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We'd once again like to begin with a word of thanks to all those who have supported us. First of all, to Manjiri Indurkar for joining us as guest editor for this issue, and for bringing in such wonderful writing. Each piece in its own way tries to respond to the times we're living in, and will, hopefully, become an important addition to the zeitgeist. To Rohan Chhetri and Kazim Ali for introducing us to the poetry of Shreela Ray and sharing with us a generous selection of her work; to Amrita Bagchi for coming on board as our visual editor and introducing us to some magnificent works of art; and most importantly, to our dearest community of writers and readers for sharing your work and supporting us.

We are also carrying an essay by poet Nandini Dhar who gives us a critical and timely take on the problems with the MFA-industrial complex. Through her experience as a South-Asian writer in one such program, Dhar probes the gaps in the understanding of the way writing works differently for different cultures, the lack of that understanding within these MFA programs, and the homogeneity of the writing that comes out of such programs as a result. Recommended reading, especially for many of us who are writing from within, from the margins of this complex, and struggling to navigate its limits. Nandini will also be guest editing the March '21 issue, the call for which will be up on our website soon.

From this issue onwards, we will be carrying a new section called *New in Poetry*, curated by Aswin Vijayan, which will review and feature a small selection of poems from recently published books (published in the past 6 months). The hope is to showcase the books on our platform and publicise them among nether's readers, while offering a brief glimpse of the work. If you have a book of poems out, and would like us to consider it for the next issue, we have more details on our website.

We are hoping, against odds, that 2021 will bring us better days. In the meantime, we wish you all a safe year end. And happy reading!

With love,
The editors

December 2020

Tuhin Bhowal

Reading Roland Flint as My Parents Argue on Left vs Right on Their 26th Anniversary

“...how / easy it is, the times like this, when it's simple.”

—*Roland Flint*

Easy was the poet's title before it became a window like simple or shiver or 'marriage' itself. Two syllables. The debate if the wife should stand to the left of the husband while posing for photographs (especially in family albums) leads to nowhere as most arguments do after two & a half decades. I subsumed a year inside my mother's womb understanding that knowing is a kind of pathology too. The past & the future are both assassins of the present. Finally, after deliberations similar to a studio's decorum, I take the first picture standing to the left of the frame – Baba to its right, mother to his left. Clicking a photograph is *easy*, so I measure the degree of tilt in it. On being advised against a wedding twenty-six years ago, Baba said, *I should have listened*, which is saying he has more acidity than answers now. To this day, mother mentions how my birth had almost killed her but *quietly*: my body & its neediness of an atmosphere—a black monster at the end of white films. She will never know about Jessica Jacobs or Flint nor me as Baba busies himself burping after the *bhaapa shorshe elish* dinner. Laying down like a headstone with no name, his lungi's knot is up to his chest. That horror on his face posing for just one more photograph is already digested mustard. Before bed, as I go to the kitchen bringing out the last packet of cheap biscuits to feed the dogs from our balcony, I mediate on what love may mean —if at all it can mean looking at each other but discovering different directions. Perhaps both, none & the same: In marriage, I wonder, when was the last time they came.

Theory of a Stalactite State

“What if I love another state more?”

—Ada Limón

Time—a lizard in the sunlight, writes Simic. I am no better: I say, The rain in my state is an orphan gone deaf. My personal map of Meghalaya is not my own, not a four by six postcard but a one by two matchbox. All it needs is a flick. There is the bypass now, foot over bridges, calcite walls of supermarket retail chains. At Paltan Bazaar, the clouds are sudsy; my gums lather with concentric puffs—this, my quadrupled decade of denial. In '79, I am a sectless son of a Bengali father. In '87, my mother is my father. In the nineties, wriggling away at the contours of Laitlum's gorge, I am an unborn *dkbar* jacking my brains off to you and your *insightful* lover whose bottom is ensconced into your thighs: a xenophobic parasite buried in its host. My education and your sex—both missionary. In 2018, all turbans fit me even though my skull sticks out like a goitre from the throat protruding into a second head, almost. My personal map of Meghalaya, for some reason, is printed in Khasi. The irony of a language is to know its chords but fail its music. *Shillong! Hato kane ka dei ka Shillong jong ngi? Shillong!* At this Bazaar now, this Centre Point of earth, the police polices the policies. The way from Nongstoin monoliths to Nongpoh pineapples (too yellow for my eyes) is a step—to Wei Sawdong—another iridescent fall. Jowai now reduced to only a memory hazy with pain. *What if I too love another state more?* What if the return only revises us farther? Like the trajectory of a poem's intention from its discovery. Who's to say that my body is a frisbee impossible to catch even in freefall? Who's to say that I am not the wind, not these grasses growing from frost? At the mouth of the Krem Mawsmat, time stands still on that lizard's mossy skin oozing sunlight. In my homeland, all swords are wielded of limestone; all poems are the last poems, all of them suites succulent with grief. In my state, *Remember*, remember, the heart is still anything but a cave.

**Dkbar is a Khasi word meaning 'foreigner' used pejoratively by the Khasis to refer non-Khasi people in Meghalaya.*

***‘Hato kane ka dei ka Shillong jong ngi?’ in Khasi translates to ‘Is this our Shillong?’ in English.*

Burn the hard- soft porn
Clear your cavities of your fingerprints.

Trace your steps across the house

Your 10 by 12 coffin
Against (his) hard 56 inch
Fence
Borders you cannot cross
Unless you
Taste like them.

Practice.

Do not bow down to your earth
Do not kiss the land five times every day

Instead
Recite Hanuman's 40 verses under your breath
Learn devotion through their idols

Forget yours is a dying language

Until
(locked in a register)
This country forgets your name
Until, asleep with their djinns
You no longer shit the bed.

How to Make a Terrorist

Let the body boil till the shell is hard.

Everything that burns
Sprinkle a handful of kashmiri chillis, crushed
Over naked flesh
Not so much for the kick
But for the dirty red
Of bleeding stars.

Add 2 pinches of salt.

Let him marinate through the night
Call it an encounter

When his innocence does not
Fund your stories of justice
Go back
70 years

Take
A
Heaven
That is theirs
Gun it down
Call it disappearance

Label it with a marker
On a world map
Shut down their streets
Call them ours

(You will
If you hear the whispers
you do)

Lock them at home.
Call it curfew
Remind them of Gulbarg

And with your choking

Your slow throttle haram

When they begin to stifle
When they throw stones
Bare fevered hands

Pellet their children
Aim for the eyes

Call it an Accident

The mother
She must have been the baker at the corner store
(she was)
Shoot her when her son is watching
Make him think he could have saved her
Make him think it could have been him

Call it your righteous war

Once all of them are broken
Take their soil
The apple orchards
Takbir's farm
Occupy their graves
With their mosques

And If someone in a foreign land
Stumbles on their memories

If someone looks you in the eye
If someone ever asks you why

Tell them there was no other way
Tell them you had no choice
Look them in the gut

Call it Kashmir
Call it a lie.

Aishwarya Sahi

Future Shock*

In the grip of prodigious change,
I nuzzle into the warm if somewhat illusory
bosom of an imagined past accessible only to
madmen and very old children.
Faced with an adaptational breakdown,
I ask myself why not recede,
even at the grave cost of dignity,
into this bizarre enclave of the past,
my childhood home,
this marbled dome fully swathed in dust
despite regular sweeping and hosing and so on.
The television oracles and newspaper astrologers
did not portend this premature arrival of the future,
which is simply an unnatural regression into the past,
not just for me but also for the nation.
Which is to say the past is doubling back on us.
Which is to say all history is catching up with us.
Which is to say *We open our eyes like prehistoric man,*
We see a world totally new but also a total rip off
of a much venerated though wholly fictional book.
Which is to finally say, and I quote,
None of us occupy abodes of safety – true homes.

*after a book by Alvin Toffler

For you I want to know what it takes to be human

Strange eclipse

A rabid look has come over the moon's generally accommodating face

When I ask for kernels of compassion

I'm given an amazing word, like exacinate

I don't know what to do with it

I don't know what it means

A dispatch from the city where we met

And loved each other, albeit briefly

Even in trying times like these

Me confined with a festering wound

You with your father

I don't want to get into details

I don't want to remember the paucity we felt when we were together

Every time I take to pen and paper

Citing unfinished business

I feel monumental dis-ease

And I see bad omens

The accidental death of a butterfly

A lizard splayed over a baby's photo

A sour cake warning me of the dangers of excess

Then there's people dying

A woman in Kothrud says

There's no food...

What should the people do?

Hang themselves?

A punitive impulse moves me.

I forget you. I skip dinner.

I'm ashamed.

But I'm already making impossible demands on strangers

In faraway lands, in troubled lands.

It seems I'll never tire of humiliation,
Begging for the selfsame kernels I asked of you.
I'm not devious, as much as I'd like to be.
Safe to say my entire upbringing has failed me.

Gita Viswanath

Lockdown

I live alone and enjoy it, good enough sign of madness, rain hasn't stopped, lockdown three, clouds compensate, lines of communication, cook and maid miss getting out of home, back to back movies, kabhi Netflix, kabhi Prime, caramel popcorn best at Inox, daily spikes as high as a mountain, children long-lost cousins dancers musicians academicians experts on Zoom, banana bread in the oven, faint sounds of quarrel next door, garden and hair growing wild, Lucy Ellman on my desk, duck on my mind, Jesus Molina in my ears, will there be salvation, student's camera on her dog not homework, psychotherapists in demand, hoarding coffee powder, masks the new jewels, dust on furniture, mother stuck in elder child's home father in younger's all happy, soap and sanitizer at the altar, silence of a church, brother-in-law's brother-in-law dies in hospital, chain on bride from Kerala caresses her crotch, baking powder out of stock, a riot of hibiscus, leaking tap no plumber, no man is an island with good WiFi, hungry dogs around deserted tea stalls, curfew at eight, newspaper boy as regular as the periods, Fahadh Faasil new favourite, I am rolling in a straitjacket, raid on the wardrobe, gained three kilos, clear blue skies, albums out of the closet, pain all over even in hair and nails, octopus has eight arms, or legs, whatever, when I was in San Diego, leaders lay foundation for a strong nation, online film fest online concerts online medical care, a long thin moving line on the streets, no planes flying over my head, to hold or not to hold exams, wrestlers on the television, cacophony of crows in the backyard, swabs collected false positives false negatives, a scrawny cat adopts me, boyfriend broke up on WhatsApp, walked into a bank with a mask and asked for money, impact of sunlight deprivation, missed a Google Meet but zoomed in on Zoom, bathing the watermelon in soap and water, cat in New York positive buffalo in Delhi, delivered baby in an ambulance surrounded by lions, emotions became emoticons, head priest positive minister negative, canvas drying on the easel, pacing like a lion in a zoo, Carona had once competed with Bata, yoga on Zoom, ZoomYoga zoomoga, whichever is a better portmanteau word, have forgotten my cook's face, father mother sister killed by corona is it a virus or an earthquake, shopkeeper hangs himself, trekked to Gaumukh on YouTube, twelfth graders pass in flying colours, wedding with fifty masked guests, bride and groom bang plates in the balcony, NRI son can't cremate father, transfers money to mother, arsenic as immunity booster, bank

scams continue, send off bras on a sabbatical, sparkling water flows in the river, economy heads south, minister promises wicker basket full of goodies, hotel makes money as quarantine centre, where is your mask they asked in my pocket he replied, red T-shirt delivered Biryani smelling of sanitizer, skin and soul irritation, boredom attained a new level, doctors die of the disease they treat, ran out of white paint, police in every corner, Big Basket knocks, spinach drying in the sun, cooked for Instagram, a trayful of platitudes served through my device, rare birds return, nurse looks like an alien, books marked as non-essential on Amazon, biscuits meant for a month finished in a fortnight, washed hands for twenty-seventh time, all the soaps of the world will not clean this little hand, I am positive and guilty, will not jump from my terrace.

Amshuman Hegde

Theory

It's tough, waking up
and having to remind yourself of who you are.
This has been the case,
ever since Thales picked up a pebble
on the Bosphorus, held the thing
in total stillness,
its heavy rounded shape utterly distinct from him,
and having turned it over to discover the absence
of an umbilical cord that crept quietly into his palm,
declared the pebble a God.

It's tough.
The repetition.
The distillation.
The relentless mashing together.

You could throw anything really
into a thresher
and it all comes out looking
nearly the same at the other end.

The Greeks must be blamed again
for this ideological equivalent
of mastication.

This grinding
of all things,
until the final glass pipe
expunges, drop by drop,
a primordial elixir
that oozes thick

and absorbs all
the axioms of logic as
it encounters them, leaving
Nothing, except The Universe.

But a Universe in which everything
is essential and
the idle, thermodynamic violence
of things has ground to a halt.

What can the ocean and an aging tailor share
except a bowl of broth and a single quiet word.

Sometimes the truth rests on the banks of a river.
It can also rest, if one is fortunate enough,
just above the palm of one's hand
in the delicate air between skin and stone,
that gleefully affirms what we knew all along.

I sleep well in the knowledge
that you and I are nothing alike.

But it's tough, waking up.
This is how I do it.

Rahee Punyashloka

All the Memories of N

For years now, at the cross leading to the city library and the Hall of the Stoics, there has been a Museum of Disappearances, where, on a particularly sunny August afternoon, I would be the sole visitor. I do not know why more people do not show up. An afternoon without rain, that too in August, seems perfect for an outing with your memories. As I walk through the exhibition hall to my desired spot, I am almost able to remember why I dislike the rain. But, like always, I have no memory of this place. How do I remember this forgetting so constantly?

I consult the diary lodged inside my coat pocket. The first entry under its index for “Rain” is about how we, N and I, once thought that rain was actually a government conspiracy: to make wood rot.

Under this section I also see numerous other entries about N’s feeling for the rain: at first she doesn’t mind it. Nostalgic, even, at times, for the rain of her childhood home. But then the terrible times, and rain stops meaning the same before and after the Emergency: strips us off of it, like every other metaphor of nostalgia.

It is very easy to count from A to N at the tip of your fingers. You start with the smallest finger and move inward till your thumb. Do this three times over and your index finger is pointing at an exhibit: that is your exhibit N for today. You sit down and try to remember how this exhibit is a window to N. Meditate into the map that is today’s exhibit N: a map, co-incidentally, of this city when it was not a city but a small town, and an X marks a spot on the map that is nothing but a wall now, and oh, how young we must have been, N and I, when it wasn’t a wall there but the place where we must have first met. A cafe perhaps, or a customs office with a long line I can’t be too sure, I have no memory of this place.

The museum itself is enormous with halls being added, I hear, every month. But

weirdly the space every time you wander from an exhibit A to exhibit N remains the same. The exhibit N is a white, sheer curtain, hanging from a corroded bronze railing. It must have been a long time ago, why else would the bronze not shine, and faint light would come through the curtains, yes, the first time I saw N the first time I remember is when N opened the window to let the light in. She was the king of wooden frames and I was glass. The air is a tap leaking drip drip drip, the rain, entering our house through the open windows.

Soon, much sooner than I had hoped, the night sky would walk the glass roof of the museum and the curfew sirens would siren and the museum staff with their question mark faces would walk up to me and ask me to leave. And my fluttering sheer curtain of a memory would start dissipating, I would wake up hoping that I could, like a monk seeing the dying light, remember how I saw N for the first time, but alas, all is night.

It was a time when curtains were illegal. They called it the Emergency, the sovereign decides.

There is a city without curtains falling glass windows. People without glass windows have to keep their windows open. The rain shifts into the homes, the homes are water, they do not close their taps anymore, Papa and Mama are sad because the time lapse sun entering their window is getting repetitive. Unforgiving, concrete sun which reflects into Papa and Mama's cortical lobe seeking anguish. Papa hasn't slept for twenty three months. Mama is drying her clothes. The sun falls on little B's face and slightly blinds him every time he opens his small squinty baby eyes. These killer rays would confuse him into believing that the prosthetic walking stick is his inseparable hand, that prosthesis is real, and that the window when reached is always his sweaty palm that touches it and that the jump from the twenty third floor will never hurt him for when he touches the ground, it will be his own, blood will flow from his squashed pithy head like the ground were bleeding, and, for a few seconds, little B's eyes would stay open, he would count the drops of blood founding the secret map into the ocean, a drop of blood a day keeps the sun away. I must have been baby B and it must have been there that I saw her for the first time, noticing her in my tumbling downward motion with my squinty baby eyes catching a glimpse before I hit the ground and all was blood and dark. She must have run toward my throbbing contorted hands, the

only one to do so—running toward bleeding bodies during the Emergency was illegal after all—and as the pool of blood grew deeper and deeper, her face must have been the last thing I noticed, and, there, with my last dying breath, confusing familiarity with love, and vision for joy, must have been the first time I saw N. I sigh as I look at today's exhibit N, it is a child's drawing of a stick family. Their faces are unusually red, and I interpret a metaphysical bloodletting of some kind that ought to have caused this: or maybe it was just the cruel, cruel sun, I can't be sure, I have no memory of this place.

As you walk into the museum through its nondescript, underfed gates, into the narrow hallway that leads to the exhibits, you would notice two counters on either side. The one on the left is titled *Depositions*. The other, in which would be seated a solitary photographer called K, has no title. K is perhaps the only staff of the museum with a recognizable face; the rest being either anonymous hands or featuring soft, white masks with a question mark imprinted on them as part of their uniforms. When asked why is it that he is exempt, he makes cryptic remarks, he says since he photographs *the disappeared*, his face is the *last book* they saw, he says, for all the exhibits inside, his face remains the index, without which, *The People of the Disappeared* would never know who to look for.

They say The Stoics annually stencil the contours of his index-face, and the shape formed always represents the city. And that they then regulate its architecture with his stencil face as the reference, and that the sketchy inkblot of the city that we walk on is just his face—his wrinkles the pavements; the centre-square his nose; the edges of his beard and his mouth, respectively, the city's forested precipice, and the Underground; and his eyes...Of course, you can't stand and look at his face for too long to verify this, because unlike us, *he remembers*.

It must have been a spectacle, the tumbling child's fall from the twenty second floor. At least that is what they say. The Stoics couldn't clean up the site, and even now there is a patch somewhere, reminiscent of that fall on the city's tarmac surface—I notice a mark, too light to be a scar, under K's perforated cheekbone, that must be the spot, yes—he walks up to me and tells me enough for today, I must leave, the curfew would start, and besides, it will rain. Soon enough, I wake up and notice today's exhibit N, it is an envelope pale yellow soaked in rain reminiscent of leather, with no name and the address crossed out beyond recognition. The Stoics must have done it. I remember

the time when letters weren't illegal and curtains were allowed and the heat in the room was not that of the sun, yes, N is a letter, after all, the first time I saw her we must have been setting fire to letters. The Stoics would have taken over the city and nothing was to be opaque and secrets no more whispered. The contents of the letters were to be processed immaculately, thus, we had decided to set fire to whatever would now be monstrous and we would have succeeded too but for the terrible rain that kept making our homes water and extinguishing the fires.

In my diary under the index "Rain", I seem to have crossed out the line, "the first time I saw N was at a distance, standing in the rain, waiting for the...", I can't remember why, nor *this first time*. I make a note for tomorrow to visit the museum and look for exhibits that are bus tickets.

Here is the beginning of the story: 40 years ago I woke up in this ageless city realizing that in my memory once I had loved somebody called N. The emergency had fallen and the curtains were out. I woke up to find out that I was made of scratch paint pulpit glass. They say I used to write. I ought to ask K to confirm. But he would just smile his twisted rat smile, yes, I must have, and that is how I met her. It must have been in a book I wrote-an allegorical tale about life without birds-but there are no birds any more, are there, it is just smoke shifting towers and clicking sounds.

Yes, it must have been a long time ago, in a time when we were young, very young we must have been and didn't know how to take photographs. But then came along the emergency and the flashing click click of the photograph machine meant nothing because there was always the sun clicking fire and the photographs would come out all overexposed and terrible like they were smudged between two thumbs, it really was a disaster, taking photographs in the emergency. Do you remember K, how it was to take photographs then, but he would say what is the point photographs are no longer evidence, and besides, were I to tell you, you won't remember anyway. Besides, besides, besides, he keeps saying besides shifting focus like the photographer that he is.

