

PAPERCUTS

The image is a vertical triptych. The central panel shows a close-up of a clay sculpture of a face with its eyes closed. The surface is cracked with dark, branching lines. The left panel shows the side of the same sculpture, and the right panel shows a blurred background of warm, orange and yellow light. The overall mood is artistic and contemplative.

VOLUME ELEVEN
PREQUEL

FEATURING AN INTERVIEW WITH SHAZAF FATIMA HAIDER

A publication of



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ABOUT VOLUME 11

The previous issue of Papercuts - Volume 10: From Pulp to Postmodern: a Tribute - celebrated the iconic writing of the modern era that has continued to influence and inspire our contributing writers today. Volume 11, Prequel, takes us further back, away from the din and the fanfare of professional success, to the silence that precedes the creative process.

With Prequel, we try to capture that particular feeling of possibility of the pre-dawn hour, the sense of great things yet to come. Our current issue questions where the real drama lies - is it in the moment at which an event of import occurs or in then series of events that led up to it?

Our journey takes us to the origins of things: from novels to literary movements, from the individual's metamorphosis to trends in pop culture.

Papercuts Volume 11 raises the curtain on the backstage, as it were: It explores the story behind the story.

“Everyone loves a good story and everyone loves a secret.”

The choice of cover image for Volume 11 was incidental. The theme 'Prequel' was a complex one to interpret artistically. Eventually our Creative Lead, armed with a camera, was sent packing to artist **Humera Ghaznavi's** studio in Islamabad in search of a mannequin, which to us personified the concept of a project that was about to begin. While he was photographing the mannequin, Osman noticed an unfinished sculpture of a head sitting discretely at the side of the studio. The bare, cracked clay and the unused paint tubes around it made for an arresting image, and presto – we had our cover for Volume 11.

Osman also took photos of the sculpture and the mannequin together, draped in Christmas lights. One of those photos now adorns the back cover of this issue.

Papercuts is the bi-annual literary magazine of Desi Writers Lounge (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://desiwriterslounge.net/papercuts/>



VERSE

What If?

Chandni Singh

What if
after all this
we don't make it?
All the inane laughter
dissolves into hollow whispers.
The banter falls into anonymity:
its character no longer a novelty
conversations too fragile to pillar our hopes.

What if?
After all this,
my senses decide to
shut down in boredom;
the distances we began at
become inexplicably difficult
to overcome in a single night –
no matter how moonlit. Or long.

What if?
after all this,
these turn out
to be mere castles
conjured up by an idle
mind, with half-baked bricks.
And I remain too naïve to have learnt
that fresh beginnings shouldn't smell so stale.

Chinese Village

Joe Massingham

White house red tiled roof
small yellow flowers
grandmother sleeping at front door

old caged chickens stacked
on the village river bank
watching ducks swim free

trees with pink buds over
yellow and green bamboo fence
house with red tiled roof

weeding garden fields
workers using tools to cut
baskets to carry

sheds hold piles of wood
dried thatching reeds beside
fields of new spring green

Chinese village girl
studying at western school
China's future safeguarded

Irony

Fatima Hafsa Malik

Despair has many faces -

a pretty little thing
dying
because you passed
the endotracheal tube
into her oesophagus, for example

or a pregnant woman
riddled
with so many bullets
that her unborn daughter has a
hole
for a heart

or even the van driver
who kept running his cold sweaty fingers
up and down your foot and
never once choked on his
Allah hu Akbar
when driving over speed breakers;

it is easy
to hush up these
recollections:
her time had come;
better dead than orphaned;
and you came home

unharmmed.

Harm is a funny
little word that comes to
mind when you
threaten
to slit your wrist open
to get his
attention.

once.

Osman Khalid Butt

we were there once.
boymen playing games we'd outgrown
a stitch in our sides as we shouted curses
we saw condensed into angry fogs on a january afternoon
just because.
before
we stopped counting losses on the tips of our fingers
before we downed our espressos alone on a two-seater
and made notes for conversation
we'd use later to stay relevant
on the pages we'd do our crosswords on
before
we lost our friends to convenience
or white-bread apathy
and our pen-drawn Neverland
regressed
into fourth-grade politics
before we
made ourselves up each morning
carefully covering ourselves in white masks we thought
would stand out in four-walled alabaster
before our poetry and prose and words
became the herbal tea of flavors
and we turned a certain but indistinguishable
shade of plastic
before when I could speak in nominative
singular pronoun
and sip chai as I wrote of love and loss

with unabashed strokes of pen
as I restrained liquid poetry and it trickled
down my throat instead
before when I saw and felt and thought and wrote
and wrote and wrote once more
I was there once.
hidden behind the bushes, pulse racing as I waited
wondering whether I'd be caught and it'd be my turn
on a familiar but forgotten ground of green
and hope.

Quest

Theresa Lang

The challenge,
unearthing truth--
of mysticism
atop an isolated mountain.

Begin viewing a rainbow
in the grey,
Trek over slippery hills
or under them.

Pass imaginary limits
where fantasy has no place.

And if you return
foreign forests become home.

Terracotta Soldiers

Joe Massingham

Formed in terracotta,
these men made China; old warriors
for a brave new world,
guarding the Emperor much
as the party now shields the
all-powerful father figure,
inheritor of Mao's mantle,
Chairman of the Party, from
reality.

Yesterday's Child

Rebecca Michelle

Behind closed doors,
He hums
Apologetic lullabies
Taming tonight's terrors.

Carcinogenesis

Bassam F. Sidiki

Amidst the scarlet circular peanuts – cells
swimming and giving the plasma hue – one
connives conspiracy against imprisoning vessels.

Miniscule traitor; rogue a lymphocyte has gone
by harbingers ascending its swirling staircase,
alchemically transmuting genes into rebellion.

The rogue is drunk with deathless elixirs, armed with a mace
and a charisma that recruits disciples equally immortal.

Microbes in the blood grin and snicker, for the race

is won against an immunity inherently hostile
to its own survival. Pathogens envy and adore
a flawed white police that is much more viral.

The bloody agglomeration starves to the core,
and shoots a trillion tentacles sucking tissues dry
just like the Morning star of weapon-lore

ready to tear, or the Star of the morning sky
that heralds the metastatic sun of dawn.

How a tiny, immortal, scoundrel spy

brings death (through its deathless reign)
and divinity when the corpse is burned and gone.

Untitled1

William D. Jackson III

There's fire in your eyes,
burning like an ancient forest.
The dead lie around you,
comrades in secrets, the mysteries –
you will turn them to mountains,
streams.
There's fire in your eyes,
burning like night-raid bombed out cities.
Inhale darkness.
Exhale extremity,
iron justice,
blood.
The clouds are afraid of you.
The stars beckon your presence,
as if to return an audience.
The muscles of your jaws move as if
to speak and eyes swerve from an escape,
turning, listen for the word, cautious,
holding their breath you let silence.
They run.
There's fire in your eyes burning up
everything you see, burning me.
Books and pages go up in smoke.
Rivers run blindly down snowy horizons.
Creatures of the ocean's deepest deep swear allegiance
and are promised after life regions, regions of sheer obedience.
Bowing in stone crushing blackness they take leave.
There's fire.

Like a gothic statue she lies before you,
head down arm out hand up pleading,
she represents anything, everything,
mercy, begging for mercy.

None given.

The Recorder of History sees your face in
a dream and waking up in a sweat makes for
the nearest cliff and leaps.

I can't write anymore and decompose and turn to bone.

You've borne witness to your own creation.

Your other self, you, waits for you at the foot of the dark hills.

There. Burning.

Your eyes blink and turn to the left.

Torchie's Book of Days - Poem One

Diane Raptosh

1)

Indigenes, foundlings, sperm-persons
and egg-,boycheks, suitors,
lumpen silhouettes,
ladies and gentlemen of the jury

of my peers, kith and kine, and those of you
I think might like the *Yeah Yeah Yeahs*,
I am here because I have this tightness

in my throat I don't want
taking over the earth. To boot,
I chose you by divine signs amidst the multitudes.
By faint directions. By sending out some luteinizing hormones

I want to noodge you
into feeling something vast. BTW, *a jury of one's peers*:
nowhere in the Constitution.

But it's a free country. So feel free
to interrupt. Already
I can tell by your jawline's ease
you'll help sway me

to be true about all things
from how to scour the consciousness of humankind
to why I cannot bring myself

to leave my house some days. And don't you adore
how Rachel Maddow's most repeated word
this year's vagina? And that giant uterus sprawled across the weather map:
we might get there. Meanwhile, let us try new tacks

for striving to get by—perhaps let soften
our trapezii or reconstruct others'
inner soliloquies. I am

here now to announce
the coronal mass ejections

sent on Tuesday, projected to impact
Earth and Mars as well as several interplanetary spacecraft,

along with upcoming elections and think-tank reports
issuized in umpteen rags, could cause problems
with our message systems. Our transfer

of ideas. I'm here because of that.
Because your shirt
is pilling

let me pluck across your back.

Torchie's Book of Days - Poem Two

Diane Raptosh

2)

The Yeah Yeah

Yeahs' lead voice,

which lobs itself

in yelps, is Karen

O. The wood thrush

through twin voice boxes

sings with himself. Bup

bup bup. When I croon

in the shower I veer

to the left

to make room for

a possible harmony:

There is no us

There is no them

To drum up scenes

It helps to rhyme:

Can you feel

the egret

of regret?

Forget

You're it

Click whir

Find the sugar

Food-ads doodads:

late great Granddad

could not pronounce idea

in such a way it did not end in ear

Torchie's Book of Days - Poem Three

Diane Raptosh

3)

Marvin our borzoi half-sits on the couch:
a canine bird marking out the sky. I am in

eagle pose—thumbs at the brows, eyes
in their 3,000-mile gaze. Bruce Springsteen

yowls out of the speakers,
the world's dogsbody. I'm sure by now

I'm really going to miss the world
when my day comes, despite the fact

our military chiefs are all white-hot
for war over the Arctic Circle and I'm a card-carrying member

of the breed who stands
to fail at living. A journalist just wrote

when all of us grow up
we'll fall in love with Earth,

but somehow this is hard to put back
into words. Do you suppose, dear Readership,

that nonstop sense of feeling almost fraudulent
might be honesty at its most thoroughbred? I'm halfway in

a deep amour with you. That's what you might call
a superovershare, but this could be to a T

what the great earbob we're walking on
needs. *None of this*

means a shooting war is likely
at the North Pole any time soon, assures the AP,

so you can relax your stance. Springsteen belted his body
of work past the glockenspiel and all those faded Tunnel of Love

Express Tour t-shirts at Pittsburgh's Soldiers
and Sailors Memorial Hall with the Houserockers. At that concert,

I grew twelve years
younger than my true age. *O darlin' Billy*, O whoever

draws near, I give to you
a full-on blank page—that doctrine of softness.

That scorch song. That fiefdom. I kindly ask you to draft
a love requitedness test:

Perception of the Precious Space Within

Twish Mukherjee

For a long, long time, there had been no sound, no melody, not even a wayward tune

that might have muted the cacophony of thunderous wails inside white-washed walls;

echoing inside the balloons that struggle with dust and soot for a whiff of pure perfume,

as pure as toxic intoxicants that spring to action when touched by wizards who once were, archangels to the weak, cloaked warriors guarding a precious poison in a castle in the middle of a lush green meadow that will remain out of reach forever for the self-induced sanctimony of a surreal love.

The witch left the books and appeared in person in the prison,
and numb went all the five senses for all the five seasons, until forever.

Terror that might have spurred the valiant forth in battles,
hid behind curtains to watch in anguish their favorite prey,
making love to bright white light for nights on end.

Contempt contested with a tragedy condemned to the platter of skeptics
who would march inside the tunnels with their tungsten lamps until
they reached the haven above the hill, caged in a house made of glass
and yet glowing all the defiance that the vulnerable can muster.

All that had been blessed with divinity forego their virginity with violence,
wake up violet lipped from the dungeons of a dreaded reality
to a cloudy, windy day that pays pleasure in exchange of peace;
the skeptics recede into the shadows and postpone their debates to a tomorrow
that passes them long before they remember to keep promises made to ancestors
who sacrificed their progeny before the altar under the trance of synthetic truths
about magic and its color, about men and matter, about things thereafter;
all that goes in vain when the hot blood rises to do honor to its existence.
The music returns nevertheless and the fragrance lingers on for long too.

Warriors drug their souls with ideals, rust their swords with darker shades of red,
with hands more able, the wings are torn; biological parents and lovers, frowned upon;

objects subjected to tubes that condense their delight to a graphical splendor.

Mathematical prophecies engraved on the three-faced dice of time

lay in vicious anticipation of the broker's observation. Begin.

The Summit

William D. Jackson III

The black cloud from the volcano hung in
the air like a storm. We stared at its image -
the face of a raging demon, mouth gaping screaming
some earth shattering heresy.

A sidewalk caked in the ashes of a problem had
a name written in it that no one wanted to say.

Snakes covered the earth like grooves in
the sierra sand.

My left hand opened and I beheld a diamond,
black and transparent; my right a ball of flame.

I was still standing on the mountain.

Behind me the sky grew suspicious.

Herbs plotted against me as a standard procedure,
not because I had done anything.

Then I saw a man, a man with skin pale as crying snow,
and it was blemished, impure, cut with the stain of
former holiness; and his eyes looked at me, black like
the window to a Great White Shark, teeth like onyx;

and he saw me from worlds away, staring at me from an incalculable
distance; and he wanted to kill me,
for he knew I was him.

Fetal - The Tale of my Abduction

Saheli Khastagir

It's dark in here.

I hear voices,
not mine.

This place
is made of water
and love.

That word, she said,
that's my name, I think.

This house
is on a sea.

It heaves
-up, down. up, down.

I like her voice.

I think she's mine.

I am a miracle.

Things grow out of me.

I am the soil.

I change every day.

How nicely I grow.

How strongly I kick.

Is this all me?

I am a marvel.

These grooves, those creases.

I am lost in my own discovery.
Is this all me?

Someone pushes those walls
-the rubbery strength of safety,
tearing my blanket
-the soft drape of numbness.

Lights startle me.
Hands frighten me.
Wretched, unwanted
-she throws me in these lights, those hands.

This world wears white coats and blue caps
and smells of nausea.
I feel the steel taste of life.
I am heavy with exhaustion,
I carry my own weight.
Where his hands stop, my I starts

except, when she takes me in hers
-I am lost again.
Her body is made of milk and love.
Her milk is my numbness
-the sweet taste of oblivion.
I am not hers anymore,
but we can pretend for a while.

FICTION

Prequel: The Aloo

Najia Yousaf-Zai

Before everything, there was an aloo. Let us examine this aloo: bracket it in your head. Hold it suspended, in space, a little brown aloo, the phenomenon that created phenomena. The aloo you imagine has connotations; it is probably an aloo you have seen. Amazing, isn't it, potato-based philosophy. I suspect it will appeal to the Irish. But I digress.

So, I don't know why my madness chose to manifest itself, first, in an aloo. Perhaps, we can even call it THE aloo – it could have been another aloo, after all, for I have peeled many an aloo in my lifetime. However, possibly a bigger, more important question is: How did I forget about the whole thing?

Well, technically, I did not forget: I can recall it perfectly well. It's just that I didn't attach any significance, at the time, to the sudden, building belief that the potato I was about to peel was conscious. Thus, I failed to think about it again.

The thing is – well, like they say, you don't know you're crazy when you are. There's a very fine line. For example, if you see a shadow out of the corner of your eye, are you crazy? If you were confused about your own body for the first twenty years of your life, are you crazy? If you considered throwing everything away to start a life on your own, by yourself, are you crazy?

Questions, questions. The point is, the line doesn't exist, not really. People draw it. I am drawing it now, divvying up everything between sane/insane, and I say now that it really wasn't the first time when I threw Akbar's bicycle off the balcony that I thought something non-sentient to be, well, sentient.

I think it is pertinent, though, to mention that you don't technically know that everything around you isn't conscious, either. Ooh, there's a thought, isn't there? I didn't say this; philosophers have. Would you throw them over to this side of the border too?

The bicycle and I had an argument, right and proper. Akbar hadn't been talking to me at the time, but that wasn't why. That doesn't even begin to cover why, because the bicycle had been ridiculously rude regardless of our relations. In fact, it was probably ruder when Akbar and I were on good terms, but I digress again.

Sometimes realizations hit you really hard. Everybody told me I was crazy then, and I got beaten for it (my parents had the best intentions, though), but I didn't come to see myself as such. Now that...time has passed, I realize that all of these things I thought to be true weren't happening.

They say I have a very high IQ, and that this happens to people in my case. I don't know if I am smart because I am crazy or crazy because I am smart, and I like to think about this question sometimes, because it is relaxing. I don't know if it will lead me anywhere, but I do it regardless. Actually, even if it leads me nowhere,

that nowhere can be a somewhere.

Some people believe that everything happens for a reason, but not in terms of causality. In their world, everything that happens has to do with what other people are up to, or have done in the past. When it comes to natural disasters, they rarely blame themselves, or their actions, though I can safely say that nobody is innocent; their blames go, then, to mysterious, faceless groups that are defined by their actions. In a way I think they have a version of my madness; I give life to objects, and they turn people into objects, reducing entire lives to actions.

It was rather square-shaped. I was peeling it with a potato peeler, rather than a knife. It was cold, and wet, because I'd washed it. As I held it in my left hand, its strange ridges against my palm, I peeled it with my right, exposing the yellow.

It spoke to me, but not like you would think. It didn't sprout funny yellow lips and start speaking in a high-pitched voice. I just knew. I knew it didn't want to be peeled. I wasn't too perturbed by it, or this revelation. I just set it down on the table, washed my hands, and went back to my room.

Nothing happened that night.

Or the day after that. Or the month after that. Or, even, the year after that. Nothing, no problems. I think I even ate the same potato that night for dinner; somebody else must've peeled it.

Maybe the potato infected me with madness. Maybe the potato was mad.

When you're a kid, there's always a douchebag in your class who tells you to not eat seeds, because they will grow inside you. I always imagined this in vivid detail; the thin, springy stalk making its way up my oesophagus, and branching out in my throat, making its way out through my mouth and eyes...

Maybe the potato was like that, because as far as I can go, that is the only prequel to the episodes that followed, a couple of years later, I would say, because Akbar had just bought a Superman sticker after watching the new movie, and stuck it on his cycle, and in the interim the madness within me had been dormant, but thereafter grew and flourished.

Maybe if I would have never acted on my beliefs, I wouldn't know I was mad today. It would've lain within me, but I would be sane.

In fact, I am probably sane if I tell doctors about the beating. They'll think, then, that this is all an understandable response because I was abused. I can tell them that I know that it was all a mistake, and then I am sane.

I counted it as an insignificant display of a symptom, but now I think...now I think that the potato must be the root of it all. After all, my mind chose to bring it to life first. Why not the table? Or the chair? Or the walls?

A pressing question: what if the potato actually did speak to me? What if all of

these things speak to people only capable of hearing them, and thus everybody else, unable to understand, labels these people mad? Maybe we are the modern-day mystics, the shamans. Must we go extinct because the times want us no more? In the country of the blind, the one-eyed man is dead.

To write a story, of course, one must first invent the universe, and within that universe, place things that are not like other things in that they know that they are things.

I know I am one of those things that know they are things

but sometimes I don't know which things don't know that they are things

and all I have to blame for it is a goddamn potato

...I could've just said I didn't feel like having dinner.

A Natural Distaste

Darlene P. Campos

Every time I go to King's Taste on Astoria Boulevard, I order fried rice and chicken wings. One afternoon, I told the cashier "Number Three" and then I realized I was short on cash.

"\$4.50," the cashier reminded me.

"I only got \$3.82," I said.

"Here you go," the man behind me said. He slid a dollar into my hand which I quickly transferred to the cashier.

"I like the vegetable fried rice," the man told me as I picked a table. "Wanna try it?"

"Sure," I said. He sat down next to me and sprinkled his rice over my chicken wings.

"So what do you do at St. Michael's Cemetery, Amad?"

"It's Amada," I said. "The A rubbed off my nametag. I clean tombstones."

"Sounds depressing."

"Oh no," I shook my head. "I like it 'cause I don't deal with people." He tried not to laugh, but he did anyway. Before he left, he gave me his phone number. I didn't look at it until I was back at the cemetery rubbing dirt off Jenna Horowitz. From the area code, I saw he lived in Queens and thank God for that. I wasn't about to get on the subway during rush hour.

"Amada," I heard the boss say. "You can go home early if you want." As much as I hated hearing that from him, I went home to Jackson Heights. I've lived on Roosevelt Avenue since I was a little girl. My apartment is above an ice cream parlor and a block away from the subway station, but I like the noise. You don't hear much noise in the cemetery and when you do, it's only someone sobbing. Before I called King's Taste man, I made a big bowl of soup and a tall glass of tea to calm myself. My dog, Othello, was begging me for another walk.

