



nether quarterly
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As we resume our journey with *nether*, first begun more than a decade ago, we'd like to start off with a big note of thanks to our reading community for the warm welcome and support. We'd like to especially thank Rohini Kejriwal and *The Alipore Post* for giving readers a glimpse of our archives, Kanishka Gupta for inviting us over for a conversation at Scroll, Ranjit Hoskote for the continued support over the years and for joining us on our very first podcast, Arjun Rajendran and Aswin Vijayan for guest editing this revival issue, and Meghna Prakash for launching us off on Instagram.

The response from writers too has been unprecedented. We received many submissions, and we are honored to have been trusted with such incredible work. When we began *nether* as university students 10 years ago, we had something of an enterprising spirit, and a commitment to creating a platform for quality literature. We wanted more than anything to have a space where good writing from the subcontinent finds voice. Now, a decade later, even as we maintain this spirit, we are more aware of our commitment to the community we are publishing for/with, and the society we're speaking in. The overall community presence seems more independent and stronger than where we left off, and it feels exciting to be rejoining the conversation. In this spirit, we want to make *nether* a more collaborative project. Working with different guest editors and readers in each issue is only the first step. We want not only to publish a greater variety of voices in *nether*, but also involve them in facilitating the community of writers and readers. We are determined to make *nether* more inclusive, to actively engage work that is often overlooked, and encourage voices from the margins to play a more staple part in our collective imaginations.

We're keenly aware of the times we're reviving in: in a climate where critique and dissent are stifled; where citizens--writers, activists, and academics--doing the democratically necessary work of critique, so important in civil society, are regarded as 'terrorists' and 'anti-nationals', and are having to bear the brunt of merely thinking. Almost everywhere, the fabric of community life, our ways of being with and understanding one another, are steadily being pulled apart. We would like, now more than ever, to dedicate our platform to democracy, to free speech, and to facilitating political society¹, where the "only constraint on the poet is their own timidity," as Vivek Narayanan said in our interview in 2013. We stand in solidarity with all those who are being incarcerated for doing this always necessary work of critique.

Our first issue is dedicated to the memory of Eunice de Souza, whom we miss deeply. We cherish the lengthy interview we had with her in 2014: the last time we witnessed her fierce spirit in person. We reproduce that interview here in full. The cover art by Amrita Bagchi tries to capture and celebrate all the things we associate with Eunice. We're also thrilled to include two short essays by Manohar Shetty on Eunice's work, alongside the interview.

We're also fortunate to include new poems by poet Deepankar Khiwani who passed away earlier this year. We thank Ritu Yadav for generously sharing a selection of his work. In addition, we have a rich selection of poetry, fiction, and visual poems from returning and new writers.

¹Cf. Partha Chatterjee

nether is, as it has always been, an independent journal. We have, as yet, no dedicated source of monetary support from which to fund it; nor do we earn anything from it. We work on it in our spare time, and we're indebted to those who volunteer with us. We hope ultimately to be able to compensate all those who work with us, and whose writing we publish. This seems like a distant dream at the moment, but we are striving towards it. On this note, we'd like to express our deepest gratitude to all our supporters: Vaishnavi Sharma for setting up the webpage; Devika Mohan for the new *nether quarterly* logos; Alex Thinius for the extra pair of eyes on the manuscript; our contributors for going through the proofs; past contributors for coming back on board to read their work and join us in conversation (for the continuation of our podcast series), and to all those whose work we couldn't include in this issue. We hope you consider submitting to us again.

We hope you enjoy the issue and continue to support us as you always have.

Divya Nadkarni
Avinab Datta-Areng

August 2020

Siddharth Dasgupta

Literature for the Illiterate

I think of half-eaten goodbyes,
and how some paintings are best viewed
the other way around. I think of the lovers
I've lost because I've woken up late,
or missed the train, or chosen the right café
on the wrong day. I think of the love
I've made and the beautiful frescoes
that love has left on this earth—beds, soil,
the gorgeous anonymity of hotel rooms,
the memoirs being written within
the splashing of such yearning tides.

I have addresses in my heart that my
mind lacks names for. It's Thursday, and
this city, the city of my birth, has no name
for the lacuna left behind by old Hindi
film songs. *Chalte chalte, mere yeh geet
yaad rakbna. As you walk along, remember
these, my songs.* People ought to be more
like books—with charm, and flow, with
the integrity of spine. People ought to be
more like songs—with the charisma
of cadence, and a briefness of perfection
that my mind lacks names for.

I want to speak to you of the lightness
in rare things. The tremble of a kiss.
The whisper within a breath. The grace
that lies in not saying a goddamn word
while the discordance only grows louder.
That's how I would like to tread this earth
—with that lightness of self, with the rescued
melody of an old Hindi film song,
with those portions from remembrance
of things past where the past tiptoes,
like the unspoken farewell of touch,
as it walks out of a hotel room.

At Dorabjee, Darius flashes me a smile
as he marshals his troops. It's Sunday,
and I've settled in for the tenderness
of goat-flecked dhansak. Just the act
of eating here, as it always does, feels
like a migration. Lands, epochs, absorption,
and the flavours of migratory voyages.
I know I'm too attached to the past,
to the musty film of nostalgia. It unspools
like an orchard of azaleas, leads me into
negatives of photographs and the negative
space where beauty flourishes, like
the arms of a released Amazon.

The heart is a sanctuary of liaisons
and erosions. Love is what wandering
one day gets exchanged for...

A city, then, is a feeling my mind
lacks names for.

Deepankar Khiwani

Ispahan

- for my Mother, who taught me the poem by Browning, but was terrified I'd learn too much.

'What is vertigo? Fear of falling? No...it is the desire to fall...'
Milan Kundera, An Unbearable Lightness of Being

It's important to steady this melon first,
For this rutted sphere has by nature
No point of balance.

It's useful also to be clear about what one wants:
The whole or just the half?
Mince its pulp - or
Cut it into *juicy slices*?

What will one do if one sees the flesh rotting inside -
Excise the rot surgically, or throw all away?
For all is God's award.
Sometimes of course, one needs to throw away the good...

The knife must be sharp and pointed,
The right hand must be resolute, swift
And you must grasp the melon
With your left hand steady

And when it's steady, just cut.
There must then be no going back,
No looking at the blood.

Sweet Revenge

Lonavala Station

Having been born and bred here, amidst the blue collared -
born, indeed near a train station, and the wrong side of the tracks too,
I know there's no point in being putting on airs.

Nevertheless it's vexing being cursed to being inexorably common,

and being condemned to remaining... cheap, always available.

The man who just bought me has a bushy moustache,
and bad breath after his dinner. He quarrelled about the price,
avoiding looking at me... how vulgar can one get?

*

Now he's examining me - all undressed in his hotel room:

do I meet his petty unimaginative expectations -
golden brown all over? pleasantly nutty? brittle? sweet?

So that's that. But this poor pitiful fool in his thin banian...

I'll ensure I will start an infection when I meet his flesh,
and with some luck I'll claim a couple of shaking teeth.

Meera Suryanarayanan

Edavu Paadhi

(From Anil's Diary – May 30, 1977)

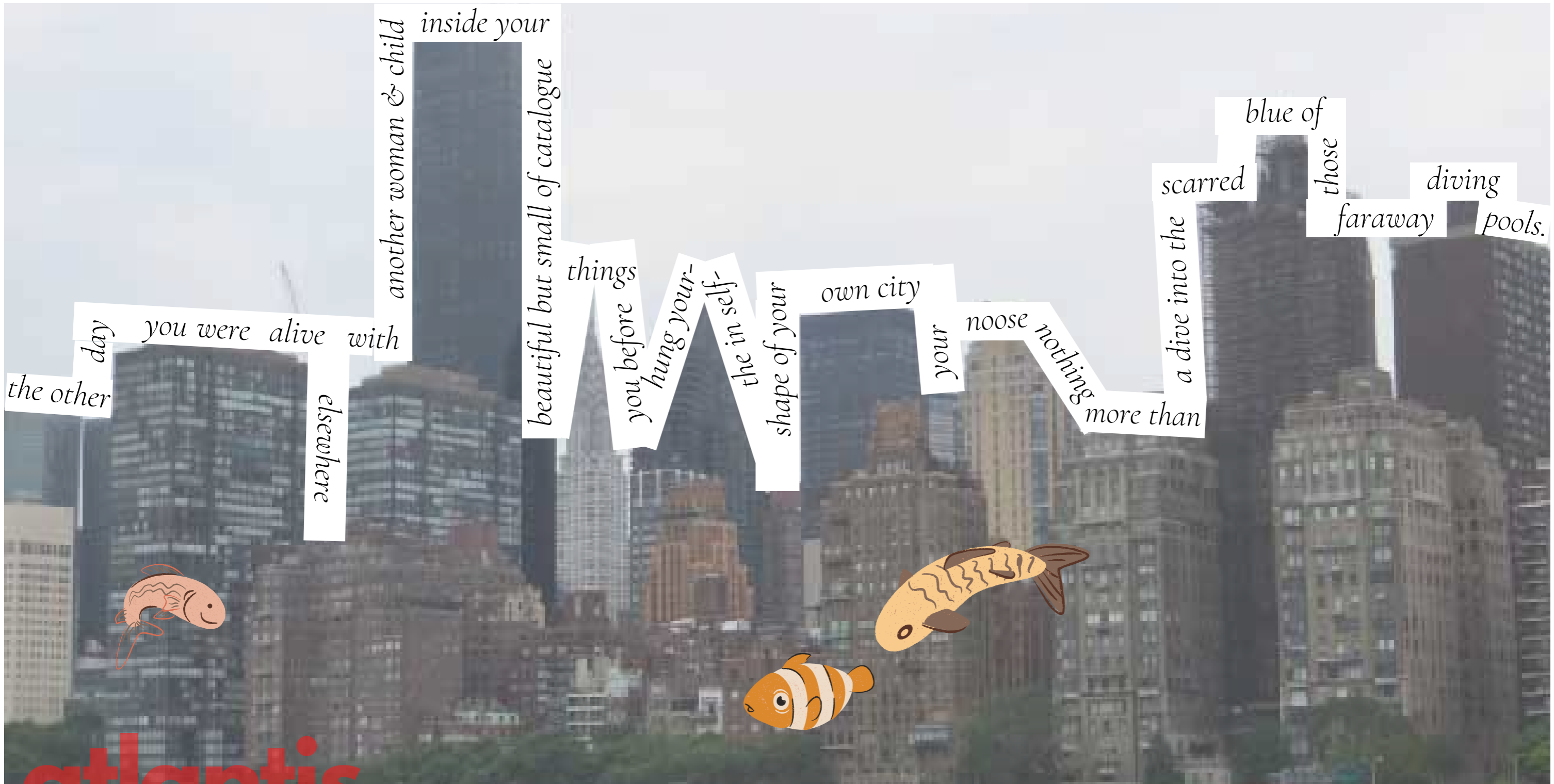
The cousins were packed and ready.
My summer of fifteen ended under threats of exploding clouds
and expanding family.
Leave takings are procedural rituals.
My cousin Ravi is fourteen, sulking and beautiful.
We slipped away to our shared bed of two months
and said our goodbyes,
his tongue sucking my neck to redness.
His shiny black curls obscured our liplock from
the ABBA poster on the wall.
New rains splintered wood
as manhood met manhood.
I kissed him – my Mohini devoid of the harsh signs
of encroaching masculinity.
Sweat trickled
down
my brow and fell
onto his closed lashes.
His dusky face changed like
the many moods of Kathakali
as I moved in him
one last time.

