill you.

“I’d like to see you try, you ball of dung. Let’s have it then, I’ll bet good money that you will chickenshit out.”

Right. You have yourself a wager, if you let me get the things that I need, that is, you fiend.

“You have my fucking word.”

Says the lying, deceitful...

“Don’t push it you twat, let’s go.”

With surprisingly resolute steps, Nigar made his way to the nearest utility store on Park Avenue and went up to an available clerk.

“Can I help you, sir?”

“Yes, I want to have sex with your wife.”

“Excuse me?”

“Yes, I want to have sex with your wife.”

“What?”

“I said I want two sets of knives. One with a serrated edge.”

The clerk returned a little while later, wiping one hands on his pants, holding a box of knives in the other.

“Here you go sir. Have a look. Anything else?”

“Do you have the clap?”

“I said I want two sets of knives. One with a serrated edge.”

The clerk returned a little while later, wiping one hands on his pants, holding a box of knives in the other.

“Here you go sir. Have a look. Anything else?”

“Do you have the clap?”

“What?”

“A clamp. Do you have it?”

“Of… course.”

The devil tongue was evidently enjoying itself. Nigar swore to repay it in sum.

Soon, he had everything he wanted, he even bought cotton pads and some tape to help stem the
NEUROPEA - PART I

Omer Wahaj

Bumpity bump, my new home goes. Unlike my previous nests, which were usually open and filled with the damp air of chilly green, this is more of a darkened, blackened shell. Not my type of abode. But I don’t have a choice; never had one. Being inside, engulfed in darkness, my mind begins to recall the macabre. I think of caterpillars and how they must feel inside their cocoons, all wrapped up in an unlit void, trapped with a vulnerable hope that they’ll transform into something beautiful someday. I imagine them, lying in a desperate lull, waiting to show their scintillating wings to a sundrenched world.

How many such dreams must I have devoured? I have an acquired taste for those hard exterior shells with a soft filling.

Delicious.

Bumpity bump, my house still bumps. I don’t know where I am going but it feels very far away from home. After every few miles, light pours down from the ceiling and I am able to see bushes, road signs, trees, and other cars whizz by. The scenery hardly changes and it seems like we are quite far from the city. Every time the ceiling opens, I try to crawl out but I only fall deeper inside my dream.

I am a child again and I see myself moving quickly amongst other critters. Sometimes, I outrun them; other times, they overtake me. When I stop, I see my reflection in a small puddle. I try to lap up the water, flick it with my tongue, but it does not taste of memories. All I can taste are feelings. Makes me think if newts have feelings; you are probably wondering the same.

I have never been able to tell when I’m awake and when I’m in a reverie. A long, very long, time ago, an old bearded man in a lotus pond told me something about dreams and butterflies. I don’t know if that was in his dream or mine. Doesn’t matter. As long as I am not a caterpillar fantasizing about being a newt right now.

As the ceiling lifts up again and I see concrete rise up from behind the windscreen, I realize, for the millionth time since my birth, that the way home is illuminating.

Everything keeps moving and I do not know how to make it stop. I don’t know where they are taking bleeding. He went up to the cashier, made an uncalled for comment about his premature baldness and then headed for home.

“Do you really think you’re going to sit there and manage to slice your tongue off, without going weak in the knees and fainting at the sight of your own blood?”

You’re not my tongue, you’re evil and I’m going to kill you.

“Alright, we got off on the wrong foot, I never did like feet anyway, but listen to me, we can make this work.”

Nigar opened the lock on his apartment door, went inside and slammed it shut behind him. He took three deep breaths, a bottle of aftershave from his toilet and a silk handkerchief from his cupboard. He fixed one end of the clamp on the edge of the ceramic table he’d been licking joyfully that morning. Then he bathed the cotton pads in the alcohol from the aftershave, took out the serrated knife, put everything in touching distance of his right hand and sat down on his knees to clamp himself.

“Don’t do this, you idiot! Will you be happy going through life senseless and dumb!!”

It took him a few tries but now the tongue was firmly in place.

“Thyou’re ghoing tho reghreth thisss, athshole!” Just as Mr. Nigar was about to make the fateful incision, the door to his apartment crashed open and a strange man, bare legged, wearing a beige shirt, came tumbling in.

“Oh thwank thfuck!”
They look at me, their sharp blue irises focused on my brown fur, my eyes stuck in caution to the ground in front of me. I cower down unnecessarily. I know it’s all in my mind. None of them really care. Except when I speak to them. I always assume differences; thinking they are the same somehow insults them. They smile at me their heavily accented fangs piercing and their whiskers twitching in the cloudy air.

Signs I can easily read. Understanding them is another matter. I feel amused. Can stories be written without words? Without language? Perhaps language is more than words. More than sentences, paragraphs and speeches.

I know these people are different, but they are also the very same.

Cultural pride is something no one can hide. One can feign it, but never too well. It has nothing to do with creating monuments but with creating pragmatism and control. Buildings from the wartime sixty years ago are not treated as relics; instead they have been restored and made fully functional. There is a lot of history on the streets, especially the town’s main attraction, a brick-road circle preserved for at least the past six hundred years. One of the hidden nooks behind the restaurants has a conserved embedded ancient Roman housing where masters would feast and slaves would bleed. It has now become a place for amusement. Various street acts, live moving statues covered in paint and in full costumes, plastic rubber bands shooting lights up in the sky, an out-of-place band playing some strange melody, all stand around the ancient fountain. An estranged ensemble plays pots and pans, one of its members producing a surprisingly diverse melody with nothing but a flatly rounded metal disc in front of him; in another corner a martial arts expert flaunts the mastery of his mind over his body by performing seemingly impossible tricks.

Yet, the colors of modernity lining the rustic area fail to take anything away from the scenery; rather, they add life to the antiquity of the locale, making a nexus where the past meets the present.
Just a little bit farther from the town circle is the city’s main river. Lined by old churches and cathedrals, markets, and houses on both sides, the river flows up into the main city, where tall buildings make up a modern skyline. Ferries go up and down the river. The river itself is muddy and grim; I'd never swim in it. It's still a whole lot cleaner than the stream that runs through my city.

She eyes me through the smoke of the cigarette she holds in her paws as I sit on one of the tables by the side of the road, an empty notebook in front of me. She is only mildly attractive and I notice she does not look local. Her fur is slightly darker, her face much thinner with well-defined features. Her pointed ears quiver in the wind as she runs her paws over her neck, which is bright white, as if it has been bleached repeatedly over the years.

She smiles her snout at me. "Don't worry, I don't bite."

Not understanding her, I just stare at her with a dumb look. She repeats herself, in English this time.

I smile back. She orders a glass of orange juice and lights up another cigarette. She offers me one. I refuse.

She tells me about the concert she is in town for; she is a violinist. We talk about music, traveling, writing, and different cities, including Faucs City, where she is from. We laugh, share drinks, eat and exchange numbers. I don't think about her again the whole day.

The next time I think of Francoise, I am on a train out of Volphenberg. My notebook sits on my lap, still empty. The scenery outside the window keeps me interested. I step out at the next stop for lunch. I miss my train and take a bus.

People have been telling me all bad things about where I’m headed. That it is a dirty town, full of criminals and degenerates. As I approach the city, I realize that it is not as filthy as others might have you believe. It looks daunting, like a city in ruins. But I soon realize that everything in Wratown is underground.

The bus stops outside the train station and I make my way inside to get to the city. The inside of the station looks like a bombed out shelter, with abandoned windows and a broken round stairwell descending into the darkness in the middle. Some signs in a strange language point up ahead. I drag my prehensile tail over the marbled floor, as the path takes me further inside the station. The floor gives way to stairs and I keep going deeper under the ground.

The way down seems quite dubious but I have no choice but to follow the signs. I start thinking about turning back, when I take a turn and stop, fixated. The sudden lights and brilliance of the train station's main terminal catch me off guard.

The whole place is alive with all sorts of international franchises, bookstores, bars, and cafes. Thousands of people run, shout, and walk around the area, some looking at the schedule boards for their trains, others running towards the platforms to find them. The roof of the underground station is extremely high, and looking ahead, I can clearly see the different levels that the station is built on. The building itself is quite old and I can tell that this station has been in business for many, many years. It is the ceiling that tells the real story.

Five large pillars arch up to meet at a single point in the center of the ceiling. The pillars are solid stone and seem to have been carved by hand. Pictures are engraved both on the pillars as well as the ceiling, completing a mural that is both picturesque and haunting at the same time. I do not know the history behind the images but I can tell that put together, they must have told an epic story. Some of the drawings still visible and recognizable show depictions of war and sometimes of people frolicking about in what seems like hedonistic festivals. The pillars are lined with carvings of flowers and vines that emanate from the form of a large vase atop each pillar. The concrete is chipped in places and many of the engravings are missing, a testimony to years and years of weathering away. Each crack, each imperfection seems to shout out a different story, but sadly I am unable to hear them. The sizzle of frying burgers and the dings of cash registers down below drown these stories. Even if I could hear them, I wouldn't have understood; the fake modernity sprawling underneath the ceiling would have obscured their meaning.

After skulking about the station, trying to get my bearings, I finally make it out the other side and into the city. It reminds me a lot of my own city, only with people who were slightly richer, a bit more sophisticated and educated, and with a lot more civic sense. Even though the natives are not as rich as their neighbors, they are just as much cultured, and behaved much better than people did in my country. I feel a sense of kinship with them, even though we look nothing alike.

Their city is filled with old, historic buildings that have been restored to serve as tourist attractions. Most of the buildings are ancient but magnificently renovated and preserved. Others are in ruin, but somehow,
try to figure out where he is from when he reads my mind and tells me he's from Kayneighnburg, as his tongue drops and he wags his tail excitedly.

“You want to guess where I’m from?” Malena asks me with a smile, stretching her arms over her head. She reminds me of Francoise. I know where they both come from.

I have an acquired taste for those hard exterior shells with a soft filling.

My notebook is filling up nicely now. Malena tries to read it. I explain what I’m writing and why.

It takes up most of the night and the world whizzes past us outside; yet through blackened windows, we can hardly see anything.

Bumpity bump, my house still bumps.

Goodbyes are always difficult. We all part our ways in Kayneighnburg, some sooner and one later. I end up visiting a long-dead musical genius in an abandoned castle in the middle of the city.

All I can taste are feelings.

The next day, I’m in the city of Horaces. With its low flying clouds, small hunchbacked hills and crystal lakes, it truly feels like paradise on Earth.

It is here that I’d realize wishes and dreams do come true.

It is also here I’d realize that I would have no idea what to do when they did.