"But I just took you out, little buddy," I said and tossed a treat to him. I watched him gobble the biscuit and then I finally did it.

"Amada?" he answered after one ring.

"Is your name really Hamlet Herrera?" I asked.

"My mom is a huge Shakespeare fan," he said. "I'm Hamlet Romeo and my sister

is Cordelia Juliet.”

“My dog is Othello,” I said. I had no idea why he thought that was so funny.

I didn’t hear from Hamlet for a week. Then he appeared at the Jackson Heights Library on the morning of my day off. Before he saw me, I picked up a book and covered my face.

“Amada?”

“Hamlet, I didn’t see you here.”

“Trouble in your marriage?” he said and pointed to the book I held.

“I’m not married,” I said. Then I looked at the cover of the book – *50 Ways to Spark Fire in a Cold Marriage: The Bedroom Volume*.

“I thought you could be since you never called me again.”

“Did you want me to?” I asked him.

“You have a dog named Othello, of course I wanted to call me again,” Hamlet whispered. The old and grumpy librarian was eyeing us from her desk.

“Hey, have you been to Coney Island lately?” he continued in a low voice. “There’s a bookstore I like over there. Wanna join me?”

“That librarian is about to kick us out, so yeah,” I answered. Hamlet smiled at me, but it was a different smile than the ones I had seen before.

While we were on the subway to Brooklyn, Hamlet was asking me all kinds of questions. Creamy or crunchy peanut butter? Low fat or non fat yogurt? Chocolate or vanilla ice cream? A homeless man waddled over to us and asked me for change and I instantly said ‘Ch ocolate.’

“Sorry, he asked me about my favorite ice cream,” I said and gave him a dollar.

“You grabbed a nice lady here, huh?” the homeless man nodded to Hamlet.

“She grabbed me, I was an innocent bystander.”

After a long train ride, Hamlet held my hand as we walked through the bookstore. He bought a few books and a postcard with Laurence Olivier dressed as Richard III. After we were finished browsing, we walked around Coney Island. Hamlet tried to buy me a hot dog from Nathan’s, but I kept saying no. I couldn’t have him spend money on me, especially since he already gave me a dollar at King’s Taste. But eventually I got so hungry that I accepted his gratitude. As we ate, I focused on Hamlet. There was nothing in him which stood out from anyone else. Yet, I

couldn’t stop looking.

During our train ride back to Queens, Hamlet told me more about himself. He was 30, born in Warsaw, raised in East Elmhurst and still living there, and he was half Puerto Rican and half Polish. His mother was married to his uncle for three years until he died in a car wreck and she married Hamlet’s father soon after.

“What in the world was your mom doing in Warsaw?” I asked.

“She got a scholarship to the University of Warsaw and met two brothers in literature class. My dad left when my mom was eight months pregnant with me, so she gave me her last name to get back at him. I should be an Abramowicz, like my sister Cordelia.” Then he told me his mom’s favorite Shakespeare plays were *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, and *King Lear*, but his favorite was *Richard III*.

“Have you ever read *Richard III*?” he asked me.

“In my sophomore year,” I said. “All I remember is the part when Richard says he’s deformed and unfinished. Didn’t we all feel that way in high school?”

“I hope you don’t feel that way now,” Hamlet said and kissed my hand. He wanted to know about me, so I told him I was 26, finishing my English degree at Queens College, and born to Ecuadorian parents who were still living in my childhood house. Hamlet said he went to college once to get an application and I laughed, which seemed to please him.

When we were back in Queens, I shook Hamlet’s hand and started walking home. But he caught up with me and soon enough, we were at my apartment door.

“Goodnight,” I said. “I’d invite you in, but you’d freeze in here.”

“I had fun with you today. So can I call you sometime?” he said.

“Yeah, you can,” I answered. “You should.”

Hamlet called me the next day. Then he began having mysterious cravings for ice cream whenever I would get home from work. I liked the attention, but I wasn’t sure it was sincere. ‘Amada’ is Spanish for ‘loved one.’ Before I met Hamlet, I dated a few men, but none of them stuck. I had never been anybody’s ‘loved one.’

One Saturday morning, I told Hamlet I was going to walk Othello in Travers Park. I didn’t think he’d be waiting for me when I got there. He had an orange Frisbee and tossed it in the air for Othello to fetch.

“I got a question for you, Amada,” Hamlet said.

“Oh no,” I groaned.

“What’s wrong?”

“Whenever people say they have a question before they ask it, it usually means it’s an inappropriate question.”

“Maybe I’m nervous,” he said and nudged me with his arm. Othello returned, so I tossed the Frisbee and watched him chase after it.

“Would you mind being my girlfriend?” Hamlet finally asked.

“I don’t think so,” I said. If I were flexible and outgoing enough, I would have been doing somersaults through the park at that moment. Since I’m neither of those, I settled for giving Hamlet a kiss on his cheek.

As I wiped down Benedict Gray one morning, I noticed how filthy his wife’s tombstone was. Mr. Gray died in 1902 and Mrs. Gray joined his side in 1911. If someone died before 1945, nobody visited the grave anymore. The dead stay in the same place and it’s easy to find them. But the living move on and on and sometimes they disappear.

I left the cemetery close to four in the afternoon and headed to King’s Taste to pick up my dinner. Hamlet had placed the order for me, so all I had to do was tell the cashier my name. When I opened my box of takeout at home, I saw he told the cook to form a heart shape with my chicken wings. I couldn’t eat them for another hour.

Hamlet surprised me by showing up at my door later that night while I was getting ready for bed. He was talking at full speed, saying he wanted me to meet his family and he wanted to meet my family too. I reminded him we had only been dating for two weeks, but he was too excited to hear me.

“Sorry,” Hamlet said in his normal voice. “I really like you, Amada.”

“I kinda like you too,” I told him. As hard as it was to say that to him, I didn’t regret it.

I awoke with Hamlet by my side. I had offered to have him spend the night since I didn’t want him walking back to his place alone so late. When I took Othello out for his daybreak walk, Mr. Marconi waved to me and said, “Nice looking boy you got in your apartment.”

“There isn’t a fee for having him over, right?” I gulped.

“I’m teasing, Amada,” Mr. Marconi said. “Just keep the noise down when he’s at your place; we get enough from the subway and the kids who come to the shop.” I promised I would. Then I tugged on Othello’s leash and rushed him back home.

“Good morning, lovely,” Hamlet said when I returned. “Why are you so pale?”

“The, super, heard us,” I stammered. Hamlet said it was impossible since the subway must have covered everything, but I shook my head.

“Next time I’ll put a rag in my mouth,” he winked. He gave me a kiss on my forehead and went back to making pancakes. I went to the bathroom, opened the window, and stuck my head out into the air. The subway was making its rattling sound, Mr. Osorio was selling hot dogs, and kids were jumping rope along the sidewalk. It wasn’t a dream.

When I met Miss Herrera at her apartment in East Elmhurst, I noticed her bookshelves which were filled to maximum capacity. There was one book that caught my eye. It was a 1900 Shakespeare anthology.

“I got that in Warsaw,” she said of the anthology. “Hamlet’s dad gave it to me.”

“Mom, not that story again,” Hamlet cut in.

“I don’t mind,” I said and looked at Miss Herrera. She said she met the Abramowicz brothers during her first year at the University of Warsaw. Stanislaw, Hamlet’s uncle, proposed to her after four months of dating and they were married soon after. Cordelia was born within a year and then Stanislaw was hit by a drunk driver while walking to work.

“I was so depressed, I couldn’t even sleep,” Miss Herrera told me. “Lolek, Hamlet’s dad, read from that anthology to me every night so I could relax. We got married too, but the bastard ran off a month before Hamlet was born. I was still legally married to him for three years because I couldn’t find him anywhere. After the divorce, I came home to Queens.”

“Mom, Amada’s bored,” Hamlet said, but I assured him I wasn’t.

“Hamlet used to have bad insomnia when he was little, so I had to read to him until he fell asleep. He loved listening to *Richard III*, right Hamlet?” she said and pulled on his ear. Hamlet nodded, but I could tell he was feeling uneasy. Miss Herrera asked him to recite the opening lines of *Richard III*, and he did, reluctantly.

“You’ve still got it memorized,” Miss Herrera said and hugged him. “Now get to memorizing Shakespeare’s sonnets for Amada. She’s got a dog named Othello, you keep her.”

After we said goodnight to Miss Herrera, I walked with Hamlet to his apartment a few blocks away. Even though we held hands the entire time, we were in complete silence.

“Is something wrong?” I asked when we were inside his apartment.

“I hate it when Mom talks about my dad,” he said and sat on the sofa. “Cordelia’s dad was a good guy. She might come home from Ohio for the holidays and I’ll introduce you.”

I kicked my shoes off and sat down next to him. I held him and rested my head on his chest. His body was cold, but after a couple of minutes, he was warm again.

Since my parents are old fashioned, I waited before I introduced them to Hamlet. If they knew Hamlet was spending nights at my place and me at his, they would have spontaneously combusted. I went with Hamlet to my childhood house on the other side of Roosevelt Avenue, hoping for the best. We all had a decent dinner together, but when it was over, my mom was after me like she was a hawk and I was a fresh carcass.

“Is he going to marry you? Are you going to have kids? Is he divorced? You can’t marry him if he’s divorced, it won’t count-”

“Mami, it’s only been three months,” I said into her ear as I helped clean up the kitchen. Hamlet was talking to my dad in the living room and the walls in my childhood house are thin.

“Three months? How come you don’t got a ring yet? And what kind of name is Omelet?”

“It’s Hamlet, Mami,” I said. “His name is Hamlet, like the play.”

“After a play? How would you feel if me and Papi named you *Fiddler on the Roof*?”

“His mom is a Shakespeare fan.”

“I’m a fan of cookies, but your name isn’t Chocolate Chip,” she said. My dad walked in to refill Hamlet’s drink and he whispered to my mom in Spanish, “Can you believe that guy is named after a boring movie?” I sighed and put the rest of the dishes in the cabinets.

My parents liked Hamlet, but it was because he was the first boyfriend I ever brought home and they couldn’t compare him. The half-Polish thing was something they didn’t appreciate, even though Hamlet was the image of his Puerto Rican mother. They thought races shouldn’t mix. But I liked Hamlet half-Polish. There still wasn’t anything about him I didn’t like.

“You look like your parents,” Hamlet said during the bus ride back to my apartment.

“Genes usually work that way, Hammy.”

“Do you think your parents are deformed and unfinished then?”

“No, just in their brains,” I said.

“Definitely,” he agreed and patted my hand. “But they made one hell of a daughter.”

One evening, I didn’t leave work until 7pm. There was a funeral service for someone important, so I was on duty to make sure everything was in place. St. Michael’s Cemetery averages five to eight funerals a day, an hour for each. This funeral was six hours. When the man was in the ground, I headed to King’s Taste. The cashier put my usual order in when he saw me.

As I walked down Astoria Boulevard, Hamlet appeared beside me. I had forgotten about the date we planned. He said he had been looking for me at the cemetery and when he didn’t find me, he knew I went to King’s Taste.

“I’m so tired, Hammy, let’s go somewhere quiet,” I yawned and held onto his hand.

“So not your apartment?” he said. “What about Othello?”

“My mom’s got him for the day.”

Hamlet’s apartment in East Elmhurst was smaller than mine, but much quieter. I sat on his couch, eating my takeout and struggling to stay awake. He put a movie for us to watch but I sprawled myself out on the sofa instead.

“C’mon, we haven’t finished the opening credits,” he said with a light laugh.

“I can’t get up,” I groaned. Hamlet laughed again and went to his bedroom to get a blanket for me. He held me until I fell asleep. When I woke up, he wasn’t there.

I wasn’t angry at Hamlet for belonging to someone else. I was angry because he hadn’t bothered to tell me he was separated. He swore he didn’t tell me because we were happy and saying so would’ve ruined everything.

“I didn’t know my wife would come back,” Hamlet said. “It’s been a year since I’ve heard from her, Amada, how was I supposed to know she’d show up out of nowhere? She doesn’t even live in New York anymore.”

“Stop talking before I kill you! I work at a cemetery; I know what to do with your body!” I shouted. He tried to pull me back to him, but I slapped his hand away. The whole time, even though it wasn’t too long, I thought he would eventually ask me to be his wife. But there already was a Mrs. Herrera and he hadn’t told me.

“She left me the same way my dad left my mom. I was looking all over for her, but then one day I wanted Chinese food and I met-”

“Bye Hamlet,” I said and rushed out of his apartment. I jumped on the next bus that passed by. Since it was 6 in the morning, I was at work over two hours early. I clocked in anyway and started wiping. The cemetery still wasn’t open to the public when I got to Benedict Gray’s tomb. I knew because the only sobbing I heard was mine.

The cemetery saw more deaths in December than in the previous months. My boss said that happens because more people die around the holidays. I had to work more often than usual. But eventually, a month passed and it was a new year.

The day after Martin Luther King Day, I only saw two funerals and was relieved. At last, the death season was over. I wiped Mrs. Brave, leaving her clear of snow. She died in 1923 and I doubted anyone would visit. Then I clocked out for the day and walked to King's Taste for some warm Wonton soup.

I was in my sub-zero apartment just before rush hour hit Roosevelt Avenue. Mr. Marconi didn't sell as much ice cream during winter, but he kept the thermostat the same. Othello begged me to go out and I said, "In a minute, let me check what came in the mail." Bills. Coupon for a store I never heard of. Pizza parlor menu. Yellow envelope addressed to Amada Aviles.

"What's this?" I said. I tore the envelope open and pulled out a postcard of Laurence Olivier dressed as Richard III.

I'm divorced now. I am deformed, unfinished...without you. Hamlet.

I agreed to meet Hamlet for lunch at King's Taste during my break on the following Tuesday. When I got there, I said "Number Three" to the cashier and then I felt someone hugging me from behind.

"I thought you wouldn't come here," Hamlet said.

"But I'm starving to death," I said. He laughed a little and ordered his usual.

"I missed you a lot," he said while we waited. "I wanted to crash a funeral at the cemetery just to see you again."

"I would've pushed you into the hole," I said. Hamlet began to apologize for everything but I stopped him. I didn't want to hear him talk at all. It had been too long since I saw Hamlet and for that moment, I wanted to make sure he was really there. The cashier handed us our orders and the scent of the rice hit my senses. I wasn't dreaming.

"Next subject," I told him and he nodded.

"So Amada," Hamlet said. "Why do you work at the cemetery anyway?"

"I have a natural distaste for most living people," I said as I eased into the corner table.

"I'm a living person," Hamlet frowned.

"Hamlet," I said. "You're not most living people." Hamlet sighed from relief. He sat down next to me and sprinkled his rice over my chicken wings.

Prequel to The Brothers Karamazov

Fyza Parviz

Following is the lost account of Fyodor Pavlovich Karamazov, a character from Fyodor Dostoevsky's book "The Brothers Karamazov" - arguably the greatest existentialist novel ever written. In the book, Fyodor Pavlovich Karamazov is the father of the three brothers: Dmitri, Ivan and Alyosha Karamazov. This unedited and unpublished chapter was found in Dostoevsky's papers at an auction. The early experiences of Fyodor Karamazov, in this lost work, help explain the plot in Dostoevsky's magnum opus. This chapter also includes Dostoevsky's footnotes.

The Making of a Man

Fyodor Pavlovich Karamazov was the only son of a wretched, taciturn, overzealously religious and illiterate peasant Ilyusha Karamazov and his meek wife Natenska. Their story was no different from the stories of all the other proud, impoverished rural families. They claimed to be the descendants of nobles who had, through unforeseen circumstances, become peasants. Then, there was the legend of the great Karamazov grandfather who had spoken up against the demands of the feudal landlord of the time only to be shot down in front of his whole clan. His heroic nature was admired but not followed by the next generation. Everything was left to God.

With little money to spend, school was out of the question for little Fyodor. It may have seemed to people that Fyodor was a bit slow but that was only because the child was always lost in his own thoughts. He spent his mornings helping his mother with menial chores around the house and the afternoons working in the farm with his father.

His mother was an agitated woman but no one, not even her husband, understood the cause of her angst[1]. When Fyodor was only six, she died suddenly of some unknown disease. Ilyusha married a widow, from the village, with five children right away. At the same time, he became so obsessed with learning scripture that his family became secondary to him. He never cared to even remember his second wife's name and just called her 'number two'.

Fyodor was not required to do the chores anymore, so he had all the time to roam around the village. He would walk for miles and miles and venture so far from home on some days that he wouldn't even get back at night. Once, somewhere along the way, he found a deserted barn. As he stepped in to the darkness inside the barn, some thing grabbed hold of him. It was there that young Fyodor lost his innocence. Every afternoon he would feel a strong urge to visit the barn again and experience the guilt. A kind of guilt that had to be forgotten[2].

This was one of the first experiences Fyodor forcefully blocked from his memory. No one knows what kept happening to him in that barn but sub-consciously Fyodor never forgave himself.

All of a sudden, for reasons unknown to others, Fyodor started despising his father. Ilyusha noticed how his family had started resenting him. He felt the change in the boy's character and thought the solution was that everyone in the family should join him in his fervent quest to understand the word of God. He started taking the boy to church to hear the sermons of the great priests. Ilyusha was always moved by Abraham's story. His heart would pump fast and his face would become distorted. Tears would roll down his face.

What Ilyusha failed to understand was that Fyodor was one of those people who come into this world to experience a complete change in personality[3]. This disgust for the father was a part of the change. And it wouldn't be through religious teachings that Fyodor would gain the personal and spiritual growth needed for his development. It was to be something else, not to be understood now. For now Ilyusha just had to witness the changes in his son.

But Ilyusha was unsettled and was often found pacing around the farm mumbling. Fyodor would catch his father's piercing eyes staring at him from afar. There was a terrible terror in them that would shake Fyodor.

One day, while Fyodor was working in the farm, his father jumped on him in a fanatic urge and tried to cut his throat. Fyodor screamed and resisted. He used all his strength to fight his father (he was twelve years old then), broke free from his grip and ran away.

"Don't you see God would have stopped it from happening. This was not meant to be murder - this was an act of faith, my faith! Come back!"

Fyodor screamed impatiently: "Oh, you holy fool! Haven't you learned that there is no God!"[4]

And he ran away as fast as he could. He ran through the fields, through the barn, and through the town. He ran under the hot burning sun and he ran till it was pitch dark. He ran till he could run no further. Out of breath, he fell down and wept. He wept and wept and wept. He did not understand what made him renounce God in front of his father. He screamed "Why" and wept some more.

Later, he fell into a deep sleep where he dreamt of his house, he saw his mother in her pain, he saw the trees in his backyard, and he saw that old barn. He woke up not knowing how many days had passed since he had been lying there on the ground. He was baffled and he couldn't remember where he was.

"Are you lost boy?" asked a long, dark face.

Fyodor opened his eyes to see but found himself too weak to look for the source of the voice.

"Are you an orphan? Do you need a place to stay?"

"Food?" Fyodor replied.

The man gave him a cup of water and a small loaf of bread.

At that moment Fyodor felt a terrible pain in his heart. He wasn't an orphan but he couldn't go back to living as before. So he lied that he was all alone in the world and it felt heavy[5].

...knows that I do not lie (See Notes,1)

The man took him in his care and dropped him off at the nearest monastery.

"You will be protected here".

And he left Fyodor with the following words:

"We should pray always and never lose heart." (See Notes,2)

At the monastery the hermits made him take the following oath:

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your mind and your neighbor as yourself." (See Notes,3)

There is no place for a runaway peasant boy in society. So he accepted this place of refuge. He was confused but after a while he made a commitment to become a monk[6]. He thought this the best way to rid his soul of the darkness, of the terrible sins he had committed[7].

He lived for ten years in the monastery utterly disgusted with himself. He wanted to live a life devoid of sin. He prayed daily, begged for forgiveness, and lived on the hope that one day he would rid himself of the doubts in his heart and miraculously start believing. He also became a vicious loner and hardly ever spoke to the other monks. He kept stacks of books on Christian theology, Greek philosophy, Russian law and the lives of saints, in his cell[8]. He was educating himself to become a religious scholar and a devoted servant of God.

He was also laying the seeds for what it would mean, later, to be a Karamazov[9].