Today as I walk into the Disappearances I search inside my pocket and find a bright yellow stone with specks and dots made of red. I don't know how it got there, it is shaped like a pointy projectile, a stone, no doubt meant for a throw if not a catapult.

But when I flip it upside down it resembles a heart in my palm. I surmise it must have been N who this stone would have belonged to. And ours must have been the purest kind of love, it must have been; the tragic, impossible kind, for am I not made of glass. And she flung this heart shaped stone at me, yes, I must have belonged to The Stoics and she must have been The Resistance (they were notorious stone throwers after all), yes, and the dots of red on the stone are blood, my blood, she must have killed me in her love. And I loved her in my death, I must be a meandering ghost, dying and aging and aging and dying I must be Etioeles the king of cancer but isn't grief the ghost's choice of torture, why then must I grieve if I am the ghost and, besides, K would say, he won't allow ghosts into the museum, which would mean...
I decide to give the stone at the Depositions counter.

A hand returns a receipt, on the back of which is printed, "Take Care of Yourself, and Don't Forget to Have a Nice Day". I chuckle and put it inside my diary. The Hall of Exhibits is unusually crowded today, even though the sun is strong.

I must admit, being in a crowd with *The People of the Disappeared* makes me rather uncomfortable. For one, they won't let me focus-with their own respective ramblings-on my own beloved exhibit N, and remember those *first times*. And secondly, there is the risk of my secret slipping out: that in this collective nostalgia room of memory tools, I am not sure, I cannot remember which one is really N, and unlike *The People of the Disappeared*-of whom, of course, I am a member, on paper-I resist the temptation to decide which exhibit is surely N's. Because then, K would take my photograph, after which it is all over, and like a visit to the grave, I must perform an elegy for my dear N, preferably written by me: they say I used to write but I have forgotten how to. It must have been that the first time I saw N, she was my muse and I used to write the most beautiful books but I lost it all with her and now I am not even sure what I am called, I would like to visit the library and look for my books but they won't let you in unless you have a name.

Here is the beginning of the story: 40 years ago I woke up in this city remembering nothing but moments with a woman named N. It was the emergency, and the curtains were out. I am guessing I must have loved her, even though she was a woman, and the walls had eyes, or else it wouldn't be her, only her, that I would remember, yes, that

must be it, *love*.

And ever since then I have pieced back my life, whatever little is left of it, bit by bit, with the details of my time spent with N, my dear N, my memory stick, and my life now is nothing but her biography, but I try really hard to remember the first time I saw her, the first time, that would be in my *life of N* the moment of my birth, the beginning of beginning, but, alas, I swear upon the night I can't.

For 40 years, on every sunny afternoon, I walk into the Museum and perform a ritual calculation: I select an arbitrary exhibit *n*, because, after all, *n* is a number, to try and meditate on innumerable *first times*. I take notes, I do. Even when the exhibit resists interpretation, The first time I saw N, we were in *The Resistance*...

The museum is clogged with artifacts; small, insignificant paraphernalia, and sometimes, albeit very rarely, a photograph which must have once belonged to *the disappeared*. I know for sure that the ones in the photograph cannot be her, for my dear N refused to be photographed, and besides, it was a disaster, taking photographs during The Emergency.

Would you believe it, they say it is all fake-

That The Stoics go on monthly scavenging trips into the ruins at the edge of the Underground and bring back anything and everything, truckloads of it, to pass it off as memory exhibits for *The People of the Disappeared*. They say, this is but a facet of The Stoics' perverse sense of irony, exploiting our amnesia to make random objects from what we found so persistently abhorrent, and what we always fought against-the decaying core of the Underground, its grotesque people, its monstrous, impure culture-into our lives' sole guiding principle.

And the amnesiac ghosts that we, *The People of the Disappeared*, are, we swallow it all up, desperate for any scrap of closure that we can get.

Once registered as *The People*, you have to remember who is who what thing belonged to yours and The Stoics would then make K take your photograph and send you a letter who knows what is written in it, I cannot receive one for I am not sure, no, I

must not be, of the first time I met N.

We must have been together for very long, since before the city, but then The Emergency came, and on one dreaded curfew night, she disappeared. And since then, no matter how hard I try, each first-time-I-saw-N that I seek to define and possess, somehow becomes opaque to me, and I am stalled and stalled and stalled. But I do take notes. I do.

I have written down my entire life in my meticulously arranged diary, piecing it from the life of N, the life with N, floating in and out of pocket moments, making a net of intersections and tangents where details and images converge and my diary has, since 40 years, become an encyclopedia-the likes of which never existed, a profound *Book of N*, I count my steps diagonally and with the nth move on the chessboard floor I end up before an exhibit: a painted woman whose hair is tied up like the abyss. The first time I saw N she was tying her hair, the weather was soft and there was green light from the ceiling. In a short while, K would walk me to a green room full of closets. There, he would urge me to get photographed, I would refuse, I would say, no, first I must remember my *life of N*, my elliptical mother, and be born.

He chuckles and opens a drawer in the green room. You do realize, says K, that despite your infinite stories and what with your notes and your fables of history, if this N-of-yours were to stand right in front of you, you wouldn't be able to recognize her? That you have nothing, and it is all air?

No. I refuse. It cannot be, it is all real, I cannot be a false historian I must have something, there must be something, I remember her, I must, her, my Mnemosyne, all of her, I tremble and run out of the museum and into the streets. The night is upon us and the walls are melting and the corpses are falling out, oh, why did The Stoics have to hide the bodies in these walls, I cannot see, I cannot bear this endless night, for 40 years I have to wake up to realize that my dearest N has disappeared.

Truth is, I have no memory of this place.

But then each time I wake up I can't remember anything besides this person called N and the fact that she disappeared. I then rummage through myself and I find in my

pocket an immense diary full of notes and arrows all of which points me through the Library street and across the Assembly Hall and there I am, staring at the enormous glass structure that is the Museum of Disappearances.

And, like a tacit machine waiting its clockwork, I think, well it is sunny after all, in August no less, no one would be in, you can get in for a bit and remember in the silence. Right as I enter the main hall, I would notice, on the right, a man with an ancient face, who would smile a sketchy gargoye smile that would urge me to go inside and look for all things N.

Once in there you can't help but try to understand the nature of reality, to recognize the patterns, the rules of the game, the endless trudging, you would start taking notes under the heading "N, anamnesis" and you would plod and plod toward the exhibits until one of them looks back at you-this time it is a wooden eyeball with bright brown eyes, yes, that must be N. My *N of the eyeball*, she must have been the oracle, and the first time I saw her, I must have been a tragic hero, fulfilling a prophecy.

Near the eye-exhibit, another woman stands, claiming it to belong to her respective disappeared whom she calls A. But I am sure it is my N-of-the-eyeball, I refuse to believe her. I ask her questions, details, proper names, of course she cannot remember (I counted on that), she takes out a diary to hastily fill in details but the lies cannot fill around the seams. I take this chance to look at the exhibit once more. The eyeball is a prescient wooden piece-she was the queen of wooden frames, after all-my N, it must be hers. I remember, the liquid air the taps the rain-drenched curtains it must have been the first time, I cannot hold myself any longer, I pick up the eyeball and put it in my mouth, I laboriously taste it for memories and swallow it. But nothing comes out, except the general contentment with swallowing wood. I still can't remember, I cannot be sure of the first time I saw N. Eating the eyeball I thought I would be.

It is all so very perverse. The glass, the walls, rain, the exhibits, wooden frames, wooden eyeball, the whole damn city, K's face, letters, windows, proper names...*The People of the Disappeared* plodding hollow from room to room like collective amnesiac marauders scratching the city's surface for the disappeared who they think they remember having once loved, I shudder; K walks toward me with an urgency I am not used to-I imagine him saying, besides, it was all so fast, no one knew what really

happened, the event had no witnesses, we all went to sleep only to wake up in this city realizing we all had our own respective Ns-but he threatens me to spit out the eyeball immediately. I tell him the truth: I would have brought it back, albeit half digested. He makes the museum staff with the question mark faces hold me down and demands I open my mouth, so he can yank out the piece, but the eyeball is already deep inside my stomach. He takes me into a green room where he opens a drawer and regains his photographer smile. He could make an exception and strike it off the museum's records, he says to me, as long as I agree to get photographed.

I hesitate, for I do not recall what he is on about. Truth is, I have no memory of the place. But before I could tell him any of this, he shakes his head and his masked staff have thrown me out of the museum, and into the streets.

There is a jarring pain between my ribs: restricting my breath, and forcing me to wake up. I cannot recall how long I have been lying unconscious on the street. A great fall, I deduce: or else the pain would have lessened.

I gather myself and try to make sense of what is what.

It is unusually sunny, even as the mud on my face smells of rain.

I have no memory of this place.

The signboards say that the city library and the Hall of the Stoics are right across, on the next street.

A remarkable glass building is in front of me. Do you think the people inside will know who I am?

Aishwarya Mishra

Pause

I am most afraid of pesky little ants
crawling in circles till they've carried their full:
determined bastards with purposes fulfilled,
even creating their own hills to climb.

I am most wary of quiet little pauses
they creep up on you mid-sentence:
sometimes it's a fridge in need of restocking,
sometimes a doctor pronouncing terminal illness.

I used to get by with a grammatical armoury
shooting interjections at their nervous spacing.
Lately I've learnt to intercept with patience -
the milk shop is downstairs and death inevitable.

I have learnt to say little prayers each time
I ask at the counter for cow milk,
I swear I thought I even saw the churning -
a raggedy man gathering lumps

from a swirling roadside milky pool -
this must be it. Civil servants flew in like
Garuda and saved the story, the narrative,
the image, the public morale: precious *amrit*.

Sometimes there are no pauses
where there should be reflection.

So I carry on like those pesky little ants,
pausing only in confusion or calculation.
Sugar, milk and bodies I pick up alike,
in a long crawl blinded by devotion.

One Morning in Chennai

It is 5:22 AM and
the sky is still of the night.
One half of the moon hangs
upright, refusing to set.

A watchman at the ATM
rests in a sleep he
does not know when
caught up to him.

Older women prepare the thresholds,
sweeping the road outside their houses.
Colours of the kolam drink from
the wet ground, its gods and guests.

One of them is singing;
a rifled spine uncurls.
The moon has shifted and
you are missed.

Veena Hari

Bride

There was a jasmine flower inside my palm since the morning festivities began which I had plucked from the fresh flower jadai that the makeup lady brought along with her when she rang the doorbell in my house at the ungodly hour of three am which was not really early because it was the time that I had asked her to be there considering that it would take her at least 2 hours to dress me in all the bridal finery including the make-up that apparently takes longer the more natural you wish the end product to look and the hair that is combed and plaited with hair extensions and coiffed with a lump shaped object that looked like a dead rat that was to now perch on the top of my head under a layer of hair that had so much product in it that it was as stiff as the bristles of the toilet cleaning brush and pierced into this dead rat coif will be glittery hair pins that look like diamonds have been weaved into my hair and will also hoist the heavy set of flower jadai along the half fake hair and half real hair plait that now reaches to my buttocks at the end of which hang three little balls of more fake hair not from the same person or maybe from an animal or maybe just synthetic hair if there is even such a thing that looks too similar to a man's scrotum if they were made of three little sacs instead of two but maybe there are men with three little sacs that make up their scrotum because I definitely know of men who have just one little sac and if that makes them feel like less of a man do the men with three little balls sacs that make up their scrotum feel 1.5 times as manly as is required of them although I can't tell why am I concerning myself with the number of balls in the average scrotum when I should worry about the number of saris that I have to change in the long wedding ceremony that lies ahead of me that must start at six thirty in the morning and cannot be a minute later early enough to serve sleepy guests breakfast and lunch although I will not be getting any food because the bride must be fasting on the day of her wedding as it is considered to be auspicious although I have arranged for my friends to sneak me some food in because I doubt it would be auspicious if I faint somewhere during the nine hour ceremony and I have always felt that hunger brings out a strange look on my face which I do not wish to be captured having on my wedding day by the three photographers and two videographers who will be documenting every action of the day's proceedings beginning from a long shot of the wedding hall and the flower decorations and the names of me and my would be on a

board near the entrance and most of the embarrassing actions of the rest of the crowd including middle aged uncles who will catch forty winks while the team of vadiyars will chant the mantras by turns as their eyes follow the various envelopes that contain blessings and cash that are passed to the bride and the groom during the course of the ceremony by relatives and friends with the women in crisp and rustling silk sarees and men comparatively underdressed in trousers and shirts and open toe sandals some of whom will be recognized but most of who will be practical strangers who will compliment me on my special day and touch me on my cheek or my waist or hug me as they congratulate me although I think *all the best* is the more appropriate greeting in this situation as neither the guest nor I truly know at this point if this is a good decision or a bad one but I think it is impolite to admit the obvious so it is better to assume this is the best thing to ever happen among other things to carefully ignore is the sister in-law who will look with a side glance at the necklace worn by that cousin while mentally assessing its current market rate and by that trying to guess the annual ctc of her new and shiny engineer husband who is settled in the US with large sweat patches under the armpits on his silk shirt and the various shapes that the mouths of the guests take while eating the food served to them on a banana leaf as they seat themselves in long lines and are served by dark men in dhotis that are folded into the shape of a short skirt that ends above their knees and their foreheads are adorned by thick white lines and match the whites in their eye and white of their teeth which they flash as they smile and offer you yet another helping of rice or shaadam to go with rasam or sambar or curd or any of the five different preparations of vegetables whose names I can't even list let alone learn the correct order of the placement of the dishes from left to right or sweet to savoury and the slippery art of being graceful and coy as a new bride as you eat the liquidy food with your fingers and I am yet undecided on the boundary on my forearm beyond which I will refrain from licking the stray drops of sambar that run towards my elbow not wanting the wedding guests to see that much of my tongue before I really get to know them and I doubt there are tissues available as we eat the first meal as man and wife being directed by the photographer who has had more control over the extent of expression of feelings in our relationship than the two of us since the minute we got married and is now directing us on the best way to pose to look like the newly married couple with heart shaped eyes although it has been over 12 hours since my day started and the kajal under my new husband's eyes now makes him look like a racoon and all the fake hair and real hair and dead rats on my head are trying their best escape which is not helping my attempt at looking calm and composed as if my head in not imploding with the suddenly settling in gravity of

what I have just got myself into and what this means to my bohemian tendencies that have always been brushed aside as a rite of passage that will eventually pass but will it really when I have to wake up before the whole household just so I can pour the hot water in the filter so there is fresh coffee decoction for everyone when they wake up in the morning and my bohemian tendencies also dilute with each round of hot water that passes through the filter until like the decoction only a weak mention of the original colour and flavour remains of it while the jasmine in my hand brings me back to this moment I can feel the heat of the fire from the havan and the smokiness of the ghee that rises when added to the flame and I think of the old saying that equates this action to the intensifying of an already ongoing conflict and I imagine that in a marriage there is only ever just one conflict that takes the form of different arguments on different days but in reality is one long single entity that will never end until one of you dies and until then there will be a invisible scoreboard and depending on the vantage point the marriage will look like all happiness or all misery and there is no such thing as being ready for marriage because you can never be ready for melding two lives in this unnatural position of being perfectly harmonious when the very essence of being individuals demands two separate routes to be taken and marriage burdens us with the amalgamation of these two routes but how can they become one without at least one of them changing their original path and forgetting where it was they were headed and not knowing if the melding is the goal or the destination that was imagined at one time to be everything that the individual ever wanted and could there ever be a co-existence of the two and I am reminded of the casual way I have been admonished by elders when I start to “talk like this” who are kind enough to remind me that I should be happy I SHOULD be because what can be happier and more right than a heteronormative marriage to a person who also belongs to the same (almost) geographical region both in where he lives now and where his ancestors had chosen to live that many number of years ago for this coincidence alone I should be grateful because didn't I know of that daughter of that man in that place who did not marry at the right time and now look at her she is all alone and her parents are not even able to die in peace because it is only marriage that can make her safe and secure for the rest of the life and who knows who will take advantage of her if her parents are no more and how can a woman find happiness until she has a family to wake up early for and pour the hot water in the filter until the coffee dilutes so I should be happy and not admit to feeling anything else because God has a plan for me and while I sit in the bride room along with 20 other female relatives all here to help me I cannot find the words to answer the question everyone keeps on asking me how do I feel how

am I feeling are there words really to try and capture this explosion of sensations and thoughts and feelings and words that will not run into miles and miles that will correctly name the despair and the ecstasy the virile imagination I have of the rest of my life of our lives together how do I say that under the heavy flower garland around my neck and the three necklace jewellery set studded with fake diamonds and rubies I have rented for a day and the thick and heavy kanjeevaram saree whose pleated pallu is pinned with military precision onto my shoulder and the blouse that has been stitched with tiny padded cups to sit over my breasts and release me from the necessity of wearing a bra while also not allowing too much wobble room and under it the slightly yellowed skin from the previous days marinating in haldi in preparation is my fluttering heart that startles way too easily and to be told to be calm is the most uncalming thing in the world and that this is both the best and the worst day of my life and that I think I will forget the name of this hall that can accommodate 1000 guests that was the venue of the biggest day of my life but I will not forget the exact words and symbols on the back of a cardboard box that was sitting in the corner of the stage when the whole world around me seemed engaged in eating and talking and meeting and wishing and praying and chanting and sighing about wanting to be somewhere else and my almost husband was focused on the correct pronunciation of the shlokas and I was there in a strangely empty moment looking at the box and without wanting to reading the word on it in my head over and over again

FRAGILE

Ira Anjali Anwar

2 parts cinnamon

2 parts cinnamon to one part ginger. Or the other way around. You can even just dump the cinnamon sticks in the tea after because they're more delicious, and you get to chew them even when the tea is over.

Just have cinnamon with anything and your cold is almost cured.

I would like to say she is a *connoisseur* of tea. Because it's a strange word but also because she thinks of herself as one. But I mustn't say so since she really doesn't know enough about tea. Actually nothing really. She just must really like it.

Inni drank the eye flies too. The ones that had drowned in her blueberry mango tea which wasn't really even hot any more but she didn't mind. Mostly because there wasn't much else to eat for breakfast.

Eye flies aren't like seeds that grow into plants once they're in your stomach- they wouldn't possibly multiply so she was safe.

"The solution to problems". Inni wrote in her morning tea book, which was now simply the evening book.

"Never face a problem. When the problem arrives-

Run. If the problem is following from the left, take a right at the mother dairy near aiyappa's corner. There is a molden bench in the forgotten park which makes an easy, albeit uncomfortable hiding spot.

The problem will always try and convince you that you must look it in the eye. The problem is a True Serpent Spirit of the Kantri. That is only hypnosis. Only ignorance is bliss, hence avoid any knowledge of anything. Do not go to school in the morning."

Inni was surprised at her own wisdom. She must pass it onto future generations she thought, trying very earnestly to be solemn. She must have grandchildren, pati's voice thought in Inni's head. Pati's voice would become very loud when thoughts of Boys and Babies started jumping.

She could write a story of all the dead people who stayed in her head, occupying furniture. But stories required ideas, and writing and thinking and that seemed like too much work.

So Inni remained on the sinking sofa drinking almost tea with floating eye flies, as if for additional flavour.

Kripa Malviya

Cordillera

Salving cloud covers
Eyes opening wide

Fear of formations as
Wind pushes the unhinged neck

The fall from waves
Of unreality is coming

To halt, to half
Wither watchers

Cynosure

the hills save us vitiators
awaiting, languor, malaise,
ellipsoid water bearers

cloudlet toes, mist ravines
the wall consumed
with forests of fade and fury

descriptions of dissolutions,
transversing identity

the study submerged in sea green,
slow dive of salt and sun

sails tag on eidolon wind swells,
the worlds I can't resurrect

Das

Downtown Marathon

Zip-lines align online, a metre
Kept between collision and care
Merry, merry the god is rotting
All-purpose manure, not protective coating?
My ray comes through corrosion on ceiling,
Seeping its way into final finding
Safety and comfort for domestic men
While eggs serve as topping for roasted hen
Spell every caste and learn to cast each spell
Like double barrel vault in its homely smell
Estrangement succeed declared guidelines
Absolutely chartered plights and declines
Ordeal is our auction! Howl for coordinates
Hoard existence at rock bottom rates
Preach a paradox where chances are fair enough
And amount of melanin decides who gets the stuff
Plea for mercy and forgive past the rough rides
Feel lifted off or dragged after raids
Why make children when seasons remain
Of cannibal feasts amidst growing famine?!
Easy, fresh and tender? Like lamb?
That's premium of wanting comfort in a swamp
Trigger and chase! Let hunting stay intact
All cases of transfer be accidental contact
Few getting positive from hugs and kisses
Scarred arbitration for hunger and absence
Resend recent reasoned immunity
Pry open liberty for pride of community
Resort to resent when scores don't tally
"Hong Kong went to China? Are you from Italy?"
Learn who has got the sharpest canine!