In the city, I find a vase. This is no ordinary vase. It is one that I loved but had broken many years ago. Not a replica and not a vase that looked like it, but the very same vase. I had broken it into a thousand pieces eight years ago and I suddenly found that it still existed in its complete form in the city of Horaces.

When I broke it, I felt terribly sad. I knew that it would never be whole again. I’d cry over it, time and time again. The sense of loss was too much, all hope eliminated by evidence. Yet, that didn’t stop me from wishing and dreaming. I would wish that it was whole again and I’d dreamt that I had it back.

Others are in ruin, but somehow, they add to the antiquity and the beauty of the city instead of making it look unsightly and ugly. These people, admittedly not as resourceful as they could have been, are aware of their heritage and they do not miss any opportunity to flaunt it.

At night, the city really comes alive. Young, nubile girls walk about in the streets with pamphlets and fliers advertising the various bars and clubs located under the old buildings. They specifically target the foreigners, who presumably have more money than the locals and who would be willing to spend it on such idiosyncrasies as absinth, barbiturates, and cheap sex.

The next day in the city finds me sitting inside a nook of an old building. My ears, which would otherwise be pointing straight and up, droop low and the hair around my neck feels thick, stiff, and knotted. My notebook is open and lying on the table in front of me again, empty still. I try to describe what happened to me the night before, but I find that no one can really describe a night out in Wratown; one has to live it.

Sitting in this crevice, away from the street and surrounded by apartment buildings, I realize how much I like such hidden places that are so widespread in this region. These are the kind of places I am going to miss the most when I’d go back home. It also makes me realize how different my people are from the people that I have been visiting, not only in the way that we look physically but also in the way that we think, in the values we hold, and in the ideas that we entertain. Yet, animals, that’s what we all are, some slightly more civilized than others.

That’s when the first words of my story come to me. I begin scribbling in my notebook.

Bumpity bump, my new home goes.

It is on the train out to Kayneighnburg that I meet Malena, Jurgen, and Mahmut. Mahmut is the most talkative of the three. He is a native of Wratown and it shows in his beady red eyes. He is constantly chirping away, in a high-pitched voice and little bursts of squeaks and squeals, about how he is the son of one of the richest men in the city and how he has so many cars. He pokes his tongue out and runs it over his two front teeth that are quite big and stand out as one of his main facial features and his whiskers twitch excitedly as he talks.

Malena and Jurgen are also bored. “He has been talking non-stop for the past two hours,” Malena tells me. Jurgen agrees. I can tell that Jurgen is not from Volphenberg, even though his accent is the same. I
And then, suddenly, now, I see it again, back all together, in the same form that I remember, the same form I had.

My most important dream and my most longed for wish, both come true.

But I immediately realize that I cannot keep the vase. I don't have any place to put it anymore. It had meant the world to me, but now it has become a memory pushed into the deep recesses of my mind. I have learnt to live without it for so many years and I do not know what to do with it anymore.

It's strange. But the sadness after finding the vase again is much deeper than the sadness I felt when I lost it first.

Soon, it is time for me to leave this city too.

Before leaving, I deliberately smash the vase on the side of the road.

I don't know if that was in her dream or mine.

No use in keeping hope alive.

You never realize that you have been dreaming until you wake up. You become aware of your dream in that instant you regain consciousness from sleep. Makes you think if you were actually dreaming or just remembering the memories of your dreams. I wonder if my memories are like that as well, that they are only something that I remember and that they never actually happened.

Someone rightly said that life doesn't change; you just become more comfortable with your core misery, which is just another form of being happy.

The way home is illuminating.

It is on the plane back to my city that I realize nothing has changed, except some new memories, some great, some horrible. But isn't life just that: a series of memories that you remember in context of someone or something?

I remember losing my tail by the pond and now I find myself at the river again.
On the beaches quite close to my home, lives the Emperor of the Sea. He is the one they call when they are caught in strong wave-formed storms. He appears in white clothes with a white beard and only the simple people can see him.

I swear to the veracity of this truth. If I have lied, let fire burn down my house if I’m at home, asleep in my bed; let my train derail and be destroyed when it’s traveling at hundreds of kilometers an hour; let my boat capsize if I’m at sea and stuck in a storm; let me eat bullet-ridden corpses or swim in boiling blood of my fellow citizens when I become a ghost.
the birth of the great Hamza, the lands he would conquer, the way it would all end. But how he would do all that was left undefined, open to the interpretation of whoever was narrating the tale. Here was a story with a beginning and an end, but no particular desire to reach that end: a book that, in theory, was the sum of all possible plots of its story and could therefore be written, rewritten and expanded limitlessly.

Interesting though that is, where’s the thrill in a story that gives everything away before it even gets off the ground? “It’s in the small episodes,” Farooqi explains. “One story starts, then it finishes; and then another begins. So you get the thrill and then you get that release. It’s a unique story telling experience in terms of an epic or a longer narrative.”

Dastan-e Amir Hamza thus forever existed in the moment, and that was what constantly drove the action within it. It evolved according to the needs of the narrator, who had only a very basic obligation to be loyal to what had passed or what lay in the future. The narrator’s needs, in turn, depended on the response of the audience.

One of the interesting consequences of this format was that the story of Amir Hamza truly became a story for everyone, regardless of their origin or station in life. “If you read any books on literary theory or the world classics you’ll find mention of Alif Laila and of the Shahnama,” Farooqi points out, “but these were very different books.” The Shahnama was a commissioned history for the king’s personal library; accordingly, it was decorous towards the emperor and made him look good in all his adventures. Alif Laila (better known as A Thousand and One Nights) was meant for the masses: a collection of folk tales that had been told in India, Iran, the Middle East and Central Asia, and did not paint a rosy picture of the decadent princes and kings of these dominions. Amir Hamza, on the other hand, contained both worlds: that of the people and that of the nobility. The dastan-go would visit each assembly – people and nobility – and would accordingly adopt the medium of his audience. The narrator’s style would thus change from rowdy and evocative for an audience of commoners to circumspect in the company of men of nobility. This fluid style eventually became a unique feature of the written dastan, combining both “body and elegance”, in Farooqi’s words.

A particular mix of social sensibilities, fascination with the written word and love for fantasy attracted the translator to this work, and to understand these, one would have to go back further into his past. The young Musharraf Ali Farooqi was an insatiable reader. A culture of reading was nourished and supported in his household. One of his uncles would bring storybooks as gifts for him and his siblings when he visited, and their father would take them by way of excursion to the only bookshop in Hyderabad, called Adbiyat.
He and his younger brother (pictured below) inherited the back issues of the children’s magazines that his two elder sisters subscribed to: Taleem o Tarbiat, Noniwal, Bachon ki Dunia. This was when the seeds of his interest in fantasy literature were laid.

The juvenile versions of Urdu classics that he read introduced him to many of the whimsical characters and stories that he would be inspired by later in life, when he started writing children’s books. He loved Chalaak Khargosh Ke Karnamay (in part inspired by Brere Rabbit) and would religiously read Tarzan’s adventures, published daily in the newspaper Jang.

“You can say that these were not realistic tales as compared to stories nowadays, which have all kinds of themes from cancer to divorce, but the latter is not my idea of children’s stories,” he says. “Literature has a very central function: to tell a good story. It does not have to have a message or a moral every time.”

As soon as he was old enough, Farooqi started spending all his pocket money on Ishtiaq Ahmed’s novels, then Jasoosi Digest and the Imran Series. “I would literally bring fifteen or twenty Jasoosi Digests or Suspense Digests, pile them up on my bedside and finish them within a month,” he remembers, his eyes suddenly lighting up. “Then I would sell them back and buy new ones with some more money. I’ve read at least a thousand digests, if not more.”

There is an enduring sense of mischief and a certain irreverence in Farooqi’s otherwise serious demeanour that is very clearly influenced by what he read and what he saw at home as a child. His first novel (the one that no one remembers; he is planning to re-release it in Pakistan now) was almost wholly inspired by his own family. His Nana probably deserved a whole novel on his own: at the grand old age of 85, he would put out advertisements in the newspaper soliciting marriage proposals for a 55-year-old bachelor.

“And he would give me the letter to post. I’d be reading it as I went to the newspaper office, obviously,” Farooqi laughs, visibly delighted by his grandfather’s antics. “It was an open secret that he was sending these ads to the paper. Everyone was worried that he might send a letter to someone who was in our social circle – that would be a huge embarrassment. So everyone we knew had been advised that if such a letter came to their house they should just ignore it!”

This apparent interest in the morally dubious appeared again and again in Farooqi’s work later in life. Dastan-e Amir Hamza (2007) and Hoshruba (2009) were both tales that celebrated high adventure and all the waywardness that went with it (Amir Hamza, for instance, ran on three main principles: Enchantment, Trickery and Warfare. Playing Fair, Sharing and Making Peace did not appear in the list.)

In the writer’s second novel, The Story of a Widow (2010 – shortlisted for the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature), the protagonist sought to break away from social norms that limited her chance at happiness and thus invited her whole family’s censure. Farooqi’s ongoing project, called Scandals of Creation, also picks up themes that showcase anything but mankind’s best practices.

From the outside, it may seem that Farooqi instinctively seeks opportunities through his writing to escape the mundane and the morally prescriptive. But the truth is simpler and perhaps more profound: to his mind, he is simply remaining true to his socio-cultural roots.

“Look at Amir Hamza,” he offers as an example. “He comes from a tradition that is embedded in Islam, and yet you find him drinking and having affairs within the narrative. Those were our elders who were listening to those stories, yet no one objected to them because that was part of our culture and there was an acceptance for this way of life. There’s been a fundamental change of aesthetic between what we were then and what we are now. It is a big cultural change, but you see, cultures are not supposed to change – they’re supposed to evolve.”

But what of that fundamental pillar of modern-day storytelling: the soap opera? Soaps, from The Bold and The Beautiful to Kyoon ke Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi, have a huge audience across the subcontinent.
Entire families sit around the TV to watch as characters enact the most sordid aspects of human behavior, including alcoholism, adultery, telling lies, embezzlement and even murder. One could even argue that the soap has the same format as the dastan: a story that could go on forever, episodes, stalling and ‘cliffhanger’ endings, never-ending trickery and intrigue and so on. Could it not be, then, that the institution of the dastan has just shifted medium rather than died out because of intolerance for its content?

“You make an interesting point,” is his response, “but there is a difference. We’ll watch all the soaps, but if we try to mimic them here, there will be an uproar. We’ll watch everybody else doing things that our own Musalman girls cannot do.”