But rigorous study was proving to be meaningless and he was severely unhappy[10]. The real education he craved for was forbidden to him. The monastery was only forcing him to purify what was capable of being impure. He was getting tired of contemplating God. The hope that life brought him to the monastery to be of any service was beginning to fade. He was becoming more and more impatient. He was now a man of twenty-two, broad shouldered, rosy-cheeked and glowing with health. Could he spend his entire youth in this monastery?[11]

He felt that locking himself in his cell was not the right solution to his problems. He did not need to hide anymore. He needed to escape and had to do it at once. His service to God was just a lie.

One morning he heard the monks chant:

*Give praise,
Glory honor and blessing
to Him
Who suffered so much for us,
Who has given so many good things* (See Notes,4)

And he could not take it anymore, so he finally confessed everything to God without any shame[12]. He confessed his doubts and his disbelief. The burden of sin was at once lifted from his soul. He was now ready for the world and the experiences it had to offer.

"Do the gods love piety because it is pious, or is it pious because they love it?" (See Notes,5)

He finally felt he was on the road that would take him to his advantage. He was happy to be back in the land of the living. He gave up religious observance for good. His belief was now more philosophical rather than religious in nature.

*When my spirit failed me
You knew my ways (See Notes,6)*

He did not know what he wanted to do or aimed for but he knew that at that moment his self was indefinable and that he needed a worldly experience. Life was to become his teacher.

Instead of suppressing sin he now wanted to find glory in it. From the monastery he found his way to a nearby castle and asked for the castle Count. After repeated inquiries, he was escorted out of the premises[13]. This frustration and curiosity then led him to a brothel in Moscow where he learned of the Anna and Vronsky scandal. He wanted a scandal of his own[14].

One day in the brothel, Fyodor noticed Isu. He felt she was someone who could easily defy society's morals without any guilt. He became instantly attracted to her. At the time he was the quiet one while she was the complete opposite. He liked watching her move around the room, going from one man's arms to the next. The way she swayed made him desire her more. She wasn't what one would call a beauty. She was quite an ordinary girl with ordinary looks but she knew how she could make use of her youth in a sexual way. What was it that attracted men towards her? It was most certainly her vulgarity and her confidence. But at the time Fyodor wanted to burn eternally and passionately and he knew that getting close to Isu would grant him that experience.

She saw him noticing her and, out of sheer boredom, started charming him. Then immediately she was giving him the sexual peace he needed to calm his otherwise conflicting mind. Isu giving up herself to him was the love and the abundant knowledge Fyodor craved. Before this, he had never known that deep inside him was a beast susceptible to sluts.

He started living with Isu and loved her past never haunted her and how the future never really mattered to her. She never took life too seriously and soon became terribly bored with Fyodor. In order to get rid of him, she cried, screamed, made excuses, fought, and cursed out loud. Nothing mattered to him except having her and being close to her. Empathy and shame lost all meaning to him. Ethics and morality were now only concepts to be read in books.

After a year of this sinful existence, Fyodor started feeling agitated and came to a realization that maybe sex wasn't the right stimulant for him. He needed something else, something very different. The whore wasn't bringing him a fortune and he needed money [15]. Isu noticed how she no longer had a grip on Fyodor so she tried to seduce him once more. But she had lost her appeal and he wanted to leave her immediately. This time she begged, cried, and screamed for him to stay

with her. Fyodor noticed the control he now possessed over this woman and felt a sinister kind of joy. He had finally found the key to his happiness[16].

He wrote his new gospel - the gospel of earthly desires. He made a pact to give in to whatever desire he felt. He forgot all about inner conflict and misery. One had to forget in order to live, he thought. And now he would only live in, and for, the moment.

Our Fyodor had now acquired wisdom, and in that he had become a fool – a passionate buffoon[17].

Notes:

1. Gospel of Paul 2 Corinthians 11:31
- 2.(Lk 18:1)
- 3.(Mt 22:37, 39)
4. Rev 5:13
5. Dialogue between Socrates and Euthyphro as written by Plato.
- 6.(Ps 141:4a-b)

[1] She is suffering from epilepsy.

[2] This is where the character uses forgetfulness to escape from his despair.

[3] He will be introduced as a shrewd and clever person in the novel.

[4] A trait one of his sons will acquire from him.

[5] Lying will become a personality trait for him in the novel.

[6] One of the sons will take this passion as well.

[7] Force him to omit a part of his personality. Something one of his sons will try to do as well.

[8] Surprise the reader when Fyodor would quote the law or theology in the novel. But never mention how once he was a scholar.

[9] All of the Karamazovs will be sensual beings.

[10] Beginning of the realization of his despair.

[11] He will despise monasteries in the novel.

[12] The beginning of his shameless life.

[13] Great idea for a book where peasants work for a count in the castle -but in fact he doesn't exist.

[14] Tolstoy.

[15] This realization will lead him to marry for money.

[16] Happiness for him would be to have power over women. Describe this in more detail in the novel. Maybe he could make a confession to his sons?

[17] Introduce him as a fool in the novel but never lay out his wisdom and his past experiences. That would remain hidden from the reader.

The Changing of Guards

Maria Amir

I

It happened rather suddenly. Time struck the Earth still, overhauling its inhabitants skin-side out.

He walked into the tiny tavern, apprehensive of His audience but conversely confident in His purpose. Completely oblivious to the reception He would receive but perfectly willing to wait for the one He wanted. The crowd was small and merry in that naïve, frivolous manner that only crowds tend to be. They would have to do for now. The best beginnings are always humble and He could make something of this rabble, of this He was absolutely certain. So He approached the nearest table and sat opposite a desolate looking youth who seemed almost as lost as his age demanded of him.

“Incomplete, isn’t it?”

“What?” the youth murmured sullenly.

“Everything.”

II

They were a number now, twenty nine to be exact. It was always easy to spot when an idea was catching on. A tantalizing buzz simmered silently in the atmosphere as every head bobbed up and down in unison, acquiescing without reservation to everything He put forth. Yet, He still approached with caution, knowing all too well the cosmic consequences of a hasty entrance. He was well aware that real allegiances always sprung from that one ephemeral triumvirate: courteous courtship, supercilious sagacity and carefully cultivated fear. They were still raw and skeptical, frequently hounding Him with the *Whys* and the *Whens*. That would all soon change but this, this was the time to keep it simple... true even.

“You are all equal and you all deserve to be treated the same.”

He neglected to mention that ‘equal’ and ‘same’ weren’t exactly the same thing. Equal was how they ought to be treated and sameness was a state contrived to conveniently keep them under control. Luckily they never really bothered with semantics. That made His job easier than even He could have anticipated. It had always been there and now He could practically taste it: a desperate yearning to be part of something that would allow them to escape their own little worlds. That was what really made them so easy to manipulate: they were always waiting for an out, any out. And all it took was convincing one of their ranks - truly, deeply planting the seed. It would sow and scatter itself.

He had picked a good host.

Humble, quiet, intense and... not at all easy to dismiss.

Soon enough, however, the host began to develop his own ideas. It had always proven to be a problem with operating from among them. They couldn’t help but improvise and place themselves at the center of every equation, even equations designed to resist a center. Much of it had to do with their blasted call for constant attention. Some might argue that He sponsored the sentiment from His own desperate neediness. This was why He was inherently incapable of indulging any argument... ever. So far, however, the only changes He could detect were relatively minor. A mere matter of the Man confusing his own mortality with the Voice’s omnipotence. It would have to do.

At the end of the day, they were each born with the innate capacity to take what He gave them without question - programmed as they were, to receive more than give. It prevented them from having to figure it out for themselves. It saved on time and responsibility and it motivated them all the same. It worked. And there was absolutely no conceivable reason to question it. He loathed curiosity. Always struggling to identify that infernal congruent where the first *Why* cropped up in their vocabulary. He figured that He had managed to stamp it out of most of them, but like a putrid habit of mind, it always had the power to arbitrarily pop up in some obstinate reprobate. Still, He figured that the ones that stuck with the *Whys* would be bred out eventually. Their presumption would never be tolerated by the rest.

III

A river of souls as far as the eye could see.

Terrifying in its magnitude.

They marched in time to the clinking and clanging of gold chains that bound them in neat, narrow queues of thousands. The men and women were always kept separate. Only allowed to roam amongst each other on select days decided by the Man.

The men walked in front. Their chains gleaming, molten in the blazing midday sun as they murmured the Words the Man had given them. The Words helped lull them all into a complacent haze, one that now bound the land. The Words inspired a distinctive brand of drowsy comfort that was impenetrable. Some would come to call it security. They murmured incoherently under their breath as they trudged their way up the mountain day in, day out. The women were bound in ropes behind them. They were clad from head to toe in dark drapes: their eyes shut, their minds shut and their mouths shut. They did not murmur the words, mutely following the followers.

Among the legion, two had been overlooked. They scampered in and out of the Man’s presence never straying in his line of vision long enough to be given the message and handed the rules for their initiation. They were young, innocuous and rather easy to overlook. The Man eventually decided to just let them be. Two children, a boy and a girl, could hardly be of any consequence to his cause.

They couldn't change anything.

IV

The girl never understood any of it. The rules, the unending routine and the eternal obedience were suffocating. And all so they could supposedly survive something that would someday prove to be 'eternal'. She refused to believe them when they insisted that being miserable now was the only way to be happy then. Where 'then' was they never knew and it was nowhere in sight.

There were so many things she felt ashamed of and she was never able to understand why. She felt ashamed for wanting to be pretty; she felt ashamed for wanting to talk to the solitary boy who roamed the camps; she felt ashamed for wanting; she felt ashamed for not believing the Man who stood on the Mountain and professed to deliver them from their pain; she felt ashamed for discarding the answers he gave to the questions they never asked while avoiding the ones they did.

She felt. And the feeling was always shame.

And so she did what those who 'feel' shame do.

She pretended.

She manufactured an entire existence, opinion, appearance, agreement and obedience. It was all rather easy in the end. They only required appearances and cared little if those were cultivated or contrived as long as they held. Finally, she could walk among them freely. She tread softly and concealed herself in the shadows the mob cast as they walked along the scorching sand. As she followed in obedience, they never noticed her hands weren't tied.

All she really knew for a fact was that the truth got you killed and a lie could guard against death.

She knew how to lie and lie well.

So she survived.

V

The boy had observed a kind of knowing in her quiet subversiveness and it haunted him. It was subtle but he somehow managed to pick up on it. Perhaps, because he had been searching for it. He felt that his hunt for another had finally ended. Being free had proven to be a rather lonely business. He observed a stoic resentment in her stance and he had carried that around in his chest for weeks. So he nurtured the hope of her with him every day as he sifted through their shadows across the timeless landscape.

Occasionally they asked questions. On such rare occasions, the Man always responded patiently, *"because He commands it"*. This always seemed to answer all their reservations. It calmly polished over any itchy doubts. He never understood why they could never comprehend the blatant farce, why it simply didn't compute. Surely, so many different questions couldn't possibly have just one answer? It

wasn't even an answer, truth be told... it was an even bigger question. The boy knew then that the Man must be very clever to know how to answer all questions with one answer and still be believed, revered even. So he held on tightly to his questions and guarded his doubts. His curiosity always seemed trivial when set against the Man's one infallible answer.

She was different. She never expressed any curiosity in what the Man said and seemed awfully content to blend in with the landscape. Whenever their eyes happened to meet across the crowd he saw that she didn't believe the Man either. Neither did she care about what the Man had to say about Him. Yet the curiosity spilling out of her eyes could hardly be contained. It contained questions of a different vein altogether, something he didn't think he would ever be able to fathom. A deep yearning to understand the 'underneath' of it all. A penchant for coveting mysteries rather than solving them and still scale every treacherous depth. That quest practically blazed through her. It was too *real* to be taken in with one universal answer or any call to obedience. It was what had stopped him in his tracks that day by the trees when he saw her come out of the lake. Not her naked breasts or her beauty but her irreverent curiosity. He had never witnessed it in anyone his age. They never looked at anything like that. The children did but they always lost it, usually around the time they learned to speak. A child would ask its first question and they would counter the curiosity by binding it within the knots of tradition. The tiny glimmer of self would dim immediately until it faded completely.

Everything rested on control and they agreed that the control was all about power. Power had always been a problem with their kind and so it seemed the safest course to give all of it to something that seemed more powerful than power. Even if it wasn't there.

VI

A day came when they had been marching for what seemed like a thousand years but was probably much more. They moaned and complained now and they no longer felt the glistening devotion for the rules that once united them. They weren't changing the world anymore. They were barely even changing themselves.

The boy and the girl had known from the beginning that no matter what the Man said or what the Man said He said (they could never truly understand the difference) none of this had ever been about change. In fact, it had been about not changing, about standing still for all eternity. They just accomplished stillness by constantly moving - trudging forward with each aimless step. It was all about following so they could remain in a convenient stasis-like sludge that would flow in whatever direction was demanded of it.

They never saw it, they couldn't and the boy and the girl had learned to keep silent over the years. The pair of them soon noticed that as ritual began to lose its luster, the men and women grasped on to the chains even more desperately. Now wearing them like garlands wrapped tightly around their necks. They had

even deluded themselves into thinking the cuffs were studded with diamonds. The women began to view the ropes as yards of silk.

Obedience was an integral part of the service demanded of them. The boy often asked the girl if she thought it would be better if they just 'believed' like the rest of them. She could never comprehend the question. The only absolute she could conceive was 'feeling' and she saw no alternative. They always approached the quest as they would a jigsaw puzzle, gathering a trinket piece every few decades. They never solved it.

VII

The Man always kept himself at a distance. He feared that mingling with them might somehow corrupt his purpose. Over the years he had begun to forget much of what that purpose was but one thing he did remember was the part of his instructions to make every last one of them follow the Words. Sometimes he still felt a twinge of unease about the boy and the girl he had lost in the crowd all those years ago.

Over the years he had begin to notice how they would all occasionally lose sight at a moment's notice and break rank. They had even begun to ask some of their old *Whys* again, which always reminded him of the two young ones. The boy and the girl were hardly any kind of tangible threat, but he found himself unable to shake the Voice's warning about not leaving anyone behind.

Truth be told, he could no longer see them. Over the years the pair had become invisible and neither he nor any of them had been able to locate them in their midst. Still, he was sure of their presence. He knew they were still there, skulking silently among the legions. Their presumptuousness was a perpetual pressure choking his heart, silently mocking everything he said, did and would come to do.

VIII

A minute, a millennia: it had gone on too long now to be traceable in time. The path was carved in concrete, deep and consecrated by the footprints of the following. Its legitimacy was its depth. Its longevity was a testimony to its strength. They had always been susceptible to the notion that if something was old enough it ought to be kept that way, just because someone else had at some point in time kept it that way. The Man became a legend of insurmountable proportions. They still followed in his tracks and left a place for him at mealtimes. Many would argue that he was more powerful as a phantom than he had ever been alive.

They had never really been a species conducive to change. And whenever change came it hated having to deal with them, because of their ingrained immunity to all its beautiful intricacies. They sat and slumbered nearly oblivious to change as it enacted its subtle dance in the backdrop of their days, always longing in vain for a rapt audience. It was nearly imperceptible through the fog of absolutes. Yet every

hundred years it wafted through the land without fail because there were two who welcomed it. Two, who spent those centuries waiting for it. The boy and the girl were the only ones who recognized that change was the only thing that didn't. And so every hundred years they were reborn in silence to counteract this force for that generation. Every hundred years they were allowed to utter one sentence of their truth. Some listened, most turned away, others pelted them with rocks but between the both of them they had only this one privilege. That every hundred years, they were granted a moment where they could speak and be heard.

They always resisted. Some were broken by that resistance but most of them were frightened by it and broke others in turn. The *Don'ts* and the *Can'ts* were a habit of mind by now. Even though the boy and the girl no longer hid in the shadows, they were still not openly mutinous. They waited still. For their sentences to collect in the well of consciousness and time, until there were pages. And someday a book to counteract the Words. Their book would map the span of thought. It would be a book of questions, not answers.

IX

Every hundred years, He would tally the numbers and there was a birth of a smile which never carried to full term. It never prospered long, for every hundred years there were those two; always staring up at Him, blatantly defying His inevitability. Every hundred years, they refused to adapt and bow their heads. He sometimes felt that the boy and the girl saw Him clearly from their pitiful position and it always made Him profoundly uncomfortable. None of them ever saw Him or dared to even want to.

Those two, however, stared up at Him unblinking and they always rejected Him. It usually made Him more apprehensive than angry because He had no idea how they did it. He could never spot them from his pulpit. None of it made any sense. It also made Him feel somehow incomplete, cosmically lacking. So every hundred years, there was a thunderstorm and a flood and many of them died. As they perished, they would cling tightly to their chains and implore for His grace but those two would rather drown than grasp at the chains for support. They never drowned.

Sometimes He found himself feeling jealous of their odd brand of belief. What else were they searching for when they could actually see Him? They were not blind. Why then, did they not believe?

Every hundred years He would ask them. "*What makes you think you can possibly win?*", and the boy and the girl would smile and echo in unison, "*You do.*"

And every hundred years, He felt a terrifying twinge of Doubt.

Never Have I Ever

Elizabeth S. Walker

December 5, 1999

The lights of the hotel swimming pool glow turquoise as we tread water in our one-pieces. For my fourteenth birthday, my mother has rented us a room at the Holiday Inn off Shackleford Road. She lies, watching television and smoking Tareyton 100s, on the queen-size bed in the room adjoining ours. We girls have stuffed ourselves with cheese pizza before putting on our bathing suits and braving the chill.

We cannot play Never Have I Ever. None of us has ever done anything, at least not anything sexual, which is what the game is designed to reveal. If one of us had, the others would know about it. We have gone to the same small private school for almost ten years.

So instead we play the game in the subjunctive: Never Would I Ever.

Wendy is perched on the concrete edge of the pool, pointing and flexing her toes into the heated water. She likes to ask the questions in this game. She narrows her dark eyes at me. "Would you let Blake Francis go up your shirt?"

"No!" we shriek, laughing and splashing her. Blake Francis is chubby and talks with his mouth full at lunch. I think of his peanut-butter-and-jelly breath, his sticky fingers on my flesh. I dip below the surface in an attempt to wash the image from my mind.

When I emerge, Wendy is asking the other girls if they would let Shep Downing put his hand down their jeans. Wendy has freckles and frizzy hair, and all her features seem to be located in the middle of her face. She does not shave her legs, and she still talks a kind of redneck baby talk, drawing out her "i"s to sound like "ah"s. Although she turned fourteen two months earlier, she has never admitted to getting her period. Even her feet are babyish, without a single callous.

I have been getting my period for nearly four years now, since the summer after fourth grade. I have been picturing boys' hands on me for nearly as long. I fall asleep at night thinking of imaginary boyfriends and their hands on my body. But of course to Wendy's question (re: Shep Downing and my dungarees) I say, "Not me, I wouldn't."

"I would never let anyone do that," proclaims Jess. "At least not until I was married." Jess is slim and tall, with glasses and a mouth that is too large for her face. The water only comes up to her waist. Her long fingers pat the surface of the water as she speaks. Many of us nod in agreement. We identify as Christians, attending Southern Baptist and Bible churches that condemn premarital sex, along with underage drinking and Dawson's Creek.

I, too, am planning on waiting until marriage to have sex, but only in a vague, perfunctory way: I have never kissed anyone, or held hands, or had a boy like me.

Cassandra admits she would let a boy go down her pants. "Of course you would," I say, although with her pasty skin and back acne, I cannot imagine that anyone would be tempted to.

Wendy rolls her eyes and asks her, "What wouldn't you do, Cassandra?"

"Never would I ever..." She thinks for a moment, staring at the night sky as she bounces from one foot to another in the pool. "Vandalize a piece of property."

We look back and forth at each other in amusement – What the hell is she talking about? Doesn't she understand the point of this game? – before exploding into laughter.

"Why would you even say that?" Wendy asks.

"Yeah," Jess says. "It's like, 'Never would I ever cheat on my taxes.'"

"Never would I ever jaywalk!"

Our hilarity fills the pool area, in all likelihood waking the hotel guests. We continue the game – the real one not Cassandra's PG version – laughing and trading hypotheticals. We make promises as children that our adult selves will never be able to keep.

5 December 2005

My flatmates and I are pre-gaming with a kind of punch we have begun referring to as "the Fatal Bowl." The Formica tabletop gets sticky as we ladle the lemony booze mixture into whatever vessel is handy – shot glasses, tea mugs, Nalgene bottles.

Twelve of us share this kitchen. I am the only American. Everyone else teases me for saying cell phone instead of mobile; candy instead of sweet; commercial instead of advert.

Without meaning to be, Sinead has become our ringleader. She is not very slim, or particularly beautiful, but she is warm and kind and never syrupy, and we all seem to gravitate towards her. Her mother is Irish, but she is from Kingston, near Wimbledon. It is her idea to play "I Never," which I call "Never Have I Ever," and Liam from Ipswich calls "Ten Fingers."