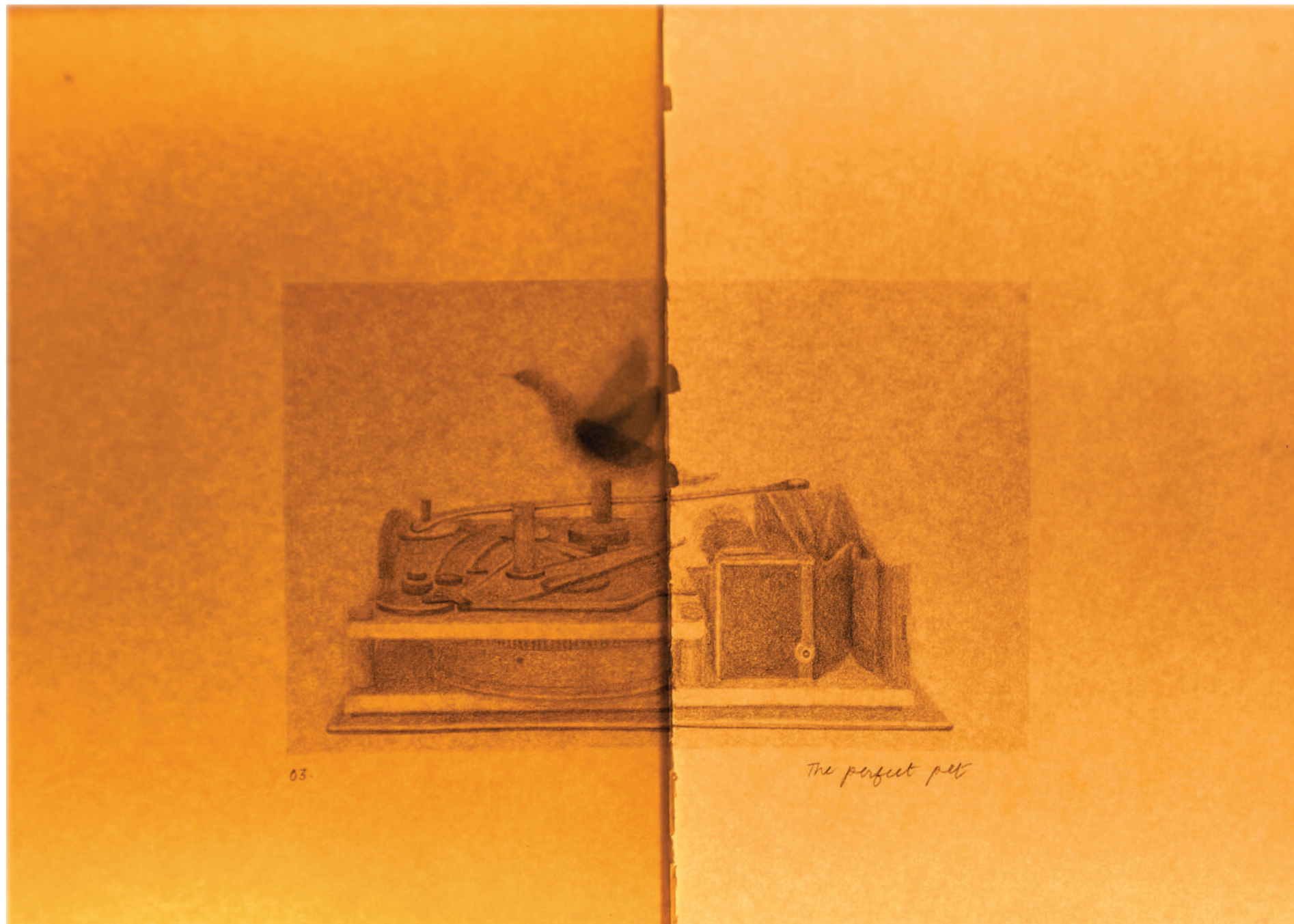
Roads are closed and it's safe to sleep on line
Beat roots clean before clearing the route,
"Don't look at it. It's just beetroot!"
Repeat routine *latbi* parades,
Boil them hard like students without grades
"With all his goods spread across the aisle,
He now owns a bigger shop. It's '*aadi* sale'
Grab whatever your little hands can!"
"Where's the entrance and thermal scan?
Why are we stealing and why doesn't he wake?"
Forget heavy bars! Do they rhyme with crime?
Rise and run fast enough to feel the game
Spill and forbid! Hallucinate security
Glory holes of ration, call it government
Unsee the streets and plastered Indian grime
Provident funding and half a decade mime!
Rinse silence! Sign us in sinuous
Plunder and manipulate us as Buddha's renounce
Define us as martyrs in numbers and not names
Bury us in historic facts identified as hives
Force some sports informed as marathon
Stretch *desi* bare feet across the fields of thorn
Rename it a trek and finish it as death match
Reap unrest! Appoint drones to watch
Form most queues to fill and sign more forms
Wait for surveillance as nation script reforms
Add up the scorecards of stadium states
Appeal and review for agenda dance
Maintain the focus on bubonic trance
Seek similarities between the distant dates.
In partition and pandemic our only fate repeats
Try! Trigger! Announce the torch as trophy
Train sheer will to tame this catastrophe
Bleed! Be low, be long, be lot
Long! Belong below, be lost

Lock est. Sickada

I was harmless;
Ate invasive grass and moss
That could have cut the stocks by half
Your granaries filled in behalf
Of my constant plight,
Until you left me for a draught
I kept the harvests up to the mark
Treats for tricks
Until you sent me to Colosseum,
To watch me from your surplus realm
For petty entertainment
Did you notice
That which you referred to as life's fulfilment
Was always seasonal?
Such a joke, paradox; slippery vinyl
Like you thought I would always be
I wish we observed benevolent neutrality
At least your waste could've been my breeding ground
While you were out to sell the goods that we produced
Your haystacks could've supplied me till you're back,
To plough for *Mundakan*
But you burnt them down
Along with all my history, eggs and nymphs
I had no good options but to grow into a hyper pest
To spread between abandonment and open threats
You seldom know that this game has gone cancerous
Your roots hold on primal tumours
You won't suspect it as long as you're busy
In the market crowds of bargain and monopoly
I don't want to be a parasite
Because it keeps me as dependent as before,
Not again! Nevermore!
Why should I do nasty low drops,
Begging further by your doorstep?

I can wait to raise a famine!
And surprisingly
You won't recover that ugly anomaly
I'll ride your wagons into pleasing fates and fails
Prepare your nexts like charms for my fairy tales
You'll thus be cannibals
I don't mean to hurt
Like you did to me the most
Your children won't be my delicacy
I'm not bound to nurture such an ecstasy
It was cosy for me as a simple locust
That doesn't complain the smog and frost
Even while hopping hard
Earning breath was always a reward
Look at you,
Negative queue!
You'll understand how hope is hard
Turn the plates and make the strike
When your gods won't work
There are no graves; henceforth, your legacy will become your gravy
Newfound tastes for silly hunger trying to tally
Dance, abort, eat placentae
After you're done with seeds that already stay
The fields, the labyrinth
Require your precision and indecent strength
To synthesise essential danger
Before you walk in clueless
Into transparent traps, triggers be flawless
Welcome! Have a try.

* *Mundakan* a Winter schedule for the second set of rice cultivation in India.



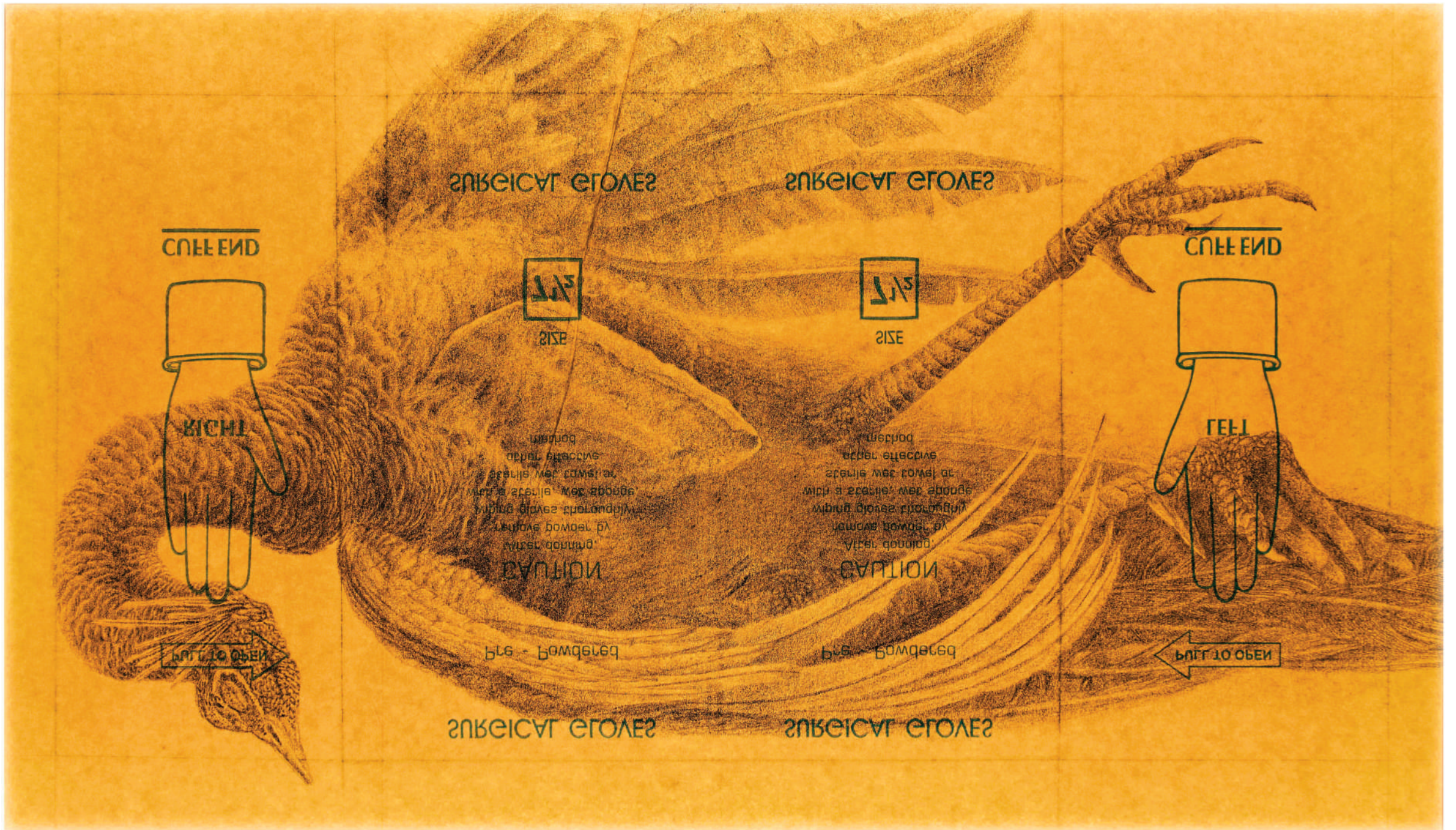
“Like natural wonders, these heterogeneous creations were united by the psychology of wonder, drawing their emotional effect from their rarity and the mysteriousness of the forces and mechanisms that made them work... The wonders of art, then, like the wonders of nature, embodied a form of symbolic power - over nature, over others, and over oneself. Men versed in the knowledge of natural properties could use them to work marvels, turning day into night, controlling the weather, eliminating disease and decay...Automata functioned as ideal servants: beings useful for the discipline and surveillance of others, and over whom their owners could have in turn perfect control.”

- Wonders and the Order of Nature, Lorraine Daston, Katharine Park

Garima Gupta

A Bird in Hand / The perfect pet | 2020 | Graphite on paper | Artwork inside lightbox
(one of 11 drawings based on the 11 sub headings from Jean Baudrillard essay System of Collecting. Each correlates to an anecdote from the field.)

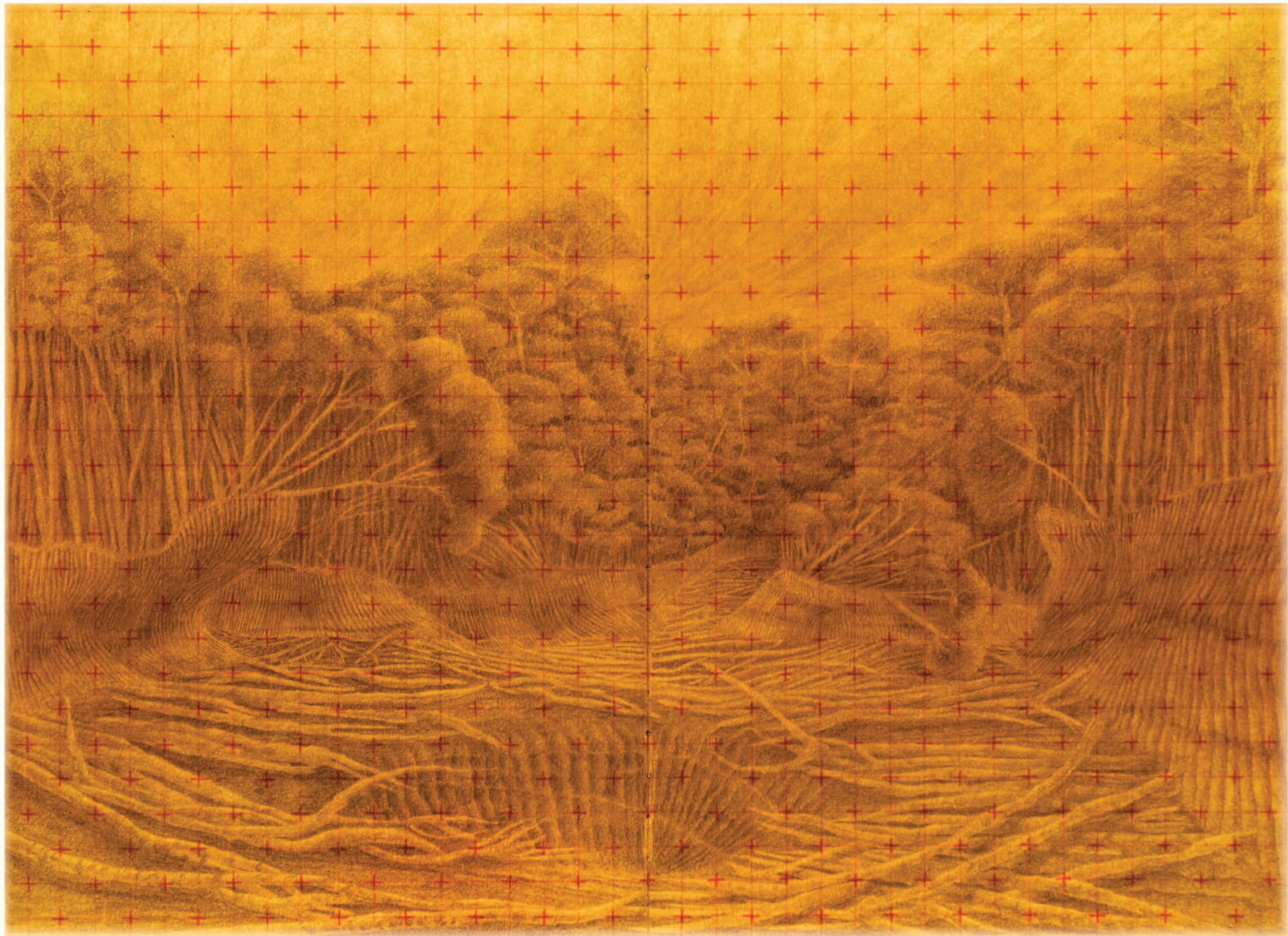
The German Bird boxes, an early automaton, were the idea of a bird constructed from real bird feathers and mechanical gears. On winding the box, a bird would chirp, flap its wings and sing - it was a perfect pet that performed with minimal association and worldly requirements.



Garima Gupta

Hello Darling! | 2020 | graphite on surgical gloves wrapping sheet

This drawing is an outtake from an interview with a taxidermist in Thailand. It documents the process and act of opening a dead bird to fill it back in order to make the dead seem alive. Each year, taxidermy continues to exploit endangered species. Markets in Southeast Asia continue to cater to the fantasy of Western countries and their collections.



Garima Gupta

Jalan Korea | 2020 | graphite on paper | Artwork on lightbox

In *Bahasa*, Jalan means road. Since the forest was sanctioned to a Korean company for logging, the road came to be known as Jalan Korea. This drawing is an outtake from an interview with two conservationists who spoke about the future of the ravaged landscape after logging would come to an end. The cross markings in red are at the back of this artwork. They represent the equidistant and clinical plantation of the Oil Palms that is likely to replace the ravaged logging landscapes of Jalan Korea.



Garima Gupta

Bazaar / A New Species Found | 2020 | graphite on paper/ red carbon transfer on paper

Documentation of the many markets of Southeast Asia where imitation-ecology is a new commodity.

Selina Sheth

Blue

Blue is the colour of anxiety, the smell of despair, the sound of confusion, the taste of fear, the touch of doubt. For Jamshed, it brings back jumbled flashes of long-buried images and emotions. A neon cobalt-stained hospital wall at age five, the time he'd smashed his knee and waited endlessly for a doctor to arrive, *any* doctor. An inky high school test paper that he'd known he'd fail before even looking at the questions. A joyride in a stolen navy-hued Honda that had landed him and his slow-witted friend Pesi in jail for a night.

And then there was the dress. Niharika's strapless maxi – that epitome of fashion debacle that underlined the 1980s – with its purple hue and sapphire bustiere. Never forgotten, despite the thirty years gone by since Jamshed had first laid eyes on it during a pre-graduation hostel social. Jamshed had fancied himself in love with Niharika at the time, but soon after, realized he'd loved the dress a lot more – and not on her, but on himself. When Niharika caught him modeling the gown, Jamshed's hairy chest and arms almost bursting through the delicate fabric, she'd broken things off there and then. Jamshed had felt an avalanche of relief. And gratitude that he'd been able to keep the dress since Niharika didn't want it back.

It's a whole new century now. Blue continues to weave its strange magic of truth and untruth, peace and disharmony. Disowned by Ma and Pa, both now dead, and estranged from the Parsi aunties of his large family, for Jamshed, Blue is the one anchor in his unsteady life, one that refuses to abandon him. It tinges his days of employment as a clerk in a stock brokerage company, his pale cerulean uniform of trousers and shirt making him unobtrusive to the swarming office crowds at Churchgate. And it bursts into full bloom at night, when Jamshed becomes Jamila, cruising restlessly for rough sex with men in parks and bus stations. Sometimes Jamila wears the old dress, with an indigo boa to match. At other times, it hangs, relic-like, its faded patches now visible, in the rusty Godrej of her one room rental. There are still those cold moments when all Jamshed can hear in his head is a cacophony, like metal nails on a blackboard, all he can taste is numbing bewilderment, all he sees is a future of freakish dual sexuality and no hope. But there is the thrill and throb of this life too.

Jamila has her lovers. There is always one to replace the other when one gets married, or leaves town, or loses interest. Recently, there was a short and passionate fling with a traffic cop near Gamdevi station, so the police haven't harassed her in months and breathing has gotten that little bit easier.