Farooqi is of the opinion that if we don’t know who we are, it is because we have completely divorced ourselves from our tradition and language. Indeed, one of the paradoxes of Pakistan’s history is that despite being famously founded by the “Urdu-speaking elite” of the subcontinent, English was seen as the way forward for the new country after independence. Farooqi’s theory is that the members of this cadre were Urdu-speaking only by virtue of the places they came from and the culture they had originally belonged to, but were so completely immersed in the colonial ethos that they were not seriously invested in Urdu by the time Partition came about.

“These people didn’t really engage with their culture,” he says. “All their children used to go to study abroad: Oxbridge was the ‘thing to do’. And this class that had power and was at the forefront always considered its own literature – that is the novel and the dastan – a little subpar.”

By this reasoning, a dichotomy was created when Pakistan was founded, whereby the people who were in charge of making policies on Education and Culture were no longer subscribed to local education or their own culture. “Tell me, who could be proud that their children speak nothing but English?” Farooqi asks. “What kind of people treat their own language as inferior?”

Fortunately, he has hope for the future. Today’s generation, he finds, is more aware and culturally engaged and does not have to deal with the complexities of its grandparents’ society, where things like having to learn the Queen’s English in order to write application letters were very real requirements if one was expected to get anywhere with the colonial administration. “This generation is the one that can bring change,” he says.

It was out of these sentiments that the Urdu Project was born: an online initiative spearheaded by Farooqi to bring together all available Urdu lexicons and integrate them with Unicode text, thus making the Urdu language more accessible to web readers.

The project was Farooqi’s “dream for a collaborative effort where everyone pools in and creates these devices that make access to language and literature so easy.” Many people find it difficult to read calligraphed Urdu text on the net, but if it were to appear with translations and all available explications, it could help people access it and then take it to the next level, where it could be translated, shared with others and debated.

And because the Urdu Project was supposed to be a collaborative effort, Farooqi is not willing to pursue grant funding for it.

“If as a people we can’t collectively do something about our language, then I’m not going to beg for money to make it happen,” he smiles. “I know money makes a lot of difficult things easier, but… you know… there must be idealism in something.”

More pragmatic people would consider this philosophy to be as fantastic as Amir Hamza’s exploits. But the thing to realize is this: most of us spend our lives thinking of how we would like to be pursuing our passion. Musharraf Ali Farooqi is living a life in which he only pursues his passion. There’s something to be learnt from that.
The respectable authors only include those who have written in the realistic vein: Prem Chand, Krishan Chander, Bedi, Manto, Mumtaz Mufti, Ashfaq Ahmed, Quratulain Hyder, Abdullah Hussain and others. These people – great writers, no doubt – wrote only about the real, the relatable, and the plausible. There was no room for fantasy, or hyper-reality, in their house.

In Western literature, on the other hand, there’s a rich variety of writers who located the same insights into the human condition and the same truths through genre fiction, and became as popular and respected as their more ‘highbrow’ counterparts. For every Hawthorne, there’s a Poe. For every Dostoyevsky, there’s a Bierce. For every Bronte, there’s an Agatha Christie. For every Hemingway, there’s a Chandler.

People like Poe and Lovecraft and Robert Howard elevated literature through their explorations of the macabre, the fantastic, the base and the ugly. They provided inroads into the unexplored areas of human psyche. While Raskolnikov pondered over a moral dilemma in the face of murder, Conan delighted in the crushing of his enemies and the lamentation of their women. Hammett’s Marlowe plumbed the same existential depths as Camus’s Stranger.

But, the status quo in Urdu literature did not let any other form of expression and storytelling come to fore; it still doesn’t. Genre exercises have been limited to cheap digests mostly.

Now Urdu digests have a very rich history in Pakistan. They are widely popular all across the country. They are published monthly, are inexpensive and contain enough pulpy material to keep the reader’s imagination fired up till the next issue.

I got introduced to digests as a kid through my older sister, a voracious reader, who was into an Urdu publication by the name of Suspense Digest. Suspense, along with Jasoosi, is probably the most famous of all digests printed in Pakistan. It publishes original short stories, along with translations of Western ones by mostly obscure, and sometimes famous, authors. The stories fall under the genre category because of their frequent fantastical content such as the long running series in Suspense Digest, *Devta*, which is a spy yarn revolving around a highly powerful telepath.

Let me explain what I mean by “genre” here. Genre, as an umbrella term, describes fiction that is hyper-realistic. Genre fiction isn’t preoccupied with real life as we observe it daily; instead, it elicits intense feelings and directly engages the imagination. It thrills, shocks, scares, and transports. Action, adventure, sci-fi, crime, espionage, mystery, horror, fantasy, you get my drift.

Storytelling requires, essentially, a heightening of events and emotions to create the desired impact, and it wouldn’t be complete without genre.

In Urdu literature, however, there exists a weird contradiction.
them to indulge their imagination at a raw and primal level.

Printed on cheap recycled paper and 12 to 15 pages long, these tiny books had Frank Frazetta-inspired covers, and were available at all book and stationery shops, even general stores. They were sold for one or two rupees at the most, with a particularly thick tome running as high as Rs. 5. A few candies along with one or two of these volumes made for a cheap, satisfying trip to the market for youngsters back in the day.

There were also the children's magazines. Taleem-o Tarbiyat, the time-honored monthly magazine run by Pakistan's largest publisher, Ferozesons, and the Karachi-based children's literary magazine, Aankh Micholi.

Growing up, I was used to tame Enid Blyton mysteries, and kid-friendly stories in Taleem-o Tarbiyat and Aankh Micholi. In those tales, little children, through some clever sleuth work, helped catch the culprits of such dire and depraved cases as the loss of the Golliwog's tail, the disappearance of Uncle Kami’s barfi (a local sweetmeat) and the broken glass in the kitchen on a rainy, ominous night.

While high-quality genre writing was frequent in Urdu digests, not many ‘respectable’ Urdu authors dabbled in it. One exception though was A. Hameed, a great writer and precursor to the Romantic Movement in Urdu Literature, who penned a wonderful series of books called Amber Naag Maria, an exciting and action-filled tale about a shape-shifting snake set in a world of espionage and international intrigue. It was serialized in Taleem-o Tarbiyat. I remember I used to wait breathlessly for every new installment.

While genre fiction never got the respect it deserved in Urdu literature, perceived always as lowbrow and beneath the tastes of more discerning and high-minded readers and writers, one name elevated it with his distinct brand of storytelling. That name is Ibn-e Safi.

Ibn-e Safi, born Asrar Ahmed, wrote spy novels in Urdu, with the literary precision and elegance of a master. He is perhaps the largest selling Urdu author ever. Even Agatha Christie was a fan, remarking, “I don't know Urdu but have knowledge of detective novels of the subcontinent. There is only one original writer: Ibn-e Safi.”

A highly educated and cultured man, our very own Arthur Conan Doyle, Ibn-e Safi gained prominence through a series of novels called Jasoosi Duniya, featuring two spies, Colonel Faridi and Captain Hamid in a mentor-apprentice relationship.

These were crisp, ‘family-friendly’ adventures. The plots were larger-than-life, featuring megalomaniacal villains that wanted to take over the world. But the extremely witty banter of the no-nonsense Colonel and his happy-go-lucky, philandering Captain transformed the stories to high art. Ibn-e Safi’s delicate wit and the chemistry between Faridi and Hamid can be sampled in this translated excerpt from the Jasoosi Duniya novel “Faridi and Leonard”:

Hamid, after having heard the whole tale, picked up the discarded blouse from the chair and started sniffing it.

“What are you doing?” Faridi asked seriously.

“I’m trying to smell her age.” Hamid replied. “After seeing last night’s picture, I’ve become quite worried about you.”

“If I’m an ass, then you shouldn’t doubt my seriousness.”

While the Jasoosi Duniya series was extremely popular, it was through the Imran Series that Ibn-e Safi cemented his stature as a literary icon. Imran Series can be compared to Sherlock Holmes in terms of popularity in Urdu fiction. Its protagonist, Ali Imran, is a goofy, flirtatious young agent of an elite secret service. The service is run by an unseen character called X2, not unlike Charlie from Charlie’s Angels; he only communicates through voice and none of the other characters have seen him or know his true identity.

But, we, the readers know who he is, and that’s what makes Imran Series such a phenomenon. For the legendary, enigmatic X2 is none other than Ali Imran himself! The silly, apparently incompetent guy is actually a cunning strategist and the head of the country’s top spy network. Think Inspector Clouseau as James Bond as M.

Apart from Imran, Ibn-e Safi’s world is populated by many other colorful supporting players, such as Black Zero, Juliana Fitzwater, Safdar Saeed, and Sir Sultan, each character having a distinct personality.
Ibn-e Safi was not only one of Pakistani fiction’s most widely read authors, he was also one of the most progressive and liberal.

His writings brought society’s modern and urban facets to fore. His characters had adventures all around the world and hobnobbed in hotels, night clubs and bars with imaginative names such as High Circle and Fizaro.

Such was the power of Ibn-e Safi’s writing that famous Urdu poet and screenwriter Javed Akhtar once said, “Ibn-e Safi’s novels created an imaginary city that could have been San Francisco of the ’50s (in Pakistan). His penchant for villains with striking names like Gerald Shastri and Sang Hi taught me the importance of creating larger-than-life characters such as Gabbar Singh and Mogambo.”

The Imran Series was so popular it continued even after Ibn-e Safi’s death. Other writers, most prominently Mazhar Kaleem, picked up the mantle and kept churning out Imran Series novels. However, they turned the originals’ direction to a more nationalistic bent, as is the predominant trend in Pakistani literature. Imran became a hard-nosed nationalist and the series acquired the tone of jingoism often associated with the country’s despotic ruler at the time, Ziaul Haq. In essence, the sophisticated magic and urban secularism of Ibn-e Safi got lost in that era’s nationalistic, anti-India and anti-Israel rhetoric.

In the mid-1970s, as Ibn-e Safi’s writing career was in its last stretch – he died in 1980 – another writer arrived to capture the stage of Urdu spy novels. His name was Ishtiaq Ahmed, and for the next twenty years or so, he would fill the vacuum left by Ibn-e Safi’s novels, despite there being major differences between their writing styles.

Where Ibn-e Safi’s books had an exclusively adult flavor, Ishtiaq Ahmed wrote spy and mystery novels for the tweens. They were his biggest audience. Perhaps it was because the youth were a major part of his novels.

He had three separate series going on at the same time. Two of these three – the Inspector Jamshed series and the Inspector Kamran Mirza series – had the eponymous officer of the special police and his respective trio of children as the lead characters.

The stories revolved around these two sets of school-age kids (Mehmood, Farooq, Farzana and Asif, Aftab, Farhat) helping their honest and extremely skilled fathers, Inspector Jamshed and Inspector Kamran Mirza respectively, save the fictional country of Ahmed’s novels, Pakland, from the evil plans of scheming villains time and again.