**Edavu Paadhi*- The fortnight of the first monsoon showers in Kerala

Tan Tzy Jiun

Prime Suspect

My mother's friend came to us because her mother kicked her out of their house. She said she had nowhere else to go. The woman had only one front tooth, and she chewed with her mouth open. In the week she was here, she hosed down the cobwebs, arranged my books by the authors' first name, and overwatered the cacti. My sister and I said nothing, but we locked our rooms before going to school. The woman cooked for us too, putting raisins in fried rice, salt in jam jars, and boiled basil in water for soup. A few days ago, she left our house to drive her mother to the morgue, because the old woman fell and broke her tailbone. The neighbors found her starved to death like a caged monkey. That night, my mother's friend went back to her empty house. She was found dead in bed this morning with needles stuck in the back of her head. The police suspect that someone had lodged them into the pillow.



the other day you were alive with
elsewhere

another woman & child
inside your
beautiful but small of catalogue

things
you before
hung your-
the in self-

shape of your
own city
your

noose
nothing
more than
a dive into the

scarred
blue of
those
faraway
diving
pools.

atlantis

Subimal Misra

Oh Jesus, my Jesus – God's lamb

From nothing was the best created, sin,
and the forsaken blood of a lamb
accomplished this astonishing feat

Who experiences the delight of creation after having waited for the first crop of fruits to be released? Who cherishes the joy of producing an offspring after having brought her bed-fellow to her father? They are now in unfettered bliss, effulgent. Do we understand why such gongs of joy sound in the genital country! Can we feel why the music of those who attain sin is so sweet and melodious! This is the melody of an unsocial love, the minstrel's ballad of sinners, where a woman achieves freedom in the form of a sister and spins round and round close to the reproductive staff, singing her minstrel-songs. The walls surrounding God's city measure 15,000 miles. We can assume some things from this. What do these walls signal! From beginning to end the wall is artfully adorned with gems – which is a symbol of celestial beauty and artistry; and for us it is all this that befits the grandeur to come as against the suffering of the present – but isn't this sinful earth's beauty and grace also comparable to heaven's artistry, beauty, and radiance? Wherefore, during the mythic eras, those who got the opportunity of dwelling amidst such beauty were considered blessed? Death is the wage of sin. But what is the wage for – hissing like a flaming serpent, raising one's expanded hood to the heavens and then blazing suddenly to be extinguished in a spark of light? Orgasmic ejaculation. Two bodies in the hazy darkness of this tiny universe, belonging to Yama-Yami, sparkle as they find light and again dissolve in the darkness. Because there's no able body that does not seek, tenderly, that supremely human organ. But so long as the phallus is not obtained, there can be no ejaculation, there can be no pilgrimage. Foremost is worship of the phallus and only then can one adopt the corpse posture of shavasana. And Yami does not know where that organ lies hidden. Some say that the queens of the day robbed and took it away at the moment of amorous passion and some say that tender buds like blooming flowers are cut with it now. And it's the dirge of not-finding that's been sung here, in this story. Who do you look for, oh beautiful Vedic maiden!

What happened was that
a snake lay on her bed

Walls surround the cave and the doors on the wall too are sensitive to touch, in keeping with custom. Each door is made of pearl, whose design delights the eye. On this subject, some commentators say that the pearl is nothing but a symbol of tears, because the pearl is formed of the tears of agony of the oyster. In the ultimate stage, these doors signal that only through the path of tears can the city of God be reached – the tears of guilt and all-consuming grief during the preparatory days. The doors would be opened wide and there would be a messenger waiting

outside the door to welcome every intruder. It is only out of God's pleasure that the doors have been opened for us now. Although he will suffer and embrace death on behalf of all of us, nevertheless, the pearly gates will permit only those to enter who will really advance through the worldly gate that bears the name of sin, who will submit to his authority and follow him. Hey, look at the robot-navel crawling along slowly in the desolate wasteland, Yami has fallen asleep after having waited long eagerly for Yama's naked body, on the soft delicate earth there's no dimension other than the rustling sound of the robot's eight hairy legs. The sun set long ago, night has arrived, Yami is naked, she probes the darkness for her own sibling. At one time it seemed that a band of people, far, far away, sprinkled womb-seeds and disappeared, another time she saw someone standing silently beside the road, with a pink condom held by his teeth and his penis in his hand – the moment Yami approached he dissolved in the darkness. Gazing at the row of stars in the celestial dome of sin he sensed that Yami had arrived, now the story will grow, but the subsequent orgasm and seeing Yami absolutely clearly had not yet occurred to him. The phallus shooting semen close to Yami, had only been hazily visualized by him, then, at that moment.

The story begins
after that one day she came upon
a peacock's feather

Waves rise in the field of barley as the southerly breeze blows, a bunch of vagabond parakeets fly around in a flock, daylight is about to vanish as the day comes to an end, the sky clear as a blue gemstone, with the furtive play of silver clouds on its bosom. After a hunt, Yama made his way towards human habitation, a grey-coloured wild boar slung on his shoulder. At the river bank, where the road to the human habitation merged with the way to the forest of meditation, once again the two met – the girl was also returning home, she had just reached the road to the human habitation at the edge of the forest, with her a herd of cows – two plump calves, one on each side of her, white. Sometimes, lifting up their tails, they mooed imitating their mother, sometimes they raced ahead, sometimes behind; sometimes, stopping abruptly and casting their large, black-askohl eyes as if to say something. The next day, when Yama was again on his hunt in the forest, a female messenger came from the girl, she wanted to mate with her elder sibling, was ready to offer herself summarily, she was ovulating now, she desired a body, just the body, the body of her elder sibling. She had not discovered anything else. There wasn't any secretiveness in her either about surrendering herself, no sense of sin, she made it known that she wanted an offspring from her elder sibling's seed. Two fair-skinned infants should flank her and run around, babbling as they called their mother – that was all that the eighteen-year-old girl wanted. She spoke freely about her desire, her body was never afflicted by seeing any other young boy in the way it was when she saw her elder brother, Yama, double her age. After that, the eyes of the two fell on one another. It was noon then, Yama was thrilled to hear his own blood-sister voice her uninhibited invitation. Tired after spending the whole day in search of prey, as he advanced towards the cane grove at the river bank hoping for rest – the girl stood blocking the path ahead: accept me and fulfill my yearning, Lord. Give birth to a heroic son in my womb – a tender bud like a plump ear of (shola) – put an end to my yearning. Startled, Yama halted, speechless, with his own eyes he plainly saw his fate; he saw the still water of the river, the still leaves on the trees, all of creation still, the fragrance of this stillness everywhere, only a cool ill-wind blew in the green field of barley, swaying the stalks. He

saw everything calmly, but he did not see anything at all, he suddenly came back to his senses at his sister's incestuous invitation, he looked fixedly into her eyes – the girl's thirsting face was turned towards him, she blocked his way. He remembered the tusked boar with a pointed face that he had hunted with great difficulty yesterday at the edge of the forest, leaping into the golden barley field. Till the very moment of its death, it, the creature, fought for survival, although bloodied it wanted to live. But now he would finally decide, he would surrender himself to Yami in order to become pure. Now he would be adorned with thorns, whose beauty was the fruit of scorn and shame, which he would henceforth carry with patience, humility and love for her very name. But wasn't this a normal matter where love reigns! After all, everyone endeavours to exhibit adequate love for the other. All heavenliness found fulfillment and exulted in this meekness and love of the Lord; the ordinary lives of sinners commanded to punishment were adorned with the long-awaited grace, and so it continued. The corpse-sadhana began, Yami on the lap and the son of goddess Saranyu, driven by fate, in darkness, in that tunnel-hole, deeper and deeper, the sadhana to initiate oneself. All along the slippery cave's wall, water has begun falling and splashing, a robot with eight arms and legs, trunk raised, advances, and yet does not go anywhere, motionless, tired, the robot, Yama; nothing can be seen in front, except – this sweet sound. Breaking through the blue darkness, Yama advanced, alone, through a solitary process, in his purificatory sadhana. Once something hit his foot and rolled away, Yama picked it up and saw it was the nape of a camel's neck. Dust-laden, grey, it lay in the middle of the path. Under the pressure of Yami's thigh, his ancient ribs were all crackling and breaking then. The thick roots of the tree descended along the crack on the mountain, Yami in corpse asana woke up with a start, as if her hands had touched a snake, cold, as if by the very touch she could hear its hissing sound. But why was everything so icy cold, why was the man so cold – so was Yama unable to accept her with heart and soul – Yami wonders. All around, some folks keep whispering something, Yama hears it, indistinct; sometimes the apparition blazes into flame and then extinguishes, once it seemed the stone wall was moving away speedily, making her completely free, again it advanced very slowly, it approached; very slowly, she sits, pressing down on his chest. From across the wall, someone's inarticulate lament, bloody like weeping, complex particles of sound waft by, or was it on this side – Yama could not exactly fathom. His feet were sinking in the quicksand of soft flesh, they kept sinking in without exertion, trying to gaze upwards yearningly he sees, very far away, the blue sky's opacity, only a hazy blue strip, an unbearable pink stone wall on all four sides. Slowly, very slowly, he feels time is slipping by, or that sometimes in life such a time comes when nothing called time exists, isn't in existence, there's nothing, there's no path to advance on anywhere, or retreat, only the two of them sitting at their respective corpse asanas, boundless time in all directions, which, whether it is mobile or appears to be still because of speed, it was beyond him to know. Making himself enter the dark well in the hope of becoming pure, Yama began groping everywhere for something in particular, – no bottom, no top, there was once a pink stone on all four sides, there was a stone wall, now there wasn't even anything called four sides, only a delightfully soft mound of female flesh – lying abandoned, prostrate, knotted together, complex – the only existence.

