

nether Quarterly
Vol.2 Issue 3
March 2021

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ISSN 2231-4792



nether
QUARTERLY

2/3 • March 2021

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As this issue came together around the question of writing our parents and family in these politically polarized times – courtesy of our guest editor, Nandini Dhar – we found ourselves reading a wealth of fascinating work from across the country, and across generations. It was both frightening and heartening to see so many grappling with the question in their work, and finding such incredible ways to write the family; finding both redeeming moments for love or empathy amidst violence, while making room for seemingly irreconcilable differences, without reducing them to agreement; acknowledging dependencies and while still drawing boundaries. It was equally heartening to see, in the variety of different experiences, so many commonalities, continuities, echoes and resonances.

We thank Nandini for joining us for this issue, for bringing us together around such a critical question. We also thank Manjiri Indurkar for joining the three of us in a conversation, “Have we cancelled our parents?”. Against the background of what has popularly come to be known as ‘cancel culture’, we talked about the implications of the term ‘cancelling’; what it might mean to cancel one’s parents; what kinds of narratives we generate about parenthood and families; and what space we might see literature carving for us as we navigate this question. While we publish only excerpts of this lengthy and very fun (virtual) conversation, it was only a beginning. We answered none of the questions we started out with, but merely scraped the edges. We would, however, like very much to continue it, and we’d love for our readers and contributors to jump in as well. How do you write your parents? Where does negotiating the question of family in your writing lead you? What is a recent work dealing with family that has stayed with you, and why? Do write to us.

Most importantly, we thank all of our contributors (including those whose work we couldn’t include) for sharing with us!

Working on this issue has been a ‘new’ experience for us in many senses. The conversation is a new form for us, in so far as it is a significant departure from our past interviews. This is also perhaps the first issue yet that doesn’t carry any fiction. But it does carry more poetry than any of our earlier volumes, while continuing to carry non-fiction. We hope you enjoy reading it! Our next issue will be guest edited by Yogesh Maitreya, and will take a critical look at caste in our Anglophone literary practices. You will find the call on our website. Do share and submit. Until then, stay safe, and happy reading!

With love,
The editors.

March ‘21

Zainab Ummer Farook

Six Names for My Daughter

Iqra. In the beginning was the word and it was you, kanna.
An invitation to read, to delve into belief, to conjure dreams
from sparseness. Gold and orchard are beyond your mother,
but you will always have reams of paper to parse: a story
to swim in, fat morsels of fable and myth, and if you wait,
a poem, so you can coax silences out of many a noisy box.

Someday, Ruhi, you will learn of Pandora and her infernal box.
Until then, may these worn touchstones serve you well, kanna:
look past the very last page of every tale. Once it turns, wait
for three beats. Wonder aloud why after folly, after fever-dream,
after freeing plague and peril, P held true to hope-spirit. Stories
ought to be sifted; let no one deter you, not even your mother.

I was told when I have a kid of my own, I'd know: smothering
is always a slip away. I leave a trail of clipped wings, boxes
I was ushered into, circles of chalk. Shikha, here is a storied
lineage of moms who hem in songbird and flame. But kanna,
mother-promise, I won't sing you into tyranny. If you dream
into life a wildfire, I'll pray for you to clear new ground. I'll wait

and watch you hopscotch across borders. You aren't born to wait.
Your feet obey no maps and leap over wire-fences, this mother
of yours in tow, giggling. You finger-paint swatches of dream-
fabric, refuse to call them flags. Ashima, my pulpit is a soapbox.
But you house tomorrow's sermons in your artless body, kanna.
Your paper-boats romp through high seas, sans pomp, sans story.

Braiding smoke and starlight with ease, you take to telling stories
as tadpole to swamp-water, dappled green. There is no waiting
for you anymore, words windswept, curls unkempt. Kanna,

my mole-kissing, tale-spinning Zia, how is it that you mother
metaphor and simile, multiverse cradled in your mouth, unboxing
all feeling, outfoxing all my attempts to hasbi-rabbi you into dreams?

You send oxblood talismans from sandcastles yet to be dreamt,
warding off home-breakers. Will your name ripple in lore, history?
Or will it be a memory they trip over when tinny music-boxes
sing of it in back-alleys? Claws naked, this country once waited
and witnessed you coming to roost, the falcon that mothered
rage and rebellion. Shaheen: soaring wing, talon, beak, my kanna—

but listen, wait! I have yearned for you since the day my mother
locked up all my storybooks (*I will be a better mom than you,*
nokkikoko!) but kanna, you're a dream I float downriver in a box

Certificate

/surr-ti-fi-cut/

n. an official document attesting a fact

Your whole family is like this or what?

Yes. When they say Angadimogar, they think *hopping mad, the whole lot* and they stroke their trim beards and pin their stoles neatly and go home to have tea at four on the dot, their smiles easing off their faces.

We have always been like this: aureole of curls framing our skin-thin mania about to meander along tangents invented by our notorious brains. *Don't you know that sanity and genius are quite relative?*

Are we taking a census now? One uncle, three cousins, daddy, possibly a dead aunt whose name my first-born will inherit. For us, madness is often a diagnosis given post-mortem, upon prying open memory: grit made pearl.

All of us survive despite ourselves. Most of us dipped our toes into normalcy and stayed put, nerves crackling in smoke and spite. Some of us are singed electric.

Mad is a word few can stomach without a side of euphemism. Screws are half-loose; hibiscuses blossom over the trellis of ears. But in my mouth, it's silken, like mashed bananas.

Here, our bodies don't escape history. Our laughs are full-bellied and our grins have ghosts. And we live in houses past, their red oxide floors camouflaging blood.

Cheshta

Plotting the death of your mother

mother died.

with three blows
one blow every five years

this way nobody finds out

2010

I poisoned her with a stench of rotting papers
that recorded my failures
duly signed by her

2015

I booked a seat on the train going east

And paid a road-side astrologer to tell her
That *rabu* sits in the ninth house with *sbani*
I will never return home.

2020

The underground wires carried her last breaths
far away
from north to south
I sent my static silence wrapped in wisdom, reason and politics back to her
It coiled and wrapped itself around her neck.

19th July,

to be exact

it rained and thundered
the city was already flooding
with disease, death and hunger

they will think the virus killed her.

I had already typed and saved her obituary on google drive
It will have to be posted on Facebook and Instagram.
They say nothing about posting the picture
of the dead body of your mother.

There was nothing left to do.

Avani Tandon Vieira

Picnic

Dusk falls over your limbs
and your face
half bent over a book
you have just begun

Swallows
like arrows or signs
soar overhead
the sky is light with birds
still

Over by the monument
a family stands in a doorway
two girls in white dresses
waiting to be photographed

One raises an arm
and calls to her father
as if to say
look, here I am
remember me.

gestation

In my grandmother's garden
the quiet resolve
of seedlings that no one has planted.

Ajay Kumar Nair

staining

my father, his fingers, their impressions
robe the cup of tea in biometric frescos

with milk flirting its stormy lips / spoons
tickling heat from its cold steel body de

throned from a kitchen limbo life to the
bright morning light of nervous capacity //

how much can a vessel of hands that unblues
water hold / will it spill, will it stain, can it

sustain the mouths it must face jaw gated
with deep voiced corridors up to the throat

& down to the bone // but my father, his
impression, their fingers, climb a stair of

silence / whisper the doors open / hold the
cup with pink wrinkled soft brown flesh

like a crystal tower moated in his hammock
arms strained with memories that stray & re

turn / lost & found in losing daylight // these
things, all his under mine, I chase & seek

hunt & find / on the only working computer
mouse in the house / inside the golden-armed

titan watch / on the tore ten rupee note he saved
to cellotape later // but left behind in moving

ahead, I reach to touch if he's gone / & wait if
he's still leaving / like an undressing wind turn
ing a prayer wheel in silent thorny places //

almost crossing the length of almost

harakiri space rocks strike a bird dead &
I think of the shroud laid over her body

each thread waltzing with its part of felt
space before in betraying unity trapping

air which cries unsynced creases & I think
of you our point of contact // at the end of

the day I see homeward birds with beaks
stuffed in blazing coal colored berries &

seeds furled in namastes / flying through
cell towers like neutrinos ghost their wings

flapping against the sky dark like an egg
carton with mammatus daggers jabbing

from the other side // the well after rainfall
a mother shrouds herself at a naked body

the father identifies it as the daughter // & I
wonder why virile bullets can't trace a cent

ipede trajectory / crawling wriggling squirm
ing / allowing bodies in its way mole out like

meanings through long arduous sentences //
sky in abscess / the birds what birds / she is

now it // when the stench of the fucked up
shows up I look away to the time four mins

to school-bell / our bodies parallel / fiddling

geometry boxes glaze paper shapes chewing

gum punctuation // we grow / blood & boners
breasts & beards / but still four minutes to bell

you hum-bite lyric ends to meet time / the heal
ing sleight of hands of clocks // if a tree fell in

the middle of the city where would the birds go
will it rain / does the father tear in joy at being

mistaken / & our transversal touch touchstone

domains

in the beginning of the album I was on
a rock where the ocean ends, looking up
at my mother is smiling, held together
by my father is smiling, the lens flare
is smiling overheads, the sea froth is
smiling at our feet, all at once but
never touching. how many divergent
steps did it take to not tip the smile
but level it on all levels except maybe
these photos that rise like the goddess
the place is named after to meet the
fishermen casting their nets composed
of nows -

halfway, my sister says you left me behind.
I'm three ish in the photo. I tell her I was
too small to carry her then. it's kanyakumari
named after the virgin lighthouse goddess
where arabian sea meets bay of bengal meets
indian ocean, the three tussling on the surface
but churning under it -

just domains for our genes to write travel blogs
on, we think some thinking - where can we go
except not away from each other nested in a
neighbor's house when mother is in the ICU
some passed down textbooks, some indistin-
guishable pre-puberty telephone voice pranks
some shared phones, some stranger asking
is that your sister looking at the girl on the
school assembly stage getting a medal who
suddenly looks like you, & some innocent
shoplifting - we think some thinking has
made us something more -

I am still too small, what we carry also grows.
my sister swaps the album with her biology

textbook that once was mine, asks what does
dorsiventrally mean. I don't say it's just us
under the wait of days, flattened both sides.
in the end she puts the album back not to be
caught in the act of caring all at once & then
having to explain why.

Hamraaz

We Have Been Here Before

I dreamt that, nearing his end,
my father wrote the story of his life
in the language of his grandmother.

*I don't understand the words,
he told me, but I think you
will find it useful someday—*

*it has something to do
with the way we lived
in the dark times that came*

*before these dark times.
It is not easy to remember,
he told me. It has something*

*to do with scattered light,
and how I love you.*

This Number Does Not Exist

-for Manglesh Dabral

We were on the run,
and things were changing fast;

one moment, we were huddled
on a windswept rocky ridge in Garhwal

peering down at an approaching line
of police and pack mules,

and the next, we were avoiding
the CCTV Cameras

in Haridwar Junction;
you warned me:

Our enemy has many phone numbers,
and I didn't understand you,

but also I did. We finally boarded
a train destined

for the Singhu Border,
or Shaheen Bagh, or home;

when you disappeared, I took
out my phone and dialed you;

a stranger's voice answered,
This number does not exist.

Squatting and shaking
in the space between coaches,

I wrote my father a postcard.
I told him how much I loved him,

that I was trying to find
my way back.

Dion D'Souza

Guava Tree

Very well, I said.
Only because it asked nicely.
The unobjectionable resident next door
wanting a bit of salt
or powdered red chilli.

I acquiesced

and look at it now. Boughs bending down
as if to peer into the house.
As if to read over my shoulder.

*

It gives us fruit.
Plenty of it. Prodigious quarters
of gravelled succulence.
From lanes afar,
stone-pelting urchins come
hungry for adventure and mischief.
From neighbours
it reaps destructive envy.
Even bats claim their share: leaving
pale-fleshed, teeth-marked
remnants of their blind feasting.

What does it take?
A patch of earth.
My father planted it.
It is his son.
It is my father
hunching with a bad back.

The Holy Family

after the painting by Egon Schiele

sepulchered in amber
child disembodied
this & palms
father
sommambulist, wife
forestaller face a
determinate agony

as if what
orbhead
flat pleas
fantastic-fingered
beater, vampire or
mask of in-

tumbling away from him
bundle
resined saviour
two blue
unstrung beads

mother
clasping her miraculous
our
her eyes
precious

stop!

the unuttered word
the cry gulped back
the subsumed image
the nail
hanging without a whimper
from stripped flesh or under a wooden frame

handsup!
everybody handsup!
drop all your weapons &
collusive accessories
put those arms where we can see them
this has gone on too long
too far
too unimpeded

no!

the raised hand
the derided sign
the reflexive shield

stop!

the lanky jewish boy, hatted and coated, on and
out of file, hustled at gunpoint at the warsaw ghetto
no!

the body between two gleaming lines
or in the centre of a commotioning street

but why him

too good for this irredeemable world

our prized child beloved

unrefusing lips & those cupped hands

ropily ropily

why him

outstretching

Rakhi Dalal

Writing Family

Towards the end of March 2020, just as India went into lockdown, I began attending an online poetry workshop. Amidst the trials of the lockdown, this workshop brought reprieve to the anxious mind, a connection to the world outside that had suddenly shut down for us. I found myself reading and writing more than ever even as the house chores increased manifold. During the workshop I struggled to complete the assignments on time. However, I did manage to write a few poems and submit a chapbook in time. It wouldn't have been possible if my family hadn't been contributing to the daily chores.

One of the themes of the workshop was 'Writing mothers': How we write about mothers and motherhood. One critical point it raised was how we see our mothers and their role in a family. While submitting a response, I began thinking not only about my birth family but also about the family I had inherited after my marriage. I was looking at two different mothers from two different families. Born of completely diverse sets of tradition and having distinct personalities, perhaps the only thing that unites them both is their sense of the duties they have as mothers, their adherence to the idea of motherhood as fostered by a patriarchal society – family-before-me mothers whose days would begin and end with house chores. Moreover, what was obvious to me was that I had, somehow, adopted the same ideas as a mother myself.

I find it interesting that it was only when I started writing about my family that I actually started reflecting on the familial structures I belonged to and my position in them. Which begged the question, when we do ponder that way, what do we really think about our families? Do we see our parents, our siblings as individuals with distinct traits, opinions and ambitions, or do we see them merely through the glasses of patriarchal, sometimes also savarna, systems handed down to us? Are families always the loving spaces which nurture our minds or are they the spaces which impose restrictions and conditions thus confining our worldviews and our identities? How do we see and interpret the roles our fathers and mothers play in our lives? How do we understand the families we choose with marriage? And most importantly, how do we write about them?

I believe families are dynamic spaces. They are living, breathing spaces charged with beliefs and notions, which are passed on generation after generation to those living and interacting within the space. They provide us the first lenses through which we witness the world

around us. Their words become our first carriers into unknown realms. Our first impressions, of others as well as of our very own self, are carved by them. We also start imbibing the value systems our families adhere to even when not taught explicitly. So over the years, sometimes we become shadows of our own parents. We enter the world with a set of preconceived notions, even though sometimes we may be changed by our experiences, sometimes we may return to the familiarity of ideas assimilated since childhood, finding solace in shared beliefs.

The Beginnings

I was born into a middle-class Hindu Brahmin family in North India in the year 1977. In other words I was born with the baggage of privilege I was constantly made aware of since the very beginning. But this information was often passed casually, without any dialogue, for what was the need to burden a child's mind with something she could barely comprehend? Over years I became deeply religious though I always felt a sense of discomfort around the discourse on caste among elders, the main outcome of which was always how we were superior to people from other castes. Once there was a discussion amongst the elders of the family regarding a marriage proposal which had come for one of my cousins and I remember how it was not considered because that family belonged to 'Saraswat' *gotra* while we were 'Gaur', supposedly the highest in hierarchy within the caste.