In junior high, the game was simply a platform to trade woulds and wouldn'ts, an opportunity to talk about sex when we were not wholly comfortable doing so. Now, at eighteen and nineteen and twenty years old, it has become a drinking game, too.

Sinead begins, of course. “I never slept with a woman.”

The guys in the room smile, and take a drink. None of the girls do.

Next to go is Liam, who at twenty-six is older than the rest of us. He is sweet when he is sober and a beast when he is not. Last night he got so drunk he threw Lara’s miniature Christmas tree out our eleventh-story window. He made the punch tonight. “Well,” he says after putting down his shot glass. “I never slept with a man.”

The girls all drink to this. Back in the States, some of my friends are still virgins, or claim to be. None of my friends here are. This is their first semester away from home, whereas I completed my freshman year at college before applying to spend the semester abroad. Still, we are all new to campus, and these uncharted waters (the gym, the laundry, the Hippodrome night club) seem to put us all in the same boat – the HMS Flat 11, sailing into the unknown!

Now it is my turn, and I say that I have never slept with anyone blond. Which is true, if you don’t count oral. I have been with, as in had sex with, two people: my college boyfriend, and Sam.

Sam and I began sleeping together during our first week here. His father is Armenian. Sam is shorter than I am, with green eyes. His room is on the other end of the hall. That night, he lay in my bed with his head in my lap, until both my feet tingled with pins and needles. I stroked his hair, so short it felt like velvet. Finally, timidly, I rocked his shoulder to wake him. “You should probably go back to your room now,” I murmured. He sat up violently, then sprinted back to his own room without saying goodnight.

The next morning, wearing his navy dressing gown, he taught me to love tea.

We have done it intermittently since. We are keeping it a secret, or at least we think we are. I don’t know if it is a real secret, or a widely known secret. Something we only pretend we are hiding.

The other week was Thanksgiving. I forced everyone to gather around the Formica and say what they were thankful for. Sam said he was thankful for East Enders. Later, in his bed, he whispered, “What I’m really thankful for is you.”

The group is still drinking, and Big Tom says he has never had a threesome, but then he takes a shot to show that, yes, he has had one. Lara says she has never had sex in her parents’ house. We name places we have, places we haven’t. In a car. On a bus. We drink and drink and drink.

It is Sam’s turn. He is wearing his cream-colored hoodie with brown lettering across the chest. He tells the group, “I have never had sex with anyone who lives in Flat 11.” He looks at me.

We grin. We drink.

December fifth, two thousand and ten

It’s everyone’s first visit to Sabine and Liza’s new place. They moved in together last month. I have spent most of this evening helping Liza in the kitchen. I can tell she wants everything perfect and that it annoyed her when Sabine volunteered to drive half the party guests to the gas station for cigarettes. Their apartment building is a new construction, as is their relationship, and the beige furniture seems a little too big for the rooms.

Now Sabine has returned and is getting louder – funnier, ballsier –the more she drinks. The hors d’oeuvres have been picked over, and we have settled in the living room, some of us sitting on the floor because there are not enough seats. We’re playing this game once again.

I start. “I have never had sex in a boat.” Except I have, so I drink, thereby incriminating myself.

It seems I am the only one who has had sex in a boat.

James is seated across from me, also on the floor, legs crossed Indian-style, his jeans riding up to reveal sockless ankles. I heard him come in, or rather heard everyone say, “Heeeey, it’s Jameson!” sometime after the cigarette run. It’s the first time I have seen him in months, and I suspect he’s got a woman somewhere. That, or he is avoiding me. One of the two. Possibly both.

Sabine asks if anyone has ever had sex in public. She is curvy with dark, waist-length hair, and it is easy to see why Liza, taut and petite and severely high-strung, loves her. Sabine’s warmth is the reason we are here. Sometimes I catch myself calling her Sinead.

We list the places we have done it:

On a picnic table in a deserted park (James).

In a construction site after hours (me).

One of those airport trains that takes you from one terminal to another (Sabine and Liza, last month, apparently).

We trade secrets. We force intimacies. This is the way we make friends as adults.

One guy – I don’t know his name – says he has never had a threesome. I think of the Flat 11 and wonder if there are only so many things we can name without repeating, only so many options when it comes to loving and making love.

James says he has never had sex with anyone without knowing their name. A few people drink, but I am not one of them. This, for some reason, embarrasses me: I have known all my lovers’ names.

It’s back to me now. James still has not met my eye. I say, “I’ve never had sex with

anyone I didn't love." It might be the first time I have told the truth in this game since I started playing it in the eighth grade.

There is a collective sigh. Liza lays her head on Sabine's shoulder. Finally, the man whose name I do not know says, in what I think is supposed to be a Bronx accent, "Well, doesn't that just break your heart?" And the spell is broken.

I get up for another beer. The game continues with the usual questions of who and where and how many. James follows me into the kitchen, stares me down.

I notice his black sweater is fraying at the hem, that his hair is dirty, that he needs a shave. The first time I met him I wanted to draw him a scalding bath and scrub him like a black domestic might have scoured a white toddler. Later, under his sweater, I learned the secret of the hair on his back, forming auburn wings beneath his shoulder blades.

He asks me, "Did you mean it?" It is clear my confession has not softened him towards me. I wonder if he hates me now, if he hates everyone he sleeps with, after. If that is why he asked me not to tell anyone.

I say, "No, of course I didn't mean it." Then, "So what if I did?"

James shakes his head, frustrated, then looks at the ceiling, speaking over my head as usual. "It's like you think we're bound by this secret or something."

He's right: I do think it. That the sex has connected us, but the secret has connected us more. I carry the secret inside my mouth, roll it around on my tongue.

I say, "I was just playing the game."

And that, in its way, is also true.

A Street of Same Houses

Visha Sukdeo

I grew up in a house full of secrets. Locked doors, locked drawers, great gaps of time in the family albums, I took these things in stride. I had to. I learned to not ask questions to keep my mother from crying and my father from whipping me up in their big closet, where Momma couldn't hear him. Now, looking back, I think she probably never knew about the whippings. After spending the rest of the day and night in my bed, I would wake up the next morning pretending nothing had happened. Without knowing it, I learned how to keep their secrets.

Our house was identical to the rest on our street, a three bedroom detached with aluminum siding on the upper floor and cheap brick underneath. It was a good place for secrets, in the middle of all that ugly sameness. When a secret lives in the wild, far away from other people, its ugliness is noticed and remarked upon. People think that putting a thing far away means it can't be found out, but those people don't account for the swiftness of cars and human curiosity. The place to hide a secret is right in the middle of other people, behind walls that all look the same from the outside because then everyone assumes that your secrets are the same as theirs.

When I was growing up, I assumed the same histories for every child on my street. I figured everyone had a pretty young mother with a fear of the outside and a big strapping father who sometimes whipped them in closets.

I was ten by the time I went to school. My folks had to make up a story to get the school board to take me without any transcripts for grades one through four. They said that they were missionaries out in Africa for the first decade of my life and I guess they were backwards enough, and my skin dark enough, to make the story seem true. Back then people were into rock music and disco, my parents wore country clothes, plaid shirts and print dresses. The principal of my new school had served in Vietnam, like my father, so he pulled a few strings and I got in. Except I had to take some tests before I started classes and those caused me to be put into the sixth grade instead of the fifth. I spent the rest of my career at that school learning to fight off boys bigger than me.

Momma was the kind of woman who took whatever life handed to her without complaint. Whenever I came home from school with scrapes and bruises, she cleaned my injuries with the little first aid kit she kept because of my father's work, and sighed quietly over each one. She never said Ignore them and they'll go away although I knew somehow that's how she'd handled most of her injuries. By then she already knew that ignoring the bullies didn't make them disappear.

Sometimes after he came home from work my father would give me a little pep talk about school or teach me how to throw a punch that actually landed. It took me a few months to piece together the right technique from these rare lessons but after I did the bullies mostly left me alone.

My father had a job in construction, overseeing the work of a dozen other men. Rows of houses like ours were going up all over the city and my father seemed to have a hand in putting up most of them. When a street was finally finished he would come home late that night, louder and less graceful than he usually was, and my mother would roll him into his bed in the room next door to mine where I could hear him snore forcefully into the night. The next morning I would try hard to be quiet but Momma didn't have to try at all; she was always quiet and always patient with whichever one of us needed her.

Most days, though, my father came home angry and exhausted, tired out from yelling at his crew all morning and fixing their mistakes all afternoon. The anger and frustration would build in him as the project went on, getting more and more behind schedule, until he would come home at times silently seething, without even a hello for me and Momma.

On those days, Momma knew how to handle him. She would serve dinner as usual, just as soon as Daddy walked in the door, but after she put down that last glass dish she would move behind Daddy and wrap her thin arms around his neck. Daddy had a thick neck, straining with cords and sunburnt at the back, to balance out the broadness of his shoulders. He was tall, too, so Momma could pretty near stay just as she was to reach around him, without leaning much to touch her mouth to the bunched muscle of his jaw, rough with dark gold stubble, and bury her lips into the secret spot behind his ear. After a long frozen moment, my father would turn his head and reach up his hand to catch her before she could move away and their mouths would meet sharply, his lips keen and her letting him all the way.

They didn't say anything, it was a silent show, but that night sure as the sun I would hear the bed rocking in Momma's room, furthest away from mine, and for the next week or two Daddy would come home whistling.

In time, of course, the whistling would stop and the tiredness would gain on him and a few months might go by where he was tired and angry all the time and then Momma would have to make it right again.

I used to wonder why she didn't make it right with him all the time, to save him having to be so weary and wronged most days. Then I realized that I wasn't paying attention to how she was during those times when Daddy was happy because my eyes and ears were always on him, trying to figure out if his mood was good enough to take me fishing or hiking that Saturday, just the two of us.

If my father's voice was tough and tired, my Momma's sounded like swallowed grief. Her words were small beneath my father's, childish, and he guided her in just about everything she did, from the cooking to the grocery shopping. It would usually take a day or two for her to work up the nerve to take that walk to the store, in front of all those staring eyes. Nothing my father or I could say would convince her that folks weren't staring at her because she truly believed her every step, every word, even every breath was watched and scrutinized by the neighbours and the clerks and cashiers down at the Shop-A-Way.

If folks were staring, it wasn't because of whatever she feared could be seen of her secret self. People stared at Momma the way they always stared at a pretty woman, one with big scared brown eyes and long dark hair she kept tied back from her face with a leaf-patterned kerchief. It's funny how I can remember these things: my father's strong golden jaw and my mother's bright kerchief when I haven't seen either of them in twenty years, don't even know where they are anymore, or if they're even together. I like to think of them being together still, even if it's wrong and I go to Hell for praying for such a thing. I know that for them life apart would truly be Hell.

"Who are these people?" I used to ask my mother when I was really little, pointing at pictures rotting quietly behind plastic covers in thick embossed albums. Memories, the albums would say, or Our Family. I knew what these words looked like before I learned to read.

Momma would go through the pages patiently, in the hours before Daddy came home, giving the unfamiliar faces their unfamiliar names. The black and white pictures were mildly interesting for their funny clothes and strange structural hats but it was the modern ones that held my curiosity. In one photograph Momma posed stiffly as a little girl between her brothers and sister. The family relationships were complicated and I never got tired of hearing them.

Uncle Tyrone and Aunt Julietta were Momma's little brother and little sister, her father and stepmother's children. Julietta was almost hidden behind the others with only half of her golden head showing from behind Momma's shoulder. I'd actually met Uncle Tyrone once, when he visited one morning 'just for a minute' and stayed for maybe five. He was a lanky young man with a big head full of crisp yellow curls. I remember him being very sweet to Momma but he never once looked at me, even after she introduced us.

"Looks like his Pa," Tyrone said in a soft undertone as he was heading back out the door he never quite came through.

I spent a long time in front of the mirror that evening, looking for signs of Daddy in my unformed face. My hair and eyes weren't a bit like his, I knew that already. My hair was dark like Momma's, nearly black, and my eyes weren't blue like his or brown like hers but a queer deep grey that was more like an animal colour than a little boy's.

I went to bed that night with my heart beating strong in my ears, unable to sleep for wondering. What did it mean that my eyes were that other colour, not a Momma or Daddy colour at all? And what did my Uncle Tyrone mean by my Pa, speaking the word as if he was reaching far for some other pa, not my Daddy sleeping comfortably in the next bedroom?

Nightmares followed me to bed for a week after that visit but I couldn't tell my mother what was happening to me or why I was frightened when I asked to crawl into her bed in the middle of the night.

A fourth child figured in the family albums between Momma and Tyrone, an

older boy with the same fair hair as the two younger children, carrying the same tendency to curl.

“My brother,” Momma said sometimes, or, other times, “my twin.”

They looked to be the same age in the last photograph, about eight or nine, although the boy was a head taller than his skinny dark sister.

“He died,” Momma told me once. “In Vietnam.”

As a child you’re always sent out of the room or at school or sent to bed too early so that you miss the big events and see only the aftermath.

One day when I was twelve I came home to find my father in the kitchen with my mother. This was so unusual I didn’t think to ask why he was there or what had happened. My father was never sick and never took time off of work except for the two weeks every summer he used to take us to the beach.

After a moment of confusion, I fell into my after school routine, dropping my school books onto a corner of the dining table to work on after dinner and taking an apple from the bowl on the counter for my snack.

“Nathaniel,” my mother said croakily, lifting her head only slightly from her chest, “go outside and play for a while. Dinner won’t be ready for a spell.”

I dared a look at my father’s face, bent over hers, and saw that it was red and splotchy in a tell tale way. Had he been crying? At twelve years old, I dismissed the thought almost immediately. Not my father. Never. Even now, twenty years later, I can’t quite seem to admit it. I still say things like My father was the old school type, the kind never to show emotion, and I never once saw him cry.

When I say these things, I think of that afternoon in the kitchen on the street with all the same houses, and try to imagine what it felt like for him to lose everything that day.

Maybe it took longer than that day to lose my parents. Maybe they went to court and fought for me. Maybe we even had visits while the whole thing was being sorted out by the strangers who knew what was best for my family.

Memories of other times, later times, might be locked up in my skull, but I remember that day as the last time I saw them, my Momma and my Daddy, her kissing me softly on the cheek and him doing the same after a hesitation, before the lady from the agency walked me to her car waiting on the darkening street.

In the car she and another lady talked about the possibility of criminal charges and jail. I don’t know if anything came out of that. I never knew who to ask.

The secret, it turned out, was in that family album they let me keep, with that little dark girl amongst the other blonde children. Momma was somebody else’s child, some Native Indian woman from the next town who her daddy liked

enough to call on for a while. When the woman died, her daddy made his wife take Momma in, to raise her with their own children. His wife didn’t like it and was sometimes mean about it but it was my grandfather, twice over, who was real begrudging about the extra mouth and, I guess too, the reminder of his own misdeeds.

I’m not making this stuff up, you know, I read about it all in the files I had to petition to go through, not just my agency files but Momma’s and Daddy’s as well. There were agencies even back then but at that time they didn’t consider beating your kid every day enough of a reason to take them away. The beatings Momma took, best that I can tell, were as far from the whippings Daddy laid on me every couple months as a lightning storm was from a steady downpour. As she grew up, the neighbours began to suspect it was more than just the beatings. Was it any wonder that she ran away at sixteen and again the next year, this time with my Pa? My real Pa, I mean, not the man who raised me up.

My real Pa was Max Sturm. That’s about all I know, just the name, Max Sturm.

I don’t know why he left her, if he left her. Sometimes I think he went to Vietnam and never came back like all those thousands of young men who forgot to buy a return ticket back from the war. Or sometimes I think he must have just left one day for a cigarette or a drink and that was the last she saw of him.

He never married her, not legally, so when she went back to my grandfather’s place he shut the door in her face. Somehow she made ends meet for the next year or so until my father came back on his two-way ticket and they set up house together in the city and then the suburbs.

That’s what the case files say and I believe them up to a point. But even in the files there are great big gaps to fill and there’s this enormous gap from when my mother welcomes her half-brother home from the war to when they start ‘living as man and wife’. That’s exactly how the paperwork puts it, sly and secret like a gossip neighbour’s wink and nudge. They never come right out and say it: sex and incest and those other words than can lead to jail. They never say it and maybe they never really knew, could only guess and wink, eventually believing it was the truth because neither of my parents ever fought it.

I was the one sleeping in the far bedroom listening to the distant rock of a bed. I was the boy sitting at the table watching her take away his tiredness with her touch.

Alphonse's Story

Salvatore Difalco

A silverback gorilla moved in to the apartment upstairs. At first I found it hard to swallow. I live on the middle floor of a tidy triplex in the east end of the city. Barb, a registered nurse, lives in the flat downstairs, a semi-basement nicely decorated with soft fabrics and lush plants. The upstairs flat had been vacant for almost two months after Jeremy, a university lecturer, skipped out of town. Apparently he had impregnated the Dean's daughter, but you can't believe everything you hear. Never thought of nerdy Jeremy as a lady's man. During the two years he lived upstairs I don't recall him ever bringing a woman home. Anyway, he packed up most of his things in a cube van one day and left without saying goodbye or leaving a note. The triplex owner, Nicola, an amiable, retired train engineer, told us that Jeremy gave him no notice, that he was surprised, and that it was peculiar, but never followed up with further information.

So more than a month passed, and except for a chest of drawers Jeremy left behind and a futon that had seen fresher days, the upstairs flat remained vacant. Not that I cared, but the place was a clean, two bedroom unit, conveniently located near a subway stop and ideal for any number of my friends and acquaintances searching for decent, affordable accommodation.

Just as I was about to ask Nicola if he wanted me to pass the word around about the flat's availability, this gorilla showed up. At first I was alarmed. What the fuck is a gorilla doing up there — I saw him in the window staring down at me as I chained up my bicycle in front of the triplex. I figured that someone had leased the place with their pet gorilla, something I found unimaginable given Nicola's no-pet rule. I would have loved a dog myself. But the truth turned out to be more astonishing than that. As I stood there on the front lawn gawking at the silverback my neighbour Barb joined me. She said nothing for a moment, then explained.

"Nobody owns him. That is, he's nobody's pet, if that's what you're thinking. And his name is Alphonse."

"I don't understand. His name is Alphonse? But Barb, hold on a sec — he's a gorilla. A wild animal. In case you've failed to notice the one overriding characteristic of our new neighbour, Alphonse."

"He's fully trained."

"Trained?"

"And he has a job. That's right. He gets picked up every weekday morning at seven o'clock and goes to work at a switch factory."

"A switch factory?"

"Yeah, where they assemble switches. He gets paid minimum wage, plus lunch and snacks."

I had to take a moment to digest all this information. It seemed inconceivable at first that an ape would be given such an independent living arrangement, but then I accepted that it could be possible — that I wasn't having one of my episodes. I had indulged in too many psychotropics as a youth, but it had been years since a full-blown flashback. And besides, those were always colourful, kaleidoscopic seizures, nothing like this, which had the calm and measured banality of a real event, of reality.

"How did Nicola ever agree to this?"

"Well," Barb said, "here's the thing. Alphonse's rent is richly subsidized by both the Federal and Provincial governments, who've been really pushing this independent living program for primates. The municipality also kicked in some cash grants for sponsors and renters. Of course not all apes are eligible, and severe restrictions apply. But once the primates are screened, trained, pass all their tests, and produce a certificate of employment, they're pretty much on their own."

"Next thing you're going to tell me is that Alphonse can talk."

"C'mon. Gorillas can't talk. But Alphonse—"

"I know, I know — he knows American Sign Language. And they've probably hired him a personal attendant to take care of his bills, clean up the place and so on."

"Yeah — how did you know?"

"Makes sense. It's a whole thing, isn't it?"

"It's comprehensive, yeah. You should go up and introduce yourself. He's pretty shy. But he's very friendly."

I looked at Barb's cool, doughy face trying to detect signs of irony or wickedness, but she was clean.

"I think it's great," she said. "I mean, he's a silverback — they're endangered aren't they? This is a chance for him to live without worry. Maybe they'll even hook him up with a missus. Wouldn't that be neat?"

I didn't know what to say. My head swirled. I tried to steady my breathing.

"Are you okay?" Barb asked.

"Yeah, just a little, I don't know — lightheaded. Whew."

"Sit down," she said, pointing to the iron bench on the lawn.

I sat down. She instructed me to bend over and put my head between my knees.

“That’s good,” she said, gently resting her hand on my back. “Now breathe slowly. You’ll be all right. I know it.”

