



nether Quarterly
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Dear readers,

We really can't think of much to say except feel this sense of relief and gratitude. This issue has made its way through so much loss and heartbreak, through the death-grip of the 2nd covid wave, there were moments we thought it wouldn't come through. We apologise for the delay, and thank you wholeheartedly for staying with us. Many thanks to Yogesh Maitreya for conceptualizing the submissions call; Rahee Punyashloka for taking over the reins from Yogesh and joining us as guest editor and seeing the issue through. Although each issue poses its unique set of challenges, this particular one made us once again confront the urgency of having a constant dialogue around caste, and also see how difficult it is to write about it. At the same time, as readers, we learnt how ingenious and subversive such writing could be.

The call for our forthcoming issue, due now in March '22 will be up on our website by mid-December. Do look out for it. In the meantime, we hope you enjoy reading the issue and continue sharing your work with us.

With love,
The editors

November '21

Dialoguing Caste

I like how the kitchen in our house looks.
Especially during the daytime. Two large windows
converge atop the L-shaped black granite counter,
the sun beaming in warm snug comfort.
When *umma* cooks at the burner in that corner
facing the window, her greying strands
– exposed by her fallen veil – gleam,
illuminating the lores in them. Seated diagonally
opposite at the round four-seater breakfast table
is from where we behold this sight. And also hold
dialogue: mostly difficult, sometimes impenetrable.

“What if I marry an *ossan*?”

“Why do you keep asking this?”

Faith seems no longer naïve and the privilege
is more pronounced. Between guilt and desire,
I bore holes of inquiry.

“Why would you marry an *ossan*?”

“Why would I not?”

Shorn of answers, a question for a question
for a question. Caste persisting, apathy
abiding. The kitchen is still a good place
for dialogue: dissident and disturbing.

We did no caste, she had said, because Islam
didn't. But people did *umma*, and she knew they
did. *Umma* ill at ease is an uneasy picture,
even as she talks about the *pancharapaatta* lessons

she learnt from an *ossathi*: a delicacy that's porous,
honeycomb-like in form, made from the airy
rice batter foam, deep-fried and sugar-dusted
to be devoured with bananas. "Your husband,
if an *ossan*," in dread, she sighs, "may be forbidden
to rest next to your *qabr*." Till death and even after,
would they do us apart, it must've meant.

Pancharapaatta, smashed and broken to crumbs
for relish, is not the only thing pervious.
So is dirt: the dirt we apparently woke up from,
and the dirt we shall all rest in.

(Silence. Morbid.)

Oisín Breen

The Anaesthesia of Sangfroid

That gummy, rooted, origin smile,
Which goes back all the way to Eden,
That falsehood,
That wild belief that everything is equal,
One, and that which burns the shoulder,
Need not burn the seed,
This threnody,
Which always to the same effective purpose,
Looses its so strident sling of muddied surety,
This knowledge that our thoughts,
Errant, ardent,
Are just hungers in a sirocco dream,
These notes; the thesis and antithesis to dream;
Lost, limp, dry, malleable, vital, and unimpeachable,
Through these we may the final obtuse melody observe.

We watch it, and, in so doing,
As though it were a straw lipped pod of peas,
A thin phallus with an ever present best-before,
As though it would always remain,
Beneath our remembering heel, we watch it,
And, heavy under the anaesthesia of sangfroid,
We grow uneasy in sight of its root and bone.

Yet it reminds us
There are limits to certainty.
And though the pulse beats,
This thronging loom of emptiness,
In silence stands.

Portrait of a Goddess

so then, beauty, a deity,

she's who we've really had our eyes on.

a go-go girl
ready to twirl
her phantom limbs

and her prosthetics
have littered

this
mouth

our landscape
of city love.

and we have looked
beneath her skirts for something she once said

it coloured the air so sweetly

but the directions say

she exited stage-left long ago

and blinded by indecision

we have lost the capacity to insist

not to others

but to ourselves

so the walls
come
and this is
it quiets

they must
crumbling

per force
down
the ideal
the heat of death

and i want
of lust
for the divinity

the divinity
and i watch
of lust

eidolon
I am undone

enantiodromia
and the circuit breaks

Now is too Strange a God

Tim Cassidy rifles through the mud,
The Earth an antique bookshelf,
Finger-stumbling in search of the meaning of life,
Where the greater the rate of consumption,
The stronger the flame, and the quicker it dies.

He sits, shoulders in an 8am slump against a bar,
His hands wracked by pins and needles
Brought on by motionless hours,
And from wretchedly fondling a worn paperback,
Its pages fused with coffee stains.

“69-” “73-” “331-”
His laughter scratches the air,
Like thin boots on gravel – an exclamation,
Wasting away, drop by drop by drop,
The result of an error to compute.

He spits. Just another day.
And dog tiredness sets herself on him.
An ill wind of old harm,
And Pints are raised.

Through it, but not above it, below it neither,
His throne, empty, too large,
He, a real lubricator of sin and sinfulness,
The Cassidy, a tenor,
Sings the evening haze.

And I believe,
As we all must,
Yesterday is all there is,
For now is too strange a god.

Kailash Chand Chauhan

*Translated from the Hindi by
Bharatbhooshan Tiwari & Kartikeya Jain*

Sanjeev's Dhaba

My village is about 150 kilometres from Delhi. This is just a guess, it could be more, or even less than that. It is called Uchawana, in Hathras district...quite an enchanting place, just the way writers describe villages. Not only are there mango trees and cuckoos coo-cooing, one can also find peacocks dancing on occasion. But I could not breathe there, so I left and came down to Delhi.

When I came from the village to live in Delhi, I could barely even manage food for myself. I left around ten years ago, having struggled with unemployment for a long time. Actually, I was fighting two things there. Despite finishing my BA, the villagers continued to practise untouchability and I could not stand it. I would often quarrel with them. Though I had many friends in the village, it's not like all of them were Dalits. There were some non-Dalits too, and I often joked around with them.

Sitting idle all the time, I was always a nuisance in my parents' eyes. So, time and again I had to go work in the fields. We also had two buffaloes in the house, and even these were rented from the Thakurs. I had to bathe them often. And on top of everything, I had to give them fodder too.

I thought that I've spent some years studying, but the rest of my life would be spent feeding and bathing the buffaloes. Even if I manage to endure all this, what would I do about the villagers who brand me despicable and discriminate against me?

Their name-calling wounded me many times. I had often heard that if someone called Dalits by their derogatory caste names, they could be convicted by law. In the city, many officers had lost their jobs for using caste slurs. But the villagers in Uchawana would openly spit caste slurs with the sole aim of humiliating me. And not only me, they would cuss out every Dalit in the village by their caste name: *chuhde ke*, *bhangi ke*, *chamar ke*, and so on. But no one felt bad about it. Only I was wounded.

Seeing all these things over the years, my mind settled on leaving the village. One day, I put my clothes and educational certificates in a bag and left home. My cousin Sonal had been staying in

Delhi since her marriage, so I stayed with her family for a few days. Sonal was illiterate herself, but the boy she got hitched to was a tenth-pass. He worked as a clerk at the municipal corporation and directed me to a call centre. Soon I rented a house near it, working by night and relaxing in the day. It is not a good idea, staying with relatives for a long time.

The call centre job paid 10,000 rupees. They assured me that they would raise it later. I sent 5,000 to my parents and kept the remaining 5,000 for my own expenses. Wherever any other job openings came up I always filled out the forms, depending on my qualifications. All this became a part of my daily routine.

I had been in Delhi for just six or seven months when I received a call from my mother: my father was very ill. 'Come see his face, if you want.' The news did not surprise me a bit, he was often unwell. Meagre eating and increasing physical work will naturally hollow you out. He had turned asthmatic while I was still there.

The second day after hearing that my father was seriously ill, I got on a bus to Hathras from the Anand Vihar Bus Terminal. It was a UP Roadways bus, and it looked ancient. Perhaps it was in the habit of shivering like a weak body while moving. It would even cough every now and then, just like an old person. When this happened the entire bus started convulsing, the way a weak, old person gets entirely shaken up when they cough. There were dents and peeling paint all over the place—it was a mess. To use another analogy, it was as if a hungry person had had no food for days. The outer shell too was squished in several places, like the shrivelled up skin of a weak, old man.

Inside, the seats were all torn up. Although I did sit down, I could not help looking over the seat and wondering about that part of my back (you know what I mean... I am unable to use the word, being a sanskari person) after such a long journey. But what could I do? I could not be sure when I'd catch another bus. Even if I got one, it could've been in a similarly derelict condition.

Anyway, I thought, *forget it*. This is India. We have problems galore and corruption everywhere. Uttar Pradesh is in dire straits, they say. But I have no intention to get into *all that*, so I'll move on.

The bus has started. The weather is chilly, it's the month of December. Even though the bus is quite full, it's not really an issue. But yes, if this was summertime, it would have certainly gotten humid inside and the bus would be awash in the stink of everyone's sweat. I had just opened the window to get some fresh air when everyone asked me to shut it. Actually, I have a physical allergy to the smell of fuel pervading buses, which goes to my head and leads to a horrible headache.

Perhaps this is because I only travel in them once in a while. Although I closed the window, I left just a tiny crack so I could keep taking in the fresh air.

‘Where are you headed?’ asked the gentleman sitting next to me. His face was shiny, sandalwood tilak on his forehead. He was wearing a dhoti-kurta. Just by looking at him one could tell this mister was a pandit.

‘I have to get down at Hathras, then catch another bus to my village,’ I replied.

Why he asked me this question, I do not know. Perhaps his companion could not find a seat. It’s also possible that his wife was sitting somewhere else and he wanted her to come closer, once my seat got empty midway. There could be one other reason too. Some people are in the habit of chattering about something or the other to pass the time, and they end up asking such questions just to break the ice. Quite often, they blabber out of their inquisitive nature: *Let me find out where exactly this person wants to go...* The motive could’ve been anything. I could only guess.

‘There must be some wedding in the village?’ was his next question.

‘No, it’s no wedding, bhaiya ji. Father has suddenly taken ill, I have to go see him.’

‘Oh! What’s happened to him?’

‘Not sure what exactly happened this time. He is asthmatic. My mother told me over the phone that it’s quite bad and that I must come quickly.’

‘Is it serious?’

‘Yes, perhaps.’

By now I could tell that mister was a chatterbox, blabbering only to kill time, with no real problem.

‘Show me your hand once.’

Now I was sure that this gentleman was a pandit, and an expert in astrology to boot.

‘No, panditji, I don’t believe in such things. Please don’t mind.’

‘What is there to mind! It’s fine only. But this is my livelihood.’

‘But you would have gotten no money for this from me,’ I laughed.

‘Oh no, not at all. I was not expecting anything from you.’

‘You must be staying in a village...?’

‘Just before Hathras, it’s a village called Ramania. Over there and in the surrounding area, folks know me as Ramprasad Jyotishi.’

‘So, are you able to earn a decent living out of this?’ I asked out of curiosity.

‘Sure, the kids are being raised. We have a temple too in the village.’

‘Then you are all sorted, panditji,’ I smiled.

‘Not really, but yes, we get by. Anyway, forget it. Did you see the cricket match yesterday?’

‘No.’

‘We were very unlucky. Australia scored 350 runs.’

‘That’s like a mountain! It would have been a one-sided affair then,’ I grew interested in mister pandit’s chatter.

‘What are you saying, bhaisaab! Team India is second to none. We won the game even without Sachin.’

‘Wow!’ I was startled. ‘Was Sachin unwell?’

‘No, no, he did play, even bowled a bit.’

‘So then, panditji, did he get injured while bowling?’

‘No, no, bhai. Actually, this time he got out for a duck.’

‘Sachin can’t perform under pressure, I’ve seen it so often.’ The gentleman who said this was standing right next to our seat, one hand gripping the strap hanging from above and the other holding on to the iron bar behind our seat.

‘After Sachin, we lost four wickets in a row. There were just eighty runs on the board after twenty overs.’

‘That means we were heading for certain defeat. So what happened?’

‘What *could’ve* happened bhai? Rahul Dravid and MS Dhoni took charge of the situation and Australia were completely floored! It was a thriller yesterday.’

Some people are in the habit of talking so much, they’ll even worm themselves into strangers’ familial conversations. I had just met this man, we were together only for this bus journey, but he was chatting as if he was my family, or a very close friend.

‘How can I get married now, panditji! I’ve just done my BA. I’m working at a call centre in Delhi these days.’

‘Call centre? So you must have a good salary, no?’ The panditji asked as if he was about to fix my marriage.

‘I don’t know about others but for me, it’s great.’

‘How much do you get?’

‘Just around ten thousand.’

‘Ten thousand! That’s too less!’ he said with disappointment creasing his face. ‘Though the job seems quite interesting. Boys and girls must have a lot of fun in the night-shifts..?’

‘You have a point, panditji. But only those who are not sanskari have fun. We are from the village, we’re not so adventurous.’

‘Oh, come on! Are you saying village folks don’t have a heart, they don’t have emotions? I’m not trying to poke into your private life here.’ A mischievous smile appeared on panditji’s face, even in his voice.

His teasing had left me embarrassed.

They say you don’t realize where time flies on a journey, when you keep the conversation going instead of just sitting around mutely. The bus stopped at a dhaba. It was not exactly a dhaba, but

modern India's developed version of a dhaba—nice and clean, in a concrete building. There were chairs instead of charpais and the tables were round, instead of the usual long, battered ones. Golgappas, tikki, bhalle papdi, sabzi, roti, tea, coffee and a whole lot more was on the menu. The place was somewhere between Aligarh and Kharja perhaps.

When I got off the bus that gentleman came along with me.

'So, what are we having?' panditji asked.

'Generally, outside food is unhealthy but this dhaba looks clean...best if we eat something.'

'Why, you didn't eat at home and come?'

'No, I just grabbed four slices of bread and tea in a hurry.'

As we talked, we entered a room inside the dhaba. Though I wished to have tea outside in the cold, I decided to get some food first. I ordered six rotis, dal fry and a kadi, while panditji got shahi paneer and only four rotis.

The bus driver and conductor were sitting two-three tables away from us. Perhaps it is the lure of this food that forces them to stop at a dhaba. Before getting off the bus, a passenger sitting in the back told me that not only do the drivers and conductors get free food at these dhabas, they also get a commission. 'Otherwise what is the need to stop at a dhaba during a four-hour journey? It's the commission only...they could stop anywhere in between if they were worried so much about people "relieving" themselves. It's a ten-minute job. Anyway, most people carry their own food.'

A million people will have a million opinions.

My own view is different. One gets bored sitting around on these long journeys. A pitstop like this offers some relief, makes you feel lighter. One can get 'relieved' too. The biggest upside is that the 'backside' gets some much-needed rest—it tends to get worn out sitting through such long journeys.

Now, you must be wondering why I didn't use this word, 'backside', earlier. Actually, I couldn't recall it then. I just realized that if I use this specific word, most people would get what I am trying to say. It seems natural too.

I ate in a hurry, fearing the bus might leave. We washed our hands and went up to the counter to

pay. That gentleman aka the panditji was also with me. I was just about to pay, when I was startled by a sudden, sharp slap on my back. I turned around, the face seemed familiar. He was smiling at me.

‘What, you don’t recognize me?’ he said with a tinge of mischief.

‘...No.’ I studied his face carefully for a while.

‘It’s Sanjeev, you used to call me Sanju.’

I gawked at him, aghast. The Sanjeev I knew used to have a rag on his shoulder, a scruffy beard, no colour in his face even as a youth. But this Sanjeev on the other hand—what a glowing face, full cheeks and sparkling clean clothes!

Back in our village Sanjeev often got into fights with someone or the other. ‘What’s the difference between us and these non-Dalits?’ he would say. ‘They are human, and so are we. Red blood flows in their veins, and in ours too. They are rich and we are poor—that’s the only difference, no? They own huge farms, while we have barely one or two bighas in our name. We’re forced to work in their fields, but don’t we work harder than them? On top of all this, they’ll say we are beneath them.’

One time when the wells in the area dried up, they installed handpumps all over the village. Then one day the Thakurs’ handpump stopped working. So they started using our handpump to draw water and bathe their buffaloes. It took a whole month for their handpump to get fixed.

That day, the always-stubborn Sanjeev landed up with his bucket at the Thakurs’ handpump. He was just starting to fill it up when a Thakurain came and protested. Several other Thakurs had also gathered. How could we stand up to them? It was the Thakurs’ village. But Sanjeev was adamant, and only moved after filling his bucket. Later the Thakurs washed that handpump with detergent.

Then one day Sanjeev crossed all boundaries. He went to a Thakur’s home to collect his parents’ wages. The man had some relatives over at his place. Sanjeev’s mother and father worked in the Thakur’s fields. It was the month of June, three o’clock in the afternoon. The heat was unbearable. The sun was moving to the west but still spitting fire.

He asked the Thakur’s daughter for some water. The girl must’ve been around nineteen or twenty. She got the water, but she brought it in a tumbler and asked him to cup his hands so she could pour from above. Sanjeev was furious. The girl still harboured casteism, despite being educated.

She had passed twelfth and was doing her BA.

‘I am a human being too. Why give me water from so far away? Just give me the tumbler.’

The girl pulled it back instead.

Meanwhile the Thakur saheb arrived and the girl told him everything. Thakur saheb rained all sorts of abuses on Sanjeev. He had to come back empty-handed, despondent. His parents too gave him an earful.

So these incidents showed him, too, to the city. Where was he, what did he do? I had no idea. He’d quit studying after passing twelfth, while I continued.

‘Ah, yes...I see Sanjeev sparkling somewhere in this glowing face,’ I said, looking him over. As if I had found some long-lost object in there.

Sanjeev laughed out loud.

‘How come you are here? Are you headed to the village too?’ I asked.

‘No, no, this is my dhaba only.’

The bus started honking after a while. As if calling out to its passengers, saying, *Come quick, I am about to leave.*

I asked the pandjtji from the bus to carry on. I was going to take the next bus, only after sitting with Sanjeev for a bit.

Both of us went inside, into another room. It was Sanjeev’s own room. It felt nice, seeing a comfortable bed there. We sat down on it, resting our backs against the wall and spreading our feet wide. I had already removed my shoes and socks.

‘Bhai, Sanjeev, I really like this setup. But tell me, what made you start a dhaba on the highway?’

‘You already know, how I often got into arguments over untouchability and discrimination back in the village. One day I got fed up and just came to the city. But things are not that different there either. I worked very hard for a couple of years. I heard about the experiences of others from our community, too. You walk into any office, and they are mostly trying to figure out what caste you belong to, what kind of Dalit you are. Whether you’re Valmiki or Chamar, a Dhanak

or someone else. If you have a caste surname, then there is no need to ask. Though certain gotras are there in many castes. If your surname is Chauhan, they would ask, “What kind of Chauhan? Are you a Rajput, Thakur or a Khatik?””

‘Yes, this is true. There is a curiosity about what community you belong to. This is a traditional weakness in India,’ I said.

‘Hahaha...traditional weakness. You got that right.’ I wondered why he laughed at my words. I was trying to figure this out when he said, after a few seconds’ silence, ‘You never know what will happen when you tell them your caste. They say things like, “These Chuhras and Chamars are progressing a lot nowadays. See, now we will have to take orders from them...etc. etc.”’

‘That is all fine. But a dhaba...here? I don’t understand, how did this happen?’ My curiosity had peaked.

‘I’ll tell you. There was a guy who used to work in the city. Someone told him that this piece of land was up for sale, with three rooms already constructed. The owner wanted to send his son to America to study. It was the perfect opportunity, how could I miss it! I sold some land next to my house in the village. There was also three bigha of farmland, I sold that too. I had saved some money while working in the city. We had some relatives there, they also helped me. The plot owner too was a gentleman. He agreed to take some amount in instalments. You know what they say: Where there is a will, there is a way.’

‘This plot must have been very expensive.’

‘No, not so much. Land prices have been on fire recently. But back then, it was not so expensive. Moreover, there is a big difference between land prices in the city and here. Buying a plot in the city was beyond my means. Though maybe now I can even buy land there.’

‘So what made you start a dhaba?’

‘I drew inspiration from both the village and the city.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘As you know, in the village everyone gave us food cooked in their homes—but they never ate our food. Even water they only gave us from a distance. If we used their handpump even by mistake, they cleaned it for hours. There is no such untouchability in the city, but still there is a lot of jealousy towards us. Everyone is hellbent on finding out our caste, as if they’re looking for

a marriage alliance. As soon as they find out, they may not indulge in untouchability, but their jealousy and bigotry becomes apparent.’

‘You have a point.’

‘That is why I started this dhaba. I’ve kept four boys here from our own community, who cook as well as serve the food. Nobody asks about caste here. The Pandits come and so do the Guptas, Baniyas, Thakurs—all of them eat here and go on with their journeys...’

He kept talking.

And for a long time I thought about Sanjeev’s passion. Then I remembered the panditji from the bus, who must be steering clear of Dalits back in the village—let alone eat from their kitchen. A wide smile bloomed on my face.

‘Sanjeev’s Dhaba’ is a widely celebrated short story originally published in 2011 in *Kathadesh* (a Hindi literary magazine) and is also the title story of the author’s only short-story collection.

Atreyee Majumder

Sriramachandraji and the Fakir

Sriramachandraji has descended upon our sacred land
And flowers open up this honeydew morning to greet him
And the waters gurgle ever so slightly by his nearness.
He wears a double-breasted suit and shiny shoes
Much like a barrister at the Inns.
He is missing a top-hat though.
His hair is messed up by the balmy air of the Ganges.
It is Benares perhaps.
He walks by the Ganges counting corpses.
Some in fire, some in water.
He walks a thousand nights.
He walks in dream, by night, by day.
His suit is soiled, his shoes are torn.
He meets a *fakir* near the ghat,
We don't know the names of ghats anymore,
We, the people, the civic body, are busy running
from the flies that are surrounding the heaps of dead.
We are the signatories of this mammoth contract of life and death,
 running for some respite from them damned flies.
The *fakir* is not running.
The *fakir* smokes a tired bidi by the ghat.
"They sing in your name, sriramachandraji."
 - I know, I know, I know.
 - I can't bear it anymore, the cacophony that is my name
"You are hurting, sriramachandraji.
Let me share my bidi with you, it could be my last one."
It is below sriramachandraji's station to smoke a bidi.
But who cares now?
A slow smoke later, he puts his head on the *fakir's* shoulder.
 - "Let them breathe." He said.
Muffled cries of birds dying of smoke rang across the horizon.

Kishan Gusani

The Five-eyed Monster Under My Bed

The one eye spoke highly of karma's thread
Having cut itself and being born twined.

The second eye spoke with impassioned lips,
The bones of man pursed with steely rebirth.

The third eye spoke cornucopias unto itself
And the bed overflowed, choked with gold.

The fourth eye spoke but of slavery and
The bed three-footed it to be heard by

None / when the fifth eye
Came of sight before
The four / foretold it could live under

Two conditions: banish under this black
Sheet of my untouchable shadow or
Die once and be born free of this scapegoat.

B, My Vegetarian Friend

Mr. B, I think of you and I imagine the riches of this world you deserve
To swim in, naked—bent, you bully, you, the country's goody two shoes helper of the blind eyed.
Your country where all your friends are status-driven casteists.

Be it enjoying the discriminated joys of those standing up to discrimination,
At kindergarten for the uninitiated, to high-school romancers, to the moral—police academy
You teach at, my vegetarian friend — face the wrath of the scaling fish,

Lower your cockeyed, cross—threaded, drunken, red remarks,
Your convenient, black abuses, and the line drawn in between, all but the same
Disgusting blindness and patriarchy that we took away from

Our B father, B mother sat langot extra—tightened, lovingly
Saying — the B word in this day and age is one of reservedness, reservation, a reservoir of verbal
Power, golden weaknesses, strong sperm—tailed progenies,

Snatched and stashed, sinking marbles of grainy, greyish knowledge, stolen
From the river of racial slurs and political potties quick to be taken when no one's gazing—prying
Attention is on you, your stomach's reel on the new fishing rod you've cast.

Capitalist Brand Ideology Spreadsheet for the Woke Monk of Yesterday

The problem with i, the word, its anal aperture
Spanning an ego of a pixel as dot headed, pigeon-holed,
Idolatry — with its myopic hold, extra cold like infinity.
And the first letter of that word — large, egotistic,

And patronizing — its privileges on display, with every monkey face all the livelong
Work day taking selfies of death — dumb, blonde, ignorant, by cosmopolitan nights —
Schooled in second grade aesthetics of little to no bloody use — clubbed, collaged,

Photoshopped, coming around to bite in the shady, proverbial ass — guts as flatulent as
Karma — buffed, muffled, and stereotyped, the more I think of the two faced solution
To that muzzled, black-holed problem — I can shitpost about, that I can piss cash

Around and read in two-tone, leathered lit mags and similar obituaries — street-style,
Alligator, fascist editorial spreads for the coffee-skinned brands promoting sun-tanned
Radical philanthropy, the more i contain my belch, swear it a goodie commentator's

Bag of overpriced social contexts, conveniently grim-reaped contents
Of third-wheeling advertisements, tagging along commodified democracies, a pigsty of
Mediocre media critically tapping flip-screens for agendized television appearances —

Prime-time, screening the disgustingly casted, marginalized, and makeup gooped, with blood
Red foundation archaically brushed on to gentrify the brand new conglomerate nation-firm's
Chic hate-speak for the cockeyed, popularized views of our propagandized, rosy cheeks.

Chinese Dental Care

The day after the Election Mian spends his entire afternoon on the balcony. The tangles of electric wires hanging low outside hide him from pedestrians and rickshawallahs. But he can see two dogs fighting each other and barking menacingly at anyone trying to come between them. A massive stray cow, indifferent to their fight, munches vegetable scraps and every other kind of rubbish. A one-eyed man twists her tail and fondles her udder. He narrowly misses a back-kick and calls the cow a street whore. Sitting in his favorite armchair, Mian would be amused by all this on any other day. A fresh defeat, however, has encroached on his right to snigger and enjoy silly misfortunes.

The day before the Election his wife reiterated her warning: that he would be crushed like an onion under his opponent's feet! Mian's lackeys were there in the drawing room, dunking Nabisco biscuits into lemon tea and chattering about their leader. For the last three months, they'd frequented Chameely House almost every day. They said they'd manage his online campaign, but they only took some selfies with him: a huge Mian standing like a gorilla among a posse of match-stick boys.

He asked Rebecca to hush her voice, but she ignored him, saying, "I can't make more tea for these slum boys. If you want to put food into their maw, you better hire a servant!"

They were both in the kitchen. Mian hissed at his wife, "Don't talk to me like that before the Election!" He would have hit her already—as he would have a year ago—but she looked at him like a snake-mother trying to protect her pit. Mian felt like an outsider in his own house.

"How can you go on like this, huh? Two girls yet to be married and you even mortgaged the studio! Has your father given you a golden hen so we won't have to worry about anything?"

Mian couldn't find an immediate reply. He wanted to say she shouldn't be worried about anything, about food, shelter, or their daughters' marriages as long as she had a loyal husband by her side, but to put things nicely was not his habit. It'd mean domestic defeat. He replied, "This house, the studio—everything is my property. You didn't bring them from your father when I married you! I'll consume everything I earned before I die. Not a single paisa will be left for you or for anyone in this family!"