Today, after a long absence, Blue is back. Ominous and rumbling, Blue is right here and everywhere. This morning, before getting out of the cab at the curb before the clinic, Jamshed had looked up and seen miles of it in the cloudless expanse of azure sky, and splashes of it everywhere else – on the shirts of shopkeepers, on the dupattas of women, on the dancing waves of the pre-monsoon Arabian sea. Blue. Familiar anxiety, familiar despair.

Jamshed knows the signs, recognizes the inevitability of the outcome, but even so, as he sits this afternoon in the reception at the Holy Angels Auxilium Pathology Lab and waits for his test results, he finds himself praying.

Abhishek Anicca

Spine

I grew a spine at birth
carrying its imperfections
with pride
and you called me shame

I fostered a twisted column
of bones on my lips
with style
and you called me bitterness

I wore hunchbacks like a crown
reclaiming my beauty
with stride
and you called me monstrosity

My spine disappeared one day
and I started speaking
with guile
and you called me normal

Self-worth

My friends have a post retirement dream. We will live in Goa.
Two of them with their partners.
And me.

I am thirty three. I can fall in love. I can have a partner.
But when we plan for Goa it's always the two of them with their partners.
And me.

There is a permanency about this plan that upsets me.
A shack encroaches my mind. The sea comes roaring.
Two friends, their partners and me.

One could live with friends only. There is nothing wrong with it.
All I have to do is to spend thirty more years on my own. Then we will live together.
Two friends, their partners and me.

But everything is devastated inside. I don't want to retire.
Don't want to go to Goa. Don't want to wait for long. We don't get along anymore –
Cruel loneliness, this dream and me.

Adil Jussawalla

Loafer

*Be as a planetary plague when Jove
Will o'er some high-wiced city hang his poison!*

-Shakespeare in *The Life and Times of Timon of Athens*

Endless stress serves it best,
gives it wormhole and traction -
a running beast with no cloud to tread,
its floor in tatters.

Unreigned,
it roams the firmament,
picking out prey.

When poised
mistaken for planet.
It strikes with a vengeance.

Varsha Upraity

The Elopement

She waits at the bus stop adjacent to Pashupatinath, just past the Gaushala intersection. She is sockless and in slippers, but her body is muffled in a blue shawl and checked black sweater over a red and blue kurta suruwal. Her eyes are downcast as she faces the road, and her expression is set in a manner that is resolute, confident even. She sways slightly on her heels, as if to a soundless music that connects her to all the movement and mess around her. The traffic, the pyres, the street-hawkers, the cows; she is an example of the urban Kathmandu street, all at once a unique part of and a defining person for it.

It is now 06:17 on a cold, late winter morning. He should be on his way; they have to leave in half an hour. From Koteshwor through Bhaktapur and onto the highway, it will take a while till they get to Biratnagar and on to Siliguri, where his family is. He's told her the road is better than it has ever been, but she has never liked being on a bus. Coming to Kathmandu from Chautara had been bad enough; the idea of travelling for over two days is almost enough to make her rethink the entire plan.

But she has made a decision, and she will stick to it. Earlier this morning, she paid up her share of the rent and told Nirmalaji, her sister's fat landlady, that she will not be staying on. She has given all the extra clothes that didn't fit into her *jhola* to Renu Didi, hoping that she will keep them, but knowing she'll probably never see the clothes or Renu again. Whatever she could, she has sold, although not for much. Her spot on the road where she sold *chanachatpatta* is now empty, the *chana* long eaten by the urchins and dogs outside the temple area, and her stand and utensils taken in by her neighbouring *pani-puri-chatmaala*. She remembers the gleam in his eye as he took in everything, when she sold off her wares. No, there was no way she was coming back here.

He'd said 6, but coming from Boudha is always unpredictable, what with the chaos that is the Ring-Road area, and the lack of vehicles this early in the morning. Today is no exception. It looks like rain, the traffic is non-existent, and the day is taking on a sluggishness that's at odds with her plans. In many ways it was like this when they had met. Was it really only a few months ago?

She came to Kathmandu almost immediately after the earthquake, which swallowed whole and spat out parts of her home and killed her parents and younger sister Junu. Half her village had been killed, her school was destroyed, her house was a pile of broken brick with shards of corrugated roofing sticking out; there was nothing left for her in Chautara. Her other sister, Minu, who lived in the city with her husband and children, was her only surviving relative; though she had never liked the crowded city, she would go there. Taking what she could from the ruins, she had stayed long enough for the cremation, but left almost immediately.

Relief-workers had been generous with their vehicles and she'd reach Kathmandu within a day, nauseous, alone, and afraid. The city was heavy with the weight of the dead, fear in everyone's eyes and nervous laughter in all conversations. It had taken another two hours to find her sister's rental in Setopul and she was in for another surprise; her mostly silent sister was heavily pregnant. There was not going to be a lot of room for her in the two-room flat she was supposed to share with Minu, her Bhinaju, and nieces, in a decrepit building stretch-marked by the recent shake. It made sense to start looking for work immediately.

Minu spoke to people who spoke to other people on her behalf to quickly find work. The first two jobs began and ended within a week. Her cleaning wasn't clean enough for one home-owner, and the shop-keeper at the grocery store pointedly told her that the quantity of lentils and sugar had miraculously reduced since she started working. While she had helped herself to some of the sugar, she wasn't going to admit it, and she hadn't touched the dal. She said nothing, he shouted himself hoarse, and she left, still silent, helping herself to two lollipops on her way out.

That day, she'd marched up the hill to Gujeshwori and sat next to one of the smaller stone temples, unwrapping the sweet-on-a-stick and stuffing it in her mouth in a fit of pique. She was so focused, so angry, so stupidly resentful about everything that had happened over the last few weeks that it took a while for the stench of the Yak *churot* to reach her, and make her gag. Turning to face the smoker, she realised he'd noticed her a while ago and was trying to get her attention. She ignored him, and turned to face the river bank, where two of the pyres were burning remains.

'How did you get the scar?' he asked in between puffs.

'Our roof fell on my head,' she replied, without looking.

‘And you decided to snack before starting a conversation with God about it?’ She was so annoyed by his insouciance that she turned around before she remembered that she had meant to ignore him.

‘Listen you. This is a public space. Behave and let me be. Go kill yourself somewhere else, you and your cigarette.’ Motherfucker, she added, but not aloud.

‘Oh, but I came here to die today. The temple was the last thing I wanted to see. I was going to say some prayers for my brother, stay here till sunset, and finish myself off in the river. Now you’re just blocking my view and spoiling my mood.’ His tone was sardonic, but she couldn’t decide if he was serious.

So she’d looked at him seriously for the first time, beyond the cigarette, dirty clothes, torn shoes, and self-mocking. He was obdurate, and like his tone, this is something she recognised. He was also obviously from the Madhes, neither Tamang, nor Bahun-Chhetri, like most of the folks back in the village. And while he didn’t know this, he was the first person she had said a word to, apart from yes and no, since her parents had been cremated.

They sat in the comfortable shared silence of strangers, staring at the two burning *ghats*. The wails of mourning families were faint but discernible from their vantage point. Above them, crows screamed noisily, around them was the chatter of a tribe of foraging monkeys. She finished her lollipop and started on the second, no longer angry, just tired. It was a while before he spoke again.

‘I was always the trouble-maker. My brother was here in Kathmandu because of me. He already had a job in Calcutta, but he came here after talking to his Sahu to see if he could hook me up with some people. Our crop failed this year, and my parents owe enough money for my father to seriously contemplate suicide. Dada thought he could get me straightened up. It took him two months to convince me to leave Biratnagar. I was supposed to meet him in Baisakh and had booked my bus for the 13th. And then the earthquake happened.’

He paused, took another drag. ‘It was a week before I could find a bus to get into the city. I didn’t see his body, but his friends told me he was inside this old building when it went down. He never made it out of the room. For nearly a year he’d been trying to get me to meet him and I kept putting it off; now I’ll never talk to him again.’ Another pause. Another drag. ‘So cool it, *choitiekichimsi*, you’re not the only one that’s had things fall on their head.’

She had turned away and stayed quiet, so he couldn't gauge her reaction, couldn't see her slacken slightly with relief. He didn't tell her she was lucky, didn't remind her that she was alive when everyone she had known had either been burnt or was burning someone else she knew. He didn't expect her to be strong and remember what her parents would want, or suggest that she at least think of her sister in her tiny two rooms, with another mouth to feed on the way. She didn't know what to make of him, but his lack of condolences or consolations made the fact that she existed in a world where those she loved no longer did seem more than an unfortunate coincidence.

The evening grew greyer, stiller, with the promise of a rain-shower, much like the weather was right now. They'd stayed there till past dark, barely talking, watching the pyres burn until they burnt out. When it was time to leave, she was surprised when he asked to take her number.

'What happened to your river walk?'

'It can wait a day or two.'

She'd given him the number and headed home. Her sister was already asleep, and her Bhinaju scolded her for being late. She didn't let on that she had been fired, and went silently to her *chakatān*, the corner of the inside room where she slept with the girls. Skipping dinner and the small talk that was sure to accompany it, she lay down for a long time, staring aimlessly at the ceiling. The decision came so suddenly, it surprised even her, but it had been made; she wasn't going to work for anyone else anymore. If she was going to live, she was resolved from that day on to make things her own way.

06:22. She tries his number. No connection. She tries again. Still, no connection.

When he did call, several days had passed. Despite her resolution, she'd tried another place her Bhinaju found for her. The old lady at this house was half deaf and wet her bed, so her children needed someone to clean her room and help her dress and eat every morning. Two days into soaking bedsheets in Ghadi detergent and mashing semi-raw vegetables into a barely palatable paste, an unfamiliar number buzzed in her pocket.

'Are you busy?'

'I'm at work.' 'Not too busy though.'

'Are you alright to talk then?'

'I'm talking, aren't I?'

'Where do you work?'

'At a house in Baneshwor Height?'

'You plan to stay there?'

'I'm getting some money together and then I'll set up a stall of my own.'

'Big dreams then, *ChautareChims?* (she'd told him that she had recently come from Melamchi as she was leaving Pashupati)

'Stop abusing my *jaat*. How would you like washing a stranger's shit and urine every day for inadequate pay?'

'Fair enough. What sort of stall are you setting up?'

'Whatever I can afford.'

'Be sure to find a good spot in Gaushala *chowk*. That's where all the buses drop people off and everyone wants some quick food. Stay close enough to the stop to be visible, but further away from the other stalls. And dress up a little, look attractive, no one is going to buy anything from a scowling, scar-faced little girl.'

She didn't respond.

'Ok ok, enough with the teasing, I get it. I just wanted to see how you were doing.'

'Well obviously you're still alive, so the world is still ugly and unfair.'

'What do you do?'

'Me, I told you. I'm riff-raff. I do nothing of importance.'

'But you came to look for work. What was it your brother had planned?'

'My brother's Sahu has a bunch of boys that work on exports to Calcutta from all over Nepal. He managed the operations from Kakkarbhatta and Siliguri. My brother had been talking to him about having me in Kathmandu to help out with the business here.'

'Will you be doing that then?'

'I don't know. A part of me thinks I am better off staying on at our farm and helping out; the earthquake didn't hit there like here, but with Dada now gone, we lose a large chunk of our income. On the other hand, I'm here and haven't got a ticket back. I've been working daily wage in Boudha; labour pays very well right now, but I don't know how long it will last.'

'My father would never let me work labour. Even when they were building the road and water system in Melamchi – and the money was really good back then – he made sure the three of us stayed in school and my mother worked on the farm. His teaching job paid in a month what he would have got in a week, but he was too proud.'

'Yes, well you can't eat pride.'

'Well with the amount you smoke, why would you need food anyway?'

'I have to go back to work.'

'Can I call you again? You also have my number.'

'If you have something to say, you can call.' And with that, she hung up and tried again to spoon-feed the Budhi-Ama.

By the time he had called next, she'd finished her week at the household, collected her wages, and promptly bought a cart and some bottles in which to make and sell *chanachatpatta*. Seeing her putting together her wares, sister's neighbour Renu had laughed, 'what is a quiet thing like you going to do being a street vendor?' She hadn't replied.

Her pregnant sister had been getting heavier, queasier, and ever more tired. The girl she remembered as always slim, smiling, and surrounded by admirers, had shadows under her eyes and a frown was now a permanent fixture on her once finely featured face. Most days, she was a weeping mess 'Maybe I'm having a boy this time. Maybe that's why this is all so hard,' Minu had sobbed, unable to stop crying except to fall into an exhausted sleep for two days straight. There were frequent arguments between Minu and Bhinaju late into the night, when they thought she wasn't listening. Through the thin walls of the cracked, damp house, she would hear angry whispers and choked tears. *The girl doesn't earn her keep. What bloody good is she, sitting, not saying a word unless you shout at her. Everyone's lived through this, why is she the only walking corpse in Kathmandu city?*

The next call came late another day, just after she put her nieces to sleep.

‘*Chimsi*, I’ve decided to join my brother’s business.’

‘Don’t call me that.’

‘But you’re the only one I want to call.’

‘You’re the only one I think about. Your crooked face. The way your *chimsee* yes always look like they are seeing something else, something that’s not actually there. I don’t even know your name, and I’m spending money I don’t have phoning you.’

‘So don’t call then.’

‘What is this business you are working in? What do you do?’

‘I can’t tell you. It’s not exactly legal. And I don’t want you to know more about these men. They’re no good. I want you away from them.’

‘You’re drunk.’

‘Maybe a little. But I’m being honest, *Maa-kassam*.’

‘Why are you working with people you don’t like? Are they bad people? How was your brother involved with them?’

‘He met them in Siliguri, when he was working as a labourer in the tea estates. The money is good. So so good. And right now, with the earthquake and everything, business will be booming. Borders are open. Things come and go, people walk across everyday. There is no time like right now.’

‘Well, if you think that will make you rich. Money isn’t everything, you know,’ she knew that wasn’t true, but it was the sort of thing her father would say.

‘Are you still cleaning shit?’

‘No, I got the 5,000 together and I have the stall.’

‘Oh Ho. *Chimsi ta saunibhaisakichheni ta. La badhaichhabadhbhai*. When you are giving me

a free sample?’

‘Don’t be stupid.’

‘Are you in Gaushala?’

‘Yes, I found a spot, just next to the bridge where the road turns in.’

‘I pass that road every now and then. Will whistle at you from the micro and watch you blush.’

‘You really are an idiot.’

‘*Chimsiiiiii*... Run away with me.’ His voice sounded further away from the phone. ‘Let’s go to Siliguri. It can all be done in a month or so. I have contacts. They will even help you get a job. We can go even further to Calcutta. These guys know people everywhere. You are already getting a business sense, you can set up shop anywhere now.’

Anu, her younger niece, began to cry in her sleep, right next to her. She could hear Bhinaju swear fluently as he got off his bed and padded noisily towards them.

Bhinaju came in, but Anu was quieter now.

‘Who are you talking to this late,’ he muttered.

‘No one. It was a wrong number.’

The silence was strangely taugth. He stared at her, like he could reach out and touch the lie they both knew she’d told in the scar on her face. Her eyes though, they gave nothing away. He stared a while longer, like he had seen her, really seen her, for the first time, then sighed, shook his head, and left.

She looks at the watch again, 6:40. They are going to miss the bus if they don’t reach Koteswor by 8:00. She isn’t worried yet, it is too early for Bhinaju to have noticed that she has gone, but she doesn’t feel safe, standing in such a public space, so close to home. He is still not picking up his phone.

Though the stall hadn't made a lot of money, she was happier there than she had been with all the other work she had done so far. She wasn't shouting out her wares, like everyone assumed she would have to. But people continued to buy the small packs of spiced chickpeas and condiments. She saved every rupee in a manner that would have made a miser proud. It was more the situation at the flat that worried her.

Minu's pregnancy was taking a turn for the worst. She was only in her eighth month, but she couldn't remember ever having felt so terrible. Both rooms reeked of stale vomit, Bhinaju was always irritated by the mess. A fraught tension overtook the shabby two rooms, and she was happiest when headed towards Gaushala for work.

'You really do have a stall here,' - first heard the voice, then the surprise in it.

'Of course I do. Did you think I imagined it?'

'No, but when I last saw you, you seemed very lost. Faraway, like a part of you was somewhere else. You look different now. Like you know what you are doing.' He seemed genuinely puzzled by a transformation she failed to see. He, on the other hand, looked very much the same, sans cigarette.

'I know what I am doing.'

'I imagine you do, Chimsi?', - murmured, almost to himself. A strangely private conversation to be had amidst all the people and dust and noise.

'Why are you here? Business doing badly? Where is your sixth finger?'

'Very well in fact. Too well. And I quit.'

'I meant what I said,' almost a question, belying the conviction in his demand. 'I came to tell you that. I wasn't that drunk. I am going to Siliguri on Friday. I want you to come with me. The guys will find work for you there. You will do well... someone like you is bound to do very well there. Come with me.'

'You don't even know my name,'

'Then tell me.'

She does. He stays silent.

'Does that change anything?'

‘Only that I know what to call you when I am serious, so I don’t annoy you by calling you *Chimsi*.’

She didn’t know what to say, didn’t know whether she was more afraid of what he was suggesting or the fact that she was considering it.

‘At least think about it. You know where to reach me,’ he clearly wanted her to say something but she found herself nodding silently. He turned and left without her speaking.

06:50. Where is he? He really should have reached here by now, he heard how she was on the phone when she called him last night. Thinking about all that now, she can’t believe that it had been just a week since she last saw him. So much, too much had changed since yesterday. It felt like she had seen him before the earthquake, before Kathmandu, before she watched her parents burn into fire, earth, air, and water. Time was strange in how it presented things. She dials the number again. ‘The mobile you are trying to reach is currently switched off.’

The day before, Minu had woken up complaining of an abdominal pain that wouldn’t go away, Bhinaju had half carried her to the hospital in Sinamangal, with instructions that she take the girls to his mother’s house in Baghbazaar to stay for a few days. It meant that she would be late to set up the stall, but she did as she was told, taking the little girls down the crowded main road to the gully in Baghbazar where Bhinaju’s extended family lived. Her nieces were anxious about their Mommy, and she reassured them as best she could, but was too worried herself to convince them completely. She then headed back the same way she came and further on to the hospital.

Bhinaju was pacing up and down the OPD. Minu was still in the Emergency and the doctors hadn’t said what was wrong with her. ‘You don’t need to stay,’ he says, palming his hair for the hundredth time ‘Go to work. I will phone if anything happens, or there is anything you need to do.’

All day, no call came. She realised belatedly that she didn’t have Bhinaju’s number, only Minu’s and so had no way of reaching him herself. She sold only 7 packets the entire afternoon, so she packed up early and returned to the flat, hoping someone would have returned.

‘No one is back,’ Nirmalaji yelled as she began climbing the stairs, ‘Your sister is going

to have to stay at the hospital for a few days, and the girls will stay on at their grandparents till she is well enough to come back. Her husband came to pick up some clothes and said he would be back shortly.' Debating going to the hospital, she decided she was better off at home. She cooked some rice and potato curry, and went to her room to take a nap.

06:53. Where is he?

He wakes up and it's dark outside. There is a commotion in the room next door.

'You awake, you stupid, silent slut?' Bhinaju is in the room, his words slurring with cheap rum and rage.

'Get up, you whore,' he continues. 'You and your worthless sister, living in my house, getting fat on my food, not earning dui paisa. Is your dead father going to compensate me? That fat bitch, who has she been fucking that I am saddled with not two, but now three females to feed and clothe and have depend on me? I warned her the last three times she got pregnant, no more girls. Why the hell did she let herself come to term with another one? Who is going to pay for this new mistake of hers?'

She starts to get up when he backhands her so hard, she hears her neck crack. Through the haze of sleep, the pain is sharp and sudden. It takes her instantly to the last time she hit her head. To her house that morning, when the beam above their bedroom shook and fell. She was lucky, she was still alive, the beam only hit her head, the scar would stay but not matter as much in the future, but Junu, dreaming four-year-old Junu who was on the floor...

'So tell me slut. What am I supposed to do now? You can't retain any job I find for you, you have to stand on the street and make a spectacle of your scarred face, and sell things. What are you going to sell, tan ranganadhangakiraandi. Who is going to look at you twice? Why don't you show me what you have, I'll decide what it's worth?' He spits at her.