Since we were Brahmins there was an emphasis on inculcating good values and observing religious rituals in both my paternal and maternal family side. My parents, however, only included us in rituals around important festivals. Like many other middle-class families, they were more invested in our studies. But I learnt to offer prayers to God daily and to keep fasts as I watched my grandmother doing it. She was a wise woman and people from every walk of life would flock to her for advice and blessings. She exuded much warmth and kindness. Though she too was steeped in the Brahminical, patriarchal system she was born into and was rigid in following the customs and traditions of her caste, she never held any malice for anyone from other castes or religions. She had gone through the trauma of Partition and never spoke much about it, but once she did tell me how her Muslim neighbours in Rawalpindi had helped her family to escape to Delhi. Whenever I saw her, I sensed a kind of sadness in her eyes, like there was something that always troubled her. I can still recall how her eyes had lit up when she told me about her childhood in Rawalpindi. I think she missed her childhood home, and wonder if it was the trauma of partition that her eyes bespoke. My mother tells me that she was a strong woman and a

very loving mother-in-law. I regret not being able to spend much time with her, and not being with her in her last moments. This regret later took the shape of a poem.

Good values included respecting the elders, never questioning or confronting them, and for me being a girl, also speaking softly. As a result, there were things we could and couldn't talk about with our parents. An eight-year-old girl should have had the courage to talk to her parents about the incident of molestation she faced inside a crowded temple or a nine or ten-year old about the sexual advances made by a cousin. That she couldn't, speaks volume about the taboos around such issues which even a tender mind had the inkling of (I am mixed up in my head about the exact age when these happened). Though, I did overhear an off-hand remark between two elders once. It was when we were visiting the said cousin's family and while leaving in the evening, were waited upon by them in the street. The conversation went something like this:

One aunt: We are getting late, let's go. The kids know the way to the house, they will come by themselves.

Other: Na, let's wait for the kids to come. I don't trust 'P' around the girls after dark. I have seen how he tries to grab them.

I heard this and of course couldn't process it because I was very young at that time but perhaps no one actually ever talked to their parents as became evident to me later. I wonder if it says something about the conditioning of young brains with ideas of inviolability of family and religious places. About the boundaries between parents and children which cannot be crossed, about the idea of extended family as a unit whose sanctity has to be maintained and whose image of an ideal family adhering to values of righteousness and purity is not to be challenged. A garb, which has to be maintained at all times even if that means suppressing voices and slipping the dirt under a carpet because of the fear of discord and violation of respect within the family. Funny that fights over petty issues and disputes over property did not fall under this.

I realised why I could not talk about those incidents with my parents when I tried writing about them two years ago. I think it had to do with a feeling of guilt on my part, though I am not sure why I should have felt that at such a young age. Writing about it was an effort to understand and make sense of the ways in which the extended family system sometimes works. It was also a way of coming to terms with episodes that had been buried in my head and subconsciously had an effect on my behavior. I am still afraid of crowded places, still uncomfortable around most relatives (though there are other reasons for that now) and it took me very long not to be apprehensive of people walking on streets.

Now that I look back, what really breaks my heart is that there was a lack of intimacy in my relationship with my parents, the lack of trust which gradually made me develop the habit of keeping things to myself even when I was hurt. Of course this habit is not good for one's mental health in the long run. If only I knew this as a child.

This is not to say that my childhood lacked good times and happy moments. I would say that we were a happy family where everybody played their roles well. In fact my fondest memories are those of celebrating festivals with my grandmother. As a kid, I might not have understood the relevance of religious festivals but was captivated by the spirit of festivities – to feel that eagerness to be cheerful and to be a part of something much bigger than my comprehension of the smaller world I was a part of.

As we grow up, we change multiple lenses and start apprehending the images of the world differently. But at times, we still wish to retrieve our first images. I believe humans, inherently believing in the idea of a kinder world, wish to return to a state of innocence which their childhood seemed to promise – the lost paradise of an untroubled life. That is why we experience nostalgia for childhood and perhaps that is also one of the reasons why I write about it to relive the memories of a distant past and to somehow keep them secure like old photographs in an album.

I have fond memories of my father and mother preparing food together in the kitchen every year during Diwali. It was always special because my father was mostly only home during Holi and Diwali and so we didn't get to see him much. I wrote a poem around it which also focuses upon my mother keeping fasts on festivals while preparing lavish food for the family.

Feasting, Fasting

Celebration of light they say it is
Triumph of good over evil
Notions of my adolescent mind
cared less about the feat of *Rama*
bothered not whether *Luxmi* came
excited as it always was about the lavish food
aroma of which would waft through the
house from early mornings on *Deepawali*.
Grinding of overnight soaked *udat daal*
simmering of oil when deep frying *bhallas*,
jaggery laced *imli chutney*,

roasting of *moong daal* for *porridge*.
Father helping mother in kitchen,
tradition inherited for *kartik* festival.
Fillings for *katchoris* being prepared,
straining out hot *puris* from oil bubbling pan,
brothers fighting for the most puffy ones,
entire day of feasting for us while
mother fasted till *pooja* at night.

As a kid, I accepted traditions handed down to us as sacred, never questioning them. When I started thinking about the patriarchal structure and how some traditions and rituals marginalise mothers (women) while stressing them with most of the labour required during the festivals or in daily house chores, I wondered how their compliance to the roles given to them by a society influences their thought processes as well as their lives. Are they happy doing what they do? Do they ever feel trapped and stressed? Did my mother have dreams when she was young? Did she ever want a different life? Why did we never ask her?

We are all, one way or another, products of the system we are born into. Those of us, who become comfortable in it, do not challenge it but rather carry the customs and ritual practices forward. I think my parents have been comfortable with the kind of structure they grew up in. The influences that they had and still have, have informed most of their decisions in life. Yet they have been much more liberal with their children than most of our relatives.

My father went to a far state to earn a living when we were growing up and my mother, with three children and all the house chores to take care of, was barely ever free to sit down and talk with us. And then we grew up and became busier with studies and had no time to sit and talk with her. It wasn't until I became a mother myself that I started understanding my parent's position, their love for us which was never expressed explicitly in words or gestures, but most importantly the trials that my mother went through while taking care of her three children, their education and their well-being, almost all by herself.

Perhaps my poems featuring my mother are an attempt on my part to make up for the time lost in the busyness of everyday life. They are also perhaps an attempt to understand her as an individual, where her thoughts and actions, her role as a mother and wife were largely dictated by the caste she was born and married into. I write about her thinking: maybe this is the way I can tell her story, because in the scheme of family affairs in real

life, mostly when it has come to making important decisions, she has remained backstage, appearing only when asked or required, her place being in the kitchen or in taking care of other house chores. But more than that my writings about her are perhaps an attempt on my part to ask for forgiveness for the times when I hurt her, whether knowingly or unknowingly, to profess my love for her openly; something I cannot still do verbally in her presence.

Accepting Self

For me, writing about family has also been about discovering and finding my own place in my family, about accepting the inevitabilities of ties given by birth or marriage, ties that have sometimes guided my decisions in life too. The decisions that did occasionally leave me frustrated. This may be true for many of us though, especially for women. And this is as true for our birth families as it is for the families we marry into.

Within three months of my marriage (it was an inter caste love marriage which wasn't initially accepted by my family), I came to know of my mother-in-law's mental illness. I had not even heard the name of illness (Schizophrenia) before and was unequipped with the basics of care guidelines or the mental exhaustion that the caregivers may experience. This was also the case with rest of the family members since the diagnosis had come just then. We live in a small city in Haryana. Around nineteen years back there was not only a dearth of information around the illness, but also no knowledge of the support systems required for it. Spending most of the day with her alone while also taking care of the house, especially when I became a mother myself, slowly became so mentally straining that it drove me to an edge beyond which I could only see darkness. Those five-six years that it took for her condition to become stabilized, were the major turning point of my life. Gradually, from a devout theist, I became an agnostic. I turned to reading for salvation and was granted life in return.

In the year 2010, in one of the lowest phases of my life, I chanced upon Goodreads while looking for book recommendations online. In the absence of a real environment to discover and discuss books, the platform became a site where I could mingle with other readers, ask for book recommendations and plough through lists and lists of volumes to find writings which could engage and stimulate my mind. In doing so I found a community of kindred souls with whom I could discuss not only books but also life. For me the platform eventually turned into a place of learning.

It was on Goodreads that a friend recommended Albert Camus' 'The Myth of Sisyphus' to me. I will always remain indebted to that friend because that book really changed my

life. It was the first book which made me plunge deep into human psyche and look for meaning where none seemed to exist. Strangely, as opposed to popular opinion, I found the book very life affirming. It did for me what reading of no religious texts ever did or what no spiritual gurus could ever do at the time. It was while writing a review of the book that I felt a kind of release I never had. I knew I had to write. That it was writing my deepest thoughts that was the key to put to rest the disquiet which had troubled me for so long.

It was much later when I made an effort to write about that distressing period of my life and went over it again and again in my head that I came to terms with my anger and pain. It was then that I grasped how helpless my mother-in-law must have felt in the wake of her illness, something which she did not understand at all herself and so was mostly bewildered by her own ordeal. Writing made me come to peace with a troubled past. It made me acknowledge my bitterness, which had unconsciously seeped into my marriage, creating distances in my mind which slowly became difficult to traverse. Apparently, writing gave a closure to unacknowledged hurt and also to sometimes unspoken or misunderstood words. In that sense writing became therapeutic for me. I felt I could no longer be bitter or unhappy. There was no time for it.

I am sure we all write about our families for one reason or another, maybe to understand them better or to know ourselves better. Maybe a larger question that can be asked is - If we don't tell stories of our families, what would be lost without it? If we don't write our parents, our siblings, our partners or children, in what other way can we document the realities of these social units which construct societies? How else can the histories of families, so important to understand the social dynamics, be chronicled? How can I understand the baffling moments I had as a child or a grown up, whether living with parents or with a partner, and the trauma associated with some experiences if I don't write? Can I accept the vulnerabilities I was exposed to and didn't understand then, if I don't write about them? Can I make peace with my inner self without understanding the cause of grief or guilt without writing about it?

In the Times of Covid and a Fascist Regime

Families are complex spaces where varied nuances intersect and can leave distinct impressions upon family members with different personalities. The walls of ordinary functional families can also reverberate with tensions, seething across relationships and generations. This has never been more apparent than in the year 2020 when most of the world went into a complete lockdown and families were bound inside the confines of

their homes. Since this has also been the year which has seen much political upheaval in the country and the dangerous role played by mainstream and social media in spreading propaganda to toe to the agenda of their political bosses, its impact upon families and sometimes the underlying conflict in their exchanges when advocating opposing ideologies, has become more apparent. We are living in unprecedented times. The threat to democracy, to our fundamental rights as citizens seems so imminent. It is necessary then to speak about it openly within families too even if it becomes unpleasant.

Most of the family from my side, including my parents, being Brahmins, are right wing supporters. So it is understandable that every now and then the handle goes off, causing tension in the exchanges. Once I had a heated argument with one of my Uncles on a social media site and consequently, because I didn't want that to repeat, I blocked him. I am no longer on speaking terms with him and subsequently my exchanges with the rest of his family members have become uncomfortable. Neither of us has tried to reconnect or talk and I think I am perfectly fine with it. It wasn't an easy thing for me to do, considering the kind of value system I was brought up in. But when times are so wanting perhaps the best course is to be as open and honest as is possible.

However, neither my parents nor have I ever argued much over the difference in our opinions. Of course there is uneasiness around such discussions and though I do argue with one of my siblings every now and then in the hope that he might someday be disillusioned with the ideology, I guess my parents do not engage because perhaps the familial relations outweigh their adherence to a belief. Whereas on my part, I think I am now at that juncture in life where I look at the time just running by and wonder how much of it have we left together. I still regret not being able to spend much time with my grandmother and I don't think I want to live with another regret for the rest of my life. However fleeting, time is still invincible. And maybe love can finally conquer all.

In 'Autumn Light: Season of Fire and Farewells', Pico Iyer writes

How to hold on to the things we love even though we know that we and they are dying. How to see the world as it is, yet find light within that truth.

In this book the author turns inward when everything in his life seems to be falling away and takes a long look at what otherwise usually remains ignored. This book makes you reflect on the helplessness of watching people closer to you decay and wonders how to deal with it. Especially, in the times of COVID, the urgency to remain closely connected to the family has become more pronounced.

Pico writes that his wife Hiroko finds meaning in traditions, which if I look around, has been the case with most of my close family including parents on both sides. I think this is how they feel connected with the familiar, perhaps this is what gives meaning to their lives when their kids have grown up, have their own families and are busier working. For me, I think it is more about collecting as many images in words as I can for as long as my memory remains intact.

Rahana K Ismail

Fermata

she opened like an ode, onion, ox-eye.
toddling, twiddling, she wished she could break.
take me to hospital: a cry saved.
my twin sister had not; and she.
seven quill-filled islands marooned, lost, longed around.
Amma would not have gone if you.
look at me, look at me, look.
the scythe had time to cut off.
ink birds lone, lost in the mist.
i wish i had an oar like.
when i grow old, i young for.
a pause is a stop in the.
since you wield the coracle, can i.
i hate tartan, tessellations, trellis, chess, marriage.
having hated tulle all winter, my veil.
nose ring, toe ring, finger ring, tea.
since i do not believe in it.
before the execution i last in the.
while you lip your coffee, could i.
pumice-hardened into a lava-fountain, the freezer laughs.
did they stop wondering at the seventh.
we are not quests, questions, animated-answers or.
in the day-light, i have to letter.
a girl, a half-sliced thought, clangs onto.

Kandala Singh

Red and Blue Flowers

You will be a waterfall, a cow
shitting congealed cakes:
red, then maroon kissing
black.

The scanning specialist will say
board exam stress. You will not have said
anything about exams.-

They will call you heavy, but never fat.
The world will shake when you walk
in swollen feet to the bus-stop.

Your aunt will gape
at your normal: thighs spewing
clots, blood pooling
ankles.

Some months will bleed you
for 21 days, make you pay
over a thousand rupees for pads.

After eight years of doctors' visits,
they will declare a diagnosis:
PCOS.

You will eat leafy greens and puke
red pills till your body learns
to take them.

They will say you don't have enough

iron to donate blood. You will smell
of iron.

You will try to rise for work, your body soft
mush and sleeping rock, your mother's voice
telling you not to be lazy.

Your boss will call you yellow, tell
you to go home. On other days, she will ask
you to spare her the excuses.

Your vagina will leave
red outlines on blue tile.
You will look at them and think,
'There are no red and blue flowers in nature.'

Vivekanand Selvaraj

Father and Mother

Once again, Father tells me, “Of course, I am OK

with it. Not so sure about your mother
Do you think she’d be able
to handle it?”

Ever since the clocks were set
Inside my head, Father has been
telling me
this.

It is always mother, the weak one

Who wouldn’t

enroll in the medical college
terrified by stories of ragging

take the bank job—after
clearing the exam—
Coz she was scared
of traveling alone,

become a teacher
“students wouldn’t
stop heckling her”

pick up the phone
her voice was a ten year old’s
and father’s colleague once told her
Kutty, go call daddy

But it was father
who sobbed—inconsolably—on video call,
as I told him my *I-don’t-need-your-money*,

And Mother who told me to shut the fuck
up & go to any which hell I like,
Christian or Hindu
And I chose Christian.

Indu Parvathi

Ayudha Pooja

When he swung his sword
the dream cracked hatching
me into day while he made
of sleep froze upright
to wake in his next,
steel glassy, battle cry
edited to loops of brittle
mist; my father,
who bent low
to clear our path of stones
which tempered within him
to fuse into a sphinx
as he aged
much like the temple-idols
he took us to for blessings.
In his prayer room Gods
sat in rows, appeased
with his incense plume presence.
On our annual visit to his shop
we burnt camphor to worship
lean air guns in racks
pistols in velvet pouches
bags of bullets
all anointed with sandalwood paste.

Tasneem Khan

A Map of my Ancestral House

Imagine, this is the *sheesham* gate
of my ancestral house,
lofty & towering,
too wide, *too open*.

From here,
you can see the courtyard and the
bricked pavement cutting through it diagonally,
so can the thugs, the robbers, the hooligans, you ask?
it is different here,
some sense of decency persists still
on the uncivilised soil of *this* uncivilised land.

The courtyard,
a keeper of the past, the present,
and perhaps, the knower of future,
massive, yet repressed.
with damp footsteps treading on the fallen leaves of the lemon tree,
and beneath it, young anger,
and beneath it, denial,
and beneath it, immoral history,
and beneath it, stifled conflicts,
and beneath it, love, and hate, and disdain;

the courtyard lives, as a fossil of eclipsed battles.