Rebecca tsked and, with glaring eyes, said, "Suits a man without wisdom teeth of course! If you had your wisdom teeth, you'd never engage in politics." She stomped out of the kitchen, making that final remark about his crushing defeat, and retired into the bedroom. Mian yelled after her— "You fat waddling duck!" —and smashed a teacup into many bits to let her know he

was doubly enraged.

~ ~ ~

The jab about wisdom teeth rankles him so much Mian feels a strange void inside his mouth. It's not that he hadn't known he was going to be defeated in the Election, but he always hoped a miracle could happen. Now even after a third defeat, he thinks he has all the potential to be a commissioner of his ward. He has gone through so many dog days in the past decade that he always eagerly awaits the Election.

To cope with the expanded budget of the last Election, he even mortgaged the old, two-story house that he inherited from his father. Of course, Rebecca doesn't know about it. He discards his wife's image from his head and calls his younger daughter. She failed in the qualifying test for the HSC exam earlier this year. When the principal asked her to bring a guardian to the college, she approached an old tea vendor from Kattrra Street and begged him to become her proxy-father. The principal was familiar with such ploys and made the old man divulge the whole affair. Result: she's been suspended from college for a year.

When she comes to the balcony, Mian thinks for a second if he should go for another round of reprimands. On one hand, he imagines himself supporting his daughter's failure before the principal. Only if she had told him all this in the first place! But such softness in his character would spoil the girl's future, so he simply asks her to bring a mirror.

Once she tremblingly hands him the mirror, he pushes up the chair against the door to prevent anyone seeing what he's up to. Cheek-by-jowl buildings on both sides of the street make it hard for the sun to reach the balcony. He repositions his chair once again to allow some light to fall onto his face. Finally, he lies back holding the mirror before him in hopes that the shame of not having wisdom teeth will be solved there and then.

What he sees inside the mouth disgusts him utterly. Countless microcolonies of bacteria—visible in the form of plaques and tartars—almost convince him to disown his own teeth. There are faint red-brown spots on his front teeth, vestiges of paan fluid and tobacco. He also notices the small bundle of flesh at the back of his throat—quite enlarged for such a cramped space. It's hanging from the roof of his mouth and wagging back and forth and even sideways, oddly looking like a dog's tail. He doesn't recognize his own uvula and wonders what the hell it's doing there. For a moment he feels choked, as though something large is stuck in his throat, but he overcomes that feeling and begins to count his teeth.

He knows an adult man is supposed to have at least thirty-two teeth and the wisdom teeth must reside somewhere in the back, helping him crush bones and generate bright ideas. Counting each tooth twice, he eventually concludes that he's either missing two wisdom teeth or they're invisible under his gumline.

The disgust for yellow teeth, coupled with the absence of wisdom teeth, spurs him to

action. And for the first time in his life, he decides to see a dentist.

~~~

The roadside dentist's chamber is only a bend away from Chameely House. Converted from two old grocery shops, the chamber has a big signboard displaying the business and the dentist's name both in Bengali and Chinese characters. The Bengali words, flanked by a close shot picture of a woman's pearl-white teeth, read: Dr. Li Kun, D.D.S. ...

The next day Mian rides his Vespa to this only dentist's chamber in the neighborhood. To make his presence known, he twists the accelerator fully. The twenty-five-year-old engine vrooms and putters in protest. He honks away the dog before the shop and parks right where it was sleeping. The dog barks violently, trying to make this intruder understand that it's done the night-watchman's job and now should be allowed its daytime sleep. Pity this rotund man with no civic sense and the poor vehicle that carries him! He must have been crushing the spirit and bones of this old junk! The dog mourns the loss of men's territorial sense while slouching under a grocery shop projection, its second favorite spot in the street.

Haadi, a thinnish old man, greets Mian inside and asks him to sit and wait. The old man doesn't seem to recognize him and scribbles away on a pad. He's writing on a small desk, outside an inner chamber partitioned with glass. Though Mian can't see what's inside, he can hear snatches of conversations coming from that room.

After a while, taking his eyes from the pad to this new customer, Haadi asks the patient's name and age. Mian, infuriated, asks him back, "Mister, do I look like a man who needs an appointment?"

Mian's huge frame—crowned with a spangled toopi he's especially worn for the visit—doesn't frighten Haadi. A wry smile flickers across his face as he says, "Well, mister, in that case, your number is 15. Wait until it's your turn." The other attendees in the room take this cue and snicker at the old man's bravery. Under his breath, Mian calls him a dirty leper.

As though to make the case even worse, he fishes out something from his baggy pants and hands it to Haadi. "Take this card and show it to the doctor. I hope you can read things!"

The old assistant casts a cursory glance at the card and flicks it across the table. But before it can fall off, Mian catches the card and flourishes it in a confused manner. For the first time in his life, he feels utterly insulted.

"Who is the assistant to the dentist here?" asks Haadi.

An automated reply drops from Mian's mouth, "You!"

Some expletives would be more fitting, but it turns out they slink away right when he needs them!

“And who works here all day?”

“You!”

“Then why are you making a fuss? Can’t you just sit and wait?”

Words gathered at Mian’s lips lose their wish to see daylight. He feels he should have brought some lackeys with him. At least they would have waged a verbal skirmish with this rogue! Luckily, at this time, a patient comes out of the inner chamber followed by Dr. Li Kun.

Dr. Li Kun asks, “Is everything alright, Haadi?” Her Bengali sounds as perfect as an old townie.

Haadi says, “Yes, I just gave an appointment to this gentleman. But he wouldn’t accept any wait.”

She turns to Mian and asks, “Is this an emergency, Mr. Mian?” Dr. Li Kun knows all the locals very well, especially the political aspirants.

Mian lies and nods.

“In that case,” Dr. Li Kun says, “you can come inside now.” Then, smiling at the other patients in the room, she says, “I hope you don’t mind one urgent case.”

With a triumphant face, Mian follows her inside. As she turns off the sucker and the overhead lamp, he asks, “Why do you keep such a layabout here? I mean—”

Mian sees the smile fade on Dr. Li Kun’s elfin face. She says, “Why don’t we get down to business, Mr. Mian?”

To compensate for her lack of warmth, he now smiles broadly and says, “It’s about wisdom teeth ... you know what I mean?”

“What about them?”

“I used to have excellent teeth, you know. I’m sure you’re familiar with this, having lived the prime of your life here with us, though I hear you’re wrapping up your business and going to America to live with your daughter. I mean what I’m trying to say is I had excellent teeth when I was a child. Uncle Bacchu, what a fine man he was! God bless his soul. Used to pray five times a day! Anyway, Pearly, he used to call me, ‘One day, my dear boy, you will peel coconuts with nothing but your own teeth, because you’re born with a squirrel’s teeth!’ The thing that never occurred to him, despite finding my teeth in such excellent shape, that I might not have the most important ones. I mean the wisdom teeth. And you see, Uncle Bacchu or someone elderly in the family should instead have told me to throw the first baby tooth that came out of my mouth, to throw it into a rat’s hole, so those little beasts would be offered what they wanted. So, I could also go on to live with peace, knowing I have all the teeth a man of my age should have. You know, all this because—”

Before Mian could go on another tangent, Dr. Li Kun asks, “So, you think I can help you with your wisdom teeth?”

“Yes, in a way if you can! In a way—”

“Well, I’d need to see your teeth first. Please lie down here.”

“It’s nothing but just maybe two of them haven’t come out yet ...” Mian insists while easing himself onto the chair with equipment crowding around it.

Dr. Li Kun asks him to open his mouth and lie silently. As she inspects the teeth, her forehead crunches and creases several times. She scribbles away a few observations, including decay and bruxism and concludes: long canine teeth (unusual).

She scrapes his back teeth, asking the patient if he feels any pain. Mian shakes his head, even though the plugger’s steel-tip causes irritation in his teeth.

Once he climbs down the bed and sits on a chair, she says, “Mr. Mian, I’m sorry, I can’t help you with your missing wisdom teeth. But it’s good they don’t appear at this age”

“Then why did you waste my time?” Mian narrows his eyes.

“Please lower your voice. I did what any other dentist would do. You may consider a cleaning and a few other things, since your teeth—”

“I don’t need your ugly advice,” Mian says, looking truly belligerent. “I can go see big dentists in the city, you know. I have all the connections—”

“You need to lower your voice, Mr. Mian. A dentist can only deal with visible issues. Did I or anyone else I know ask you to come here?”

Mian hates her smooth, vernacular tone and prepares more arguments and volleys. But before he can run them out, Haadi comes inside and asks, “Anything wrong here, Doctor?”

“Not to worry, Haadi,” says Dr. Li Kun. “The gentleman is just raising some questions.” She is careful not to pass any worries to her old assistant. Haadi, looking at Mian’s crunched up face, decides to wait. Mian feels the old man’s breath on his nape and says to Dr. Li Kun, “Tell this leper to get out, will you?”

This time Dr. Li Kun flares up, “That’s it! I won’t allow you to talk like that in my chamber. You should leave now. And I wouldn’t mind your fee.”

Mian lingers— “Eh, are we finished ...?”—but Haadi points him to the exit, saying, “You heard her, Mister! On your feet before the police come—”

Mian feels hemmed in. He grits his teeth and says: “You, your assistant, and your god-damned business will be history!”

He jumps on his feet, elbows past the old assistant, then storms out of the chamber.

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When Mian returns home from the dentist's, a stray cat with greyish fur follows him inside, and, out of an old habit, curls up by his feet. Mian watches her as she then meows her way into the kitchen, bellyaching perhaps about why the door was closed even when the clock's greeting noon. But before she can reach the trash can, Mian kicks her from behind. She springs off with a start, then, growling and hissing, darts across the drawing room toward the balcony.

From the railing-top, she swivels her head back to see if the blob of a bozo was still after her. "Moonee get your mangy ass out of my house! Else ..." shouts Mian, chucking one of his shoes at the cat. Moonee swiftly dodges the shoe, and, with a steady growl, jumps down onto the studio cornice.

Rebecca snaps at him from behind, "Else what, eh? You think you'll glorify all of us by beating a poor cat?"

"Don't meddle with me early in the day!" Mian glares at her and slams the balcony door in her face.

"Ha! Burn your hair off if you must," she shouts from the other side, "but write down what I say in golden letters: You'll never win in any goddamned Election! Now you can suck your thumb and think of what I just said"

Mian finds it one of her stock remarks. She has been making such remarks in all her conversations with him for the past several years. Once her footfall fades, a contorted Mian drops into the chair, wishing to smoke for hours. Before he can fully realize its genesis, he hears a big crack. One of the chair legs has snapped. Then the mahogany arms—where he rested his elbows for the last eighteen years—join this revolt and fall apart. He hears a loud explosion as he collapses on the floor, destroying an old favorite with his own weight.

The sorrow and the absence of wisdom teeth, the series of unfortunate events peaking at the collapse of a damned chair—all eventually goad him to rise to his feet. For a moment, he fears the entire house would collapse on his weight. But he discards that feeling and chastises himself for being so silly.

He sidles up to the railing, careful not to burden anything with his weight. Leaning over, he calls into the studio below: "Hey Pappu! Come have some tea with me. Hey!" The one-eyed man rushes up to his landlord. His servile entry to the drawing room cheers him up. So much so Mian asks him to sit beside him when they're done exchanging salaams.

Mian says, "Pappu, you realize Dr. Li Kun is a heathen, don't you?"

Pappu, who doesn't remember if he's ever contradicted Mian, who hasn't paid the past three months' rent yet, replies to his landlord, "Sure, she is! I've always said, you can never fully know a Chinese mind, can you?"

Then seeing Mian's face brighten, he adds, "This Neehowma is nothing but a quack." In the neighborhood, Dr. Li Kun is known by at least half a dozen names, Chinese phrases Bengalicized and pronounced in distinct local tones, though never said to her face.

Mian says, "For you and me, I mean for everyone in our community, I have a favor to ask of you, Pappu ..."

That evening some of the matchstick boys return to Chameely House. They vanished right after the Election results but when Pappu sent them some Flexiload money to recharge their phones, they couldn't deny the one-eyed lobbyist's request. They live in Jinjira, on the other side of the river, where it's so peopled that on summer nights two or three members of a family have to sleep on the pavement.

With skeptical eyes, Mian sees these skeletal boys with skin-fade haircuts trickle into his drawing room. The ingrates, he thinks but welcomes them with an extended smile.

Once again, the matchstick boys sip lemon tea, but they look cheerless, perhaps due to a reduction in snacks and their own number. Mian delivers a speech over tea.

He cobbled this speech from cold-served spite and BPP pamphlets. In the speech, Mian strings together Chinese Dental Care and heathenism; infectious faithlessness and moral decay in society; invisibility of God and its ramifications on men's wisdom. He fumbles for better diction but fails. However, he continues by adding outsider-influence and disruption of communal life, further theorizing about exploitation of local resources and Chinese Conspiracy. "Dr. Li Kun is a stinker and her Chinese Dental Care is a worm eating away you and me, I mean our beloved mahalla. We've got to fight this worm off before it turns endemic," he concludes his speech.

The matchstick boys feel a strange tickle in their spines. They rise on their feet as though prepared to march in a procession. Now all the slogans, all the bhais rain down on Mian, followed by his name, followed by the motto of the Plow Party, and then followed by a wish for the country's eternal life and youth. It charms Mian and he forgets about wisdom teeth, his injury from a wretched collapse, pestering him all day.

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Although Mian feels charged up by his own speech, the residents of Old Dhaka feel otherwise. Men who have seen his video are heard to be saying, "What's it to us that a dentist isn't religious? This loser can go fuck himself!"

Then begins the praise for Haadi. People say his hair hasn't turned white for no reason. Though Dr. Li Kun remains silent all through the gossip, the old assistant tells people about the origin of Mian's gripe: that the commissioner-in-progress is missing something valuable inside his mouth. He also confirms that the dentist doesn't wish to retire abroad. After that, even tea vendors, who are the prime sources of gossip in these mazy lanes, blast Mian: "This man and his old Vespa, you see, damn nuisance! Makes sense why he fails at the Election."

One morning, when Rebecca is on the roof, clipping wet clothes on a clothesline, the woman from the other roof shouts, “Is it true your husband wishes ill to Mewanti?”

Before Mian’s speech it never occurred to her or anyone else what religion Dr. Li Kun practiced or if she didn’t believe in any known gods. When she set up her chamber forty years ago, there were no competitors in the area. In fact, there were only a handful of dentists in the entire country. People welcomed Dr. Li Kun and her devotion to dentistry, her monastic life, her singleness of purpose.

The woman, wanting a reply, now adds, “My man says your husband says she eats pork with noodles. Everyone says what a fine man your husband is!”

Rebecca eventually retorts, “Missus, why don’t you mind your own business?”

The incumbent commissioner, who has won the Election with the grace and symbol of the Outstanding Party, is also reported to have dismissed Mian’s speech, “Such a lame attempt, you know!” The matchstick boys have since returned to their shacks in Jinjira and never answered Pappu’s call.

When Pappu carries the commissioner’s comment to Mian, he says, “Tell that dwarf to zip his ugly mouth! We know how many brothels he runs, don’t we?”

Mian then dozes off on the new rocking chair. Pappu bought this clunky object from the Port area. The good thing is Rebecca didn’t ask anything about it. Has she even lost her interest in bugging me? Mian thinks before he begins to snore with his aquiline nose. After midnight, he wakes up to an acute pain inside his mouth.

First, he thinks the wisdom teeth have sprouted out of their own volition. But as he inspects them again in the bathroom, he doesn’t see any sign of the missing wisdom teeth. Rather, he notices two large pointy teeth with their long roots. The receding gumline has made way for the teeth to drop their pink garments. He can’t say how he missed it during the earlier inspection, but now the sight of them stirs him. And for a moment he imagines himself transformed into a wild creature.

The pain worsens in the morning and Mian feels a strange sensitivity in his teeth. He feels as though he wants to bite on something. He tries to remember if he ever had a toothache or gum disease, but he can’t. However, he imagines one and chastises himself for not taking enough care of his teeth.

When the sensitivity peaks in the afternoon, Mian surreptitiously enters the kitchen and finds some jaggery inside a plastic jar. Under his jaw, he crushes the shell-like piece and chews it. The need to bite seems to subside momentarily.

Just as he’s relishing his home-remedy, Rebecca enters the kitchen and, seeing Mian with a jar full of stale jaggery, says, “Why don’t you eat the whole jar? That’s what you need to grow

some sense!”

Before he can open his mouth, Rebecca closes the door, as though giving him some privacy. Mian avenges her jab by rebuking the elder daughter again for her failure. When she comes to the balcony to water the potted bougainvilleas, Mian says, “All the time this and that. Flying in the house like a damn kite! I ask, when do you read girl, eh? Have you forgotten the scam you played for a damn test?”

The girl stands rigidly. She’s been waiting for her younger sister to return from English lessons. They are going to face off in Words with Friends. She feels trapped and vows not to come to the balcony again. Rebecca, hearing Mian’s voice rise, comes to the balcony and rescues her daughter. She says, “If it’s for your damn teeth, I say don’t meddle with the girl. A girl shouldn’t find her father acting like the police in her own house!”

Mian, grimacing, tries to dismiss both with a flourish.

~~~

The next day, seeing Moonee on the threshold, Mian croons the rhyme Uncle Moon.

The cat debates her instinct versus memory. Instinct: Ah, the toopi-guy has a rhyme with your name. Memory: Wait, didn’t this bozo kick you yesterday?

Meanwhile, Mian wags a severed fish-head and sings:

“I shall give you the paddy husk—after winnowing,

I shall save the fish-muro—after filleting ...”

Instinct wins, the cat gives up, and, erecting her tail, she nuzzles Mian’s legs. Mian paws at the cat up on his lap, still crooning the nursery rhyme.

The cat eats the fish-head, her head tilted clockwise, keeping an eye on Mian, who now rubs her tail gently. When she gets busy on the greasy prize, when her feline instinct betrays memory, unaware of what’s to follow, Mian sinks the canine teeth into her tail-head. The cat, wanting to jerk her tail free of this mortal trap, desperately flings her legs. She tries to jump away, but Mian’s teeth dimple and bore into her flesh until the bones resist and block their entry. Seconds later, she finds herself upside-down, hanging in the air, a robust hand firmly gripping her bleeding tail. As she snarls and tries to scabble at the cord of a hand that’s tormenting her, two faces appear from behind a pulled curtain. Mian’s two daughters fail to accept what’s happening with their wit. Finally, noticing his startled daughters, Mian says, “I’ve bitten the damn cat!”

When he releases the cat, Moonee shambles across the room toward the girls. Blood, fresh blood, dripping from a mauled tail, creates an atavistic rapture in Mian. He feels nothing for the cat. The idea that he’s capable of doing something as novel as this, that something so sinister has long been hiding in his teeth, overwhelms him. He denies any other feeling, even when