REPORTAGE

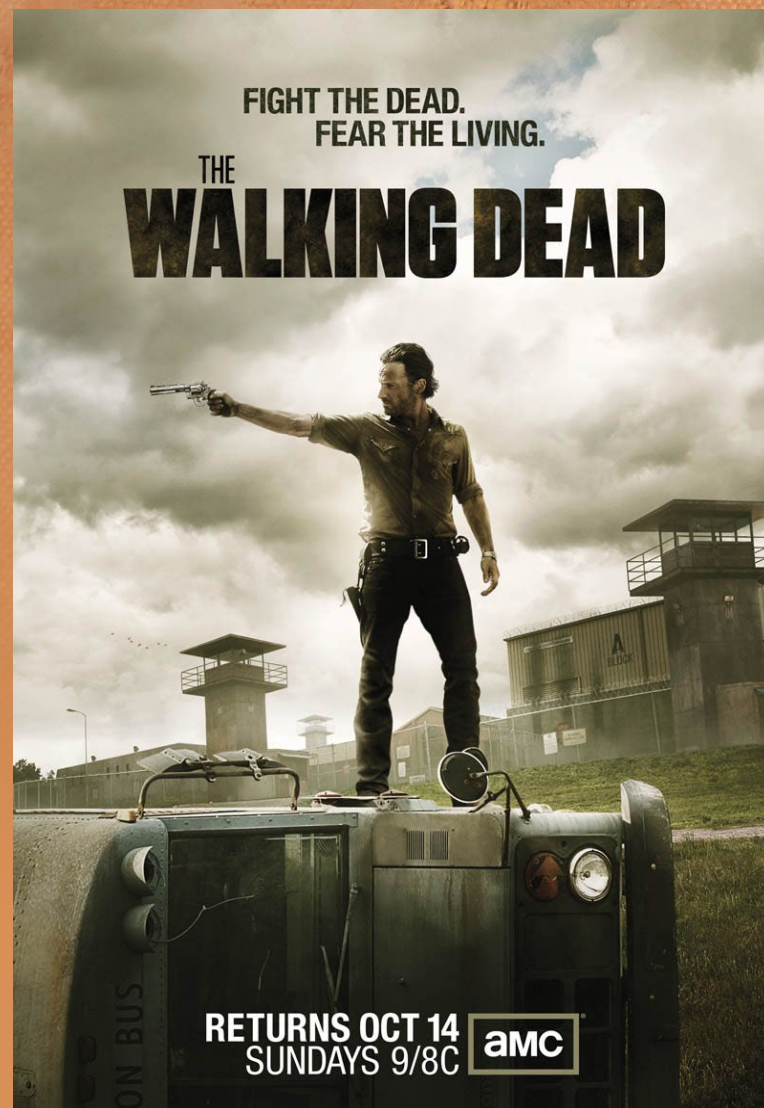
The Burden of Metaphor on Rotting Shoulders: The Three Ages of the Zombie

Fatima Shakeel

“The fear we all felt then, we felt it again tonight,” says the Governor to the battle-scarred residents of Woodbury, who have gathered in the town center in the aftermath of violence and chaos. “I failed you. I promised to keep you safe. Hell, look at me – I’m afraid. I’m afraid of terrorists who want what we have. Want to destroy us.”

Much as this sounds like a real-life sampling of post-9/11 political rhetoric, it is actually a scene from AMC’s phenomenally popular television series, *The Walking Dead*, which is set in a world where human civilization has ceased to exist and rotting, flesh-eating corpses walk the earth. The show follows the post-apocalyptic survival struggle of a group of ordinary people from what used to be the American state of Georgia, led by the show’s badge-and-hat-wearing Southern sheriff protagonist, Rick Grimes.

Meanwhile, also in Georgia, the streets of Woodbury are zombie-free - the houses in neat little rows, lawns perfectly mowed, and food and merriment aplenty. It is a town that seems to somehow embody the American Dream (or a more bizarre version of it). The Governor of Woodbury, in stark contrast to the heroic Rick Grimes, is the archetype of the charming but ruthless dictator. He provides the town residents security and a semblance of the lives they used to know, and in return, they give up certain freedoms and don’t ask too many questions about how this security and



abundance was ensured. In fact, the terrorists that the Governor refers to in his pronouncement are members of Grimes’ group, who have infiltrated the town in a mission to rescue one of their own from captivity and torture in Woodbury.

If this sounds like a heavy handed allegory for the post 9/11 era, it certainly is. Faced by what he considers the biggest threat to his authority since the zombie apocalypse began, the Governor needs to play on the people’s fears to keep them on his side. You would assume that the greatest existential threat he could use to rally round the town would be zombies – because, hello, it’s still a zombie apocalypse, remember? But *The Walking Dead*, like all great zombie fiction that has come before it, is not really about the zombies at all. Since it first aired in 2010, the show has been dissected and analyzed by critics as an allegory for everything from the War on Terror to the economic crisis to global warming to the Holocaust.

This is nothing new; in fact, it is a downright cliché – throughout the history of zombies in popular fiction, there have been theories about what the zombies *mean*. “The zombies are symbolic of the dangers of science; the zombies are Nazis; the zombies are the AIDS epidemic; the zombies are *you!*” What *is* new, however, is that *The Walking Dead* signifies an era of heightened zombie popularity unprecedented in past decades. Adapted from the ongoing comic book series of the same name created by Robert Kirkman and Tony Moore in 2003, the series has garnered tremendous critical acclaim, making it undoubtedly the cornerstone of the modern “zombie movement”, pivotal in reintroducing the world to the post-apocalyptic zombie narrative as envisioned by genre pioneer George A. Romero. While the show has been burdened with the almost universal expectations of critics seeking metaphors in the inherent nature of the zombie apocalypse, there is one thing that *The Walking Dead* unequivocally does symbolize: zombies have undergone – in the words of film and television critic Scott Meslow at *The Atlantic* – “a pop cultural resurrection.”

The past decade has offered not only a plethora of zombie movies like *28 Days Later*, the video-game-based *Resident Evil* series, *Shaun of the Dead*, and *Zombieland*, but also a comeback by writer-director Romero, who released three more films in his *Night of the Living Dead* series. The most recent zombie “first” occurred with the release of *Warm Bodies*, which is this particular monster’s contribution to the phenomenally successful supernatural teen romance genre. Based on a 2011 novel by Isaac Marion, the zombie romance stars 23-year-old British heartthrob Nicholas Hoult as a sexy, young, undead thing who still possesses the ability to think and struggles against his zombie nature to win the affections of a living human girl (played by Teresa Palmer) whom he has fallen in love with. Clearly, vampires are no longer the only



undead creatures defying their traditional nature and getting themselves some teenage lovin' (and a piece of that lucrative "young-adult" market pie).

The zombie virus is spreading beyond the borders of the West as well. Pakistan's first contemporary horror movie, *Zibakhkhana* (dir. Omar Khan), prominently featured *shalwar kamiz*-clad zombies as its undead monsters as early as 2007. It was the zombie's imminent "big break" in Bollywood, however, that became the real indicator of its global appeal. In early 2011, Indian producers Siddharta Jain and Ekta Kapoor announced they would be producing Bollywood's first zombie movie, *Shaadi of the Dead*, followed by news that Bollywood superstar Saif Ali Khan would be producing and starring in a zombie venture of his own. Luke Kenny's *Rise of the Zombie*, a "zombie-origin" tale, is also in the running to become India's first entry into the zombie canon.

Simultaneously, we have seen an increasing amount of zombie-themed literature.



medical causes of zombiism by performing autopsies on captive zombies.

Add this to a burgeoning amount of zombie-themed humour books (*Zombies for Zombies: Advice and Etiquette for the Living Dead*, *The Zombie Combat Manual: A Guide to Fighting the Living Dead*, *So Now You're a Zombie: A Handbook for the Newly Undead*, etc.) and you have a genre boom on your hands. "As with zombies themselves, what grinds you down in the end isn't any individual, but the overwhelming number," noted a Wall Street Journal review of Colson Whitehead's 2011 zombie novel *Zone One*.

The zombie craze has also infiltrated academia. Just last year, University of Queensland professor John Quiggins published *Zombie Economics: How Dead Ideas Still Walk Among Us*, which used zombies as a metaphor for disproved or redundant ideas in economics that still hobbled around in journals and newspapers like the undead. The year before that came *Theories of International Politics and Zombies* by Daniel H. Drezner, a Tufts professor of international politics, who imagined a world overrun with zombies and considered the likely responses of national governments, international organizations, and nongovernment organizations through the lens of theoretical approaches like realpolitik, liberalism, neo-conservatism, and bureaucratic politics.

Our brains are so drenched in pop culture zombie-gravy that we see them everywhere in real life too. Last summer, amid a bizarre rash of reports of vicious cannibalistic attacks in North America, the US Center for Disease Control (CDC) actually had to issue a statement calming public fears of a zombie apocalypse. "CDC does not know of a virus or condition that would reanimate the dead (or one that would present zombie-like symptoms)," wrote CDC spokesman David Daigle in an email to the Huffington Post. Amusingly, the official CDC website features a complete "zombie apocalypse preparedness guide" in order to reach and engage a wide variety of audiences. CDC Director Dr. Ali Khan notes, "If you are generally well equipped to deal with a zombie apocalypse you will be prepared for a hurricane, pandemic, earthquake, or terrorist attack."

"They're popular enough that I half expect a zombie to show up on Sesame Street and hang out with The Count," said Romero in a 2011 interview with the science fiction blog io9. "Vampires became The Count on Sesame Street, a zombie might be the next guy. I don't know, it's crazy."

Wake up and smell the rotting hordes. Welcome to what I call the Third Age of the Zombie.

How did we come to be so obsessed with the walking dead? And if what we are seeing now is the Third Age of the Zombie, when exactly was the First?

The first significant appearance of zombies in mainstream American culture was in the explorer William Seabrook's 1929 book *The Magic Island*, in which he wrote his observations of Haitian culture. Seabrook explained the Haitian voodoo practice in which "a soulless human corpse [...] is taken from the grave and endowed by sorcery with a mechanical semblance of life". The purpose of this resurrection was to enslave these walking corpses for the performance of "dull heavy tasks" - namely, tilling the cane fields for an American sugar company. In all other respects, these zombies were harmless. You could not find a more apt metaphor for the colonial era: Seabrook described the zombie's hands ("callused, solid, human") and his eyes ("the eyes of a dead man").

Seabrook's book was a bestseller, and it also inspired an unsuccessful Broadway play, which in turn inspired the world's first feature-length zombie movie in 1932.

The origins of pop culture zombies in colonialism and racism are driven home by the fact that this movie was called *White Zombie*. The movie was about a young white woman who traveled to Haiti to marry her fiancé, only to fall into the clutches of the evil voodoo master and sugar-mill owner, Murder Legendre (played by horror cinema icon Bela Lugosi), who poisoned her and resurrected her as a zombie.

So many glaring differences can be seen between the zombies of *White Zombie* and those we are more used to today. The 1932 zombie was not a predator hungry for brains, but a brainless minion in the grip of a dark master. Unlike the independent zombies of the postcolonial era, *White Zombie*'s undead were telepathically controlled by another. In the movie's hilarious climax, Murder Legendre was knocked down by one of the good guys and his telepathic control over the zombies was broken, causing the zombies to lose their sense of direction and walk off a cliff. There was no prosthetic makeup on these zombies, no gory faces with ragged flesh, no dripping blood, no gaping jaws - simply pale (but intact) people with blank-eyed stares and robotic movements. Also, unlike today's zombies, these zombies could be restored to life if their master was killed, as was the case with the white heroine who fell prey to Murder's voodoo.

As the world changed and globalization picked up momentum, horror stories too began to reflect world-views rather than localized urban legends. Visions of Victorian-era ghosts in flowing dresses making benign appearance on the moors were not doing it anymore for people. War had become a far more frightening specter in the 1930s and 1940s. It was after all in 1938, as the world teetered on the edge of World War II, that Orson Welles' radio drama *The War of the Worlds* sent North American listeners into panic, fleeing their homes to save themselves from what they thought was an actual invasion by great machines. With the advent of the atomic age, the new boogeyman of the age was science - terrible, powerful science that had created all sorts of previously unimaginable ways to kill, maim, devastate and destroy. Many zombie narratives were a symbolic grasping of straws in the wake of two horrific World Wars, as humanity struggled for explanations of how such things could happen - the prevailing theory being mind-control. Modern critics seeking a Holocaust allegory in *The Walking Dead* point out that the show doesn't address the nature of the human evil that drove the Holocaust - because the



zombies are a mindless, random force with no apparent puppeteer. In contrast, the zombie narratives of the 1940s ascribed the actions of mindless zombies to an evil mastermind - much like the perceptions of Nazi ideology colonizing the minds of followers like an infectious disease. The villain in 1943's *Revenge of the Zombies*, for example, was a Nazi scientist. Empires crumbled and the horrors of war surpassed human nightmares.

The First Age of the Zombie was thus all about the slow, shambling evolution of the walking dead from brain-dead slaves to bloodthirsty monsters. And it wouldn't be until the 1960s - at the height of the Cold War, when the world had become too weary, too familiar with the brutality of war, to be frightened anymore by the hexes of exotic witch doctors or the brainwashing of evil scientists - that the zombie would truly come of age.

Mister Rogers, star of the PBS children's educational series *Mister Roger's Neighborhood*, was indirectly responsible for zombie cinema as we know it today. George A. Romero's first job after graduating from university was filming segments for *Mister Roger's Neighborhood*. Romero says Fred Rogers was the first person to trust the young aspiring filmmaker enough to hire him to actually shoot film. Legend has it that it was a segment that featured Mister Rogers getting a tonsillectomy that inspired Romero to start making horror movies. (Romero joked to Vanity Fair in a 2008 interview that the tonsillectomy segment was probably the scariest film he ever made.)

It is a random connection, this one between a children's show hosted by a mild-mannered Presbyterian minister and the birth of gruesome horror cinema. But it is not the only one in the history of zombie pop culture.

Romero's directorial debut, *Night of the Living Dead*, came out in October 1968, when America was still reeling from the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. It was this context that would give *Night of the Living Dead* its extraordinary impact at that time, given that it was one of the only films of the era to star an African-American man as its protagonist - something that was almost unthinkable, especially with an all-white supporting cast. The decision to cast the African-American actor Duane Jones as the lead was not, as Romero pointed out later, based on his race. "He simply gave the best audition," he said. But audiences and critics alike were blown away by what they saw as a bold, revolutionary take on the racism of the time. At the end of *Night of the Living Dead*, Jones's character fights off an army of zombies only to be gunned down by a posse of rednecks who mistake him for one of the undead.

That this was purely coincidental, that history and circumstance were so aligned at this particular moment in time, was nothing short of destiny. *Night of the Living Dead* was not meant to be a movie with a message; in fact, Romero had intended it as just a commercial "cheap-thrills" project to make him a quick buck so he could fund other projects he really cared about. But the timing of the movie's release and the choice of its lead actor imbued it with groundbreaking relevance. A horror movie that made an overt, intelligent, social statement - who would have



thought? Whether Romero had intended it or not, audiences took away from the movie whatever messages they interpreted through the lens of the times. *Night of the Living Dead* was hailed as a commentary not only on racism, but also on the atomic age, on the crumbling American family, on the widespread terror and panic of the Cold War era. It was also the movie that revolutionized horror with its graphic violence, delivering a more satisfying shock to Vietnam-era audiences who were not spooked by ghosts and witches anymore. Most importantly, *Night of the Living Dead* reinvented the zombie into the rotting, stumbling, flesh-eating monster we all know and love today – and this was yet another coincidence, for Romero was not taking his cue from the resurrected stars of the likes of *White Zombie*.

“When I grew up, zombies were just those wide eyed boys in the Caribbean who were basically slaves to some master,” Romero said in 2011. “When I made my first film, I didn’t call them zombies because I didn’t think I could, I thought those were what zombies were. I just wanted some sort of extreme event to be happening, and I called them ghouls. That was it. I didn’t presume to call them zombies. And now, they’ve become zombies. All I did was make them neighbors.”

It is unclear how the word “zombie” came to be applied to Romero’s flesh-eaters by fans and critics, or what made audiences decide that this – not the passive, victimized voodoo archetype – was what the zombie needed to be in an increasingly violent and confusing world. But in modern pop culture, the word evokes no other image. *Night of the Living Dead* was the movie that introduced all the rules of the zombie genre that still apply to this day: zombies are resurrected corpses that rot and decay but never die naturally; they eat the living; they can only be killed by destroying the brain; anyone who dies during the zombie apocalypse is reanimated as a zombie. Much the same way as Romero’s zombie

apocalypse overthrew an existing world order to replace it with a new one, his groundbreaking film debut effectively revolutionized zombie pop culture and set into motion the Second Age of the Zombie.

“If you look at the poster of any Western zombie film, you will know that it’s not about some bhoot, but is in fact something else,” said Siddharta Jain, one of the co-producers of *Shaadi of the Dead*.

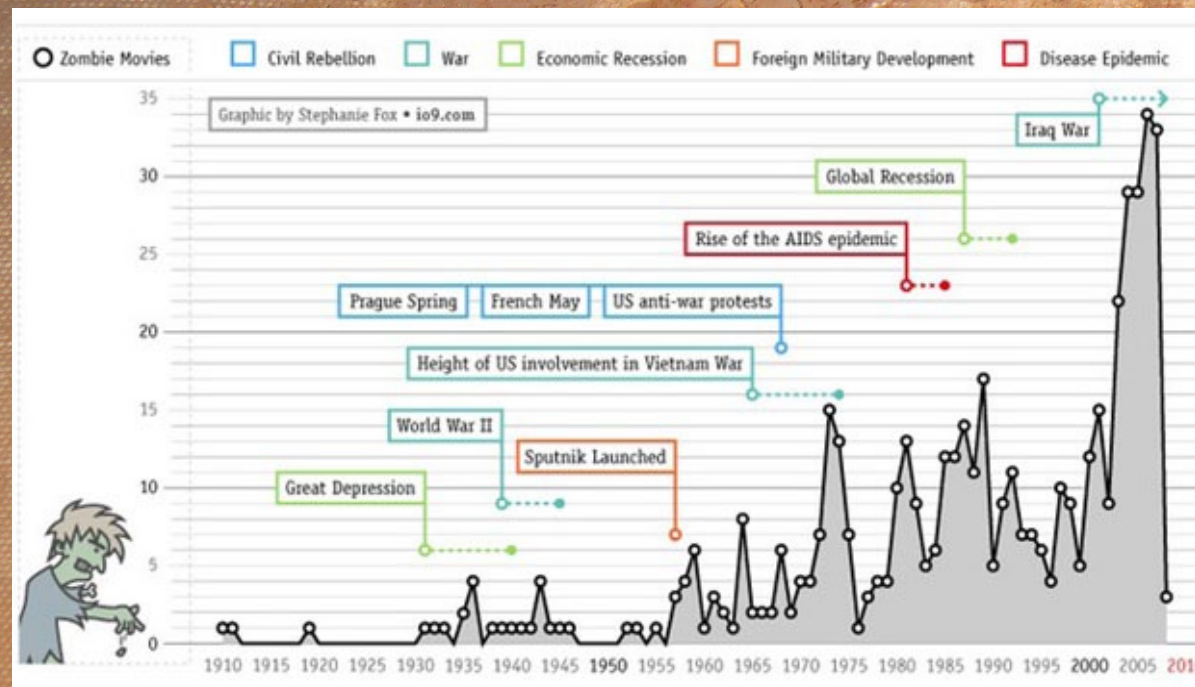
This “something else” was what the Second Age of the Zombie brought to the forefront. Gone were the days of the zombie playing the obligatory boogiemani in a random penny-dreadful. Accidentally or not, Romero had stumbled onto a formula that elevated the zombie from a mere monster to a metaphor for the times. And he ran with it. His sequel to *Night of the Living Dead*, 1978’s *Dawn of the Dead*, took on a different subject for its satire, to the delight of critics. The film was set in a shopping mall where a small band of survivors took refuge from the flesh-eating hordes outside. The film was rife with obvious satirical jabs at modern consumer society, with the zombies shuffling and moaning their way through the mall as Muzak droned in the background.

It is worth noting that George A. Romero said he never intended for his zombies to be symbols of anything.

“To me, the zombies have always just been zombies,” said Romero in a 2010 interview with *Vanity Fair*. “When I first made *Night of the Living Dead*, it got analyzed and overanalyzed way out of proportion. The zombies were written about as if they represented Nixon’s Silent Majority or whatever. But I never thought about it that way. My stories are about humans and how they react, or fail to react, or react stupidly. I’m pointing the finger at *us*, not at the zombies. I try to respect and sympathize with the zombies as much as possible.”