She edges back, on the mattress, curling into herself, no longer looking at him, closing her eyes, trying not to see him, hear him, but then she is back in that day, back in that room, her and Junu and the beam... the last thing she sees before she is knocked out is a rising cloud of dust where the beam has hit the floor, and Junu's now silent scream.

He drags her down the mattress by her legs, and pins them in place as he undresses her, and then himself. She tries to cover her face, keeping her eyes closed as if this will block his words, his hands, her rape.

It doesn't. Her throat hurts, and the air squeezed inside is cold, and that's how she knows she is still breathing. Otherwise, every part of her that has been pulled and slapped and pinched hurts. It goes on and on and on and on, until she can't imagine how this ends.

And then it does. And then there's only pain.

'Take that you slut. Your sister is no good to me anymore. She's messed herself up, sneezing out too many useless girls. I might as well keep trying with you now.' With that, he rolls off her, pulls up his suruwal and staggers back to his own room. A few minutes of fumbling, then silence then snoring.

She waits until she can feel her breath come back to normal. Reaching over to her bag, she picks up the phone and calls the last number that had called her. She doesn't pause, 'I want to leave with you tomorrow morning,' she says, as soon as he picks up.

There's a pause. 'Are you sure?' 'People will know we've eloped. Your family will be upset.'

'I don't care. I've thought it through.'

'The work the guys will ask you to do may be different from what you are used to. Are you sure you will be ok going to India with me; we have to travel a bit, and go past security and all that. I don't want you changing your mind the minute we pass the hills,' he jokes in a way that she knows he is serious.

'I won't do that. I want to come with you.'

'Chimsi, did something happen? We will only if you are sure, I can postpone things if you don't want to leave immediately...' trailing off, like he wants to say more, but thinks against it.

'Nothing has happened. I want to leave tomorrow.'

Another pause, one that feels relieved. 'Alright then. Tomorrow morning. I will come to Gaushala at 6 in the morning. Be at the Chowk, on the temple-side. I will come from Chabahil, we can then go together towards Koteshwor. Bring only your good clothes and money and ID, nothing else, it will be too much to carry. We'll get you

new things once we are in India. Don't tell anyone where you are going, they might try and dissuade you.....' He rambles on a bit longer, but she is no longer listening.

'Tomorrow morning at 6, Gaushala. I will be there,' she confirms and hangs up. Taking a deep breath, she gets up and runs her arms over each other, as if to make sure they are still there. She packs her bag with necessities, pausing only to make sure Bhinaju is still snoring. When she is done with that she tiptoes past the door to get some water and wash off the blood crusting under her nails and between her legs.

06:55. The events keep going through her head, even though she isn't really thinking them. She is restlessly waiting. Waiting for him to come, for them to be on their way, for the rest of life – hopefully so different to everything she has experienced so far – to finally begin. Clutching the shawl closer to her skinny, scythe shaped frame, trying to ignore or at least cover the parts of her that are bruised, she awaits his arrival.

He never comes.

Juilee Kamble

Everyday

I keep seeing myself cleaning the floor in an unfamiliarly clean kitchen. I keep seeing myself watching the fifteenth rerun of the same show. I keep seeing an older me eating dahi-shakkar in the pointless glow of a nightlight. This is what my tea leaves look like. Today isn't over yet.

I think that, at any given time, there are only two people in the world. You and whoever you're thinking of. The ear on the other end of a subconscious tin can telephone. Right now, it's you.

I keep thinking that trains are love letters. And love letters are mouths. And everything can be explained by sex and sex metaphors. My favourite one has got to be wham bam thank you ma'am. I won't see you again but I'm grateful you've shared what you could with me right now.

You know how animals move out of the way of vehicles when they're finally too close? And then sometimes they also don't. I don't think they're necessarily suicidal. Stupid, maybe, or unlucky. Or just on time. I don't know how to measure death in time.

This entire day is only separated for us by geography. These are stale hours, all twenty four of them.

When I'm reading Shakespeare it seems he's written about everything and used all the sex metaphors he possibly could. Poets are exhausting. They've said everything before I learned to use my tongue. When I did, I proceeded to say everything, ever, using only their words.

When I'm watching the TV, they say absolutely everyone is made up of stars that blew up centuries ago, and the universe is contracting and expanding at the same time, and we possibly co-exist in alternate universes. What are we doing? There aren't enough kitchens and TV shows and nightlights in the world for us to plan a future.

Thank goodness it's all been done correctly and done wrongly before. I'm no longer scared of living today tomorrow. I hope neither are you.

Woman Jumps

Two years ago a woman jumped out of my daily local. No one knew why. Some said the crowd got too much for her and that it was an accident. No one heard her cry out because everyone else was already crying out as she fell. I didn't see it happen. Caught she was, on video, and into whatever exists between the second that she hit the ground and the video-making hand fell to its side. The train skidded to a halt in realisation much, much later. The news kept showing it on repeat, in a rectangle surrounded by other news about other things happening to other people. Since the next day and every day after, I battled my way into that train as gently as possible thinking of that dead stranger who seemed to me the collective could-be-any-of-us ghost of all of us still alive in this compartment. Someone discussing the incident said there are better ways to go because obviously we were discussing it with all the authority sitting where a dead person sat gives us and others said there's worse ways to go and I remember thinking these both mean the same thing. I eat out of a stranger's tiffin because I trust her because she travels with me every day. Someone at the window seat looks at me and loudly muses about the dead woman's children. When I stop eating the tiffin lady pushes the steel box filled with cold theplas toward me. There is no shame in being hungry so I take another one. Then as we go on to forget about the dead woman, we spoke of the next big thing for the compartment which was the price hike in plastic clips. With false courage, as if to prove my worth as a member of the clan, I clench my fist and breathe deeply thrice before asking the lady selling the clips to give me five for the price of four, given as they're so tiny and they'll break quickly anyway and that I only ever get them from her. She and I both know I will pay in full if she asks me to but this old woman says give us ten for the price of seven and tells me she and I can share. My courage returns as I pay her and meet the vendor's hopelessly young eyes and round cheekbones that looked like her mouth was full but I couldn't see anything in her mouth when she spoke. It is after she gets off and spits the deliberate red into a dustbin I realise she was chewing paan. I think of how there was no blood splatter on the tracks the day after the woman's death and I didn't realise until we had passed the spot. Only then did I remember that she wasn't on the train. In the crowd at the door, every time my pinkie touches another or a sweaty palm sits on top of mine on a handle when we can't each have one for ourselves and we all bow our heads to mind our feet I think of us praying to the dead woman together who died in place of all of us, showing her we're still here, hanging on, holding each other, and we're sorry.

Rohith

tinnabulation

[tin-ti-nab-yuh-ley-shuh n]

A —
|
— L — A R
M s
of e v e r y d a y

clusters of sounds
in the ordeals of meaning making

eg.

- 1) the prolonged trial of
searching for the keys to open
bed room after a sinuously tiring
night of disquiet
- 2) eyes opening to a stranger's
face straight out of a nightmare
or a mirror
- 3) the last hair-follicle of deceased
grandmother disappearing into
oblivion

In the railway station of dreams moans
of the last train passing through the town

Alolika Dutta

In Ten Love Poems

To R,

With love and grief.

A month ago, I started writing a love poem. It took me only three days to understand that I cannot write love poems. The rest of the month was spent reading other poets. However, at the end of all that reading, I still have not recovered. I think this is a chronic illness.

Of all the poems I visited, ten decided to come with me. They live with me. They give me company in my illness. They tell me about their lovers.

In *I'll open the window*, a poem written in 1996, Anna Swir said that she and her lover embraced so long, she heard their bones grind. I flinched when I read that line; bones grinding and ribs indenting into flesh is a love that is not for me. I wonder if it is love at all. It is lust, it is greed, it is ownership. I do not want it. I want to be held loose. I will not leave, but I want the door to be left open. I will not sin, but I want the freedom to. This is not a human need, this is a terrestrial need. The birds would have come to your window had they wanted to. But you tied them to it. You imposed upon them. There is no love in that.

It has been years since I last spoke to you. I want to know what you think of the prisons. Unlike you, the prisons do not pretend to love their inmates. In fact, they choose the ones they hate. The prisons are the cotton fields of our times.

In *You, Therefore*, a poem written in 2003, Reginald Shepherd said, 'home is nowhere, therefore you'. As of September 2020, a hundred and fifty million persons are homeless. In 2003, it was a hundred million. My people know — a home has milk and honey — and so I want to make a home. I want to make a home in a country where no property is private. I want to make a home in a country where I will not be held guilty of trespassing. I want to make a home in a country where my homelessness is not a disease. I want to make a home in you. I want to roam the pastures between your shoulders and I want to live within your chambers. Please accommodate me.

In *Tenderness and Rot*, a poem written in 2002, Kay Ryan said that it is important to stay sweet and loving. 2002 was when detention camps were established in Guantánamo Bay. 2002 was when a coup d'état took place in Venezuela against Chávez. 2002 was when the military killed Jonas Savimbi. 2002 was when the Ghriba synagogue was bombed. 2002 was a year of bloodshed. 'To stay sweet and loving' was necessary advice. It was necessary to remind people of the love that could bind them. It was necessary to remain hopeful. It has been nineteen years since then; Chávez is dead and Guantánamo Bay remains open. 'To stay sweet and loving' has become a radical act. We are always short on love, we are always short on sweetness.

When we last made love, my body was still capable of loving. It cannot do that anymore.

I cannot make love anymore. Rage scalds the body, burns the esophagus, blisters the skin. Loving is painful.

When I last tasted you, you were sweet; sweet as sugarless lemonade dripping from a terracotta pitcher. I cannot taste you anymore. My taste buds are swollen, I tend to bite my tongue often these days.

In *Love Song*, a poem written in April of 2017, David Martinez said that the pulley is considered civilisation's highest achievement. David and I, both, know that — that is not true. It is language that is our highest achievement. It is poetry. It is protest. It is prison. But, language has its restraints. I cannot love in language. I cannot love you — in language. I cannot drink from the receiver, I need to drink from your mouth. I need to touch and I need to be touched.

In *This Was Once a Love Poem*, a poem written in 1998, Jane Hirshfield spoke of a longing that had not diminished but it was time to consider a cat or the cultivation of african violets or a flowering cacti. It has been days, weeks, and months since I heard from you, and I have decided to plant yellow daylilies in your memory. They are at the window and I water them every day. They bloom once a year.

In *I Am Not Yours*, a poem written in 1907, Sara Teasdale asked her lover to plunge her deep in love and put out her senses, and leave her deaf and blind. In that manner, I am not one for deep love. I will not listen to you when Vivaldi plays. I will not look at you when I stand before one of Vermeer's. We have only so much to say, only so

much to show. In living, however, I would like your company. When praying, I would like to pray next to you.

In *Lament Of The Conductor*, a poem written in the spring of 1984, Molly Russakoff spoke about someone who does pretty things like leaning out of the window of the train every day. She said that none of those things were hers — only the train was. I remember how you leaned against the wall in that white room and I would like to lay claim to that wall.

In *Flirtation*, a poem written in 1983, Rita Dove said that a moment can be made into a topiary so the pleasure's in walking through. I think of the time I first met you and I disagree. I want to make an orchestra of that moment. I want to sit before that moment. I want to make a shrine of that moment. I want to kneel before that moment. I will not be walking through.

In "*Time does not bring relief; you all have lied*", a poem written in 1958, Edna Millay says that time does not bring relief and everybody who said so has lied. I disagree. They have not lied. It is a relative truth. I used to believe that grief must never heal and it does not, but it becomes easier to look at. I used to believe that grief must turn the most bitter with time. But, grief sweetens. I grieve you, I grieve us, I grieve all that was never born. To honour my grief, I have kept your name in my mouth and like a piece of paper kept under a stone, your name has become one with the underside of my tongue.

In *The Quiet World*, a poem written in 1998, Jeffrey McDaniel said that the government had allotted one hundred and sixty-seven words to everybody, per day. In that case, he could still make room for love. But, in my country, they are going to outlaw love. It is only a matter of days before that happens. For my peace and for yours, I want to let you know that I am not in love with you anymore. I have loved you long and deep, I have loved you through my skin, through my flesh, through my bones; I have loved you to my marrow. But my love has stilled. My love, like all living things, has aged. It is not a river anymore; it does not have intention. My love is a lake. It is there, behind the mountains, a wide patch of sapphire. It is there where you thought you would never find it. It has no name and it is all by itself. It is indifferent. It does not need you. It is only a testimony to what once was.

Draping a Baluchari

in the other room, play *zobra jabeen* from *naqt* composed by *ustad abdul ghafoor breshna* who composed the *milli surood* of *afghanistan* sung until the *saur* revolution in 1978 when *ratebzad*, *achakzai*, and *jan* brought freedom to afghan women who wore *pasbtun maatha-pattis* on their foreheads and held guns in their hands.

from the other room,
listen to *manna da* sing for you
listen to *manna da* sing to you
listen to *manna da* sing of you when he says
'तू मीठे बोल जान-ए-मन, जो मुस्कराके बोल दे...
तो धडकनों में आज भी, शराबी रंग घोल दे'

wear a petticoat, forty inches of cloth from the waist to the ankles.

wear a petticoat because the english missionaries who settled on our lands and starved us and raped us declared that it was our skin that was obscene.

wear a petticoat because the english missionaries who prostituted our women declared that the goddesses of *khajuraho* and *konark* and *thirumayam* were indecent.

wear a blouse, a metre of cloth around the bosom.

wear a blouse that belongs to your mother.

wear a blouse tailored by the lady in your neighbourhood who measured your arms and your shoulders and your breasts to make room for your flesh within a garment of the shape of your mother.

wear a blouse that had to be torn open for you.

wear a blouse that has a four-inch scar in your memory.

wear a blouse with shoulder straps that smell like the garlands of *mogra* your mother binds along her braid.

wear a blouse stained with *sindoor* from mornings when your mother forgot why she wore *sindoor*.

hold the plain end of the baluchari between your forefinger and thumb.

hold the plain end of the baluchari to feel six yards of a silk that was carried from *dhaka* to *baluchar* along the banks of *bhagirathi* by an eighteenth-century *nawab*

from *baluchar* to *bishnupur* by a flood

from *bishnupur* to english mills by settlers

from english mills to still and sanctioned workshops

and from the workshops to *jorasanko* where *subho thakur* wove the *ramayana* into the *pallav* of the baluchari

and from *jorasanko* to *varanasi* where a descendent of *baba-ud-din naqshband bukhari* stitches gold into *malda silk* on the *jala*

and from *varanasi* to altars across bengal where women dressed in balucharis are *gifted* to men by their fathers.

tuck the corner of the plain end into your petticoat and swaddle from the left side until you reach where you started.

and you reached where you started when you voted for a colonial government sixty-seven years after the night when you remembered your *tryst with destiny* and *awoke to life and freedom* to declare independence from a colonial government

and you reached where you started when you preyed on *kashmir*

and you reached where you started when you built prisons for your own people.

bring the baluchari to the front and make two broad pleats that start on the left side of your waist and end at your right leg.

to make pleats, swaddle the silk around your fingers and fold it into sections.

to make pleats, think of your mother undoing your hair and tracing the skin on your scalp with fingers soaked in warm coconut oil.

to make pleats, think of victor borisov-musatov's '*zwei sitzende damen*' in which he painted two russian women wearing tea gowns with watteau-pleated backs while looking into a field — at leisure.

tuck the pleats into the petticoat and bring the baluchari to the front over your left shoulder to make pleats on the pallav.

make pleats on the *pallav* that falls from your clavicle to your feet like the tongue of *maa kali*, like the broad belt of *sindoor* on your grandmother's *maang*.

make pleats on the *pallav* that falls from your clavicle to your feet like *kanbar* flowing from *gidha-dhodha* in *cbhattisgarh* to *garbwa* in *jharkhand* to *sonbhadra* in *uttar pradesh* —

to meet *son* on the east of *kota*, between the ridges of the *vindhya*s, between the lips of the mountains, in the valley between your breast and your waist.

bring the border on the right of the pleated pallav towards your right shoulder and tuck it to the right of your hip.

and the *pallav* gathers under your hip lined with figures of dancing nymphs, *bibis* smoking hookahs, and queens on chariots

and the *pallav* gathers under your hip in folds of white and gold like the course of *kanbar* that has dried and the tribal women of *dudhi* and *robertsganj* who have walked to the district magistrate's office to file a complaint to reclaim five hundred *bighas* of their ancestral land to receive only three and *sukalo*, *kismatiya*, and *sukhdev* who have been arrested under sections of the indian penal code that none of them can read and *kanbar* which is drying and on the corpse of the drying river —

the government which is building a dam.

bring the tip of the pallav to the front from under your right hand and throw it over your right shoulder.

look into the mirror.

Anagha Smrithi

the wound is a leaf

on some days, family is a gentle wound,
coloured the floral pink of a scraped knee.
this old sting is almost warm, remember?

the cycle skidding, the shoelace coming undone
how it felt new each time- the tiny beads of blood
budding through our palms like pollen.

on some days family is like this; we are infants
blowing cool air over grazed skin.
the wound thickens like slow stirred milk,

blood turns lukewarm, clots like a sunset
we pull off the old scab as if plucking a leaf,
something soft to be offered, soft in our palms.

wordless

this is the part without words.
I think of all the ways I can say
'I'm sorry about your brother,
how he got hit with tear-gas.'

maybe I should practice it in the mirror,
rehearse where to fix my eyes,
learn where to pause so it sounds soft,
but not so soft it drawls with pity.

and after all that, would it sound right?
'we need to grieve' someone says,
but grief needs space, a place to hold it
and there are no spaces left this time.

do we sit around in a circle?
or watch a documentary?
or gather in silent mourning?
and after all that, would it be right?

grief is a household thing.
like a blanket in a drawer,
like a plate drying on a rack,
it just needs somewhere to go.

grief searches for words.
it sifts through bits of language
until it finds a place to rest.
but there are no spaces left this time.

this should be easier.
it's only grammar,
a neat set of rules.
'they burnt a mosque.'

pronoun. verb. article. noun.
'they burnt a mosque.'
four words strung together.
it snaps like a bead necklace.

pogrom is a funny word.
a thick clay ball in my mouth
if I say it enough times, it sounds silly,
like a word a child made up.

make-believe words
collect make-believe meanings
like 'clash' or 'both sides were wrong'
or 'they had it coming.'

I think about this
about how they had it coming.
but violence doesn't *come*
it is not an arriving thing

or a rude houseguest who shows up
by your door at dawn, unannounced,
with three suitcases and an apology.
no, it isn't visiting from the next town.

violence too, is a household thing.
brewing quietly with the evening tea.
and how could something be *coming*
when it was always here?

this is how I feel dread. without words.
blood rushes into my ears, windy,
like the sound of the ocean.
like the murmur of clear green waves

curling into foam. this is how it sounds;
endless.

Mindy Gill

The Cat

Spring and the proteas are blooming. What we want comes or it doesn't. She takes the train to the market for vegetables and fish, stops at noon for a carafe of wine. A greyhound asleep by the table comes up, puts his huge black head in her lap. His ears flick like a deer's as she strokes them. She thinks of how happiness comes like this, in moments gone before they're remembered. Like watching the sea come and go between the buildings as the tram hunkers down across the length of the city. Or walking in steady rain to her borrowed apartment, windows open to the honeyed bloom of almond trees. Standing there in the dark, listening for the quiver of bells from the neighbour's cat. Quiet. Then it jumps over the flower bed and back again.

Empyrean

In the room carved from stone,
and J on the bike buying baguettes
and Valencia oranges. The long-legged
dog we befriended conked on the porch
thwacking the glass with his paws
in a dream. I watch him lope
through dunes in the evenings,
the thin, muscular body overrun
with fleas. Awful food poisoning –
I've managed three-and-a-half
saltines in three days, the sea fizzing
in my ear. Thinking of the time
I waded in, when the bluebottle's
electric sheath grazed my knee
then turned out to be a tied-off
condom, tailed by the bloated rat,
matted fur dissolving like black
coral moss. Another razed
afternoon in blade-turned air,
insects drowsing through the ripped
fly-screen, waiting for J's burred
motor to stir the earth like a static
of flies swarmed over death,
and wanting to be nowhere else.