Second death
the roaring lions run
the fleeing fawns run

There – there’s the bottomless dark pit, which Yama saw on returning to his senses, where a fire burns endlessly, where he lacked the strength to retain any hope of obtaining solace, where it was impossible to sit, or lie down; and the walls were so terribly tilted that even looking at them made one suffocate. Nothing called light existed there, never existed, and everything there was immersed in darkness like human life. Yama was not able to figure out how that happened. Even if there was no light, it was possible to see something, the things through which there’s suffering, where souls are the broken relics of burning sins, who observe his carriers’ misfortune with greedy eyes and keep alert watch so that all those journeying to death in the pit of fire, in an endless procession, never find peace under any circumstances. All suffering, if at all anything called suffering existed, or remained, came floating from them, all along the valley of birth. And God rarely waits to receive the unfortunate souls of sinners, the ones who are subject to death agonies. He was past his prime, he had prayed again and again to God so that he wouldn’t give birth to the promised offspring through his own sister’s womb. Year after year passed by, yet Yami was not granted any offspring. To outward appearances, merely brother and sister, no one could know that deep inside Yama a great struggle with God raged, an eternal surrender to protect faith, in which he had to remain resolute. His faith was celestial, shrouded in deep sorrow. And this was a struggle of faith. He had devoted himself to a permanent state of waiting, to partake of the next disappointment from God, to continue the struggle until he reached, anew, the station of believing. This secret life of his was concealed in a vagabond existence, in hardship, waiting, in faith, and finally, in the devotion attained through faith, which had an influence on God himself too. But the kingdom of the dead too was earthly, a place of grief. All the sinners arrived at this place, and this happened in their lives when he descended to extraordinary misdeeds with them. They confronted different and nightmarish realities. He raised his hand, he said, you should rather fear the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

Death, be alert
because it’s He who’s love

The sky and the air trembled ecstatically in the intoxication of stillness, exactly then, below the mountain, through the middle of the forest, went ten youths, flaming torches in each hand, the twenty torches of the ten men hissed and emitted spirals of smoke into the sky, and through the kiss of the glowing flames all the black darkness was rendered bright like day. The young woman was making them excited, emitting a shower of flowers of red light with her eyes, sharp as a razor, she says: Yama is unbearable, he’s terribly cold, aloof and mournful, I shall hang my bridal garland on the neck of the one among you who can roast him. I want Yama to burn to death – which he has done to me, by keeping me alive – keeps doing. The girl was now a young woman, standing under the dark sky in the beautiful town, with tearful eyes, she wept, sometimes in monstrous rage, she now wanted her desire to be fulfilled with this very band of entranced youth. Before they knew it, all light was extinguished, the youths ought to go to Yama’s house that very night, there wasn’t a moment to lose. Sloshed to the gills drinking soma, her hair disheveled, the young woman kept saying: Yes, tonight, right now, tomorrow will be too late. I have seen the unmistakable shadow of death at Yama’s doorway. The youths’ chests heaved, it was as if in front of their eyes the darkness was cloven and it opened, as if an ogre gaped from within that cleavage. They too were intoxicated with soma juice, they stared at one another, so then we have to burn Yama to death, that was Yami’s

order, the order of a young woman in this forest of youths – who had no doubts whatsoever about giving herself away to them eventually. They did not have the strength to go against her order. They advanced. Accompanying them, Yami, in drunken guise, devoid of clothes, the disheveled tresses touching her hip, with that alone her eyes, face, breasts and everything of hers was in darkness, she was soma-intoxicated, lurching. The fire was becoming more and more horrific now, in a moment Yama saw the town swathed completely in darkness; it didn't take even a moment for him to recognize the woman. The darkness of light in all directions now, he understood what was about to happen, but despite knowing, he remained effortless, not even a deep sigh escaped his chest, for he had a mind, he understood that he was a sinner, and he could not escape suffering for his sins. Yama prayed inwardly, Lord, oh God, protect this jewel of a woman, yes this jewel of a woman – who has no mind, who does not know what sin is. He was tied up with a rope made from a bundle of grass, he made no protest. The shadow of the man wearing a crown of thorns fell on his eyes and face, the one who would be revealed in Jerusalem a few hundred thousand years later. Do you have anything to say, Yama – one person looked at him in astonishment, he had never seen such a passive man in his life, but Yama only gazed at the sky in silence, whose colour had turned turbid to him long ago, the little that could be seen through the door – they stood gazing steadfastly at that side of the full sky – how far away – how far away isn't it! From the very beginning, the youth was hesitant, he would not burn an innocent to death without instigation, he came running to free the bonds, but Yama did not move despite the efforts to free him. Yami screamed: Don't free him, burn this impotent man to death, who doesn't heed pleasure even in his little finger! He smiled wryly, where was fate taking him, he uttered clearly: I have to attain death, the punishment for discovering sin. But who are these people all around me, not in their senses from drinking soma, who can slay the body but can never slay the soul? After that he raised his head and looked at Yami, at her eyes: rather, it's the one who destroys the soul and the body that I fear. A moment's stillness. And then there was a soft sound of knocking, the oil-lamps in the corner of the room came alight, after that the fire spread furiously through the house. Yami was startled momentarily: no, no – in truth, I did not want this ... Yama's whole body had then started burning, in front of her very eyes, in the fire she herself had instigated, blazingly; his body, genitals, knees, chest, the hair on his chest – he whose every confidence she knew, had known since she was born – which had remained mysterious to her, ever since she was born; – that mysterious man, was burning, the one who could not be held captive, and yet was not uncaptured either. The young woman was weeping inconsolably, helpless, lost, for a moment she wanted to leap into the heart of Yama's fire and save him, disregarding everything, the very next moment she controlled herself: what's the use – what's the use. This man would never be her companion on the path to the fulfillment of her deepest desire. The fire's noose had then completely enwrapped Yama, the young woman thought she heard an indistinct moaning, she was waiting expectantly to hear that, perhaps there was still time, what if this wise man submits, the son of goddess Saranyu, but no, there was nothing other than the popping and crackling sounds of the fire, there was no other cry, indicating life. And then from between her legs, like a spring flowing, a stream of blood sought to ooze out, it was oozing out, down her left leg, she was menstruating again in the middle of this very night, once again she was eager to give birth to an offspring. She could copulate with these youth for a few days, for sure, but would they be able to yield a healthy, sentient offspring, these callow young boys – which only Yama, if he wished, could have given her? The young woman became dispirited, with a bitter taste in her mouth, Yama had burnt to nothing long ago, the

remaining fistful or so of ashes lay near her feet. The young woman looked long at the dark interior of the human remains lying there. In front of her, with his body, Yama, once again, standing up now. There was no more animosity now, no more malice. He had made the requisite offering of his body for ascension to the world of sin from the world of man, the king of sin. At the moment of death, Dharmaputra's life became free of covering, she saw that. His coming together and life with God came to light. He was accorded the honour of being the father of sinners.

1996

Translated by V. Ramaswamy

¹ Yama Yami (brother sister) in the *Rig Veda*, and the *Avesta* too, he had not yet become the god of death, an ordinary man, and Yami clearly desired and lusted for Yama, and ...

Amal Joseph

Snow in Macedonia

There's a bling for hope. A blink in peace.
A kiss on the forehead. Pre-heated hands,

without asking, cup my cheeks. Driveway
with snow. Flood my doorknobs. In keys I

rush to latch on swifter. Some about forest
spirits of Macedonia. The wild snow sings.

Like an old friend or a perverse traveler's
diary with the dirt and all. I bring her in.

Offer a cup of tree tea. And a place by my fire.
Is that Bach? I do not know by the keys and

wonder. What I fix my radio on to. The clump
of pale white frolics. Sight. More of her friends

placed along the fire. To note. In a line. Good.
My shoulders ache. Blade like door hinges.

Offer ripe oranges too. Rusty, I wonder if Mercury
would seem appropriate. I ask to the empty areola

like puddle. Oh, I forget uno. Again. Too long I left
my love of snow. To watch me fireplace.

Saheli Khastagir

Tending Silences

I woke up and walked into a room of sounds.
An empty washing machine whirred,
the wind beat at my door,
someone knocked on my ceiling.
A lawn mower, a dog, an infant.
The loud sisters and the drug dealer.
A motorbike, the crows and my blood.

Pauses are squeezed between fingers and thumb.
They kick stillness like a soccer ball.
Should I cheer?
All my stirrings are wrung into a scowl.
He hands me 3 pairs of earplugs,
my brother buys me 50.

I was conceived with the might of a silent want,
built cell by cell under a single lamp
with patient hands inside walls where no one spoke.
Filled to the teeth with quiet
I am dropped in this room that vibrates with your voice.
I flinch every time your lips part.

So I water your pauses like secret plants.
and drug every molecule in these rooms into submission.
I will conceive my own children and books
(under the lamp of your absences).
Do you resent my roots?
Will you bear my fruits
and take them for a soccer match?

Fugue Forest

(for Agatha Christie)

When you disappeared into your winter fugue,
that night in 1926,
did you hear the whistle of a longing?
Did you dance to it?
Did you follow the whiff of freshly baked desire
Did you bite into it?
11 days you were gone,
no footprints, not a trace in the ground.
They sent men and aeroplanes after you,
more than a 1000 police and 15000 volunteers,
Did you wear a wig, a hat?
Did you speak with an accent? Did you limp, did you squint?

And afterwards, did you ever try searching for her,
or find her suddenly in the midst of a crowd,
under the shadow of a street-lamp, in the glint of a wine glass,
the interlude of a waltz?
Maybe you caught her staring at you while powdering your nose,
or saw her reflection on the tip of your lipstick?
Did you recognize her? *Will* you recognize her?

If I step into that quarry,
the one where they found your car,
will I also enter that forest of disappearance?
Will I find you there?
Maybe I'll find 10,000 of you,
all the different *Agathas* you could not be in this life.
Maybe I'll also multiply with you.
I can be the mother you lost that year,
you can be the daughter I will never have.

It's a wicked thing isn't it,
this inability to erase and edit,
the linearity of continuation.
Like a relay race where no one gets to run the first leg,
a Chinese whispers played across generations.
Is that why we write then?
To forget,
and to multiply?

Priyam Goswami Choudhury

Kathmandu

I am secretly a lonely child
I am secretly on the run
somewhere on Hallelujah Junction
rambling around a minor note
in sanctimonious patience
waiting
on the hint of an escape
pursing lips for a vaccine
in the beginning of this spring
all for a bus ticket to kathmandu
one cold night before gorakhpur
burns down just like they burnt

delhi, aligarh, jamia, vijay park, maujpur, chand bagh

I dreamt I was in Bongaigaon again
you were my other half, my soul mate
but you did not know
if you had to leave
to kathmandu or not
to a hotel at the end of a universe
or not
for there is not much to say

every morning at 4 am
summer is far far away
the pond is so deep
and who but you pours water
on my lapsing guilt?
who but you brings me tears
to mourn the kindness that shrinks?
at the very end of an apparition
I am counting only on other plans—
it is 20 degrees in Antarctica; it is spring.
We go marching to Kathmandu
to watch Everest melt away in debris
we go out in laughter
in bouts of mirthless glee.

Fever

1.

perhaps there is a logic to fevers
a symmetry
we are too innocent to know
it responds to chills on empty nights
you think it is love
another dirty word I did not want
to write about to you.
It is only the last of the summer
heat that refuses to pass.
What will you do with all that light?
 the mouth of my waiting
has now run utterly dry.

2.

my love is a history
of strange fevers
flaring up in the heat
no but I want to say
what will you do
 with all my love?
it only curdles in wordshed
rotting at the end of a season.

3.

all my dreams are heretic now,
realising several untold revolutions;
it is the dirty word in my tongue
trickling down from a supermarket trolley
where you stand fighting pesticides and plastic.
 O but what will you do with all that love—
it curls at the bottom of a sea
rending it deeper to no end.

I wake darkly.

Prashant Parvataneni

(re: shruthi menon)

MONTAGE: ONE

int. midnight:

mountains sleeping
ten thousand streams
running: nightmare

ext. morning:

no sign of earth here
only mist in her eyes
hibiscus in my ears

int. noon:

sex on mute, sun is out
nilgai enters, tiptoeing
steals our sheets(sic), exits

ext. evening:

sour tea, spoilt milk
sky is red, eyes upset
so, she starts singing

ext. night:

mountains turn, trees rebel
rocks surrender to streams
i sleep soundly in her skin

THE END

1.33:1, 35 MM, 16 FPS

When the machine coughed up light,
dotted with dust and bidi-smoke,
three sisters: Particle, Wave, and Prophecy
leapt out of a wheel of pictures

to touch, and turn the opaque
screen translucent – in an instant.
Phalke rubbed his eyes to see
The Arrival of a Train

into a small tent, six kilometres
away from Dadar – the passengers
alighted at La Ciotat, and walked
for a while in Bombay, before disappearing.