a sudden fever attacks him at night.

~~~

In the following weeks, Moonee finds an asylum in the house. With disinfectant and bandages, Mian's two daughters have taken care of her dragging tail. Meanwhile, Pappu nurses his landlord. It's not obvious how the arrangement was made, but both men seem to enjoy each other's company.

One day Mian says, "You see, Pappu, you're here in a big house with all the nice things, but your own children won't even come and ask how you feel!"

Pappu says, "That's why I left the third. I fathered four girls with her, but I'm telling you each one was a fine brat! I knew they'd have killed me if I didn't leave them. I knew for damn sure."

The other day, when Mian seems confused between days and nights but is still refusing to see a dentist or a general practitioner, he says, "Pappu, ask your auntie to come here for a second, will you?"

He's decided to tell Rebecca about the house mortgage and ask for her advice, which he thought would be the beginning of a truce. But when she comes to the drawing room, he forgets all that. The old bitterness returns, and he says, "Pappu, you're a man on your own feet ... you know everyone breaks down every now and then. Maybe you did some wrong. But you see how people treat you in this house? Tell me was there ever a woman who leaves her own husband dying. Just tell me!"

Pappu relishes such domestic dramas and now looks at Rebecca for an answer.

Finding Rebecca silent, Mian bets his hopes high and says, "Respect, man. When that is gone everything else—"

This time Rebecca snaps at him, "Tell your uncle, Pappu. He should've thought about it before biting the cat. Tell him to go to Newmarket and pack his bag with respect! He thinks he can buy anything with money, huh?"

Mian feels her words stinging and scuttling in his head, "You hear, Pappu, you hear! Write that down. Also write down what I say: A wife of today wouldn't even speak with her man face-to-face, even when he dies. Yes, even when he dies!"

Since this short episode, Mian hasn't spoken a single word with anybody. He takes up his tenant's bed in the back office of the studio. Rebecca, though, sends his meals twice a day and Pappu sees to his other necessities. Mian seems pleased with both of their favors.

## Suchandra

### Eye

Seeking the  
remote for your big-fat tv but  
you hardly  
see –

From underneath the blinds of  
what  
the blinking screens  
scream.

With mouths rambling  
hands practicing  
the strangling of  
your senses.

But mostly we are  
mouthing words –  
someone else's admissions  
of some good old fuckery.

All the judges in the world cannot  
implicate us  
for our crimes  
and god forbid –

If you did not commit  
to sanctioned violence  
then the verdict is out –  
You are guilty as charged.

While the court proceedings dull out  
statistics of the dead and we watch  
tv  
blasting our volume:

Every note,  
well versed  
an orchestra for  
impending doom.

We are the collateral,  
a mere extra  
for a blockbuster  
where everyone dies.

We have  
front row tickets  
for the two second framing of our  
demise.

And if you look hard enough – un-  
blinking,  
you may as well be martyred at the altar of  
your screen lights.

## Arushi Vats

### *Gufa*

It was pouring when I climbed up the stairs to your apartment, muddy rainwater running down the steps. My sandals were soaked, I had to steady myself on the wet handrail to hold my balance, wondering that within the cramped lane of dissimilar structures elbowing for dominance, the whole building felt like a sponge, taking and taking water unto itself. Someone's garbage pile had run loose in the stream, food packages and disintegrating tissues floated past my ankles with cigarette stubs and sanitary pads. You opened the door with that familiar look which used to unnerve me at first but has now assumed a soothing effect. I moved to sit near the table where your computer rested. It was another day of me bending all laws of commute in a busy city to visit you. And then you played the first video.

'I can't stop looking at these,' you said, handing me a glass of whiskey you always kept ready for my arrival.

I edged closer to the screen. A group of men holding each other's hands stood on small boulders at the top of a waterfall. 'Wait,' you paused the video and played it from the beginning.

An idyllic scene shot on someone's phone camera, grainy images of groups of families and friends gathered around the still top of a waterfall. Some people are chucking things below, to see how far they fall. Some others have ventured to stand in the middle of the stream, singing, shouting, splashing water at each other. And then the current thickens, some run to the banks, but it all happens so fast that a few are stranded. The current is relentless. They all join their hands in an effort to stay fixed, one of them lets out a nervous laugh. From then on, the video plays in agonising slowness, each sweep of water etching horror on faces, cries rising from the banks. And then it ends, a body fumbles and down they all go.

There's more, you say pulling up a list of videos on the 'Recently Watched' tab.

We're inside a car speeding down a road, mountains in the horizon, the lights of vehicles passing on the other side twinkling like potent stars on the windshield. There's some kind of local rap blasting from the stereo, a group of boys sing bits along with great effect. 'This happened in Punjab,' you tell me. 'He was going live on the phone the whole time.' There are beers passed around, the car is unsteady in its path, racing over the gravel. And then it flips with a scream cut short. Darkness, silence.

I let out a breath and look at you. You're still watching the screen, where other videos have popped up as thumbnails. I notice how droopy the corners of your eyes are, like the ends of an umbrella.

'Why are you watching these things?' I knew you were expecting me to ask this, that you wanted to be asked. You were drawing me into a field of pain and I was entering it barefoot, helpless by my need to know. Even then, I could see the sincerity in your face.

'You know I can only remember what happened in dreams. But the dreams don't come easily. I have to watch these and go to sleep. I have to keep thinking about this. Only then can I dream of that day.'

'What do you mean you can't remember what happened?'

You consider this for a minute, take a swig. 'You. I know you were that day. Like I know that you are sitting in front of me right now. But I don't remember what you were wearing. I don't remember your face. In my dream, you weren't there at all.'

I can sense what you are trying to say, but I don't believe it. 'How can you not remember?'

You finish your drink. 'Another?'

I empty my glass; the whiskey lights a tunnel in my chest. 'Milder this time.'

'It's a kind of punishment, I suppose? When I'm awake, I keep trying to hold on to some fragment of what happened. When I'm asleep, it plays like a movie in my head. Everything is clear but I know it's not the full picture. There's things missing, perhaps they are beyond the frame.'

I try to appear convinced. You were hoping for more questions but I retreated. 'I have to tell you about this new batch of philo majors,' I begin, knowing your face would drop but you would go along, as you always had.

While leaving I stop at the door, turning to say goodbye but your eyes are fixed on the screen, the top of your head lighting up in a vivid blue-white.

\*

Contrary to what you may see in your dreams now, five of us were there that day—you only need to look at the police reports. You, me, Mita, Ronit and Akshay. A group made of one victim and

four culprits.

It was a hot day, like every day that summer, weeks before when we had made the plan. The concrete slabs under the trees that passed for chairs and tables at the dhaba were too hot to sit on. I remember it was Mita who came up to me. She sprung back up the instant she sat down. ‘This is burning, Roo! How are you sitting here?’

I shrugged—*you get used to it.*

‘Ridiculous! Let’s go to the canteen. The boys are there. It’s Akshay’s turn. Come on.’

I wanted to say that lunch hour sucks, the canteen is crowded and noisy, you have to beg for chairs or stand indefinitely. The fans too were winded to a different order of time, barely shuffling any air. But as Mita had pointed out, Akshay was footing the bill and my bank account was paltry.

‘You’re still hunched over that thing?’

I got up and stuffed the spiral-bound volume into my bag. ‘I can’t wrap my head around it. I can’t believe I got a B.’

‘Well, I got an A Minus. *Minus*. Scoring less than Akshay, it hurts.’ She paused. ‘You deserve better than a B, come on.’

Her words were comforting but I shook my head. ‘No, Mita, I think this time I deserve this. I don’t understand this stuff at all.’

She scrunched up her face, ‘No! You can’t be morose. Not over this paper.’

I remember that made me laugh, her eagerness to prop my feelings up anytime they threatened to swoop. It was hard not to like Mita. And it was all too easy to envy her.

‘We’ll study together,’ she said, her eyes clear as a shaft of light. That’s the memory of her which prevails each time I think about that year. She held a quality of clearness, a transparency between mind and face, thought and word. You were like that too, with a lot more romantic flair, but that has changed.

I remember that afternoon because out of the many lunches we’d had in that small basement room where the walls felt boisterous and voices bounced off the walls, reverberating on plastic tabletops while we were trapped for a meal beneath the ground within what passed as a canteen, this was the only time an argument in our group escalated to such decibels that everyone else felt

the need to turn silent, as if to honour a balance of scales.

Who started it? The way I remember it and I think I am right, it was Akshay. I'd always place a bet on Akshay. No sooner than we were at the table, he began the orchestrated needling he enjoyed inflicting upon Mita, dismissing me with a brief look.

'A Minus, huh?'

She nodded, pulling a chair up next to Ronit. She dropped her bag on the floor.

'I don't know why you've taken this paper at all.'

'What's that supposed to mean?' I could sense her voice tensing up.

'Ronit hasn't opted for it.' Akshay pointed his bottle of coke towards him.

I was sitting next to you, your long hair brushed against my kurta with the turn of the fan. You were the oddest among the boys, yet the one I felt easiest with. I saw that your eyes were on Mita. I looked away.

Mita dug into Ronit's plate of chowmein. 'I don't know how that matters,' she said, between mouthfuls. She passed the plate to me, and took a gulp of nimbu pani.

'Ronit's studying for the civils too. He didn't take this paper.'

Ronit looked up and his eyes caught mine, but he didn't say anything.

Mita wasn't going to back down. 'How does that matter?'

Akshay rested the fork he was fiddling with on the empty plate before him. He sat at the edge of the table, presiding over the four of us, two on each side. Sometimes, when he got like that, he would assume the air of a father gently admonishing his family for their transgressions. I knew you hated that—you who were generally at a remove would save a look of scorn for that moment.

Akshay cleared his throat. 'Mita, you don't need to do this paper. You will clear the exams. All of us know it.'

When conversations took this expected turn in the road you and I would look at each other; this course of argument always defined the two of us as the outliers, the ones without the dream of

acing the Exam.

Mita laughed. 'I know I will clear it. Because I am smart. I work hard.' She turned to Ronit and arched her brows, 'Right?'

It was evident that at confrontational moments such as these, Ronit hated being placed in the spotlight. He was happy to let the debate continue without taking any sides. You always loathed that about him. I once asked what made you any different from Ronit—you were silent too.

'I speak without words,' you said, offended at the suggestion. 'I make it known that I am not finding this amusing. He, on the other hand, doesn't want to get off the fence. Ever.'

'It can be difficult for him to get off the fence, when on one side stands his oldest friend and on the other...'

'Roo, if it's between a person who is right and a person who is wrong, you know which side you should be standing on.'

'I don't know if right and wrong are that easy to determine,' I insisted.

You gave me that shrewd look which I would associate with you, as if your eyes were scanning my mind. 'He'll never speak up for her,' you declared. 'Just you see.'

And your statement was to remain true. When faced with Mita's question that day, Ronit squirmed and looked at me instead. 'How are you finding the paper, Roo?' he asked, his voice gentle and firm.

Not expecting to be called upon, I'd just shoved a forkful of chowmein into my mouth. Mita spoke instead, giving Ronit a look that was difficult for me to read. They had their own private language, those two. I felt a pinch in my chest.

'She's having some difficulties.'

This perked Akshay's interest. 'Oh yeah? With what?'

I'd finished chewing but was scared there were bits of fried cabbage stuck to my teeth. I tried to speak without opening my mouth too much. 'Book Seven.'

'What in Book Seven specifically?'

I ran my tongue quickly over my teeth. ‘The cave allegory.’

Akshay snorted. ‘That’s the easiest part of the text!’

‘Is it? I can’t even picture it properly.’ I was aware my voice turned meek in front of Akshay. It was an effect I had no control over, a part of me feared his derision.

Mita cut in, ‘Have you ever been to an actual cave?’

Ronit jumped in, ‘Wait—we haven’t even been to the caves right here!’

Instantly the air shifted, my shoulders relaxed and the harshness of the tubelight above seemed to dim. Everyone was mulling over this. Here we were, seven months into living on campus, and we had made no efforts to visit the caves.

‘We should go.’ Ronit was sitting up. I remember you nodded. Mita and I looked at each other, our eyes shining.

And then, swift as ever, Akshay said, ‘And *Miss* here can give us a tour of her people.’

That summer I was introduced to the *hemlock*, a strange word and an even stranger substance—made from a plant that was all venom, through and through. When I imagine what it would feel like to have hemlock course down one’s throat, this moment comes to mind. The careful intonation that turned words on their heads, like a serpent swimming in the air, from body to body; its brief bites poisoning the nerves quietly.

Though Akshay wasn’t looking at any of us, we all knew who the comment was directed towards. My memory speeds up here, I think Mita pounded the table with her fist, the jar of water tumbled, drenching Akshay and your pants, she shrieked something to the effect of ‘what do you mean?’, and Akshay shouted something back. The rest of the canteen fell quiet. Everyone was looking at us. I remember Mita grabbing her bag and storming out, and Ronit remaining seated just for long enough for it to be noticed that he hadn’t moved. He got up, placed a hand on Akshay’s shoulder as a gesture of pacification and left to follow Mita.

You shook your head. ‘Come Roo, I need help moving the study table.’

I got up, purposefully avoiding looking at Akshay. He had moved on to speaking with the canteen manager. Some joke had been made and they were laughing.

We climbed up and walked out into the path lined with trees that led to your hostel. It was a scenic part of the campus, a stretch where dogs came to sleep, nestling between crisp, withered heaps of leaves, and where bougainvilleas erupted into bloom every few steps.

As we walked, you kept glancing at me. Perhaps I was more shaken than I remember being, but you understood my disquiet and began humming a tune I loved. A smile broke out on my face and we began singing together, as we so often did when it was just the two of us.

*Koi mud ke dekh lega is taraf  
Koi nazar hogi mere naam ki*

\*

A few weeks later, we went to the caves.

The sun dominated everything. I could feel it in my throat, the rubbing of dry muscles, the constant sense of being parched no matter how much water I drank. I don't know why we chose that day. Things had been fragile between all of us.

You'd messaged me to meet you at the T-point junction. You were wearing a shirt which exclaimed, "Let's Do It!" It felt apt for our undertaking—hiking to the caves in a July afternoon in Delhi. We must have been possessed.

I must admit, I was surprised to receive your message. We'd hardly hung out together since that awful scene in the canteen: *the afternoon* to all of us. But you assured me all five of us were to walk together to the caves, and when I fell in step with you, I saw this was true. Soon we were at the bus stop where the three others sat in great harmony: Mita, Ronit, Akshay were laughing at something together. It was an outworldly scene and I immediately wanted to believe in its truth.

'We're going to the caves!'

Mita shouted out first but it was followed by hoots from the boys. Akshay repeated it, and soon enough, you and I were grinning too. I think we wanted to let their happiness invade us. We understood all too well how temporary such lightness was in our bodies. They joined us, and as we walked towards the caves, our spirits remained high. Akshay and Ronit were leading the group, Mita trailed alongside us.

'Once we take a cut from here,' Ronit said, 'we'll cross a small shrine.' We'd left the burning concrete of the road, and entered the forest. The trees were shrunken and dry, offering no shade.

If we'd hoped to catch a glimpse of some wildlife, we were thoroughly disappointed. Out here, the vegetation had dried a dull brown, there were no pheasants or pea-hens or birds. All life had fled this scorched land.

You were carrying a small tumbler of water, and I had a bottle on me, but we'd gulped down most of it. The sun pressed down on my head from above. I remember thinking I should have carried a scarf or dupatta. I wanted to sit down, but we were nearly there.

A narrow parting lay between two giant rocks, burning an orange so livid that I could have mistaken it for lava. Ronit stepped up and said, 'We should form a chain, I'll go in first. Akshay follows me, and then the rest.'

Akshay chewed on this for a minute. 'I think I should lead the chain, and you should be at the end, Ronit. If we secure the start and the close, we should be alright.'

I was amazed to hear Mita agree with Akshay. 'Ronit, in case anything goes south we need someone who can think on their feet in the rear.'

Ronit blushed at her words, and I felt that discomfoting sensation of intruding on someone's private code. I looked down at my feet which were dirty and calloused from the walk, encased in tattered floaters, and felt something akin to shame rise in my throat.

'Okay, it's set!' Mita grabbed my arm. 'Aren't you excited Roo? A cave!'

Smiling was an ordeal then, but I obliged—my stomach was in knots, I felt a familiar pain in my rib which I had assumed to be appendicitis many times in the past. It would pass, I told myself.

I saw Akshay enter the cave, and Mita let go of my arm to join him. You followed her, and then it was my turn. Ronit held my hand as I slid into the crevice and I felt a wave of electricity course through my muscles. 'Don't worry, Roo. I am right here,' he said. I was grateful for the darkness of the narrow tunnel which we had entered, I wasn't very sure what my face looked like.

It seemed that we were descending into an absolute darkness. Not the dark that we experienced so often in our hostel rooms during the summers, when power supply was out for hours. Not the dark of the rocks where we would gather to drink, doused in moonlight. This was a different dark, the like of which I haven't known since. I could hear everyone's breath magnify in my eardrums, each inhalation pounding inside my head. You whispered something to me but the pain in my rib had grown disproportionately. I couldn't bring myself to reply, I only grasped your hand in the dark, clasping our fingers together.

Ronit was behind me, his hand resting on my shoulder as we proceeded sideways, navigating a turn after which we couldn't walk up but had to slide against the rocks. The path was narrow enough that I could feel my chest press against the stone. You were terribly quiet, and I wondered if you were claustrophobic. Later, people would tell us it isn't possible for solid matter, like the body, to move through the route of the cave we had entered—not even a cat, they claimed, could have managed. I don't know if we were in our bodies then, or if we had turned into apparitions, creatures of air, for it was only that which could have passed through. We must have begun becoming air by then, dissolving into nothingness. What else could explain the harrowing silence that marked our progression?

Suddenly, I couldn't feel Ronit's hand on my shoulder. Fear took over me so quickly, it seemed inevitable that I would scream. Just as I was about to call out Ronit's name, a loud sound punctured the dark. It took me a while to understand that this sound was one of Mita shrieking. Something had happened, and your fingers unfurled from mine as you rushed ahead to check on her. How can I describe what follows? Your voices mangled into a web, a web that slithered over the rocks and entangled all three of us. Ronit was far behind me; when I stretched my arm to its full length, I couldn't feel his shirt.

The first sound I could draw meaning from was the word 'Akshay', shouted repeatedly.

You were at my ears, pressing me to walk back, pushing my arm with yours, *back, back, back*. I was confused; we weren't going back, we were going *up*. We were ascending, my muscles felt this climb. My breath was hollow and quick, a fainting spell seemed imminent. I felt the darkness bleed into my eyes and flood my insides. The last part of the climb felt impossible, but you kept pressing my side. Somewhere close to the turn when we could walk forward again, I found Ronit.

'What's happened?' he asked.

I dropped to my knees, my legs giving way. I could see Mita's frame emerge from the turn and she slumped to the ground.

'Where were you?' you demanded.

Ronit was taken aback by the force of your voice. He blinked and then composed himself. 'My glasses fell. I couldn't find them, so I decided to come back and wait here.' He glanced at Mita, then me. 'Where's Akshay?'

I could hear you pant and your shirt was soaked in sweat. I realised then that you had probably

carried Mita part of the way.

You suggested we needed a search party for Akshay—there was nothing we could do to look for him, not in the state we were in. Ronit kept hounding Mita about what had happened, until you snapped and said, if he cared so much he should go and find out for himself. That seemed to offend Ronit into silence. He was looking at all us as if we were strangers, and anything I had to say then died in my mouth. Mita made no sound, her eyes fixed at the cave.

You broke the silence. ‘We have to get out.’ There was a natural authority in your voice, and we followed you with no protest.

It was an agonising climb, the last part. I kept my eyes on the light at the mouth of the cave. I couldn’t look away from that orb as I scrambled over countless small boulders, each giving way under my feet, tumbling into the darkness from which we had arrived. All parts of me were hurting. I could see the orb at the mouth of the cave moving, rotating clockwise. When I looked at that narrow strip of light, even the sky appeared to be made of stone.

We made it out, we even made it back—this is the part where I find gaps in my memory. Who flagged people at the bus stop? Who stopped for us? How many times did we turn, hoping to find Akshay following us?

Hours later, when we were seated at the health centre, drowning in oral solution and salts, Mita was asked to explain things. When a missing persons report was filed and the police arrived, she’d be asked that question again, this time with a threatening undertone. When we returned to our hostel, people had gathered to ask her that question. She kept repeating the same thing: *there was a flash of light and he was gone.*

I don’t think we ever sat together again, any of us. Ronit was escorted home by his parents, who had known Akshay for many years. You and I stuck together, but Mita—she was aloof. A rumour had floated after countless searches had led to no results: Mita’s folks handled dead bodies in the morgues of hospitals in her city. *There’s dark magic here*, people said. I wonder why none of us bothered to say something then. I told myself that I was tired. That day had altered my body, binding it with a constant sense of fatigue. I would spend hours lying down, and then feel too tired to move.

I wasn’t shocked when Mita didn’t return the next semester. Like Akshay, she was to vanish from our lives, no explanations necessary.

\*

The young who surround me today seem different. They shuffle into class on time, they get along even as they form islands, they fret over infractions which are imperceptible. 'I'm so sorry...' begins every late submission, every query, it's what follows a knock on the door to my office. They are already sure of the damage on which they stand, the crimes and accumulation that has shaped them. They are sorry. Perhaps I am blinded. Perhaps this is how we seemed to our teachers. Standing at the podium, we see much less than we would otherwise. There is the visible world, playing out as per the rules in front of us. And there is what lies beneath it.

I know this: we never apologised to Mita. We should have, but what words could measure the extent of our wrong? The thought of Mita invades me with the least alarm. I think of her when I see Ronit share updates of his life on Facebook. He could never be the district collector he had wanted, but he was in a cushy government job in other services. He's now a father of two children—a peculiar notion and one I find difficult to reconcile with the bespeckled, bashful boy I knew. Sometimes I have tried finding Mita online. I google keywords that should lead me to her: *Calcutta, Doms*. Nothing comes up.

This year I will teach the text I struggled with that summer. I will present visions of the right and the good, the three horses of the soul, the supremacy of reason above all. I will do this knowing that in my loneliest moments, times when I permit myself the clarity I used to find in Mita, I admit that our expedition was doomed from the beginning. A flash of light illuminates and blinds simultaneously, but we had decided to turn our heads away.

## **House Party**

B talks about Luxembourg. She says there are a good deal of people in Luxembourg who are depressed. Depressed! She says it like it's the most unbelievable thing. The implication is that in a country with a high GDP, where the people "have everything" she summarizes, it is preposterous that so many should be depressed.

B is a great disbeliever of other people's pain. This disbelief is challenged by neither the beggar on the street in this country nor the richest man in Luxembourg. B doesn't read books or watch movies because she feels like the pain they speak of is a scam. Most of that was to create drama, right?

To cut off B's talk, I change the subject. I wish I was named after an American TV show character, like Peggy Olson, I say. It would be reassuring to be named after someone who has lived a successful life – whether on TV or in real life. I could tell myself that my name-compeer had done a much better job of her life than I was doing with my own. It's a nice thought to have on a bad day.

M says she's named after her grandmother. Some days, the very bad ones, she sees how her life is no different from her grandmother's; they are both weighed down by the same anxieties and the same sort of expectations to look a certain way. She would've liked a name that was free of her grandmother.

K comes onto the balcony where we're all standing and talking. We're at a party in a long, beautiful room. The balcony overlooks a long park that stretches out like a rampart through the neighborhood.

Do any of you invest in mutual funds, K wants to know. He has brought over a brownie with ice-cream for everyone to share. He pauses to look at us expectantly before taking a big bite of the brownie, leaving the ice-cream intact.

Why, I ask.

K doesn't know what to say to my innocent 'why'. He is embarrassed because it was not a real question. It was a segue for him to talk about his mutual funds. But none of us really know what mutual funds are so we're not sufficiently impressed. His eyes widen when he realizes this.

K passes the dessert to me, having eaten too much of the brownie. I am irritated with the skewed ratio of brownie to ice-cream. The inability to maintain the balance while sharing

food was a marker of an inconsiderate nature, I decide. But I don't know how harshly to pronounce that judgement on K. This is the first time he's meeting my friends. Perhaps he's nervous. He is wearing nice clothes that look soft to the touch. A boy who wears good textures. K's sweet in a way that's not performative; he has an easy way about him, like he's not going to pat himself on the back for every little thing he does.

The other two girls don't reprimand K for how he's eaten the dessert. They take small bites trying to equalize the brownie-ice-cream ratio while listening to K talk about mutual funds.

K knows a lot about money. On our very first date he told me he's calculated how much he needs to retire early. Even as I looked back at him with that fake hmmm, he didn't change the subject. He wanted me to know that he took it seriously. And that he knew how to earn it. So I let him talk and he visibly relaxed. I realized I was the kind of girl he wanted to impress.

We listen to K talk about mutual funds until M talks about art.

It's easy to talk about art when you can't identify a Monet, says M.

I don't find it easy to talk about art, I countered. What do you mean?

M is flustered. She perhaps wanted to sound like she was saying something meaningful, a sedimentary axiom from her art school education given in a flourish at parties like this.

M explains, identifying the names of artists or the style and period of things, whether it's a photograph or a painting or a piece of music - that's not really talking about art. That's not really you talking about how you responded to the art work. That's merely identifying things. Like in an exam. Children need to know how a piece of art moves them, the feelings it sets off in their minds and bodies. Their emotional and physical response to art. And that's easier without academic knowledge, she says.

But it's part of the education right? K asks. Since you've already been taught it it's easy for you to discard its use. I'm a garden variety engineer, he adds self-consciously.

K has identified M's super power over him - she can talk about art. I saw him talking to M from across the room and I saw that uncomfortable look on her face every time somebody asked her what she does. How are you going to make money from being a photographer, he had probably asked M because that's the same question he asked me on our first date. He doesn't mean it in a bad way like some sceptical Indian uncle. K is curious about what the children of rich people do with their time. He's curious about the internal architecture of our lives - how do *you* make it work?

When you put it like that - B says, drawing me back into the conversation - you promote the philistine attitude that permeates this country. I like to know whats-what, she says. That's the only thing that remains after all those "feelings" are forgotten.

That's not what I meant, M says. Forget about it.

K brings up Elon Musk, naked, riding a Shiba Inu. He shows us the photo on his phone and tells us it's worth a ridiculous amount of money. Millions, he says, so hilarious, isn't it? His eyes shine.

B and M look at the screen sceptically. I am embarrassed of the photo K's holding up on his phone and somehow that feeling extends to K as well. We have been going out for two weeks and I am not yet used to having him by my side. It is that fragile period where our closeness relies on our bodies and everything else – his expressions, the things he says and does – they're new to me and their newness is embarrassing.

I excuse myself, saying I wanted to go to the bathroom but I take a detour to the kitchen where I get myself a handful of crinkly potato chips.

The house smells like cigarettes and rich bourbon. It's a fine house. Windows extending from floor to ceiling on one side and all around, a thick lush privacy. It's C's house. I went over to join C and some others around the drinks table that was piled high with snacks and alcohol.

C is awkward about having us over. She is awkward about everything as far as I can tell. When people first arrived at the party, they gushed over the spiral staircase at the end of the living room. C looked like she wanted to disappear. I guess embarrassment is what happens when you're not thankful for what you have. But perhaps there's more to it and I simply don't have the right sympathies.

C says "it feels like I'm showing off, you know?" There is a weird tinge of regret, the reluctance to admit that all of that - all those floor to ceiling windows, the tree canopies that bordered the balconies, the book shelves - they were all hers.

A boy (whose name I don't know) says cruelly, well it's not yours. It will go to your husband anyway.

The girls protest in mild disgust. But they don't take the boy seriously. One girl playfully hits him on the shoulder. There's always that one person, isn't there? Who is a stand-in for what our parents would've said?

Somebody remarks about the statement bookshelves. It's beautiful.

Yes, C allows, it is. Her mother's.

I look at the spines of old books lining the shelves.

Virginia Woolf too? I ask with the kind of wonder K probably reserves for mutual funds.

Yes, C admits almost gloomily.

A mother who read Virginia Woolf in college. Now that's the real privilege, isn't it? I say, trying to make a joke of it. I just wanted to put C at ease.

But the remark seems to irritate C.

She says that her mother thinks Woolf is overrated. C fidgets with her hair, says she's going out for a smoke. Some people from the group follow her, also wanting to bum a cigarette.

To no one in particular, I say, Woolf's not overrated.

The same boy who had made the stupid remark earlier, high fives me. He tells me that he prefers Woolf to all the other "bad bitches." When he leaves with his arm around a girl's shoulder, I am standing alone at the drinks table.