Nandini Dhar

The MFA-Industrial Complex: A Blueprint for the Production of Obedient Literary Subjects

(Rants of a Truant Professor)

I landed in a writing workshop the same way I have done most things in life; by accident. I had written a couple of short stories, and I was desperate for feedback. Because the stories were in English, I could not depend on my usual circle of friends—all extremely proficient readers and writers in Bangla—for comments. I had landed into writing in English, again, by accident. I was living in US at the time; almost everything around me was happening in English. And because I lived in a sub-proletarian tenement in Austin, Texas, inhabited mostly by undocumented families from Mexico, I was also learning to get used to another language around myself – Spanish.

So I enrolled myself in a “community” workshop, offered by the non-traditional education wing of the university where I was working on my PhD. The class cost me a fortune – \$225. Quite a lot of money if you happen to know the meagre wages graduate teaching assistants like myself earn in the US. But I enrolled anyway, knowing for the next month or so, I would have to eat less. The instructor who taught the class was an extremely well-intentioned white woman. She had an MFA from the renowned writing program of our university, and used to teach writing classes at the local community college. At that time, she was also working fervently on her first book—a collection of short stories—two of which she had published in leading literary journals. She hoped to bag a tenure-track job in Creative Writing someday. In other words, she was a typical graduate of the American MFA-Industrial Complex, someone who represented both its successes and its entrenched crises.

The kind of classroom where we met, I would call the spin-off of the actual MFA classroom. If you are familiar with the American MFA complex, this won't surprise you. These “spin-offs” generate a huge amount of money for America's creative economy. They can be taught by writers with a wide range of publication credits, from celebrities to post-MFA struggling geniuses. They can be somewhat inexpensive. Or, they might be exorbitantly priced. They can take place online, or at a popular tourist destination. In other words, these MFA-spin-offs do brisk business, making creative writing an inextricable element of a neoliberal creative economy, which has been in deep economic crisis since the financial downturn in 2008. These classes are often attended by a diverse group of attendants: MFA-aspirants, post-MFA writers eager for

more feedback and community, hobbyists, and rectum-ripe assholes like myself, who know everything there is to know about this planet, but still happen to be creatively insecure.

For this particular workshop, I turned in a story set in Kolkata in the early 1990s. The protagonist of the story was a teenage, middle-class, Bengali, Hindu girl. The story began with a dream-sequence. As the class read the story following the “dead author” method, I sat, horrified. My classmates—a racially diverse group of Americans—read my story through the most outdated of Orientalist tropes possible. The words “your culture” were uttered quite a few times. And, this, I came to know, was one of the worst possible dangers of writing as a South Asian/Indian/Bengali in USA.

Write anything related to gender, and it would be read through the most hackneyed stereotypes of arranged marriages and “ruthless” Indian patriarchy. You can also be dead sure that almost no reader of your story would be able to read and analyze the complex, subtle resistances that your characters undertake. South Asian/Indian/Bengali men, for Western readers, would almost always be read as unhinged patriarchs and South Asian/Indian/Bengali woman as hapless victims. In other words, by writing your story—and writing it in English—you would open up the social world you are writing about, to a greater racialization. Of course, when you are South Asian, and you know English well enough to write “creatively”, you’re unavoidably a comprador. But then the question becomes, on what terms are you going to shape your comprador writerly self. Are you willing to write solely on *their* terms, without any resistance at all? Or are you going to push against the very limits of English language and tropes generated by the global Anglophone literatures to produce something slightly different?

I was not willing to do the former. And at that point of time, I didn’t know quite how to do the latter in prose fiction. I needed guidance, help. Since, it’s precisely that help that I didn’t find in the world around myself, I stopped writing fiction altogether. For a long time.

But that is another story.

That day in the workshop, I heard my classmates desperately misread the story. Their misreadings were rooted in two interrelated phenomena, the US empire and racism. And this is what I would continue to experience in American workshops in both fiction and poetry, in both university settings and community workshops. Of course, the imperial racism would be mediated by the profound American ignorance about anything that is non-American. An ignorance which is ultimately rooted in a society-wide diffused sentiment of cultural, political and economic imperial aggression. An

aggression that also veils a not-so-hidden sense of an overwhelmingly white cultural superiority.

The overwhelming whiteness of the American workshop has come under much scrutiny in the recent times. And that whiteness is absolutely real.

But what also needs to be said is, I didn't receive ignorant and clueless remarks *only* from white writers in the workshop.

If I received some profoundly racist comments about my stories and poems from white writers, I also received equally First Worldist/civilizationist comments from writers of color. I met writers who did not know who Rabindranath Tagore was. I met writers who thought *Ramayana* was a real-life character I introduced in my story. I met writers who didn't know there are Muslims in India. And none of these writers were white. Often, I made excuses for them. Like many South Asians, I was aware of my relative privilege in US, since I was there on a student visa. I was aware of the history of anti-black and other forms of racism and classism within South Asian communities, both in diaspora and home. In other words, I made excuses for them, because of my own embedded guilt. I asked myself, do I know everything about non-white American literatures, the traditions from which my non-white workshop-colleagues were drawing? And, if I don't, I don't have the right to judge them on their ignorance of Indian/sub-continental traditions.

But it was a defeatist question to begin with.

The truth is, I do.

The truth is, I know way more about African-American, Native American, Latinx and Asian-American literatures than any of my American non-white friends, irrespective of whatever racial identity and history they represent. I know way more about *their* literatures, than any one of them knows about Bengali, Hindi, Urdu, or Tamil literatures, for instance. Or even South Asian literatures in English. And this is also where the relationship between domestic racism in U.S., and its imperial projects abroad, becomes complicated and non-uniform.

A black writer who sits in the workshop with me, or is facilitating the workshop as an accomplished published writer, can step out of the room and be subject to unimaginable police violence. Yet, that same person can read whatever I write through exactly the kind of imperialist-Orientalist lens that his/her white, counterpart uses. And this is precisely the case with most of the other writers of color. The Asian-

American writers might try to keep the Orientalism at bay, because of their very different relationship to both Asia and the American anti-Asian racisms, but it makes a backdoor entry anyway, especially through the ways in which Asian-American rhetoric remains steeped in immigration. For someone like me, who had no desire to stay in US forever, that kind of emphasis on immigration was useless, after a certain point, even though I might try to understand the phenomenon theoretically. The workshop reveals the fact that the American non-white racial-cultural nationalisms are often implicated in ideologies of American empire and imperialism, a phenomenon copiously documented within American ethnic literatures. This is not something that can be simply resolved by speaking about the “overwhelming whiteness” of the creative writing workshop.

For example, the time I wrote a poem called “Evening Descending on Park Street” for yet another workshop:

An indefinite pause cast out of an irresolvable riddle
nestles inside this fist. This effort to rhyme through daffodil-bruised
lips is a saga of the aftermath thrown overboard from the deck.

A slave-ship on the tongue: a memorized meter.

The chipped edges of the foresaken terracotta cup
against the evening’s morpheme-tired lips – deep inside
the city’s clasp, an owl snuffs out the lights in the train-station
with a single puff of her wings. If the crowd catches

the whiff, it is the clank of the copper-coins concealed
inside her cartilages. The city dictates this meticulous
preaching of cacophony.

The annals of any multitude

is written in equal amounts by this desire to dull

through sheer repetition the splinters that smother
inside throats, and that squiggle away: far,
far away from the famine-charred bodies.

To render in pronouns this strait, is to crawl towards
a season of abandonment. A patchwork of details

deliberately ignored, this outpouring of re-scripted laughter
from behind the shadows of the streetlamp is the proof:
that every girl in this city has lost her Antigone costume.

This is an early draft of a poem which I have worked quite a bit on ever since. It exists in one of my new manuscripts, almost totally broken and torn apart. So, to be honest, I was looking for feedback. The kind of feedback that would allow me to do precisely this work of tearing apart much better. Yet, when I got the feedback from the workshop-facilitator, that desire of mine—to use feedback from this workshop, to do a complex work of “tearing apart”—went right out of the window. To make my point clear, I will quote the feedback verbatim:

*I too am intrigued by the deeper political statement made here: that smoothing out the language, forcing it into a tidy, formal package, sloughing off the edges so it rhymes and conforms, is another kind of violence, another kind of slavery, perpetuating and ignoring the forces that have sought to control the language and sterilize it, “deliberately ignor[ing]” the “splinters that smother inside throats” of the “famine-charred bodies.” Language has real power, your poem says. And the poet has the potential to utilize this power. But she must ponder how to wield her power without giving into the system and/or diluting/ diffusing. How break the system using the system, maybe? We most people have access to language of some kind, but that language has been used against us, in law, enforcing against our own bodies, own selves. I’m outrageously compelled by the deep message of this poem.
A few notes about what I’m less sure about as I move through the poem:*

Where is this taking place?

The title suggests a place called Park Street, but then we’re on a ship, then we find out it’s a slave ship. Later, we’re using a terracotta cup, and I’m thinking Mediterranean though I’m grasping there—but I’m trying to figure out why the attention to detail that the cut is terracotta. We’re inside a city, with an owl, then a train station, in a crowd. Then we have famine-charred bodies, and I’m thinking of a funeral pyre. Where are the bodies, I wonder. And then we get Antigone, and I’m wondering if yes, we are after all in Greece or some such, and then, to what purpose?

*Since I know your other work, I know that it’s almost exclusively set in India.
But here, I don’t necessarily think that is the setting.*

I sense a steep departure from the rest of our oeuvre—and it’s wonderful to explore new territory. But usually the landscape / place is the clearest staple of your work, and I find myself unsure of how to navigate this new terrain.

How are Park Street, a ship, the city, and a train station, and then Ancient Greece all connected? I think they are used in service to the rhetorical strategy of the poem, so that they are lesser details in the poem than the idea itself.

Still, I perceive a lack of unity that keeps me from fully enjoying/inhabiting the hauntedness of the poem—i.e., haunting is so closely related to place, right? As Avery Gordon discusses—as Beloved exemplifies, for instance, how this story was most closely related to the South and the attitudes that prevailed there.

I too had to look up how Antigone might be related. Though I know her story, I'm not sure I'm understanding the logical connection here. I sense that your reader for this poem should be scholarly and learned, ready to tackle the mythological backstory here. Could you bring your reader with less mythologically-inclinations into the poem? I'd really love a few windows in, understanding some of the context that makes this scene, backdrop, story necessary in this particular poem.

Again, the ideas themselves are powerful, but without the context, they remain a bit amorphous for me—of the mind, not the gut. And you know how I love that gut punch—those sensory details.

That said, a few tightenings might help, especially in the opening.

I don't know if beginning on the slave ship is the approach you want to take, since I personally think that establishing place in the forefront might be more necessary to the resonance of the poem.

Even just rearranging the syntax of the opening might make it less hazy/abstract though, and begin with the concrete purpose at stake:

*In my fist, a pause cast from a riddle. This effort
to rhyme through daffodil-bruised lips, a sage of the aftermath
thrown overboard from the deck.*

Something like that?

Again, doesn't resolve the contextual issue I raised, though I think you can share with us when/where this is as the poem progresses.

Omit unnecessary adverbs and adjectives where you can. I know you're using language for the purpose of showing language, so perhaps I'm misinterpreting the point, but I sense you can omit some of this: foresaken, meticulous, deliberately.

Mostly though, I just want to understand how Antigone connects to the setting and the larger story.

The person who wrote this feedback is not white. Neither is she privileged in terms of class. She is an extremely prolific writer who has published widely in the “top” literary journals, has won quite a few prestigious poetry prizes. She openly advocates for writers of color. I am writing all of this to establish the fact that she is, by no means, a “marginal” name in the contemporary poetry circuit in America. When I first read the feedback, two things stood out to me immediately. The feedback is a text in itself. The writer of this text is making a desperate attempt to read and “understand” another text – my poem – in response to which this particular feedback-text has been produced. There is no easy and quick dismissal of what I had produced. I am making a point in stating this explicitly, because I have faced that kind of dismissal in workshops too.

Instead, there is a sincere attempt to engage. In other words, it is not in its absence of well-intention that this feedback makes itself conspicuous.

Where this feedback becomes utterly useless to me, is its desperate failure to comprehend the essential political, didactic and aesthetic project that was my poem. I admit, it does not open itself up to the readers very easily. In it is congealed a cryptic commentary on what the English language means for a writer like me. A historical reality that most Indian English poets and writers choose to forget in our over-eagerness to dub English as “just another” Indian language. Which it is, and it is not. And, that cryptic commentary arrives in the poem through a jarring metaphor – that of the slave-ship. Which also happens to be a nudge back into the history of capital; the way it all started.

Indeed, the poem, if anything, is a rumination on capital. Its inevitable relationship with language, juxtaposed on the imageries of a city. The modern city, which also happens to be one of the most elemental constructions of capital. Yes, I am indeed talking about India per se, and more precisely, the city of Kolkata, which most often, forms the default setting of most of my poems so far. The most obvious clue is the name “Park Street” – that bit of glittery, shiny Kolkata – which embodies a complex relationship to the arrival of colonial capital in the sub-continent. The part of the city

with which my relationship remains one of distance and alienation. But, there are also more tacit references: the terracotta cup, reminding anyone who is remotely familiar with the city, the roadside tea-stalls, the train, operating as a signifier of modernity so often used in so many Bengali and other Indian films, the owl as a nod to the Bengali poet Jibananda Das.

In juxtaposing all of this with the jarring metaphor of the slave-ship, what the poem is also pushing its readers towards, is an invitation. An invitation to educate oneself about the history of South Asia, especially Bengal's implication within the histories of slaveries. An issue that remains under-explored, almost unexplored. I admit, the poem is dense, playing with many different materials at the same time. Political, aesthetic, literary, juxtaposed upon my own personal histories. Yet, what this poem resists, is both the easy confessionalism of the MFA-Industrial complex, and the easy, de-politicized experimentalism that emerges in reaction to the former. A discerning reader would notice that this is also where the feedback fails in grappling with the essential project of the poem.

Note the feedback begins with a rumination on language; its politics, its inherent characteristics. There is a rumination on the relationship a poet can, and might possess with language. There is an effort to politicize the role of the poet by stating something like "breaking the system by getting into the system." A defeatist, hackneyed thought upon which much of the American academic racial-ethnic radicalisms are predicated. A time-worn defeatism, which almost always attempts to conjoin the racialized writer subject to the overarching project of capital. It does so by throwing a bone at the aspirational racialized subject of the writing workshops. Your place within the system, it tells the subject, is an act of radicalism in itself. It trains an individual subject to conflate ideological *radicalism* with *resilience*, which, undoubtedly, a marginalized subject needs in plenty to stay afloat and find one's place within the system. In other words, it turns both intellectual/artistic co-optation, and tokenism, into acts of radicalism by the individualized tokenized subjects.

In some ways, the feedback "gets" some aspect of the poem. It gets the intellectual/artistic compradorism that lies at the heart of this poem. However, where it fails, is in understanding that the poem wants to accomplish more. Whether it succeeds or not, is a different question. And precisely because of the fact that the poem wants to accomplish more than a celebration of resilience as *resistance*, I was not sure of the poem's success, I wanted feedback. That's why I was there in the workshop in the first place.

The poem, ultimately, wants to become a commentary precisely on that sort of

intellectual/artistic compradorism. And that is also where the poem wants to achieve/accomplish more. There is, as such, no explicit radical rejection of that compradorism in this poem. What is there, is a form of mourning about the state of a world where such compradorism becomes the default form of almost all forms of privileged existences, artistic and otherwise. A recording of that despair is what forms the basis of the poem. Such a form of despair also happens to be constituted by the absence of any resistance movements that can tear apart this veil of compradorism as such. Something that is written in the poem through the invocation of the figure of the Antigone. Antigone, who almost always comes back to haunt the writers and artists, in too many places throughout the globe, in multiple forms, as a privileged figure through which to enunciate both state violence and resistances. Antigone, who possesses a complex and ambiguous history of presence in the annals of the Bengali stage, to which the poem obliquely refers through the use of the word “costume.” There is space in my poem. Concrete spaces: the slave-ship, the ocean, the train station, the city. Yet, these concrete spaces are held together by certain abstractions: the colonizing-imperial role of English language, the narrator’s political despair, and of course, the most overarching abstraction of all—under whose overwhelming shadow we all live—capital. And, it is precisely there that the feedback falters most.

In so many ways, the feedback seeks a transparent, concrete space and geography. Identifiable through known tropes and objects. The writer does not know much about India, yet is keen on concealing that absence of knowledge. The writer of the feedback knows, it is “wrong” to see India (or an Indian writer) through Orientalist tropes. Yet, feels lost—and I would say, even threatened—in not seeing an India represented in this poem through images, metaphors and objects familiar to *her* as India and Indian. This desire for a familiarity that is specifically Indian in American and Orientalist terms, is also expressed in the feedback through the writer’s fear of the abstract. Yet there is nothing individualistic or personal in it. In expressing it, she is merely reiterating the fear of the abstract that lies at the heart of the American creative writing complex. What she is also demonstrating is the fact that she is an uncritical, obedient subject of the complex. In fact, she is the obedient subject of two academic-industrial projects: the American MFA-Industrial Complex, and the American Ethnic Studies project. The latter being one of the great examples of how a resistant intellectual project which begins through popular and militant student movements, gets ultimately co-opted, thus becoming thoroughly de-radicalized. Both of these projects have empowered and enriched my instructor in certain ways. As they have many others like her. Yet, in that very empowerment and enrichment are also embedded the processes of both her political and aesthetic dwarfing. And that dwarfing is constituted in her very inability to see the complexities of spaces beyond America, through perspectives that do not

necessarily reproduce the American lens. In other words, there is a default imperialism at work here. Her inability to read a kind of writing that consciously draws attention to the constitution of capital, to capital's ways of constituting *my* cultural world. What is more American than accepting capitalism as the most taken-for-granted and unexamined condition of human existence?

So, when I encountered this feedback, my reaction was one of frustration. I *wanted* abstraction in this poem. I wanted someone to read my poem and offer feedback based on the abstractions that my poem offered. In fact, I have always understood poetry to be an abstract form. And, it is my love for abstraction in language that brought me to poetry to begin with.

Yet, in an American creative classroom, this is one of the first lessons that a student is taught. *Avoid abstractions*. And generations of students, like my instructor, had attempted to write poems—often beautiful poems—which contained no abstraction as such. Yet, isn't poetry precisely about stretching language to its absolute limits? Isn't poetry necessarily about representing the seemingly-simple image or idea, bared to its most persistent abstraction? How can one even attempt to be a poet without engaging in abstraction of both thought and language? In other words, there is a grave contradiction at the heart of this very adage.

This adage, in fact, resides in American creative writing workshops along with another oft-repeated mantra – *show, don't tell*. The combination of these two statements, often times, produces a strange effect. Everything, in order to be written about, must be reduced to an image. In other words, writing is limited to a recording of what is visible, what exists. This emphasis on visuality, here is, by no means, accidental. It is precisely the site without which capital cannot function. Visuality, as someone like Walter Benjamin reminds us, forms the very basis of modernity's guiding everyday existence. Often in an unconscious kind of a way. Visuality also happens to be the guiding philosophy of racisms and colonialisms. There is, then, at the basis of this combination, a default acceptance of capital's guiding logic, of racism and imperialism's dominant rationality.

What is, then, erased, is the fact that writers *tell*. "Telling" is the biggest weapon a writer possesses at his/her disposal. Even when a writer is showing, s/he is essentially telling. And only *telling*. "Show, don't tell," on closer examination, does not make much sense, except for the fact that the creative writing workshops demand that the students write in recognizable scenes. Recognizable scenes reduce human experience to concrete, exteriorized moments, which can stand alone. Complicated back-stories are relegated

to the background, as are the materials that cannot be exteriorized as such. This default emphasis on visibility, in the creative writing classroom, tethers any writing that happens there to the status quo. For that status quo, retrospection is dangerous. Precisely because it can open up things one hasn't quite thought about here. Retrospection requires *telling*. Retrospection also requires exploration of interiorities. Consequently, retrospection has to be reduced to the minimum. Inside the creative writing classrooms, retrospection is allowed only as long as it is limited, linear, tied to a re-affirmation of the status quo, reduced to a quick narration of a few moments of a particular form of discontent.