Inside, there is a room,
my grandfather's,
with one switchboard and two doors,
and four *taaks*, stacked with books,
books, written in Urdu,
in a language that was supposed to be mine,

the calligraphy of its words: too coastal,
it flows, it glides, it sails,
it confuses *me*,
a doomed wanderer from the doomed lowlands.

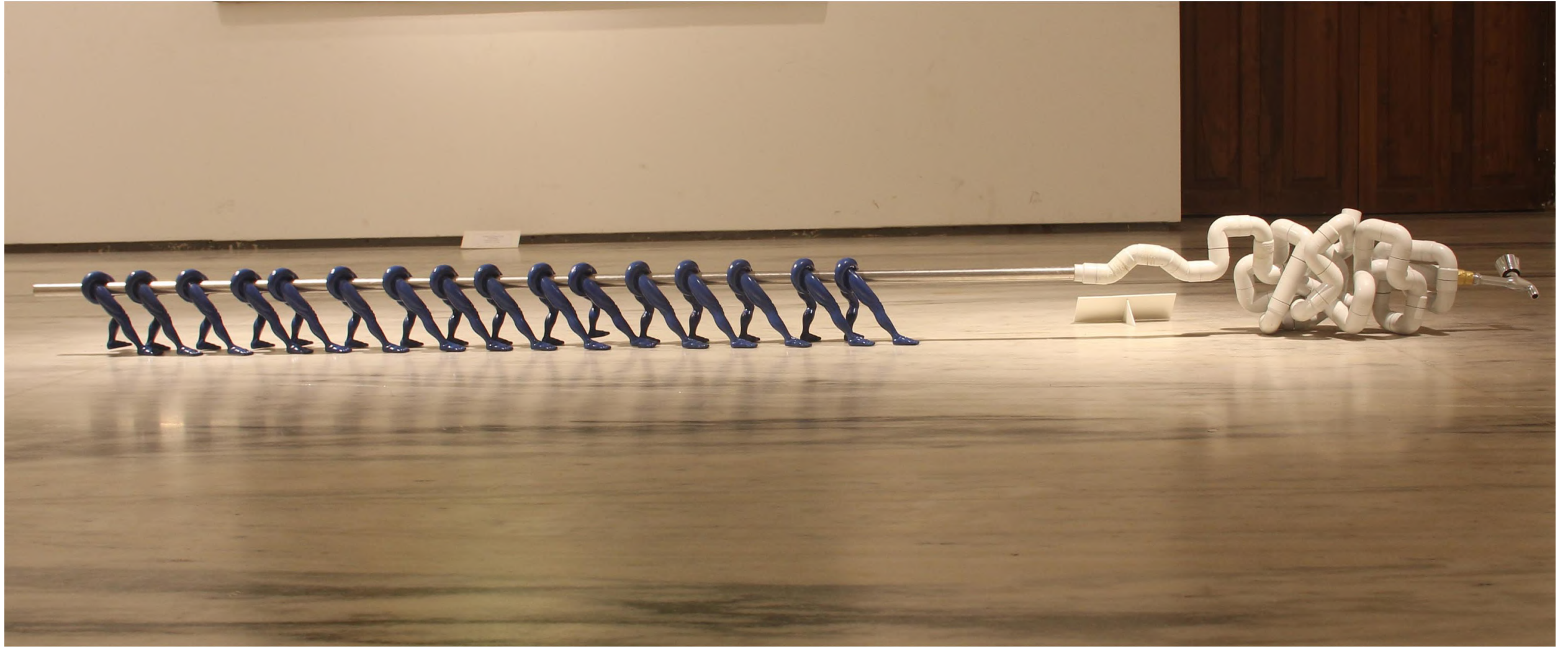
the room lives, with its unmappable geography, as a scorn at disgusting, forked tongues.

A bit further, and comes the abode of women,
within the contours of the inner-courtyard—
from its centre, if you look above,
you will see a perfect square of spotless white boundaries and
a perfect, blue, sky—*which will seem distantly near.*

The women,
invisible,
like their faces behind the thick smoke of the *chulba*,
like an afternoon in winters,
like that colourless, ragged bra hanging on the clothesline,
hidden beneath a cotton *dupatta*,

invisible, like their memory and any trace of it.

An aerial view
of this ancestral house,
would let you see —
an endless labyrinth
of generational battles, of contradictions,
of history: bent and buried,
of legacies: undid and unmade,
wounded and dead.



Manesha Deva Sarma S N

The Elixir / 2015 | Mixed Media | 280 cm x 30 cm x 30 cm
(1 of 3 in a series of sculptures around the themes of water scarcity and pollution.)

I was born and brought up in a green rural village named Pattazhy, (Kollam District), Kerala. I migrated to cities to pursue higher studies and during my stay there I came across water problems several times. I am constantly concerned with the purity and freshness of water in urban places. We know issues related with water supply are still prevalent among several states in our country and the struggling human limbs with PVC pipes suggests the medium as a message.

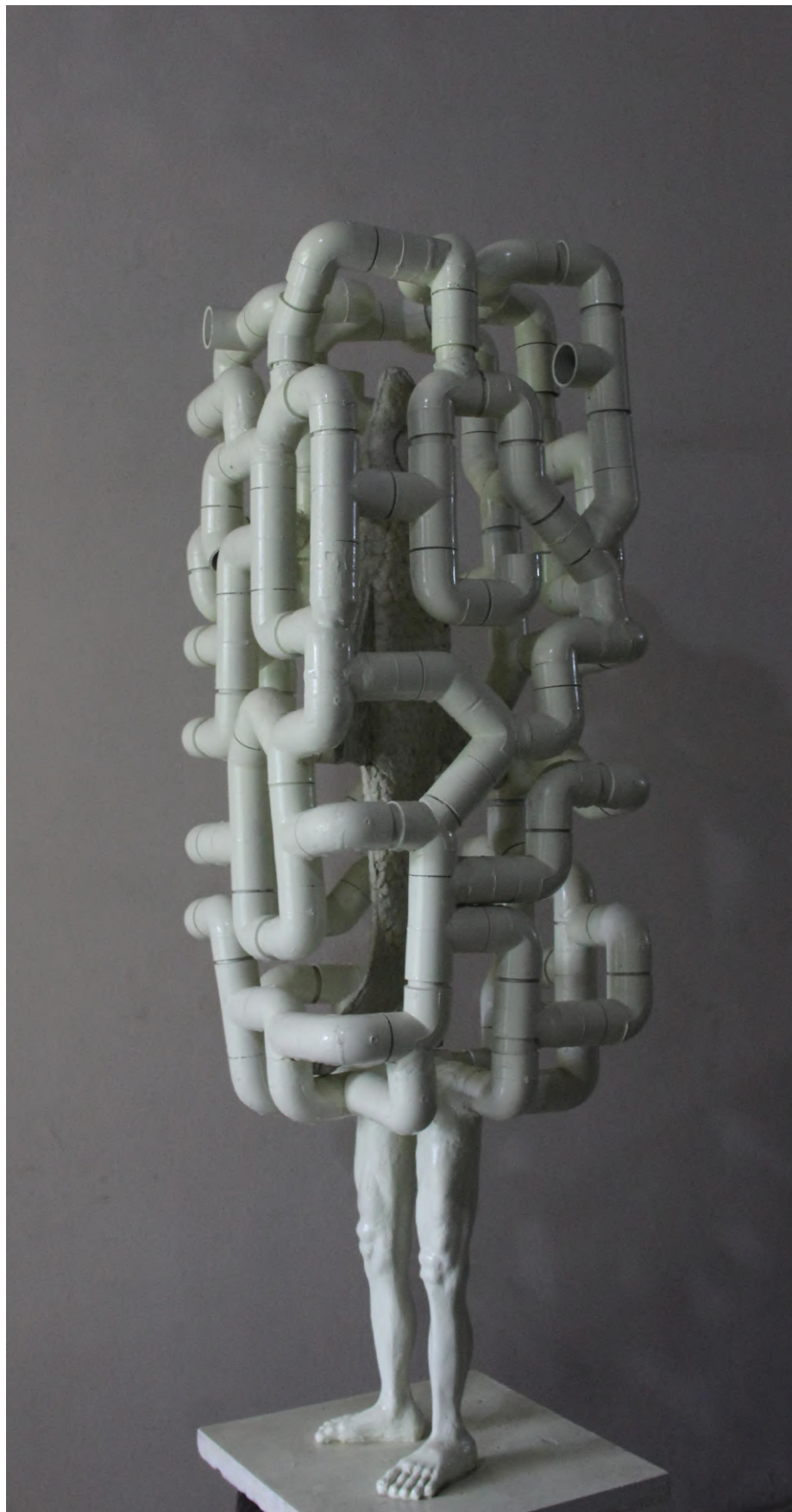


Manesha Deva Sarma S N

(Continuation of the Water-Scarcity series from the previous page)



Wrestling forms in PVC (Untitled 1 & 2) / 2015 | Mixed Media | 30 cm x 50 cm x 30 cm
(Part of a series of sculptures around the themes of water scarcity and pollution.)



Memory of a Village Boy / 2015
Mixed Media | 1 ft x 1 ft cm x 4 ft
*(Part of a series of sculptures around the themes of
water scarcity and pollution.)*

Manesha Deva Sarma S N

(Continuation of the Water-Scarcity series from the previous page)



Somnambulist/ 2013
Mixed Media | 56 cm x 32 cm x 160 cm

Manesha Deva Sarma S N

The Somnambulist is a self-portrait.



Manesha Deva Sarma S N

Immigrants / 2013
Mixed Media

This is a continuation of The Somnambulist. The migrating character has played an important role in Malayalam culture. Here I am trying to depict the minds of immigrants who are landing with dreams of various colors. Walking legs with knotted wings - a romantic representation of the subject, but they land on a limited space.



Manesha Deva Sarma S N

The idea behind this work came up during my life in Chennai (2011- 2014). The Thirupathy idol (Lord Vishnu – Thirupathy temple) is a very popular image in South Indian states, especially Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh; I was trying to transform a popular iconic image into my own visual representation. Chennai is a highly polluted city, but in each and every corner we see this idol image in posters, calendars and banners. I borrowed stylizations and design patterns from Kerala mural paintings and colour schemes from our popular calendars of Indian gods and goddesses.

M.S. Alphonze

Crisis

I do not believe in gods, I tell my parents
They find it harder to believe someone can say that
They pretend they didn't hear me
Or that I didn't say that
The same way gods pretend we do not suffer
Or perhaps they too have lost their faith in us

I imagine a young god having the same one-way argument with his parents
I imagine some gods murdering others over the fiction of our existence
(When gods die, they come to Earth –
Those who believe that, hasten the departure of those who don't
Consequently, some gods are believers, some are here)

I imagine a skeptic god
He wears signs of doubt on his forehead
Keeps a string of pretense tied around his wrist
It connects him to his family
Every sunday morning, he accompanies his parents to a temple
Before entering, he leaves his chappal, shadow, and faith outside
Inside, he offers flowers of dry supplication at the feet of an idol
Made in my image

His prayers never reach me on Earth.

Shivi

Job Crisis

I've seen mothers worry.
Worry so much that
they hurt their heads,
such immense worry
about what will
their daughters do
now that they've turned 25
and don't even have the skills
to wash the underwear
of the sahib to be.

Arun Paria

Flawless

All my life I wished to be flawless.
Like Schiller was flawless,
like Das was.
When father died
I hid myself in a room,
wrote a poem.
My mother wept
till dawn.
Then I slept.
After life's magic
act was over,
a man with a long van came
from the crematorium.
He pushed
open the door.
He found,
bare bodied —
laid in the morning —
two men in two different rooms
dreamless
but without a flaw.

Shailee Mehta, Annalisa Mansukhani

In thinking about what the domestic swallows - as space, place, body, and name - this work creates what we felt might possibly be the poetics of an inheritance that traces the relationship between mothers and daughters through specific rememberings. The verses are freeing, they follow a sensorial route of reaching and revisiting our mothers, allowing for a bleeding into of belonging and being.

What definitions does conflict take on outside of its frowned-upon aggression and sighed-upon passivity? How does it encounter the intimacies of filial ties? Does it render itself meaningless, stuck in the echo chambers of routine and machination, torn between want and desirous need?

As an experiment in writing alongside, the verses are rekindling of many (m)otherhoods - found, felt, fabricated across two lives, two daughters and several selves.

my mother's suitcase is tough and brown
much like her
on a fiery Delhi day.
two years it sat atop a metal almirah
watching
waiting
humming to itself
much like her
waiting as her buckets filled to their brims
and overflowed

Today I saw the house as it consumed care—
slowly licking
at the corners of compartmentalisation
and salivating uncontrollably
on its dry walls.

my mother's suitcase has extra buckles
on either side
so careful with what it holds
much like her
as she sits on sultry evenings
watching her two dogs jostle for love.

It hummed and moaned
at the taste of Sea Breeze
and the smell of Half-Cooked Food

my mother's suitcase has stayed a lifetime with her
much like the way her words have with me
they echo off windows walls doors
making openings out of closings
turning days into nights
and back again

as it dug its soft gums
in the flesh of familiarity
and sucked clean
the bones of fondness.

my mother's suitcase
tough, deep, and brown
now sits at the foot of my bed
1195 kilometres away from her
knowing that it's time to go
but never ever leaving.

Crumbing all over the floor,
Dusts of a collective yesterday.

*

The kitchen counters in our house are made of a brown granite.
Counters that I remember being quite high but over the past years, they've shrunk.
Does granite continue to crystallise under the heat of the afternoon sun?
Superimposed permanently in my memory of Kitchen
is my mother, standing, never seated.
The memory inevitably evolves, and my understanding of Kitchen and Mother
occupy new definitions. Belonging, ownership, necessity,
obligation, habit. A play of time for the both of us.
Ritualistically, my mother lies down for some time in the afternoon.
The sunlight is hushed out by curtains,
the ceiling fan on a sweet speed,
just right to imitate
that surprising summer breeze.

I look at my hands and think of what they carry
the bones, the joints, the muscle and the flesh
the silent strength of a grasp
the weight of memory passed down in a palm

!

Like any other ritual, in principle, it feels wrong to interrupt;
even though I have, at times, and she never minds.

“તું સૂતી હતી?” (were you asleep?)

“ના, આંખો બંધ રાખીને પડેલી હતી” (no, just lying down with my eyes closed)

An important distinction. After all, sleep loves to elude the ones who need it;
sleep remains extraordinary.

But lying down is mundane, absolute passivity,

like your everyday beige,

a voluntary submission to earth and the earthen.

She rests, as the rest of us clamour towards a collective dream estranged in banality.

Hers is a rest less spoken of, just like the soil she learns from.

She protects her feet from dust;

daughter of the same soil; a grey brown composite of dead skin and more.

She loves lying on the floor,

without a pillow or a sheet separating her hair from

this same invisible dust.

Things go rusty and dusty and musty when they age and decay.

Time smirking at the illusion of robustness and attachment.

What do you inherit when you inherit a name

fragments of another, many mothers

old wounds on new elbows

weird toes that will eventually give away

the nauseating urge to write quick, hasty poetry for men who

would break your heart

Brown is duration, just right or slightly overdone
deposited with the slowness of silt, and before you know it,
 burnt like toast.
 The smell of alarm, burning.
 It is a colour cooked and savoured,
 with the sweetness of cardamom
 and a prickle of the chillies
 that dried in the same afternoon heat.
Brown, known for her obedience to the sun;
 luxury, painted on skin
 or labour, rubbed on.
She is the dirt on the well-preserved purity
 of their white collars,
 and what their ashen failure
 looks for to dissolve in.

bones do not fare well in the bodies of our women and fish,
they bend in the anticipation of more graveside kneelings,
grief is voiceless, unwelcome - erased from the picturesque of family
to be re-inscribed behind the ears

a failing and flailing of words you do not understand
but nevertheless swallow whole

i have heard the houses creak
brief exhalations that dangle over dining tables that used to be
the ghost of bloodlines waits in the smells
and there is no more to be said

Brown, the colour I am to perform.

you have forgotten what it means to belong to something,
something that calls you with familiarity.

**

Two large steel plates sit on a table, reflecting shades of burnt umber, violet
and aged yellows.