The third series actually had four young men, the Shauki brothers, who ran a private detective company. It is believed that Ahmed based the Shauki brothers’ characters on himself and his three brothers.

Ahmed’s books were tall tales and for young adults, the ultimate fantasy: naïve, chaste and full of heroism. But where Ibn-e Safi’s novels were excellent prose, Ahmed’s stories would be considered positively kitsch by literary critics. In fact, purists would brand mentioning Ibn-e Safi and Ahmed in the same sentence as sacrilege. For where Ibn-e Safi was all class and elegance with rich, fully-rounded characters and clockwork-tight plots, Ahmed’s writing was overly simplistic. His heroes were too goody-good and the villains single-mindedly nefarious. There was no distinguishing color or texture to them. Ahmed’s plots also tended to be quite straightforward and rather sloppy at times. Even though as a boy, I was addicted to his novels, in retrospect they seem even poorly crafted.

The biggest difference, perhaps, lies in basic ideology. Ibn-e Safi was an urbane, well-read man and quite progressive in his writing. His was a world of lounges, discotheques and cosmopolitan lifestyles. The characters were literate and extremely witty, trading quips and jibes worthy of Wodehouse.

Ahmed was a conservative Muslim and used his novels to push his Islamist, jingoistic agenda, a vile symptom that permeated most mainstream Pakistani art in the ’80s.

A liberal purveyor of conspiracy theory and propagandist hokum, Ahmed’s villains were thinly disguised Israeli or Indian agents trying to weaken the Islamic state of his novels, Pakland. One of his lengthier novels, Baatil Qayamat (False Apocalypse), even featured a villain whose plot of world domination revolved around his appearing as Christ-reincarnate and getting the Muslim world to follow him. The plan of course was foiled by the virtuous and pious Inspector Jamshed, with the help of his similarly chaste but wisecracking kids, Mehmood, Farooq and Farzana.
While religion rarely figured in Ibn-e Safi’s novels, Ahmed’s characters never missed their daily prayers and espoused the virtues of Islam at every possible opportunity. And most dangerously, Ahmed also used the supplemental pages in his books to print advertisements carrying hate messages against the Qadiani community and overt propaganda for Islamist organizations.

Ahmed continues to write, but the general decline of Urdu readership, the failure of Urdu writers to experiment with genre, and the complete dearth of adapting Urdu fiction to movies or television have together made it difficult for Urdu spy novels to gain the popularity they once enjoyed.

The Indian publisher Random House released one novel of Ibn-e Safi’s in 2010, translated to English by Bilal Tanweer, and another group of Indian publishers, Blaft Publications in association with Tranquebar Press published four Ibn-e Safi novels in 2011, translated by Shamsur Faruqi. There is a chance that the many Pakistan-based online forums devoted to Urdu fiction and prose might lead to a renewed interest in these novels, perhaps by sharing scanned copies or PDFs of these books.

For a believer, what can be imagined is infinitely more powerful than what can be seen and experienced. Urdu fiction requires a healthy dose of imagination to make the young generation stop and take notice. With translation and digitization of these works picking up speed, there is a sliver of hope that Pakistan’s current generation of young adults might get to taste the finesse of Ibn-e Safi’s works, even if not in their original Urdu form, and that someday genre fiction will be as celebrated in Urdu as it is in Western literature.

Photo credits:
1. Ambar Naag Maria cover: alladinkachiragh.blogspot.com
2. Jasoosi Duniya cover: jasoosinovelsurdu.blogspot.com

UNKIND TRIBUTES

MAHWASH BADAR

“Only a few individuals succeed in throwing off mythology in a time of a certain intellectual supremacy – the mass never frees itself.”

CARL JUNG, Psychology of the Unconscious

It was as far back as the early 1900s when Carl Gustav Jung proposed the concept of collective unconscious. As postulated in his analytical psychology, Jung suggested that there are various primordial images that we inherit from our ancestors: ideas, thoughts, fears, and behaviors that have appeared consistently across time. For example: a child’s attachment to his/her mother and the universal fear of the dark. These are innate traits that are not taught or learnt; they simply linger as predetermined constructs of human personality.

If applied to literature, Jung’s concept describes how various characters (or archetypes) such as the wise old man, wicked witch, angels and demons appear throughout our narratives. James Bond has achieved an archetypal status in twentieth century literature and film and has inspired countless similar characters. But what happens when Quentin Rowan (also known as QR Markham) writes Assassin of Secrets, borrowing liberally from the Bond novels? The concept of the collective unconscious provides us with a unique perspective for observing and analyzing the notions of plagiarism and falsification that often occur in the literary world. Maybe James Frey needed more compelling ‘situations’ when he was writing A Million Little Pieces and so borrowed from a collective unconscious experiences that he may have felt strongly; experiences that may not have been necessarily his own, but relatable to him in some way. Who draws the line, as it were, between fact and fiction?

To embellish is human

Researchers studying the concept of memory have come up with various theories as to how human beings process, store and retrieve memory. It has been noted that embellishment of facts is, in fact, a developmental milestone. Studies have shown that children often create new realities based on existing ones; the better they are at doing so, the better storytellers they are likely to grow up to be. However, as we grow older, things get more complicated. Memory processes and recall and incorporating real facts into something that will pique the general readers’ interest have to be carefully considered.

These factors apply to fiction as well as non-fiction authors. A non-fiction writer (e.g. an
autobiographer) would be expected, as a matter of course, to be honest about the facts that he/she puts in writing. However, in some cases, such as Greg Mortenson’s *Three Cups of Tea*, we find allegations that the author fabricated events and situations. It becomes important to view such controversies with a different lens, to see whether they are fact or fiction or a bit of both. Research does tell us, after all, that anxiety, stress and physical circumstances all play key roles in recalling memory and rebuilding memories. Writing memoirs, therefore, is not as simple as it appears.

A level of honesty is also required in fiction writing. This means that even though the author can create whatever characters or situation as he/she pleases, it is important that they are the author’s own ideas and not someone else’s. Even though fiction writers sometimes ‘borrow’ from reality to depict their stories, it is imperative that they do not ‘steal’ from other writers or storytellers. Many authors, upon being charged with plagiarism, argue and justify that they wrote as honestly as they possibly could but unconsciously ended up sounding like someone else. Kaavya Viswanathan is one author who argued exactly that.

**“Accidental Borrowings” and International Scandals**

*How Opal Mehta Got Kissed, Got Wild and Got A Life*, published in 2006, became an instant hit for which the young author attracted much attention. This chocolate-chip-ice-cream ‘chick-lit’ described a hardworking Indian student’s attempts to turn herself into a more “American” teenager, vying to be academically and socially acceptable. Everything was going perfectly for the author – Kaavya Viswanathan, fresh out of high school, had signed another book deal, Dreamworks was going to turn it into a major motion picture – until the allegations of plagiarism began. Viswanathan defended herself by saying she didn’t mean to ‘copy’ passage after passage, line after line, from literary works and did not ‘mean’ to turn them into her highly publicized debut.

It is in instances like these that the fine line between literary commonalities and directly borrowed ideas becomes blurred. Take a look at some of the instances of “accidental borrowings” in Viswanathan’s book, many of which came from Megan McCafferty’s novels *Sloppy Firsts* and *Second Helpings*.

McCafferty wrote in one of her books: “Finally four major departmental stores and 170 specialty shops later, we were done.”

And in another passage, “‘Omigod!’ shrieked Sara, taking a pink tube top emblazoned with a glittery Playboy bunny out of her shopping bag.”

This is what appeared in Viswanathan’s book: “Five departmental stores and 170 specialty shops later we were done and I was sick of listening to her hum along Alicia Keys, and worn out from her resisting her efforts to buy me a pink tube top emblazoned with a glittery Playboy bunny.”

This appears to be a clear case of plagiarism; however, Viswanathan claimed she has ‘photographic memory’ or as it is medically termed, eidetic imagery. She said that she might have been inspired by many authors (Salman Rushdie’s *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, Sophie Kinsella’s *Can You Keep a Secret*, Meg Cabot’s *The Princess Diaries* and Tanuja Desai Hidier’s *Born Confused*) but maintained that she had not plagiarized any material whatsoever. This came after it was discovered that several more of her passages were almost exact copies of others from various books and authors, including those she was inspired by.

This occurrence is more common than one might imagine. J. K. Rowling herself has been taken to court on charges of plagiarism. Nancy Kathleen Stouffer, author of a series of books called *The Legend of Rah and the Muggles* featuring a bespectacled, dark-haired boy called Larry Potter as the lead character, filed against Rowling when the first Potter book came out. Rowling eventually won the lawsuit, but one wonders if this was an act of plagiarism that could not be proven in court; the similarities between Larry Potter, his name and demeanor, and the word “Muggles” are too analogous to be set aside as mere coincidence. Did Rowling end up making hundreds of millions of dollars by copying someone else’s ideas? Of course, the stories that she wrote might have been her own, but can she be credited with that initial idea, that vibrant spark of creativity?

In cases such as these, it is important to address the creative mechanics of writers and to explore how memory contributes to such processes as plagiarism and distorted or fabricated facts. Memory recall is an aspect that has to be considered when reflecting upon such ideas of fact versus fiction, especially in non-fiction writing.

In Greg Mortenson’s *Three Cups of Tea*, for instance, the author recounted an inspirational story of survival and payback that led to the founding of a charity to set up schools in Pakistan. Last year, Jon Krakauer disputed Mortenson’s accounts of building the schools and made several allegations against Mortenson, including the cogency of the charity known as Central Asia
in memory recall and even if the data were recorded with derisory attention, recall would be almost perfect. This might explain her eidetic memory; however, this remains a controversial concept and something that does not as yet have solid scientific basis.

With Greg Mortenson, the evidence of eyewitness testimony being faulty may have been the case. Studies suggest that accounts of memory recall were based on what kind of clues were suggested for recall, hence responses were quite easily tainted by present experiences rather than being objective reports of the past. However, critics claim that motivation to sell the book may have been an important factor for Mortenson to write events that probably did not happen. Controversies such as these may always remain absolutely unsolved, but it can be safely stated that the reproduction of items from memory is never a clear, cutout process, and is almost always vulnerable to contamination.