Regardless of his intentions, Romero’s movies resonated with audiences for their apparent symbolism of the times. Zombies have borne the burden of metaphor ever since *Night of the Living Dead* first came out. In the third film in the series, *Day of the Dead* (1985), Romero did not try hard to imbue the storyline with political or social messages. It is telling that this was the first movie in the franchise to meet with little success. Audiences and critics did not want horror for the sake of horror. They wanted to attach meaning to horror. The failure of *Day of the Dead* at the box office shook production companies’ faith in the zombie genre in general and in Romero in particular. For his part, Romero decided to take time off from zombies, devoting his attention to other projects instead.

The science website io9.com posted a line graph a few years ago, showing the number of movies about the living dead coming out in the West each year from 1910 to 2008, in order to illustrate the possible causal relationship between periods of sociopolitical unrest and the popularity of zombie movies. The graph shows spikes during the Great Depression, World War II, the height of the Cold



Source: www.io9.com

War, the height of the Vietnam War, the rise of the AIDS epidemic, the global recession and the Iraq War. The post-9/11 increase in number of zombie and living-dead movies is enormous, signaling the onset of the Third Age of Zombies.

That the popularity of zombie fiction (and post-apocalyptic fiction in general) is correlated with social and political upheaval is very probable. The post-9/11 era brought with it a wave of paranoia surrounding the use of chemical and biological weapons of mass destruction. If Saddam Hussein's use of chemical weapons in the 1980s against Iranian and Kurdish civilians (and the alleged involvement of major Western corporations in supplying these weapons) caused widespread fear in the 1990s, the anthrax scare of the early 2000s and the buildup to the 2003 Iraq War not only reinvigorated these fears but magnified them exponentially. Add to this the 2003 SARS epidemic and the 2009 swine flu pandemic, furthering the global population's fears of some mysterious contagion or other sweeping through the world. The *Resident Evil* video game franchise, which is about a biomedical corporation's illegal experiments leading to an outbreak of a mutagenic biological agent (that turns people into zombies), released its first game in 1996 and was hugely popular among gamers from the beginning. The movie adaptations only began in 2002.

In several ways, the zombie apocalypse encapsulates the sum of all the fears of the modern age. We live in an age when the collapse of civilization is always dangerously within reach. Whether it is the looming threat of terrorism and war, increasing evidence of climate change, or frequent and sustained economic meltdowns, modernization and globalization have brought with them a plethora of doomsday scenarios that never cease to be imminent. Remember the panic surrounding the Y2K bug – when planes were supposedly going to fall out of the skies and cities around the world would be blacked out as every computer in our computer-dependent world would stop working and society would be turned on its head?

The Third Age of the Zombie may have come on the heels of 9/11, but it has been shaped by global economics – the Asian economic crisis in the late 1990s, the early 2000s recession in the West, and most importantly, the global financial crisis that began in 2007, whose effects linger to the present day. By their essence, zombie films represent the same upending of society that became the nightmare of the mid-to-late 2000s. The global financial crisis shattered the security of white-collar workers everywhere, especially those who worked in highly specialized fields. Just like a recession, the zombie apocalypse overthrows the white-collar professional from his comfortable swiveling chair and renders him useless. It is a world where survival is the most sought-after skill; where being an artistic director, civil rights attorney, journalist or accountant does not make you immune to falling behind and getting eaten. In this de-stratified and de-specialized world, the blue-collar workers – the cops and the handymen – with their hands-on work experience and their familiarity with “roughing it”, will be the survivors.

Max Brooks writes about this in *World War Z*:

“You’re a high-powered corporate attorney. You’ve spent most of your life reviewing contracts, brokering deals, talking on the phone. That’s what you’re good at, that’s what made you rich and what allowed you to hire a plumber to fix your toilet, which allowed you to keep talking on the phone. The more work you do, the more money you make, the more peons you hire to free you up to make more money. That’s the way the world works. But one day it doesn’t. No one needs a contract reviewed or a deal brokered. What it does need is toilets fixed. And suddenly that peon is your teacher, maybe even your boss. For some, this was scarier than the living dead.”

If a zombie apocalypse doesn’t put class differences in perspective, nothing does. Romero knew this, and capitalized on it, when he made his comeback to the zombie genre in 2005, after a hiatus of twenty years. In *Land of the Dead*, which continued the series that he began in 1968, survivors had set up outposts across the United States, one of which, in Pittsburgh, contained a feudal-like government. Bordered on two sides by rivers and on the third by an electric fence, the city had become a sanctuary, with the rich and powerful living in luxury on the Fiddler’s Green while the rest of the population subsisted in squalor. The film could not be clearer in its depiction of the widening gap between rich and poor. This is similar to the situation in *The Walking Dead*, in which there is a walled survivor-outpost-meets-suburban-haven where life seemingly goes on in spite of the horrors outside. The nature of Woodbury mirrors something that has come to characterize America in the 21st century – the realization that Americans cannot remain sheltered within their picket-fenced lives of privilege forever; there is a chaotic world outside that is clamoring to be let in; the have-nots are hungry for what the haves... well, have; by the simple natural law of equilibrium, the 99% will try to become part of the 1%. It is not a far-fetched presumption to liken the dehumanization of the have-nots in much the same way as that of zombies, in the minds of the privileged – and this does not just apply to the West, but to privileged classes in all societies. This is something to think about the next time you are racing to beat a horde of beggars to your car.

At the most essential level, dehumanization has been one of the primary themes of *The Walking Dead*. First, most obviously, is the literal dehumanization of people who turn into zombies. Then there is also the survivors' necessarily swift acceptance that their loved ones are no longer "in there" after their corpses have reanimated. And most importantly, there is the 'Other'ing of fellow survivors, because the way of this new world is that no one can be trusted and anyone could be the enemy. Whether this dehumanization is used in fiction as a defense mechanism against the lurid violence of the world or as socioeconomic commentary, it is nevertheless one of the most prevalent and transcendent themes of real-life human interaction – one whose troublesome existence has become more pronounced in the collective human consciousness in recent times, as the world becomes more and more interconnected and interdependent.

Monsters do not simply make themselves.

Few fictional devices are as illustrative of human inventiveness and resilience as monsters. They are defense mechanisms socially constructed by the collective conscious of a culture. Nina Auerbach, author of *Our Vampires, Ourselves*, memorably wrote, "Each age embraces the vampire it needs." It is not illogical to extend Auerbach's observation to monsters in general. Where global pop culture embraced vampires for the past decade or so as its go-to monster, representative of a culture lusty for eternal youth and beauty, it is now embracing zombies as an allegorical device to make sense of the inherently finite nature and ugliness of the world.

But it is worth noting that in orthodox zombie fiction, the zombies serve as little more than scenery. Indeed, in *The Walking Dead*, the characters barely even bother to comment on their presence anymore. The real action is not in the headshots and decapitations and general slicing and dicing; it is in the interactions and relationships between the human survivors of the zombie apocalypse. And this in turn means that the true monsters, in zombie fiction, are our selves. The zombie apocalypse takes away all the moral codes and social norms of civilization and sets the stage for an exploration of human nature in its barest essence. At its most pessimistic, this exploration will lead us to man's capacity for extreme inhumanity; at its most generous, it will offer glimpses into the forces of compassion that drive us, and hope for the possible triumph of human will. True, questions about morality and human nature have been asked over and over in all forms of fiction forever, but the staying power of zombies owes much to their unique capacity for metaphor, especially for the times we live in. As the actor Andrew Lincoln, who plays Rick Grimes in *The Walking Dead*, recently commented, "When people want to make a metaphor out of a show, it means you're doing something right."

The significance of this characteristic cannot be understated. While both zombies and vampires will pervade modern consciousness for many years to come – temporary shifts of influence between the two notwithstanding – zombies, unlike vampires, offer the kind of versatility that will ensure that, even during periods of vampire dominance, zombies do not stop being relevant. The current glut in zombie

fiction may seem to signal the approach of a saturation point but there is no such thing as a saturation point for zombies. You can pretend all you want that they are not out there. You can build your sanctuaries and try to forget all about them. You can shoot all the rounds in the world.

The horde will thin, the horde will surge – but the sound of those scuffling undead feet will not stop.

Rinse and Repeat: Tales of Heroes Old and New

Jalal Habib Curmally

Neil Gaiman once asked why we read stories; why we keep turning the pages and why we thrill to them. He posited that the reason we tell stories - why we gravitate towards them and experience them again and again - is not escapism. Rather, his answer reaches back to the feelings of the first child that sat before the first storyteller in wide-eyed wonder and anxiously begged an answer to this simple question,

‘...and then what happened?’

And then, the story continues...

...until the ‘happily ever after’ happens and they come to a close. If the tale is particularly immersive, its ending leaves one feeling alone and almost bereft. We hunger for more, asking that same question well past the happy ending. We flock to the sequel, eager to experience the continuing narrative, to delight in the return of familiar names and faces as though we were greeting old friends long separated. And if the tale is especially beloved, the more inquiring of mind may even consider asking another question,

‘...how did it begin?’

The prequel is not a new phenomenon. It has existed in literature for a long time, though the phrase itself was coined only in the last century. And one need only look to film to find an explosion of this literary trend in a new medium. Sequels and prequels now dominate the major fictions of our times. And the prequel attends to another primal anxiety: a reason for why things are the way they are; in other words, our search for origins and identity.

It’s not so hard to understand why prequels have suddenly become vogue. Consider earlier bastions of identity – religion, nationality. We have seen them fracture and distort to the point of becoming unrecognizable. It is seductive then to reach into the comforting confines of story and legend and therein, if briefly, discover some secure grounds for identity. We have always sought for the best in our identities and when they fail us, we have looked instead to ourfor heroes. And now, under



the glaring lights of Hollywood, ‘retrospective prequels’ live and raise our banners once again as ancient gods and myths clad in brand new clothing respond to our call to wage that ancient, ongoing, never-ending war.

Apollo Apotropaïos arises from his cold, frozen abode and lights the sky ablaze with his chariot, giving light, warmth, life itself. This solar deity is associated with the highest, most noble aspirations of man, courage, art, music, truth, justice, and prophecy. He fights a never ending battle against evil to secure a better future for all mankind. Now substitute frozen abode with ‘fortress of solitude’ and ask yourself who else is powered by the sun, embodies the highest and noblest ideals entertained by all mankind, and who fights a never ending battle against the darkness for truth and justice, to secure our future?

Consider another being, one that embodies not one but six figures from myth; the wisdom of Solomon, the strength of Hercules, the stamina of Atlas, the power of Zeus, the courage of Achilles and the speed of Mercury. The utterance of this being’s very name is sufficient, in a flash of lightning and a roar of thunder, to transform a frail child into the world’s mightiest mortal. Regard this being, whose name for a time was spoken, tragically briefly, in blaxploitation era movies by hookers out to wreak terrible vengeance upon their pimps, the Man and society at large.

If your answers to these questions are Superman and Captain Marvel (of SHAZAM fame) respectively, then you have begun to see how ancient legends find new life in modern culture.

Much has been made of the American superhero’s role as gods in a modern mythology. The gods of our modern legends have enjoyed longevity in comics, in cartoons of our youth and even made the transition from the printed page onto television and film. Since 1978, a total of 92 superhero films were released. A rough estimate of the total gross box office earnings by superhero films alone (according to Box Office Mojo, sub.IMDB) is around a staggering 8.24 billion USD. This is not factoring in franchising and comic sales. The superhero has arrived to save the day, and he plans on sticking around for a while.

The superhero has his roots quite firmly in legend and the parallels are not hard



to find. The reason for the parallels can perhaps be found in our need to tell stories about the best of us and the best in us. We have always looked to the stories in our myths for more than religion. The traditions set by the ancient tale spinners have at times kept alive our most cherished histories, our social and moral codes, heroes for us to aspire to, guardian angels to wage our battles for us, archives that tell us who we are. And in an age of eroding identity, deteriorating political, social, religious and cultural norms that had in the past sustained us, retelling these stories in modern myths takes on new meaning.

Mention has already been made here of Superman as the modern day sun god, the shining bright light that guides, nurtures and protects us and points the way to all that we can one day become. Where Superman is the pinnacle of otherworldly power, his dark counterpart, Batman, is the peak of human perfection. As a young boy Bruce Wayne witnesses the brutal slaying of his parents in an alleyway, a life defining tragedy that when coupled with his formidable will drives him to channel his anger and grief into honing himself to become the Batman.



Batman is not the only hero inspired by loss and tragedy to embark upon a sacred quest. Hercules comes to mind. At first glance, Hercules seems to have more in common with Superman, but only superficially. Both Batman and Hercules derive their motivations and define themselves through personal pain and tragedy. Specifically, both lost their families and cannot shake themselves from their guilt. Batman feels guilty because it was his insistence at

watching a movie, the Mask of Zorro that led to his parents' murders. Hercules is tricked into slaying his wife and children by his step mother, Hera, thinking them to be monsters. The same sense of guilt and grief that motivates Batman becomes the setting for the legend with which Hercules is most identified: his twelve labors.

Flash is Mercury. Silver Age Flash even wore the same winged helmet that the god is famous for. Wonder Woman and Thor are living examples of Greek and Norse mythology repurposed to meet the demands of comic book fiction and brought onto a modern arena.

The parallels are many and openly debatable. And that is the point. The power of the prequel is that it allows for reflections on origins and it is only in reflection that we find meaning. Our superheroes can now look back at their ancient predecessors and find that their stories were told centuries ago. Modern myths have retrospectively found their prequels in the legends of our ancestors and surprisingly, we find ourselves telling the same stories, touching upon the same themes once again. There is a common universality of wonder, breadth and depth of emotion, unique human themes that touch upon taking our darkest fears and

turning them towards our noblest aspirations. Superheroes and ancient gods emerge from our imaginations to do battle for us when we cannot, to be strong for us when we are weak, to be noble for us when it is hard, and to show us the way. These were the stories of our ancestors. When religion and nationality begin to fail us, in today's superhero these stories and aspirations are ours once again. These living stories and their ancient prequels are just sketchy enough for us to fill the gaps 'till we find ourselves reflected within.

The prequel is especially seductive as it provides us that all important safety net - the hand holding needed to reflect upon an origin and in so doing let the stories reflect upon ourselves and our origins and identities. However, that security too comes with a price. Transported by the comic page into a world of sun gods, dark knights, Amazon princesses, thunderers, space cops and alien astronauts one cannot help but recapture a small piece of oneself. As children we were remarkably open to fantastic leaps of imagination and creativity. We expected wonder and accepted the existence of the fantastic as routine even commonplace, and we asked no questions. Superman flew because if he did not, he would not be Superman. Batman looked the way he did and punched crooks each night because to look or to do otherwise, would be to not be Batman. As children we understood that and did not seek to prequalify our acceptance with explanations, or worse, justifications. Our preoccupation with origins, facts and answers is a fixation acquired by the adults we children grew into. And our knowledge has been bought and paid for dearly, at the price of wonder.

Until the Superheroes flew in, and with a riot of glorious color, flashing costumes and musical cacophony, they saved the day.

Pilgrim

Dustin Renwick

The thick envelope hung suspended in the mail drop shaft. I tapped on the glass a few times to free the white rectangle, but I expected nothing of the reward from a vending machine. If the letter fell, I would receive no candy bar or chips. Instead, my gratification would come from moving a story along.

The paused parcel reminded me of the pilgrimages we all take. For the lost and alone, the trip might be a daily walk to a corner drug deal. For the religious, the holy lands of a faith can represent an ultimate homecoming.

For me, the end of June beckoned in my boyhood.

A seven-hour drive meant my feet could stand on the land of Door County, Wisconsin, by day's end. My lungs could fill with the mix of pine forests and lake water, and my stomach could fill with cherry ice cream and Swedish pancakes.

Our family route never strayed except for minor detours in construction zones. We stopped at the same rest area for the same lunch: a picnic of deli meats and cheeses, a can of original Pringles and M&M cookies Mom had baked the day before and frozen for the trip.

Dad drove the entire way, up through Milwaukee, when we had to turn off the radio, and my sister and I were forced to quit fighting so Dad could concentrate in heavy traffic. We traveled through the old tunnel in the city's downtown, a part of the trip now only a memory because of infrastructure upgrades.

Back then, the summer afternoon disappeared into the cadence of tunnel lights.

By the time we made it to Manitowoc, we'd eat at the Elbow Room, a local haunt filled with smoke and stares at our family of four, out-of-towners. After the meal, we always politely told our waitress we were full. No dessert, thanks. We'd drive down near the harbor to the red-and-white-striped awning of Beerntsen's Confectionary.

The ice cream shop is still there, but the portions have shrunk. New laws have eliminated smoking in restaurants, and the interior renovations at our traditional dinner stop have made the place look bland. The grit of a dive establishment left with the removal of the dark wood paneling and wrought-iron wall decorations.

Dusk on those trips found us crossing the Door County line, and we all settled in for a week of zero distractions on a peninsula where most bends in the roads include a view of Lake Michigan. My parents never worked on vacation, and my sister and I could never bring friends. Family time was sacred.

But as summer faded into school days, another annual pilgrimage began amid the snowflakes of winter break, though the route stayed much closer to home.

In what my aunt had dubbed "The Jelly Run," she and my sister and I would don festive hats, blast Christmas oldies in the car and unload holiday cheer upon extended family members. Homemade cookie platters strained against the plastic wrap next to jellies packed into jars we'd saved for my aunt throughout the year, now decorated in festive cloth and adorned with tiny, handwritten labels noting the recipients.

The three of us would ping pong our way to houses in two counties like an ornament falling through the boughs of a Christmas tree.

Our route started in my hometown with the empty house of a great-uncle gone to Texas each winter. His goodies stayed cold in the natural refrigerator of the screened in porch. We'd fit the narrow gifts between the storm door and the front door while the neighbors peered from their kitchen window to see who might be robbing the house.

Next, the great-aunt and great-uncle who owned an auto shop where we could drink pop in glass bottles and eat my aunt's fresh cookies, sugar to balance the air sour with the oil and grease.

Down the road, we pointed toward the Mississippi River and a great-aunt who lived in a two-story house twenty steps from the riverbank. When ice gripped the river's edges, we'd test the thickness with a boulder tossed from the boat ramp. A dull clunk granted my sister and I time to slide around in the whipping wind as we walked on water.

The trip wound back through the countryside to my grandparents, another aunt and uncle with our younger cousins and finally to the old farmhouse warmed by a wood-burning stove. Another great-uncle, a World War II pilot, lived in the isolated home hand-built by relatives of a generation long gone.

Often our trip started well before my sister or I wanted to wake up on a Saturday and lasted until we were late for the big pre-Christmas family dinner. My parents used the time to cook, clean and set up for company with my sister and me out of the house.

The map has shrunk, and in the past several years, the trip has lasted a few hours if we've stretched it.

As our family's old guard has died, the piles of cookie plates and stacks of jelly jars have dwindled so that they slide around in the lid of a paper box. Treats used to overtake half of the backseat. My aunt would have to mediate arguments about who would ride all day shoulder-to-box with the collection.

Similar to summer luggage and winter sweets, that letter in the drop shaft needed somewhere to go. It remained lodged behind the glass, and I needed to leave for work, a pilgrimage of its own but never as fulfilling as those yearly trips to the Door and door-to-door.

Book Review - How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia

Afia Aslam

Bursting with irreverent humour and swagger, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* will go down in the history books as Mohsin Hamid's coming-of-age novel. Those history books, however, will be written outside Pakistan.

The novel follows the fortunes of an unnamed protagonist as he moves from poverty to prosperity in an unnamed Asian country. Along the way, he encounters danger, infatuation, success and disappointment – all of which he uses to learn, to grow and to transform his destiny.

The storyline is general enough to appeal to a broad spectrum of readers, and one can see why the book has struck such a chord with reviewers in the West. The story is told in an effortlessly global voice, but from an insider's perspective. That is the perfect combination for a reader who does not belong to this region and who cannot hope to Google all the nuances (read: gory details) of social climbing in a foreign transitional society. Hamid was quoted recently at a literary festival as saying he kept his readers in mind while writing. It probably goes to his credit that the readers he visualises are not just South Asians. In all honesty, Hamid is one of the few truly international Pakistani writers from his generation and that should count for something.

For a reader from Pakistan, however, the novel's contents take on a different significance.

This is our lived experience Hamid is writing about, after all. The meta-issues he picks up, such as environment, corruption, violence and class warfare, are enormously relevant for anyone living in Pakistan right now, regardless of economic opportunity or social status. Readers in Karachi will know the fear of having a cold revolver stuck to their temples, while readers in Lahore may feel faintly sick when they think about the industrial effluents contaminating their groundwater resources. Readers anywhere in Pakistan, or South Asia, will understand the frustration of having to bribe their way through multiple tiers of government. These issues are real; they overlap directly with our lives in one big, geometric mess of tangent circles. Unfortunately, there is a problem with the way these issues are treated in the book.