I am a little drunk so I start thinking about the word chastity. It was a word I had to memorize for a history exam years ago. Blah blah blah fill in the blank. The word was chastity, I knew it. But that blah blah blah question was deceitful – its purpose was something else. Its purpose was not to elicit an answer. In a girl's convent school, chastity is part of the morning prayer. What was a word like chastity doing in a history exam? We were asked all the wrong questions.

I wonder about C. She has large brown eyes and a moodiness that's attractive. We are not close friends, I know that. We are only friends because of M and the feminist WhatsApp group, Ferrante Fever, that we are both part of. I don't know anybody here but B, M and of course, K, who I've brought along.

I take in the intimate atmosphere, the cathedral like windows, the soft sofas, the smell of chamomile tea in the living room. In short, all those little stamps of class and caste that mark people's houses.

K breaks away from a group with whom he has been making small talk. He raises his hand up for a high five and when I put my hand up to his, he holds it tightly. I feel bad, I know I should be doing more to make him feel welcome but I don't feel confident as well.

Is this okay, I ask.

It's interesting, I guess? He says looking around unsure. I didn't go to the schools and things you went to. I never thought I'd find myself in a house like this. And if this was school, these people would not be my friends, he laughs.

I should be social, introduce you to others, I say half-heartedly.

It's okay, he says. I manage on my own, he grins. This is not the first time he has had to talk to people unlike himself.

I like your clothes. They're well-chosen, I say.

Thanks, he replies, self-consciously touching his collar. He looks so relieved at my compliment that it upsets me momentarily, like I've missed something about him.

I could never imagine the inside of these houses, he says with a strangled awe. He looks around at the arm chairs and the high wooden beams.

On our second date, K and I had walked around a neighborhood where the film stars, politicians and bureaucrats lived. We were tipsy after a drink or two. Window-shopping for houses was my kind of date. I liked to gawk at the arched windows, the sloping red roofs, the lush garden swaddling the inhabitants and the coffee table set up on the balcony. This, I declared, this is where I would live, pointing at a house.

K pointed out the last names and the professions on the boards in front of the houses. Look how they're all the same, he said. His surname would never pass the test in these neighborhoods.

Just play the game, I said. Point out a house you like.

They're all nice, he said dismissively.

C's house, where we're at – it's pretty close to that neighborhood where K and I walked around. K is reluctantly appreciative of the house and that hinders my own enjoyment of it.

A new group of people surround the table where we're standing. They get refills, pour themselves white rum and wine. I recognize a few of them from the WhatsApp group. We haven't talked much in person and I was mostly quiet in the group. They are talking about white people. A favourite conversation point at these kinds of things.

N, who is leading the topic, talks in an urgent, hysterical manner. She has a serious complex with white people, she says. I just feel so inferior. I don't feel confident around them. When we were in Washington, it was just like, how do you talk to these people? I would have something prepared and then, when I start talking, I'm falling all over myself saying sorry for this and that.

All of us laughed at her urgent way of speaking. N is peeling the thin orange fibres of mehendi from her hands unconsciously as she talks. She just got married. I know that from her profile photo on WhatsApp.

Another boy agrees with N. He tells us about the time he was in Luxembourg. At the conference where all the Americans and Europeans were taking more than their allotted share of cakes and biscuits laid out on the buffet table for the conference attendees. But "us Indians" at the conference, we were so meek, we would take just one biscuit, one cake. We didn't take greedily like those white people, he ended in a tone that was both meek and holier-than-thou.

N goes on. One thing she has noticed in American cities: all the black people, the African

Americans, they do all the jobs that nobody wants to do. Cab drivers, cashiers, cleaners, garbage collectors. Or they just hang around on the streets, looking crazy and begging or whatever they do. It's shocking. You hear so much about America being developed and then, you see black people in their cities, their eyes red and sleepless, she says. She shudders for effect and admits that she was a bit scared of them. It's a highly unequal society, that much is obvious, she says. There's no hiding from that.

Other people have joined the conversation. M and B wander over with others. K puts his arm around my shoulders but I don't lean into his embrace. I try to act like we're one of those couples who are just casually together, nothing serious but it's difficult to keep track of all the artifices one must commit to in these kinds of parties.

There is a nice moment when we're all hovering around the table with our raised glasses. The table is like a strip of public space and the conversation has come to a broody stand still.

M tells us about taking the bus in San Francisco. She tells us that she always tried to sit next to African Americans, both men and women because it made her feel safe with other people of colour, you know? There's some solidarity there, she says.

I look at M. In the soft evening light, in her floral print dress, M looked like a large flower against the backdrop of dark green outside. Her statement is a bit ironic. A Brahmin from a Madurai family speaking of solidarity with the African Americans taking the bus in San Francisco. Hah, I told myself quietly. I know M comes from a good place and anyway, some ironies are best not commented on, especially with friends.

People nod sympathetically as if they understand. Other people excuse themselves from the conversation, to take phone calls and to squirrel away with their dates.

N, after holding court on the topic of white people with such urgency, announces that she has to leave. It is only seven-thirty in the evening but she has to leave, she says, since she has a curfew. I am irritated by people like N – she lives in an American small town with her husband for most of the year but when she visits us, she has to stick to the curfews her parents imposed on her in fifth grade. Do these people – people like N – ever break free of their families? Perhaps they're scared of being bereft. What would they do with their time if their families didn't manage it? Some people have no families except for the ones they're born into, I tell myself, because they don't need anything from anyone else.

I give N a thin smile. I don't care for her exit and I don't care for her political shit on the WhatsApp group. She looks at everybody around the table as if seeking their approval for her leave. A few people nod and are sympathetic. N leaves and in her wake are all the future plans trailing. Let's meet again for sure, she enthuses in her goodbye.

Next to me, K looks bored. Perhaps he has figured out this particular set of people;

perhaps he has easily found the limits of their lives and their intentions.

C returns to the table trailed by her coterie. She suggests a board game. Some people are happy for a diversion like this at a party. It's an easy way to avoid talking about personal things. There are now only a few people who remain standing moodily around the drinks table. I am one of them; there are a few people I only know by face but B is with me. K also hangs back loyally even though I know he wants to join the game.

Go, go play. Have fun, I chide. We won't be invited back anyway, I think to myself.

He refuses, he says that he wants to spend time with me. K says it sweetly like a little boy who has found no entertainment in the new place he's been brought to. People around the table, people I don't particularly know well say aww, what love. I want to smash their faces when they do that. I feel the uncertainty of being with K keenly, especially when surrounded by people like N and inside C's fine house.

B takes advantage of the lull in the conversation to talk about a boy she's interested in. He's a worker in her father's jalapeno factory. He has polished, cut abs.

From picking jalapenos?

No, B says, he works out in the grounds behind the farm. I have a clear view of him from my bedroom window.

Must be quite a sight, somebody says.

Yes, B says deliciously. He could be a model. He gives my father oil massages when we visit the farmhouse, she says. I can't take my eyes off him when he's out on the field plucking the jalapenos from the stem.

You should get him to give you a massage, somebody suggests.

Everybody laughs.

B sighs. My dad won't like it, she says. I want this guy so bad, I get wet just watching him work out. He has this glorious dark brown skin.

We laugh. It's one of those things you don't expect a girl like B to say. She's so uppity usually.

It's a very God of Small Things situation huh, somebody remarks smugly.

B blinks for a moment. No, it's not like that, she says blandly. I just want him from afar. I don't love him or anything like that.

She sounds so serious and practical. She has killed the image and desire she elicited for a moment. Standing around that drinks table, perhaps we were all imagining this beautiful boy

who works on a jalapeno farm. I don't know about the others but I was definitely a bit wet imagining the oil massages this boy could give me. That whole thing seems easier than being on a date, I tell myself, looking at K who looks like he didn't appreciate B's confession. He's uncomfortable and self-conscious and somehow, I find that irritating. How difficult was it to fit in at a party, for god's sake?

K clears his throat, adjusts his shirt and asks B, so your father has a jalapeno factory?

That was the end of that conversation for me. I excuse myself again. I take my drink and head to the balcony. K lets me go because he can't just end the conversation with B. When I look back at the two of them, K is listening to B talk. He is attentive to what she's saying, nodding and asking questions about the practical matters of her father's business. He wants to actually speak to the people around him and I envied his persistence in trying to know others. Perhaps that boredom I had seen on his face earlier, perhaps that was just me.

M joins me on the balcony with C and some other girls. They have brought out a hookah apparatus. There was no escaping company that evening. I should just go home if I want to be alone, I tell myself but I know I won't leave until I'm a goner, until I completely blackout.

C is telling everyone about her last holiday. The Chettiars have made a neighborhood like no other in the country, she says. Everything remains as it was first built 200-years ago. Chettinad houses. Once you've been inside those kind of houses as a tourist, lusted after the carved single-tree teak wood pillars lining its corridors, Instagrammed the cool Athangudi tiles panelling the floors and looked curiously through the families' old kitchen vessels, fountain pens and ink pots displayed in museum style cabinets, you begin to question where you stand in relation to their historic caste power.

She pauses and looks at us meaningfully. She wants us to imagine those large, looming Chettinad houses.

Somebody asks to see photos from the trip.

C shakes her head, saying, you have to see it to believe it.

Somebody says, just a bunch of old houses, isn't it?

C is irritated. That is not the gist of her story.

C tells us she walked beneath the Burmese wood rafters in awe of the high ceilings. It's so hard to imagine this group of people, the Chettiars, who had this much wealth and they decided to build these astonishing houses that remain 200-hundred years later. Still standing in all the power they've always had. And now they charge you hundred rupees per person to tour their casteist hallways, can you believe it, she asks.

A few people are in awe and they say that they'll plan their next trip there. But others are

confused.

Should we pay hundred rupees to see these houses or not? You don't make it sound morally right.

That's the point, C insists. It's not easy being a tourist in those kinds of places.

It's not easy being a tourist anywhere in this country if you think of caste, I say. Those Chettinad houses are no different from your house, I add a bit drunkenly. This one, I say, patting the balcony railing.

As soon as the words are out of my mouth, I know I am trying to imitate K, trying to imagine what he would've said or would've liked to say.

C glares at me icily. The hookah smoke has a blackcurrant flavour.

Somebody jokes, don't worry C, we'll pay our hundred-rupee entrance fee on the way out.

Everyone laughs. C goes back to being attractive in her moody way. She has made popsicles from guava juice and vodka. Does anybody want one, she asks hospitably. She is Mrs. Dalloway through and through.

C and a group of others head back into the kitchen to get the popsicles. M and I are alone on the balcony now.

What is wrong with you, M asks me. You don't get personal about that kind of stuff.

Well, it's true?

So what if it's true in like a larger sense? As if we're any different, M says, making a face.

I don't dine out on those kinds of holier-than-thou stories, I reply.

Yes, you just judge people silently. Have you even looked at that poor date of yours?

M leaves me standing there. She's had it with me. I've had it with me. I just want to find a hole to crawl into and stay there. But C returns to the balcony, this time alone.

Ugh, I groan and when I hear myself out loud, I realize I sound like a huffy animal.

C tells me that she wasn't "dining out" on that story like I had accused her of (she overheard us, apparently everyone did). She really wanted to know: how do we enjoy the beauty of art, architecture and literature that are all rooted in caste and class? Because the thing is we do, we do enjoy beauty from art, architecture and literature that comes from caste and class injustices and there's no use asking ourselves whether we *should* be enjoying it.

Well, I don't think about things that way, I say.

C asks with interest, what is the way you think of things? Tell me.

I don't really know, I blubber. I shrug as if it's not important for me to explain myself.

C looks at me steadily until her disgust is obvious. You have no real awareness of your privilege, she tells me. At least I'm talking about it, raising the right questions, unlike you.

She gives me a last look before going back into the warmth of her beautiful house. I turn my back on the party inside and look at the avenue of trees that stretch out below. Bats fly around at this time of the night.

K joins me loyally. I am comforted by the smell of his body. I ask him if he could get me some water and he agrees easily. He's back before I can decide what to do next.

You're behaving like a pariah, K says, handing me a glass. I thought they were your friends from school.

Some of them, yes, I say, gulping down the water quickly.

You're upsetting your milieu, he says, smiling. You don't like them?

Not particularly, I reply.

Why not? he asks patiently.

We're all too much alike. It's a bit nauseating, I reply.

He doesn't say anything. He just nods but I secretly hope he thinks I'm different from the rest. To elicit a response, I tell him about my exchange with C.

K sighs like he sees through me. He tells me it's been a long evening and that he wants to go home.

What do you think about what she said? I ask him. Do you think that all the beauty in art, in literature and everything – that all of it comes from class and caste injustice? How should we enjoy any of it?

Why is that the important question? he asks, irritated now. His face is an open chocolate box, everything laid out. Those are not the right questions at all, he says. Those are questions that will give you answers that make only people like you and your friends feel better about yourselves. What about asking different questions? he snaps. What about asking a question that reveals a reality and a viewpoint that is not yours?

K is looking at me sort of betrayed because he knows I don't quite understand him.

This is our first real argument and it has come with that tense knowledge – we think we are close, we think we have kissed, gone on playful dates and tried to impress each other – we

think that should amount to something but we don't really know each other. It is disorienting. I can feel the beginnings of an estrangement crystallize around us but I want to dispel it, push it away.

I ask him to tell me about the kind of house he grew up in.

K pauses for a moment, looking relieved. And then starts to tell me about his small town, his childhood home, about the doorways, windows and views he considers beautiful, about the way the moonlight streams in blue and silver on clear nights.



Sanjay Sengupta

Divine Tune  
Acrylic on Canvas



Sanjay Sengupta

Bahurupee  
Acrylic on Canvas



Sanjay Sengupta

Family  
Acrylic on Canvas



Sanjay Sengupta

Look At Me  
Acrylic on Canvas

## Synonyms

### *Asphyxiation:*

How we even pronounce this, asks my daughter. I tell her to close her eyes and remember the first time she was thrown in the swimming pool. The flavour of the word will come to you like a guava's, I say. But I know that this sophisticated word on my middle-class tongue is a poem that has crossed limits. All women know the smell of it, the look of it. My daughter will too.

Trauma is only a well-thought aftermath, love – an obscurity.

### *Suffocation:*

Suffocation does not come in sachets. It is a loose word that they sent me away with as dowry, says Atya. The pillow swallows the pungent odour of the balm and lets her handle the headache instead. She says that her muscles become clenched fists as doors and windows are shut in the evenings to keep the mosquitoes away. Breath - a burden is placed on her gentle throat and rests on the thumri she is practising.

Fear smells dirty, more so when you're sleeping with it.

### *Claustrophobic:*

It is hereditary. Appa runs short of air but then does not understand lack of space in relationships. What can stem from absolute silences, from peekaboo moments when it takes longer than usual to find you, from times when you forcefully taste him - is air cut in three quarters and served on ice. What remains is sweat of an imagined death.

## **Caveat**

Writing and reading are not neutral interventions.They are politically charged and socially situated. Aren't they? A writer like me who hails from dalit background needs to specify social location. Even If I hide my social background,casteist society like a secret police will find out my caste and start judging whether I am the following;

Good writer?

Bad writer?

Mediocre writer?

Conspiracy maker?

Propagandist?

Meritorious?

So,it is better for myself at least and for my community to reveal my identity.Of course,I am not the one who sticks on to the question of the genealogy of the writing of the nation.

According to Dr.B.R.Ambedkar, "I am not a part of the whole ,I am a part apart"

Some of you may wonder whether I know that I will be branded as a person who comes with a polemic.It is because of I saying what is forbidden or about the privilege of the dominant castes.

There are "others" who argue that dalit literature is becoming central to the geopolitics of literature.Dalits are writing for the west.They are becoming the gaze of the west about the east.Critics with sacred thread/wannabe to be with sacred thread also argue that caste is the construct of the colonialism and dalits are compromising according to the interests of the colonizer/neo-colonizer and and so on.We were already colonized by the caste,we are colonized in the so called "post-colonial" India,we are becoming penniless in the brahmanic-capitalistic phase of neoliberalism.

1

It is difficult to articulate my life in a linear way.This is not about life.There are interesctions of diverse facets of dalit life.At the the same time,I am one among them.It is difficult to differentiate myself from dalits across India and abroad as well.At the same time, I am not interested to

immerse myself in the traditional, literary debates on modernism and postmodernism. I am also not following the dominant, nationalist and global social science. I straddle across these streams in critical fashion. Still, I feel that dalit lives are misrecognised in the field of the main stream disciplines. Therefore, it is important to maintain critical distance with those streams.

## **AUTO/BIOGRAPHICAL-SOCIAL-POLITICAL...**

### **Haiku 1**

Caste and labour as rain

Turn into unemployment and hunger.

As a metaphor in the bin of Anthropocene that procrastinates the rain...

I am returning to my parents and grandparents through this haiku. Achan told me about his struggles during the rain. He said this in response to the romanticization of rain in Malayalam literature. Achan told me “rain for us is hunger. Since our parents can’t work during rainy season, hardly anything to eat”.

Why are such thick descriptions reduced into a haiku? I am finding answers for our own experience through strange ways of writing. Haikus has the potential to articulate larger truths. My affiliation with Buddhism is social and political as well.

Let us return to Kerala. Kerala is known as god’s own country. It is also celebrated for its development model. However, my experiences as a dalit in Kerala are different from these much discussed aspects regarding Kerala. Dalits in Kerala know that they hardly exist in the dominant stereotypes related to Kerala. Some of the experiences are written in the form of narrative.

Comrade Surendran Nair is coming to our home after a long time. He asked “majority of your community, dalit people are not having computer and you have luxury of having one? Don’t you think digital divide, a serious issue. Your community children are committing suicide. But, our revolutionary government is doing everything to “empower” them”. He stopped in his usual shameless manner.

It is better not to argue with an upper caste privileged man who believes in class and forgets caste questions in Kerala for his own convenience. Comi Nair is global as well as progressive in Kerala. His children are studying in the best ranking US universities.

## Haiku 2

Sacred thread of the revolution  
walks with its legs of foreign degree  
turns into an eclectic desi !

As a dalit ,education is a tool for us to acquire social mobility it will help us to challenge caste question.Suicides of dalit students have not questioned the thick skinned academics.However,the same academics have double face of discriminating dalit students and also writing about dalits' lives.Deshbhakth Moosath asked me”why people like you need reservation? You have to be included in the creamy layer.

## Haiku 3

Education in the form of suicide  
hides the insult of the many and kindle the arrogance of few  
Strange metaphor of status quo

My grandparents died earlier.My parents had to drop their education and indulge in precarious labour.They had to eat the thrown away food from the feudal homes.However,they were able to get further education only be cause of reservation system.Is it possible to compare a dalit with less social mobility /due to he/her caste loca tion to highly privileged upper caste men and women.

Another comrade,Shiv(Menon) who always hides his caste name always theorizes about dalit politics as identity politics.His grandfather comrade,Madhavan menon used to say dalits are casteist,they speak about only caste and they are mongers of identity politics etc”.Shiv told me “you are undermining progressive politics through caste politics”.

## Warning

These incidents can not be limited to Kerala,India.These casteist temperaments are central to any states in In India.So,there are two possibilities of reading this novel.

1.Upper castes or no-dalits may find it difficult to read it.Because,it is not written according to the dominant parameters of writing a fictionPurists of literature can not digest “ the political

“ in this fiction.

2. Dalits may understand it because they are familiarised with caste. Sanskritised dalits will also understand it. But, they won't show it due to their casteist -social conditioning.

As discussed earlier, one of the central questions is that who should speak for the dalits? Whether non-dalits can articulate the questions of dalits? Existence becomes coloured by caste in India. However, so called homogeneous canon “Indian Literature” conceals the various layers of domination and subordination across cultures, language, social stratification etc.

So, there are patronising offers from the hegemonic class-caste writers. It is a kind of tokenist literary rituals that categorise those dalits who write on their experience as dalit writers.

So the logic goes on as follows;

1. We are writers who strive for pure literature.

1. We are giving space for you to speak about your own experience. So you can speak about.

There are others who have the social/cultural capital (foot notes are possible in fiction or not?) to encash the pangs of the oppressed. They are able to categorise dalits and dalit literature. Interestingly, they are the casteist sins of their upper caste forefathers who patronise dalit in the name of dalit literature.

Writers across India exist in different islands of assertions, silence, cocoons etc.

Leftist ?

Modern ?

Post-modern ?

Dalit ?

Adivasi?

Feminist?

Minorities ?

Caste within minorities ?

(Literature departments have to flourish everywhere. One can read about the suicides of dalits, minorities from the same universities as well. There are people who masquerade as progressive and gender sensitive but they are also casteist and patriarchal to women from the marginalised sections as well).

Whether non-dalits will read dalit literature or not ? They started writing on dalit literature. Is it because of their concern for dalits in particular and dalit literature in general ? They have to write on everything. So, they have to write on dalit literature also. They have to be visible. They will also act as a dalit.

Assertions against caste are mushrooming in the universe of social media .I am intimidated by such strange ways of archiving the past,present and reflecting on the future.

Save/Delete!

Hi

How are you ?

Fwd ur photo asap

Sure.Thanks

Who designs us and encash our murmurs?

A message without a cell ?

Still, I “sms” to All.

Some of the intellectuals asked me to read about the relations of communications and capitalism. My ancestors did not have the access to knowledge. Therefore, twice born intellectuals are happy to imagine me as an ignorant person.

I have to chant Sherry Turkle's adage “I share...therefore I am ”

I can not read.I am destined to download and save it in the folder.Like an archetypal scientist,I do name each folder.Ego reloaded! Hower,I know the constraints for my search for social and cultural capital(Hail Pierre Bourdieu)

Key word is the user interface and my embedded nature in it.I have to cover the bridge of cultural lag as well .As one who maps embodied space of tech,is it fair to reduce everything to ‘me’ rather than ‘you’-the multitude caught in an interface@@@@@@@@@....I am reduced to certain pixels and spectacles.My community women are raped in the name of caste and they only exist as images in the social and traditional media.Justice as form of manipulated image....

We do flicker our lives with some esoteric ring tones.Ringtones of unheard penury and insult.Some of us among us are not able to hear it.They are transforming it into music of pain.

It leads us to reflect whether the ringtone is plagiarized from any old song,symphony ? Parody

of the oppressor become the parody of the oppressed. Oppression thus is circulated via the notations of the status quo. As people who heard the buzzword 'open source'... we console ourselves by saying that this sort of recursivity, parody etc are creative in a new sense. Our ancestors, members of the family are decaying with their corpses. Our world(s) are torn between the copyright and copyleft gibberish.

I am fed up with interface, mobile, channel... my syntax is being conditioned by the youtube lectures, news channel... Our language rooted in our own knowledge and experience has not developed. I do not expect to be heard by the inhuman mob. It is beyond their dead ears and skin. Conscience is anathema for them.

News circulate via channels. Democracy has become mouthpiece of media barons. I hate idiot box that measure the cheap time. Politicians distributed it among some regions. The logic is that you watch and forget your surroundings. In addition to alcohols and deadly substance, it reached our ghettos via politicians and related maffia. We could not adapt to it as well. Internet a much later term ?

Media ...Media...Media...Some of our friends who got admission to those institutes are busy in making ad films. They told me Ads are death of reality and therefore we have to return to our classics and masters. They are freely downloadable in those websites etc. Return to the "Classics" abound with the vestiges of brahmanic world ?

## **CULTURE ?**

Ad gurus reminded me that our language is the strange product of mother tongue and English. But a Dr. Bhayya who earned PhD in interdisciplinary theory enlightened me by saying that we are redefining vernacular through English. We are saved from language mammoth. For sms, you don't need grammar. I do sms to my mother and romanticize those phone-less days. Have you read William Plomer who criticized phones ? I will google it. Books are expensive. Library mediates dust. Photocopying is a crime ? Lets pray for some online robinhood who will upload those books. Law can be theorized. It is difficult to evade.

Access versus law

Access/denial.

Capital=new forms of sacred threads

...dogmatic wo/man or the unheard...

We can (de)brahmanize ourself and handover laptop to everyone. This is a corporate utopia. Bhadrakomrade's daughter deconstructs such reactionary ideology through writing a thesis against such corporate giants'. She told me "We have to challenge those categories of socially regulated economy. Da, pls fwd this..."

## Questions/Answers from the Possessed

Do you have internet in your mobile phone?

I have to buy a fancy one.

You can browse and find cheap phones.

I have a data card.They can't cheat me.I am a citizen journalist.I will capture everything and circulate through social networking sites.

We need transparent governance.We have to learn from developed countries ?

That's true.Rich to the poor in my district use mobile phone.I will make a documentary.

You can also gather old mobile phones to construct an installation.Thus,you can 'subvert' capitalist interests. Can we classify the key words of our relationship and life ?

Download...

Upload...

Message...

Fwd...

Photo...

Ringtone...

Range...

Coverage area...

Recharge...

Comrade ,no need to be an academic.essential things.limit is imp!

These are certain ways with which we can embellish ourselves.

Or,scream like a Journalist "DATA"....

Or ,we can buy a television to save the life of aged in a underdeveloped country (Thanks to Slavoj Zizekian category of 'Ethical Consumption' which enables us to develop counter imaginations..Please refer Zizek's works)

We need a certain methodology to explore the meaning of our love,life,technology...

No more experts.Tacit Knowledge Ki Jai !

Firstly , we have to pose as someone who can develop a sophisticated monograph on our

schizoid entanglement with gadgets and emotions. Then, we will circulate it among people to generate dissent against techie culture?

LOL!

I am pushed to a world of new glossary. Difference and deference are terms used by some professorial powers to explain my current conditions.

Pastiche

Language does cripple us.

Keywords act as needle to our body

Caste, Communalism, Gender and so on.

The moment in which we talk about language, you have the webs of terms such as modern/postmodern in order to trap me.

Still, we dream in a particular format. A format that is known to us and to our future psychoanalysts (Is it possible to have a Frantz Fanon among us to understand the correlations of caste, fantasy, oppression etc?)

Libido attacks us in a recalcitrant manner.

Somewhere Many writers creep in with their primitive understandings. Check with plagiarism and copyright police.....in order to penetrate into their exclusive world.

We are unable to penetrate their world.

Too pedantic in our subjective realm? They are damn pedantic in their worlds?

Footnotes always appear before us. It is impossible to escape from the footnotes? Spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions is a hypocrisy. I am conscious in writing about each word. My enemy pretends as creative and hides her/his cunning dimensions in the name of spontaneous imagination. Literature of the white found space in the pockets of Brown sahibs. Neocolonialism in paper and anti-colonialism in the public dramas?

Let us imagine myself as beyond the caste and start loving my oppressor? Is it possible to script "our love" as a novel in nature? 'Our' is a heterosexual construct which excludes the non-heterosexual.....capital letters project us .you have to be modest in deciphering crude sexuality (murmurs of brahmanic patriarchy).

Society is divine as well as our priest. Our words are under constant surveillance. Marriage, Family, Identity, Law, State.....the ultimate big words....All finishes in the mountain of caste.

Love is caste

Sexuality is caste

Marriage is caste.

Children are caste

Socialisation is caste

Region is caste

Nation-state beyond caste?

Vernacular in me force me to reconstruct love through 'the vernacular'

(Refer:Rushdie-Sachidanandan debate on the category of the vernacular).Enquire through some Professorial Power',in Bourdieuan sense, to have footnotes.Foot note is a keyword,right?

We are stranded with story,prose,poetry...Free associations are essential to untangle the desert of monogamy.Whether politically correct love can be retrieved through monogamy,polygamy,polyandry and so on...How can we curate ourselves ? There are many installations through national/global/glocal art,interpretative forms.....Language is short sighted...We have to articulate like a student of linguistics.But our readers who exist outside this narrative will suffer.....How long will repeat the same notion of "writer's block"?