Skinned dates, unwieldy in their own peculiar way, fleshy and sweet,
lie piled in one,
while the other's circumference is lined by an assortment of multiples—

Pumpkin and cucumber seeds
as old as me,
conserved like fossils
of a rather intricate arthropod.

i remember my mother with a fierceness that refuses to relinquish her to time and its nuclei
i swallow her whole each night - her morning self a renewed regurgitation that carries with it
me and my deepest anxieties of loss; the stench of a partial grieving is unmistakable

What are the women in our families facing when they sit in nearly perfect circles,
or their versions of perfect and circles, on odd elevations, with odder vantage points?

A spiral that
in its ever-inflating vacuum
suspends a preserved desire
like the Orphean gaze

my mother has aged much like her silks - a soft dullening that is not abrasive
a gradual shedding of wounds, words, whorls and worlds; winter knows but to rouse them gently
approaching through the trees and resting for a moment ever so slightly on bent balconies in the Delhi sun.

With empty grasps and unsettled eyes,
they sit in nearly perfect circles, with docile comfort,

unfurling their fingers
in gesticulation
brushing aside hairs
that interrupt their lips and tongues.

i remember my mother as she lives alongside my collected memories of her
self and these selves merge - they are formless in the sunlight stitching them back into singularity for consumption
and there is a pause as her name is spelt across my skin, an etching of forevers against time and the metonym of erasure

The dates are losing their form to ghee and fire, singing
to the seeds, as they fold into each other
and fill the air with saccharine music.

several years ago and daily ever since, my mother whispered her faith in me into my ears, a potion for survival
and i listened quietly, consuming her wounds, words, whorls and worlds, bloodstream aching with the weight of belief
and i carry her with me, solemn vows uttered to the winds and her, solemn and serious and sore

language surrenders
to the silence of dusk
as the women in our families
continue to face nothing but
each other.

my mother is only a fingertip away, a mention of white lilies and mellow jaggery, glasses of tea that fly off of armrests
nothing is allowed to accumulate - sorrow, impunity, complacency, and most of all, dust - and nothing is allowed to wither
she tends to her gardens both present and past; she is heat seeping through the insides of all she touches, a sustaining of breath and bread

my mother and furnaces have that in common

Kinjal Sethia

Maa stitched

different costumes every annual day.
Sometimes Spock, once a fruit vendor
and then Santa Claus, even a futuristic
laser gun wielder. Moulded to my size.
The delicate running stitch smoothened,
thread tails neatly cut for my comfort.

Hunched over a Singer-clacketing,
humming her favourite ghazals.
Each frock, shirt, the hem
and the attached lace- forgiving and safe.
Rainbow rolls of thread soaked
with her devoted instinct.

Every dress costumed a lesson,
an impress of her values and convictions.
The day she dressed me as Santa,
she spoke of his seasonal profession.
The yoke was a promise of autonomy,
an ardent oath she pressed into each fabric.

A thread broke, a knot
has made waste of all the moth balls
and her songs.

Abbas Bagasrawala

Lift with your back

On some post-dialysis days
my father, in his dilapidation,
cannot find the mountain
of his old strength
to rise from the Western
toilet and he calls to me
through the emissary
of my mother.

I sleep-walk to him, put my arms around him
minimizing contact—of eyes
and embrace. I plant
myself and prepare to uproot
him like always. We each inhale
for the effort to follow
and I am tickled by the fuzz
at his cheek.

When I put in the heft,
I'm surprised at how little was needed
and how, in some taint
of kindness, I could crush him
like our carrom board did our unfortunate cat
and still be a good son.

When did he evaporate so much?

After he is up on his feet, I question
whether to linger
in the half-hug, but turn away
as he stabilizes—
one hand on the ceramic
one hand on his drawstrings.

As I walk away
the man follows
with a “thank you.”

This is not a man who thank-yous
and I break down
the inflection in my head,
not replying
nor looking back,
allowing him the dignity
of men who know—
to acknowledge gratitude
is to acknowledge defeat.

Preeti Vangani

Item Song Girl

sequined, feathered, cleavage-glittered
daydreams 3-minute-screen-self
as female lead between touch ups
her iron-red corset stings
like her mother's words leaves lines
on her bleached skin she memorizes
man-written words how perfect
her lip sync her hip sink her shimmy
her doll shine in her last song
she seduced a quarter of cheap whisky
a man called her tandoori murgi
another called her to his van. This van,
some call it vanity some call it work. Sometimes she looks at a man
and already mourns her body.
More oomph, they say, feel your body
a crowd pulling formula, a machine of swing
and swoon in a gaze hungry industry
She is hungry too she is a whole industry
of hunger. Her hunger, it comes blazing
through chandeliers. Shakes and thrusts,
and spins and spins and spins
around the desire to be more
than what any man can imagine.

Dipanjali Roy

Bitter Gourds / করলা

7AM on a mostly sunny and incomparably hot morning in the summer of 2010, I think about writing a letter to my mother. A part of me is convinced this is a terrific idea. Other parts of me are feeling varying degrees of vengeful and frustrated. Most parts of me have no idea what to do with a text brewing in my head. A very small part of me is ashamed I cannot undertake this entire exercise in Bangla.

Still, I begin writing in fits and starts. Soon enough I arrive at the aggrieved conclusion that I have spent entirely too long translating and mistranslating my mother because most of our conversations involve her rapid-fire shooting at me in Bangla and me as a sitting duck on a conveyor belt that mostly gets pelted and perhaps occasionally bounces back. The mistranslation is becoming a problem. At sixteen, I am writing these bits of Bengali and translating them into their angst-ridden equivalences in English. Eventually, I realise that the problem lies inherently with the tone of my voice.

It doesn't sound like Bangla – this is not the language of my choosing – we have just returned home to Gurgaon from two years in Singapore and my thinking speaking talking languages are all mixed up with each other – but none of them feature Bangla – *Tumi Bangali?* (Are you Bengali?) I was tired of answering, yes, yes, I am – No, no I'm not fluent in the language – yes, I grew up in North India – yes, indeed, my education has been remiss – this is not my language of adolescent cravings for “independence” – I don't think in it – I don't speak it – I rarely ever dream in it – I only slip into it while talking to my mother who has recently had a hysterectomy and is experiencing the most unforgiving pendulum of hormone-imbalance-induced mood swings (at sixteen, we don't have the best relationship – I have not yet learned how to speak my mother tongue, and I certainly haven't yet learned how to speak with my mother) – I do still only slip into it while talking to my mother – Ma, aami aschhi – Ma eta aeka korona – Ma, wait, I'll do this myself – Ma, tumi bosho, tumi shuye-thaako – Even now, even still, over a decade later – Ma, please nijেকে eto over-exert korona, I'll do it myself, please sit – But at sixteen Bangla tastes like bitter gourds to me – Diya, korola sheddho khaabi? Sure, let me just put it in the pressure cooker – No, you please don't get up.

Did you know, bitter gourds – korola – is one of the most aggressively nutritious vegetables in the Bengali cook's repertoire? Korola is versatile – you can eat it fried, battered, boiled,

in *shukto*, in pakoras – like language, it can be prepared any which way for any number of reasons. That whole year, we ate it almost exclusively boiled and with rice, perhaps adding a dash of mustard oil to help blend the taste.

My mother is in her late thirties and missing her entire uterus and an ovary. We have moved to this new house in this new city and she is bleeding through every pair of pants and every piece of clean underwear and every double-duty, maxi-size, extra-absorbent, winged sanitary napkin she can find (sometimes, two at a time) – but it is 2009 and we are still recovering from the economic crash and she is afraid of inconveniencing the logistics of the move and she is afraid of worrying my father who has just lost his father and been repatriated to this city within the span of a single week – Ma, eta ke Bangla-te ki bole?

I am trying to help the best way I know how but I am also an angst-ridden sixteen-year old who has just moved to her second high school in a new city in so many years and I want nothing to do with being back home or speaking in its tongues – *My mother hates me*, I tell my friend whom I also happen to have a raging crush on, weeping into his shirt for the second time in three weeks as he holds me to his shoulder and tries to comfort me the best way he knows how – *My mother told me she wishes I was never born – She's in a very fragile place right now, Dipanjali* – his tongue curves around my name uncomfortably – he speaks eight more languages than I do but somehow saying my name still feels like an entirely uncomfortable affair for him – *I think sometimes your mother might be worried you're a little too clever to be good for yourself* – at sixteen I am bristling at his words; at sixteen, I become an IGCSE world-topper for my grades in English and French, but Bangla is still the bane of my existence – Bangla is what keeps me tied to my home and Bangla is what keeps me feeling like my mother wishes I was never born.

Mostly, I know that I'm aggravated because I am an angry, outspoken teenager but I can never retort in it – Bangla is the language of both love and control in my house – my mother can deliver all these verbal blows, but without the advantage of entering the home-turf, I can only absorb them – “Dipanjali is extraordinarily articulate,” the principal of my last high school writes in her letter recommending me to university, “as a student she is ambitious and highly-motivated, she is in possession of a singular focus when it comes to the subject of her choosing”. At the bi-annual parent-teacher meeting she tells my mother, “She’s a firecracker. You must have your hands full. Rarely do I meet a student so capable of arguing their way out of trouble – and also, she is friends with that foreign boy? – You should do something about that. No worries academically, but she’s not much of a girl, is she? I worry about her growing up into a young woman who possesses no ostensible femininity.” My mother came home in a situation of consternation between academic

pride and personal concern. She recounted this exchange to me in Bangla while bestowing upon me a four-hour long lecture on my failures at girlhood – Years later, I had many, many words with the school administration; but for Ma? – for Ma... Bangla – bitter gourds – no retort –

At sixteen I'm also obnoxious about my linguistic proficiency and my mother is always quick as a blade to cut me down to size – aamake ingreji daekhaabe na! – She tells me I'm kamikaze, beshi chaalaak, ektu beshi paakaa – You have forgotten where you come from – *Where do I come from, Ma? What have we done that lets me lay a fucking claim to a place where I come from? All we do is move! You just haul me around everywhere like fucking baggage and expect me to magically adapt to whatever sinkhole you drop me into!* – As an adult Writer of Things, I don't need to tell you that at sixteen I am also fairly uncouth and exceptionally dramatic – My mother catches onto this fairly quickly – ki mukh, mei-tar! – You have no shame! – No holds are barred when I open my mouth to speak. No sense of shame. Nice girls don't talk about these things and Ma is still hard at work trying to temper me into some semblance of nicety because she wants me to succeed in a world that I realised quite belatedly only ever gave her the interpersonal equivalent of bitter gourds for lunch – Do you even hear yourself when you speak?

At twenty-one, I wrote the first real draft of this entry and wondered daily – does all protection lie in restriction? At twenty-one, I am at an all-women's college pursuing an Honours degree in Literatures in English and I finally, finally, feel like I am in a place where – if not home, then at least – if I am seen falling backwards, someone will pause to catch me – someone will anticipate what I need and hold my hand. At twenty-one, when I first write this, I am slowly growing into a life where I know the right words I want to speak (albeit, I still can't speak them to my family) – At twenty-one, my mother and I have talked more in the car during the daily traffic jams we would encounter on my commute to the metro during the weekends when I came home to visit than we did the entire decade of my adolescence – my fists are still clenched with resentment, but now I am beginning to wonder if in writing about my mother I have made her sound shrill – This is not a representation I am comfortable with, but comfort too is limited in that it is always enveloped in a sense of security – I am still not entirely comfortable speaking in Bangla – there is still the sense of a false bottom, a knockout, shaak-diye-maach-dhaaka – one confession too many to my mother in the car during a traffic jam and I know that all of the wordplay in the world won't save me from the onslaught.

But so it goes – Ma is still the voice I hear at the back of my head whenever I wake from long sleep – at twenty-six I know that there will come a day when this is not the case – I

don't know how I'll feel if and when that day does arrive but I feel it coming – At twenty-one I have thought about Ma every single day since I moved out. I wonder that there is something to motherhood of the kind she practices that is willing to take on a role it knows will be scrutinized, rebelled against, turned into the ostensible figure of everything I resent about my family. My mother was never afraid to be a mouthpiece. She never felt that she would lose a part of herself in this exercise. At sixteen I thought Ma was the surest, most infallible pillar of my life. At twenty-one, I am slowly beginning to see the cost of every conversation we have had where she has screamed with exasperation – ‘Do you know what it will do to your father?’

I do not resent my mother. Somewhere, everything I have ever done is for her. It is like this: you are lost in the hills, in a forest, in a city. Eventually, all thoughts turn to your anchor. Eventually, all my thoughts turn to her. Ma is a lynchpin. In Scotland, nearly half a decade later, I miss her with a keenness that I did not think I possessed for home.

It goes both ways. At sixteen, I am not the best when it comes to communicating with my family. Perhaps it's all in the axis. Turn, turn, turn. My resentment turns to rebellion turns to resignation turns to resilience. I stop speaking of these things. As it is, I like to tell myself lies. I convince myself that speaking has never really been my forte. I convince myself that I stammer and hesitate when I speak to my family because I really don't know the words I'm looking for (when I know what I am doing instead is running the long con – when they believe me to be at a loss for words, they tend to be more trusting, they tend to feel less exposed under what they like to call my tukhodh-chokh). At sixteen, I am grappling with a language whose script and rhythms I am stubbornly averse to learning – because it would mean admitting to the humiliation that this is a language I have neglected, and also because DuoLingo hasn't been invented yet – which mostly means that to learn the language I must resource learning guides from either the local market, which I can only access if I ask my mother to take me there, or directly from my mother – which is another resource I can only access if I'm willing to submit to learning anything from her again. Neither prospect is particularly appealing. Mostly because (and even now, at twenty-seven), I still sometimes get flashbacks to standing in front of a chart paper full of multiplication tables trying to learn them by heart and my mother telling me I am a Bad Person for not succeeding the first three times. At twenty-six I realise that my mother was herself raised by her mother in the style I like to call The Morality Trap, and that in her conscious and desperate attempt to grow up not to be her mother (reader, you are not allowed to laugh at me right now) my mother has in turn tried to moderate and re-calibrate herself as best as she knew how, but most of the morality traps leaked through anyway.

The primary function of the morality trap is to convince you that you are either a Bad Person or Not Behaving Like Your Usual Self when you do things like refusing to cut your bangs, lock your bedroom door, wake up any time past 10 in the AM, have an adolescent friend group that consists predominantly of boys, doggedly ask questions about why it's necessary to present as ostensibly feminine, and also when you do things like borderline failing IGCSE Math not because you're bad at Math but because you don't enjoy the subject and so, stupidly, stubbornly, just like learning Bangla, didn't practice calculus.

At sixteen, stuttering my way through Bangla while my classmates ask me every few months why I 'don't look Indian' – *what does that mean? I am still asked this question and mostly all that I have deciphered from it is that when I'm in North India I don't look like I can haggle in Sarojini and when I'm in Kolkata people feel free to talk about me while standing beside me in Bangla because they're comfortable in the assumption that I don't understand a word of what they're saying and I'm comfortable in maintaining this performance because otherwise the transcript is loaded with questions of home and belonging and a solid heaping of classic Bangla shame* – emaa, tui ekhono Bangla-ta ekdom foreigner aar North-Indian-der moton bolish Diya ma – I mean I don't know what else you were expecting, mashi, I've not really had a formal education in the language, but I'm trying. – tui ekdom bodlashni, ekhono shei chhele-der moton jama kapor porish... tor kokkhono boyfriend jutbena –

In Bangla, I am always ashamed, it seems. Linguistic inefficiencies abound. Grammatical errors abound. Ontological inefficiencies abound. Bitter gourds. This is a shame I don't want for myself. I feel it anyway. I don't want to open these memories. They have not yet fallen back into the pockets of forgotten things. There are things I don't speak of; wounds that insist I blank out those words. I wonder if she has forgotten them. I never will. [So many sentences beginning with an 'I'.] This is taking a form I did not anticipate. I wonder that it should cause me to speak in such a garbled tongue.

In my mouth, this language is neither felicitous nor political. I roll my 'r's and twist my tongue in tangles over it. When I open my mouth, Bangla sounds like I've spent eight years on Sohna Road dreaming of going away to university somewhere in the Great Beyond. It sounds like the roiling hum of engine oil and petroleum pumps. Highways and ever-dry brown hills dotted once with *vilayatee keekar*, then with *salai, kullu, kaim, jhinjheri*, and now with foreign investments and concrete boxes packed to the brim with people as thorny as the hills they came from. I feel more a part of those hills and this city than I do of that vehement other home people are always so keen on foisting upon me when I'm anywhere that isn't West Bengal – Tumi Bangali? – Yes, but I'm not from Bengal. Not

really. Please don't ask me to recite poetry.