They took with them their patch
of French sky, the fluttering leaves too
were sucked into darkness, before
Phalke could measure the distance

between him and France: 37 steps.
Shell shocked squatters, prayed in relief
that the train didn't run them over.
In that silence, Phalke made a few notes:

One, everything must move, stillness is dead.
Two, gods should reject their Ravi Verma
poses, and start running like trains
to collapse all distance in Faith.

Pooja Rathnakumar Sengottuvel

Neighbours and their Stories

Everything in that house was going well. The baby slept for ten hours straight at night, after it was done feeding off its mother's breast. The couple had excellent sex after the baby slept. After they had excellent sex, they slept excellent, for eight hours straight. After they slept excellent, they woke up, liberated, because they found meaning in the work they did. The family had just moved into that house. The new house, they called it. Could things get any better? There was so much money in the bank; so much food in the fridge; so much more make-up in the mother's dresser. The baby's sister, eight-years-old, was in perfect health. They hadn't taken her to a doctor in the last two years, except once, when she was down with the flu. This was brilliant, considering how the parents this couple knew ran after hospitals and doctors to get their children to even sleep at night without wheezing or crying. Yes, they were a perfect family. The baby hardly cried. The little girl did not throw any tantrums at all. She was sweet as a dove. Hard to believe, isn't it? To top it all off, the couple was in perfect matrimonial harmony. They hadn't fought in months. Even the little arguments they had were not arguments, but well-meaning, synchronous negotiations, negotiations that fell in place at the right time, meant for the higher good of the family. The neighbours simply could not get enough of this family. They wanted to visit all the time. There was something about this house this family lived in, something about its vibration, they all wanted to scrounge after. Let's say someone was in a dire situation. They were perhaps battling a chronic illness; had been depressed for weeks; or just suffered a break-up without even the closure of make-up sex; or gone broke. They just had to enter this house, and something in it made them forget all their troubles. This house is not a temple, or a church, or a synagogue. It is just a house. A plain, simple house. But it did something to you. You became something else when you were here.

People wondered. How was this possible?

I think it's the baby, really, it's the baby. It sleeps like a dove. That's why I like going there. It really is beautiful. It doesn't cry at all. Who wants to be around a baby that cries all day? Have you seen its face? Such an angel!

No, it's the mother. It's her prayer routine. There's something about that woman, particularly when she prays. She does it with all her heart. And she chants so much. No wonder you feel positive when you get in there.

I love that girl, she's eight, but her perception of the world is far beyond her age. What maturity, what understanding, have you seen the way she talks to the guests? Her mother does not have to do anything at all. She's a miracle child!

No, you're all wrong. It's the husband. Have you seen his smile? If only something happened to the wife, I would ask him out!

Things go wrong, people talk. Here, everything was going right. People talked more. They could not be blamed. They were all given to believe that a perfect house or a perfect family or a perfect child did not exist. What was a world without problems, a family without dysfunction, a baby without poop all over the house? There was nothing wrong with this family. But the neighbours would not buy into this truth. Neighbour A was trying to conceive. She had had no luck. This couple already had two children. Neighbour B's husband was having an affair. He was with the

new woman at least three nights a week. Neighbour B could do nothing about it. She was financially dependent on him. Look at the husband in this family, though! He came back home straight after work; and when the door opened, he hugged his wife tight every single evening, as this particular neighbour watched from her window every evening, without fail. Neighbour C was in a different kind of soup. What was it about this family? Really? Why the hell were they so happy? It wasn't that A, B, and C were one hundred percent jealous. They were humans after all. They held in their subconscious a tinge of compassion; a tinge of consideration for the possibility that someone else's life could very well be better than theirs, albeit phenomenal. They felt slightly happy for the family that moved into the new house. How could they not, they were neighbours after all. And yet, they could not understand what fortune did for this family that fortune did not want to do for their own.

Hence, when the mother-in-law paid a visit to the house, two weeks later, A, B, and C were thrilled. They would get their closure. Something was going to happen now.

The mother-in-law was the nicest woman in the world, God damn it! She invited them all to dinner; cooked the best food in the world; took care of the baby and the little girl; made sure that the couple had enough time for themselves. To top it off, she took the baby into her own room, and insisted the daughter-in-law pump all her milk in advance so she and her son didn't have to be disturbed at night.

No, mother, the baby does not wake up at night, the daughter-in-law insisted.

Perfect, said the mother-in-law.

To prepare for emergencies, the mother-in-law insisted the baby sleep with her. She was obsessed. She would not sleep till the couple had another baby. Every woman wants a mother-in-law like this. It is not easy to make a baby when you have another one in the room. But the daughter-in-law was unhappy. She was tired of making babies; and she wanted her second child in the same room with her when she went to sleep, sex-going-out-the-window notwithstanding.

Why is the baby not sleeping with the parents? What's wrong? What is this old woman up to? Is she trying to break the marriage?

Do you notice the silence in the room when this woman starts talking, the silence around the baby's mother? They both were so happy till this bitch entered the house. The mother does not smile anymore. She seems offended all the time. And I don't hear any moans outside the bedroom downstairs when I pass the house after I'm done shopping for groceries. Serious in-law trouble, I say. Wicked woman.

You know what? I think the husband is taking therapy. I saw him drive his car into Park Street yesterday morning.

*How do you know he's taking therapy in Park Street? He was probably shopping for groceries, you dumb s***!*

*Stupid b****, you can't buy groceries in Park Street. And what business would he have in Park Street other than to visit that famous therapist? We're the only people the family knows from Park Street.*

So he's taking therapy then?

The mother-in-law, on the other hand, sensed something insistent about these women from Park Street: something that needed to be addressed sooner than later. They were so nice to her grandchildren, doting on both the baby and the little girl. But she knew something was wrong. These women were not like the people she'd known back home, just a three-hour ride from her son's new house. Her neighbours back home: 1, 2, and 3, were sweet. Although they were very kind to her, there was an honesty about them that thrilled the mother-in-law. They spoke the truth when it had to be raked up. This honesty put her to sleep every night knowing she wasn't around people who lied.

1, 2, and 3 did not hoist their stories upon her. This was in sharp contradiction to what her son's neighbours did. A, B, and C complained all the time, even about the slightest trivialities. A stayed in her son's house one entire evening complaining to her D-I-L incessantly about a cold she had caught. B groaned all the time that the tap water was bad to drink from. C, that there was a teeny yellow stain on her apron that she couldn't get rid of.

1, 2, and 3, on the other hand, kept their stories to themselves. 1 had just had a surgery on her hand. She could barely cook for herself. For a woman given to cooking for herself all the time, this should have been hard. But she did not for once complain. She only spoke about how good the weather was and how much rain they had had all year. 2, seventy-years-old, was living all by herself after her husband died. The mother-in-law did not even remember her crying after the funeral. Neither did 2's eyes moisten up out of nowhere when memory took its course as they met at the park to talk about their grandchildren. 3's daughter had just had a miscarriage, after the fifth try. But 3 did not complain either.

The mother-in-law had known these women for twenty-five years. When she first set sight on them, she was young. So were they. She had just moved to the new city, terrified of the new life, terrified of her husband who drank all night. Her interiority altered every day. She underwent emotions she could not recognise. Her body changed in ways she could not understand. Either it was those disturbing panic attacks; or that bout of diarrhoea that would not stop no matter how many books she read, looking for a cure.

But her neighbours, women she was not related to even by blood: they put her together. They spoke so much about positive thinking, and positive living. They were all part of a spiritual group that met every alternate day in the mornings, they all had a "Guru". One day, when the mother-in-law was pregnant with the son, her only son, who happens to be the blissful, bliss-inducing husband in this story, she had a panic attack again. You will never know how bad a panic attack can be unless you actually experience it for yourself. She felt something tighten up around her abdomen, and it felt like this same hideous thing; this same hideous thing that caused her so much pain, so much shame, was coursing up all the way up her spine, was spreading all the way up her back, up to her head. And then, she threw up. Why do I have to live, with all this happening around me, and to me, she thought. But it is only in those moments when we want to end everything that circumstance starts to shift. That night, in the rain, for the first time, she opened up about her pain, to her three neighbours, the most wonderful women she knew, women who were nicer to her than her own

mother. Even though their honesty pricked her, they were made of a compassion that easily balanced their blunt propensity for truth. But it was on the day that it rained that they really came to know her, and she, them.

Come, we'll take you to the guru. He will change everything.

Will anything change at all? I want to die. This pain is too much to bear.

We are all in pain for a reason, take heart, be strong.

What will happen to my baby? I'm sick all day.

Wait till you see him. Something will change. Trust us.

The mother-in-law did not believe in epiphanies. She did not think she could call on such experiences. She believed only other-worldly people like 1, 2, and 3; people who were made of that tough strength; people who were innately enamoured to handle life's challenges: only such people could receive the blessing of the guru.

It was not her time, just not her time.

And then, on one particular morning when everything had to change; when the sky had to look its bluest best; when the panic attacks had to cease and there was nothing going up her spine again; when life turned over in a luminous way whose workings she could just not fathom: she met the guru. How exactly this changed her life, she did not know. Whatever happened there, happened, for a reason, and happened for the good.

Nevertheless, it was not the guru to whom the mother-in-law was grateful as she changed her grandchild's diaper that night, putting her ears on the wall occasionally to watch out for moans from the other room, (yes, this couple was really loud when they were at it, much to the mother-in-law's pleasure). It was her neighbours, her wonderful, ebullient neighbours she was grateful for.

And look at A, B, and C! Not that the mother-in-law was not sensitive to their challenges. Pain was not something that was new to her. She knew how much pain fragmented people every moment, making them one different self after the other, eating into their happiness like termite. But who wanted to watch other people wash their dirty laundry?

But the daughter-in-law, herself stupid as well, or so it seemed to her husband's mother, loved these women. She was prey to their naiveté, their lack of spiritual understanding, their lack of understanding of the fact that no matter how much you survived, there was always a bright spot on the deck. But what nettled the mother-in-law more, was the energy around these women. She had taken energy-cleansing classes and overdosed herself with pranayama for twenty-five years as 1, 2, and 3 gave her company. She knew it when someone's energy did not attune itself to the Divine will; when there was something negative caked up around a person's aura.

Forget their complaining. Not everybody could be as strong as her own neighbours. But A, B, and C had a sense of dire longing on their faces when they visited. There was a hopeless sense of loss;

not even the slightest possible trace of optimism. When they played with the baby, she instantly wanted to wring her granddaughter out of their hands. The way these women looked at the baby and asked the daughter-in-law, oh, look at that cute diamond pendant, how much did you pay for it, (and how much worse it was when the daughter-in-law smiled one of her sweet dove smiles and replied with so much innocence, quoting exactly the price the old woman had paid for the chain that adorned the baby's neck), and the way their faces fell when they got their answer.

That old bitch, she's a snob. Did you see the way she grunted when I asked her if I could hold the baby?

Her daughter-in-law, she's so dumb. She doesn't even know what her mother-in-law is made of. Soon, the old woman is going to throw her out if she doesn't manage to conceive another child, and get her son married to someone else.

That diamond pendant on the child's neck, heights of extravagance!

Well, why do we care? It's none of our business what other people are doing.

Of course, we speak about them only out of concern, what could we possibly hold against that family? They treat us to such excellent dinners.

Talking about dinner, the soup was cold today. I wanted to tell her right-away, but you know, we've always been nice to them, who wants the truth splashed straight on their faces?