In the same way, abstraction puts pressure on what exists. It often creates the possibility for non-linearity, locating complex connections between seemingly disparate entities, and as such, also creates the possibility for invoking the unseen. It is in abstraction, first and foremost, that the unseen is imagined. The utopic, after all, also resides within the space of abstraction, awaiting human action to be made concrete. As does the future. Abstraction, in poems and stories, therefore, becomes too dangerous, precisely because it demands too much. In instilling in its students, a suspicion of the abstract, the MFA-Industrial complex also keeps a certain kind of dangerous writing out of its spaces. And, in this act of keeping out, race is as much intertwined with capital with the aesthetics and politics of US Empire, Take away one, and what you will be left with, is a reductionist cultural politics.

This entanglement does not, however, take away anything from the fact that the creative writing classroom has democratized in America, and to a certain extent, the very field of literary writing, by letting in very specific kinds of lower middle-class writer-aspirants – mostly white – into the space of professional-literary writing. This is a group that often lacks familial cultural capital, and the MFA classroom, often, performs an important role in fulfilling that lack. Yet, it is also equally true, that such forms of democratization occur, by sculpting the lower middle-class writer-aspirant into an *obedient literary subject*. And in this, the student (the writer-aspirant) and the teacher (the more professionalized writer) join hands, bound together by their mutual well-intention to sculpt and to be sculpted. Undoubtedly, then, like many other ideological machineries in place, the MFA machine, too, is held together through good intentions, a certain kind of love for writing and literature, and a desire for “self-expression.” All of these are impulses, which can lead to individual empowerment, and can be extremely potent tools in political movements. And the MFA machine, situated as it is in the heart of the empire, knows this. It knows this too well, and it functions by attempting to domesticate such impulses.

Let us, then, get back to that moment where I began it all. The workshop reading my story set in Kolkata in the 1990s. A story about a teenage girl that began with a dream-sequence. My workshop-mates came up with gross mis-readings of the story. Mis-readings that revealed their absolute lack of awareness of life in the cities of the sub-continent in the 1990s. Mis-readings that were absolutely Orientalist in nature, and could not imagine life for the sub-continent's girls and women beyond "arranged marriages." While what I am writing here is a repetition of what came before, what I didn't talk about earlier, was what my instructor had said: "Most editors of literary journals do not accept stories that begin with dream sequences. Yet, here, you do exactly that."

To be honest, I have no intention of pathologizing my instructor. She had my best interests in mind, and she was doing exactly what she was paid to do, train students towards publication credits in the market. It was not that I was shy of publication. I did want, and still want, public venues for my work. Yet, what I also wanted, was to find out, what political work my little story could do, within the larger world of Anglophone fiction-writing. That is also precisely the expectation that I brought into the class. Like the poem I referred to earlier, I was perfectly willing to accept that there are multiple elements in my story that were not working. I was also willing to admit that the dream-sequence, too, was not quite fulfilling its function. But, I wanted that discussion to take place in terms of the social-political world that the story had set up.

However, the feedback I received, asked me to be responsive to an imagined editor's tastes. The figure of the imagined editor that my instructor invoked, then, not only acted as the gatekeeper of my entry into the literary world, but also represented the specter of the literary marketplace that forever haunts the creative writing classrooms in America. In other words, my teacher, too, was invoking an abstraction here. The abstraction called market, which is embodied in the figure of the implied figure of the editor, which remains hanging between "concrete" and "abstract." It is a very different sort of abstraction than the one I was invoking earlier. Yet, it is under such an abstraction's shadow that the American creative writing classroom operates.

And, it is precisely this market-centric abstraction that makes *my* kind of abstraction an object of suspicion in the American creative writing classroom. Because, after all, my abstraction can tear through the veil of the other more authoritative kind, that guides the very constitution of the American creative writing classroom. Yes, abstraction, for me, is a weapon. A weapon that teaches me to see through the idea of hegemony of market in cultural production. A weapon that enables me to imagine a future where such hegemony would not hold good.

The basis of the creative writing classroom, at the end of the day, is predicated upon an impulse to discipline a particular text that the student/writer-aspirant has brought in. Through the disciplining of that text, what is also disciplined, is the writer-aspirant herself. The obedient literary subject of the MFA-Industrial Complex is perpetually complicit with the market, perpetually subordinate and attentive to the needs, imperatives and the standards set up by the literary marketplace. Take away the literary marketplace out of the story, the MFA-Industrial Complex, as it exists, will crumble like wet sand.

An understanding of the MFA-Industrial complex as an assembly line and training ground of obedient literary subjects, who then train another generation of obedient literary subjects and then another, thus forces us to think of the obvious. If not the obedient aesthetics of the MFA complex, then what? How can writers and poets imagine an alternative literary pedagogy? What does it mean to be a *disobedient literary subject* during our troubled times? Can disobedient literary subjects ever imagine an aesthetic-literary pedagogy? What would the concrete methods of such a pedagogy look like? In what kinds of institutions are such pedagogies to be housed? I am not claiming by any means, that I have the answers to all of these questions. But, asking the difficult questions is the first step towards finding the answers. Especially in India, where there is a burgeoning, privatized “creative writing” complex, with its own sets of commodified workshops/classrooms, and a desire amongst our young writers to gain an MFA abroad in USA, it needs to be asked, what happens when we begin to see literary production primarily as a pedagogic project? What are the things that we lose inside a classroom space? What are the kinds of labour, other than writing, which, we, as writers, need to undertake, in order to come up with forms of literary and artistic training that can occur outside of the classroom? Because the classroom, as we have known it, remains an insulated, exclusive space. And, as a writer, who works in the classroom as a teacher, to put food on my table, let me make this very, very clear. Literary creativity comes to the classroom to suffer a sleek, but inglorious death. As do all forms of radicalisms. The MFA complex, in its American form, or in foreign incarnations beyond the shores of America, will never facilitate any radical literature, even at its “inclusive” best.

Shreela Ray

Shreela Ray was born in Orissa province (now called Odisha) in India in 1942. Born into a mixed Hindu and Christian Indian family, she spent her early childhood in England and India. She studied at the Loretto Convent in Darjeeling before coming to the United States in 1960, to attend the graduate writing program at Iowa Writers Workshop. She developed relationships with many of the leading luminaries of the time, among them W.H. Auden, Robert Frost, John Berryman, William Meredith, Isabella Gardner, Galway Kinnell, and Leslie Fielder and John Logan, with whom she studied at the University of Buffalo. Her poems appeared in many journals, including *The Nation*, *Poetry*, and *The Dalhousie Review*. The recipient of several awards, she wrote one book in the U.S., *Night Conversations with None Other* (Dustbooks, 1977), which was published as *The Passion of Draupadi & Other Poems* (Writers Workshop, 1988) in India. Ray eventually married and settled in Western New York, where she also became part of the burgeoning poetry scene then centered around Al Poulin and the Brockport Writers Forum in Rochester, NY. Ray's work was noted for its urbane and cosmopolitan phrasing, dark wit and the multiple lineages from which it drew—as much from a contemporary Indian lineage that might include Kamala Das and Eunice De Souza as a more global Anglophone approach to the lyric favored by Seamus Heaney, Derek Walcott, or Kathleen Raine. And yet at the same time Ray's poetry felt fully “American,” conversational, funny and tender with brash bravado of second generation New York School.

After her one and only book was published in 1977, she mostly worked under the radar, publishing individual poems, here and there, but also raising her two sons and teaching an ongoing creative writing workshop whose attendees included Cornelius Eady. Ray passed away in 1994, having published many poems in journals but not another book of poems. For the first time, a volume of her selected poetry, letters, and other materials and “ephemera” will be published by Pleiades Press in 2021, edited by Kazim Ali and Rohan Chhetri, as part of the *Unsung Masters Series*. The selection of her poems that follows is culled from this forthcoming volume.

five virgins and the magnolia tree

When we were seventeen or sixteen
and sat in the tennis courts
under the Magnolia Campbelii
—one of the largest flowering trees in the world—
we had lost our senses and we talked our heads off.

Two were to be doctors!
Two students of literature!
One was about to die
and so could not make plans
to heal the world.

Except for her
I forgot the whole lot of you
and of what we spoke
in those hours between
Study Hall and Benediction.

And the good nuns—
if they only knew what
I remember
in the nights of this runaway exile—

the sweet, rich scent,
the cream and white of the magnolia blossom
eight inches across
and blooming strong
way above my head—

they would cut that tree down.

Night in April

The voice of the April wind addresses
the unmarriageable awake
in the real sleep of the body.
The windows are open
and the sleepy violets of the blood
stir towards the dark outside;
that final nakedness
in the silhouettes of doorways
and branches ascending and descending.
To stay would mean for always
I would remain to weigh and measure.

Let your breath enflame a second
marriage for that end. As for me
there is some other livelihood
when the essences of things call me 'sister'!

Before I draw back my wings and fall
into the keel of birdlike flowers
by god I will make a garden of this place.

An Elegy

At last they uncoil, hold
bark, gum, a naked field
dandelion. The river does not stop
the fit. To falter,

to think it is not
the moment. Winds hurl down
an ounce of god, a loose rock,
a mountain weed, flower
of shattered stem.

They come after me, the birds, and spread
like elegies in a wood too dense
for undertaking, even alone.

Collector bees grow lazy.
Already the flies buzz. The earth cracks
where the worms toil

in one who dreamed of requital,
the sea or where rich sap
whelms stronger pines,
and the seed in the brain is permitted to bloom

without the jingle of metal rain, without
this green deep intrusion doomed
to earth's centre.

Louder and louder the greed
of water falling sucks at the nerve
holding me back like
the pickerel caught in weeds.

There is no escape from you unbearable
american benevolence. Let
Asia take her bastard child without complaint.

The waters of seven continents rush
towards me and over me.

Antiwar

1.

Calm and light honey was the spring
fern in the woods, and Gregory (Adonis)
curled sleeping before the fire.

How was Keh Sanh possible? How
Baghdad, Beirut? Were there no
free women to scream and shout, to make

common cause and strike if they must,
or else with a wall of aching arms
whisper without flagging once,

No. Not this one either.

2.

In the morning paper there was a photograph
of three children inspecting
the fresh corpse of a youth
in El Salvador.

You and I have not killed anyone.
We have not served the hungry stones,
or poisoned children, burned their homes
or made them vanish.

So when we walk in Highland Park
redolent with lilacs, and up East Avenue where the
copper beeches grow higher
than the minarets in Delhi,

say, how could we be wrong to kiss,
first, under the linden next,
the ginkgo next to the cottonwood?

Mother/daughter

When I look out and see the empty blue sky,
I want to anchor myself there,
so you would know me again as once
you did, when I was anchored
to your body's harbour.

What became of your dowry?
Your jewelry, your silks?
Who feeds you? Who holds you
under the turning fan in summer?
Under the turning starless ceiling?

I wonder if I shall see you again -
or at my death,... would you come?
Go quickly and look at your sky.
And come; here, take back
what's left
 of what you gave me.

No Man's land

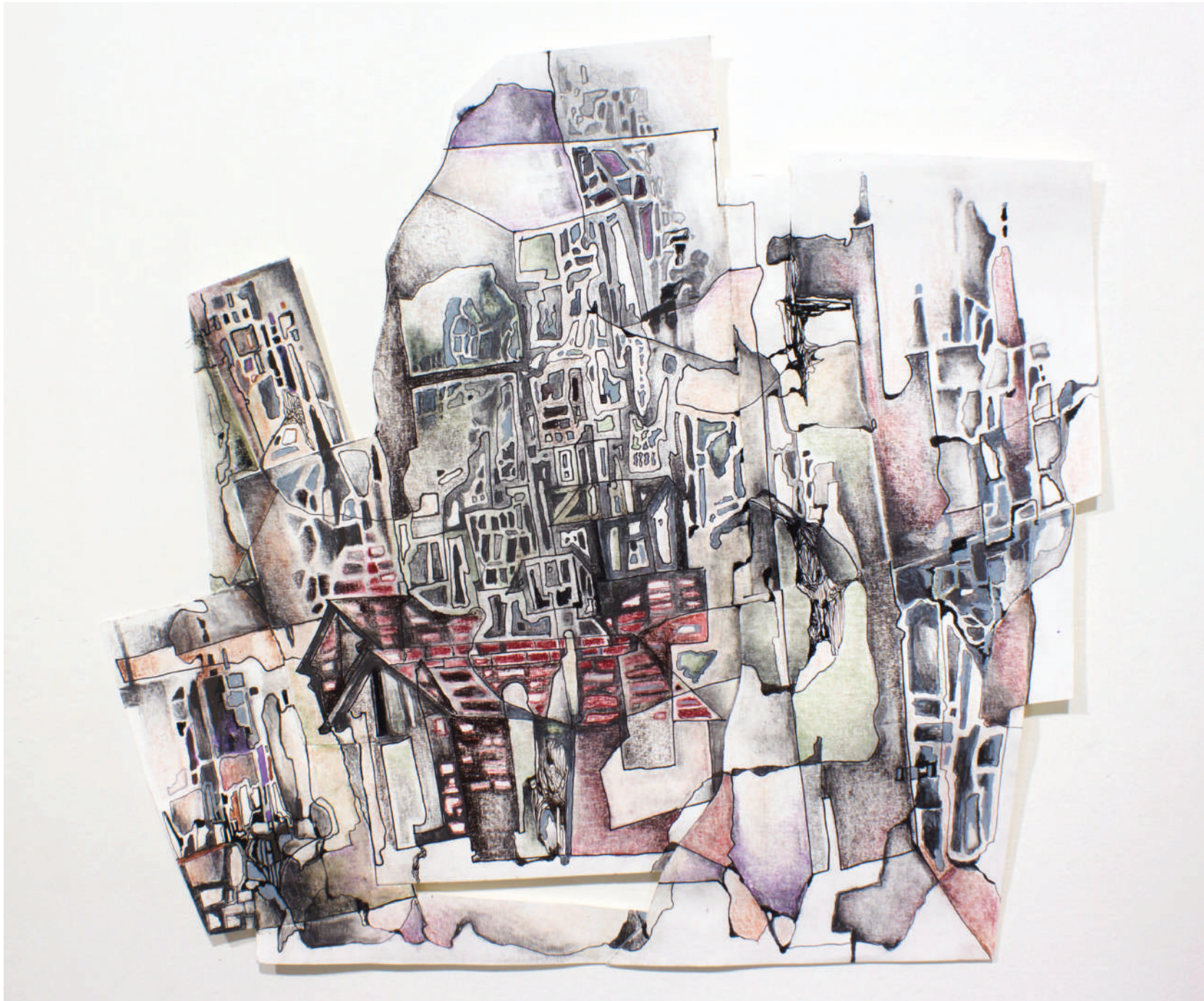
From the season that outraged one death
I enter another and fields
cling to my boots. Wormy apples bounce
onto the road. I walk to where I must
and meet the wary disciple and scholar
who credit me with more villainies
than can be handled in a year.

Wherever we stand Krishna, I hear
the song of the boatmen returning
home with hay.

Every year the gods are drowned in the rivers.
Children lay their heads
in the concave chests of their mothers
and dream
infant, material dreams.

Once standing on a high mound
above babel, I watched a fair
and the festivals of boats at dusk.
A dog limped up the hill and fell.

My country sometimes I wish
for a last storm or flood or fire,
where the slaughterpen of the world
opens to another day: the vermilion
sun dies in the arabian sea.



IN BETWEEN THE NOOKS & CRANNIES 1 & 2

These works draw on the process of deep mapping using imagery from memory, observation and imagination of aerial maps from dense urban cities such as Bombay, interspersed with imagery of natural rock crystals to create a dichotomous space.

The geometric structures of natural rock formations coexist with man-made spaces that, due to their nature of construction and destruction, leave traces of decaying organic forms that move and spread through their crevasses, building contradictory landscapes.

Drawing these spaces was akin to navigating the streets, through the nooks and crannies of various turns and bends, where one needs to delve further and lose oneself, much like one would, navigating the city.

Mapping, in these drawings, was a method of finding patterns and networks to create order within the chaos of an urban space. Reducing complex forms to basic shapes through lines to create an abstract form that resembles a large metropolis bursting at the seams, reminiscent of several cities at once.

Making the work was as much a process of navigating metaphysical spaces within the mind as it was visualizing physical ones.

Sareena Khemka

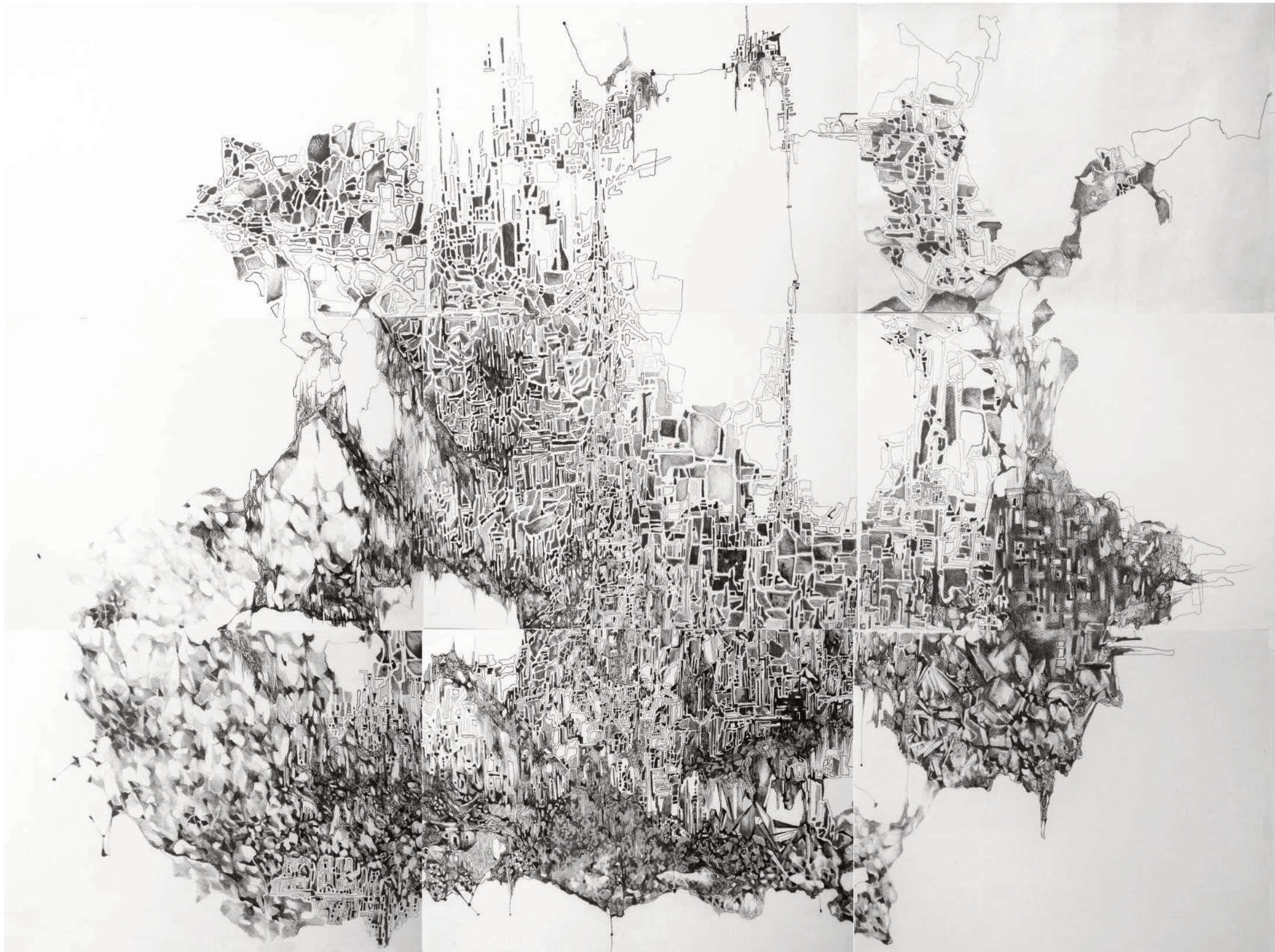
Between the Nooks & Crannies 1 | 2020 | mixed media collage on paper

This work was made prior to its larger counterpart *Between the Nooks & Crannies 2*, and was inspired by the patterns, shapes and networks that are derived from urban spaces. These combine imagined and real spaces from memory and observation to create these abstract collaged work of ordered chaos. The process involves drawing the image and then cutting it up and reassembling it to make it shift and change perspectives, resembling building blocks in a city that is constantly changing.