It is good to depart.

It is bad to regain

Good/bad

Raw/cooked

Sounds like a usual high cult pandit who is being stranded in the midst of film analysis,pastiches of social sciences.. In order to expand our love,we need some sort of dictionary.

Digital/Print?

This 'we ','I 'or 'You' are using Gendered.

Re-mix of Socialist Realist Feminist Move ?

Eastern Soviet Bloc,France and many things

Your Caste

My religion

Our sexual orientation

If we have to insert into literature,we should be value-free..

*Shuddh Ghee* type.

Some like our Parents,Critics,Professors,Publishers stare at us...

Mammoth like Gaze.Isn't it ?

We have to read ourselves through "suspension of our disbelief"(If you have time,try to find out the origin of this expression) It is too tragic that we are the specters of some outdated glossary.There are certain standardized others called classics and the blind followers of that privileged species called 'high cult readers'.

So we have some sort of 'match the following' intellect.

Milan Kundera

Gabriel Garcia Marques

Orhan Pamuk

Do you like fiction?

Yes,I downloaded it.

Goodbye to Books and Library

Enlightenment/horrible New Age ?

We have to attain eligibility exam to give *bhashan* on *sabitya* (We lack merit according to some literary pundits)

We remain same through its diverse ideological colours.Sounds like our *desbi* argument'' all are corrupted....politics is bad.....we need superman....."(These are the usual dialogues from some high priests of diversity)

(corporate applauses and social responsibility histrionics)

Can we start like this....Once upon a time there was something called love .How to revive it ?  
Narratives and their impossibilities.

Thanks to Grand Anthropologists.

Subtitles are required for us.

Citations

Acknowledgement

Our Hagiography.

Honour Killing

Cohabitation

Marriage with in Caste,Outside caste

Inter-faith marriages?

Court marriage ?

Drama with the help of Pundit?

Can we meet through the following; Letter

Email

Social networks

Uploaded photos

Click 'like'

Download options

Friend/Unfriend

Log in /log out

Through Objects...abstractions...affordance.... Design was/is the key word.

Your vocabulary has to be improved. Your school ?

Writing programmes ?

Awards ?

State ?

Kinship?

We want to know your grandparents were polymaths or not

Subspecies: Bureaucrats,Academics,Entrepreneurs....

However,these cultural capitals in the Bourdieuian sense are buried in the history surrounding the narrator and narrative.

Textual purity like Blood....

*Khandani* ?

Testimony-The so called person is a highly politically conscious elite who de-class/debrahmanized him/herself .S/he will resurrect via the trajectory of the oppressed.Therefore,s/he will examine 'all' and prescribe medicines to all diseases that plague the world.

S/he onslaughts our *Kabanis* and ransacks our veins without our permission.Intellectual intruders are privileged to map your subjective territories and generate perspectives.

Lexicographers of difference...

Cartographies of desire.....

Curators of Inequality

Our final-recursive move.

Selection and Gradation

Typologies

Classificatory schemas

Limit:Reflections,words.....

At last,some of them are trying to console me through their strange logic.Lets us return to my poem to arrest their histrionic moves...

Black and White:Transcending the rooted animosity?

A white wo/man may repeat the slogan ,black is beautiful

in order to overcome certain social and political guilt/privilege

But,black and white are privileged

They are diverse

But unequal beyond the rhetoric

Struggles to pass the tunnel of ideology

may end up in the labyrinth of language

However,black has to indulge in endless fight with the white

irrespective of the word games structured around binary oppositions

One can play keeping black in front of white and vice versa

Probabilities may wound the confidence

It may instill self dignity to fight against the pedigree of white  
Colonial,postcolonial...categories reproduce the internal white/black  
without repudiating it.

Diasporic existence of the privileged leads to the cacophony of race  
without addressing the caste at their home land

Thus,they play very simplified games using terms like black and white.

It is important to understand that they are entering to me through the western vocabulary  
rather than engaging with my own vocabulary.When my Professorial powers have to teach in  
abroad universities,they have speak against the caste discrimination.Therefore,they revisit the  
anti-racist discriminations -struggles and play with their postcolonial rhetoric.They are busy in  
arguing against them.My fight is with the empire with its roots in my own soil.

### **Empire of Nonsense**

You cooked my pain in your text

Your text reflects you

Mine is not even mine

Whispers are my tongue

Prisons are our dead bodies

My space is deferred

We are in an unknown map

Capital is a distant red dream

We carry our bones to construct your nation

Waharu Sonavane,We remember you<sup>1</sup>

Laws become hexis-us

Move...Move...Each Minute Moves Us

To return to our stigmatized cocoon of caste

We do not have our earth

I write They overwrite

With our own words  
Freedom coated progressive caste wo/men dragged  
Us to recursive liberal caste groove  
Caste flows as time  
We recede to our banks  
To cross the river of caste  
We hate your ideology-explosives  
Which are made out of caste  
Your parties are caste  
Policies are caste paper-texts  
Your/Our NGOs suck our blood  
Momentum of transnational brothels of governance  
Created pimps out of us....  
Our poverty is your caste  
Your modern patronage  
Is Your modern caste  
Your postmodern patronage  
Is Your postmodern caste  
Hell with your ahistorical political theatre  
Hey ! Get lost with your theories  
We don't need your door.  
I/we -am/are living in the midst of toxic environments of caste.I know that you will raise  
questions about my repetitive nature in writing.  
You, the ultimate  
Other voices are hardly heard  
There are people with myopic eyes  
Like their gods and goddesses, you are omnipotent to them

Hope cannot be a mirage

Because there are no other ways

To come out of the trauma

Life is still waiting

For the aforesaid repressed voices

For those voices that cannot be parodied.

Our language is being evolved through our struggle. I am constantly reminded by you that I do not have language. Therefore, your community do not have language. We have organic intellectuals and we are returning to their oeuvre. I realised that;

Your synonyms cannot assure us the self-dignity

Your acronyms cannot capture magnanimity

Your pseudonyms cannot hide the masquerade of your caste

Your language is waiting for its retirement.

Atrocities in the name of caste are proliferating in front of me. Caste is transforming all religions as castes. Caste flows through temple, masjid and church. Even after my death, I may be not buried because of my caste. Death will be polluted by caste. Am I becoming too cynical without any form of “agency”.

Unemployed like me become one among in the que of the majority of the unemployed among us. Que of those sorts reminds me of the que in Fascist films. I am being taken into a gaschamber of caste. My community may have to argue like Zygmund Bauman and have to analyse our own form of modernity and holocaust. Professorial powers always corret me about the contextual specificity. I find such tricks as a means to evade my questions about their oppression. They unfold the following vocabularies in front of me ;

pre-modern

anti-modern

‘modern

feudal

semi-feudal

Most of them are particular about not bringing up the caste question here. They are conscious of their own privilege and the challenges before them.

My/our life/lives : reading for “YOU” ?

My/our life/lives : writing for “YOU” ?

Of Course,my narrative is categorised

Our narratives are canonized

Categorization is the dead end of our journey.There are people to judge our revelations.

Subjective ?

Objective?

Is it essential to transcend subjectivity/Objectivity?

Neat narratives about us are spreaded in your table of lesiure.You have ample time to reflect on us German Ideology!

Pascalian Meditations!

Castes in India

If you are patient enough,please explore the aforementioned texts.I know you lack the patience,you do not want us to have any sort of dialogue.

Your answers for us are the following;

Fate

Birth

...which can not be wiped out...

burden of crimes in the previous birth...

Some of you have moved away from the soteriological questions to that of so called objective-social-political descriptions

Every society is stratified...

Caste is nothing but division of labour...

It is functional in nature...

It is essential for the smooth functioning of the society...

Caste hardly exists,merit is important...

Your hardwork will pay off,you have to work hard...

Stop playing the victim card...

You have a kind of analysis for everything>Your social space legitimises your analysis.

However,our questions remain the same

Our answers are still unheard

You may “teach” us that politics of representation may not work.

You may also say that tokenism is not essential.

Your “big stature”(Constructed) lies in the coexistence of the oppressor and pro-oppressed stance in your biological-social-political realm.

Fastidious critic in you wakes up when we start articulating our issues.Then,you will speak in the following manner;

Is this the way to represent your questions?

Your questions can not be represented by others...

You lack scientific approach,and you are emotional in addressing these questions

Those who are keen to understand the complexities related to the theoretical and the empirical in the realm of knowledge generation, please read Gopal Guru’s article,`How Egalitarian are the Social Sciences in India”,Economic and Political Weekly.

<https://www.epw.in/journal/2002/50/perspectives/how-egalitarian-are-social-sciences-india.html>

However,hegemonic are chanting the following lines;

Measured past

Nonlinear present

There are no categories

For the future in the glossary.

Philosophical smoke in addition to the day to day religious rituals are there to attack us.They believe that we will be suffocated in such pernicious smoke and will perish for ever.

Enemy thus acts as the friend in such cases.Spectres of social reform revisit in our day to day life.Those who are politically conscious among us are happy with such alms of social reform.They are happy with their new identity.They are willing to sacrifice their lives in the altar of the superior sections.

Altruistic suicides of different order?

What about us ?

What is waiting for us?

Prisons?

Morturies?

Day to day forms of insult?

Legitimate forms of isolation?

Do we have to erase the following words from our book of self dignity;

Hope ?

Livelihood ?

Citizenship ?

Constitutional privileges?

Social security ?

However we are adding the following phrase in our book,

Socially regulated economy in the neoliberal phase of capitalism and its impact on our social mobilities? Capitalist with privileged caste surnames and its profits ?

Max Weber was right in his articulations regarding the negative impact of caste on economic development.

Dalit capitalism?

<https://www.epw.in/journal/2012/50/special-articles/rise-dalit-millionaire.html>

Like guinea pigs in medical trials,we are being subjected to different forms of trials. Trials after trials

Experiments after experiments...

Diverse and unethical forms of testing...

False promises...

Hyperboles of legalities...

Euphemism of Inclusion...

I am not indulging in any sort of linguistic exhibitionism.

This is a sort of conscious playfulness and it is much needed to counter the protean other!

<sup>1</sup> For more details,please refer Gail Omvedt,' An Open Letter to Arundati Roy'  
<http://www.narmada.org/debates/gail/gail.open.letter.html>

**debarun sarkar**

**re, or how to write punk poetry when the city makes no sense**

*March 2020*

listening to Nujabes with Shing02 at 7:53am drunk at versova  
i just dodged a water tanker and a car a bus and a motorcycle

Have you seen images of planned destruction, TNT in buildings to get rid of old buildings  
deemed unworthy?

I'm listening to Luv (sic) on loop but I can't seem to let go of architectural destruction, the  
beauty of it. The lo-fi study streams with the anime girl doing homework are calming. Nujabes  
is calming.

From Versova I take a bus to Andheri station and another bus towards Powai. And entering  
that steep staircase to the first floor in this slum where I have suddenly made residence, the  
Japanese duo of Nujabes and Shing02 are the only thing that make any sense to me.

\*

i have stared at the pages  
for more than a year now

silence procreates a myth  
like a vulture on medusa's head  
picking off the snakes

my hands have wavered  
have traversed across the maps  
from syria to china

i paint pictures in the mind's eye  
hypnotize the invisible retina  
draw images of pasts and futures

i shove pages inside your mouth  
up your anus to color the world yellow  
spreading the eastern disease  
across the globe and beyond

i have learnt to drive miniscule silences  
of battered wounds and broken bones  
and shape them into ancient weapons  
like a rhino i strike at your heart with my ribs  
devour your bass gods and shallow shrines

i desecrate your idols gods and masters  
like a seasoned anarchist in the black bloc  
i whisper riots into existence  
pour arsenic in the water retrieved from solar panels  
i poison minds of stones, flags, buildings and ruins

i burn like a priest in the 21st century  
break it down,  
silence.  
i burn like a witch  
on the steak

i force-feed you to make you live when  
you have chosen to die

i choke you with food  
stuff you up and waterboard like in the bay

i do not paint pictures of an other life  
a better life  
i draw images of hate, disgust  
i prescribe violence. i dematerialize  
inside your visions of the prophet

my keyboard is battered like a face  
punched in like a knucklehead

i don't break any bones no more

i prescribe violence against bones  
of ancient times buried in the soil

there is no debt to pay back  
for any sculpture or bones

\*

When I told my friend, who was staying at Uttarakhand, that I might be visiting Mumbai soon and I might have to spend some time living there if certain things fall in place or demand of me. He replied back rather enthusiastically, “go to the maximum city”. I had an option of choosing between Hyderabad or Mumbai, a city I had lived in before, city I never had.

I had first read about Mumbai in the books of Gyan Prakash and Suketu Mehta a decade ago. Mumbai was never that alien to me, its history and its geography, which I memorized easily by looking at the railway system. The language, Bumbaiyya Hindi felt natural, having grown up in Surat which is roughly a four-hour journey on train and felt close to the Hindi I had come to love in Hyderabad, Deccani. The books pointed to interesting and intricate stories and histories, both in the past and the present, as rich as the usual academic history books Bengali scholars are so fond of writing about their province with plethora of archival citations.

The Bombay railway system took a few minutes to get used to. The horror stories that were painted of the Bombay local trains appeared just that—horror stories—stories. The local trains during rush hour at Dum Dum are no different than they are at Dadar. The Virar fast in the evening is as bad as a Lakshmikantapur in the evening. If someone tells you otherwise, they are probably lying or are simply bad at travelling on the local trains.

\*

you write of stones  
the timeless  
while I dream of sand which once was

the night hangs low  
like a chorus of drums-machines

i see the world in your mouth  
the food you eat

\*

*Au Revoir Charles Correa, December 2017*

I lived here once. Inside, around, over, on you. Dwelling in your construction. I lived here once. And here and there and there and there. I lived in your construction. Your designed construction. I lived here once. By the sea. I do not think I can ever afford to come back here again. Making money isn't what I'm best at nor do I need much.

\*



that they did not belong to her?  
That they were, claimed, uncovered, already the property of someone more powerful  
Did she know yet what they might do to her story, her legacy, her rebellion  
That yet again, snakes would crawl into our earthen homes, and suck up her soul and regurgitate it,  
keeping their vile gaze upon her  
Tell her story as though it was theirs,  
in a sickening dance, reclaim ownership upon her body?

I am at odds with this body, because this body was never mine to begin with  
We are yet to remember ancestral love, from those who created us and who loved us, who lived on  
the edges and the outskirts,

we have existed before.

2.

before I grew breasts, I knew an ungendered joy  
in the old house I visited, where my grandfather, who is blurry in my memory  
would walk  
he walked with a stick  
he had no teeth for as long as I can remember him  
back in the yawning, vast expanse of time before my body had *become*, my cousins and I would play  
we created games that did not create boys and girls,  
pretending to make chutneys and balms with plants and flowers that we found around the house  
we would crush them with a stick inside a coconut shell  
and I would learn the names of the trees and the bugs and the snakes  
we would sleep on the floor together and tell each other stories of ghosts, real and made-up in the  
pitch blackness  
in the deafeningly quiet, dark nights marked by the jarring absence of streetlights, I would open my  
eyes and close them, and the darkness the same either way  
the canopy of trees so large it blocked out the moon and the stars,  
if the clouds had not already  
nobody could see me, and I could not see my self  
I had always been afraid of the dark, and I was afraid I would perhaps disappear  
but I was yet to realise  
I was only afraid of darkness when a little light was cast upon it,  
when I knew it was there,  
and I need not be afraid because the ghosts and the staring, knowing eyes could not see me now I  
was nothing, no one, not man nor woman  
in that darkness, I did not exist for them

that house is now gone  
it has been run into the ground, replaced by a larger one  
with the unmarked cremation site of my grandfather now underneath  
in my mind, that house is a vessel that carries the time from *before*  
the house is gone, and with it, those moments of infinite dark freedom

## City and the Non-city

The Invisibilised cities don't make it to Architecture theory. They rather have their presence felt as a spectre of the city's insecurities. We can only cherish cities we can't see, not the ones we choose not to see. Every Indian city at its core breeds a non-city. By mere logic, the city can never outgrow the non-city, as all of its existence is nothing but an open act of burglary. Yet, all that is stolen from the non-city are memories. Memories that are never allowed to stay long enough to become histories. The non-city is rather associated with numbers and research papers which decorate the desks of the city dwellers. After all, numbers ensure effective control, while memories inspire anarchy. I preserve my memories in letters that I exchange with people who live in various cities around the world in a hope that when they come for me, someone else might have already hidden one in an old book, somewhere on a shelf waiting to become history. Now since Italo Calvino happens to be a close pen friend of mine, I often discuss with him my relationship with Bombay and he tells me about his love for Venice. I tell him I live in the B.D.D. chawls of Worli, I tell him about my love for studying Indian cities but why I find it hard to love them. How in their sewer drains I cannot unsee the blood of my non-city. Recently in one of our exchanges, I sent him an introduction of a book I very much look forward to write. I hope these pages find him in good health.

The black stone burrows house the plumpest mice of this city. After the plague of 1890, the piper who was commissioned with freeing Bombay from disease breeding rats, pied them all into this peripheral ditch. The sight of a million mice carcasses naturally suggested a potential waste dump. Residents of Bombay started littering this spontaneous landfill with leftovers from last night in soggy wet polythene bags as they passed by for their day job at the ports. A fresh layer of offal refuse, dead garlands, rotten fruit offerings that the gods did not eat, dry scattered bones from a thoroughly relished carrion, a salty spread of the Arabian sea sediment and a nibbly wreck of some plasticky oddments surfaced within a week's time. Much like Pash's 'Ghaas', the mice resurfaced. Like an exiles' return to a holocaust ground, the mice they claimed their autonomy on this land where their ancestors shed blood.

And thus sprung a new colony on this ever shifting terrain. An assortment of all memorabilia to a lusciously thriving city, of everything the city sought to dissociate, everything the city chewed and spat, everything it devoured and shat, everything the city tried it's best not to be, everything the city was not, the non-city. Dot? line? level? Plane zero? Level one? It was all mere plateaus of fossil, hardened over thousands of mice years, an evidence to the hunger of this city. Dissected,

bisected, rabid teeth at work lavishly intersected this body of muck which only knew it's sun through filtered cavities. Drilling through carbonized stratas hardened under atmospheric pressure, the mice built the busiest metropolis of tunnels. The work went on for 40 human years. Trash-pile-fossil-hardening-mice-carve-tunnel longest running construction project the city had seen. 1932. The tumor has now bloated almost 25 meters above sea level. The Bombay municipal trust, impressed at this architectural feat, declares this plot to be the official dumping ground of the city. Wide roads were cut through to improve accessibility, dividing this massive chunk into 120 separate quarters. Each marveled at for its sculptural grace of intricate mice work. If one was to be dropped in the midst of this mania, they would find themselves running through a stitched labyrinth of Piranesi canvases. Its freshly chileased skin of stone which forever slithered in a swarm of rats. Meanwhile, the non city had quite a living population of its own beyond the gene pool of just mice, algae or cockroaches. Though not much is known about them. Some say they've always been here. Some say they speak mice. Some say they eat mice. Some say they are the mice. We'll probably never know. If one digs through the city library, one might find an extensive study on the structural load distribution of these burrows with figure ground diagrams of their incremental growth but none about its residents.

I can write ten more paragraphs on the form of garbage and ten more on the history of its mice and I'm sure they will all be read just the way this story was and yet if I write just another line on them, it would probably be called a work of speculation. Their story has been torn off from the memory of the city and buried somewhere in these burrows, these burrows in which the city buries its traumas. No one will ever know why there are broken Ambedkar busts lurking from its ceilings and why there is a buddha caked in its walls. It might have to do something with these others, with their religion, their language, but that's only a speculation. We only know them as the non-mice as we know the city from the non-city.

This non-city which if exhumed in its bedrock might find a paper with a speech titled 'The Bombay Plan' dated 1944, in which Mr. Jamshedji Tata claimed :

“ An ideal house would measure at least 500 square feet at the rate of '100 square feet of house per person' and would enable the person to inhale '3,000 cubic feet of fresh air per hour'. It would have 'two living rooms, kitchenette...a built-in cupboard, a raised platform...pegs for hanging clothes and minimum of 3 electric lights'!

Moreover, the house must have a prescribed dimension of 250 square feet for four people or sixty square feet per person, and included amenities like a toilet inside the house, a fair-sized veranda and a roofed terrace for sleeping in the summer.”



## Chanchal Kumar

### adagio

i want to write a poem for you but

i want to meet you more

So that's what i do

the poem

can

wait.

i text you, ask if you are free

You tell me not today: you are busy

But you call me in the evening, you say

“Will meet.”

And i say “Okay.”

And everywhere poets are writing

poems for their lovers

And me,

i'm meeting you today.

## **I have willed you into existence**

I dreamt of everyone but you,  
Took your name softly and prayed  
I bet on language and failed again  
Watched them and laughed a little  
Eating plain white rice I begged them for,  
Finally called you when  
A spider died, I don't know when.  
It lay strewn like sticks in a black matchbox  
But it had drank all the water dry  
I jumped having worn the thread around  
My neck and woke up with a bump  
On my head. I traveled to the airport  
But could go no further  
Dressed myself in linen and muttered  
The only prayer I knew  
You said, Talk to me if you want  
Forget me if you can.  
I have things to plan,  
Put into motion the wheel of future  
I stared and stared until I couldn't  
I took a cold bath and wore a clean kurta  
Looked around for an apartment to stay in  
My friend said, It's better to be sad with money  
Than without it & I thanked him for the perspective  
since I couldn't disagree  
Everything is strange now  
I am getting used to living with memory  
I teach myself lessons I have asked  
my students to never forget:  
"Nobody exists without a history"  
Life really does go on and on  
Where is the end of the earth?

## Through nights

Desire is the honest work of the body.

— Jorie Graham

How many times I have relied  
on my body to show me sleep,  
To find me some relief  
Out of wanting you  
I walked for an hour to get here &  
What did I receive  
Through nights I wasn't sure  
If tomorrow is real  
I have embarrassed myself but that's ok  
No one remembers  
I'm here because I forget too soon  
All my words are important, dispensable  
I lay there thinking, drawing outlines  
on the shadow with my finger  
How could I have survived  
without family,  
trying to find ways to say it better?  
So chaotic it seems imagined  
It shouldn't be this way  
I am not sure how else  
it could have been possible

## **Location Unknown**

I'm at an age when things disappear mysteriously:  
Pens, N95 masks, socks, notebooks  
It seems a deluge is coming  
Threatening to carry away vestiges of memory  
My life no more a Marquez novel  
Where things return to from whence they began  
I believe the life I'm living is at the locus  
Of an unknown pain again  
And I have to begin gathering the seeds asap

## **Geography**

Sometime between the fourth period bell and Borkotoki Maam's arrival, my classmate Abhishek exclaims—"Wow you're hairy, bey! Your legs are even hairier than mine!" It's the first time I actually notice the hair, and find that there is, in fact, quite a lot of it. I'm thirteen years old, and before this day, I'd never thought of my body at all. Now it is all I can think of, as the geography teacher lectures on about Andalusia, Pangea, and other things of the past. It is as if the world has split into two types of people—the bumbling, hairy ones and the smooth, perfect hairless ones.

Through the day, I steal glances at my female classmates' bodies. At lunch, I stay rooted to my seat, unwilling to expose myself. The girls circle around my desk and we take out our tiffins. I watch the tiny hairs on Akankhya's fingers as they tear pieces of luchi and pick up bhaji. I look at Rohini's shins, propped up on the desk like a mafia don from a Hindi film. I only pretend to listen as she reports what Miss Jyotsna said to Avinash during class, and how Avinash talked back. I barely notice when Pritika, who has a sprinkling of a mouche across her upper lip, whines, "I'm feeling so fat!" and Tina, who started shaving in the sixth grade and who has not one hair where it shouldn't be, responds, "Well, you ARE fat."

Post-recess, I find that I left my History book at home, so I share a textbook with my benchmate, Aosen. The down on her arms is very fine, glinting like gold dust as it catches the sun through the window. I knock my pencil over and crouch under the desk to get a look at her legs. I strain to see the hair—it's only visible up close. Well, she's Naga, after all, I think, with resigned envy. Girls from Nagaland have shiny, straight black hair on their heads and almost none on their body. Aos barely even has eyebrows. "What're you doing down there?" she asks, and I scramble back up, avoiding her eyes.

I begin to fear that I'm the hairiest girl in class until Hindi period, when I sit beside Tazmina. I've sat by her for a full year now, but this is the first time I've considered her physical presence. Dark strands as long as my fingernails cover every inch of her legs, thigh to calf to shins. Gross, I think, recoiling. Tazmina is perfectly nice, if a little slow, and thinking this about her makes me feel guilty. But there's another thought there—do the others think of me like that too?

Back home, I'm at the wash basin when I notice Deuta's razor, leaning casually inside the toothbrush mug. Ma is at the neighbourhood beauty parlour and Deuta is snoring on the divan in the living room. I snatch up the razor and upturn a bucket. I seat myself on it, stretching my right leg out. I take a deep breath. Then another breath. Heart racing, I glide the razor in one short stroke over my shin. I've never shaved anything before. It surprises me how simple, how painless it is—the blade swipes the hair up immediately, revealing smooth, clean skin. I examine

the mass of scraggly strands collected between the blades, and run the tap over it. It drops with a “plop”. Another swipe, more skin. I become less afraid with each stroke, my fingers grip the handle more boldly. I’m almost finished with one leg when the bathroom door swings open, followed by a strong, damp smell, like chyavanprash. Ma is standing in the doorway, her hair piled up high on her head, held together by wet, pungent henna.

Her eyes widen in horror as she registers my newly-hairless leg, clean to the knee. She yanks the razor out of my grasp and is shaking me by the shoulders, shouting, “Why did you do that? Why did you do that?”

After that, the house is a furore. Ma paces the living room, her henna hardening and cracking like a green-brown hive. My father is sitting up in his white raggedy ganji, rubbing his eyes, still recovering from being shouted awake from his nap.

“Don’t ever shave, bachha!” Ma is repeating, over and over. “Only badmaash girls do it! Promise you won’t do it again,” she pleads, clasping my hands, and looking into my eyes. “Promise me, promise me!”

I remain silent. I can never react when Ma gets panicky like this. It makes a part of me cold, like my body is there but my mind is floating outside of it, looking from a distance. She whirls on Deuta, “Say something, she was using your razor!”

Deuta shifts uncomfortably, and murmurs, “Listen to your mother, baccha. It’s not good...” He trails off, having done his bit.

“If you really want to hide the hair, you can bleach it instead,” says Ma, insistently, desperately. “The hair won’t show at all.” She hurries out of the house, leaving my father and I avoiding each other’s gaze. He yawns and it turns into a sigh. I stay standing in the same spot.

Ma returns with a box labelled Fem Fairness Bleach. Inside it is a tub of thick white cream, and a packet of salt-looking powder. There’s also a plastic pink spoon-like thing. She mixes the powder with the cream and reaches for my unshaved left leg.

“Let me show you na, it’s the same as shaving!” she insists. I protest that I’ll do it myself. Only when I start shouting does she back off.

I lock the bathroom door and spread the bleach mix with my foot propped up on the sink. The mix has a strong, chemical smell, and its fumes make my eyes burn, and I feel slightly woozy. As the instructions state, I keep it on for fifteen minutes. When I wash the bleach cream off, the down on my legs has somehow become invisible. It’s camouflaged onto my skin, almost exactly matching the colour below it. Who would suspect it? Later, I make some more mix and bleach my arms and face too. The next day at school, I’m no longer tucking my legs under the bench. I’m prancing around, ready for Abhishek to comment on my suddenly-hairless legs. Nobody notices.

On Saturday morning, I'm putting on a t-shirt when I notice the fur in my armpits, thicker and darker than the fuzz on the rest of me. I smear some bleach mix on it but soon Ma is yelling that I'm late for swimming class. So I wash it off before its prescribed duration. The hair is definitely lighter than it was before, but it's only strawberry blonde instead of completely matching my skin.

When I reach the club, my swimming mates are already in the water. Tina, who is in her pink-red marbled swim cap, declares that I'm wearing an "aunty" swimsuit because of the skirt attached around its bottom. Ronak and Debolina are doing the underwater breathing exercises; the aggressive bubbles in the water over their heads make me nervous that they're laughing at me.

Canato, our swimming instructor, is about eighteen years old. He's a college boy with a smooth chest and a stubbly, green jaw. He has a bulging Adam's apple and a sexy grown-up voice. He wears hair in a bun on the top of his head. We know that Tina likes him because she is especially mean when he's around, making me both distracted and jumpy in his presence. Ronak likes Tina, and shows it by being especially crass around her. Tina will never like Ronak back because he tries too hard while Tina's cruelty comes naturally to her.

"Nice mane," Ronak tells me. It takes me a minute to realize that he's talking about my sideburns. In contrast to my earlier armpit bleach situation, I accidentally left the cream mix on my face for over twenty minutes, turning the hair there a shiny platinum blonde. Canato clears his throat. "Enough, get swimming."

"Sure," says Ronak, rubbing his chest suggestively, "I guess I'll do the breaststroke today." He emphasizes "breaststroke" loudly, making the gangly older boys at the end of the pool turn around. Ronak kicks off, still rubbing his chest, proud that they heard him.