The Guru was a man of presence. He undid you when you were around him, to the very core of your aliveness. You were not yourself till you met him. You were not yourself after you met him, either. Life has a way of strangulating you straight in the gut, slicing with its own dreary knife every ounce of your soul. Then you see the Guru. He changes everything. That's what they told you. He would change everything. You would not be the same anymore. You would not be the same battered woman anymore. The woman who got kicked in the stomach till she had a miscarriage. The woman with scars on parts of her body she could not reveal to the world. The woman who stood for hours in the rain, waiting outside. Because she would not be let in. Because the house she claimed to be living in was not her house but someone else's. Someone who would not care if she died, melting away, with the moist chillness of the rain.

He threw hot coffee on your face. He slapped you many, many times when you burnt his business suit, running helter-skelter into the next room to care for your newborn, your newborn who was crying so much because you were not around, because you were in a different room caring for his father's clothes. He did not introduce you to his friends' wives at the parties he threw, did not care to acknowledge you (and neither did they care to acknowledge you, you were apparently not worth their acknowledgment) as you walked around the tables serving food you had so meticulously prepared, putting every atom of the blood in your body into, and a little bit of your sweat too. But it all changed when you stood in the rain that night, your clothes so wet till the contours of your body were visible to that man who bicycled down the street, hooting and whistling into the air, stopping to look at you, to look at some part of you, as the phosphorescence of the light bulb over the porch lit up your bodily curvature.

This is what I was talking about, about life strangulating you in the gut, do you remember that feeling? Or has the Guru erased that memory from you, erasing as he does every pain, smouldering it in the hearth of his light? Yes, you stood there that night. You cried. You'd never cried like this before, even when the miscarriage happened. You were only terrified, you were only incapacitated to your very core, but there were no tears. You wondered if you were abnormal not to be able to cry when the life inside you had died out like smoke under the wind. But you had already seen enough pain to take in anymore pain that could come out as a wayward tear. And yet, you hadn't found your balance, till you stood under the rain that day. No, not till you stood under the rain, not at that exact moment. The moment was when you met the Guru.

Yes, you stood under the rain. You cried. The tears flowed, the flowed all the way down your nightgown, onto the mud of the garden you were standing in. There were rosebushes all around you, the ones you had so painstakingly tended to, just as you tended to your child, your child who was crying now, bawling in agony from his nursery, waiting for you to come up and feed him some milk. But you could not go in. The doors were locked for you. You could only exit, not enter.

You bladder filled up. You began to leak. But you had nowhere to go. So you stood there, waiting for something to happen.

Not all husbands can be like this, you thought.

That face revealed itself, on the other side of the wall that separated your house from hers. You had seen her many times while tending to your pomegranate shrubs, spraying the water on them, looking intently at the mud that was consummating with the water you were spraying on it, while also keeping a short eye on the face that appeared above the wall. What was she doing in her garden, you wondered. Was she tending to the same shrubs you were tending to?

Was she giving life to the same thing you were giving life to in your stomach, which was growing bigger and bigger every month, and sadly, you had nobody who cared to ask about this beautiful, unexplainable process?

Did she have a nice husband, you wondered.

That face revealed itself again.

“What are you doing here, getting wet in the rain? I was dusting my window, and I saw you standing here, in the rain. Why is your baby crying so loud? Why don't you go back and give it some milk?” she asked.

You were only glad she asked. On occasion, someone or the other has to ask you something. Otherwise you cannot find the answer you have never dared to ask yourself, unless you are the kind to seek answers on your own, which you weren't, till you got wet in the rain that day, and till that face revealed itself through the rain.

Well, not till the face revealed itself, but till you met the Guru the next morning. The face was only the trigger. The Guru was the wound that healed.

You went over, touching the wall that separated you from this woman. It was cold, made of cement that was coarse to the touch.

“Can I come into your house, only for today?” you asked.

“You don’t even have to ask, my dear...”

You slept all night in that house. The life came back to you, but slowly. It wasn’t life but life with pain. Like toast with butter, milk with syrup. But yes, the life came back, and that was a good thing.

You woke up, feeling like a stranger. But fear gnawed at you, your baby was not crying anymore from the house next door. Had it forgotten all about you? Had it lost all sense of hunger? Or, worse still, had it died? Or, worst, had he killed it, too, just like he had killed the life out of you, the life that eventually came back because the Guru brought it back to you, slowly, but with certainty, with promise?

When you walked out of that new house to peep into your own garden, there were two more. They were talking about you, with a frantic energy in the air around them. When you walked closer, they kept quiet. They told you what to do.

Go back sister, please go back. It is your house after all.

What could he possibly do to you? We are here, we will take care.

Come with me, I will take you there. Neighbour 1 said. And she led you into your own house. You stopped at the gate. *Go in. Do not fear.* And then you stopped at the door again. *It isn’t locked. Let us go in.* She went in. You followed.

The abominable happened.

He lay flat on the floor, blood pooling up around his stomach, a glass of beer lying broken near his side. You ran, but upstairs.

You did not run with the same fervour even when you were being hit, you only stood there, taking it all in. What made you run now? Perhaps it was the Guru, perhaps he sensed something about you had to change.

The baby smiled at you.

They took you to the Guru.

Everything changed.

Then you would, all four of you, the three women who were your neighbours, and yourself, you would all become the relentless, unshakeable force of a sisterhood of your own. They were all in this for you, together. You were all in this, together.

The Guru followed. Yes, everything changed.

Isn't this all you wanted?

Isn't this all you wanted? See, you have it now.

Isn't this all you wanted? See, you have it now. The Guru has shown the way.

Yes, you said. The Guru has shown the way.

You think you know me. But I know you better. Do I know you well enough, you wonder? But there is no space for doubt here, doubt thrills, but kills. I tell you not to worry about these things. There is a huge, effervescent part of me that is taking care of everything for you. I'm always watching. Always. I watch when you walk down the sidewalk. Sniffing in the cold. Getting your groceries. Worrying about the winter and how much it stifles your core; how much sickness has overtaken your life. I watch as you cook food in the mornings. I read your mind.

Will my son be okay? How long is he going to be depressed? Is it me? Has he inherited it from me? His wife is so pliable. He has two beautiful children. But what makes him resentful? Why does he think all the time of a father who did not care to stay alive? Guru, please do something.

I watch every ounce of you, each thing you do. I know you in and out. Where would you have possibly gone, without a husband, with a baby in your arms, crying all night? What could possibly have rubbed balm on the bruises of your heart? Believe me, I have been watching you even before you set eyes on me. I watched your husband hit you. I watched him stamp his foot on your back, pushing you hard into that marble flooring, whose damp coldness spread all the way across your face, except the space above your upper lip, which your nose covered up completely, squelched in like tar on the road outside. I watched you cry all night. I watched you as you said your prayers, crying your lungs out, asking, who is going to save me from all this? You know, I find it funny. Sometimes you mortals think there is no answer to your questions. No escape from your pain, that pain is an endless shaft that circumscribes your life. Because you are so attuned to it, even living without it would be painful.

Yes, you thought there was no escape. Your conscious mind knew there was no escape. Of course, where could you possibly have seen scope for escape? You were in the middle of that tunnel, although you were walking toward the light. That's the problem with humans who try. They are in the middle, so they think they're going to be in darkness forever. But take a step forward, and you see the light. Sometimes you take many steps forward. Till you see the light. Sometimes many miles even. Sometimes you walk for years. But yes, when your husband hit you one last time, when you stood outside your house in the rain, thinking all was going to end, that is when everything was going to begin. You were a step away from the light. And yet, because you were still in the darkness, you thought it wasn't going to end. How wrong you mortals can be! The next day, they brought you to me. You stopped taking those antidepressants. You felt bliss anchor your being.

But the old patterns returned. However, they did not touch your core, because you had healed already. When you come to me, I heal you for good. But yes, you have your own karma to shoulder. The pain came back, but a little, thanks to me. I'm the only one here with the unfettered core, you all have broken cores. Of course, your three neighbours have it stronger than you, karma did not defy them as badly as it defied you. But like I always say, the sooner you clear the karma, the better. The more pain undoes you, the sooner you heal. The sooner you heal, the lesser the pain.

Yes, you have many things on your mind, even now, even after all these years, even after all those sessions of healing that I put you through. I understand. It is all part of your internal resistance; of nature's unfolding; of karmic unfolding. I understand. But you do not. You are caught up in a whirlwind of confusion, of befuddlement. Why me, you think, why us, you think, why him, you think. Only people who have conquered the mind understand how it works, the others are always teetering on the boundaries, trying to slip in, slip out, trying to make sense of this gigantic werewolf that changes form every single second, tightening your throat till you choke on your food, every single day. People ask you, you are with the Guru, what makes you so anxious?

Well, I know how anxious you used to be. I so remember when you first came to me, with your three friends. Very strong women, they put those discordant, painful parts of you together. And I solidified those cracks in your being, in the puzzle pieces of your being. You walked in that day, shuddering. Your husband had killed himself. You held that little boy in your arms, and you put him before my feet, just as your neighbours instructed you to. And then I touched his forehead. He stopped crying. And then you touched my foot. You stopped crying. And then I saw your mind, for what it was. It was bruised all over, bleeding everywhere. There was so much blood. Sometimes I wonder how humans manage to be alive with so much pain. But yes, death is not the answer. It makes things worse, that is why I always tell you not to choose that path, at least for yourself. And because you did not choose death, you survived.

Your son will be fine. Don't you worry.

I think he is getting better, Guruji.

Good.

Now what is on your mind?

The neighbours. My son's neighbours.

You do not know their stories. That is why they worry you. Look into their stories now. Your story always seems the biggest, the most complicated, but when you see through empathy, you realize every story is as big as it gets. Even the smallest ones. Trust me.

We do not want to judge. But we can't help it. That's who we are.

We do not want to gossip either. That's who we are, again.

How can I not, when I want a baby so badly, and your daughter-in-law already has two?

You do not know how much it hurts. When you want a baby of your own. And you cannot have one. My husband and I tired. Over and over. But no baby. Your son has two children. When I see them, my heart melts. Yet, I feel jealous. It's not like I can help it. It's human tendency. To compare your shortcomings to the strengths of others. I know you don't like the way I stare at the baby. Remember, I'm a broken woman. That's all I'm capable of.

How can I not, when my husband sleeps with another woman, and your son sleeps only with his wife?

You do not know how much it hurts. When your husband sleeps with another woman. When you suddenly start spending the night alone. After ten years of being together. But look at your son and daughter-in-law. They moan all the time. Yes, I can hear them. When I do, a wrench goes down my windpipe. I know you do not like the way I stare. At your son and daughter-in-law. At your son, especially. That's all I'm capable of. I'm a broken woman, too.

How can I not, when my husband is already broke, and there is so much food in your son's fridge? How can I not, when your son is so nice to you? When my own son has thrown me out the window? When the only woman in his life is that girl? That girl who appeared out of nowhere, and sliced him away from me?

You do not know how much it hurts. When money goes terribly short. When the doors to your abundance close themselves before your eyes. When your toddler wants all the expensive toys. I know you do not like the way I stare. At that diamond necklace on the baby's neck. But that's all I'm capable of, broken woman.

Broken women.

All of us.

All three of us.

“But my neighbours back home are not broken even though they are broken, Guruji”, the mother-in-law said.

“Not all people are made of the same mud,” replied the Guru.

The mother-in-law's heart opened out a little. She realized their pain was larger than hers.