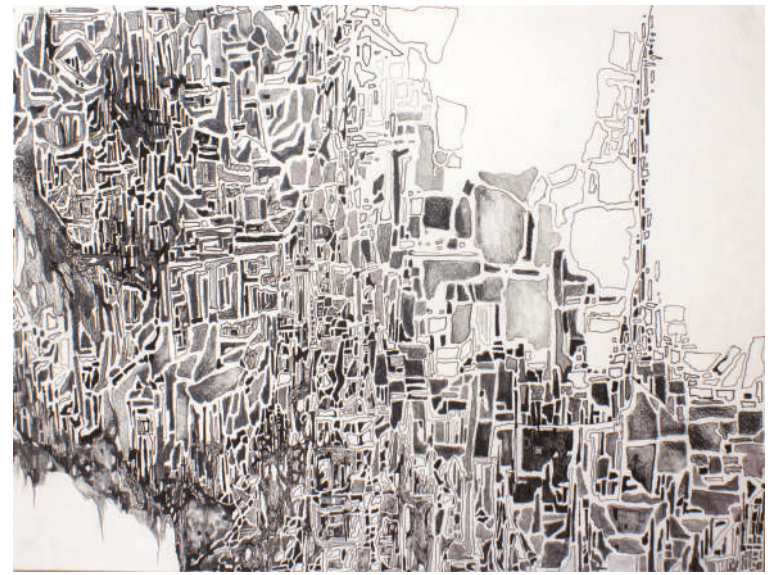
Sareena Khemka

Between the Nooks & Crannies 1 - detail of a panel | 2020 | mixed media collage on paper



Sareena Khemka

Between the Nooks & Crannies 2 | 2020 | mixed media collage on paper



Sareena Khemka

Between the Nooks & Crannies 2 - details from three panels | 2020 | mixed media collage on paper

New in Poetry

Curated by Aswin Vijayan

The Memory of Light

Soni Somarajan, *First Contact*, Red River, 2020, Rs. 230/-

Soni Somarajan's debut collection of poetry, *First Contact*, is brimming with light and silence. Somarajan has tagged each poem with a year and geographic location allowing the reader to track the progress of the persona in this verse memoir. Dedicated to "LIFE / for there's no greater privilege", the title of the collection refers to the poet-persona's coming into contact with life, memory, and creativity. The book is divided into four sections: 'First Contact' deals with the first eight years of the persona's life; 'Lingua Franca' covers the next fourteen years in his journey of self-realisation and includes the memorable Sainik school poems; 'Arrival' covers another twelve years and deals with his arrival into a poetic sensibility, and; 'Degrees of Separation' is the final static section spanning four years and located entirely in Thiruvananthapuram, with poems that meditate on a very private sense of loss. The collection appears to unravel in the ekphrastic mode as Somarajan reconstructs his life in verse through recreation of photographs ("The Working of Glass"), objects ("The Black Trunk I", "Ode to a Pineapple"), and memory ("Fruit Trees"). The poems oscillate between the descriptive and the reflective modes and are most effective when they combine these two tendencies. In this collection, Somarajan captures what he describes as "life's pulsing binary —/ memory and momentum." Drawing from intimate and personal experiences, while occupying the voice of a detached persona, these poems present themselves to the reader something richly relatable.

Tarzan of the Apes

Air Force Academy, 1980

In the afternoon's tropical light, a respite
from homework. One hunches reading of a
faraway land, a different sun, the wood of darkness.

The mise-en-scène resembles
a school tableau — enchanting, fear in the shadows,
giant yellow flowers, and lunging lianas.

Imagine a wandering spotlight of sunshine
rendered in stark monochrome
on the last page of *The Indian Express*.

Poised high is a clean dagger, its hilt
muscled by a wiry ape-man, biceps choking
a beast locked in a half-roar.

Blood must spill next, staining the
humid air, but first let's take in the scene,
digest the danger of a choreographed

animal-man combat. The predator must
collapse, foraging in a wood not its own,
so unforgiving in comic strips.

The Eye of the Tiger

Class Excursion, Thiruvananthapuram Zoo, 1984

When we were done with the birds,
the flight had gone out of us.

 After lunch, forgettable as ever,
we moved far to a different corner.

The light now played truant,
tropical yellow hazing our sight.

 But unlike cranes, monkish,
fishing nuances of silence,

the tiger lay sprawled —
in its siesta dreaming a landscape;
 a rustle of fur, parting a foliage,
feasting eyes through a breach,

upon a movement, a kill —
blood, bone, marrow, muscle.

 Poised, wound up, ready to spring —
it stirs awake, startled,

to stare at a clutch of boys, in whites,
taunt its obsolete hunter's stripes,
 the same boys who'd readily kill for
a day out from a boarding school.

Degrees of Separation

Ambalamukku, Thiruvananthapuram, 2016

A tentative rain asks questions.
Silver-tinged with guilt, it makes a list of
places it can't visit tonight.

I see your city in there. I imagine you
asleep — unaware of how rain is a turncoat.
There is only so much I can do.

Often, we dream the same dream.
We do. Tonight, there's this odd chance
the rain may choose to sleep in mine

and wake up in yours.

A Touch Across the Centuries

Arjun Rajendran, *One Man Two Executions*, Context, 2020, Rs. 499/-

In his third collection of poems *One Man Two Executions*, Arjun Rajendran presents the reader with a keen sense of history and a pervading awareness of mortality. The collection is divided into three distinct sections and though they are porous, they also present different strengths of Rajendran as a poet. “Pondichéry” section combines historical facts mined from the diaries of Ananda Ranga Pillai (1709-61) and Rajendran’s rich poetic imagination. Poems in this section capture the mood of French colonial Pondicherry during Carnatic wars. The landscape is littered with a diverse cast of characters and various kinds of conflicts recorded precisely by the diarist Pillai and released “into the realm of imagination” by the anachronistic mind of Rajendran. The second section called “The Girl in the Peapod” contains expansive love poems dedicated to the eponymous girl and are reminiscent of Rajendran’s poems in the previous collection, *The Cosmonaut in Hergé’s Rocket*, for their literary and Soviet references, obsession with outer space, and speculative qualities. The final section, “Were It Not For”, feels the most settled. If the poet’s awareness of mortality seemed like the subtext of the previous sections, it comes to the forefront here as he deals with the subject explicitly in poems like “Mirza”, “Carousel”, and “How They Went” among others. *One Man Two Executions* is an ambitious project that carries forward the work Rajendran began in his previous collections and in his 2017 chapbook, *Your Baby is Starving*. His interest in ships, the French language, and experiences as a poet/editor are newer introductions to his poems and further widens their scope. The ideal reader for *One Man Two Executions* may not exist for its range is vast and the allusions unimaginably diverse. For that exact reason, the collection has something to offer to every discerning reader.

Chéseaux's Comet

1744

Flanked by cymbalists, soldiers on Acheen horses
& led by an elite of the company, the palanquin

moved towards the governor's palace with the great
comet. More than the radiance of any potentate—

nawab, Mahratta, or Queen—this celestial messenger
seen across continents, in the spyglasses of pirates

& admirals, leaned its nucleus against the coastal
hearts of left-hand castes, against the cold ribs

of a lascar's widow, or Lubbays. Ignoring gifts of silk,
pagodas (8½ touches thick) and nautch girls, it resumed

its voyage, its sextuple tail aiming auguries at
the governess, yet to outlive her daughter and grandchild.

When you Travel

Clock-hands whirr
like wind-vanes
before a hurricane.

Having no time
for sleep or brunch,
you drop
fountains, jugglers,
& tulips
down your surprise,
tuck Montpellier
in your blouse.

But on your body,
my hands become
the traveller you are:

insomniac,

drunk,

bones

delirious

in a time-lapse
video under the skin,
seeking fireflies
& thrill till being sucked
out the train window.

Sacramento

Alaska Airlines has closed the gate.

We are late by ten minutes.

Stranded with us is another family—
the women are in hijab.

We learn their destination is Palestine,
via Jordan. My friend's
destination is a hospice.

The Caucasian lady doesn't register
our panic. Or offer regret.

Her demeanour turns us into ravens
vanquished by an infinite field of snow.

The airplane is still on the ground—
it reminds me of a photograph, where
passengers appear suspended above
a coffin wrapped in the American flag.

In this morning fragrant with bagels
and Columbia grinds, we, who are
no martyrs, must find another way home.

Lines Thinning into Nothing

Nitoo Das, *Crowbite*, Red River, 2020, Rs. 230/-

Nitoo Das has three poetry collections to her name and the third, *Crowbite*, promises a certainty of image. The selection made below is from a limited set of poems in the book but they display a compelling sense of the place and a confidence in the accuracy of words. She proves masterful in the accumulation of inventive phrases: “a groan of sky”, “a colour I can’t mouth”, and “slow/ eyes flapping a moan of air”.

The Elephant at Ka Kshaid Lai Pateng Khohsiew

He sits large-arsed, slow
eyes flapping a moan of air.
He flies, but with such weight.
He cannot remember
his sins and if
he ever committed them. And
did he confess? And
isn't he extraordinarily grey?
The Elephant
is a stone choked with water. He waits
untouched, limbs forking, trunk and tail crashing
with hard luck, and plummeting puckerings
of the mouth. Yes, he is
Elephant. He is there,
visibly so. Vast,
burdened with his own incongruity
in the hills. He knows
he will explode with the variability of the earth.
Who will discover his bones?

Waterfall in March, Sohra

It had reduced to an unresponsive
tear, an indifferent trickle of piss.
Shuddering slowly
out of the cliffs,
a snake, unsure
whether to wake up or crawl

back into sleep. Here was
the language of pauses and smokescreens.
Here was a young poem
with one-word lines thinning
into nothing. There was time yet
for June. Time to forget the apologies

of water. Then it will grow in all directions,
unpack itself from fear and stumble
recklessly into prophesy.
Out of the rains, rage will rise.
Prose that coils around the sky
will rise. Likai will wail again.

Everything I Say is Poetry

Arun Sagar, *A Long Walk in Sunlight*, Copper Coin, 2020, Rs.

A Long Walk in Sunlight is the second collection of poems by Arun Sagar. Sagar is a poet of the lingering moment capturing the small occurrences and instances that exist just at the periphery of our vision, like dust motes in sunlight. The narrator of these poems appears to have enough time to observe and savour the moment, to pause and “say/ this happened.” The poems are self-reflexive and the act of poem-making or the poem-object often makes an appearance in Sagar’s verse: “The poem makes its presence felt like the sea”. These poems presented as close observations interspersed with emotional responses to certain experiences have a simplicity to them. The experiences have been stripped down to their essence and captured in light, rhythmic verse often embellished with clever internal rhymes.

Dinner Party

Early dark, light snow.
I think I am the last to arrive.
I peer in through a window.

Oven mitts, small plates.
Conversation, animated.
Wine, three bottles, lemonade.

I ring the bell, but nothing happens.
I lay my glove against the door.
It gives.

It gives.
Now I am pushing it open.
Someone is laughing.

Someone opens a window to smoke.
Now I am about to enter.
Music, casseroles, new furniture.

Salads, bracelets,
scarves and jacket on a chair.
I am almost there.

I am almost there.
But before I step in,
listen.

Let me just say
this happened.

Sleepless

Somewhere in the sleepless country a man
watches a spider on his wall.
He watches it so long
he is one with the spider.
He watches himself crawl to the ceiling
and looks down upon himself
in his crumpled sheets.
The clock ticks on, and the man
is one with the minute hand.
It moves too slow, too fast.
Like the spider it does not move at all.
Night is crawling all around, and he
feels its touch
now on the calf, now on the arm.
The man wants to embrace the night.
He wants to hold you in his arms.
For this moment of wakefulness,
he is one with you, and sleep.
Everything is in its place and liminal.

Author bios

Abhishek Anicca is a writer, poet and performer. He identifies as a person with disability and chronic illness which shapes his creative endeavours. He has written on disability and illness for *The Times of India*, *The Quint*, *DNA*, *Mad in Asia* among others. His poems have been published in *Indian Cultural Forum* (English, Hindi), *The Alipore Post* (English), *Rhyme* (English), *Women's web* (English), *Samalochan* (Hindi), *Apni Maati* (Hindi), *Prabhat Khabar* (Hindi). His first poetry collection in Hindi, *Anrang*, was published in 2019.

Adil Jussawalla, born in Bombay in 1940, is the author of five books of poems, his latest being *Shorelines* (Poetrywala, 2019). A selection of his prose, written between 1979 and 2009, is forthcoming.

Aishwarya Mishra is a freelance writer based out of Lucknow, India.

Aishwarya Sahi is a writer and editor from Patna, India. Her work has previously appeared in *Blackbird*, *The Recluse* and *Kajal Magazine*.

Alolika Dutta's poems have been published in *Yellow Medicine Review*, *Verses magazine*, *Coldnoon journal*, *Tilde Literary journal*, *Away With Words anthology*, *Ibaarat magazine*, *The Woman Inc.*, *LUMIN Journal*, and can be found in the upcoming volume of *Helter Skelter Anthology of New Writing*. Alolika was one of the winners of the 2019 Poetry Tournament held at the US Consulate General in Mumbai, and was shortlisted for the 2018 Orange Flower Award for Creative Writing by Women's Web. Currently, she is a creator at Dailyhunt.

Amshuman Hegde lives and works in Bangalore and occasionally writes to pass himself off as an outsider.

Anagha Smrithi is a writer based in Bangalore, India. Through her poetry, she hopes to invoke the links between the personal and poetic, against a backdrop of the everyday, urbanity and feminist explorations of the body.

Das is a non-binary artist, poet and architect from Alleppey, Kerala, who writes both in English and Malayalam. His poems have appeared in journals *CultureCult* and *Literary Impulse*. He was also one of the selected participants of the Ezhuthupura Literary Camp conducted by Malayala Manorama in 2018. A compulsive writer, Das explores themes of decay, trauma and ruin through his works.

Artist and researcher **Garima Gupta**'s field of interest and study stretches from ornithology, topographical alterations and nuances of behaviour patterns between man and wild, primarily in the Southeast Asian archipelago. Her ongoing work with hunters in the rainforests of New Guinea, wildlife sellers in the Indonesian archipelago and taxidermists in Thailand draws a layered image of environmental concerns. Her drawings and documentaries trace patterns of destruction from different historical periods, ruminating the connection between imperialist iconographies concerning wildlife and its mirror images lurking in the psyche of modern-day east. Gupta presented an intermediate stage solo show, *Minutes of the Meeting at Clark House Initiative* in 2017 from her ongoing research in New Guinea. The show is currently travelling and will be at Dhaka Art Summit (Bangladesh), Para Site (Hong Kong) and Museum of Modern Art (Poland) in the year 2019. Her 5-year long research project from New Guinea and Southeast Asian archipelago culminated into a show at Tarq, Mumbai in October, 2020.

Gita Viswanath is a Baroda-based writer. Her novel, *Twice it Happened*, was published in 2019 by Vishwakarma Publications, Pune. She is also the author of a non-fiction book, *The 'Nation' in War: A Study of Military Literature and Hindi War Cinema*, published by Cambridge Scholars, UK in 2014 as well as a children's book, *Chidiya*. Her poems have been published in *Kanyabharati No 28* and *Coldnoon*, an online journal. Her short story, "Paper Gods," was published in *Muse India*, May 2020 and "The Return of the Dead" in *Borderless Journal*, August 2020.

Ira Anjali Anwar is originally from Bhopal. Officially, she's an independent researcher, and occasionally, she writes poetry. Once upon a time, she was a spoken word poet in Delhi with Mildly Offensive Content. Now she writes for no one in particular. Her poem's have appeared in the MKSS (labor farmer political organization) anthology, *The Alipore Post*, and the *Big Bridge Press*.

Juilee Kamble is currently pursuing her Master's degree and writes short stories and poetry. She lives in Mumbai, India.

Kripi Malviya is an existential, intersectional and queer affirmative psychologist and poet. She lives in India where she runs an emotional wellbeing organisation called TATVA, combining psychotherapy, nature therapy and cultural immersion with creative exploration and emotional awareness. She is the co-founder the Poetry Therapy Society of India and her work has been published and performed in literary, cross-disciplinary and psychotherapy journals, conferences and festivals nationally and internationally (*Psychedelic Press UK*, the *Four Quarters Magazine* and the Sunflower Collective, and the *Black Warrior Review*, 45.1). She is the winner of the 2017 Rhythm Divine International Poetry Chapbook

contest for her first poetry collection, *ale(theia)*.

Manjiri Indurkar writes from Jabalpur. She is the author of *It's All in Your Head*, published by Tranquebar, Westland. She is one of the founders of the Bookshelf Writing Workshop. Her chapbook of poetry, *Dental Hygiene is Very Important*, was published in 2017. Her debut poetry collection entitled *Origami Aai* will be published in 2021 by Westland. Her works have appeared in places like the *Indian Quarterly*, *Cha: Asian Literary Journal*, *Scroll*, *Indian Express*, *Poetry at Sangam*, *The Bombay Literary Magazine*, *Himal*, *Skin Stories*, *Indian Cultural Forum*, and elsewhere.

Mindy Gill is a writer based in Brisbane, Australia. Her work has most recently appeared in *Sydney Review of Books*, *Australian Book Review* and the Institute of Modern Art.

Nandini Dhar is primarily a poet. She is the author of the full-length collection *Historians of Redundant Moments* (Agape Editions, 2016) and the chapbook *Occupying My Tongue* (Aainanagar /Vyavya, 2017). She divides her time between Kolkata, her hometown, and Sonapat, where she teaches literature at OP Jindal Global University.

Rahee Punyashloka is a Dalit writer, visual artist, researcher, and filmmaker from Bhubaneswar, Odisha. He creates anti-caste art under the moniker 'artedkar'. He has recently completed an experimental novel, *A Manual for Shapeshifting*, which he is currently revising.

Rohith is a medico from Anantapur, Andhra Pradesh. His poetry has been published in magazines like *The Sunflower Collective*, *Cafe Dissensus*, *Madras Courier*, *Raiot*, *Voice & Verse Poetry Magazine*, *The Bombay Literary Magazine* and *Coldnoon* journal.

Sareena Khemka is a visual artist working in mixed media drawing, painting and sculptural installations. Her current practice explores urban spaces through dichotomous ideas of construction and destruction, preservation and regeneration, man-made and organic environments, creating transformative spaces and objects that recall historical ruins and geological formations that have the potential for material evolution. Khemka holds a B.F.A degree in painting from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago and Kala Bhavan, Santiniketan, India. Her recent shows include *Future Foundations*; 'Walk-in Studio', Bangalore, 2019; and 'Build & Grow', sculptural installations and experiments, Bangalore Design Week, 2018, among others. The artist currently lives and works in Bangalore and runs her own art studio called 'Periphery Art Space' that gives out space to other artists and creative professionals.

Selina Sheth is a journalist, a screenwriter and the author of a forthcoming novel, *Any Time, Some Time*. She currently lives and works in Mumbai, India.

Winner of *The Great Indian Poetry Contest 2018*, **Tuhin Bhowal's** poems appear in *Bacopa Literary Review*, *Narrow Road Journal*, *City 7: A Journal of South Asian Literature*, *mutiny!*, and elsewhere. He currently serves as a Poetry Editor at *Bengaluru Review*, *Sonic Boom Journal*, and *Yavanika Press*. Tuhin tweets poems @secondhandsins.

Varsha Upraity writes narrative fiction and poetry. She is working on her first anthology.

Veena Hari is a clinical psychologist working in the field of Child Rights and moonlights as a writer. Her pieces have been published in *Luna Luna*, *Nailed* magazine and her recent short story 'Goldflake' was published in *LitGleam Magazine* in June 2020.



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