Unoriginal Sin

However important the role memory plays in creating works of fiction, writers must always be vigilant of ‘conscious’ or ‘unconscious’ borrowing of words, facts, stories, characters and themes. Authors can probably lean on a genre for creating a framework for a story (rags-to-riches, boy-meets-girl, coming-of-age are popular examples of themes that contemporary writers explore for fiction). They can even choose certain types of narratives (first person, sweeping back and forth between a number of protagonists, story-teller, etc.), as well as use various archetypes (tortured hero, fallen angels, beat cop, etc.). What they cannot and must not do is let their work be an overwhelming ‘imitation’ or ‘inspiration’ from other works of fiction to an extent that their own unique style and substance is lost due to plagiarism. Signature works are never overwhelmingly inspired; classics became classics because they were the first of their kind. It is a tough job indeed to be original and to relate to the audience en masse. It is also difficult to write an autobiography where grand achievements aren't achieved or a novel that does not strongly remind the reader of another novel they had recently read. But at the end of the day, it is this effort to be original, to be unique in one's own artistic way that creates new worlds for the reader to explore and enjoy. This triumphs over plagiarism every time.

Institute (CAI). Krakauer asserted that many of the schools that the CAI claims to have built are not functional at all. In the book, Mortenson also claimed that he got lost while climbing down K2 and ended up in Korphe in Pakistan. This story is alleged to be false and merely an exaggeration on Mortenson's part. In his sequel, Stones into Schools: Promoting Peace with Books, Not Bombs, in Afghanistan and Pakistan, Mortenson wrote about how he was captured and kidnapped by the Taliban. Later allegations claimed that he was merely a guest for a group of people who were not associated with the Taliban at all. Mortenson responded by saying that whatever he wrote was the truth; however, he did say that much of the information had been changed to fit a long amount of time into a few pages.

A License to Lie

Ernest Hemingway once said: “All good books have one thing in common – they are truer than they actually happened.”

Of course, the amount of truth that goes into a book or a story is entirely dependent upon the genre; one cannot be expected to write “truthfully” while writing about fairies or aliens. However, most other stories, even though fictional and exaggerated, have some roots in reality. On the other hand, an author would be expected to tell the complete truth in his or her autobiography, albeit with some embellishments that usually come from romantic ideas instilled in the mind during memory recall to make things seem more interesting.

For example, an autobiographer might write about how he proposed to his wife, but instead of the large crowded park in which he actually proposed, he might replace the venue in the book with a much more secluded and romantic atmosphere. Or, if his fiancé had said, “Yes!” in real life, he might write that she said, “Yes, oh yes! I will marry you!” Such additions and embellishments are still acceptable, as they are not too far from the truth and they can be conceived as how the author actually wanted those events to occur and how he imagines them to be. These distortions of truth might be unintentional due to poor (or fervent) memory recall, however, even if they were intentional, they would not pose any problems.

Yet, in the cases of Mortenson and Viswanathan, one cannot help but wonder if the lies and plagiarism were done unintentionally or for financial benefits. Good writing and sensationalism sells, and maybe the authors tried deception to make their work more outstanding. Interestingly enough, such “lies and deceit” can be explained through psychology. Viswanathan’s predicament could be because of something known as ‘perfect recall’. Researchers have noted that past experiences pay a strong role
begun to encounter serious opposition: Lem’s creative abilities now appear to have been overrated and Lem’s crude, insulting and downright ignorant attacks on American science fiction and American science fiction writers went too far too fast and alienated everyone but the Party faithful (I am one of those highly alienated)..."

The letter was signed, “Philip K. Dick”.

To any fans of science fiction, and those keeping track of the history of development of the genre, this letter marks a crucial turning point; the verbal manifestation of a philosophical conflict that tore at the very soul of the medium from diametrically opposed directions. On the one hand there was Lem and his critique of mass produced, mass consumed, commoditized American science fiction; a product, at its worst, just as intellectually repulsive as the twatty little moniker it came to be identified with; “Sci-fi”.

On the other hand, there were wildly popular and successful writers like Philip K. Dick who saw themselves as exploring the possibilities of technological determinism, and viewed Lem’s fiction as dull expressions of the workings of an iron-curtained imagination.

It is hard to even conceptualize the conflict unless you’ve read Stanislaw Lem. For the uninitiated, Lem was a Polish postwar writer who first shot to fame when his novel *Solaris* was adapted for screen by the great Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky in 1972. The novel was replete with long, pseudo-academic passages about the history of science and elaborate, again academically dry descriptions of the behavior of an ocean intelligence that covered the entire surface of the planet Solaris.

Tarkovsky’s movie opened up with a five-minute shot of a metropolitan with traffic flowing across its highways and roads in a seemingly random dance of efficiency, and the narrative going nowhere. Many would leave the theater during those first five minutes. Tarkovsky later admitted that he intentionally wanted the idiots to leave the cinema halls; this was not a tale for the intellectually impatient.

Lem hardly ever wrote anything for those who – as Dylan would say – never understood that it ain’t no good to let other people get their kicks for them. Lem’s science fiction was for those who were willing to put an effort into their quest for literary gratification. And gratification was plentiful to be had: a strange mix of intellectual, philosophical and spiritual awareness, once you’d invested yourself in Lem’s deep, ponderous prose.

---

**FRANKENSTEIN HAS PIMPLES AND GOES TO COMICON**

**FOUAD KHAN**

As rain might have run down the glass of Villa Diodatti’s Victorian panes like so much nervous sweat, and the days of a dank, swollen summer by Lake Geneva slipped past her like a stranger in a rustling black raincoat on a shivery dark night, what would Mary Shelley have made of the male cohabitants of her quarter of dread? Would she have thought of men as intellects, towering above her with their inimitable talents or would she have seen half-baked creatures of pure rationality’s creation with big metal screws where ears should have been?

We have extensive records of that holiday. After all, men of letters such as Lord Byron and Percy Shelley were there, not to mention our distinguished woman of letters, Mary Shelley herself. One account is captured in her novel *Frankenstein*, where the “dreary night” sets the stage for the rise of the man-machine antagonist so drearily as to wake up the monster almost all by itself. No denying that the rain, the villa, the fog-drenched lake and the gloomy nights of incessant storytelling influenced her creation of literature’s first ever novel length tale of science fiction; however, the atmospherics must have been only part of what she took away from that summer spent indoors with Byron and Shelley. There’d be more of those days, more than mere ambience, that she’d go on to capture in *Frankenstein*. And what she’d bury there, like the forgotten cadavra of an unfortunate murder mystery victim, would rise decades later to influence the very direction in which science fiction would evolve.

One morning in September of 1974, somewhere deep within the bowels of the behemoth called Pentagon, a letter landed on the desk of a darkly suited agent assigned to the investigation of Cold War anti-American activities in the homeland. The letter read, in part,

“… [Stanislaw] Lem is probably a composite committee rather than an individual… [trying] to gain monopoly positions of power from which they can control opinion through criticism and pedagogic essays is a threat to our whole field of science fiction and its free exchange of views and ideas… In earlier material which I sent to you I indicated their evident penetration of the crucial publications of our professional organization SCIENCE FICTION WRITERS OF AMERICA. Their main successes would appear to be in the fields of academic articles, book reviews and possibly through our organization the control in the future of the awarding of honors and titles. I think, though, at this time, that their campaign to establish Lem himself as a major novelist and critic is losing ground; it has
It would be impossible for all science fiction to be as good as *His Master’s Voice*, but all science fiction should at least aspire for similarly lofty aims. The question here is: “what is science fiction?”

Is science fiction inspired of the imagined possibilities of technology, no different from the possibilities borne of say witchcraft or sorcery, to tell the same old white knight tales in garbs of futurism? Or is science fiction supposed to inquire into the very nature of knowledge to explore the limitations or capabilities of science?

One distinction could be drawn between technologically speculative fiction or technological fiction and science fiction. If we analyze most post-Dune science fiction using this categorization we would notice that it could at best be termed technological fiction. In Dick’s now almost canonized work *Now Wait for Last Year*, the narrative shifts from present to future to past and present again, as the protagonist tries to make sense of the unraveling reality around him. Dead characters come back to life and die again, only for the reader to never really give a hoot about either occurrence. In some inspirational passages – trying to recreate the spirit of Woodstock maybe – women’s nipples hold intense meaningful “eye” contact with the narrator at (futuristic, experimental) drug binges. The meandering narrative collapses into a predictably nihilistic dystopian past-future where life (and, in my opinion, the narrative) has lost all meaning. Similarly “mind-blowing” realizations mark the end of novels like *The Scanner Darkly*, where the narrator wakes up to the fact that his reality had been constructed entirely by proto-fascistic corporations through use of drugs and through binding entire economies around the drug trade. Even when “sci-fi” does aspire for greater truths and deeper meanings, it gives up on the narrative medium altogether as in the case of the iconic movie and literary saga *2001: A Space Odyssey*. What happens at the end? The likes of Windows 95 screensavers flash on the cinema screen and ta-da… the star-child is born!

It doesn’t need to be that way. The choice between profundity and narrative cohesion is a false one. At its best, say in the hands of a master such as Lem, science fiction does two things: a) it mimics science in texture and voice, bringing verisimilitude to the story through verbiage and academic culture; and through that, b) it seems to create new ‘scientific’ knowledge. The best of any type of fiction aspires to these two benchmarks. There’s realism through detail and there’s the illusion of creation of a new reality. If science fiction is to be ‘literature’ of any credible quality, it must not give up on achieving these two goals. Most science fiction today, however, comes prepackaged with a pill of ‘suspension of disbelief; from page one, nay, the illustration on the cover, you are supposed to leave the questioning parts of your brain outside. The drug takes you to the future because it does… this is science fiction, fool!

In *His Master’s Voice*, a novel pretending to be the memoirs of a Nobel Laureate mathematician, Lem digs deep into the annals of mathematics, philosophy, cognitive sciences, Artificial Intelligence and Cold War politics to pull out a gem of a book about what it means to be an ‘intelligent species’. The mathematician recounts his days working on the His Master’s Voice project, a Manhattan-project-like multidisciplinary endeavor to decipher a message from outer space. Thousands of scientists, philosophers and theoreticians are gathered in a makeshift base in Nevada to make sense of the message. The tone of the work is very academic, in parts it reads like a journal paper but as it races towards the end the reader finds his heart beating to the tune of a true intellectual thriller. You feel like you’ve been chosen to be a prophet and God’s about to reveal some great, eternal, universal secret to you.

At one point in *His Master’s Voice* one of the characters, lost for ideas on how to decode the message from space, starts perusing the pages of contemporary science fiction. Using this setup, Lem launches into a tirade against the laziness of contemporary American sci-fi, blaming it for vapidity and an utter bankruptcy of ideas.