Bangla is a language that does not help me resolve any conflicts at home or in my writing. I have a great deal of literary respect for it, but it is also the language that undoes me at every turn. Even in college, when a professor would realise (after navigating the quagmire of my internationally displaced accent) that I am Bengali, more often than not a comment would follow – *Oh, so you don't read Bengali? What a shame. You should really learn from your mother.*

In *The Argonauts*, Maggie Nelson quotes D.W. Winnicott and unfurls a question before us that I have been considering throughout the process of leading this essay from my lonely little computer screen and into the pages of this journal. “*The mother of an adult child sees her work completed and undone at the same time.* If this holds true, I may have to withstand not only rage, but also my undoing. Can one prepare for one's undoing? How has my mother withstood mine? Why do I continue to undo her, when what I want to express above all else is that I love her very much?”

Writing about the people you live with and the people who anchor you is difficult – my mother is in many ways more of a ‘partner’ in my life and my decisions than anyone else. When I lived in Scotland, it was a normal affair to hear my flatmates remark upon how frequently my mother called me and how many languages our conversations appeared to transit across – *Do you have a mother tongue? How do you shift between English and Hindi and Bengali and all the other little bits? Is that weird for you? Doesn't every day feel too much for you? I guess you and your mother are quite close to each other...* – Yes, I suppose – yes, in our own complicated way we are inseparable – particularly in the years since I have begun learning how to communicate with my mother not only as a guardian but as a person whose story is only really available to me in fragments and with the passage of time – Ma holds back what she feels is inappropriate or irrelevant – until recently, she also held back most of her grief and her regrets. But it still manifested – as anger, it manifested. In our interactions, in the conversational whiplash of my adolescence, there is so much that only becomes clear when I think about it as an adult. Does this absolve the weight of those conversations?

I learnt about my mother accidentally – incidentally – eavesdropping without meaning to, catching onto conversational subtext between her and my *Nani* that patently wasn't meant for me and then making sense of it by way of translating Bangla into English.

As a young reader, I devoured Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck*

Club, Warsan Shire's poetry. I read about motherhood through Anne Carson's gut-wrenching sections in 'The Glass Essay' after a chance encounter with an excerpt on Tumblr, I poured my readerly soul into the three generations of daughterhood in Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*, Betty Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. You could name a book and I could tell you that had read it and tried to situate myself through its contextual offerings. Some mothers were harsh, some were traditional, some were eccentric, some were fierce, some were full of censure. So many literary daughters, too, came close to reflecting the pulse of my interactions with Ma: always emotionally charged, always out to prove something to her, to prove her wrong somehow.

It is a re-calibration matrix, and at sixteen I am still some kind of small and insufferably squeaky animal seemingly indefinitely cartwheeling inside of it. At sixteen I don't know how to bridge the gap between me and my isolation. And isolation is such a sterile word, but it sounds familiar, in a way. In a way, I am here – but nowhere else. Bony wrists and a swampy malaise.

At twenty-seven, I know – in my rush to reach a place wherein I would no longer be 'defined' by those conversations with Ma, I forgot that it was she who bought me my first novel. It was my mother who encouraged me to read the translated local literature of every city and country we moved to, and my mother who defended me furiously and fervently to the rest of my family when I decided to choose an All-Humanities academic trajectory as a sophomore in school. I felt independent in my freshman year at college, surrounded by books and libraries and resources galore, but it was my mother who had pushed me to enrol at an all-women's art college, and it was my mother who had emphasized upon me the importance of learning how to listen to the stories of others (even if she sometimes still misses that memo herself).

Sometimes, I think I only began writing this nearly a decade ago because it felt like That Was What Writers Did – writers who deployed language like a deft blade or a weighted blanket, writing about my relationship with my mother felt like a rite of passage – it was a place of ritual, a means of catharsis. Now, over the years with this essay, it can sometimes feel like penance – like eating boiled bitter gourds in the afternoon after a McDonald's delivery night. When I try to write with clarity about my mother I either end up feeling protective and infantilizing her – this is my adult perspective, and this is what gave me cold-feet about this essay when *nether* accepted it – I am now beginning to see myself more as my mother's guardian than the other way around – or I run the risk of flattening her, writing about her as though she is a prop for the purpose of the text, characterized now

by the language of my choosing in much the same way that I once felt characterized by the language she deployed. My adolescent voice tends to define her by way of an absence of agency on my part, and I think perhaps this essay is not the place to begin defining her in any way because it is still a place of sweet-bitter nostalgia, a place of parallax – the defining connection between what is apparently in sight and where I happen to be when I am looking at it.

At sixteen, I think of writing an ode to my family. I do a mostly terrible job of it. Almost all of it is about Ma. At twenty-seven, I re-open this document at 7am and at 7.30am sharp as usual Ma asks me from across the hallway – *Tui ghumoshni? Kyano? Uff, ei mei-tar kokhon shokal aar kokhon raatri keu jaane na. Kokbhono theek time-e ghumoyena. Ki je kore shara raat, keje jaane. Aar sharakkhon laptop aar laptop aar 'kaaj'* – she's now mumbling to herself as she moves to the kitchen and begins the brisk daily ritual of rinsing the red mug in the cabinet before setting the kettle to boil for the first of many cups of tea – *Ma, wait, I'll do it for you, aami kore dicchi* – Uff, fine. Diya tui eto controlling na.... – first muttering lowly under her breath and then breaking into peals of laughter as we both settle into the onset of the day – me with my coffee, sitting atop the granite counter, one leg folded under me as I have every morning I've shared with her in every home we've had across three cities since that adolescent time for both of us in Gurgaon; her with her tea, leaning back against the kitchen counter – gurgling under her breath – *Diya, you still roll your r's so much when you talk in Bangla – choddh-de beta, tujhse naa ho payega – tor R aar O gulo-r aar kicchhu hobena –!*

Here, and nowhere else. Reviving the kingdom of forgotten things.

Salik Basharat

Kanger Daydream

(For Azhar Wani)

in wisps o kanger smoke I sit

cracking open walnuts
with my craggy tattered thumbs

crackling coals hum
some sombre shruk by the sheikh ul aalam

destined to transform
the jhelum
slides, swirls, gushes, spurts, flits,
as kids skip stones,
strip, play, dip,
discover -
on the river shore
childhood shivering naked

mothers and daughters giggle
and their laughter weaves paisleys
into shawls of magic wool
as fathers and sons prune blueberry bushes
autumn colours their tunes
and lovers sheltered by the willows
in autumn's air swoon

in wisps o kanger smoke I sit

cracking open walnuts
winter's numbed my thumbs

crackling coals hum
bellow - and then keep mum

mother
jhelum's waves are stifled
uneasy poplars grieve
our neighbours
have grown distant
but their sons refuse to leave
"you're welcome to wreck our thresholds
and please do smear our shawls -
we'll sweep your dirt off later
we'll get your stench off it all"

their sons demand *dalbeen kahwa*
my mother brews them a rhyme
"our saffron's hue is strange to you"
she sings and claps in time

in wisps o kanger smoke I sit

cracking open walnuts
with my sturdy mountain teeth

the coals have stopped their crackling
there's only smoke and breeze

the jhelum is quiet
the chinar has retired
saffron is turning amber
my father's pheran(is)phobic
the neighbours are sniggering
the forests are now theirs
my sisters have lost their voices
who's stripped my brothers bare?

mother is radiant
mother hums
mother heats the kanger
mother
giggles

mother
sit
mother
sing
the coals crackle
I crack open walnuts
in wisps o kanger smoke we swing

Kanger: Pronounced kəŋguɪər. An earthen pot decorated with wicker. Filled with hot embers by Kashmiris to keep warm in winter.

Sheikh ul aalam: Elder of the World. Honorary title given to Kashmiri Sufi saint-poet, Sheikh Noor-ud-Din Noorani, who wrote in the late 14th century.

Shruk: (presumably from the Sanskrit Shloka): A form of poetry associated with Sheikh Noor-ud-Din Noorani.

Sree Sen

Contraction of the Self

hoarding glass
jars once filled
pickles, jam, mayonnaise, honey, tahini
tapered bottoms, squared shoulders, leftover crumbs of stickers
spice-jars line kitchen cabinet promising pungent heat thrice a day
spooning out treasures from bottles i cleaned in warm water, dried under
intermittent sun, writing names on transparent bodies making it
easier to locate, use, damage. i've labelled myself over & again
body crammed with ingredients deemed useful –
as daughter, fear filled my bosom
friendship tasted of loneliness
being a lover uncapped shame
marriage added legitimacy

in time there'll be cracks
invisible to naked eye but
you'll worry nonetheless
i'll cover it up with a nightly
beauty regime of ointments from little glass bottles
i'll wash, dry intimately, trace its body, fingers whispering to
the gentle contours of bedroom jars, whiff of rose or maybe jasmine,
flowers that remind you to smell good after a day of nursing.
my baby's feeding bottle has printed butterflies & a label
'CHERUBIC' in capital letters she'll read one day,
also cursive scribbles in fading black

i'm sorry, jaan
khoma koro

Rehman Rahi

(*trans.* Ashaq Parray)

As if a Poem

*A farmer's toil invites the flash
of lightning to strike the crops.*

(Mirza Ghalib)

(1)

He has written:

The world looks different here—

No peaks, no rollicking streams;

Everywhere sand,

Every day sunny.

People- black and tall like cedars

wearing long white robes like a Kashmiri Shalwar

and speaking Arabic;

While waiting for a bus

If they wish, they spread out a carpet

at the roadside and get busy in chatter.

Roads- polished and developed,

Buildings grand too;

Everyday, the wind rises in the afternoon

and lifts trash bags into the air like crows.

The essentials are hard to get

But all pure, no mixture—

Olive Oil, dressed chicken with skin,

real cow milk,

and raw cheese

slices can be picked like papers.

We are both fine

performing our duties;

our hospital is worth a visit,

patients from across the spectrum
visit my cardiology ward—
Some visit by cars as if flying in a plane
Some poor like donkey keepers;
Your daughter-in-law is a bookworm
Her library reaches up to heaven,
She says, 'hoards of books are here
on modern English, Italian, and French literature
Abba Ji would've loved them!'
Anyway, a walk in the morning, T.V in the evening;
Our neighbours are from both the East and the West
they are our hosts and we- their guests;
the day dies quickly after it is born;
We are both fine and doing wonderful,
recently, we opened a bank account too.
You shouldn't worry,
I am your support
We only need your blessings.

(2)

*A quickly arrived letter
posted from Bombay—*

There! Congratulations to you
He writes:
Tali gave birth to a son
today is the eight-day.
(Fourteen or fifteen days ago, got it?)
They kept her at a nursing home for two nights.
If electricity goes off for a moment here
there would be uproar everywhere;
(Hello! Why are you so excited?
Place a pill under your tongue)
These days, we've forgotten everything
the morning walk and evening T.V.
(they'd to invite neighbours yesterday).

He says:
You should visit the bank and
withdraw the third instalment.
You shouldn't worry at all.
You'll receive a detailed letter soon
Do look at the new born son
and suggest some names
apt for modern times- please!
By the way, he is very cute.
(Clever and kicking; you got it?)
as if he would talk right away.
However, tears form in his eyes when he giggles,
I don't know what that means!"
(Where are you lost?
Would you please stop lighting that hearth today?)

(3)

He'd called: —
He wouldn't talk to me
You are his mother; he wanted to hear you
and inquire about his sister;
Beyond deep-sea lies the state of Libya
Embraced by mountains rests Kashmir
What if he is unable to place a call?
the daughter would be in her office.
You are bound to offer gifts to relatives
I weave loose threads in a literary assembly
on *Love in Kashmiri Poetry*.
I met our domestic help from the *Ganai* clan:
'I had come running to your house
the outer gate was locked
and a dog howling in the courtyard.'

(4)

Look at the Eid card;
These are the pictures—
She is our daughter-in-law driving a car;
That is the little one; look at Doctor Sahab
perhaps teaching his darling to walk in the garden.
(the photo should've been large and a bit clear!)
(You should change your glasses
there would be an acquaintance of your son
at the Headvin hospital).

He writes:

The bank had misplaced a draft,
You would receive an installment soon;
Here things are getting too costly
but available without getting pushes and blows—
Korean readymade, French perfume,
Japanese... everything;
(Please get me that inhaler)
Some days ago, I'd been to New York
(AMRIKA, he means)
I'm trying to get in somewhere
I can't come back to settle in that place of mud,
(Hello! Did you doze off?);
He has received my letter too;

He writes:

Every day we talk about you
You shouldn't worry at all,
we've come here only for *your* sake.
(It has begun to snow again)
(Hello! Did that matchmaker visit again?)

(5)

We've got a mail:

We've signed a contract for two more years

(today my *Kanger* gives no warmth),
(Mine too is cold like death);
He has written:
A nice group photo, coloured;
You don't worry at all
(Oh God! Have mercy.
Hello! I think kerosene would be available now)

(6)

I saw him in a dream—
An ostrich running through a desert
carrying waves of the ocean in his eyes
with tussled hair as if wind had set in it;
the threads of his dress darkened by sun;
Suddenly, a *Tanga* emerged out of
of a gateway. A dog that came running
was crushed under the truck wheels.
He was either speaking Arabic or Koshur
and searching for something;
Everyone told him
They will return for sure
until the evening.
He tore his shoe laces with his teeth
tossing it outside the veranda,
a dirt arc was glued to one
of his insoles like a gold rim.
I had called him in my filial voice
He stood bare feet in the middle of
a weed-filled garden
Black, wearing something like a scarf
and standing still like an elephant—
In the crevice of the house
had appeared a tangled snowflake—
watching!
Alas!

*

Have We Cancelled Our Parents? | A Conversation

We got together with Nandini Dhar (our guest editor) and Manjiri Indurkar to reflect on an aspect of the theme that Nandini had in mind for this issue: how do we write our parents? How do we write intergenerational differences in these politically polarized times? Both in our personal lives and in our lives as writers, we're grappling with these concerns. Somewhere in our conversations, spanning the last few months, we came to the word 'cancel' in the context of what has popularly come to be known as 'cancel culture'. Are we actually cancelling our parents, we asked each other. What follows are excerpts from an extended conversation: What does it mean, to cancel our parents? How are we negotiating this question in our own work? We have all found ourselves in many ways inescapably bound to our families in writing. Time and again, intentionally or not, in one form or another, these questions return to our work. How do we talk to and about our parents? And what kind of space do we see literature carving for us? What kinds of narratives do we generate about parenthood, about families? What can understanding the differences between literary narratives and social media narratives tell us about how we politicize our differences? And finally, to the extent that we might be economically or emotionally or in many many other ways linked to and dependent on our parents, the entirety of 'cancellation' becomes way more complex than we could possibly understand it. Is it merely a social media performance?

Manjiri: Why don't we start by thinking about the literature that we've already read? I am thinking of Avni Doshi's novel, *Burnt Sugar*, which was one of the reasons why we started talking about this in the first place. I'm not sure she intended to do this, but in the book she sort of 'cancels' her mother in a symbolic way. She basically ends up cancelling the personhood of the 'mother'. The character of the mother is not present as a whole person, but, you know, only in parts where she did some horrible things. I did not get any image of her mother other than what she is supposed to be in her lowest moments like when she is with this Baba, or when she is gradually becoming this person with amnesia. I think that in a sense it was like the cancellation of the person that the mother could have been or was supposed to be. And I'm not sure if it was done with the intention of cancelling her, I think Doshi was trying to create a mother who isn't like your average doting, loving mother. Her mother was supposed to be complex, but without any tender moments, without any real human moments, she ended up 'cancelling' her.

Divya: Hmm, I kind of agree that what she ends up doing is cancelling the symbolic personhood of the 'mother' or motherhood in its entirety. But then again, at times it feels that she cancels 'personhood' in its entirety. And to me this is where the book fails. The mother and daughter are literally, figuratively, imaginatively, and metaphorically interchangeable, or as the book progresses, become more and more interchangeable as

characters, and as persons, dispensable in their life world. The character wants to cut the influence that the mother has on her life, her life choices and her narratives and everything. But the more the mother starts to forget her own life and her own past, the less ground the character has to cut, or to cancel. And the less ground that she has to cancel, the more her own ground gets overwritten or in the sense they start to become the same person ultimately. And while there is an interesting dynamic in the book, it doesn't work for me: what makes this notion of cancelling/cancellation so challenging in life is because we're complex people, we're difficult, and we're mysteries to ourselves and to each other. And this sense of mystery (positive or negative) is altogether missing from the character's relation with her mother. This is also why, as you say, Manjiri, we never really get to know the mother as a person. I think that in any literary writing, I am most interested in this aspect of personhood: how do we write persons (especially those we are deeply connected with and/or feel deeply distanced from) as *who* they are, not *what* they are? And most importantly not simply, *what* they are *to* me, but also who they are in themselves, and who they are *with* me.