"Ugh, he's so immature," says Tina, casting a sideways glance at Canato, who smiles politely.

We swim across the breadth of the pool, Debolina kicking up all the water around her. Tina is learning the backstroke today, spluttering and pretending to drown. She keeps putting her arms around Canato as he tries to fish her back up. I swim on my own, trying to avoid Debolina's splashing legs and Ronak's gropey hands.

At the end of the hour, we're collected at the side of the pool. Tina has pulled a section of hair out of her swimming cap and is curling it flirtatiously around her index finger.

"How many boogers do you think are in the water pool today?" asks Ronak.

"Chee, Ronak!" says Tina. "Could you be more classy?"

She steals a glance at Canato, who clears his throat and turns to me.

“Great legwork there, Sisa,” he says. “You’re getting good.”

It is startling to be appreciated by Canato. His attention is like being in the glare of the sun, and with Tina orbiting him jealously, it’s dangerous to look directly back. I retreat against the pool wall, propping my elbows on its edge to steady myself. “Um, yeah,” I stammer. “Thanks...”

He begins to talk about some district swimming event, but is cut short by a piercing shriek. It’s Tina, and she’s pointing at me with a disgusted, horrified expression. “Ayaaaa!” she cries, lunging onto Canato’s arm. “Spider! Spider!”

“Where? Where?” shouts Ronak, accidentally elbowing Debolina, who starts howling too.

Something strawberry blonde, spindly and strand-like is floating about just under my armpit. With a jolt, I understand what it is. I pull my arms back into my body, and join the shrieking. “Spider! Spider!” I shout, splashing out of the pool. “Spider! Spider!” I run, arms wrapped tightly around myself.

When I get home, I shave every bit of hair off my body.

## **Goirick Brahmachari**

### **How to erase memories**

The short-lived once are the hardest  
Comparing does not work  
Whining is just me; fading out like time, evaporating  
There is a thin line between possessiveness and the end  
I examine the two ideas  
Closely. Oversleeping, is a good advice  
Oh fuck, someone stop that filthy music right now, fuckers!  
My room is my universe  
Coffee makes you restless,  
Work is slow, so are our movements.  
Count your hours until we can converse again.

## **Anomaly**

To approach the state  
Of containing no meaning,  
The end of sound must  
Begin; abstaining the speech  
First, then the sighs or the moans

Now the minds must stop,  
All anatomies disem-  
Bodied; entities  
Resolved to isolate or  
Fade into silence

The drone of an aged  
Old fan, text alerts, alarms,  
Cars disappear; roads  
Melt into rivers, disjoint  
Monophonics in this age

When soliloquy  
Becomes the only script, all  
The codes and trials  
Fail to connect us; no, don't  
Blame it on our ignorance.

## **Sunny Hill**

*(A walk with Armer Pariat)*

Gods and devils wait by the side of a lake that bleeds  
hate, sometimes love.  
And hate is just hate  
love remains love,  
as I walk with my friend  
watching the houses where we were burnt.

And identity is just identity  
And majorities will have all the fun  
And minorities are at their place  
And minorities are at their place  
dying, dying, asserting  
their foolish religious prime.

Sometimes, I do not mind when I am called a Dkhar.  
when I travel in leather covered autos to NEHU  
to meet my comrades,  
to drink the evening among pines,  
for this is the fight  
we have to fight,  
yes, yes, we must resist this fight  
until an earthquake sends love letters  
to Jaintias, Pnars, Khasis  
and us Non Tribals alike  
to shakes us up  
to bring love  
to bring life when faced with death  
and our grandmothers will always chant  
and those drummers from the temple will drum the fear out of us  
And the holy chants will echo, will echo  
through the frost and the forests of a broken January.

I suck my thumb, my kindergarten cigarettes  
the cold air heaves through my lungs  
And I eat my worries with my Jadoh

and drink your worries with my jhol.

I hope, I hope, we will see a day when people mourn, when people mourn  
for both sides and carry the weight of death  
over their shoulders  
in the name of love  
in the name of hate  
in the name of hate  
in the name of hate  
that surrounds us.

## Shetty Huchchi

I must have been five or six years old when I heard the name ‘Shetty Huchchi’ for the first time. In my mind, the name induced feelings of both terror and wonder. Terror because if we didn’t agree to have dinner or go to sleep, elders in the household would tell us, “Shetty Huchchi will come and eat you up!” Wonder, because she was an enigma - an actual living, breathing, person whose words and actions I could never comprehend. I never got close enough to her to comprehend.

My parents had a home in Shimoga, where we lived, but I spent a large part of my childhood in my grandparents’ house. On the street of my grandparents’ house, to be more specific. They were my mother’s parents, my *ajji-taata*. Though my parents lived in the same town, my grandparents’ house offered more freedom and I went there as much as I could. I spent most of my weekends and holidays there. It was there that I made friends, played cricket from morning until the sun set and we could hardly see the ball, learnt to ride a bicycle, started stealing money to buy chocolates and did other annoying things that children do. All my memories of growing up go back to the warmth and love offered by that place.

My grandfather was a priest at the local Subramanya temple. He would go to work at six in the morning and return by noon. Since the evening shift wasn’t his, he was available throughout the day to tell stories and play games. I spent time working with him in the small garden he had nourished in front of his house. He narrated to me stories from the Ramayana, Mahabharata, Puranas and Upanishads while I assisted him with shifting plants from small pots to bigger ones, and with mixing and pouring manure.

My grandparents lived in a small, tile-roofed, single bedroom house that sat behind a large bungalow, almost like an outhouse. One had to walk through a long, slender passage along the compound of the bungalow to reach the house. This passage opened onto the aforementioned street, where I spent most of my childhood. Half a mile down that road, in an old, dilapidated house that brought to my mind the haunted houses shown in horror films, lived a fragile old woman who hardly interacted with anyone. She was called Shetty Huchchi.

Obviously, that was not her real name. I assume this is where it came from: In between Shetty

Huchchi's house and my grandparents', there was a *shettrangdi*, a small provision store owned by a Shetty. The old woman would visit this store regularly because the owner supplied provisions for her, and that was also why she was often seen roaming the area around the store. Based on this roaming near *shettrangdi* and because she fit the image of a mad person with her tattered clothes and unkempt hair, the people of the locality had decided to call her Shetty Huchchi. *Huchchi* in Kannada means mad-woman.

It is strange how fear is built into a child's mind. I never interacted with this old woman. In fact, I had never even gone close to her. But I dreaded her enough to have nightmares about her. If I saw Shetty Huchchi, or even any old woman who resembled her in some way, from a distance on the street, I would run and hide behind a tree or inside someone's compound, wait till they passed, and only then continue with my intended business. Since I never went near her, there was nothing she ever did to me. Neither had she done anything to anyone I knew. Yet, I was scared.

It must have been when I was in eighth or ninth standard that I spent a couple of months at my grandparents' house. An aunt of mine was pregnant. Now anytime one of my mother's sisters got pregnant, they would live at my grandparents' house for a few months till the baby was delivered and the mother was ready to get back on her feet. It was like maternity leave from household work. I was always looking for excuses to spend time at my grandparents' place and saw this as a prime opportunity. I told my parents that *ajji-taata* were getting old and would need help taking care of Renu aunty, and so I should stay there till the baby was born. They agreed on the condition that I improve my performance at school and blah blah blah while I nodded my head vigorously to whatever they said. Needless to say, my scores plummeted during those months. Well, plummet is too strong a word I suppose, since my scores were never that high to begin with.

During those two months, strange things happened that left an impression on me. That's what I want to share with you.

One of my younger cousin sisters had come with her family to meet my pregnant aunt and one afternoon we were playing a game of hop-scotch in the passage leading to my grandparents' house. All of a sudden, my sister got scared and started whispering '*alnode! alnode!*' pointing towards the street. I turned around to see an old woman entering the passage, slowly walking towards us. It took me a moment to realise who it was, and when I did, I froze. It was Shetty Huchchi. Never before had something like this happened. I simply didn't know what to do. I was cornered in a narrow passage, and though my sister started running back towards the house and

kept calling me, I stood there in sheer terror.

Shetty Huchchi came and stood just a couple of feet away from me. A frail person almost my own height and build, she reminded me of my late great-grandmother. With a round face full of wrinkles, she had stubble on her upper lip and chin. She wore a maroon saree that had almost turned brown. She covered her head with it, saving me the sight of her thickened hair, which I dreaded. I stood there waiting to be eaten up. Stories of Bakasura, Mahishasura and whichever other asura stories my grandfather used to tell me passed through my mind. I thought she would suddenly grow into a monster, pick me up from the ground, put me in her mouth and chew me up. The sound of my body being chewed up ran through my head - *kacha kacha - kurum kurum* - a combination of juicy flesh and crispy bones. In the background somewhere, and it sounded like miles away, I could hear my sister crying loudly and running away towards the house.

To my surprise, all that Shetty Huchchi did was smile. Was it the smile before the monster ate up its prey? I couldn't say. But then, keeping her toothless smile intact, she stretched out her hand. Instinctively, I was going to give her what was in my hand - a flat piece of stone that I was playing hop-scotch with. I dropped it on the floor and checked my pockets to see if I had a coin, but I didn't. All I had was a Coffy Bite, a toffee that cost 50 paise in those days. I shook my head to suggest that I had nothing to give her but she didn't move. Not knowing what to do, I placed the Coffy Bite on her outstretched palm. She took a look at it, unwrapped it, put the toffee into her mouth and started chewing it with her gums. Then she turned around and walked away.

Meanwhile, my sister must have gone home and told my grandfather that I was being kidnapped or murdered or some such thing, so he came running. He asked what had happened. I told him. Maybe it was too strange for him to comprehend or maybe he was just relieved that nothing bad happened to me, he didn't say anything. We walked back home, and just when I was about to enter, he told me to stop. "Go home, take a bath and come back," he said. When he said 'home', he meant my parents' house. Confused, I asked why. He said that since I might have touched Shetty Huchchi and because she was dirty, it was important that I took a bath. Since the bathroom at his place was located in the backyard and one had to pass the kitchen and the puja room to reach there, it was better if I cleaned myself at my parents' place and came back.

I did as my grandfather told me - took my bicycle, went to my parents' house, took a bath and came back. That day, something in me changed. I was not afraid of Shetty Huchchi anymore. In fact, I started becoming curious about her. I would ride my bicycle by her house time and again, trying to spot her inside the house. I started wondering what she must be doing all day. Though

the house was scary to look at, there was a jasmine tree at the gate that stood out. In spring, it would burst with flowers and look like a tree covered in snow. The fragrance from the tree would reach as far as *shettrangi*. I once saw Shetty Huchchi watering the tree, but I never saw her plucking the flowers. No one else really bothered about those flowers either because they were afraid to enter the vicinity of her house. Also, since the day I first encountered her, if I saw her walking along the street, I wouldn't hide from her. In fact, I would go to her and offer her the same 50 paise Coffy Bite and she would accept it with a smile. It was a sight to behold when she would chew the toffee in her toothless mouth. I never told my grandfather any of this. After the day she walked into the passage, he had put a make-shift gate at the entrance and instructed me to stay away from her. Despite that, I was so fascinated by her, I found myself scribbling her name, 'Shetty Huchchi', on the last page of notebooks when I was bored in class. That led to another strange incident.

One day, I was scribbling something on the last page of my notebook in school. At this point I should interject that the principal of my school used to do rounds around the campus during school hours. She would slowly walk along the corridors making sure that her teachers and students were involved in 'constructive work', a phrase she used so often that I felt like destroying something every time I heard it. She would also come into the classroom, walk along the aisle, peeping into our notebooks while the teacher carried on with their lesson. Since ours was a particularly notorious class, these visits were frequent. That particular day, we had math class going on when she was walking past. I hated this class with all my heart. For some reason, math teachers at my school wouldn't stick. There used to be a change of teacher every year, sometimes twice a year, so it was really difficult to develop interest in the subject. The teacher at the time, Rajesh, came from a rural background and his English wasn't very good. When I say his English wasn't good, I don't mean mine was great. Though we were supposed to be speaking only in English in school, we hardly ever did, except for in English class. Among ourselves we always spoke in Kannada, for which we were often fined. Now apart from his poor English, Rajesh sir used to speak really fast and had a particularly funny accent. If he caught someone talking or being inattentive in class, he would say, "Hey you, whatryoudoingisay? Standuff. Standuffisay!" I imitated this among friends so much that after a point of time, I myself developed the habit of saying 'standuff' instead of 'stand-up'. Rajesh sir, on catching someone misbehaving, would go near that person, and depending on who the student was, their performance, and his own mood, he would slap the student really hard. As you might have guessed by now, I got slapped quite often.

Coming back to that day's math class, I was bored and scribbling something on the last page of my notebook. In the corridor, I saw my principal on her rounds. Our eyes met. Sensing danger, I slowly turned the pages back and re-postured myself into the figure of a studious and inquisitive

child. She must have become curious about this significant transformation in one of her favorite pupils. She came inside the classroom, walked along the aisle, came next to me, and as if it was the most natural thing in the world, took my notebook and skimmed through it, landing on the last page. At that moment I realised something. I had scribbled ‘Shetty Huchchi’ on the last page of the book. And guess what, my principal’s name was Vimala Shetty. Just before she turned towards me glaring, I realised that the words ‘Shetty Huchchi’ on the last page of my notebook would take a very different meaning in her head.

During lunch break that day a bunch of us were summoned to the principal’s office - Shujath, Syed, Anmol, Rohith and me. Being summoned to the principal’s office was never good news, and when all of us star pupils were invited together, it meant danger. We were all scared. All our fathers were generous in using their belts and this meeting was a prelude to scenes of domestic violence in our homes. Another surprise awaited us at the principal’s office. The whole staff was in the room! Only then did it dawn upon us that this was not just about our principal, Shetty, going *huchchi* over my last page scribbles, but a larger issue.

See, we had given each of our teachers a nickname. We had received intelligence from our sources that some teachers had suspected us calling them names behind their backs, but who could have foreseen that they would press charges against us based on a scribble in my notebook about an old woman staying near my grandparents’ house?! Our principal was convinced that the nickname we had given her was ‘*Shetty Huchchi*’ and she wanted revenge. Among ourselves, we had decided not to challenge her assumption because her actual nickname was much worse. She wanted us to plead guilty and accept punishment and her teachers wanted to know what each of their nicknames were.

We didn’t know where to start. Our science teacher, Thomas, helped us out. “Tell me, what am I called?” he said, trying to be sportive or something. Syed and I looked at each other. Despite our pounding hearts and sweaty hands, we couldn’t control our smirks. To divert myself from laughing out loud, I said, “*Chombu*.” Thomas sir was a little plump and our social science teacher, who was his best friend, was very thin and when together, they would make quite a loud and noisy pair. We had named them ‘*Thatte and Chombu*’ - plate and tumbler. The duo’s faces turned white after hearing that, but they didn’t say anything. Soon, we started giving them all the other names. To our surprise, some of them took it with humor! I even thought that the teachers might be starting to like these names, and would call each other with them among themselves in the future. Until Syed announced our math teacher Rajesh’s nickname. “*Holemaadiga*.” He said. An eerie silence surrounded the room for a moment, and then suddenly, Rajesh sir jumped up from his chair, and slapped him so hard that Syed fainted and fell on the floor.

Neither my friends nor I knew what the word ‘*Holemaadiga*’ meant. In my house, if I ate before brushing my teeth or didn’t bathe till the afternoon or evening, my mother would scold me saying, “*Holemaadigra thara hallujde, snaana maadde tintidiya!*” (Eating without brushing or taking a bath, like *Holemaadigas*.) I thought that it was a word used to describe an unclean person. Rajesh sir was never unclean. Looking back at it now, his dark complexion, rural background and poor English made him appear unclean in my mind, and it was I who had suggested that name for him. Only after this drama at the principal’s office did I realise that Holeya and Maadiga are two castes. Until then, the only castes I had heard of were Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra and a few others like Gowdas, Lingayats and Bunts. At home, I was taught that I should be proud to be born a Brahmin since thousands of years of *punya* have led me to this birth. At the same time, if the issue of caste came up in public, my parents or relatives would say that caste is not actually inherited by birth but something that one gains through hard work. If you study well you become a Brahmana and if you laze around, you become a Shudra. Both these theories are opposite to each other, so I never understood what castes were, but I had shared these theories with my friends and they seemed to agree. Apart from this, none of us knew much about castes. For me personally, mentioning my caste always helped and I never shied away from it.

“Am I a *buchchi* because I am a Shetty?” asked my principal in front of my parents. All our parents had been called. Mine sat there looking utterly ashamed of me. I didn’t know how to answer my principal’s question, nor could I understand why my parents were ashamed and angry. I had learnt these things from them! Gowdas were drunkards and meat eaters, Shettys were modern-Indian-moneymaking-Jews, Lingayats were wannabe-Brahmins and so on. And all the castes were conspiring against us, the poor, holy, cow-worshiping Brahmins. This is what the elders discussed among themselves at home. Now why were my parents angry that I had professed these thoughts among my friends?

“Do you know Rajesh sir comes from the same caste as you? He is a Brahmin. Do you realise how hurtful it is for him to hear something like that?” asked my principal. I told them how I came up with that nickname. My mother wasn’t ready to take the blame. “Don’t put it on me, you must have heard it somewhere else, from your friends maybe,” she said. My principal continued, “All our previous toppers have been Brahmins. Do you know that? We have similar expectations from you when you write the Class 10 board exam and that’s the only reason I am sparing you this time,” she said. I thanked her. “And one more thing, I do not want to hear the word caste or anything related to it ever on the campus.” With that she concluded the meeting. Before we left her room, my mother told the principal, “Please make sure he stays away from those Muslim boys. They are the ones filling his head with all this.” Vimala Shetty agreed with her.

I was livid and hurt at my mother's comments. I wanted to shout "It was not Shujath or Syed. It was you, your husband, your parents and your relatives who taught me this. Spare my friends please!" But I couldn't say anything. I was scared my father would thrash me then and there if I said anything that day. On the way back, my father asked me to pack my stuff at my grandparents' house and return home. I simply nodded. When I reached my grandparents' house, shocking news was waiting. "Shetty Huchchi died," my grandfather announced. She was found dead that morning and since no one was there for her, her body was taken away by the municipality. I was heart-broken. I felt like I had lost a friend, and worse, no one knew that she was my friend so I couldn't share my sorrow with anyone. I simply packed my bag and left. I cried all the way back home. My parents thought it was because I was ashamed of what happened at school, and gave me advice about becoming a better student.

Within two months of her death, the house Shetty Huchchi lived in was demolished and the construction of a temple began at that site. I asked my grandfather how that could be possible. He said that his temple had been taking care of her for the last couple of years and as a sign of gratitude, she had left her house to the trust that ran the temple. I couldn't believe it. I didn't have proof of fraud or anything, but after the incident at school, I had started to doubt everything my parents and grandfather told me. My grandfather had asked me to take a bath after my first encounter with Shetty Huchchi. Could it be because of her caste? I didn't know. I knew this though - he never went near her, nor did he want me to go near her. Would such a person and his temple have cared for her?

My aunt gave birth. The new temple being built was a Ganapati temple, and since the baby came into the world while it was being built, the name '*Vinayaka*' was chosen for him. The naming ceremony was to be held at the same new temple. Though it was still being built, a statue of Ganapati had been placed and a roof constructed over it. People had started to visit the temple. My grandfather insisted that the ceremony take place there, since he was solely in charge of this new temple and his grandchild's naming ceremony should be the first function to happen there.

I stood outside the temple on the day of the naming ceremony. I had stood at the very same spot a number of times, looking at Shetty Huchchi's house. And within a snap, she and her house had vanished and a half-constructed temple stood there. Amidst all the joy and celebration, I couldn't help feeling sad that day. The *mantras* being chanted inside sounded like a celebration of Shetty Huchchi's death. I would have liked to be in a world where I could tell my grandfather that I liked Shetty Huchchi. I would have liked to have told him about my encounters with her,

that I gave her a small chocolate every now and then and that she enjoyed it. I would have liked it if he appreciated my gesture. I would have liked it if he had asked the municipality people to wait until I came back from school to see her one last time after she died. I didn't live in that world. I lived in a world where upon her death, her house was destroyed to build a temple. A god stood on her land, adorned by the flowers from the jasmine tree she had nurtured. And my brahmin grandfather brought home sweet prasadam from that temple, every day.

## **The Life Cycle**

As he took his last breath, Bikku remembered coming out of a crowded train. The train was so packed that Bikku had to wriggle out to the exit. His hands, groping for the emptiness, sprouted out of the space between the passengers, then Bikku himself bloomed into existence at the gate. While stepping out, Bikku felt the slowing down of the train – like his last breath exiting his body.

There was so much darkness on the platform that for a while Bikku felt as if he had disembarked in a tunnel. The only light on the platform was of those escaping out of the train-windows, forming a series of rectangular illuminated regions, adhering over the blackness. The train soon started to depart. The rectangular patches of light moved following one another in succession, giving Bikku an impression that they rowed the platform forward. Bikku, though fascinated, was also worried that he stood on a moving platform and stepped a little aside, to ensure that he indeed controlled his movements. While he was still gaining some foothold over reality, the last bogey of the train moved past him and left him behind, with the pervading gloom

After the train left, and along with it the chattering hum of the passengers, Bikku discovered a silence so complete that he felt his own breathing had been muted in it. If the silence made the darkness deeper, or was it the other way around, Bikku could not fathom. The darkness and silence merged so well with each other. It was as if his eyes and ears had been welded together and rendered ineffective. The bodily awareness, the feeling of being an organism, caused by the very inkling of the absence of the organs, made Bikku think about walking. Several times he thought that he should start moving, but he could not figure out how to take the first step. It was as if Bikku knew that he had a body but not actually possessed or felt it. The silent blackness of the platform seemed like some solvent to Bikku, and he felt dissolving in it.

Bikku pressed his feet firmly on the ground and waved his hands in the air, he felt the darkness covered him like a piece of cloth, and it was not only around him but he was also standing over it. His senses began to seem useless. Bikku was now fully aware that he is a mind floating in space and not an actual body. He forsook the desire for movement and stood still.

In what must have felt like hours to Bikku, but not actually so, since nothing had changed in the space and there was no other way to perceive time, he felt his right foot move. The motion was involuntary and it was perhaps his memory of getting off the train that had caused it. Believing that his memory might work, he recollected the illuminated rectangles that moved along the platform when the train had departed. The recollection, partly imagined, aroused in Bikku both a fear and a desire for walking, and his feet started to move as distinct footsteps. By and by, it was

also becoming clearer to Bikku that he had landed in a place where memories of doing something actually caused it.

Treading carefully on the cloth-like earth, Bikku moved *forward*. Feeling disoriented, he walked in a straight line, so that he would be sure to hit some boundary, in the form of a wall or a fence, and from where he would be able to locate himself. But knowing more than some spatial reference to his whereabouts, Bikku was mainly looking for a relief, perhaps of obscure and religious nature – comparable only to the pleasure of knowing something essentially unknowable.

Walking straight on the cloth-like earth was akin to rope-walking, and here Bikku miserably failed, his immediate position wobbled so much that walking straight seemed impossible. However, to remain sane, Bikku considered taking each footstep on one path, believing if he walked long enough, he would be able to reach some destination and anchor himself.

In his disoriented walk, Bikku sensed someone standing in his *way* — an apparition, a silhouette? It felt as if a wisp of smoke had taken a human shape. The recognizable shape aroused in Bikku some hope. But in no time, he turned fearful, thinking that he might as well be hallucinating.

He spoke softly – ‘who’s there’ – thinking that too loud a speech would distort the familiar shape.

Bikku pleasantly noticed that his language had still not forsaken him. His fear now resonated with a hope, making his voice a patchwork of sonorous and dull sounds, as if a piece of metal banged on a wooden surface. The air repeated his question, but he received no response, until a gibberish was heard, as if someone was mumbling, which although felt human but inspired no meaning. He kept moving toward the silhouette, until a second one emerged, not separately, but attached within the first one, as if someone was holding a child. He came near them and was able to sense the muttering language the silhouettes now spoke, which seemed to him as his own, but due to the voice competing with the wind, the language sounded not even foreign but inhuman. He extended his hand to touch them, but his hands went through them. Shocked and unable to follow what was going on, Bikku moved past the shadows.

He thought that the darkness had made him crazy. He did not dare to turn around. He feared that if he looked back and found no one there, his spirit to return home would be crushed. Seeing his own eyes reflecting in the darkness also multiplied his fear, he felt that some pair of eyes not belonging to him floated in the air and watched him. To avoid this thought now weighing on him, Bikku decided to close his eyes and walk, for they were hardly making any difference.

After a few steps, which to him felt like miles, he opened his eyes and saw a flame fluttering in the distance as though in the veil of blackness a blazing hole had appeared, revealing what might lay behind the darkness. He rushed to the fire like someone wandering in a desert would run for a lake. A human face and a pair of hands appeared and moved back and forth, circumscribing the fire. It must be burning on some elevated ground – thought Bikku – for the flames looked

like suspended in the darkness. He reached the spot stumbling and actually touched the fire to see if it was real. An old man sat next to the fire, speechless and unmoved, as if he had been witnessing it for a thousand times and had grown weary of it all. The old man had a thick silvery beard which looked more like an extension of his hair. Bikku noticed that the hair covered his visage with so much intensity that if he poked a finger into them, the finger would actually come out penetrating at the other side. He felt as if the hair had somehow become a face, with no flesh or bony stuff whatsoever. The old man kept caressing the flames as if they were his beard.

‘Someone was standing there, with a toddler perhaps?’ – Bikku spoke as he sat near the fire.

The old man suddenly stopped fiddling with the flames, which now were hissing like a many-headed angry serpent. He asked, pointing his finger in the dark – ‘where, out there?’

Bikku too had pointed his hand, but in another direction. He suddenly realized the absurdity of the gesture – of pointing towards a direction – in a looming darkness. He put his hand down and acquiesced – ‘Yes, there’.

‘They are just memories. This place is teeming with them.’ – the old man spoke and stared at Bikku expectantly, perhaps to elicit a feeling of awe from him. Bikku felt too exhausted to show any sign of wonder, on the contrary, he was skeptical, for it was easier for him to believe that they were some ghosts.

‘But why do they feel so much..... ghost-like?’, asked Bikku hesitatingly.

The old man, as if waiting for such a question, spoke in a loud voice and at once – ‘What do you think memories really are? Don’t they come like an apparition in your present, from some past? Imagine a memory unrecognizable and persistent, wouldn’t it scare you?’

The loneliness had softened Bikku’s spirit. He felt listless for the argument. He would not have bothered if the old man had called Bikku himself a ghost. Bikku just wanted to talk, to carry on the conversation, feeling the sound of language falling on his parched ears. Even when the subject did not interest him, he urged the old man to tell him more.

‘The thing we call ghost is actually our way of dealing with uncomfortable memories - internalizing and preserving them. Individuals do it, creating a nation of their own – within and without. In fact, the way you connect to an unforgettable painful event in the past, defines your nationhood, you become part of that collective imagination. All those talks about glory and golden age carry within their core a loss, an experience of death. Such a nation is an attempt to resuscitate what has died within us, giving birth to ghosts, itself becoming one, often appearing like an apparition in our everyday lives, defining and at the same time persecuting our existence.’

‘Didn’t you feel sorry for a past Bikku, all your life, for the past that existed much before you, and you feared it would haunt your kids too?’

Bikku saw a horde of shadows walking in a caravan, the fire growling, chasing after them, its smoke taking the form of a train, blood oozing from its nuts and bolts, dripping, marking a line on the bodies of men, women and children, partitioning them into halves.

Bikku immediately recognized this line. Though mostly remaining hidden, it sometimes manifested in his life and made him a stranger in his own home, among his friends. Bikku began wiping off the line, all of a sudden.