Hamid weighs in on themes of social inequality in an informed way, but is never quite able to immerse himself enough in his characters' lived realities to really do justice to these themes. The readers are provided insights into human nature and social interaction that give the novel an air of glib authenticity, but we do not get a sense of knowing the characters or their motivations intimately apart from what the author spells out for us. In other words, the characters do not capture our imagination. Even the protagonist, the details of whose private life we are made privy to throughout the book, remains a dark horse to the end – difficult to own

and to support.

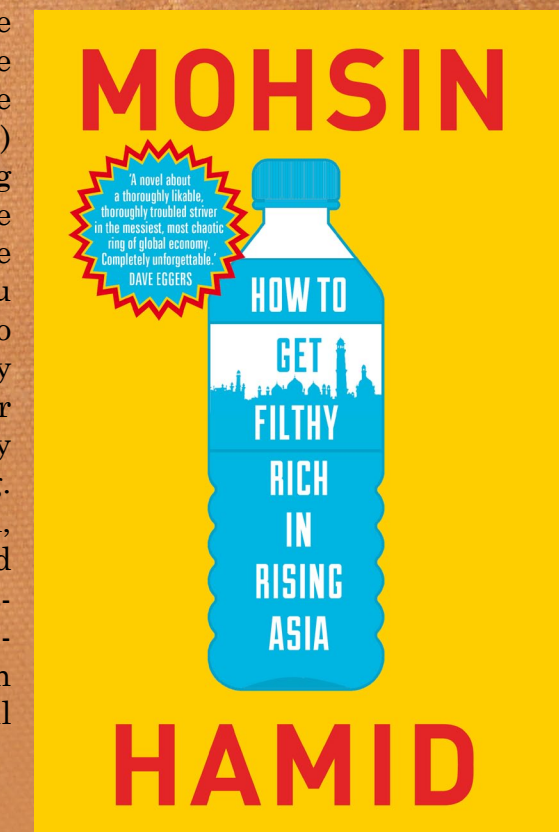
At the risk of speculating, one possible reason for this disconnect could be that Hamid's characters struggle with a poverty that he has never known. He gives us a window into their lives when the story demanded that we actually be able to climb into their heads, to wear their skins. Without that connection, something essential of the nature of their struggle is lost. Swathes of the narrative that should have been helping us to get more invested in the characters and their situations suddenly whittle down to a sea of thinly disguised social comment, which can get exhausting after a point. This distance between the narrator and the characters is a blow to the story – more the pity because it was a story that needed to be told.

The detachment is amplified by the narrative technique: written as a self-help book, the story is recounted by an omnipotent voice that knows what the protagonist ("you") is doing and also knows what is passing through the heads of other characters. The voice is unique and interesting – a little like God, or an arrogant specialist who'll tell you what to do but won't actually help you do it. Take this portion as an example: "Many skills, as every successful entrepreneur knows, cannot be taught in school. They require doing. Sometimes a lifetime of doing. And where money-making is concerned, nothing compresses the time frame needed to leap from my-shit-just-sits-there-until-it-rains poverty to which-of-my-toilets-shall-I-use affluence like an apprenticeship with someone who already has the angles all figured out."

The voice is interesting because it does not care. Hamid has intentionally crafted it to sound superior. But in a story like this one, this creates a moral quandary. It would have eased the tension significantly had Hamid used the voice creatively or introduced some element of change in it as the narrative progressed. Instead, it appears throughout the book to give the advice required of a self-help book format and to give detailed exposition on what constitutes "Rising Asia".

To the local reader, this voice starts sounding suspiciously self-conscious after a while. The detached bravado of the commentary simply does not ring true, breaking the spell. If Hamid was narrating the tale in person and "you" happened to be sitting in the room, "you" might half expect him to grin and wink at you from time to time.

In fact, by the time the book ends, it is not clear why it was styled as a self-help



book at all, other than to do something different. Throughout his career as a writer, Hamid has shown a propensity to take his time and play with the structure of his novels. This is not a bad thing in itself, and if this is how he has fun with what he does, all power to him. But the technique cannot outdo the story, which in the case of Hamid's latest novel, it seems to have done. The characters are there, racing through their lives from one page to the next, while the camera is on the celebrity narrator sitting in the stands. What takes the book through to the finish line ultimately is that the narration, when seen purely on its stylistic merits, is thoroughly enjoyable. This novel will most likely be remembered for the strength of its prose, which Hamid has evidently spent time on. The sentences are multi-layered, the vocabulary rich and the wit sharp. The author throws metaphors around uninhibitedly, which surprisingly does not take away from the prose (in fact, it adds substantially to the scaly, darkly humorous personality of the God-voice). You continue to turn the pages not so much to find out what happened next to "you" but to see how it has been described.

"Self-help books are two-way streets, after all. Relationships. So be honest here, and ask yourself the following question. Is getting filthy rich still your goal above all goals, your be-all and end-all, the mist-shrouded high-altitude spawning pond to your inner salmon?"

As his own books go, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* is a step forward for Hamid and it leaves the expectation that much more is yet to follow from him. In the future, perhaps a return to the basics is in order. When Hamid's next novel ambles over the horizon, it will be interesting to see if there is a shift of focus from style to storytelling. From this reader's perspective at least, that ought to be the spawning pond to which Hamid's inner salmon should aspire.

What Just Happened? An Interview with Shazaf Fatima Haider

Or, How Shazaf Poked Fun at Everyone and Got Away with It

Afia Aslam



Shazaf Fatima Haider's book *How It Happened* has garnered constant attention since it hit the stores in December 2012. A warm, crazy family drama reminiscent of the much-loved 1980s Pakistani TV plays, Haider's story plots the trajectory of two weddings in a Syed Shia family in Karachi. The novel has received extreme responses ranging from the rapturous reader who finds her redemption in it, to the feminist who thinks it supports regressive stereotypes of women. In this interview, we try to peel away those layers of opinion to get to the heart of the book. In the process, we find a writer of great heart behind the book.

A.A. How did you decide to write this novel?

S.F.H. I think I chanced upon it rather than decided. To write a book, there's a particular kind of state you need to reach, when things just align. For me, it was a combination of restlessness, boredom and anger, and that's the state I was in, in the last year of university. I was also, to a certain extent, very lonely. My brother had moved abroad, my sisters were married and after years of being cosseted and spoilt as the youngest sibling, I suddenly felt like an only child. I think I wanted to recreate that fullness of family, which you see in the book.

Somewhere along the way, I had a traumatic *rishta* scene, and then I heard that someone had called to ask after my friend for *herhand* in marriage but wanted to know first if she had an American passport! That's when I decided it was time to write a rulebook for marriage proposals. It was supposed to be a very journalistic piece when I started writing but before I knew it, I was in this trance-like state, with no sense of time. After about five hours my mother came in to ask where I was and I said, "I've just written these fifteen pages." That was the beginning of the story.

A.A. This book's been a long time coming, from what I've heard.

S.F.H. It was a huge secret initially. I wrote the first quarter of the book in fairly little time. I was convinced (like many first writers, I imagine) that this was the most terrible piece of writing ever to grace paper. So I stopped. But the characters kept coming my way, until I finally said, "This is serendipity. The universe is pushing me to write this story." So I wrote another big chunk.

After that, I went to the US on a Fulbright to do a Master's in Literature. It was only when I got there that I realized that this novel had become too much of an addiction. I really wanted to write professionally. So I tried to transfer to the creative writing programme, which they didn't let me do (but they did offer me therapy since I felt so strongly about it).

At this point my father became very ill and I decided to come back to Pakistan. So I was actually in between jobs and this monumental decision to discontinue my Master's degree. This book was all I had, really. So I kept working on it. Except the ending – that came two years later.

A.A. Why the long breaks?

S.F.H. Life kept intervening. You're either processing a story or you're processing life.

A.A. But life inspired the book as well, didn't it? Tell me some of the incidents that inspired you.

S.F.H. I know someone who went to meet a girl's family, ate dinner with them, were getting along rather well... and then produced a weighing machine and asked the girl to get onto it, please. This is not many years ago, by the way; it's within the last decade.

I also know that, with many other girls, the family would arrive and when the girl walked in, if they didn't like what they saw, they'd just get up and leave. And there were so many people who came hours late and then just stayed, and stayed. Once, a family came to see me at 11 o'clock at night without informing us. We were all in our sleeping suits. They said later that the match was unsuitable because the girl wasn't dressed well. Go figure.

A.A. Do you feel you were privy to more interesting stories because of the particular dynamics of the Syed Shia social circle?

S.F.H. Of course. I couldn't have written this book if I wasn't Shia and I wouldn't have written this book if I hadn't seen the marriage circus taking place. Even the imambargah bride hunting escapade has happened to me a couple of times: people trying to find out about me, my sisters, or my friends during a *majlis*. It's very entertaining, because you can see when the prey has been sighted (laughs). There's a slow approach – the predator sliding close, trying to detect who the mother is so the mother can be approached too. Trying to see who the girl is talking to, then asking that person later, "Who is she? Is she single?"

I'm happy that I've got a sense of humour about it. I don't let it outrage me. The imambargah plays a social function that is necessary. The issue is that the interaction between young people in our society can be incredibly claustrophobic. I mean, how do single people meet? Surely there has to be something a little more permissible – some legitimate, respectable avenues for people who are single and compatible, to meet each other and discover each other over time, slowly and spontaneously.

A.A. Do you feel the book as it stands today is a realistic representation of how things really work?

S.F.H. It's too toned down for what happens in reality. I had to leave things out. There's this one bit when Zeba is approached by a woman in a wedding (the obese woman who is throwing chicken bones under the table), and while a lot of people think that part entered the realm of farce, it actually happened exactly like that.



Reality is actually much stranger than fiction. I changed a lot of things because people would have recognised themselves and would have gotten hurt. You don't want to hurt people through your writing. You want to prick them into some faint recognition, yes, but you don't want to stab at them. The whole point of my novel was to show society a mirror of itself but in such a way that it would be able to digest it.

A.A. You have received some criticism for not developing a few of the characters enough, for instance Zeba.

S.F.H. To me the main character of the book is not Zeba, the girl who's getting married; it's the grandmother and the narrator. I loved creating them. It was almost as if they came to me. They were like characters sitting next to me, interacting with each other, and I was just recording their interaction.

The book is not just about the girl getting married, although a lot of people will read it like that. It's about men *and* women and what they go through. What goes on, how people react, how relationships come into that combination and how stories of the past are also very much a part of this process because of our addiction to tradition. The past is still alive for us. And, really, how can we *not* be fascinated by such a rich, ludicrous, colourful past? To leave it and move ahead is difficult for a lot of people.

A.A. How do you feel about the reviews? And in retrospect, do you think publishing's all it's made out to be?

S.F.H. Bad reviews are like a stab in the heart. If an author tells you they don't read reviews or don't care about them, they're lying. But I think I've grown through this process. After you've been through the emotional roller coaster and you think about it maturely (which is very difficult to do because this is like your baby) you realize that what DH Lawrence said years ago was true: *your story is not yours*. It's only yours when you're writing it. The minute it becomes a book, it's the public's.

From the writer's perspective, it can be scary. But this process of writing and being published teaches you patience – patience to be accepted, to be read, to be published; patience with people who're going to read your book. It has also given me a lot of hope... and it's taught me something: you have to ask or fight for what you want. Just literally keep throwing yourself at that impenetrable wall and one day, you might find the door.

Author photos by Ibaad Lari.

EDITORS' PICK:
POETRY

“O”

Asnia Asim

August swigged its four weeks out of my cup
folded its tongue and left me here
so dry and unaccomplished
just as I was
in the arms of July

“But how have you been”
is a question
a question that when I rhyme
tinkers
in the oval of every “O”
that does not start your name

Has the musk of my un
opened letters made you want to chain
smoke at all? as cancer
do I clot your blood
worry your wife
pull you toward the shrinking axis
of my lust
at all?

A wishful stain of misery on the starch of your arrogance
How low can I stoop?
ponders my spine
sore for the sting of your nail

Here the year’s cheek has a blush of orange

they say Fall is come
leaves and resolutions
are on that edge
the one that only blossoms
away from the sun, close to the ground
where dreams of you sprout to frolic like devils
tipsy on my resolve
where the eyes of inaccessible sleep twinkles
dew
on freshly varnished coffins
where the preacher roars about the horror
“O the funk of six feet under!”
and I can’t help but wonder...

Is your hair still so musical
to hum dark ruffles
between the cleft of my fingers?
does the blue of my fondness
ever yolk
in whites of your collars
in the blacks of your denial
in the frowns of your wife
in the play of your children?

“O the funk of six feet under!”
and I can’t help but wonder...

Hovering on the Edge of a Dream

Noorulain Noor

You feel rocks in your throat
listening to soul music during long commutes
under gorgeously grey skies
of early morning and evening and hidden griefs
stalled only by the idle banter of radio jockeys about one night stands
and the quality of brand name mattresses.

A stray wanderer,
your mind travels to those lazy afternoons
in mediocre hotel rooms
with scratchy sheets and unappetizing
room service menus,
strong smelling soaps
in cheaply made cardboard boxes,
none of which mattered
because poetry flowed between both of you
and you dreamed
over fast food burgers and curly fries,
of having enough one day
to escape those days
but maybe those days were the escape.

You will wake up one day
and years will have passed you by like an indifferent bus
driving into the mist of a winter morning,
leaving you shivering at a strange bus stop,
cold and wet and short of breath
from running towards a fate slipping through your fingers

quicksand like.

Weren't you just in a coffeehouse
having your second six-shot-raspberry-mocha,
writing poems about a city you barely remembered
aside from its romantic landmarks -
a dying river, a Mughal fort with a bloody history?
But in the way of dreams
there were rocks in your throat,
and no one heard a sound.

Afterword

Hera Naguib

For years now, I wander you, a vagrant mist
skirting your acres of blankness. What moon

unwound in you still drags and hurls my refrain.
Tonight, your absence pelts its far seas. I wake

to explosions, delirium whirls the narrow ear
of my sail. Tell me, do you still don black shirts

to the likeness of your moods, do wisps of my spine
still sling you in iron arcs, or do I wade through your

days behind a haze? I long to jolt you with my fever
again, my fists of hurtling rocks down the sediment,

the red siren of your heart. But the grey well
of your voice tells me this is the end.

Out of my window, whose long, drawn mouth flaps
a wide cry, I watch you, a mirage anchored, masts

tall and rippling against the slopes of my thighs.

Being Ordinary

Noorulain Noor

I am lost in the aisles of large grocery stores
that have no substance,

between diapers and chicken leg quarters on sale
and have become that woman I saw
at farmer's market all those years ago
when I was young and golden with the summer's sun,
my taut waist in snug designer jeans,
a tote with books of poems on the shoulder,
and a bag of Fuji apples in my hand.

She was standing just a few feet from me,
holding an unremarkable baby,
her husband towering over her, irritated,
several bags of produce at her feet,
clutching tissue paper in one hand, wiping the baby's nose,
and a few dollar bills in the other,
her hair disheveled, skin sallow, feet in house slippers.

I had looked at my own perfectly painted toenails and thought
“Poor woman.”

Kind Illusions

Moazam Rauf

You say that I am full of contradictions:
I have delicate wrists, but strong forearms.
The length of my fingers is perfectly shaped
To reach out to the crevasses of your soul.
I enter your little paradise arrogantly
As if I were God, playing the role of a fiery serpentine.
And in the end, I only feel my own heartbeat
While my ear rests on your breast.

EDITORS' PICK:
PROSE

there is a guitar

Madeeha Ansari

There is a guitar leaning against a wall in her room. When she shuts her eyes in bed at night, she imagines herself picking it up. There is music in her head and at that exact moment, it is the easiest thing in the world to pluck it out.

Her fingers slide over the frets, the strings digging into the tips. She presses harder, thinking of the calluses of endurance and mastery. They cut into her flesh, and she presses harder until a little piece of skin is torn. She looks at her hand, and touches the fingers lightly with her thumb. They look purple and feel raw and strong and supple.

A refrain plays over and over, as someone's fingers fly over a Spanish guitar. It belongs, perhaps, to a street in Madrid where an old man sits late at night. His shoes are laced tight and one foot moves in time. The tourists have leaked out of the four corners of Plaza Mayor, and no one will pass his way until the drunken boys begin staggering home. Still he sits on his two wooden crates, jaw jutting out in concentration, foot moving in unceasing time.

A girl stands ten paces away, so she cannot be seen. This melody that fills the sky could not be conscious of being heard, or else it would not be so clear and pure. It is not melancholy for it is not slow, but full of resolute energy. Rising high, plunging low, cutting the air with swift, dangerous strokes. Telling the story of a wild heart, in a pitch that could only be Spanish.

She leans against the wall of a lemon coloured house and tries to listen hard enough to remember.

If a passerby were to stop while a girl was leaning against a yellow wall, it would not do to speak. The dusty moon would make her eyes seem clear, her silence would inspire confidence. He might tell her things that no one else knew.

One thinks of what could happen, if she could let it. He would sit quietly on the pavement and listen with her.

And what then?

They would wait till it grew light, and the morning crept stealthily in. The old man would sniff hard and stretch the fingers of his leathery hands, then lift himself off the crates, and if he saw the drama of youth he would smile a smile with a missing tooth.

They would awaken to the smell of frying batter, and she would lead him down a side street where they do not charge the tourist price. The girl with the black hair from the counter would be setting the tables in place and turning the chairs the

right way up.

It would be warm inside, and he would have to make a choice. It would not do to move to a small place where she would be glancing at the door. Then, she would simply laugh and pay and leave, walking fast towards a busy day.

But if he would look to her, she would take the steaming cups of coffee out to where the chairs faced the street. Looking at the city setting up shop, she would hold the cup close to her nose and talk about the things she wanted to see. And he would be surprised, and let her. And then?

He might tell her what it was like when he was a little boy in an independent world. His past was different from hers - it was clear from the way he walked. His future would be different from hers - she knew it from the way he talked.

If they stayed there long enough, he would begin to talk in an earnest voice, looking at her as if she might be something other than a girl tapping her feet on the street.

And there is always so much to say, until of course there isn't.

How simple it is, to put an end to thought. There comes a time when there are no more ambitions to share.

The weather is good and I am ordinary.

With this revelation, she would look hard at a coffee stain on the table. He would swallow and smile and nod, then leave her sitting there and walk down the winding, cobbled street. And enter a house with thin walls and a beautiful prostitute, who would cradle his head and echo the things he whispered, the way he wanted.

We have nothing in common.

She would hear it in her head, like the abruptness of a goodbye. And yet if she saw a yellow house, she would lean against it and hope that he would venture out. Just once, so she knew it was all right, he didn't mind. That he would smile at her again the next time; ask her why she didn't feel cold.

She would wait and watch as people dropped coins in a tin can for an accordion playing a merry tune. And if a gallant stranger asked her to dance, she would smile and twirl without saying a word. And draft a hundred letters to someone who could have been a friend.

And really, what then?

One day, he would walk the pavement once more and she would come forward to stand expectantly before him. Being kind, he might smile politely to almost say yes. Then he would leave her a week behind while she lay awake and still, unable to empty her mind of a Spanish refrain.

It would not do to encourage the fascination of the unknown. When the old man stretches his fingers after playing the story of his life, a young girl starts walking towards Calle de Cartegena. Safe, anonymous, and absorbed in enjoying the silent syllables rolling off her tongue. Calle, Calle, Calle, Carta-he-na.

The guitar stands in its quiet corner and she realises, after a while, that she is still awake. Her fingers curl on the pillow, soft and whole – she has never known enough to play.

House Number 93

Yasin Asad

The news spread like an infection.

Abdul Jabbar Hasan Gillani of House Number Ninety-three, Fifth Street, Phase 2, Defence Housing Authority, had passed away. At eighty-three, he had finally succumbed to the multiple diseases thrown his way. Rumour had it that he had been fighting a common cold for the past few weeks.

Mr. Gillani had been somewhat of a local celebrity: he had an estate stretching over three thousand square yards, fourteen imported cars, two wives, a pet lion, a thick moustache covering most of his upper lip and on the occasion of Baqra Eid he would have the fattest and most expensive looking cow chained outside his house.

His Janaza was scheduled to follow after Asr Prayers. The entire route from the Masjid to the graveyard four streets away had been cordoned off so that the funeral procession could pass smoothly. After all, the entire neighbourhood, along with the Gillani family and many other high ups of the city were expected to attend.

The grieving widows had spent the entire morning dealing with countless condolences communicated through sympathetic text messages, tearful phone calls and awkward hugs. They retired shortly after three o'clock, away from the public eye, and it was rumoured that they were holed up in the same room for the first time in seventeen years.