Nandini: I haven't yet read Avni Doshi's book, I want to, but haven't gotten to it yet. I think this discussion of personhood is interesting, of course because of the questions that you raised, Divya, the questions about *who* they are, and *who* they are as they relate to me, but also how they have been formed through larger social and political histories, and how such larger socio-political histories emerge, often in congealed, mediated and convoluted ways, in interactions that *we* have. The novel, as a genre, expects that we write this personhood in a very specific kind of a way. Poetry allows for a different kind of a conversation. I am thinking of the series of poems Mihir Vatsa wrote about mothers, using this vantage point of 'my mother'. The mother who visits a beauty parlour, the mother who reads her son's poems, the mother who dances with her niece. In some ways, there is a narrative quality to these poems, but they are also, for me, lyric poems, where language works very differently from the novel. Here, language is brought to its absolute limits, as it tends to happen in poetry. And, I wonder, what does it mean to create such personhood, of a dancing, reading mother, during the times when much of the Hindutva fascism expresses itself through the creation of a particular version of the mother-figure – the Bharat Mata, so to say. What kind of personhood does Bharat Mata have? And, when we write about mothers, as Indians, and especially Hindu, middle-class, or upper middle-class, upper-caste Indians, how do we continue to bear the burden of Bharat Mata, and the many ways in which things like state-sponsored nationalisms insert themselves into our personal moments, familial lives, intimate relationships?

Avinab: I'm currently working on a novel, where I'm trying to navigate the schism that I

would feel when writing the father figure, somebody who is already a problematic figure, but whom the character perceives as a relatively decent human being to begin with. The character wants to understand how his father could choose a political way of belief that is completely at odds with the person that he was. I've chosen a kind of narrator or a character who's unreliable, who's mentally unstable, who is actually on his way to recovery and trying to get better, when something surreal happens: he's kind of jolted into recognition, hurled into this violent situation where the personal and the political kind of coalesce. What happens is one day he suddenly sees that his father's face is the face of the prime minister; it doesn't just look like the prime minister, it *is* the prime minister's face. And from that moment of disbelief he tries to go back to what his father has been in the past, while also trying to coalesce what the prime minister has been, trying to navigate both their histories, and somehow trying to come to a conclusion.

This is obviously all happening against the backdrop of a completely fascist government, with a completely fascist prime minister. And his father embodies all of the prime minister's beliefs and vice versa. They're interchangeable as people. But even in this violent realization, he tries desperately to humanize his father, to retrieve the person that he was, to defend him, to protect him, but at the same time he knows that he must symbolically kill, or for a lack of a better word, cancel his father to actually do any sense of justice. It is a nuanced thing, because he realizes how much he owes to his father. For instance, he realizes that it was because of his father that he first became inspired to do creative work, to do or to feel creatively for the first time in his life. I want the character to see inspiration from him, to make him like a godlike figure, but also to bring him down, you know?

Manjiri: In the book I'm working on right now, I have a character who is writing a memoir of her grandfather who used to be a member of the RSS, a guy who has roots in the RSS and is extremely right wing, and has raised his children in a certain kind of ethic, certain kind of politics. My character is specifically dealing with her mother and she wants to understand what has happened in her family, and in order to do this, she's writing a memoir of her grandfather. But I've been asked why, why a memoir of her grandfather? What is the motivation? Actually, I found my answer within what you said, Avinab: to humanize these characters in order to understand what is going on. And I think that in some ways my character is trying to get to the root of why her mother behaves in a certain way. Why is she so easily racist, so easily offended by this and that, so communal, but also so affable at the same time. So these complexities that her mother exists within, she's trying to understand them and the one way that she has found is to write this memoir of her grandfather. That's where her mother's story begins and in some ways she's finding her footing there.

So I was thinking about the intentions of writing the way we are writing our parents, why Avinab's character feels the need to kill his father, or why my character is writing this memoir. I was wondering, are we writing about our parents the way we are, to save ourselves? What does it mean to symbolically kill the father who looks like the fascist? And I was also thinking how our families work as institutions which can often be pretty fascistic in nature. So are we as writers trying to find our ground and our space through this writing and this saving basically of this character? Are we saving ourselves, what is the intention here? Avinab's character is trying to kill his father, my character is trying to sort of redeem this person by giving him an alternate life outside of this right wing existence of his, which is what we end up discussing most of the time: my father is so right wing, or my mother is so right wing. But outside of this 'ideology', these right wingers are also people and they have their good and bad moments. And by my character trying to build these good *and* bad moments, or Avinab trying to give his character a personhood of good and bad qualities, it's actually like presenting a whole picture. And I think in some ways we are trying to redeem ourselves, save ourselves from this overarching evil that sort of has taken our lives up.

Divya: If I can go back for a moment to the business of the *who* vs the *what*... I'm currently not writing poetry or fiction, but my PhD dissertation, which is a theoretical project on poetry and understanding: how do we understand *who* someone is and not *what* someone is? This is something that Hannah Arendt talks about: that whenever we try to describe someone – say I want to describe Avinab or I want to describe Manjiri – I'm going to end up describing *what* you are rather than *who* you are; Arendt would say that the *who* cannot be simply described. It cannot be objectified or reified, but it can only come out in an interaction. So *who* I am, appears in interaction with you, as does *who* you are. And thus we appear to each other as subjects and not as objects.

I suppose in a way, this business of how we understand the *who*, ties to your idea of saving ourselves. I think it's more about claiming for ourselves an appropriate social appearance, which involves reinterpreting our histories, our genealogies, our family structures. But it is equally also about granting or creating the space of appropriate social appearance for the other, because we know very well that in the way we describe the other, in the way we allow the other to appear to me, I am also appearing thus. I think literature gives us the space for this. It enables us to allow this *who* to come into being in this genuinely intersubjective way versus in any other kind of discourse where you would very likely be satisfied with the description of *what* they are and that would be the end of that.

So, if I think of my personal life, certain deep political differences with my parents have become evident in these past years, and there is very little space to talk about them. In Rakhi's essay in this issue she puts it very nicely, how our family norms are such that

there is little room to cross our parents, disagree, or speak against them. That resonates with me. If I try to discuss my point of view with my parents, I think the fact that I'm doing it hurts them more than the actual opinion that I have. But somewhere I have this deep conviction that if they could just understand our life in political terms, they would be able to think of 'others' with a certain sense of justice or equanimity, or think of themselves as one among others. So I thought of writing letters to them, and the first thought behind that was probably precisely that I wanted to save them from themselves. But at some point, I realized that that's not getting me anywhere. It's not my place to save them from themselves because that implies an inability to respect who they are now. And so what then? I want to understand *who* they are and *who* they have been. And I do think that it is in this understanding I can also in some sense be free from the tensions. So if I have to think of this in terms of 'cancelling' at all, I have to think of it in terms of freeing myself from the burden of our differences, without turning away from my parents (as people) altogether. I don't want to cancel them, I want to understand them. This understanding does not have to result in agreement. On the contrary, I want to make space in our togetherness for our differences, to find a legitimate space for disagreement.

Nandini: I think for me, getting away is to get away from the 'family form' itself. After my first two books of poems in English and Bangla, all of which were focusing heavily on the family space and on the figure of the parents, I'm kind of done writing the family. I'm currently working on a long story that delves into spaces outside of the family; especially the spaces of friendship. I am trying to explore, what does it mean to live with roommates? What does it mean to share spaces in a hostel? These are *family-like* spaces, but also not exactly families. They are families in the sense that you do share a household, that you do share certain kinds of resources for the time you are living together. But at the same time, you are bringing very different histories and family histories into the space. In other words, when you live with roommates and in hostels, you do not quite 'cancel' your families. There is a kind of impermanence in these relationships, a kind of temporariness that is not attached to families. We tend to think of our belonging in families of our birth as something permanent, something that transcends everything else. And, indeed, we don't get to choose our families. Possibly, that's why, the very idea of cancelling our families — our parents — comes with a kind of intense shock. Because, we have been told, repeatedly, in so many different ways, that our blood families are the most important relationships that we would be having in our lives.

And part of why I made this transition is because I was beginning to feel that there is only so much I could personally do as a writer if families form my only raw material. To write about families is complicated, because families, on the one hand, are complex archives of feelings, stories, emotions, but at the same time, they are also extremely exclusive. In fact, families survive on exclusions. There is something deeply

regressive in-built into the very idea of family, in my opinion. I was beginning to wonder, how family is a *form* in itself. Family provides us with a form to think about human relationships, about human belonging, which dictates the literary forms in so many ways, and that 'family form' actually also was beginning to have a restrictive effect on my own writing.

One way in which the 'family form' dictates the 'literary form' is by interiorizing social relationships. Consequently, even when we write about the violences embedded within the families, it becomes difficult to move one's writing out of that interiority. Most of the writing I have done so far are such interiorized writings. I want to believe these texts politicize the very institution of family, and the parent-child relationship, but they are circumscribed in very specific ways. They rarely move beyond the interiorized spaces, whether physical or emotional. I began to think, what if family brushes against the exterior? Against the social? I mean, what if my family members have committed unforgivable crimes against humanity? I mean, what would it mean, for example, to be the daughter (or the son) of the jawans who commit the rapes in Kunan Poshpora? What would it mean, for instance, to be the daughter of an IPS officer, who sexually tortures an alleged Maoist woman-activist? What if my brother, uncle or father were part of the crowd that destroyed the Babri Masjid? I mean, these men can be great fathers or brothers or uncles. They can play extremely responsible roles within their own families, and might even encourage their daughters or nieces or sisters to become 'strong' and 'independent' women. But, how does that brush against their public roles, which, by all means, would remain obfuscated from their children, until and unless the children begin to ask some deeply uncomfortable questions, about class and state, about complicity.

Avinab: It's uncanny that you bring up the possible complicity and implications of a family member being responsible for 'unforgivable crimes against humanity'. In my novel the character essentially reaches a breaking point when he realizes that the prime minister, and in turn his father, is responsible for unforgivable crimes against people, and for that reason alone he cannot try to humanize his father anymore. There is a scene in the novel where the character is at a religious ceremony documenting it, and he is surrounded by people, mostly men, who are waiting for the prime minister to arrive. His socio-economic privilege constantly gets in the way of his understanding of why these men are here at this ceremony, why they are here waiting, but there comes a point where he again begins to spiral as he stands there in the crowd and begins to feel what he's sure is this weight of the voiceless few among the crowd who secretly wish death upon his father, who have been so pained by his father and his acts that they wish death upon him, and the character

feels its unbearable weight on him, and he can't ignore it anymore, and he can't keep his father protected from what he has done to the larger world. He has to let go of the idea of his father completely, cancel him, but that's of course not easy.

Nandini: For me, the crucial question is, would these children (or your character) have the courage to *cancel* their parents? If we go by the intimate histories of the upper middle-class, urban activism of much of liberal India, including feminist activisms, we would know, not much of any kind of cancellation of one's family heritage has happened. Instead, what happens, is a kind of public silence, or obfuscation, or plain distortion of the politics of one's familial histories and belonging. I tried to express this in a poem:

The Secret History of Versification

An owl with a broken beak – a bone-mourned
silence. It would have been a mistake to know
the names of the turbulence here – the certitude

with which a soldier fires towards a crowd,
the inevitability with which a glass bird
of an unidentifiable species is installed

in the middle of the city square, the raindrops
spilling from its wingspan, illuminating
the darkest corners of an yet unborn child's

oral cavity – these are not instances
of temporary acquittal. A dawn: flavored
with burnt coal smell of the roadside clay-oven,

the tealeaves brewing in milk. The tang
of an almost-kitchen. A famine always smells
like a memory: the recollection of the fragrance

of a pot of boiling rice. White, as autumn clouds.
How the odor of a body stuck in a chair
can flatten a meter's edges, how the irrelevance

of a poem can reek. A thousand fragments and more,

and we both know: there is nothing that will shackle
my index finger to yours. A broken genealogy

between us – sans blood-maps, sans marriages.
A rickshaw-puller crushed to pulp by a squeaky
new car, and the young woman driving the car,

does not look away. In between her thumb
and forefinger, gliding out of the car window,
a leather leash, awaiting the presence of a puppy.

In another instance, she will write – in rhymes
the private history of drapery, as touch –
knowing, her father's hands had tied

a shawl-weaver in front of a military-jeep.

An armor against laudable disaffection.

In yet another instance, from the fortified walls
of the university in the edges of the city, she squeaked –
in cadence, the biography of a swooping arrow

in a far-flung tableland – knowing, her brother's voice
had ordered an entire village to be raped.

An armor against decisive disaffection.

This is, how, too, innocence can be bought.

As you would see, nothing is quite cancelled here. What happens is what I call a 'buying of innocence', which is, in my mind, the space where most of our – the privileged, upper middle-class India's – writing and rumination are happening. I see this poem as the one that creates the bridge between my earlier work, and the present work. Personally, I am not interested in humanizing the father or the brother figure of this poem, because, as you suggest Avinab, can they ever be humanized *to* the communities they have destroyed? Can they ever be humanized *by* the communities they have destroyed? I want to understand the complexities of their existences, but I also want to live with this conflict that familial complicity brings.

This is, indeed, one of the pivotal moments where I begin to get really skeptical of the family form, and the family form masquerading as a literary form. Moving beyond the family, to throw a kind of exteriorized gaze upon the family, I am beginning to believe, allows us to create certain other kinds of solidarities, both in real life, and in our writing. Solidarities, that, to me, are as important as, and in some instances, even more important than the family. This is not to deny the fact that I do whole-heartedly believe in the feminist axiom that ‘the personal is political’. And I do think that we are all implicated in deep politics, in our personal lives. And it’s not just that the personal is political, but the political is personal, too. But, at this moment, I am much more interested in exploring how these complexities can be explored through forms that are not quite familial. Does that make sense?

Divya: Well, it does. Though, I do tend to differ a bit on the point about ‘humanizing’. Even in these cases of extreme violence, isn’t it precisely essential to humanize, see the ordinary humanity in these people? This is absolutely not the same as agreeing with them or defending their actions. Casting the evil ‘monster’ out, i.e., not even allowing the separation of evil from the actor risks that we will become self-congratulatory and perhaps overlook or even conceal our own tendencies and shortcomings. And anyway, isn’t this one of the problems we’re facing in our political discourse today? The difficulty of separating the person from the ‘wrong’, which I guess is also one of the underlying principles of ‘canceling’. But of course, as we can see, it’s not easy in practice. This is where literature might actually help us.

I do, however, like the ‘family form’ notion that you bring up, also because as I understand it, the family model necessarily implies a model of consensus. And formally speaking, at least to some extent, it seems to be a good way to understand the larger socio-political tensions that result from such a consensus model. For instance, this nuclear family consensus-model has sort of infiltrated all of our forms of relation of, well, knowing each other, or being with each other; at the level of national politics in fact. Imagining this lethal interchangeability between the father as family head and nation-head is not implausible at all. Now that you say it, Nandini, I want to get away from the form too, even though I’m not actually writing domesticity at all (the way that you and Manjiri have been).

Nandini: For me, the question has become, you know, very foundational. If family is essentially exclusive, and yet provides a ‘form’ through which we organize human life and human relationships, is it a viable form to think about a more democratic future? Or, do we actually actively need to imagine other kinds of affinities in order to have a better world? It’s extremely difficult in India to question the idea of family as a basis of human life. Everything is so tied up to families. Your inheritance, in the most material terms, comes from your family. In your life, you survive through the networks that you have

inherited from your family. And, if your family doesn't possess any of these, well, then, you lead an extremely precarious life. It doesn't matter how progressive you make the life inside your family home. Ultimately, the very idea of family is guided by something extremely exclusionary. And, that is property. Property, as we know, holds families together. Property, as we know, can also break families apart.