‘What are you doing? You cannot wipe off a shadow, you can only see who is standing above it, you can eliminate the one standing, but how could you unburden the weight of a nation, that mythical being, almost a ghost, whom we so painstakingly imagine and then let it live amidst us, letting it cast us into its own image.’

Bikku spoke as if crying – ‘but why does it scare me?’

‘Because you learned too much of history. Learning history led to the loss of your personal memories, your individual selves.’

The fire now burned in multiple colors, as if burning within itself its thousand forms. The old man continued speaking, his hands caressing the flames, as if consoling someone weeping.

‘This loss is what scares you, because you wanted to live, with all your multitudes living within you, nurturing each of them. But to conform perhaps, you yourself extinguished many of your lives, yet something of them still linger, that lingering of the dead scares you.’

The fire growled and opened into itself, revealing a carbonaceous darkness, where Bikku felt seeing his past selves, all dying, at his hands.

The old man now spoke as if exhorting Bikku to remembrance.

‘Even now, you don’t realize that death is just an aspect of life, as much as life is an aspect of death. Didn’t you die when no one understood your first love? Where did that kid disappear, who was dancing on the street, on receiving his first love-letter from someone on the other side of the divide? What happened to that rebel who began to acquiesce to all his Boss’ statements at his work-place, just to be called a good member of his kind?’

The old man now grew silent, as if condensing his vaporous rage into a cool stream of words, and finally spoke – ‘a weak, hollow individual, a nation is no place for diversity, in their imagination, they maim the multitudes within. What becomes of all those rejected? Don’t they haunt, like ghosts do? How much of personal memories are burned within to make an individual a raw material of history – its fuel?’

The questions lingered before Bikku. The fire, emulating his thoughts, grew calm and began to settle on the earth, as if following some law of gravity. Slithering, the fire suddenly leapt onto

Bikku, and burned something of him, which made Bikku feel lighter within. Bikku realized that he was dying all through his living, and he knew it, for he was the one doing all the killings, to conform according to his prevailing norms. He understood that the event we call death claims only the last one breathing – merely a house for all the ghosts of our living. Bikku began to see light in the darkness around him. Silence was now becoming his thoughts.

To change the course of the conversation, to bring this meandering river of language to his shore, Bikku asked what this place is.

‘Here souls are wiped clean of all their past. Memories will leave you and wander here forever, as ghosts. I will prepare you for your rebirth.’

Bikku had understood that he needed to go back and unite all his fragments at peace with the Self – that he must express all his individual selves fully, making them live within himself.

The old man asked Bikku for cigarettes. Bikku never smoked but he unconsciously slipped his hands into his pocket. He took out a twisted, almost broken cigarette in his hand. The old man took the cigarette from Bikku and lit it up, taking a few drags. He offered the glowing cigarette to Bikku and gestured to him to smoke. Bikku took a few quick puffs and felt like spiraling down some cave, his breathing slowing down and with it the old man’s hair turning into wisps of smoke, vanishing into the darkness. The fire began shimmering into a river, becoming one.

When the breathing returned to Bikku’s body, he felt without realizing that he was sitting in a shallow river, waving his hands along the surface, feeling the cool travel within his pores, the ripples brushing against his skin. Bikku watched his breaths bubble out, oblivious to the new existence awaiting him – wiped off of all personal memories, one as a specimen of history.

## Prashanti Chunduri

### The Museum

One bright, sunny morning  
greeted omelettes frying in the pan,  
sparkling orange juice,  
ancient toaster spitting curses.

History lesson time, says Dad  
on said bright, sunny morning.  
I try to slink back to my room,  
but with no success (Papa has sharp eyes).

One hour later:  
nondescript old museum,  
faded sandstone and cracked brick,  
drooping with age and melancholy.

Exhibit A:  
Pure, breathable air from 2015.  
My eyes are saucers behind my mask,  
as I hold my breath (oh, the irony!)

Exhibit B:  
They call it a giraffe.  
'Last seen in 2021' they proclaim.  
I look up, up, up, slightly terrified, wholly amazed.

Exhibit C:  
Water from a lost river.  
Potable, reads the information board.  
Not sure if I believe them.

Exhibit D:  
Organic vegetables – reds, yellows, ochres.  
I squint and wrinkle my nose.

No chemicals? Seems dubious.

Exhibit E:

An old, fraying map of the 'Arctic Circle'  
Isn't that fictional? I ask the museum guide.  
He only looks at me with sad eyes.

Exhibits F, G, H:

Books (?)  
A 'pride' flag (??)  
A train carriage (???)

We're almost at the Exit now; Exhibit I:

A 'healthy' human family- four kids (!!!)  
Fascinating, but I turn away quickly,  
hating them, envying them.  
(Sharing their last name.)

## The Receipt

Try it, says the shopkeeper  
at the vintage bookstore  
on 42<sup>nd</sup> Avenue,  
as she presses hardbound books  
a tad too expensive  
for their leather bindings  
and their foolhardy themes  
on fiery heroines and their dashing daschunds,  
gallant heroes and droll sidekicks,  
and the love they all roll over for.

Try it, says the clerk  
at the thrift store  
in the poorer shopping district,  
when I pause near gauzy mint fabric on a rack,  
as he points out the sweetheart neckline  
the strategic ruffles,  
the swish designed to draw blue irises,  
the teasing hem as it tickles my knees,  
its fishnet overlay designed to snare  
love on the cul-de-sac.

Try it, says the host  
of my first poetry competition,  
smirking at us as he proclaims the topic,  
as we attempt to pour glitter down our throats  
and make red blood roses bloom  
from our raw ungrown ribcages.  
I struggle to let the ink flow,  
to write into the paper the taste of love,  
of mum's raspberry chocolate ice cream  
and the glue of envelopes to a father at war.

Try it, says the boy  
on the fire escape of my old building,

with skin like pockmarked paper,  
warm to the touch,  
as we hold clammy hands  
on one balmy summer day, and find it easier  
to taste the autumn breeze than each other.  
I mark the rendezvous in my diary  
and doodle on it sometimes  
when the heat sometimes gets too much.

Try it, they say  
more loudly on a pink-red-rose day each February.  
Try it, they advise  
holding twitching hands with fellow lovers.  
Try it, they demand  
or all the good fish will be gone.  
Try it, they insist  
wearing lovely veils that look more like straitjackets.  
Try it, they answer  
when I ask them about the price,  
and attempt to haggle.

Maybe I will,  
but before I do,  
I say,  
let me keep  
the receipt.

### A Storyteller and a Tomb: A Tale of an Untouchable Woman

The gigantic banyan tree behind the Hanuman temple is the oldest in our village. It is so big that a few hundred people can comfortably sit in its thick shade. It is so tall that one can climb atop it and see as far as their eyes could reach. People fondly tell their stories connected with the tree. And they always guess its age.

“It was of my father’s age; my father used to say”, someone says.

Some agree, but others refuse and claim, “It must be even older than your father.”

Somebody else says, “My mother and her bridal party was the first to station under the tree when she’d first came to this village as my father’s bride. It was quite old then, my mother used to tell me when I was a kid.”

“The tree was quite young, just a few years old, when the police-Patil’s uncle was brutally murdered for raping the two Mang caste girls. His corpse was hanging on the tree for one whole night until the police came in the next morning.”

“Hundreds of Indian army men had stationed under the tree for a couple of weeks when the ugly riots broke out in the region when Nehru had acted against the Nizam.”

The stories around the banyan tree go on endlessly for hours and hours. But the tree is not older than our Ganga *atya*. In fact, nothing is older than Ganga *atya* in the village. She is the oldest person in the village, older even than the banyan tree. She knows all the stories, more stories than the men and women in the village put together know. She knows whose bridal parties stationed under the tree. She had witnessed the nasty rape of the two Mang caste girls and the subsequent murder of the rapist. When the village men kept their women in their homes, with their doors and windows shut, she was the one bold enough to come out and help the men of the army during the Indian army action against the Nizam’s Razakars. When the village men refused to give water to the Mang and Mahar men in the army, she fetched water for them twice a day from the Manjara River. We, siblings, call her just *atya* or Ganga *atya* though everyone else takes her full name: Gangabai. We also call our paternal aunt *atya*. But Ganga *atya* is not my father’s sister. She does not share any blood relation with my family, but her immense love for us never makes her different from my real aunt.

Ganga *atya* always keeps a *kunchi* and an old Bisleri water bottle with her. The bottle looks very dirty to us. *Kunchi* is a handmade garment made from old *saris*, in the shape of a sleeve-

less raincoat without buttons or zippers. The three to three-and-a-half feet bamboo *kathi* she carried helped her balance her little bony body while walking, squatting, sitting, getting up and, sometimes for shooing away stray dogs and hens in her yard. Unlike our grandmother, she never hit kids with her bamboo *kathi*. She is visibly bent from her waist and also from her chest. Her wrinkled skin looks like the dry and rough trunk-skin of the old tamarind tree in our caste ghetto. Once I had inquired her about her age, and she replied,

“Only God knows! Am I educated like you clever fellows to know or note it down or remember my birth date? There was no school for our caste people when I was a child. And there was no school at all in our village then. The school was opened in our village when my daughter Padma, the youngest kid, was born. But they did not accept girls, especially from our caste, in the school then. I really wanted to send my Padma to school. Her father also did not pay heed to it. He died soon. Education was not in her fate. What could I do, my child? But I found a school teacher for my Padma as her husband. Now her daughter is a headmistress. Yet, the girl thinks I haven’t done anything for her. ‘You give everything only to your grandson. You bought that land for him. You built this fine cement-house for him. What about me? Am I not your blood? Give me an acer.’ Padma’s girl said, last time when she visited us. My grandson lost his father when he had not even left his mother’s breast. Whom should I give the land and the house if not to my son’s son? Is he not the one who is going to feed me the last spoon of milk before I die? Is he not the one who is going to bury me in that land? My Padma’s husband had only the job. Nothing else. I gave him everything: a fat dowry, a gold ring, a silver chain, and a bicycle and a watch of his choice. Plenty of utensils including two big copper pots, a copper bucket, a big copper plate, a wooden bed and what not. All alone, I gave everything I could. Haven’t I done anything for her? You tell me, son. Haven’t I done anything for her?”

She’d always slip away from the main subject, maybe due to her old age. So I agreed with her contribution in her headmistress granddaughter’s life and asked her again, when was she born.

“I was born many long years back. Everyone of my age has died. Your grandfather, brother Hanamant, was of my age. We used to play under that tamarind tree in front of your home, even after my marriage. I had not even started bleeding when I was married off. Brother Hanamant also died a year after your father married your mother. The kind soul left so soon. We were raised together by our parents like siblings. When my mother cooked beef curry, he ate with me, and when his mother cooked it, I ate with him. We ate together in one small plate like siblings. My father had no son, but your grandfather was no less than a brother to me.”

I could not process the loneliness and the sadness in her voice. Her deep, dry eyes were

hidden behind the thick lenses of her grimy old glasses. The glasses were tightened by a small nylon thread so that they would hang around her neck even if they fell by accident.

Ganga *atya* is the treasure of all secrets in the village. Whenever people wanted to know some secrets of someone, they would go to her. A round in the village every morning was more than enough for her to get all the information about what had happened on the previous day. After the morning visit to the village, she would have a cup of tea and go to her three acres of land, just to sit there under a mango tree for two to three hours and come back for lunch. She would visit her land even on the dry and hot summer days. For this ritualistic habit of hers, all her family members disliked her. Laxman, her only grandson and the heir to her house and the land, did not object to her going into the village, but he too hated her visits to the land. Every day they fought over her visit to the land. For Ganga *atya*, it was her land that she had earned after her husband had died. Her husband had widowed her some forty to fifty years back. He died, leaving a small hut behind for her and her children. Every time Laxman tried to prevent her from going to her land, she would become furious and, sometimes, violent. She would raise the bamboo *kathi* in her hand and shout,

“Laxya, it is my land. The *patta* of the land is in my name. I’m visiting my own land. You bastard have no right to stop me from visiting my own land.”

Laxman would back off whenever she lost her temper and got violent, and the matter would settle down for that day. He knew that she wouldn’t listen to anyone if she lost her temper.

“Why do you go to the land these days *atya* when you have no crop in it? You already complain about your knee pain. Walking too much is not good for you. Didn’t the doctor who visits our village ask you not to walk?”, once I had asked.

“You don’t know anything, son. The doctors are foolish people. That dwarf, the white-faced dandyish fellow who visits our village, must be the most foolish doctor on the earth. He gives only useless bitter tablets, and they don’t work at all. I ate packets of tablets, but the knee pain did not stop. I must advise you. Don’t believe them. You will be fit if you work hard. In my time, I worked hard and ate whatever I had. We used to eat even the dead animals. We would dry the meat and consume it for days. We drank the water from the trench in our farms. Yet, I had been healthy and fit, for God knows how many years. But it is enough now! Everybody of my age is gone! I am the only one left here, alone! Better the God should take me away soon!” she replied, looking at me through her dim glasses.

What can you say when you get such a reply? Besides, she was my best companion and storyteller. So I didn’t explain the knowledge on medical science I learned in school books to her, nor did I disagree with her.

Once I was listening to her stories in our courtyard. Maa offered a cup of *chai* and some biscuits to *Atya*. She refused the biscuits, kept her bamboo *kathi* aside with her shivering hand, held the *chai* cup in her left hand, and then gave support by the right hand to keep the cup on the ground. Maa later brought a glass of water for her. *Atya* cleared her throat and spat right behind before drinking the water.

“She is filthy; she spits where she sits!” My siblings would say after she left.

While having tea, she asked,

“Will you come to my farm? You will eat mangoes. They are very sweet. Besides, you will see my land. I bought it after working hard for years. My Padma’s father died leaving a hut for his children, but I bought three acres of land for my son. My son too died early just like his father, but his son Laxman and his children are there to eat.”

I was listening. She finished the last sip of the tea, kept the cup aside and whispered,

“Some of the bastards of our caste think that I slept with some rich bastard upper caste and grabbed the land from him. They think I was a whore of that bastard Desai. They are all lies. I worked hard and earned. I was very young when my Padma’s father died. But after his death, what I thought all my life was the future of my children. I did not want my children to be bonded labourers. I worked from early morning to late night and bought three acres of land. In dark evenings and mornings, bastards raped me twice and snakes bit me three different times. Yet, by the grace of God, I survived and ensured a better future for my children.”

I could feel a sense of pride, honour and determination in her voice.

“Let’s go to the farm. I will tell the whole story on the way.”

I immediately agreed to visit and asked,

“*Atya*, when should we go?”

“Now?”

“No! The land is too far. It will be dark to come back home. Tomorrow morning would be the best.”

“You, timid boy! How will you do your *sansar* if you are afraid of the darkness? You have good eyes and strong legs. Yet afraid of the dark. I used to go there at night before my eyes turned green and dry. God knows how you guys will do your *sansar*. Fine, tomorrow morning it is. But you will have to get up early so that we can come back before

it gets hot.”

The next morning was fixed. She took her *kathi* in her right hand, squatted for a few seconds, put all the force of her left hand on her left knee and the right hand on the *kathi* to get up. She dusted her shabby saree and left for her home.

With a white *dasti* on my shoulders and a bottle of water in my hand, I went to Ganga *atya's* home in the morning. She was ready and waiting for me under the neem tree in her courtyard. As she saw me, she tightly held her hand to her bamboo *kathi* in her hand, stood slowly and was ready to walk. We walked slowly and reached the main road after a while. She started pointing at different plots of lands by her left hand and telling stories and her memories associated with the land.

“That piece of land with the lime tree is our Tukaram’s land whose daughter has eloped with our Santya. He is a big man, and has a lot of money.”

“Can you see that small neem tree behind that giant tamarind tree? The land from that small neem tree to the berry tree there belongs to Ramesh Patil and his brother. The two brothers of the same seeds are fighting for it like arch-enemies. They once asked me to buy it, but my Laxman didn’t listen to me. Instead, he bought that ugly tractor. He never listens to me. Tell me, what is worth buying, a tractor or a piece of land? Having our own land is always better. Nothing is equal to land.”

After walking a couple of hundred meters, she suddenly stopped, slightly twisted her left-hand wrist and put it on her waist to soothe her aching waist. I too stopped. She slowly bent down to take off her repaired leather *chappal* made by the village cobbler. Without any struggle, she took off the *chappal*. She must have repaired it a hundred times like my father. I don’t understand why do these old people repair it again and again? I used to be ashamed of using once repaired *chappal*. My father is also like Ganga *atya*. He would have repaired his leather *chappal*, made by the same village cobbler, for a hundred times or even more than that. Sometimes I would wear my father’s *chappal*. They were heavy and hard. I could hardly walk ten steps wearing them. I asked him to change his *chappals* many times, but he never listened. Every time he went to the market, he bought everything for us but ignored buying a new *chappal* for himself.

After walking barefoot for a couple of dozen steps, she turned to her right hand, hid the *chappal* behind her back and bowed down in front of a small tomb. The tomb was constructed in an area around two by two square feet and around two and half a feet tall. On the front side of the tomb, a name was inscribed in Devnagari —*Parshuram Desai*. It was shocking for me to see her bow down in front of the tomb. Why did she remove her *chappal* before that tomb? Why did she hide them behind her back? Why did she bow down in front of a tomb? Why did she bow down in front of a dead man?

\*

It was Kaleji *mama's* niece, Baby's *nikab*. Kaleji *mama's* great grandfather was our grandmother's uncle. Kaleji *mama* was a Musalman, and we were untouchable Mangs, but we were blood relatives. It is strange, but it is true. It is a long story, but let me tell you in short. It happened much before India was born. It happened while the Nizam was ruling our region. My *matti*, father's mother, used to tell us,

“Kaleji's great grandfather used to do *dalali'* in animal markets. He fell in love with a Musalman widow from Nizamabad town and married her. When our caste people threatened him to leave her, he gave up his untouchable caste and his Gods and embraced her Allah. Now, his children live outside the village in the South-East corner as we live outside in the North-East corner. After all, the blood that runs in our veins is the same! So, in good times and bad times, we go to them and they come to us.”

*Matti*, being the oldest relative of our two families, was going to get clothes as a gift in the marriage. The marriage function was scheduled at night. So she got ready early when the sun was setting behind our caste ghetto. Going alone to an auspicious event like marriage was not considered good, so *matti* decided to take me with her. *Matti* covered her head with the edge of her *saree* and put her leather *chappals* on her feet. I held the little finger of her right hand with my left hand, and we started walking. I was barefoot and not even wearing my shorts. The long half sleeve shirt of my eldest brother was more than enough to hide my entire body. The shirt looked like a robe on me. Right after crossing our ghetto, we reached the shabby narrow lane that went through the village dump yards. *Matti* took me on her waist until we crossed the shabby narrow lane. Then we walked on the outer lane of the village and reached a broad and fine road. We continued walking until we crossed a narrow lane on our right that went to the village school. When a gigantic mansion came, *matti* stopped suddenly. It was the first time I saw the mansion. *Matti* freed her little finger from my hand and removed her *chappals* from her feet exactly how Ganga *atya* did near the tomb. Then *matti* took her *chappals* in her left hand and walked again, holding my hand. We reached right in front of the partially closed enormous iron gates of the giant mansion.

*Matti* bowed down before the gates of the mansion as she bowed down in front of our goddess *Mahsa-Aai* in our courtyard. I peeped through the gates to see if there was any God inside. There was no God, but a giant man was resting in a semi-sleeper chair. Half of his enormous hairy belly rested on his thighs, and a white thread rested on the belly. *Matti* bowed down to greet the man who was more than fifty meters away from us. But the man didn't care. He didn't even look at us. While I was peeping through the iron gates, *matti* whispered,

“He is the Desai of our village; greet him!”

Confused at her strange behaviour, I could not make sense of what she was saying. So *matti* whispered again,

“Greet him, child; greet him!”

I immediately folded my hands and greeted the half-naked giant man as my *matti* did. He did not greet me back or look at me either. So we walked and moved ahead. *Matti* put her *chappals* back on her feet only after we crossed the big mansion.

The giant man with his enormous hairy belly was Parshuram Desai and the owner of the big mansion. People called him Parshuram Desai or just Desai. He was a Brahmin, and his family was the only Brahmin family in the entire village. But after his children from his two wives got separated, the one family split into four. Now, there are four branches of the same tree in the gram panchayat list. Yet, their big mansion is empty. They all live in some big cities working as powerful officers. Now, only some wild climber plants and shrubs are growing on the colossal mansion's tall and big walls and roof. Whenever they visit the village, they come in the convoy of their four to five fancy cars. I had heard that the grandchildren of Desai were studying in some foreign countries. Tukaram *kaka*, who worked on their farm, had once told us kids in our ghetto,

“Desai's grandchildren travel to some other world in “sky-motors” that fly in the sky like birds.”

We did not think much about what Desai's grandchildren studied in the foreign country, what type of houses they lived in, or what food they ate there. But we were very curious about sky-motors—the flights. We had seen flights in the sky over our caste ghetto while playing under the tamarind tree, but they all looked tiny like sparrows. So we asked Tukaram *kaka* to tell us more about flights, but he too had no more information.

Parshuram Desai was the only priest of the Hanuman temple in the village who owned more than one hundred acres of land right behind the temple. Around a dozen servants worked on his farm, and Ganga *atya*'s husband was one amongst them. He worked on Desai's farm since his childhood days for more than two decades before his death. He died on an *Amavasya* night on the farm. How did he die?

“Only God knows!” Some people say.

“He died of snakebite,” others argue, “There are snake burrows all over that farm. Is he the first one to die on that farm? Two more servants, both from our caste, had died before him. All of them died from snakebite.”

But for Ganga *atya*, a ghost murdered her husband. Whenever people of our caste discussed her husband's death and blamed snakes for the death, Ganga *atya* got furious and said,

“Had he slept on the ground to die from snakebite? I went to the farm with his food when he had not come home in the morning. I was the one to see his dead body first. His corpse was on the *mala*<sup>2</sup> that was taller than me. He always slept on the *mala*.”

She would clear her throat, spit right behind and whisper,

“That whore, Desai's sister, murdered my Padma's father, my husband. She was old enough when she became the bride. But in a month, she came back to her parents, leaving her *sansar*. He married someone else in a year. Six months after his marriage, the girl killed herself and became a ghost. She has been killing men on that farm. She murdered my Padma's father. Before him, she killed two other men. She killed the first man within a year after her death and the second one much later. My Padma's father was the third one. He was a very good man but left this world soon. He left me alone and young in this lusty world. It was not easy to live without a man in those days. But I did and raised my children like any man could or even better than a man. I worked from dawn to dusk and bought a piece of land for my son. I did not let my son work like his father but he too died soon. I should have died in his place. Nothing can be more painful in this world than seeing your child's death.”

Nobody in the village had the guts to call Parshuram Desai by his name or abuse his family like Ganga *atya* in those days. She started abusing Desai and his family only after Desai's death. Everybody called him Desai by slightly bowing down in front of him. Even children had to bow down to greet him. Our caste people had to maintain a much longer distance while greeting him, whereas upper caste people were allowed to go a little closer. Desai was a fat man. He looked like a man from some other world with his fair skin, wide sporting moustaches and cotton-like white and clean clothes. He looked different from all the men in the village. As school kids, all we thought about was the colour of his skin. On our way to school or back home, while crossing his mansion, we used to think,

“If Desai is such a fair man, then what about his two wives?”

“They must be fairer than him.”

“They ought to be fairer than him. Wives are always fairer than husbands in our village. Fairness is the most important thing. People want their children, especially girls, to be fair. So men marry fair women. They are all obsessed with fairness. Dark skin is unwanted. It is disliked by all. Dark skin is a burden. Dark skin means a fat dowry; fair skin reduces the burden of dowry.”

“Then what about the children from both of his wives?”

“They must be the fairest kids on the planet, like the fairy queens and princes in English tales. For sure, their kids cannot be like us!”

Every time we passed by the mansion, we wished to have glimpses of Desai’s wives and their children. We used to peep in through those partially closed enormous iron gates, but we never found them. We could see only the well and some servants around. Desai’s wives and children never crossed the threshold of their mansion. Why would they come out? They had almost half a dozen servants to work for them in their mansion. There was a separate well for drinking water inside the mansion. Teachers would go to their mansion every day to teach their kids. They came out of their mansion only when they visited some other place. But they came out in their cars and never lowered their car window panes. Only Desai could be spotted sitting in the semi-sleeper chair near the well only while the sun began setting behind his mansion.

Long back, Mang and Mahar caste people were not allowed to wear their own *chappals* in front of Desai, his family members and even his mansion. It was one of the laws in the village. Our caste people had to be barefoot, or they had to hide their *chappals* behind their back, holding in their hands. Else, they were punished cruelly. A few years after the vicious rape and murder of two Mang caste girls and India’s independence from the British, the drunkard Mariba from our caste came home from the village *Kallu-Bhatti* in an evening. As he was drunk, he walked all the way wearing his plastic shoes. He had not removed the shoes even in front of Desai’s mansion. Desai spotted him and called a panchayat in the same night. As punishment for crossing Desai’s mansion with plastic shoes in his feet, Mariba was whipped one hundred times in front of the entire village near the Hanuman temple. He cried for forgiveness. His family begged for mercy. But Desai’s heart didn’t melt. He was whipped even after he lost his senses and fell in the dust. He was whipped even after he urinated and shit in his *dboti*. No mercy was shown. He was whipped one hundred times. No less but one hundred times! Four men brought his, almost dead, bleeding body home on their shoulders, and a week later, he died and left the cruel world. While narrating the terrifying whipping of Mariba, Ganga *atya* once said,

“We cried during the whipping. Our people were helpless. That fat bastard Desai was the *sarkar*, and his words were the *kanoon* in our village. What else could we do other than crying, my child? His blood spilled in the dust with every single whip, and turned the grey dust red like thick tomato sauce. I rarely fall sick, even at this old age. But after witnessing the whipping, fever caught me, and I was bedridden for weeks.”

Decades later, during the Panthers wave, youths of our caste ended this cruel practice by using force. They attacked Desai and spent years in jail under the “attempt to murder” charge. A decade later, the old Desai died. Yet, old men and women of our caste, who had witnessed the terrifying whipping of Mariba, continued to bow down even before the tomb of Desai. The ter-

rifying whipping and the death of Mariba could not fade away from their memories. Bold and brave Ganga *atya*, who could raise her bamboo *kathi* to hit her grandson, was no exception. Desai's terror remained fresh in her memory.

<sup>1</sup> Brokerage

<sup>2</sup> A tall bed prepared on farms to protect from reptiles and wild animals

*From The Yellow Wall*

Obsessed as she was with the NET exam, having given it for the first time, she searched the NET website thoroughly, out of curiosity. Idly, she explored it, clicking on every link, as she surfed the internet. “SC/ST candidates who cleared NET until 2000”, said the link. She clicked it, not thinking why she did this or how it would serve any purpose of hers. And there it was, the fourth or the fifth name on the page, “Kopilee Hazarika”. Father’s name- Jitendra Kumar Hazarika. Address- Uzan bazaar, Guwahati, Assam. Whatever Aarohi may have expected to see, she had certainly not expected to see this. What!!! Her beloved Kopilee ma’am was from the SC category. But she could not believe!! She was too good!! Aarohi was stunned and shocked. Aarohi had never even thought about category or caste, she had just assumed Kopilee ma’am would be general. She could not believe it as she stared at the screen. Kopilee ma’am was from the scheduled caste. How was this even possible!! She could not believe this, could not accept this. Is this why the girl Saloni in her previous pg asked her if she was from SC category? Was it because of Kopilee ma’am, or was it because of her own dark skin.... Or what!

Aarohi also liked a couple of Assamese guys. Like, mind you, not love. These silly affairs were rather different from her abiding love for Kopilee ma’am but anyway, that is not our immediate concern here. Aarohi’s gradually disturbed and disturbing changing notions of caste consumed her. Initially, Aarohi while talking to a guy made sure he was not from a Dalit family. Not that caste mattered to her, she told herself, but her father might not like her marrying a Dalit, even though nobody ever talked about caste in their house. Her phone beeped. “I support reservation but no, I am not a Dalit”, came the response. Aarohi was, truth to tell, slightly relieved. “yeah yeah, that’s okay”, she replied. By the time she came to the other boy, who was actually half SC and half Brahmin, she had gotten over these notions. And she really liked the guy though he didn’t commit to her. He was the only boy she had ever cried in front of in life. (well, excepting family members, that is.) It seemed as if gradually, she had changed. Now she didn’t have any problem if the person she loved was a Dalit. And well indeed, she had been in unrequited love with a Dalit woman for quite some years now. So that was something.