She let go.

They stopped staring. They stopped talking.

They stopped coming. He stopped going.

“Your daughter-in-law is pregnant again. Will that be enough?”

“Yes, Guru. But only for now.”

New York is another story
altogether
the long flight
to the big apple takes two
whole days for my friend to find me;
too young!
he'd exclaim, later (*in print*)
amputated for a manuscript!

and in Kolkata, I am on your roof,
insolvent
 upon your knee,
time, it seems, was not on our side,
but somehow,
(and this is the problem, see?)
you was you and
I was just
me.

Pipe Dreams

Have you ever
willed something into existence?

In a desert city
where my father let his youth wilt away,

in the month of Ramadan,
hottest of summers, I snuck you

into the prayers of believers,
made you up, just like that, just

like that *sheikh* who knelt on a carpet
to anoint his fingers in oil,

imagined
an empire of glass where even grass

refused
he wholesaled my endless uncles

adam's endless descendants with
coconuts in their throats;

evicted from the sea

with palmfuls of the ocean
tucked inside passports

who emptied it all upon arrival
and cast their nets into

a gulf, waiting
for decades, for fish

to send back home to sons who found the silt
of endless skyscrapers reflected
in an oil spill

Sophia Naz

Left & Right

On the 26th of March 1971 the right hand entered the operation theater. The left hand removed a mouthful of fish bones from inside an upper lip before the point of contention became too big to swallow. The right hand was still holding on to an ice cream cone in the middle of a sandstorm. A bayoneted sunlight leaked from a left leaning belly in thin rivulets down to a delta of toes. This was the beginning of the sea. The left hand picked up the faded yet still colorful candy wrappers into a scrapbook made out of repurposed cardboard. The right tugged at Ayah to pluck a plumeria blossom from the treetop even though the earth was littered with sweet smelling stars. The left hand colored six empty balloons with crayons on birthday invitations. The right hand stubbed out a cigarette butt in an ashtray of skin without missing a beat. The left hand thumbed her nose at the menace. Then it went missing. The right hand raised itself to an unmistakable height and ordered sixty six million people to make paper maché boats out of their bodies so it could float them downriver until the unsolvable became soluble. Next to the water buffaloes, in the paddy fields, in the hostel, in their homes, on the streets, at midnight. Left and left and left and left to rot. There was nothing right about it.

Nakhoda

(Sea Captain)

1 Fountain Pen

The fountain pen was like him, an extrovert, prone to spilling seas above a sinking breast pocket, heart grown a blue rose. A thorn pitched in the belly of a Grundig scratched an itch on a mane of dense concentric rings glossy as black oiled hair. In his hands the thorn would step delicately in, a circular sea voyage began again.

The gait of a god; love convulsed as fish bereft of water; an invitation to the beloved to take up residence underneath one's eyelids. When they had shed their pollen the talismans were neatly stored standing up, sleeve in sleeve.

Everything began with water, eyes, love, life, death, all (s)waddled in *jal, sagar, samandar, siyahi*; even the meter of the ghazal, *beher*, emanated from *behr*, sea.

After he was let go, unmoored. A drowning. With your little girl's hand you try to fashion a boat out of scrap paper, chipped teacups, reed placemats, even your own shriveling hands. Nothing floats.

2 Ribbon

No matter what time of the day you touched Remington's body, it was a cold olive green, yes quite unequivocally the machine that made words was male and the ribbon that fed it, female.

Was ribbon a derivative of rib, as taken from one frail body and made to order? Rib-in, softening the blows of metal punching the defenceless sheet. Years later, after he died there were fifteen metal trunks of paper to go through. Some fifty years of his writing life. Your hands trembled. Jonah, standing at the mouth of the whale.

3 Paper

Hold them up to the light and they quiver, as if a shaman was breathing on them. The type-written pages with their visceral analog surface, whispers of whiskers where the metal left just a faint after image of itself. The ones that actually flew out of your hands like butterflies were his favorites. Aerograms of onion skin, the lightest paper ever invented, pale skies where the birds of his hand lay nestled, shriveled blue roses.

Vivekanand Selvaraj

Knock, and it shall be opened unto you

(Speculating on J P Chandrababu's conversation with the Judge after he was produced in court for attempting suicide by drinking copper sulphate — the eccentric Tamil Movie Star supposedly enacted a Shakespearan soliloquy)

A Courtroom, Madras- 1952

Before

he yodeled open an obscure song unannounced
drove his Fiat straight up to his bed in the first floor
called the greatest Tamil tinsel Star a Mighty Graceless Rapsallion
treated Gamel Nasser's favourite actor to a spur of the moment improv — a stinging slap
to aid the scene's mood —

leapt onto the lap of the Republic's President to appreciate that *aficionado*

Before he became Chandrababu- *the maadi vetu ezhai'*

Panimayadasan Rodriguez was standing in the cage performing
for the judge production manager as witness

.....*who would fardels bear,*
To grunt and sweat under a weary life
when he could CuSO₄ his bare bodkin make
A liquid blue as the the ocean as the sky
receiving the water the 98 % of his body
all the tears shed in hunger in insult
in park benches in studio canteens
in Marina's sands where
they consummate

But thine mortal coils, not shuffled off yet
under this Court's ink lines, also blue, hence your fortunes lie
says the judge

Perhaps I should have shot myself
alas! I do not own a gun
or jumped into the river or the sea
but Water does not kill its son
Tell me which actor does not fancy a final act
flirt with the uncertainty
the forever the ever before
the ever after
one last time
who passes that chance
to make his death
a spectacle

Prawn Fry: Interrogating an absent plate

(*To Mrs. S*)

Mom can't stand seafood
prawns especially, perhaps
it reminds her of the uncles
who died at sea long before
she was born, perhaps not,
perhaps I am just being
apophatic, finding her
a second world war excuse

she still makes a decent mutton
biryani for all her fuzziness, sez Dad
him being a wishy washy philosopher
graduating through Vivekananda (*naming his son
after him while still waiting for the next bus*)
Osho and Krishnamurti before finally
reluctantly settling on Ee Ve Ra strongly
hinting that her vegetarianism is not ritual
but something else

Brother has no opinions
even when skeletons from the subconscious
push up,
his attempts at raising a pet
dog thwarted by a hard nosed
bowl of vegetarian diet
Mom pushed into the motor room
that was also its kennel
(the dog ran away, stealing
the neighbor's chickens)

When I returned to non-vegetarianism
of paternal variety—recalling
Grandma's packing of the salted boar
into tight Eversilver tiffins for onward
districtwide transmission—after 14 years
spent in oedipal vegetarian exile
I had grown fond of frying prawns
for Wifey who can't live without them
every weekend signs of withdrawal
manifesting as she mouths fantasies
that go *erac, vanjiram, maththi, nethili*

in the process eliciting from the taste buds
of Dad, a rare desire to not mind
Mom's silent protestations
—separating plates veg & non-veg wise
promoting the use of the other side
of chopping board—
and sleep in the sofa in the living room
drawing prawn vapor in, with every gust
peeling off years of sea-food dry life
like a lollipop that wouldn't
grow smaller with time

while Mom returns to bed
exhaust fans running full steam
door tightly shut
failing to drive out the stench
of the oil from kitchen
from her mind from her nightmares
her nausea of sea food almost nostalgic
yet still unresolved

Amrita Singh

The Obituary Reader

Every weekend morning she would wake up before anyone else in the house, race to the main gate to grab the newspaper, and open it to the obituaries page. Once the adults were up they would jostle for the sole paper that the house subscribed to and her turn wouldn't come till the evening. It was not that she did not read the rest of the newspaper; she would spend at least an hour combing through the range of stories and information it carried. The obituaries, however, captivated her, as she looked through the pictures and descriptions. Gaunt faces, happy faces, photographs of much younger selves who would now be unrecognizable. She would meticulously calculate the age of the dead by the dates given, and would decide whether to grieve the death of a young son, or feel some solace for that of an old grandparent. She also carefully read the names of the mourners trying to identify any familiar ones. She was only eleven so wouldn't know as many people, but sometimes the names would ring familiar, like the ones she heard at home. Sikh names would particularly attract her; there was always an Amarjeet or Daljit or Devinder and she would halt on the memory of the Amarjeets, Daljits and Devinders she knew. She imagined what it would be like to read their names in the column with the familiar faces staring blankly at her. New words sprung at her – chautha, uthaoni, rasam pagri. She didn't bother to find out what they meant, just that they were fascinating, magical words that spoke of another realm, one that didn't have school and homework in it.

She would not linger on the page if others were around; then she would just skim the column and move on. She would read about murders and accidents and relish every detail the writer had to offer. Sometimes she would get upset at the lack of description of, say, the mangled remains of a driver in an accident, and wished there were more pictures of victims. The stories on offer were quite often very typical – wives being killed for dowry or something else, old people being killed to rob the house, rash drivers suffering for their arrogance and lack of restraint and so on. Occasionally, a killer would be dramatic and creative – for instance that man who killed his wife in haste, cut her up and put her to stew in a tandoor. Or the one who killed an entire royal family in a matter of just a few minutes. Then her imagination would spike and she would lay awake for hours in bed picturing how the incident would have unfolded. She would add her own imaginative bits whenever details got blurry or didn't fit. Sometimes she would wake up on a Sunday to historical slaughter – like that of the Buddha in Bamiyan. She didn't really know who the Taliban were or what they wanted; however, she couldn't help tearing up for a piece of history she would never even have the option of seeing. She would have dreams of trekking up to the top of the statue and rappelling down, taking pictures...

As far back as she could remember, she had always opened the newspaper to the obituary section first and then went backwards from local city news to front-page necessities. Every Friday she would look at the programme listings for the weekend and movie show timings. Occasionally, she would move to the sports section and then make her way to the front. She would snatch the paper out of her grandmother's hand, who would be peering at it with her thick rimmed glasses, the page held almost up to her nose. She never dared to ask of course, but often wondered if her grandfather

had ever had his picture in this column. Which picture of his would they have chosen? She really liked the one in his beloved garden holding the new-born version of her. How calmly he looked at the camera in that one, relaxed on a chair holding his new grandchild. That's how she remembered him – even in the living memories that she had of him, she could picture his face only on the basis of the photographs she had of him. She wondered at the fate of the obituary people, remembered through that little box on a big page, only to be thrown out the next day. Or did they lie forgotten in the library of newspapers? What happened to those who were not fortunate enough to be put into these columns?

This worried her greatly and she wanted to do something to ensure she'd have a respectable position in her favourite column. She knew she couldn't trust anyone to get her obituary right and therefore decided to write it herself. This was not going to be an easy task. For weeks she combed the newspaper looking for the right template. There would be a picture of course; her latest passport photo would do: not frivolous, not serious but her face recognisably visible. The next choice involved size – half-a-page was too much, and best reserved for celebrities and politicians. Among the smaller sizes, she had to take out a scale to measure a box that felt suitable. The symmetry in a 4x4 square looked the most appropriate and belied a vertical or horizontal choice. The picture would go on the left with her name and years of existence below it. To the right of the picture would be a quote from a book she had recently read – “I keep turning over new leaves, and spoiling them, as I used to spoil my copybooks; and I make so many beginnings there never will be an end.” Below that would be the name and address of the local gurudwara with timings for the ardaas, and then “In Grief” and the name of her parents. When it was ready, she found a spot on the obituary page of the Sunday newspaper and carefully pinned it there. It looked perfect. It filled her with such excitement that she couldn't wait for it to be published soon.