In some ways, nineteenth century realist novels have been about documenting precisely these interrelations between property and family. But, my concern right now, is, through what forms does one write social relations and affinities that are not about property. Is it at all possible to write, through existing forms, inheritances that are not familial?

Manjiri: But I wonder if it is just about India or does the world run this way? I mean, can we ever think of an alternative form other than family? Because even if you take away the blood ties, we are constantly forming 'families': my alternate family, or my new family, or like you move into a new form, like a network of friends, and they become your family.

Nandini: And the language still remains the 'family' language. The workplace family, or even the chosen family... Even in feminist politics, the much talked about term 'sisterhood', ultimately goes back to the idea of family. Yes, this is the reality. Undeniably.

Manjiri: Exactly. Like I was thinking of Sally Rooney's *Normal People*. You just read it, I know. The female protagonist, Marianne, has a problem with her biological family. Then she moves to Trinity College and we see that she has undergone a radical personality change, though she is still living in the house owned by her family, but there is separation and that separation helps her. She meets friends, and forms an alternate 'family' in Dublin. In college, her ex, Connel, returns to her life. We know the class differences between these two and that is at the heart of this novel. But now that Marianne has friends who are as rich as she is, Connel sort of benefits from this family structure. When he is low on cash he ends up finding a job because of Mariane's friend. So, I mean, in the end, the economic ties come into place again. I feel like all families will have economic ties, whether it's chosen or you were born into it. Economics is always going to rule it.

Nandini: And I think that's the word I was trying to get at, that families are formed through economics to begin with. As deeply as Mariane is alienated from her family, as much as she's ashamed of them, she never takes that step of completely renouncing them, precisely because of the economics. She kind of keeps going back because 'cancelling' them would clearly not be viable for her. It would make her life far more complicated. So, in her incomplete cancellation of her family, there is self-interest, so to say. And, there is also such a theme in *Conversations with Friends*, Rooney's other novel.

Divya: We were talking earlier about the very notion of cancelling implying a social media performance, right? It's not always possible to actually reject one's family; there may be too many inter-dependencies, economic, emotional, sentimental, or whatever. And there may be commitments. But we can evolve narratives that help us get away. We've been talking about literary narratives, other forms of communication. But there is also social media, which offers us one very powerful tool to break away, to retell our own narratives and identifications if you will, to choose the way we *appear* to others; and it brings us the term: cancelling.

Nandini: Right. There is the question of: *do we at all cancel our parents*. I mean even people who claim to be cancelling parents, do they actually do that? In my limited experience, they don't. This idea of cancelling parents or cancelling your family is a public performance, and social media becomes a site where this performance is played out. So I think that in a way, we need to think about how social media encourages a certain kind of narrative making. There is, most of the time, a huge gap here, between the 'material' (the offline life) and representation (the social media representations). Most of the time, people we know in real life, they're not exactly rejecting the resources that come from the family. But it's more of a cultural, performative thing, distancing oneself from the values or political beliefs that one's family represents. So the social media narratives of cancellation actually become kind of what I call in my poem a 'buying of innocence'.

Avinab: Yeah, I guess the whole idea of cancelling your parents, whether in social media, which is a performative space, or say, in fiction, is a very nuanced thing, because there is no specific register that you can actually call cancelling. You might be economically dependent on them, or emotionally, or linked in so many ways in which the entirety of that cancellation becomes way more complex than we understand it. I think what I'm more interested in seeing are the limitations of this cancellation and the psychological implications this has on an individual. Not only how much is it possible to cancel a parent but how erosive it may be for an individual to do so. How do we cancel or disown inheritance, particularly when that inheritance is psychological? Several cultural, situational factors also come into play, which determine any act of the actual cancelling of a parent, if one were to speak of it, and, moreover, it works differently for different people. How are we to arrive at a common ground for it? In fact, while we ask ourselves this question – have we cancelled our parents – we may be asking ourselves another question: a lot of us actually haven't cancelled our parents, why? I personally haven't. Although I can safely assume that I have enough reasons to cancel my parent for all of us a million times over. Instead of seeing cancellation as a momentary or social act, which one does to another, I see cancellation, specifically of a parent, depending on the nature of the relationship, as

a perennial task and a very complex navigation through one's own history, something one cannot be removed from. But the nature of the relationship would always have to be, in a sense, for a lack of a better word, cancellable? Am I making any sense?

Divya: Perennial, exactly. You also said that your character at some point discovers that he was first inspired by his father. So less than economic ties, you're concerned with emotional ties in your work. Can you talk a bit more about that? What's happening in your novel? Where does 'cancelling' or even the perennial effort of doing that leave the character – given that the consequences can be terrifying? Is he up to the task?

Avinab: So there are two kinds of erasures here, as far as I see it. First, is the patriarchy he plays into at a young age by ignoring his father's violence toward his mother and him, choosing to glorify him as a troubled person in his eyes, which he could be still excused for because he was young. Second, is him playing into it way into his adulthood, whether out of delusion or not, and mythicizing him, giving him the liberty again to possess so much room in his life. Sometimes I wonder if the fact that the character finds the father worth cancelling is in itself problematic, as opposed to, say, standing by the mother or amplifying her erasure at his hands. So, in a way, he is not up to the task. Because his very act is deeply rooted in this act of erasure. And, even in the novel, in the final part, to get to his father, in order to 'cancel' his father, the character has to yet again lie to his mother, effectively, betraying her again, for whatever it's worth. In many ways in order to cancel his father he has to alarmingly mimic his father, not in the exact sense of course, not even close, but in certain ways his life could've been said to be turning in that direction.

Nandini: Can I say something trivial about Avinab's novel? I've known real people, Iranians to be precise, who actually have seen Ayatollah Khomeini's face on their fathers' faces. So your novel character is not alone.

Avinab: They're correct, I'm sure. I mean, the character is not alone. But I'm assuming these people who saw Khomeini's face on their father's face saw it out of some form of reverence, in the sense, saw it as a good thing, to a certain extent. In the case of the character it is never a good thing, it can never be a good thing. It's a horrifying thing, probably the final horrifying thing. In the novel, I'm trying to find places where the father-figure, as a person and a father can be redeemed. For instance, the character believes that his father, despite his barbarity, despite how horrible he may be as a human being, intellectually, is smarter than the prime minister. But then what made him want to become the prime minister? What has caused him, so to speak, for lack of a better word, to become a philistine of sorts at such a later point in his life and also go back on a lot of his ideals?

So he tries to trace back, to look for clues both for how his father used to be, and to understand how he became this. He also tries to go back and his father's religious beliefs and how that kind of is in conflict with his current worldview view of history right now and his current ideology. It's not a very clear dichotomy. And there is also the personal crisis of the father being a very problematic character in his own personal sphere in the sense of just as being a parent, like being violent or abusive or a lot of other things. So how do you reconcile all of those things and how do you reconcile with, like, these multiple identities and which culminate into this person now?

Divya: I actually find this business of going back and making connections really interesting. The literary space allows for this indirectly. I was hoping that writing letters to my parents may create this sort of space as well. To go back, to think back, to draw connections across time, and to understand the difficulty of them. Social media on the other hand seems to be a place of the continuous incessant present. The past is literally instantly overwritten, but at the same time, it becomes set in stone. You are what you tweeted, or so. It is difficult to find room for negotiation, nuance, or change. But then again, I don't want to make simplistic oppositions between literature and social media, or undermine the agential power that social-media platforms can have in many circumstances. I mean, it *is* a space where especially those who are structurally disadvantaged, those who are cut off from access to resources like publishing, can find a legitimate voice. Still, it has particular consequences on the way we remember or relate to the past and to the changeability of 'persons'. Can we come back to this later?

Manjiri: I was also thinking, how do we fit our political lives with the political lives of our parents? Nandini, you said before, that you grew up with left leaning parents, but I think that the three of us have not had that sort of opportunity to grow up in that kind of a household. So our parents are fairly right wing. How do we fit our lives then? Mutual cancelling seems to be one way out, right? And social media aside, this has quite a long tradition. Because I remember, like, these older films cancelling used to be like "oh ab tumko jaydaat se nikaal diya:" you are cut off from the inheritance.

And there is of course the gender angle involved here. Not only are women still largely just not considered for 'inheritance', they're also not expected to become political people at all. So, in some sense, I guess, it comes as a surprise, that their kids have turned into these political beings, who are willing to give up on relationships, and friendships, and even their parents, because of politics.

Nandini: Yeah, I agree with you more or less. We do need to think about the role that gender plays in the narrative. The space of protection that women receive from their families, often becomes much more important for them. It is much more difficult for

women to rebel against the idea of family. But, maybe, that's precisely why it's much more important for women to rebel against their families, if they have to find their own voices in some way or the other?

Manjiri: I guess it is precisely because of this matter of inheritance that it is easier to belittle or disregard the political lives of women. My mother constantly kept telling me, why is political ideology important when it comes to choosing a husband? So what if the guy supports the Right, you can change him, or that in the long run, it is not going to be important. Why would I change him? It sort of boils down to the fact that the political life of women is not relevant, has never been relevant, or they have sort of been silent, which brings us to the fact that women would never cut off from property because they were married and shipped off to someone else's house, to become someone else's problem.

Nandini: Women inheriting equal share of the family property is still fairly new in India, and other parts of the world. Often, affluent families have given their daughters 'gifts'. Those 'gifts' can be lavish by themselves. But property is not something that they could demand from their family. Because, in some ways, they are property themselves. So the idea of inheritance has always been far more complicated for women. While much of it has changed legally, there are always far more surreptitious, and mediated ways through which this gendered narrative of inheritance is performed. And, of course, we are talking about women and families, where there is some amount of property, to begin with. It would be completely different in families where there are no tangible forms of property to begin with.

Divya: Is that why my so-called anti-national behaviour has not had any real consequences? But just to go off on a little tangent, with this gender angle in mind, if I look at the current waves of protests across the country, they are literally in a large part helmed by womxn. And suddenly womxn and womxn's solidarities are starting to look very very dangerous. Perhaps here, in womxn's solidarities we can actually see the family-form disintegrating? Or for that matter, the patriarchal logics of property and inheritance, which are, as matters of social reproduction, of course also deeply tied to caste hierarchies in our country. The question remains, how we can do justice in writing to such solidarities, without falling back on the family as a (literary) 'form'.

But I want to go back to the question Manjiri was asking: how do we fit our political lives with that of our parents? So much is changing so quickly. Nandini, you were talking about temporality earlier. I want to try and connect the things we've been saying so far along these lines. Avinab, you talked about your character trying to go back to find where his father has 'regressed', when he was actually so progressive? I wanted

to do something similar, remind my parents of a past in which their ‘softness’ was a fundamentally politically progressive kind of ‘softness’. But really, is it as simple as regressing or going back on your ideas, or is it more complicated than that? If one thinks about changing political attitudes, one sees that there is a historical connection between emancipatory and reactionary positions. For example, this nationalism could at least in some senses be seen as an emancipatory anti-colonial stance by a class that wanted freedom from the British. Of course this emancipatory stance was rife with inequalities – caste being a central one. But even if it served any kind of emancipatory function in that particular context, several decades later, it has most definitely become regressive; it has become reactionary in the interest of preserving its own power (in the context of course of new, neo-liberal forms of imperialism, and access to new forms of knowledge). And the dark side of its power has become more visible than ever. There’s this aphorism I’ve heard here, that you are leftist in your 20s, center in your 40s and right in your 70s. Because the concrete things that used to be emancipatory for you in your time are suddenly reactionary. If we think of temporality, we can think of how the family-form, once a tool for emancipation, suddenly becomes a very conservative thing, a status-quo maintaining thing. So I really want to know, how do we understand change? I’m not happy with calling my parents ‘right wing’ (this term is too much of a western import, and I strongly doubt its efficacy in understanding our own political situation) or ‘reactionary’. There is no conversation to be had there. So imagine someone who used to be among the good guys and is now suddenly seen as right-wing or regressive? The world they know, the beliefs they held as ‘good’ are suddenly irredeemable? It must feel like the world they understood is being ripped from under their feet. That can only lead to frustration and resentment (for which by the way, social media seems to be a great outlet). So how do we deal with this?

Manjiri: I have a similar question. So Avinab’s character’s father is an ‘abusive’ figure, and now he’s the ‘abusive’ prime minister. So there is like an all around malevolence attached to this character. But like, I know Divya and I have talked about it: we sort of grew up with liberal values and our parents did not raise us in a very restrictive conservative kind of way. So how to write about these people who were good parents, who raised their kids well with good values, who gave them space enough to develop a political life, like be intelligent enough to choose whatever political leaning, whichever way they want to go, to develop themselves as people in a certain way, provided books and good food and whatever, everything that a good parent is supposed to provide. But suddenly we find ourselves at a crossroads with these people because of this political explosion that has happened in their lives, like fascism is sort of knocking at their doorstep. So we are struggling with our families to make them understand that, like, OK, you have to see that this is a problem. You can’t really be OK with this. So when it comes

to writing, how do we write these people? How do we write these people with the empathy, the understanding, and the compassion that they deserve? And yet with the critical lens that we need to bring into writing for these people.

Nandini: Maybe one way to think of it is, what kinds of lives do our parents and family members have, when they are not being our parents? In other words, I think, it also has a lot to do with how parents reveal their biographies to their children. I actually don't think, as children, we get to know our parents very much as human beings, in the same way, our parents do not necessarily get to know a lot about us. We offer each other sanitized biographies. This is inbuilt into the very nature of families, this is also socially approved. As such, Indian families are storehouses of secrets. We are all great liars. Literature, I think, can do two things in here. It can offer us diagnostic tools. It can also offer us pathways to imagine and write the alternative, what doesn't exist yet. Literatures, including Indian literatures, are full of such examples. And, even if literature can't always provide us with a solution, it can provide us with the diagnosis. It can show us where the disaster lies, and how we can look at the disaster. As uncomfortable as it is, there is a redemption in that very act of looking. Because, once you have looked into it, you can't unlook. I want to retain hope, however small it might be, within that process.

New in Poetry

Curated by Aswin Vijayan

His Own Rhythm

Chandramohan S., *Love after Babel and other poems*, Daraja Press, 2020

Chandramohan S. is an Anglophone Dalit poet and *Love after Babel* is his third collection of poems. The collection focuses on language and issues of translation expressed in the register of love. The poet shows an awareness “of the dangers of being the Other, but also [is] cognizant that there is no option to be anything but the marked Other,” as Suraj Yengde states in the introduction. The poems are divided into four varied parts. Part I: Call me Ishmael Tonight and Part II: Name Me a Word are sets of poems grouped together for their thematic unity. Part III: Learning from the Panthers is a long poem in eleven parts which is a tribute from the poet to Dalit Panthers for their contribution to the cultural and political struggles of the Dalits. Part IV: Love after Babel is a sequence of twenty-two short poems that function as a single long poem on translation, its processes, and the ways in which translation itself becomes an act of love in the post-Babel period of chaos—linguistic and otherwise.

Why Loiter?

(In the neoliberal world)

The era of open markets

Added colour to the stale world of white-only lingerie,

Everything got spun around

Like the inside of the washing machine,

With the colour pink spilling over to the white,

To scrounge for a rump-sized perch

On the lingerie clothesline.

LOVE AFTER BABEL

(10)

A translator is perennially in pursuit
Of his own rhythm, un-weaving his voice from the
Rhythmic wave-strokes on either shore.

LOVE AFTER BABEL

(19)

In an unnamed busy street
An occasional stranger
Elbows me like a cuss word grating
On my soul, I overhear a beggar
Seeking alms in my vernacular.

The language is an archipelago,
Its dialects are the islands
Slowly drifting apart like
Blood-relatives estranged to the vein
Until the sea swallows them
One at a time.

The market speaks the same language
Along the world's sea-routes.

Into the Rear-view Mirror

Shobhana Kumar, *A Sky Full of Bucket Lists*, Red River, 2020, Rs. 230/-

Shobhana Kumar's collection of haibun addresses what both the blurbs to the book term as "the human condition." Divided into six sections titled Motif, Within, Conversations, Work, Streets, and Beyond, Kumar's third collection of poems discusses human alienation, illness, poverty, and death. What strikes the reader is the empathy in the voice that Kumar assumes, placing herself in the position of the active observer. While discussing the diseased body and the mind, these poems carefully portray the subjects as suffering yet self-aware. The poems, as is common in the haibun form, turns to the imagery of nature to highlight what is human. A stunning example is the haiku: *always different/ always the same/ sea sounds*. The book is also sprinkled with dramatic interludes before each section and these are starkly poetic, engaging, and adds a layer to the poems that follow.