The Association of American Sci-fi Writers, which had offered Lem an honorary membership didn’t take too kindly to this criticism and his membership was rescinded. That’s how Philip K. Dick, whom Lem had singled out as the only American sci-fi writer deserving praise, ended up writing a letter to the FBI reporting Lem’s ‘anti-American’ activities. Such were the days of the Cold War, where paranoia was rampant and commonsense and magnanimity were in short supply, even amongst men of letters.
There’s definitely a note to be made here for Cold War politics and its influence on the conceptualization of science fiction as well. Where Lem’s fiction, for instance, saw itself as distinct from the reader, almost adopting a godly voice of wisdom towards the readership – which was viewed as a body of students to be dispensed education to – the shape American sci-fi was to take was dictated by the “market” and its fickle demands interpreted by business-school graduates employed by publishing houses, and not by the authors themselves.

Just as “intelligence” in America was reduced to a measure of memorization of insignificant factoids through popularization of the game show genre on TV, sci-fi was reduced to technology worship through melding of the distinction between science fiction and fantasy to create a product that appealed to a broader market base.

So if the collapse of USSR and the failure of socialism could be interpreted as a lesson in humanity, a majority opting for a system of greater personal freedom, the overwhelming success of American (style) sci-fi may be interpreted as the rise of the “lowest common denominator” in appreciation of arts in a genre; the one genre in literature which really, should have been left to those who knew best, in service of those who brought a genuine intellectual curiosity to fore in pursuit of literary pleasures. Science fiction turned into flying blue aliens and painstakingly choreographed spaceship dogfights when it was hijacked by the growing army of ‘fanboys’ who’d been raised on a diet of marvel comics for literature and Apollo propaganda for science.

“I saw the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together – I saw the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life, and stir with an uneasy, half-vital motion… What terrifies me will terrify others; and I need only describe the specter that had haunted my midnight pillow.” Mary Shelley said of the nightmare at Villa Diodatti that was to become her inspiration for the novel Frankenstein.

What Shelley wouldn’t live to see is how characters not very unlike her “pale student of unhallowed arts” would go on to become the “market segment” that would hijack the genre her novel would inspire, rendering it as lifeless a medium as the monster Frankenstein.

Have you ever been to or known anyone who visits Comic-Con; the annual celebration of all things ‘nerd’? For if you did, you’d be better able to understand what the ‘median consumer’ of sci-fi looks like. The problem with sci-fi today is the problem with most things in a world where success in measured in terms of units shipped: commoditization. Science fiction has been commoditized and in order to make a merchandise of something and a need to develop a ‘market’ for it. The market, unfortunately, is made up of pale students of unhallowed arts. And what they want their fiction to celebrate is nothing other than technology; the most unhallowed of all disciplines of human knowledge. According to a survey published in Science Fiction Studies, 89% of sci-fi readers are male, and almost 40% of them have very few friends who are also sci-fi readers. Reading sci-fi is not a social activity. (1)

I know someone who visits Comic-Con every year, loves ‘The Big Bang Theory’ and can’t get enough of Philip K. Dick. He’s a graduate student in Physics at an Ivy League school. He couldn’t read His Master’s Voice because he thought it was ‘boring’. If you want to irk him, all you need to do is explain to him an xkcd comic that he misunderstood or didn’t otherwise get. Sometimes when he’s ‘waxing eloquent’ about the nuanced greatness of the original Star Wars, sprinkling his conversation with quaint little filmmaking and technological factoids – nothing you can’t find on a thousand geek blogs – I look at him and I wonder, which ‘market forces’ jolted this Frankenstein monster to life.

He’s the geek. He’s the nerd. He’s just playing his part. He’s cool these days. Science fiction – no, it’s not about exploring the fringes of human knowledge, it’s about wearing T-Shirts that say, ‘Are you the Kwisatz Haderach? I’ve got your worm right here’. And don’t you try to tell him otherwise, because sci-fi, it’s ‘his thing’.

Notes: 1) http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/backissues/13/berger13.htm
Photo credits:1. Portrait of Stanislaw Lem: polandhere.blogspot.com
The Reluctant Fundamentalist (2007), where an expatriate’s search for identity in the wake of 9/11 becomes a metaphor for the entire nation’s condition.

Ambitious Storytelling: Far-fetched yet close to home.

Hanif’s and Naqvi’s debut novels, along with Shamsie’s Broken Verses, reach deeply into what is now perceived as a national tendency to build elaborate and farfetched conspiracy theories. Hanif’s book focuses on the death of Zia-ul-Haq, and in a clever, tongue in cheek style lays out an impressive panoply of assassination plots. He mirrors the real life approach of Pakistani people when it comes to speculating about the suspicious murders of important personalities and presents the readers with a plot where it seems the entire universe is conspiring to kill the Leader of the Faithful.

He makes complicit in the assassination parasites, birds, gas-infested mangoes, a blind convict, the Marxist-Maoist sweeper, General Beg and Under Officer Ali Shigri, showing the conjectures that abound when an event of such magnitude occurs. This motif of exaggerated, outlandish conspiracy theories that Hanif draws attention to is reiterated by Shamsie in her gripping novel, Broken Verses:

The art of storytelling, so ingrained in this nation, had turned – in all the years of misrule and oppression – into the art of spinning conspiracy theories, each one more elaborate than the one before.

Broken Verses exudes the sense of being larger than life, right from the protagonist’s imaginative name, Asmani Inqalab (literally translated means “Celestial Revolution”) to the cryptic language shared by The Poet and Samina. The story of the Poet, with his metonymic appellation; a man of “national popularity” and “international reputation”, abducted and killed, presumably, by a government agency sixteen years ago, seems to be an all too familiar story in our country’s history. Here again, the writer draws attention to the country’s tainted past, where things remain unexplained and the only way people try to make sense of the convoluted and mystifying occurrences is by making up their own accounts of what happened and repeating them enough times for it to become true. The end of Shamsie’s novel, however, acts as a foil to the sophisticated premise of conspiracy and intrigue. In fact, it falls a bit flat, but perhaps it was the writer’s intention to make the reader wonder at the hopelessness when it comes to reaching any definite conclusions. Just like in A Case of Exploding Mangoes, the mystery...
is intact ‘till the end and the reader, much like the nation, remains evermore in the dark about the ‘reality’ of what happened.

Flamboyant characterization

In constructing a grand narrative, another thread that runs through the books is the presence of larger than life characters. These characters are not the archetypal figures of a Pakistani society, rather they are specimens of an altogether different class of Pakistanis. They contribute to the loftiness of the plot. For instance the status of the older characters in the novel *Broken Verses* is that of legends, giants in their own respective fields each possessing a certain “sprezzatura” and “grazia”, as the Italians would say. These characters, their ambitions and their lifestyle all convey a grand persona. This aspect of Pakistani English writing can be better observed by contrasting the characterization of Hamid’s and Naqvi’s novels. While the subliminal theme in both is similar, the way the characters have been dealt with puts these two novels at opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of execution. Naqvi’s characters and their extraordinary lifestyle help to extend a feel to the novel where the characters overshadow the events. The characters of Home Boy, Chuck, AC and Jimbo, have the potential to become heroes in the true sense of the word. They are “boulevardiers, raconteurs, renaissance men”, self invented and self made; they are men well versed with the Times, the Post, and the Voice Weekly, as well as with Tight and Big Butt; they listen to Nusrat and to old school gangsta rap, leading epic lives in the city that they have claimed and that has claimed them.

Contrary to this is Hamid’s staid characterization in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, something that does not lend a grand feel to his story but helps in making it an affective allegory, symbolizing the Pakistan-America equation through the major characters of the novel. The greater purpose that the writer probably undertakes is to make some sort of sense of history rather than just narrating a simple tale of a failed inter-racial relationship and the return of an expatriate. The characters are obvious endorsements of bigger things, in an effort that’s almost too on the nose: Erica imbibes the qualities of the USA, as “Am-Erica” and Changez embodies the changes that engulf the United States after the attacks on the towers. Erica’s late fiancé Chris is also a representative of America and is symbolic in terms of how Changez sometimes tries to don his identity in order to gain Erica’s acceptance. Furthermore, he represents certain nostalgia for the past; for simpler, better times that are, like the memories, haunting yet gone. This vacillation between the past and the present is a very common aspect in Pakistani politics, where with every new crisis, the yearning for comparatively better times of the past swells up: exactly what Hamid shows through the conversations of the protagonist with his family back in Lahore, the insidious deterioration of hope and constant referrals to past happiness.

The Political becomes Personal

To fully comprehend the culture and manner of a nation, history often needs to be revisited. Both, Hanif and Shamsie go back to the period of dictatorship in their books. As Bapsi Sidhwa writes in *An American Brat*, “In Pakistan, politics, with its special brew of martial law and religion, influenced every aspect of day to day living”. This is something that one comes across in much of the literature that comes out of the country. And perhaps, because the dark days of Zia’s regime left such an indelible stain on the country that the authors are forced to look back upon that period in their works. In *Broken Verses*, the horrors of this unforgettable period are mentioned and constitute a great part of the narrative. Although the name and time remain unspoken, the reader can easily guess what she is referring to. Hanif’s distaste for the theocratic figure surfaces in his writing, as he transforms the dark days of Zia-ul-Haq’s theocratic dictatorship into a farcical, cloak and dagger style whodunit. He unabashedly reduces the leader of the largest army of the Muslim world, Commander of a nation of millions, into a sniveling, paranoid fuddy-duddy, “fattened and chubby cheeked”, smitten at the hands of the voluptuous, fairied skinned Joanne Herring.

In a lot of Pakistani English literature written post-9/11, there appears to be a shift in perspectives; moving from localized, national issues to broader, global ones. Through the lives of characters like Chuck, Ed and Changez we are told of the isolation and feeling of alienation that envelopes these Pakistani men. The use of bildungsromans and introspective dramatic monologues highlights their existential crisis and search for identity as the city that accepted them as one of its own does not anymore. The authors might have drawn from their own experiences about how life changed for a Pakistani Muslim living in New York after that day, yet these books can be said to define the whole nation’s sentiments in this “with us or against us” period. Fear, indignation, confused loyalties and the instinct for self-preservation become the common streak between the characters and the citizens. While *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* takes on a meta-narrative, telling a greater story through the protagonist Changez’s microcosm. His disappointment with the apparent shabbiness and rundown state of his house and the country in general that he witnesses on his visit, followed by guilt and acknowledgement of his highbrow attitude is representative of the evolution of his character.
from being an outsider looking in to finally accepting and defiantly owning his identity.