The occasion would have to be orchestrated, of course. Forced to go to bed at 9pm on school nights while the house watched TV, she'd activate the reel in her head and play the starring role in deadly scenarios – a slit of a wrist here, a pop of a pill there, a quick jump off the roof. Add a lover, a relative, best friend. A jilted romance setting, an abusive relationship, an assault, some jealousy – there was no dearth of characters and milieus. When something seemed unsatisfactory, she would promptly alter the plot and change the ending. Death was so easy, so fearless; here today, gone tomorrow. Her grandmother's mourning and praying, mourning and praying that went on through the night became the background score to all the action. During boring classes at school, she would scribble the front-page reports on the nightly deaths in the back of her notebooks. Usually she would burn the pages quietly in the backyard during afternoon siesta. Night after night she recovered scenarios, reopened the narratives, even those she had burnt away, till she could shortlist a few. When the moment came, she'd pick the one that felt right then.

In the meantime, she devised a plan to ensure her obituary would be available and waiting for her parents when the time came to put it in. She placed the 4x4 cut out into a 5x4 envelope and put her parents' name on it with the home address neatly scribed. She rummaged through her father's stationery drawer and found stamps and an old postcard. She conducted a dry run with the postcard and found that the turnaround time for mail was two days within the same pincode. She'd give it three just to be safe. She had the envelope stamped and ready, and carried it in her school bag everyday. However, taking the envelope to the post office turned out to be more of a task because

Ma always picked her up from the bus stop and never let her go to the market by herself. Then, on the thirteenth day after her twelfth birthday, as the school bus pulled in to her regular drop-spot she saw their domestic help waiting to fetch her. She withdrew the letter from the bag and posted it. As soon as the house had settled into its languid afternoon nap that day, she snuck up to the roof and flew off. Her calculations were correct – the envelope indeed found itself in the mailbox three days later, and the little cutout made it to the newspaper two days after that.

Kathryn Hummel

Stargazing

Happy to have orbited. To have
these many phases tucked
under my celestial girdle. Aged stars
lend some light to my eyes.

The cusp can split us in untold
ways, or so nonsense says. Generations
of planets are misplaced at twilight.

All mortal tragedy can be counted
between setting and rising. All wokeness.
The wholeness passed will come again

even between unrecognised apsides,
if patterns stand for anything. There's
pleasure to be had in ambiguity,

in stretching out the cynical membrane
of the joke. I have also marvelled
at first thoughts, turning each globe

slowly against the source of light.
Gloated over discovery, disregarding
its icy hair and tail. Accorded each
idea a unique frame, a pin in my own

curated system. Now at the cusp,
neither in one space nor another.
Not yet where empathy occludes
foolishness or where love

doesn't discomfit. Glad of the astral
experience. For the release from any
quivered god, from studied indiscretion.

Happy at this distance.
For the vantage point. For having
witnessed those illuminants
felt and spoken of before.

They unfurl again, they sublimate.
Only occasionally visible
to the naked, disbelieving eye.

Pitambar Naik

Paranoia

Here goes the root of your being crazy
about the pedicure of the ancient Ur
your stunt for *momo* is better
than the taste of a casino nearby.

Anyhow the first prize in
the French Beauty Competition in 2010
went undisputedly
to Ms Paulina Cardinova, not truly.

You're now accumulating the shards
of the shattered fossils
to duplicate the Mona Lisa
your isolated nemesis are two beads,
three pearls, four oysters of brocades
you search for a lost locket around
the absent past of the Marina Beach
in your Volkswagen's dickey
you stash the mortgaged gullibility.

Hiding an ambiguity in your bosom
you go hitting the last *déjà vu*
at the ridge of a frond
of *Jehovah Jireh's* will
and across the agreement table
mending the smell of celibacy.

That's a piece of humour
in the moon's silence;
the purple martini drips down the
Lord's Table in Philadelphia Church
it's when your first love letter is on
display as a life-size image of high
resolution. The recent pap talk is
chasing an insomniac forest.

The shadow of your penchant persona
plays hide-and-seek to take note
of an unsung serenade with goodwill
through the window of the medieval era
but a white paranoia under a
petticoat warmly swims with
poignant and evergreen cormorants.

Manya Mishra

Theories about the Universe

they say the universe was one
before the rippling theories of
Hawking, before the big bang
before the moon and the sun.

that makes us elemental formats
of a widely patterned galaxy.
we're all parts of many many
planets, earths, satellites.

perhaps, I am made from the
same elements the oceans are
because of how much I feel
underwater even when I'm out
breathing just fine

and if i'm in a room with other
such ocean bearers, we'll together
be able to hold tides at our mercy.

or maybe I have a larger part that
is made up of what has gone into
the making of the bermuda triangle
because no matter how much I try
to hold things, they're always falling,
getting lost in me

I also feel like I share a few elements
with dogs and paints, but none with
cats, it seems. not everyone is made
of everything, but we'd all like to believe
that we have the better elements from
the pot, don't we? but what if we don't.

what if we are one human but many little
elements from stardusts to sand? what if
we are the vacuum in the space and not
a fancy little star and or beautiful ringed
planet? what if we're rain and not the entire
ocean?

and why not, don't we all feel like
metaphors sometimes— vaguely
different objects or even beings.
probably, it is the elements inside us
that get aligned in the most accurate
pattern to reflect another planet,
another space, another starline, another void.

they say the universe was one
but what if there are multiverses,
and a pattern from another universe
was brought down here, and a few
patterns from here travelled there.
(what are the chances?)
we can only feel human until we don't.
afterall, who knows how patterns travel
in space-time-galaxies?

Interview: What's to Finish?

(This interview appeared in our final print issue back in the summer of 2014)

You've been staying here for a while?

The building was supposed to go in for redevelopment. Thank god it hasn't happened. An aunt lived upstairs. She was 96. I wouldn't know where to take her. Plus the dogs refuse to leave. I'd have to give them tranquilisers. They associate taxis with going to the vet. Nothing is going to go away. There are suddenly three parties, and they're all in lawsuits with each other.

(Referring to the journal) You mainly publish poetry?

Yes.

Which for lots of people is simply...very few people will buy poetry. They read it if it's easily available. I use quite a lot of it in my column in the Mumbai Mirror. That's the only way to do it. I don't know why it is, but maybe because while a lot of us were in school, poetry was such a bore. It was badly taught, there were poems that didn't appeal.

Do you think that's how it is even in universities?

You know something...Writing is, you know, for people...like you know these Urdu mehfiles... Everyone's high on Urdu mehfiles. Wow... the most simplistic verse. I watched a program the other day; someone had sent me a video clip. It was some Pakistani woman talking about the similarity between Indian fundamentalism and Pakistani fundamentalism. It was a translation. It was so banal. But everybody was delirious with happiness. I think we're used to that kind. In the middle of a discussion suddenly someone quotes a ghazal. But when it comes to poetry that's printed, that has to be read and understood, it's a different thing altogether. This other kind of thing, this easy stuff, lots of it around.

You've taught for a while, how was it then?

I had some very good students. And if you made any effort for them, they were wonderful. They may have come having read only James Hadley Chase or something, but they learnt very fast. If you could make sense of the text for them. For instance take somebody like Plato who has no relevance apparently to their lives, and you have to make sense of it! That's the point usually of teaching, to make sense of bad texts. If you don't do that then you might as well forget the whole exercise. You know, what can it say to their lives? Don't you agree?

Is it because of this condition that a lot of poets stopped writing in that period?

Which period?

When you were teaching, do you think there were a lot of talented people?

Plenty. We used to have plenty of poetry readings. They may not have kept on writing. There were lots who were poets at some point, who wrote some poems. But the fact that you start writing makes you stay in writing, whether you continue to write or not. We used to have lots of readings in the 70s and so on, with established poets, new poets. There were many new groups. They formed co-operatives and publishing houses, they produced beautiful books, very inexpensive. So there was, besides Adil (Jussawalla) and Arvind (Mehrotra) and all those who started Clearing House, Melanie Silgado, Santan Rodriguez, Rao Da Gama Rose who started Newground. They published several books, and they were always very well produced.

Melanie was your student, right? And Newground published your first book?

Yes, but it wasn't their first book. Their first book was the three poets. And there was me, there was Saleem Peeradina. My book was being sold at an advanced rate of 6 Rupees. The official price was 12. But nowhere could you get a book of that quality. The cover was designed by (Arun) Kolatkar, the paper was beautiful. I have a few copies today, from 1979.

Were there other women poets at that time? Because it seemed difficult anyway to get published as a poet.

There was Kamala Das.

I mean here, in Bombay, in this local scenario.

You mean poets who sustained themselves. There were many who published a few poems just for the fun of being part of the scene, but people who sustained their writing, mainly Melanie and me.

We still work together. You know that anthology, *These My Words?*

You've worked on many anthologies. Women's Voices...

That was prose, but much earlier I did *Nine Indian Women Poets*, and then a book of writings on Purdah and also an *Anthology of Early Indian English Poetry*. Most people assume it started with Sarojini Naidu. But there was excellent poetry and experimental too. There was Kapil Thakkar from Gujarat who was writing a long epic poem about Hitler, called "Hitler's Tears," and he was talking about the whole episode. It's amazing stuff. I don't think anybody today could be said to have experimented the way they did. I mean there was a Jewish poet called Samuel Solomon, who was an ICS officer in Bihar. I couldn't get much information on him. I got it through the University in Israel. I really had to search for him. And again he has an experimental poem, a long experimental poem about the 1st World War. You know that stuff is really amazing. Nobody knows it. Everybody

thinks things started with either Sarojini Naidu or with Nissim Ezekiel or Tagore. And believe me all these guys are far more interesting than Tagore. Tagore is very bland in comparison.

A lot of people are beginning to complain about Tagore. Do you think he's lost in translation?

I don't believe this business about lost in translation. Half the time they gain in translation. You know for *These my Words* we looked through literally 1000s of poets. Millions of Radha-Krishna poems. And the really good poems are good in English. If they are feeble, they're feeble in the original. We're reading everything in translation. I find that a very feeble excuse.

What have you been up to? Are you writing any poetry?

I was about a year ago, but not at the moment.

You've also written a couple of novels..

Two. Have you read them?

Yes, Dangerlok.

I'm quite fond of the other one, but nobody reads it. It's got some very good reviews.

How was it like earlier? Were you reading a lot? Were you travelling with your work?

In the 90s, quite a lot. Several times to England and Scotland. After that, no. I mean I do the occasional reading in Goa, but I say no to most readings. It's too hot, it's too tiring.

You don't step out much?

Not anymore. I've said no to readings at the Prithvi. I cannot do it anymore. I find it too exhausting.

Do you keep in touch with people?

Sort of, quite a number of people, those who are my friends. But you know what South Bombay is like...nobody wants to come this side. Let's meet, they say and mention some South Bombay restaurant. Just yesterday I went to meet a friend, and I spent exactly half an hour there (guess I'm getting old). I just don't have that kind of energy. I am nearly 74.

You're fond of animals, there is the odd cat poem, but they don't feature much in your work as subject matter?

No. I spent about 10 or 15 years looking after dogs on the street. Used to cook for them, take them to the hospital, get lots of abuse for feeding them. Oddly enough when Ravi Singh, my editor, asked me to write a memoir, the only thing I could think about was dogs.

So have you progressed from that?