Confinement

The twigs on the ledge appear like magic. Their bearers descend, wings hushed into a silence — both discreet and disarming. Before we know it, they have created the semblance of a nest. We try to shoo them off but their persistence wins us over.

One of them is pregnant. For days, she doesn't move. Two weeks later, we are awakened by the chirrups of two helpless chicks. They are a deep brown, unlike their grey parents.

We open the window a little more to let some warmth in. The little ones turn away; bury their heads in their downs. But we believe the morning sun will do them good.

abandoned shrine the gods as lost as us

Grimm

Appa likes to smoke the house every evening. He places some camphor and charcoal on a dried coconut shell. He lights a match and gently blows into it with an old iron pipe until the orange flames lick every layer.

bougainvillea

all the secrets between neighbours

We watch his eyes light up in child-like amazement. 'How many millennia are tucked into this splinter of black!' he sighs as he sees our absolute apathy to this epiphany.

He kindles the frankincense and goes into meditative silence. 'Look at us, burning all this to go to heaven.'

karaoke night

the record always slips at his favourite line

'Why do it at all, Pa?' we ask, annoyed at this cynicism.

'Because you need something to remind you of home. And how much there is to do before you hang your boots.'

last sunset all the memories now in an urn

Apocalypse

In a cabbage farm one hundred miles away, a field bursts with promise. But this time, there is no truck waiting to transport them to the city, no middleman sauntering in claiming to know the market best.

harvest song
a cradle squirms under a mango tree

The farmer sends out a distress call. When no one answers, he opens his field to the village livestock. Over herd ruminations, he sends out a warning of a famine on the horizon. Again, his voice is muffled in an urbane cacophony.

rain clouds... traffic lights pause longer at the red

A Pot of Avial

Ranjani Murali, *Clearly You Are ESL*, The (Great) Indian Poetry Collective, 2020, Rs. 150/- (ebook)

Ranjani Murali's second collection of poetry was conceived as an MFA thesis at George Mason University. This collection is highly inventive, radically questioning the rigid ways in which language and poetry is often approached. The book is structured like a workbook designed for the ESL learners addressed in the title. It has three sections and each section seems to be comprised of definitions, anecdotes, graphs, and writing exercises to aid the learner. This structure is intentionally repetitive, invoking a sense of familiarity in anyone who has ever tried to learn a new language with the help of textbooks and workbooks. *Clearly You Are ESL* is inventive not only in its structure and form but also in the content. Murali extends the limits of imagination in most of her poems but especially in 'Watchman', 'Yama's Buffalo Halted and', and 'Beach Violations'. 'Clearly You Are ESL: Workbook Cursieve III' is an example of the ways in which Murali uses association and activity-book interactivensness to push the bounds of the rigid definitions of poetry.

Define: Identify, or, Several Short Sentences for Our Language

Ours is a lyrical language. A classical springing fourth of reticent consonants. Our vowels are edged with wholesome clarified dissent. Our faces contort into melting plastic wires. When the state stamps our petitions with yes, we will eat our paper. Then, our hairy-eared clerks will turn. Singing roadside percussions will turn. The streets lined with silver anklets will turn. The jasmine sellers' calls will turn. the last bell of the primary schools will turn. Our smithies and our firing coals will turn. Our paper words will turn, turn into the plastic horizon, all our sentences singeing at the corners.

Yama's Buffalo Halted and

I found him in a field of billowing
grass, stirring a pot of avial.

That which is succulent unfolds
the end, he said, cutting open

a sachet of coconut milk. Hand me a wok,
he gestured, his mouth full of pogaielai

spiked with cardamom fogging his
glasses, five strands settling on his cotton shirt.

When I picked up the brass wok, potatoes appeared
in it, already sautéed, sprinkled with freshly sliced

ears and fingertips. Must I eat this, I asked.
Why? He wiped the back of his hand on his apron,

ladled the avial and some Ponni No. 2 rice onto a plate
and pressed my right arm. The lotus stream

was tinged with beads of sweat. You cannot drink
on an empty stomach. Then he placed his palm

upon my head and I could not see the counting
of each grain of rice, its white belly

sliced between my teeth, the words full
of the traces of husk.

Clearly You Are ESL: Workbook Cursieve III

There is a well full of water.

The girl has an empty pot.

The mother works at the stove.

The father waters the fields.

The stove is burning.

The water is cold.

The girl fills the pot with mud.

The father's hands are muddy.

The mother wipes her hands.

The field is full of muddy water.

The mother burns the rice.

The girl breaks the pot.

The rice is boiling.

The father breaks her hand.

The mother is burning.

The girl's eyes water.

The rice is in the mud.

What Hell is This

Gopal Honnalgere, *The Collected Poems of Gopal Honnalgere*, Ed. K. A. Jayaseelan,
Poetrywala, 2020

Gopal Honnalgere is a relatively unknown name among the Anglophone poets of India. His collected poems, brought out as a result of the effort of his friends and well-wishers including K A Jayasheelan, E V Ramakrishnan, Vivek Narayanan, and K Satchidanandan, is a reminder that Honnalgere and these poems should be more prominently featured in the discussions of our poetry in the latter half of the twentieth century. Honnalgere's poems are not necessarily as pithy and curated as some of his contemporaries but has an open, rambling quality that is marked with a certain wit. He observes his surroundings clearly and narrates the goings-on. He begins and ends with the quotidian while occasionally, almost accidentally stumbling into a larger philosophy of life. This collection features his work from his five collected volumes including juvenilia alongside the newer unpublished poems collated from his letters to friends.

Death in the Apple-Core

Then a night
dark moth
named death
bored a tunnel
into the green
apple's core
and ate
the apple seeds
laid two eggs
and flew away.

When the old
Adam cut
the red ripe apple
into two
he saw two moths
as dark as the eyes
of his beloved Eve
flying away.
Surprised, he asked
“How did these
moths get into
the apple core
without making
any hole
like thoughts suddenly
getting into our heads?”

How To Tame A Pair Of New Chappals

for tirumalesb

don't keep them together
don't allow them to talk to each other
they may form a trade union

don't leave them anytime near
a wall-clock, law-books, calendar, national flag
gandhi's portrait or newspaper
they may come to know about
independence day, satyagraha
holidays, working hours, minimum wages and corruption

don't take them to your temple
they may at once come to know you are weak
your god is false and start biting you

don't take them anytime close to your dining table
they may ask for food
or cast their evil eyes on your sumptuous dinner

first use them only for short walks
then gradually increase the distance
they should never know the amount of work they have to do

pull their tight straps loose
let them feel happy
they are growing bigger
smear some old oil on the rough straps
let them feel they are anointed

now they are good subdued labourers
ready to work overtime
for your fat feet

Breaking the Monotony

Even the Big Ben clock in hell
Has a smiling face.
Its hands move timelessly
With time.
And at 4 O'clock
The Warden says:
"Children hell is over now
You can go home and play."

But what hell is this:
"Rama is a good boy
Rama is a good boy
Rama is a good boy . . ."
I have to write
Again and again
And again . . .
The same sentence in the copy book.
The master has a creative face.
The master has a Hitler moustache.
I shall not write my copy book.
Some days he twists my ears clockwise.
Some days he twists my ears anti-clockwise.
Some days he twists my left ear clockwise
And the right ear anti-clockwise.

I shall not write my copy book
Let me feel
At least a pain
Each day differently.

Author bios

Abbas Bagasrawala is a writer of food blogs, non-fiction, fiction and even less frequently, poetry. He's had the privilege of being one of the few people published at *The Bombay Literary Magazine* for fiction as well as for poetry. He's also recently been published in *Vayavya*. He lives in Pune with his family where his day-to-day involves dealing with the travails of an engineering business and life in general.

Ajay Kumar Nair lives in Chennai, India, where he's pursuing his BA in English Language and Literature. A winner of the Rattle Ekphrastic Prize, his work has appeared in *The Bombay Review*, *Muse India*, *Praxis*, and *The Bangalore Review*, among others.

Annalisa Mansukhani studies histories of photography across spaces of exhibition and modes of remembrance, working with notions of the archive in contemporary curatorial practices. She read history for her undergraduate degree from St. Stephen's College, University of Delhi, and has a Master's in art history from Nalanda University. Writing alongside image and verse, she is currently fascinated by evolving vocabularies of imaging trauma across mediums in art. As a Programmes Manager for the Foundation of Indian Contemporary Art in Delhi, she establishes frameworks and activates resources around art and education, spaces of exhibition, research, critical writing and public programming.

Arun Paria lives in Pune. He writes poetry, fiction, creative non-fiction and songs. His poem has been published in *The Bombay Literary Magazine*. He is the founder of Pune Writers' Group, a writer's community serving over 2000 writers.

Ashaq Hussain Parray is a poet, translator, and currently a Ph.D. candidate at the department of English, Aligarh Muslim University, India, working in Translation Studies, with a special focus on the translation of Indian poetry into English. Parray's translation of Zamrud Habib's autobiography *Nigab-i-Anjum: Life and Times of a Kashmiri Woman* detailing the Kashmir conflict from a woman's perspective is forthcoming from *Zubaan Books*, India. Parray's poetry and translations have featured or are forthcoming in journals and magazines like *Inverse Journal*, *Kashmir Lit*, *The Punch Magazine*, *Cerebration: The Literary Journal*, *The Bombay Literary Magazine*, *Ezra: An Online Journal of Translation* from Roger Williams University, Rhodes Island and *Presence: A*

Journal of Catholic Poetry from Caldwell University, Caldwell, New Jersey.

Avani Tandon Vieira is a PhD candidate and Gates scholar at the University of Cambridge. Prior to beginning her doctorate, she received a bachelor's degree in English at St. Stephen's College, Delhi and a master's in World Literatures at the University of Oxford. Her research considers little magazines and independent publishing in the late twentieth century. Alongside her academic work, she runs the *Pind Collective*, an online space for young artists from India and Pakistan and *The Museum of Ephemera*.

Cheshta is a human being who wishes it were an octopus with no ambition.

Dion D'Souza is the author of *Three Doors*, a collection of poems. He lives in Mumbai.

Dipanjali Roy (she/her) is a poet and researcher of feminist cyberpunk and posthumanist theories of the body. She holds a Master of Letters in Women, Writing, & Gender from the University of St Andrews, Scotland, where she was also a poetry reader for *The Scores*. Originally from Gurgaon, India, she is a graduate of Literatures in English from Lady Shri Ram College for Women, New Delhi. Her debut poetry is now out in print with the Glasgow-based *Gutter Magazine*, Scotland. She enjoys cyborgs, anime, cold coffee, and warm toast; and can otherwise be found flitting through the virtual as @dipandjelly.

Hamraaz lives in Delhi and writes about the dark times we are living in. Their poetry has appeared in *Rattle*, *The Alipore Post*, *The Sunflower Collective*, and *LiveWire*. You can find more poetry at hamraazpoems.org or on Instagram and Twitter.

Indu Parvathi is an educator and poet from Bengaluru, India. Her work has been published in various literary magazines and journals including *The Sunflower Collective*, *The Annual Journal of the Poetry Society of India*, *Indian Review*, *Bangalore Review*, *Muse India*, *Punch magazine*, and elsewhere. Her first volume of poetry, *On the Sidewalk*, was published by Authorspress, India in 2019. Some of her new poems are forthcoming in *The Alipore Post* and *Adelaide Literary Magazine*.

Kandala Singh is a writer and qualitative researcher from New Delhi. She lives with

her partner in a flat that looks out at Ashoka trees and escapes to the mountains as often as she can. Her poems have appeared in or are forthcoming from *Rust + Moth*, *The Alipore Post*, and *Muse India*. You can find her on Instagram @kandalasingh.

Kinjal Sethia is a freelance writer-editor based in Pune. She is working as a copy editor for a media start-up. She is a part of the poetry community *The Quarantine Train*, and is the prose editor for *The Bombay Literary Magazine*.

A postgraduate in English Literature from the University of Delhi, **M.S. Alphonze** is currently part of the founding team of a content startup, Kaudent Connect.

Manesha Deva Sarma holds an MFA in Sculpture from Kalabhavana, Visvabharati University, Santhiniketan, West Bengal. His work has been exhibited at several venues such as Lalithkala Akademi, Durbar Hall Art Center, Chaithyanya Art Gallery, among others. He is the recipient of numerous awards and scholarships, including the 2017 State Award for sculpture from the Govt. of Kerala. He lives in Nadutheri, Kerala.

Manjiri Indurkar writes from Jabalpur. She is the author of *It's All in Your Head*, *M* 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.

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 /Vayavya, 2017). She divides her time between Kolkata, her hometown, and Sonapat, where she teaches literature at OP Jindal Global University.

Preeti Vangani is a poet & personal essayist. She is the author of *Mother Tongue Apologize* (RLFPA Editions), her first book of poems which won the RL India Poetry Prize. Her work has been published in *BOAAT*, *Gulf Coast*, *Threepenny Review* among other journals. She is the Poetry Editor for *Glass*, a Poet Mentor at *Youth Speaks* in the Bay Area and holds an MFA (Writing) from University of San Francisco.

Rahana K Ismail is a doctor and a poet from Calicut. She is a member of *The*

Quarantine Train. Her poems have appeared in *Active Muse* and *Indus Woman Writing*.

Rehman Rahi (1925-) is the greatest modern Kashmiri poet who brought Kashmiri poetry out of the stupor of hackneyed romanticism and years of mystic fervour. Beginning as a progressive poet who was inspired by the wave of progressive politics in the Indian subcontinent, he soon turned towards the modern self, exploring the human subject in relation to itself and the world. Known for his difficult style, Rahi remains the unacknowledged master of Kashmiri poetry combining Eastern and Western wisdom. He is the recipient of numerous awards that include the *Sahitya Akademi Award* (1961) for his poetry collection *Nawroṣ-i-Saba* (1958), the *Padma Shri* in 2000, and the *Gyanpith Award*, India's highest literary award for his poetic collection *Siyah Rudeh Jarren Manz*. He is also the only Kashmiri on whom a full documentary named "*Rahi: The Poet of Silence*" was released. Rehman Rahi's major poetry collections include *Nawroṣ-i-Saba* (1958) and *Siyah Rood Jaeren Manz* (1997), and *Kadleh Thathis Peth* (On the Pier of the Bridge) 2006.

Rakhi Dalal is based in Hisar, Haryana. She is an educator by profession.

Salik Basharat is a graduate student in the English department at Ashoka University. He loves drinking nun chai, coffee, and orange juice. Not all at once, of course.

Shailee Mehta is an artist who works with figurations of the feminine with an autobiographical approach to the politics of otherness, mythology and desire.

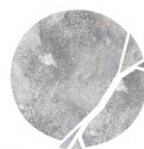
Shivi is a budding writer in the final year of her Post Graduation in English Literature from Ambedkar University, Delhi. She is also a teacher, a storyteller and a freelance content writer. Shivi has been published in *CityScope Magazine* based in Hong Kong, and has a paper published in the *Indian Journal of School Health and Well-being*.

From Mumbai, India, **Sree Sen** relocated to Ireland in 2019 to pursue MA in Creative Writing at University College Dublin. Heavily published as a journalist in India, Sree's creative works have appeared in *Poetry Ireland Review*, *bath magg*, *The Night Heron Barks*, *Crossways*, and others. Recipient of the Cill Rialaig Residency 2020 and UCD Maeve Binchy Travel Award 2020, she's currently working on several writing projects.

Tasneem Khan is a poet from Lucknow, India. She has contributed to online platforms like *Live Wire*, *The Wire's space for young writers* and *Women's Web*. She posts regularly on her Poetry Blog on Instagram.

Vivekanand Selvaraj currently lives in China and would very much like to introduce himself as a poet. He writes in both English and Tamil and translates from Chinese and English to Tamil and also from Tamil to English. His work has appeared in *TBLM*, *nether Quarterly*, *Sonic Boom*, *Vayanya* and *The Freedom Review*. His debut collection of Tamil poems, *Sudhandhiram Oru Dabba* was released in January 2021.

Zainab Ummer Farook lives in Kozhikode and is, unfortunately, stranded in a phase where she whines about not writing than actually sitting down to write. She hopes to come up with a witty bio someday.



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2/3 March 2021



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