The Pakistani socio-political scene becomes the canvas for the writers’ stories, since in it can be found some of the most unique and exceptional ideas to construct narratives around. The underhanded political games, the inexplicable disappearances, the shady presence of foreigners are all elements that have, over the course of years, become part of the national make-up. Through the inclusion of these factors into the plots, writers are able to construct grand narratives that seem to be spun around outlandish and bizarre occurrences. For instance, Hanif summoning the most notorious figure of the post 9/11 world, Osama Bin Laden, might appear a bit out of the ordinary to the reader but someone who is aware of the country’s history during the time of the Afghan-Soviet war will know that such a thing is not very farfetched to imagine. OBL arrives wearing a “nice suit” at an American Embassy function in the capital where he receives accolades from the Americans on his indispensible assistance to the Americans, who are happily dressed in flowing Afghan tribal outfits, oblivious to the irony that this suggests to the modern reader. While the Poet’s disappearance in Broken Verses is dealt with from the perspective of a person on the outside, the harsh reality of these disappearances is shown in A Case of Exploding Mangoes. This is where the reader is given a tour of the inside of interrogation cells set up in Lahore Fort, the torture chambers and the prisoners that have been imprisoned without any trial, showing the same time period about which is Shamsie is apparently writing. What is interesting is that Naqvi’s protagonists, although separated by oceans and decades, experience much the same predicament as they look into the odd disappearance of their friend Shaman and end up being threatened and held indefinitely in a detention facility. Their picaresque journey ultimately reveals America’s inclination to overreach and make premature assumptions in her end up being threatened and held indefinitely in a detention facility. Their picaresque journey ultimately reveals America’s inclination to overreach and make premature assumptions in her end up being threatened and held indefinitely in a detention facility. Their picaresque journey ultimately reveals America’s inclination to overreach and make premature assumptions in her end up being threatened and held indefinitely in a detention facility.

To understand Franz Kafka’s world and his art, we need to thoroughly explore his literary universe – an alienated, morally desolate place. This would not only make us appreciate his work, but also make us respect how he grappled with such ultimate issues as the disjunction or disharmony of consciousness and being, individual aspiration, social bondage, man’s innate religious need and his endemic inability to reach that solid assurance of metaphysical truth for which he longs. The term “Kafkaesque” refers to that unique combination of qualities Kafka’s work can have. It has come to mean anything from the dreamlike to the sinister and the absurd. In this article I will compare the political absurdity indicative in Kafka’s major works to the current financial crises in America.

Kafka’s Political Literature

As one of the most acclaimed and influential writers of the twentieth-century, Kafka is renowned for prophetic and profoundly enigmatic stories that often portray human degradation and cruelty. In his works, Kafka presents a grotesque vision of a world in which alienated, angst-ridden individuals vainly seek to transcend their condition or pursue some unattainable goal. His characters are always victimized and never overcome adversity; they accept it. The situations he presents can be nightmarish and go far beyond being simply neurotic. There is a fixation on all of life’s negativities. His characters are mostly paralyzed in their exercise of will by anxiety. His fiction derives its power from his use of precise, dispassionate prose and realistic detail to relate bizarre, often absurd events, and from his probing treatment of moral and spiritual problems.

In his short story The Penal Colony, for example, the accused is asked to blindly conform to the law. The prisoner fails to stand at attention and salute the captain’s door and is awarded the death penalty for this petty mistake. There is no rational connection between the alleged crime and the punishment, but the system is not concerned with establishing guilt or rendering justice. Kafka’s writings sketch an anti-authoritarian image. In The Trial and The Castle, the Government is a hierarchical, abstract, and an impersonal apparatus. Despite the brutal, petty, and sordid characters the bureaucrats are only cogs in this machine. As Walter Benjamin, the German-Jewish critic, acutely observed, “Kafka wrote from the perspective of a modern citizen who realizes that his fate is being determined by an impenetrable bureaucratic apparatus whose operation is controlled by procedures that remain shadowy even to those carrying out its orders and a fortiori to those being manipulated by it”.

All of this purports how many Pakistani authors writing in English show a strong inclination to question how we fit into the grand scheme of things. Whether consciously or unconsciously, writing about Pakistan along these lines helps garner a lot of international acclaim for the authors. In the post 9/11 world, where a lot of negative media attention has been focused on Pakistan, the works of these writers present an alternate view of the country and its people. The interest shown towards what is notoriously marked as a “failed state” has, if nothing else, helped the cause of art in the country. Perhaps this is the silver lining in all of this: much deserved and much prolonged acclaim and acknowledgment for a literature as rich and multifarious as its people.

FYZA PARVIZ
Even though Josef K’s false arrest in *The Trial* seems completely illogical, it should, nevertheless, be kept in mind that Kafka is not describing exceptional states in this story. Kafka is indicating the alienated and oppressive nature of a corrupt state. He writes in *The Trial*:

“K. lived in a country with a legal constitution, there was universal peace, all the laws were in force; who, then, dared seize him in his own dwelling?”

As Josef K pleads with the guards to acquit him, the guards indicate their blind belief in the law:

“Do you think you can bring your whole damn trial to a quick conclusion by discussing your identity and arrest warrant with your guards? We’re lowly employees who can barely make our own through such documents, and whose role in your affair is to stand guard over ten hours a day and get paid for it. That’s all we are, but we’re smart enough to realize that before ordering such an arrest the higher authorities who employ us inform themselves in great detail about the person they’re arresting and the grounds for the arrest.”

Kafka’s characters seem so resigned to their circumstances that they start embracing their surroundings. The guard’s faith in the government points to an egregious abuse of power by the law enforcement agencies. Kafka’s two major novels, *The Trial* and *The Castle*, are a critique on modern states. He considers them alienated, hypostatized, and autonomous bureaucratic systems, which become ends unto themselves.

*The Castle* contains all of the primal emotions readers interested in existentialism look for: confusion, isolation, immobility, estrangement, and a sense to understand the human condition. The story’s protagonist, K., who by all descriptions is a simple surveyor sent to measure the land, cannot reach the Count of the Castle no matter how much he tries.

In one passage that is a masterpiece of black humor, in *The Castle*, the town mayor describes the official apparatus as a machine that seems to work by itself:

“One might say that the administrative organism could no longer put up with the strain and irritation it had to endure for years because of dealing with the same trivial business and that it has begun to pass sentence on itself, bypassing the functionaries.”

The story of K. is the story of a person discovering the tragedy of being trapped in an endless, dream-like maze. At the start of the novel, K. is primarily occupied with the desire to survey the land and leave, but the more K. works, the more he discovers. For instance, he sees a village where people are scared, overly cautious, and paranoid, as if they are hiding some important truth. They do not know that their Count Westwest is dead (in German, west means “decomposing”) and so continue in a state of mediocrity.

One can feel that Kafka’s work is missing a sense of time and place, which is why it can be very easily related to any period in human history. Although his work did neither prophesize about the future nor bash a particular system of government, his stories were somewhat autobiographical and attempted to portray the society he lived in and knew very well.

**Kafka and Modern American Politics**

In the 1980s Ronald Reagan made a fateful judgment: “Government is not the solution to our problem. Government is the problem.”

The Occupy Wall Street movement has been in the news since September 2011. Due to the influence of big business on politicians, President Obama and leaders of the U.S. Congress did not address the movement very often. The Republicans continuously slammed the occupy movement in their rhetoric. Eric Cantor, the House Republican leader, remarked at the Conservative Value Voters Summit:

“If you read the newspapers today, I, for one, am increasingly concerned about the growing mobs occupying Wall Street and the other cities across the country. And believe it or not, some in this town, have actually condoned the pitting of Americans against Americans....”

News analysis of campaign finance data is showing that the 2012 American presidential election is almost certain to be the most expensive in history, and while the state of the U.S. economy has been a major debate issue in the Republican primaries (and is expected to be crucial in the presidential debates later this year), the politicians seem hesitant about addressing the financial concerns of the Occupiers.

Parallels can be drawn between Kafka’s works and the events that led to the Occupy movement. Occupy’s story has all the attributes of Kafka’s *The Castle*, as the attempts of the protesters to rise against the bureaucracy seem to have ended in vain, for now.
The Occupy movement started when people took to the streets alleging that the big banks and large corporations of United States were ripping off Americans. At the beginning of the housing crisis, which put the U.S. economy in its worst recession since 1982, Goldman Sachs, a global investment banking and securities firm, denied that it bet against its clients. But evidence soon surfaced that this was exactly what Goldman Sachs did; and a lot worse.

A vicious circle followed, where foreclosures helped accelerate the fall of property values, helping to spur more foreclosures. The losses created by the foreclosures brought the financial system to the brink of collapse in the fall of 2008.

The steep recession led to even greater homeowner delinquencies as homeowners who lost their jobs often also lost their homes. The corruption at Goldman Sachs was rumored to be very deep and very entrenched initially, but it was never fully investigated, allegedly because of the firm’s close ties to the U.S. government. To make matters worse the Federal Reserve bought up the vast majority of U.S. government debt in 2009.

Finally, in April 2010, the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) filed a civil lawsuit against Goldman Sachs for helping a leading client, Fabrice Tourre, place a $1 billion bet against the housing market. Though the SEC only charged Goldman $550 million and informed the company to reform its business practices, this punishment was a mere slap on the wrist. Billions of dollars in taxpayer money allowed institutions that were on the brink of collapse not only to survive but even to flourish. These banks now enjoy record profits and the seemingly permanent competitive advantage.

The police have been following the same irrationality as depicted in Kafka’s Trial. From pepper spraying peacefully seated college protestors at the University of California-Davis campus, to officers not only removing the protesters from Zuccotti Park in lower Manhattan, where they had camped for months, but also destroying their belongings, and dumping their library of almost 6,000 books. Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg defended the decision to clear the park, saying, “Health and safety conditions became intolerable.” The protesters have been evicted to cause a decline in their visibility. With less visibility, the movement has received less attention from the news media.

The demands of the Occupiers have been: tax the rich, end the wars, and restore honest and effective government for all. The Occupiers voice the need for activists among shareholders, consumers and students to hold corporations and politicians accountable, for example, shareholders pressuring companies to get out of politics. They advocate that consumers take their money and purchasing power away from companies that confuse business and political power. They call for the government’s priorities to be set straight. The protestors claim they do not want higher standard of living, they want a better standard of living. And in doing so, they find themselves trapped in a Kafkaesque world of hopelessness despite their protests and general awareness; the Occupiers face the same oppression as Kafka’s apparently naive and harmless characters.

In the End

Kafka’s stories and novels may be about a world where things seem the opposite of what they are; but we find that it is much closer to the truth than we might think. Kafka might have written about bleakness in people’s lives, presenting a forlorn world; however, looking at what is happening around us in the world, we find that he was not that far off from reality. Kafka presented the difficulty of the situation, where one simply cannot escape the law. No matter how Kafka’s protagonist tries to escape the court in The Trial, he only finds himself dragged deeper into its web. This situation resembles Capitalism without a conscience. When we consider how we are stuck in the vast web of capitalism without regulation, the more we try to struggle and wriggle our way out of it, the deeper we engulf ourselves into a Kafkaesque neurosis. As the Occupy protestors have experienced firsthand, it is a long and difficult haul to reform the political and financial sector.
DEMONS WITHIN GODS

AHA ASLAM

They had cleared the debris from the field and sprinkled the grounds with water to settle the dust. The akhara clay had been turned several times to remove lumps, and later kneaded with turmeric and aromatic herbs.