Jaffer could not fathom which shalwar kameez to wear. He could go with the brown striped khadi but it seemed a bit too nonchalant for the occasion at hand. Then there was the plain grey stone wash, which always made him look broader but he had worn it too many times for Juma Prayers. Finally there was the orange cotton one, which he had got stitched for his sister's mehendi. The colour was not too flattering on his dark brown skin but then again he had gotten a few compliments here and there. Those were the times when he wished he owned a shalwar kameez that would truly make him noticeable. The choice was ever so unnerving. He was about to give up and go take superior advice from the wife when he saw it, pushed way back into the cupboard, hiding behind an old flannel sweater. He knew at once...

“Rasti what in the world is taking you so long?” Mrs. Khan's voice echoed throughout the house. A startled Rasti winced as she pulled out the final hair a bit too hard. She rubbed the skin above her upper lip gently, trying to soothe the burning sensation her act had produced. “Rasssstiiiiiii...come down right now!”

Mrs. Khan was getting impatient. Rasti trudged out of her room and stood at the top of the stairs to see that her mother was already half way up.

“Do you want me to send you an invitation every time I need you to go with me somewhere?” Mrs.Khan implored.

“Ami, I was just getting ready, you go ahead na...it’s just two houses away, I’ll come khud se...”

“Rasti it’s a funeral, we’re already late...is tarah akele ao gi, it won’t look nice and-”

“I said I’m coming Ami...just give me ten minutes.”

“Ten minutes? Beta-“

“Please na I’ll be there!”

Mrs. Khan gave one final disapproving look and turned. A minute later Rasti heard the door shut and she breathed a sigh of relief. She quickly rushed to the window overlooking the street, saw her mother exit through the gate and make her way to the Gillani residence. Finally. So seldom was the house empty. Instantly her phone was out and the desired numbers were being pressed. One ring. Two rings. Three-

“Hello.” His husky voice made her cringe with glee.

“She just left. The soyum will go on till maghrib and she won’t even notice that I’m not there once it starts. So I think we have about an hour and a half or so to be safe.”

“Oh, good good. I’m just waiting for my car. I’ll be there in about fifteen minutes,” he replied.

“Okay...back gate today, too many people ageh gi taraf...and hurry...love you, bye.” She hung up. Her heart was racing slightly and he hadn’t even come over yet...

Mudassir had seen Mr. Gillani only once. It was two years ago when he used to deliver the morning newspaper. He had stopped in front of the house opposite the Gillani residence to grab a glass of water. He was waiting for the guard to return when the tall dark metal gates swung open. A white BMW reversed out into the street and Mudassir managed to get a glimpse of the aged fat man with the thick moustache sitting in the back seat.

The same guard informed Mudassir before Zuhr Prayers at the Masjid that the fat man was dead. The Soyum would be in the evening and he should be there if he wanted to have some free biryani. An offer Mudassir could not refuse. He loved

biryani. Especially free biryani. What luck that he was in the neighbourhood.

So Mudassir hurried home, almost an hour away, to ask his mother and sister if they would like to join him. It would take longer to come back in the evening as the buses would be crowded and would make more stops. Maybe he could borrow his neighbour’s motorbike? He just hoped he would make it before the biryani ran out...

Mrs. Shahnaz Haider slammed the phone down with contempt. Her high tea, which she had been planning for the past three days, had just been reduced to two guests. The remaining two would probably call to cancel any second now. And all because that Gillani had decided to pass away today of all days. He had been sick for almost six years now but no, this was the day he had to go.

She cursed her luck out loud. Loud enough to make her cook, who was at the other end of the house in the kitchen, come scampering into the room. “Kya huwa baji?” “Mutton ko chulle par mat rakhna, zaya ho jae ga,” she answered reluctantly. “Baji magar woh-“

“Maine jo bola he woh ja kar karo!” With that she slumped onto the sofa that was closest to her, racking her brain to figure out a way to salvage her tea party. Maybe she could turn it into a dinner? No that was impractical; people would just present the “it’s too soon” argument.

It was inevitable; the party must be shifted to tomorrow. How irritating that was. She looked at the time. It was nearly three-thirty. The Soyum was in an hour. She could go to that. Everyone else was going to be there anyway. She heaved a long sigh and made her way to the bedroom, thinking how she would guilt trip her no-show guests for cancelling on her party...

Aziz rested his arm against the window and tapped impatiently on the steering wheel as he waited for the traffic signal to turn green. There were at least forty cars in front of him, all honking at this one rogue driver who had decided to reverse mid way, smartly realizing that the road wouldn’t be opening any time soon. Aziz slid down the window and craned his neck outside to somehow figure out what the matter was. The issue seemed to be more than just a kharab traffic light.

“Yeh road kyun band kardi he yaar,” he wondered out loud.

The over enthusiastic driver in the car next to his came to the rescue, “Suna he Jabbar Gillani mar gaya he, aj subah ki-“

“Jabbar Gillani? Doesn’t he live near fifth street somewhere?”

“He does, but the graveyard is around the corner, the janaza was right after asr

and so-“

He rolled down the window. He had had it with these people. One of them died and the whole city shut down. He wanted to be home in the next fifteen minutes but roads would not be opening for another half an hour if the janaza had taken place around ten minutes ago. There was an alley towards his left, half blocked by a truck. If he could somehow squeeze through the gap between that truck and the electric pole he would be free. Then he could just travel around the blocked traffic and be home in about twenty minutes. Fifteen, if he stepped on it.

With that thought he flicked the indicator signal on and started to turn...

Nadia sat on the edge of her bed and lit up the last cigarette in the pack. Benson and Hedges - her father's favourites. She had started smoking right after he stopped eight years ago. He would have been furious had he found out then that his eighteen-year-old daughter had picked up the habit. He did find out much later. A year ago to be exact but by then he was emotionally too weak to protest. She was his ladli after all, the youngest of seven daughters.

She was sure he had wanted a son, though. Apparently, that was the reason he gave for marrying her mother. That did not work out too well. She was the only child from the second wife and that too was a miracle considering her father was fifty-seven when she was born. He probably realized that himself and so she became the favourite. This is not the time to be thinking about these things, she thought to herself.

She walked through the huge glass doors and onto the balcony. It was almost time for maghrib- the day was finally over. She walked to the edge and placed her elbows on the railing. So many people had come to pay their respects. Almost the entire neighbourhood.

Her father had been loved by so many.

That was when she saw Jaffer Ahmad and grimaced. What in God's name was that man wearing? A Sherwani to a funeral. No wonder his wife seemed to be hiding her face behind her duppatta.

Here came the innumerable aunties she had met at shadis and dinners. Mrs. Khan, from the end of their street; her daughter did not seem to have made it though. Even Shahnaz aunty from around the corner was here. She always threw the best tea parties. And so many others had showed up.

“What are you looking at?” someone called. Nadia turned to face Anum, her mamoo's daughter, standing next to the glass door.

“Nothing I...didn't you leave like ten minutes ago,” she said.

“Well I was going to, but then my driver disappeared. Apparently there was an

accident three streets away. A car hit a motorcycle wala. A man and two women are dead, I think.”

“Oh no...that's...that's terrible.”

“Yeah, the driver sped away after...probably drunk...but these motorcyclers never learn either...always jumping right in front of your car when you least expect it...no sense of direction I tell you.”

Portraits across the Window

Suneetha Balakrishnan

She watched the bogies chug out in slow rhythmic dance, each passing scene an accelerating cameo as the train gathered speed. A blotched sky in dull grey moved into view followed by an empty platform dotted with dusty merchandise on tired cartwheels. On the upper berths, her father-in-law's snores competed with those of her husband. Her mother-in-law reclining on the other lower berth did not snore, but slept with her mouth open and the saree's edge cautiously pulled over her greying hair even in sleep; her dark chequered hanky was spread over her eyes and covered most of her face.

She counted their bags once more from her prone posture on the lower berth. She could see the two tin suitcases into which various household articles and basic condiments had been packed for their new life ahead. Then there was one red duffle bag with some clothing and two cane baskets, the last containing food to last them through the journey. Two black duffle bags full with her trousseau were stuffed under her berth and she put her hand out to feel one of them, the other was tucked away too far for her reach. Left with nothing to do, she trained her eyes upon the platform again.

The edge of the platform on the other side was now visible and she was drawn to a spot that looked yellowish and dripping, probably a food packet that was spilt, she could not make out from her post. Human odours had started to mingle with the morning smells and she wished she could step out and breathe some fresh air, and stretch her limbs too. This was the third morning she had spent on the train and other than the guided trips to the lavatory with the reticent mother-in-law, she had not moved from the seat. The stop at this station had been more than twelve hours if she guessed right. Their train was halted here last night, since a landslide had blocked the lines on their route ahead.

The morning was cool and she felt her eyes close but sleep was far, the images that came back to her were from the home she had left behind. The slow life of the cow-herd people, the sounds of milking, butter-making and other dairy chores, some days of school, and one image that stayed back with her of the young school master. He had come to her house to request, nay, almost beg her father to send her back to school, days after she had dropped out. She had hardly cared but for the teasing her friends had started about how the young Masterji could not live without seeing her.

It had also led to an animated discussion among the women in the community about how long girls should attend school and when the discussions were just crossing boundaries, the elders of the village had put a stop to all the chitchat with the reason the Masterji wanted her back on school. The school's pupil count was running low, and it would close down without the minimum number. So back to school she had gone, to help a common cause, ostensibly. The year had passed without incident, but for the tiny tugs in her heart as the Masterji greeted her at school or when their paths crossed while she delivered the milk at the

co-operative.

The school closed down that year in spite of her contribution. But she never forgot the Masterji. Clean shaven, tall, fair-skinned and soft-spoken; as against the boys of her village, coarser, darker and as moustached as nature would allow them to be at that age. Their speech to their women was just as to their herd, short commands to call them to their respective confines at most times; the endearments reserved for favours expected. She had despaired of the suitors for her in the village, and resisted them as much as she possibly could. After a couple of years of desperation and frustration in the family circles, when a soldier came looking for a bride to their village, she was the chosen match.

The match for the very man that now lay snoring on the upper berth, with whom she had had little contact in the five days they were married. They had been travelling since the wedding day. All she could remember was the warm hand that held hers while she climbed up the steps to the compartment, and the strong sinews that stood out from the slit of his striped shirt. She had looked up and met his eyes for a moment; brown, warm and deep, and in an unexpected moment he winked. She had blushed and looked down in confusion, but the moment held on for what seemed a long second. The slight male smell of sweat from his body, the heat that it radiated, the tremor that it sent through her heart, held unbroken till her father-in-law had called out for help. They had gone on to sit on opposite seats as if they had been strangers and they had not had a chance to exchange even a glance for the two days and two nights they had been travelling together.

Her reverie broke with a sudden movement. New sounds of chugging engines and loud voices and new smells of smoke and re-opened food containers were taking over, and the platform was waking itself again. After a flash of slowing pictures, a train finally stopped at the other platform. The bogeys took their time to decide which of them was to fill her vision and the chosen one shuddered in its track, finally sighing to a stop. Just opposite her, one window was pulled down and so were the shutters, but the other was open and welcoming, a baby stood on its knees at the seat, and a young woman with a round chubby face held fast to its waist murmuring endearments. The baby smiled now and then and the young woman kissed it repeatedly in an expression of pure happiness. Vendors pushing their ware snipped her view and the resonated echoes of motherhood at intervals. Behind her she heard the thud of feet and looked up to see the man she was married to looking at her. She glanced quickly at her mother-in-law, who had started to snore gently now, her mouth still open. Her father-in-law was unrelenting in his stertor and drowning his wife's feeble attempts as well. Her man stood tall and confident now, looking down on her in open admiration. She smiled and tried to sit up, but the berth above offered her little space. He mouthed softly,

-you want to freshen up?

She stood up and then bent down again to pick up her mug and tooth brush that was hung down with a twine, then followed him along the narrow corridor. At the door, he nodded at her to go on into the toilet and leaned back on the door, crossing his arms, seeming to relish the breeze that blew in. When she came back,

he seemed to have washed his face and was wiping his neck with a coarse towel. She did the same with her saree, and as she tried to walk on, his left arm created a barrier in her way.

-what's the hurry, they are still sleeping. Come and stand here, it's breezier.

She moved shyly to the place he was indicating and immediately felt that tremor in her heart again. She wished she was bathed and fresh, and wearing a new set of clothes, and alone in a room with him.

-missing home? feel like you want to see your people? feel like you have lost all of them forever?

His voice was deep, and she could feel the warmth of his eyes on her face, and right then the wind blew lifting her saree from its place across her body. She felt his gaze shifting on to her contours. She blushed as she had before and broke away from him, rushing to her seat. Adjusting her saree, she crept back into the space on the lower berth. The window across the platform was still open but the baby had gone, so had the young woman. A man was sitting with his back to the window, reading a newspaper. She tried to see if the baby was on his lap, but she couldn't look beyond the newspaper spread across her vision.

She shifted the gaze to the vendor's cart and wondered if she should ask the husband for a favour. The hot samosas were making her mouth water, but her elders were still asleep and it didn't seem courteous to eat when they hadn't even woken up. Her man had still not returned to the upper berth. She considered the option once more and slowly dragged herself out again, checking if the mother-in-law was awake. The gentle snores continued to rise even after she pulled her feet up on the lower berth once more.

An announcement sounded on the public address system, and the people standing about on the platform started boarding the train waiting at the opposite platform. She looked immediately at the window, but the man had disappeared. In the rising crescendo of noises, she thought she heard the baby crying, but none of them appeared in view. The whistle sounded and the train shook a little in its readiness to move. The slow rhythmic dance started, and as the bogey pulled out, the man appeared at the window once again, this time looking out as he folded the newspaper. And as she watched his eyes widening in a flicker of interest, the train gathered speed and she lost her picture to a sudden blur of tears this time. Then she felt a tap on her shoulders,

-samosas? and tea? get up...

Man and Crow

Fatima Khalid

“Other friends have flown before -
On the morrow he will leave me, as my hopes have flown before.’
Then the bird said, ‘Nevermore.’”
- **Edgar Allan Poe, The Raven.**

The other day, I met a man who lived with crows.

That was his pick-up line. ‘I live with crows.’

I would have ignored him, but you know how deafening and unreal the city can get some of these nights. So I asked him what he meant.

He did not answer right away. He continued to sit there, like he had the whole night – with blurred outlines and hunched shoulders, eyes glazed over. I thought I could even hear faint echoes of residual memories bouncing in his ears. I asked him again what he meant.

He turned to me then, ‘Would you like to see?’

I know it sounds bizarre now. But the city was blasting in my ears, so I just sort of shrugged, you know, like, sure, I guess.

I cannot remember where it was exactly that he lived. It was a beautiful house, though, and rather big for just one man. There was a glass enclave built at the back of the house, where his living room opened out to a rather airy verandah.

I did not see the crows until the next day.

I did see shadows rustling in the glass house that night. An inky darkness rippling across the glass walls, the kind you could see even against the blackness of the night. I asked him if that was where he kept them. He nodded. And then he said, ‘I don't keep them. That's where they live.’ I was somewhat disconcerted. We did not talk much after that.

The next morning I lingered over breakfast, and he asked me to stay awhile. His crows were not there. I decided to stay. The city, no matter how far you get from it, it gets inside you. That morning, it was pulsatingly alive inside me. I was in no hurry to get back. I asked him where his crows were. He just shrugged, as if he could not care less. I looked outside at the empty glass annexe. He said, a little abruptly, ‘They're not my crows. I don't own them. They just live here.’

The throbbing slowed down soon after, towards the evening. That is when I called to hitch a ride. There was a picture by the phone of a woman and him – young and happy, laughing. It was not in a frame or anything. It was just lying there, dog-eared, partially obscured by dust and almost hidden beneath some papers. I asked him who the girl was after I had hung up. He did not answer. I do not think he heard me – he was leaning against the door to the verandah, looking distractedly at the glass house. The sun was setting in the distance. I heard a flapping, like paper cutting through the wind. And then there was the cawing. Harsh, battle-

like, stern.

The crows were returning.

Cat in a Sack

Fatima Khalid

Mother likes to tell the cat story to guests.

‘The kids, they adopted a stray cat once. Did I ever tell you?’ She usually begins, laughing a high-pitched laugh. ‘They were crazy about it – spoilt it thoroughly.’

She mostly brings it up when guests ask her about my sister’s marriage prospects. There isn’t much of a story, and she never holds anyone’s interest for long. The guests sometimes laugh politely, mostly uncomfortably, and Mother then changes the topic.

If anyone ever asks though, not one of us can say exactly when the cat went from being an irrelevant stray to a pampered pet. We all agree that this is the reason Mother can never develop a solid story – because there is no solid beginning – but we are probably wrong.

We cannot remember exactly when the cat decided to take up residence at our doorstep. We do vaguely recollect it wandering around the house for a couple of days before settling down on the doorstep. We can also recall an incident when Father had opened the door to go get the newspaper one day and found it curled up fast asleep at his feet – annoyed, he had stomped his good foot to scare it off, but the cat had not moved. Father had then gently poked it with his foot, and woken it up. Indolently, it had looked at Father’s foot, stretched and slunk a little further away from the door to curl up and go back to sleep. Sister believes this might have rankled Father a little bit. What we do remember quite clearly is that it was Mother, contrary to what she tells guests, who first started feeding the cat. She would save scraps of chicken fat and leave them out with some milk, poured into the cap of a used-up furniture polish bottle. Sometimes she would stand over and watch with a small amused smile as the cat ate.

‘That’s an entire life’s worth of affection that she’s saved on us,’ Sister jokingly said to me sometimes – though never in front of mother.

Attempting to finish the story that Mother has begun, we sometimes pitch in with accounts of the cat’s growing attachment. ‘It became so that whenever we opened the door, the cat would come running up to us,’ we say, ‘And lower its head and rub it against our shoes. Every time. It was always there when we opened the door.’

Guests usually lose interest by this time. The storyline begins to falter.

When the cat had begun to respond affectionately to Mother’s generosity, Mother had reeled. She would draw back when the cat tried to rub against her legs, and when the cat persisted, she would shove it off strongly with her foot.

We had welcomed it. When it rubbed against us, we would bend and stroke it. It liked being stroked – it would sprawl on its side and give in, purring contentedly all the while. Sometimes we would sit down on the porch cross-legged and it

would crawl into the hollow space between our legs, curl up and close its eyes. My sister and I found ourselves out on the porch those summer afternoons more often than usual. Mother's fondness for the cat began to subside. Her irritation at our attachment began to increase.

This is the part of the story no one bothers to talk about. Usually guests become bemused at why the story means so much to us.

There were days when there were no scraps of meat left over to feed the cat. It would spend hours mewling through the door, and we would linger close by uncomfortably – dashing to filch some milk to put out for her as soon as Mother left the kitchen. When Mother found a small sachet of white powder in Brother's room, the cat spent the entire day wailing outside the door, while Mother ranted and raved and cursed and abused all of us. Sister and I strained to hear the sounds through all of it, listening for when it would give up and go looking for food elsewhere. It lasted a long while. We didn't dare to go out. Later, when we did step out, sometime after midnight, we found the dregs of what seemed to be recently-poured milk in the bottle cap, and an apparently fulfilled cat curled up and fast asleep.

Sometimes, guests care enough to ask, 'What happened to the cat?' There is a pause where we pretend to not remember, and then Mother says, somewhat vaguely, 'Ran away, I think.'

The cat had at one point taken to dashing into the house every chance it could get. It never really wanted anything – it would just run in as far as it could before we realized it was in the house and then it would sprint right back out as we started after it. We found this amusing, but it drove Mother up the wall.

'This is all your fault!' She would scream at us as we went after it, 'Now drive it out before your father sees!'

When Father would see it, he would attempt to kick it if it was within his reach, and hurl things at it if it was not. He would then glare at us darkly while we held our breaths and silently prayed the cat would get out unhurt. The cat rarely stayed when father was at home.

A week after Sister turned 28, Father had to pick up a rather emaciated, barely conscious Brother from the local police station. The cat lay stretched out on the doorstep when they came home. When it saw Brother, it stood up to rub against brother's legs. Brother, however, was weak on his legs then and while he struggled to stand up straight, he lost balance, tripped, hit the floor and threw up. He curled up and continued to lie in his own vomit.

This never features in the story but we remember what followed distinctly. Father had stood still – quiet, calm, slightly swaying in the doorway – and then stepping over brother, he had gone to the store room and come back with an old brown woolen sack. He had stooped to pick up the cat, thrown it into the sack, silently walked out to the car and driven away. Later he had returned without it. He never said a word. We knew better than to ask questions.

Guests shrug off the story at the end. Pets come and go all the time, they tell us. They say they can never figure out why people get attached anyway.

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FEATURED WRITERS



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