Aarohi also struggled to understand what was Kopilee ma’am’s exact view on caste reservation. A few years ago, they had a department lit soc forum on Orkut, where talk was happening of the recent OBC expansions. Aarohi commented that having OBC students and general ones in the same class would create a lot of disparity as far as the standard of the teaching and education was concerned. KH got angry over this and accused Aarohi of making a casteist statement. Not

knowing what to say, Aarohi just said that she realised it was politically incorrect.

But like a junior, Vidya, who was from the SC category had told her: apparently Kopilee ma'am had once told Vidya that she would get admission into MA, and need not worry, implying her reservation. Vidya was a pretty bright student in any case. Aarohi asked Vidya if KH had said this in a good way or a bad way. "Neither." Replied Vidya. "She said it very objectively, and neutrally." Aarohi could understand that tone. That was how KH sometimes said things like "One mark makes a lot of difference". Or, "survival of the fittest". You couldn't really understand what was exactly her position on these things because she uttered them in such a matter of fact way. Aarohi had a problem with all these. For example, to her survival of the fittest represented a capitalist logic, and she didn't like to think of it either in the contest of humans, or even animals.

But sometimes Aarohi got really obsessed with this question. Like, she understood that reservation was necessary to uplift people who had been downtrodden for centuries. But sometimes she didn't understand why a person like Kopilee ma'am, who had been to a good english medium convent school, would need reservation. She was so talented, I mean, Aarohi thought she could easily beat all the people in the general category too. Aarohi then couldn't understand why she would need reservation when she could anyway beat all of them. Why would she or her sister or people in her family need reservation? Aarohi could understand it for those who seemed as if they had got lesser facilities.

So as Aarohi got more and more obsessed with this question, she came to a stage where it made her panic just like the question over the killing of animals did. So she started to ask a lot of people. She asked friends and acquaintances from these marginalised sections whom she knew so as to understand their perspectives on it. Through this process of interaction, she got to know several things. One, that discrimination was hidden behind a lot of things. For example, often, names. Surnames, and even first names. People told her that Raju, Deepu, Niloo, Pилоo, these names usually only came from a certain strata of society. She got to know a girl whose name was ostensibly Neetu, but her nickname at home was Niharika. The girl was her student, in fact. Aarohi thought having a school name as Niharika and a nickname as Neetu would be more easily understood. She wondered if it was caste discrimination that had led to her student being named thus. She heard of someone whose nickname was Sandeep but the name actually used in social circles was Raju. This person was from the SC community. Then she heard of surname discrimination by which people looked down upon their students or their teachers or their employees. About a very intelligent Dalit professor who had to apply for the same job four times because either they chose an upper caste person who was less qualified than him, or they simply said "no candidates found suitable". She learnt of another Dalit professor, very high up in the hierarchy. Even at that top position, people would call him up on the phone and say what a day had come that "such people" are now leading us at the helm of society. She learnt that a lot of Dalits were paid less or not given promotion simply because of their caste. There were a lot of differences,

she learnt. OBC's were discriminated against too but slightly less so. And even OBCs would, in their turn, discriminate with the SCs who were even lower down in the hierarchy.

Then one day, a boy she had liked told Aaroahi two things. One, he said, I am an SC, so it is my identity. So I will fill SC on the form. They can give me a job against an unreserved post if they want. Nobody is stopping that. Aaroahi began to understand. For example, if there were two columns, queer or heterosexual, what would she fill? One would be her identity, after all. How could she write that she was not queer? Perhaps some such discrimination may have happened with Kopilee ma'am too. She had somehow managed to find that KH was employed against an SC post, because she googled and found something somewhere from the college website, god knows how. But Aaroahi didn't know of the discrimination she may have gone through. It was upto the college. They could have taken her for an unreserved post, and they could have taken someone else for the SC post. But then, as a boy observed to Aaroahi, the general people would have problems that instead of sticking to our quota, we are taking up "their" seats. And that was true. Aaroahi realised that people actually did talk like that. This boy also told her how when he was a school kid, the teacher would ask him to sweep the floor and clean classrooms just because he was a dalit. She read of dalit students being made to sit at the back or even stand outside the classroom. Then her colleagues told her that earlier, in their times, which would also be around Kopilee ma'am's time, there was much more discrimination and it was much harder for SCs to get jobs than it was today. She didn't know if Kopilee ma'am had faced any discrimination of that kind. Then, back to the boy who had told her about the identity bit. This boy actually had a dalit father and a brahmin mother so he said it had been really dangerous for his parents to live in an inter-caste marriage and they would hear slurs and insults against them every now and again.

A girl who was once a friend then told Aaroahi about the basic concept of representation. That reservation was actually for the representation of various marginalised communities so that they could enter more privileged positions and hopefully speak up for their community and help them gain a better footing. Like it was important to have judges or politicians from their communities to showcase their needs and interests. Similarly, Dalit teachers who could then be more sensitive to Dalit students within classrooms, and not only that but to create a vocal class of people who could help in the upliftment of their own community. It's a different matter that many times they were co-opted by the majority community and tried to emulate them in order to gain acceptance.

So while she still struggled with ideas of middle class dalits taking the benefit of reservation or really backward, poor ones from far flung regions taking the benefit, she also had to admit that there were structural prejudices which were implicit in society, and reservation was necessary to at least gain one step towards equality, though there were both positives and negatives in the current system within which it was run. But she still needed to understand a lot more. What she understood was really just the tip of the iceberg. The boy who had a Dalit father and a Brahmin mother had talked about there being competition in the SC category just as much as in the gen-

eral... just equal portions for representation but why shouldn't there be equally robust competition in all of them, he said.

People in Aarohi's family didn't really get much of all this. They had never thought in this way and it was quite alien to them. Because when we look at people and don't bother to have in-depth interaction, then we don't really know of their struggles or what their life had been like. We may see anyone wearing a jeans and a t-shirt and think they were middle class "like us", but the more Dalit people Aarohi talked to, the more she realised that they had some difficulty, either material or psychological but always structural discrimination somewhere built against them. She realised the importance of having cultural capital... her own great grandparents were well educated and knew english and sanskrit. Somewhere in one of Kopilee ma'am's sister, Kakolee's articles Aarohi had read that she belonged to the Koibarta caste which was some fishing community in Assam. So... would Kopilee ma'am's grandparents be fishermen? Aarohi didn't know. She had no idea what her life had been like though she did know that she had got a good education. Her perplexity was of course increased by the simple (or rather complex) fact that she couldn't ask Kopilee ma'am any of these questions. Otherwise that would have helped her infinitely. Once she read on Kakolee's husband- Digant's social media that caste was something that never ever got erased, no matter how one rose up in the social ladder. Kakolee was Kopilee ma'am's sister. Aarohi, once again, wondered why he wrote that, what it meant, and once more to ask questions which she couldn't ask... but she always kept these bundles of things inside her head and always tried to search for an answer.



**New in Poetry**

*Curated by Aswin Vijayan*

*Singing in the Dark: A Global Anthology of Poetry Under Lockdown*

K. Satchidanandan and Nishi Chawla Eds., Vintage, 2020, Rs. 499/-

*Singing in the Dark* is an anthology of poems from around the world that is brought together as a response to the restrictions imposed by the global lockdown, necessitated by the onset of Covid-19. The pandemic has affected all human beings and it is only natural for the species to respond through the means of art and literature. Usually, it takes years or in some cases, decades for us to respond to momentous instances of history unfurling before our eyes. Satchidanandan and Chawla have attempted to collate the immediate response to an unprecedented catastrophe and this becomes a valuable historic and artistic document. There are translations and original poems in English from poets across India and abroad, some addressing the pandemic directly and some illuminating the experience of living in this changed, changing world.

## **The Song of Songs<sup>1</sup>**

*Anvar Ali*

It went off startling the cities.  
The scattered bones  
didn't become the destination  
nor the stones a punishment.

From measured distances,  
each city heard its bark.  
Each channel was filled with its foam.

Since there was no more distinction  
between the body and the soul  
it passed  
formless  
as incarnate speed.

\*

Renunces of the future, know  
one day  
this journey will end  
on the tip of a rubbish heap.

The nervous system  
that had been circulating  
the anarchist electricity everywhere  
will that day reverberate  
as a single string.

It will hug and crush  
and explode the last vowel.

From then on  
the rubbish dumps of earth  
will give birth to  
rivers that will drown

heaven and hell.  
Love's army, all nude,  
will stand guard to it.

Nothing that is not mad  
will have entry there.

## **Bumblebees**

*Amanda Bell*

There was no need to fret about the bees—  
their fragile nest, unlidded  
as I pulled weeds beneath the apple tree,  
their squirming larvae naked  
to my gaze and to the sun.

They watched me from the border  
while I hastily replaced the roof,  
before returning to rethread  
the fibres of their grassy home.

In the cleared weeds I see  
their entrance and their exit,  
how their flightpaths sweep  
the garden in an arc, stitching up  
the canvas of this space, as if  
they could remake the world  
which lies in shreds around us.

The dome moves, as I watch it,  
the stretching of an inchoate form—  
when morning comes  
it glistens with white dew.

*Yearbook of Indian Poetry in English 2020-2021*

Sukrita Paul Kumar and Vinita Agrawal Eds., Hawakal Publishers, 2021, Rs. 600/-

This anthology records the poetry written by Indians in English and published between October 2019 and October 2020 in various online and print platforms. Envisioned as an annual affair, this ambitious anthology promises to be a guidebook for the future historians of Anglophone Indian poetry who may want map the progress of the same. It contains a varied range of work and displays the multifarious ways in which the Indian poet yields the English language. Apart from the editors, an illustrious group of poets and critics namely, Anjali Purohit, EV Ramakrishnan, Ashwani Kumar, Ranjit Hoskote, Menka Shivdasani, K Srilata, Dibyajyoti Sarma, and Uttaran Dasgupta were involved in the selection process.

**An Earthquake in Shillong**  
*Lalnunsanga Ralte*

Today I learned  
That concrete is not so concrete,  
That we run out, not in,  
That I no longer envy  
My neighbour's mansion.  
He stands next to me panting  
Barefoot, in the dirt of the street,  
Glancing nervously at the tall lamppost.

## **The Walk**

*Uma Gowrishankar*

In another version of his life  
he has not travelled beyond a mile.  
The river plies fresh loads of algae  
empties the hill at his feet where the ferns  
dry their hoary limbs.

He fits the odds of his life in a bag  
walks along the spent river  
that cradles the kingfisher in a shard of light.  
The villagers troop along the cracked bund  
see his back diminish to a pinpoint.

The fish floats belly up  
the venom stains the reeds a shade of purple  
flows down the throat of the crown flower  
to the small of his back when he kneels  
as if the body is built to fold up.

They bring him wrapped, calf muscles buckled  
from what the human body is not meant to do –  
walk three hundred miles, drop like a yellowed leaf  
to be rested under the cassia tree in full bloom  
just a mile from home.

*The Shape of a Poem: The Red River Book of Contemporary Erotic Poetry*

Srividya Sivakumar and Paresh Tiwari Eds., Red River, 2021, Rs. 399/-

*The Shape of a Poem* is an ambitious anthology that attempts to carry forward the tradition of erotic poetry. The editors operate with the credo that “When it comes from a place of consent, even a salt shaker passed across the table is erotic.” The anthology features overtly erotic and the subtly sensual poems by poets from ten different nations. The editors envision the erotic as a counternarrative to the contemporary discourse of restrictions and oppression.

**Peach Stone**

*Carole MacRury*

Because of the way he chose a peach—  
the gentle, resting press;  
because of the way his eyes close  
with that first mouthed bite;  
because he didn't wie juice  
from lips, from chin—

this is why I chose him,

this man like Rubens,  
who worships light and shadow as it plays  
over curves, crevices, folds;

who holds me knows me,  
skin to centre core;  
this man who craves the flesh,  
the juice,  
the stone.

**bābilim/ Babylon**

*Somrita Urni Ganguly*

you know, in my head there are different compartments for languages:  
punjabi is for friendship,  
urdu for poetry,  
french is for courtship,  
spanish for sex

so, you would have me write you letters in french  
and fuck you in spanish?  
mon dieu to dios mio?  
what if i say i am french and spanish, both?

i want you to be my tower of babel  
before our tongues split

what is the language of love?

*bunchprose*

Ranjit Hoskote, Penguin Random House India, 2021, Rs. 499/-

Ranjit Hoskote has an inimitable mastery over the poetic language and he wields it with considerable power in *bunchprose*, his seventh book of poetry. The poems included in this collection were written immediately after the publication of *Jonabhale* (2018) and before the onset of the pandemic. The poems still reflect the prevalent sense of being entrapped and speaks to the moment of its publication. It is rife with experimentation of form and language. The continuity from the previous collection is signalled by the titles formed by the compounding and conflation of words and ideas.

## Hunchprose

He calls me Hunchprose but what's a word  
between murderous rivals?  
Across from me he strops his fine blade  
smooth talker barefaced liar pissfart  
teller of tall tales who wraps you up  
in his flying carpet serves you snake oil  
carries off the princess every time.  
And I what can I offer you except  
fraying knots coiled riddles scrolled bones  
keys to doors that were carted away by raiders  
betrayed by splayed light and early snow.  
Lost doors I could have opened with my breath.  
Call me Hunchpraise. I bend over my inkdrift words.  
And when I spring back up I sting.

## **Ivory Bird**

*Hoble Fels*

Nothing in the world  
    except the rasp of adze  
    the scrape of gauge  
    against the gutted mammoth's tusk  
until you cup  
    cream ridged into feathers  
        wings folded back  
        legs pulled in long neck-head-beak a missile pointed  
at water far below or the clouds  
the first cormorant  
    ever sculpted  
        in the sky of your palm

***Witness: The Red River Book of Poetry of Dissent***

Nabina Das Eds., Red River, 2021, Rs. 499/-

*Witness* is an anthology of poetry written on the theme of dissent. The editor Nabina Das describes the project as a collaboration between herself and the poet-translator-publisher Dibyajyoti Sharma. The duo has brought in various and varied voices of dissent and has accommodated both angry revolutionary poems and silent seething ones. This book, that also features an Introduction by Nirupama Dutt, strives to be a witness of the times.

**We Sons of Bitches are Doing Fine**  
*Kazi Neel*

We make tiktok, memes,  
dalgona coffee and chicken dry fry.

We sons of bitches are doing fine.

We write rain-poems, sing songs,  
paint pictures and hold online Bihu;

curse the useless prime minister  
at eight in the evening  
and fuck at midnight and high noon.

We sons of bastards are doing fine.

We wait in line at liquor stores,  
drunkenly establish communism,

and pimp out to capitalism  
first thing in the morning.

We worthless bastards are doing fine.

Millions of bodies come home.  
There's blood on the highway,  
blood on train wheels,  
blood on pieces of bread.

We sons of pigs eat watermelon  
and bleed tears on our screens.

We sons of bitches are doing fine.

We invite stars to Leftist events-  
they decide if the starving  
should or should not eat meat.

We priceless parasites are doing fine.

Nothing will happen to us.

If the world goes to hell, nothing will happen to us.

We will keep writing poems  
and workers walking hundreds of miles  
will be our profile pictures.

Find me a bigger opportunistic leech;  
we sons of bitches are doing fine.

We read novels in silence, read poetry.  
When this plague ends who but we  
will write heartwarming literature.

We sons of hypocrites are doing fine.

We see humanity wallowing in mud  
and nothing happens to us.

Nothing will happen to us.

We scumbags will keep doing fine.

We will keep rolling in meat and wine.  
In this chaos we will keep posting  
bleeding heart ballads.

We sons of bitches are doing fine.

## **Eggless Republic**

*Kunjana Parasbar*

They start small,  
the big crimes.

Like the oval body of an egg  
erased from a child's midday meal.

The oval, once ordinary,  
suddenly charged with a secret energy.

Those children, though grown, roam scared  
of bumping into Mr Humpty Dumpty.

Still haunted by the taste of his white innards.  
Haunted by the sunny-yolk of his being.

Their old, vegetating pulse  
grows afraid of a loud hatching.

They call the king's men in a hurry.  
Shout, *arrest this egg for corrupting our genes!*

The shape of this desire,  
once pure, free,

now the map  
of something ugly.

## *Osmosis*

Debarshi Mitra, Hawakal Publishers, 2020, Rs. 200/-

Debarshi Mitra's second collection of poetry *Osmosis* is a short volume consisting of 35 poems. The poems themselves are brief and often gathers one or a sequence of thought within their grasps. These vignettes touch upon subjects ranging from loss to mortality. In the words of the physicist-poet, the book attempts "to de-familiarize the ordinary by not resorting to obfuscation or embellishment but merely by revealing or portraying it with as much clarity and transparency as is possible."

## **Family Sundays**

Anecdotes of  
grandparents  
and dead aunts.

On the centre table  
a decapitated wax turtle.

I look both ways  
to cross a one way street.

## **An Insect**

trapped between  
the two hands  
of a clock.

Time becomes  
an epitaph.

*A Moveable East*

Siddharth Dasgupta, Red River, 2021, Rs. 300/-

Siddharth Dasgupta's *A Moveable East* is another beautiful artefact produced by Red River. The title of this collection is derived from Ernest Hemingway's 1964 memoir *A Moveable Feast* and like its source of inspiration, this collection carries a deep sense of nostalgia for the cities and their shared spaces. The collection of fifty-five poems is divided into seven sections, or 'movements.'

## Madras Café

You don't sip the convulsions  
Of coconut milk;  
You slurp.

This is noisy, earthy homage—  
Both hands cupped fervently  
Around the wet rims of a ceramic bowl  
Breath to heat; tongue to spice

The mellifluous swirl  
Of freshwater prawn  
Bathing in the saltwater kiss  
Of a curry married  
To coconut's myths.

You don't clean the residues  
Of a meal such as this,  
Savoured on the humility  
Of coy banana leaves;  
You mop.

The shy elegance of *aapams*  
Cradles tradition like a child—  
Circling the verdures  
In meditative daze, imbibing

Every last drop  
Of this land's fertile moan  
Meeting the mouth like a lover,  
Thoroughly slaked; bringing  
Denouement to the shadows  
Of this undeniably Indian dance.

## Delhi, With a Hint of Turmeric

*Gali Paranthe Wali* they call it, they could just as well christen it Paradise Road. Its rowdy visage, that roguish charm of a handsome film villain, is a deep-fried collage of taste and myth. On this crisp, primal morning, Delhi's winter fables arise to whispers from loud steel vessels and large clay cauldrons, a finely amalgamated infiltration of spice, the redolent immediacy of inflamed chillies, the romantic resonances of turmeric... Wanton, wild.

My rickety table of wood has seen better days, but then again, so have I. We converge as one in this narrow alleyway, lined end to end with arrogant aroma, pride, and epochs, our parable of inhale & exclaim bound by the prophecies of stage, encore, masks, and fates. The dry, furious crackle of batter courting oil, the majestic churn of flour as it settles in lush, the meditative swirl of a Sufi's search for solace and sky, all of this set to the frantic cascade of orders and voices, an operatic parade thus fed through idle whims and these exasperations of fire.

My flatbread *paratha* arrives, chest heaving with the wholesome conviction of potatoes. Before I'm done, the next one. This variation bears the spicy potency of minced lamb, a combination that cries for elegies unspoken. Blushing meat simmers on skewers, my extinguished hunger savours. What is man when held up against the saffron-scented denouement of rich, rousing romance—of vessel and flame; of repartee, sharp, and marinade, thick; of this city tinged with finely-seasoned bliss...

The old city, an instant hush, wrapped in the alchemy of jade, of mosque, musk, and prayer. Nizamuddin's ripples, in densely-scented air. This is India, the only prayer reverberates. A microcosm dripping with aromatic moans, a delicious confluence—creation, religion; nay, salvation—and thus these histories unfold. My alleyway bristles beneath the lush poetry of texture, it dances, rebellious, the intoxicated confessions of flavour. Within its passionate caravanserai of colours, these choruses awake. A morning filled with the crunchiness of hope, and as these prayers hover like sparrows in the air, the lingering aftermath of taste...

<sup>1</sup> Translated from Malayalam by K. Satchidanandan



## Author bios

**Arushi Vats** writes on arts and culture. Her writing has been published on online platforms such as *MARCH: a journal of art & strategy*, *Alternative South Asia Photography*, *The Karachi Collective*, *LSE International History*, *Critical Collective*; she has authored curatorial notes for Galerie Mirchandani Steinruecke, Mumbai; Reliable Copy, Bangalore; and Aicon Contemporary, New York. Her short stories are published in *The Gulmohar Quarterly* and *Hakara Journal*; poetry is forthcoming in *PIX Quarterly*. She has been awarded the Eyebeam & Momus Critical Writing Fellowship 2021-22. A complete list of publications can be found at: <https://www.arushivats.com/>

**Atreyee Majumder** is an anthropologist. She teaches at the National Law School of India University. Her poetry and short fiction have appeared in the Sunflower Collective Blog, RIC Journal, Café Dissensus Blog, the Bangalore Review and the Bombay Review.

**Bharatbhoshan Tiwari** is a writer and translator in Hindi, English and Marathi. His latest work is the English translation, *Legal Fiction* (HarperCollins India, 2021), of Chandan Pandey's Hindi novel *Vaidhanik Galp*.

**chamba** is a Ph.D. scholar at the Centre for English Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. At the intersection between poetic discourse and contemporary critical thought, her research work follows the issues of history, memory, language and time. Born and brought up in Abu Dhabi, U.A.E, she currently resides in her native town of Kannur along the coast of Kerala.

**Chanchal Kumar** is from Jharkhand and currently lives in Delhi, India. He is an Ambedkarite Buddhist. His poems have previously appeared in *The Sunflower Collective*, *Hamilton Stone Review*, *Welter Journal*, *Name and None*, *Young Poets Network*, UK, among others. He won first prize in a Young Poets Network, UK poetry challenge. Recently, his poems were translated to Bengali by *Harakiri Journal*.

**debarun sarkar** sleeps, eats, reads, smokes, drinks, labors and occasionally writes and submits them. He recently published his first collection of poems, *<blank>* (Kolkata: Writers Workshop, 2021). He is currently holed up in Hyderabad. Find him at: <https://debarun.noblogs.org/>

**Goirick Brahmachari's** debut collection of poems, *For the Love of Pork* (Les Editions du Zaporogue, Denmark) won the Muse India – Satish Verma Young Writer Award (Poetry) 2016. He is also the winner of the Srinivas Rayaprol Poetry Prize, 2016. Other collections of verses by Brahmachari include *joining the dots*, 2016, *Wet Radio and Other Poems*, 2017 and *A Broken Exit*, 2019. He is currently working on two collaborative volume of verses titled 'The Nightwalkers' along with Debarshi Mitra and 'Non-Tribal/Tribal' with Avner Pariat. His poems and essays have appeared in various journals, magazines, blogs and pamphlets.

**Kailash Chand Chauhan** (1973–2020) was a well-known Dalit writer, editor and publisher in Hindi. He is the author of the novels *Subah Ke Liye* (2011), *Bhannar* (2013), *Vidroh* (2017), a short-story collection *Sanjeev Ka Dhaba* (2012) and editor of the anthology *Dalit Sahitya Ki Charchit Prem Kahaniyan* (2019). He was awarded the Dr. Ambedkar Fellowship (1993) and the Dr. Ambedkar Youth Dignity Award (2017). An active member of Dalit Lekhak Sangh, he also edited a Hindi literary journal *Kadam* for several years. 'Sanjeev's Dhaba' is a widely celebrated short story originally published in 2011 in *Kathadesb* (a Hindi literary magazine).

**Kartikeya Jain** is a writer, editor and translator based in Delhi, India. His work has appeared in *Scroll*,

*The Deccan Herald* and *TheLallantop*.

**Keerthana Jagadeesh** is a fiction writer based in Bangalore. Her short fiction has been published in *Ducts* and *The Irregular Times*. She is working on her first novel.

**Kishan Gusani** is an Indian poet based out of Mumbai. He is currently pursuing M.B.B.S. from K.J. Somaiya Medical College. His work has been published in *Monograph* magazine. His debut poetry collection is forthcoming in October 2021.

**Mir Arif** is a writer from Bangladesh. He is currently pursuing an MFA in Creative Writing at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, where he is the Nonfiction Editor of *Witness*. His fiction has appeared/is upcoming in *Crab Orchard Review*, *Almost*, *The Penmen Review*, *The Bombay Review*, *Himal Southasian*, *Kitaab* and *Arts & Letters*.

A poet, part-time academic in narratological complexity, and financial journalist, Dublin born **Oisín Breen's** widely reviewed debut collection, *Flowers, all sorts in blossom, figs, berries, and fruits, forgotten* was released Mar. 2020. Breen has been published widely in journals and anthologies, including in *About Place*, the *Blue Nib*, *Books Ireland*, the *Seattle Star*, *Modern Literature*, *La Piccioletta Barca*, the *Bosphorus Review of Books*, the *Kleksograph*, *In Parentheses*, the *Madrigal*, and *Dreich* magazine.

**Prashanti Chunduri** (she/her) is a self-proclaimed aesthete, word-painter and armchair globetrotter, currently working as an English Communication and Business Skills trainer at an MNC in India. Her poetry, prose and micro-fiction has been published by and in *Terribly Tiny Tales*, *Mad Swirl Poetry Forum*, *Women's Web* and *Verse of Silence*. Most recently, in 2021, she presented a selection of original poems at the Southwestern Humanities Symposium (SWHS) hosted by Arizona State University, USA. She sometimes writes as @alucinor.

**Priyadarshini Gogoi** is a writer and poet from Assam, India. Her poetry has been published on platforms such as *The Shoreline Review* and *The LiveWire*. She is also the author of four picture books, with a few more in the pipeline. Several children have told her that she's cool. Sometimes she writes as @shinogogo.

**Poornima Laxmeshwar** resides in Bangalore and works as a technical writer for a living. Her books of poetry include *Anything but Poetry* (Writers Workshop), *'Thirteen' - a chapbook*, (Yavanika Press) and *Strings Attached*, (Red River).

**Sanjana Ajith** is a non-binary Bahujan researcher, writer and anthropologist. Their work centers Ambedkarite, queer and abolitionist perspectives. They love exploring themes of science fiction, fantasy, speculative histories and futures in both fiction and non-fiction. They are also specifically interested in documenting a debrahmanised history of the Ezhava community, to which they belong. They have worked with feminist non-profit organisations and currently also work as a freelance researcher. They are the co-founder of Mavelinadu Collective, a publication and community space for and by Bahujan people

**Sanjay Sengupta** identifies as a bahurupi. His works have been collected across art foundations, museums, private collections and galleries. His works, especially in context of contemporary art have been collected for exhibition by the Lalit Kala Academy, Delhi in both India and abroad. In addition, his works have been showcased in museums of contemporary art and galleries across the nation and on the world forum. The artist has had his work published in numerous art magazines, newspapers and journals held in high esteem in the art community. The artist was invited as representative of the Government of India to SAARC, 2012. The artist is actively involved in the contemporary Indian arts and is regularly invited to art camps and workshops organized by the Lalit Kala Academy. The artist hold his Bachelors and Masters in Fine Arts (2002-2009) from Kala Bhavan , Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, West Bengal. Currently, he considers himself a young contemporary artist, one whose goal is to bring his art close to the populace and have his subjects find a place in their souls.

**Sathwik NN** is a theatre-maker and writer. He has written, translated, directed and produced plays in Kannada and English. He also has led workshops for children and adults, acted in theatre productions, commercial advertisements and lent his voice as a professional voice recording artist. He currently works with the Studio for Movement Arts and Therapies, Bengaluru, as their Relationships Manager.

**Shruti Sareen** born and brought up in Varanasi, studied at Rajghat Besant School, KFI. Graduating in English from Indraprastha College for Women, University of Delhi, she later earned a PhD from the same university, titled “Indian Feminisms in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Women’s Poetry in English” which is now forthcoming from Routledge (UK) as two monographs in 2022. She has had over a hundred poems and a handful of short stories published in journals and anthologies. She is currently seeking publishers for her novel, *The Yellow Wall*, and is currently working around a hybrid manuscript around lives of queer artists, on themes of queerness and mental health. Her debut poetry Collection *A Witch Like You*, was published by Girls on Key Poetry (Australia) in April 2021. She was an invited poet at global poetry festival, hosted by Russia, Poesia-21. Found on FB and IG as Shruti Krishna Sareen or as shrutanne, she blogs at [www.shrutanne-heartstrings.blogspot.com](http://www.shrutanne-heartstrings.blogspot.com) and may be reached at [shrutanne.ipcollege@gmail.com](mailto:shrutanne.ipcollege@gmail.com).

**Sanil M. Neelakandan** is an independent researcher based in New Delhi. He received his Ph.D. and M.Phil. in Sociology from the Centre for the Study of Social Systems, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. He has published in international and national journals. He writes in English and Malayalam.

**Suchandra** holds a Master’s degree in English from Ambedkar University, Delhi.

**Suresh Gaikwad** is currently working on a PhD research project titled “Caste and the British-Indian Military from the Sepoy Mutiny to the Second World War, 1857-1945” at the Centre for English Studies, School of Language, Literature and Cultural Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Suresh was an exchange research fellow at the University of Wuerzburg, Germany during May-June, 2019. Suresh’s research interests include (world) war studies with focus on caste and race, caste and colonial military, colonial and post colonial studies, anti-caste literature and thought, English and anti-caste movement, translation studies with focus on Marathi Dalit literature and literature in India.

**Tabish Nawaz** teaches Environmental Science and Engineering at IIT Bombay. He has published a short story collection *Opening Clouds, Fermented Rain (Hawakal, 2020)*. His poems, essays and short stories have been published in *The Critical Flame, The Bombay Review, Madras Courier, Woolgathering Review,, The Bangalore Review, Flash Fiction Magazine, The Punch Magazine* among other venues.





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