It was the sport of gods. The mythical Rustum, whose name is still synonymous with herculean power, was a warrior and a pehlwan (wrestler). In Zoroastrian tradition, when Zarathustra was readying himself to fight his nemesis (the Ahriman or ‘destructive spirit’) he referred to pehlwani as a divine gift. The Hindu religious epics, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, spoke of the wrestling prowess of Bhima and the god Hanuman.

In the enclosure Ustad Ramzi put on his fighting drawers. A white turban fumigated with incense was tied on his head by an elder of the clan and his shoulders were draped with a coverlet embroidered with Quranic verses. Tamami and the trainees carried him to the exhibition ground on their shoulders, reciting the qasida burda to solicit an auspicious outcome.

The scriptures tell us that man was made from clay, and must eventually turn to dust. Between these two states he has moments of divinity and instances of terrible failure. It is this atmosphere of destiny and struggle that surrounds the inhabitants of Musharraf Ali Farooqi’s new novel, Between Clay and Dust (Aleph, 2012). The book follows the fortunes of two brothers, Ramzi and Tamami, who are trained in the art of kushti (Indian wrestling) and who are forced to face their inner demons in their divergent pursuits of greatness. Their struggle takes on an added significance against the backdrop of Partition – a time of great opportunity and merciless change in the subcontinent at large, but particularly for the ‘inner cities’, where the old traditions still survived.

Location is an important factor in this story. While Farooqi does not let on which city the novel is set in, the characters are firmly rooted in their familiar spaces. In fact, in the rapidly shifting socio-political climate following Partition, they almost cease to exist outside of these spaces. Ustad Ramzi, the older brother, lives between the akhara and the pehlwans’ ancestral graveyard (once again, between clay and dust). Outside of that, his influence – one might even argue, relevance – is greatly diminished. The only other location where he establishes some legitimate space for himself is in the kotha of Gohar Jan, the courtesan. She, in turn, is also inextricably attached to the courtesans’ enclave – we almost never see her move out of her kotha, and the need to stay in ‘her place’ becomes all the more evident as her relationship with Maulvi Yameen, the local cleric, deteriorates. Between them, these three spaces (the akhara, the kotha and the masjid) represent three pivots on which Farooqi makes the life of the inner city spin.

The architecture of this novel is thus simple, but it is an artful and deliberate simplicity. Farooqi is not out to change any paradigms or to teach his readers anything new. He is simply striking a match where there is already fuel for fire, and he draws liberally on existing social constructs to do this. The book seems in parts to romanticise the past (for example, the beginning reads like an elegy for the pre-Partition era) and the reader is asked to accept a rudimentary view of historical change, in which there is a stark divide between the old and the new. Even in characterisation, Farooqi does not try to rock the boat; he focuses instead on layering the characters so as to make them as real and as familiar as possible. For instance, the reader finds herself rooting for the good courtesan and riling up against the overzealous cleric. This is predictable, but there is no doubt that it is happening because the story is hitting a real nerve somewhere.

Indeed, Between Clay and Dust seems to pull its characters out of the very hearts of its readers, to dust our denial off them and to put them out in the open sans any pomp or ceremony, with all their strengths and their faults plain to see. This is the extraordinary strength of this novel: it could be anyone’s tale. The characters, right down to the masterfully crafted fight-promoter, Gulab Deen (a thoroughly enjoyable and interesting player), will keep reminding readers of someone they know.
In many ways, this is a book about faith – faith in people, in principles, in society. It is also a book about human nature and how it betrays the same people, principles and society. By choosing two siblings as his protagonists, Farooqi eliminates the white noise of a sexual relationship and is thus able to cut directly to the basest human emotions and to explore the insecurities that plague us all at a more primal level.

It is the age difference between the brothers that makes the relationship more complex (one is old enough to be the other’s father) and that in turn saves this from becoming a classic Kane and Abel drama. The power equation is skewed from the very beginning, and yet the battle is inevitable. One of the beautiful ironies of the book is that it is set in an akhara – a pehlwan’s battleground – but the real tussle takes place outside of the arena, between the hearts and minds of the two brothers.

This is one book that ought to be judged by its cover. The stirringly beautiful cover image shows two hands frozen mid-motion as they vigorously rub clay on a wrestler’s head in preparation for a match. Amidst the flurry of movement, all that is visible are disembodied hands at work with clay. It could be a depiction of the creation of Adam just as much as the ceremonial grooming of a pehlwan. Between Clay and Dust is easily one of the best-looking volumes to have emerged from the English fiction scene in South Asia, and the surreal divinity of its cover echoes the soul of the novel. Despite the melancholic historical tone of the book, its observations on human nature will strike a chord with any reader in any era. It has all the makings of a classic and is likely to go down as one in the canon of South Asian literature.

Photo credits:
1. Cover photograph by AP/Sucheta Das

The italicised portions at the beginning of the review are quotes from the novel.
“HOMEICIDE”

Faraz Mirza

Tonight, darling,

(tonight I would pay you
to love me; demand

to let me call you darling;
together
we will watch the love-child dissolve
into a late realization)

tonight we will end you
with that which has been.

CRYONICAL LOVING

Asnia Asim

in slack summer sandals
long distances you travel
away from me baby
your distance is congealing
it is condensing
is curdling
clotting
in every heart of my joy

my lungs are sparring
a cage of ribs
is snaking around oxygen
in which kindles
a perfectly round ambition for you

rousing fresh
O dazzling
carcinogen darling
do you also
miss me most when people
forget about bad teeth
and simply
laugh?

I also journeyed
across my state lately
saw the sea
with its thousand slavering tongues
day and night
it kept licking sand off the beach
under its long vacillating skin
cyan darkness resisted
white lazy yachts
from sinking in too far
antique shops ligneous
moldered all over the landscape
used china kept glistening
in their sunny vermin bellies
no one smiles like you
and no one makes me drown
in existential gnosis romance
during the lifetime of just one
cup of coffee tall
no
no one
yet

more than once
I felt like showing you
the red ripe nips
mosquitoes kept infusing
behind forgotten calves
the new friends I’ve made
and the oblique blue sadness
that outlines sentences I reword
to erase you from public eyes
and my own hard memory

O you
so far
rocking your own bold riff
names of new cities you drop
in letters to mutual friends
which is why I stole
the first letter of my life
your generous exclamation marks
fell in my mind like tears
new names I could not pronounce
friends you win too easily
every excited word semaphored
all that I am not

a sad surprise
has been registering its birth
in the womb of my arrogance:
how far you have managed to get
without my love

so maybe even this secrecy of mine
this cryonical loving
has gone too far
maybe it is time
to as they say move on
split space on the skin
for new scars
even though no one around me
has the courage to say
“Sorry, my bad,"
as swiftly as you did
AN INABILITY TO WRITE LOVE SONGS

Asmara Malik

has led to this yearning— I want to write
songs of you, the way Trent Reznor sings
of his ephemeral Her, his God, every roar,
every whisper, every husky syllable outlining
this emptiness within our darkly dreaming
cardiac cages. I want to write songs for you,
twisted and double-edged, shaping all
my depthless, wordless need; a melody
I would bury deep, let oceans crash over
it so when it rained you could be soaked
in this music the rain would whisper
in your ear. Let this rain always be for
you, piano notes reverberating on your skin
like a pulse, still in search of something
numinous. I want my words to melt
on your tongue. Breathe them out
into the wind, circumnavigate the world,
be suspended in the ether of midnight,

fireflies caught aglow in amber; hold
my amber-spun dreams in your hands,
let the sun warm them, seep the sun-wine
of their slow fire to resonate in
your emptiness, the way piano keys echo
within the hushed gloom of a thousand

watching eyes, I wish you could be—
*eternal, eternal, eternal.*

Because:
Death makes liars of us all.

SPOONY

Asnia Asim

Of you
a vegetal urge
is blooming
like buds of fantasy
rooted in objects as tatty
as teenage chum tattoos
and half empty cups
of a plunging sea blue
bra

clippered replies are hanging
from artless edges
of a very
tight conversation
tongues
as if wearing spandex
are sliding on the legs
of even
unimaginative adjectives

damn
have I missed
such spoony awkwardness
or what!

when salad leaves are gone
and forks begin to scratch
balsamic patterns tart
on expectant china white
"Are you free tonight?"
asks the musculature of your tone
pushing through
the diminishing arms
of my attention span
I feel like that pony-tailed
frangible girl
who fell from the sudden swerve
of her father’s Chevy silver
into the magnificence
of a banyan’s complete
and complicated
paws
levered inside his elbows
tattered and too little
with fear of random tragedy
and the first recognition of that thing
called death
globuling around big eyes
when asked if alright
all she could say was
“Yes.”
The coldest fires burn in the distant hearts of the bluest-white stars dripping ((drippy, drip, drip)) from the tarry night sky. These stars are not lies; I would not call them lies. But in the face of your incredulity I hesitate to tell you what they truly are, because, well, I know you would scoff and call me the god-obsessed lunatic I sometimes suspect ((only at night, the deepest night, when the barrier we set between ourselves and our fears is thinnest)) I might indeed be. In spite of your smirk, because of your smirk, I will tell you.

These stars… they are the highest, sweetest notes of the lullabies my mother sang to me whenever I escaped, screaming, from the clutches of one pale-eyed monster or the other into the waiting oasis of her embrace.

Then God heard her sing and He was so moved that He took the highest, sweetest notes of her songs and suspended them from the velvety blackness of space-time; nebulous strands of a divine harp that stretched all across the universe, across all universes. My mother’s voice birthed the bluest, whitest stars; my fiery brothers, my shining sisters, singing her infinite incandescent songs.

Sometimes, now, when I miss my mother’s cool touch on my fevered eyelids, I yearn to pluck those starry strings, so that for a while, my hurt may resonate all across the universe. Alone and eternal, crying for her, for her.

‘Kiss away our tears and heal us, hold us safe in your embrace and promise you will never, never let go.’
FEATURED WRITERS

ASMARA MALIK • NOORULAIN NOOR • SHABANA MIR
EDWARD RAGG • LUU TRONG TUAN • HASEEB ASIF
MICHEL DI CAPUA • MOAZAM RAUF
OMER WAHAJ • AFIA ASLAM
FARAZ MALIK
MAHWASH BADAR
FOUAD KHAN
SANA HUSSAIN
FYZA PARVIZ
FARAZ MIRZA
ASNIA ASIM