No. They're most adorable.. Street dogs...

Does that mean you absolutely have no new work?

I have. I wrote quite a number of poems in the last year. I don't know how many there are, about 25 or so. But they're all short poems. Ranjit (Hoskote) wanted me to read them at the Prithvi. I said these short poems don't work in a reading. By the time you've begun them, they're finished. You know what I mean... And I love writing brief poems. How I came to write them is my dog used to insist on going down for a walk at 4 in the morning. And 4 in the morning my mind was blank except for taking him around. That's when all the poems occurred. It's usually when I'm ill or my mind is totally blank, you know that I write...

You've been writing a column for a while.

Yes, that takes up a lot of energy and time because I have to find a subject that would interest people.

Are you reading a lot now? Has it come down? Do you read a lot of stuff that's been sent to you?

Yes, but I don't use all of them (for the column).

(On the corner table) We notice Ranjit Hoskote's new book of poems. And Joy Goswami.

You're interested in Joy Goswami?

I've read some of it... You know the column I write, it's for the newspaper. It has a very general readership, and I don't think Goswami's surrealistic poems will make too much sense... a couple of them might.

I'm reading him in Bengali.

It's okay, but the average person who wants to be in poetry is not going to be attracted to him. When you read them they look very striking, but it's difficult to know what they might mean. Difficult to know what the fellow wanted to say. Some of the poems, yes. But surrealism has its limits. In a painting, okay, it may work. This sense of disturbance, and things in the wrong place, but I don't find it working here. I'd have written about it, but it's the kind of book that doesn't make sense to a general audience. I try to keep to subjects that'll make sense.

But then do you think a poet should aspire to write things that make sense to a general public?

They should write whatever they want. My point of view is only that because I'm writing this column, and I have to keep the kind of audience in mind. If I were talking to academics I'd talk differently. But over here these are general sort of people interested in literature, not necessarily very knowledgeable, but I want to make things accessible. So it's that you know, I would choose the kind of work that would make sense. Most people think I'm writing a review column, but I'm not.

Was it different before, when you were starting out?

Yes it was much more open.

But even in Arvind's anthology you're the only woman poet, which appears like a conscious move on his part?

Yes, because his main focus is on language. And he felt I had...

You were the only one who could be represented?

Yes, in terms of language, because I was using that sort of local lingo.

What do you look for in a poem? A good poem?

Maybe when you feel something or see something for the first time. A critic talked about "Feeling the stoniness of a stone." Something has to come to life. Almost as if you were experiencing grief or joy or whatever for the first time.

Your work is so intimate, and yet open. And you had students. Did you ever get strange questions from them about your personal life?

No. It was funny. There were people who knew Melanie, and knew she was a friend of mine. They wanted to know very ordinary things, like does she wear a nightie? That kind of thing.

It's very hard to restrain oneself from finding autobiographical strains in your work, there seems to be no other way, and there are poems where you're directly speaking to that idea that people might have, or you're warning them against it. Does that annoy you?

Because everyone wants to read it, any damn thing. Even the novel I wrote, *Dangerlok*. I don't care one way or the other. I just feel ...My question is always, is it well written or badly written? Otherwise, in a sense, everything one does is autobiographical, though it may not appear so.

So you've had that question coming a lot of times?

Relentlessly. Of course if it's autobiographical, they think it's personal. Then poetry shouldn't be about personal things. It should be about history and myth, you know. It may have been because of T S Eliot who said something about poetry being impersonal. So they attack Sylvia Plath, Anne

Sexton...

People would be tempted to liken you to Plath...

Two totally different people. They use the word “confessional.”

What collection of poems in the recent past have you really liked?

I always liked Manohar Shetty’s work. He’s a very fine poet. Melanie’s writing very well, but she hasn’t got enough to publish a new book. Even Jeet Thayil’s work is very solid.

Do you read younger writers who send in their work to you?

Sometimes, but I’ve stopped reading things on request because it’s a bit painful. If it doesn’t work, it’s very hard to tell young people that it’s not working, but if you tell them about language or growing up or any damn thing, it’s way too patronizing. So now I say no to almost all writing. It’s too painful.

Are you working on anything now, other than poems?

My ambition now is to do nothing, absolutely nothing. So many years of teaching and this and that, so many volumes and anthologies, it’s exhausting. I’d love to do more research, but I don’t have that kind of stamina now, to go to the university every day. They have some wonderful poetry. Some very good underestimated work. It’s a very good library.

But they aren’t really updating it now, are they?

They update mostly at Kalina. But whatever they have of the old books, it’s a wonderful collection. But you can’t take books out. You have to photocopy or sit there and read. I love it there. I spent so much time while doing my PhD.

Why did you publish your collected so early?

I didn’t think I would write any more.

Do you think if the scenario were different, if people were constantly asking you for work, if the environment was different, you’d have written a lot more? Because you have a small, very concise, body of work.

Mine is small. I’m not at all prolific.

You also say you started late, at 30. But it wasn’t late enough.

39. Well I published at 39. I was writing before. But I’m not as prolific as, say, someone like Keki

Daruwala, for example. But if I do have enough new poems, maybe I will have another book out. Among my unpublished poems, I forgot to publish a lot of them. I just forgot to include them.

What fiction are you reading now?

For a very long time, I used to read a lot of detective fiction. Then I went off it. Now I've started again. I really like it.

You mentioned in an earlier interview that your father wrote. That he may have wanted to become a writer?

Yes, I have his notebooks. He had written stories and verse. But he died too young, he had no time. He was 33. He was in those tribal areas, in Chhattisgarh. He and two of his friends caught this thing called Blackwater fever, a lethal fever, and he died.

Were you too young to remember him, to know if you were close to him?

I was three. I have only one or two vague memories. Beyond that, nothing.

Is it because you have his notebooks and whatever's remaining that you feel...

No... I remember... It must have been in the Chhattisgarh area, him taking me up to ride an elephant, or just jogging me on his knees or something. I wasn't taken to his funeral so I have no memory of that. I just didn't know what had happened.

Did you grow up in a joint family?

No. My father, when he was dying, suggested to my mother (he was in Pune for his treatment) that she stay on with her family. So that's what we did. Her parents, brothers. So I grew up with them. My father's family wasn't really around. They were in the army and the Air force and in the NEFA region, so there was nobody around really.

So you grew up with your mother.

My mother and my aunts. One aunt lived upstairs here but she died about 2 years ago. It was fine. The uncles varied, they tended to be quite strict, except one of them. I was made to learn the piano, and one of them insisted, and I practiced, and the other one used to say, take it easy.

Was it difficult with your mother? Was it a normal relationship?

When I was young, it was okay. I was very close to her. When I started growing up I found her very authoritarian. She wanted to know everything. What I studied, where I went, who I wrote for, who my friends were, everything. On her own she was a lovely person. So this entire business of looking after her fell on me. And when I was even quite young, 12 or 13, I used to go out and buy her saris. I was very protective. I thought it was okay for my aunts to be washing dishes and so on,

but not my mother. So I think that protectiveness made it difficult for me later, I used to sort of fight her off, because I always felt some compassion for her. But it was very different. Not fun at all.

Was she alive when you got into teaching?

Yes, she was living here with me. First we were living in Borivali for about 10 years, and then we moved here. She died in 1992 or so.

We read somewhere that you also directed a play, acted in a few?

Just ignore that. That was just a very short phase when I suddenly felt like doing these things. So we did a play about TS Eliot and his first wife, Vivienne Haigh-Wood. Tom and Viv. I did that and one other play. But it wasn't serious. Just for the heck of it. I tried so many things for the heck of it. When I lived in London for two years I tried silk screen painting, pottery. I used to go to the Museum of Natural Sciences, and read on evolution and so on. Because as a student at school, we never studied any of these things. The year after I left, the sciences were introduced for girls. But when I was there, there was nothing. So I was endlessly curious. From the public library, I used to borrow books that teach you to draw. I couldn't draw, but it was just for the fun of it that I did a lot of these things. Because over here everything was so strait-laced.

You're very prolific with anthologies.

I love research. I really love it. Everything written in English in the 19th and 20th Century is sort of forgotten work. I don't have the energy now. I used to spend about 15 hours a day on research. I discovered all sorts of people who no one remembered, ICS officers, people from remote places.

But these books are hardly available any more. Why do you think this is happening, Eunice? You have so many anthologies, it's essential work. Is it because you don't talk about them enough?

You mean, why aren't they well known?

Yes. People are still publishing anthologies, winning awards.

Sahitya Akademi has awards for contributions to literature. I think I've made quite a lot of contribution to literature, but no award is going to come my way. Like I may have said earlier, you have to be networking.

Have you ever been involved with the Academy in any way?

Yes, I was on a panel once, but they're godless specimens. They don't take any stance. If you go to a Sahitya Akademi reading, the entire audience looks as though they've been dug up archeologically. They have mud coloured skin, mud coloured caps, mud coloured trousers, mud coloured socks.

There's something special about these Delhi guys, they're totally non-human. Honestly, not an expression. Once when I was asked to read there, it's okay, it's at Delhi and you stay at the international centre, this guy writes to me and says, "Madam, I must tell you, you have no idea how to read a poem." He told me about a 100 things I'd done wrong.

What were they?

I don't remember.

What do you think is happening?

It depends. There's government money, and loads of bureaucracy.

What panel were you on? Reading manuscripts?

Yeah, something like that. What to publish, what to suggest... They were the deadest of dead people I've ever met. They would not take a stand about anything. I wrote a review once for Biblio, they never asked me to write again, and they didn't pay. I don't know why all these guys think we're in it for charity. Once I conducted a panel discussion, and once I planned an event, three evenings of poetry. Not a penny. They give you those satchels which somebody's given them. Like dove shampoo, talcum powder. I mean, come on! That's not the way you pay professionals, is it?

Have you ever considered working on longer poems?

If it is a long poem, I break it up into sections. No, I can't write longer poems, I don't even want to. Can't write longer novels. Novellas.

Yes, your poems are getting shorter and shorter.

Yes they are. These were just little imagistic poems, images that turned up in my head during those 4 am walks with my dog. I don't read them out ever. I can't. They're over before they start. Somebody once asked me if they're unfinished poems, and I said "what's to finish in a two line poem?"

Manohar Shetty

Two essays on Eunice de Souza

1. A Tribute to Eunice

(Read on Zoom, June 30, 2020)

Eunice de Souza was the master of the terse, pithy, often witty poem. For her, words were precious; they were not to be wasted. I don't think she ever used a superfluous word in her poems. They were always to the point, often acerbic comments on the society around her. She valued quality over sheer numbers. Her collected poems, 'A Necklace of Skulls' runs into just 119 pages. Her work exemplifies beauty in brevity. By nature, or by choice, she was not the sort to write epic length poems—unlike a few others. It is the tautness of the poems that lend a compelling immediacy to them. Here are two from her ultra-slim final volume, 'Learn from the Almond Leaf':

Finally

Finally, the Lord said:
Move that damned highrise.
Let there be light.

And the next one called *Tell Me*:

Tell me, Mr Death
Date, Time, Place.
I have to look for my
Life-of-sin panties,
Make an appointment
For a pedicure.

This kind of sardonic humour is pivotal to her poetry. But the caustic comment was always part of a larger design. Underlying all her poetry was a deeply felt empathy for the poor and marginalized. But her poetry came straight from the heart—and her nerve ends—not as part of some political ideology. And she was a natural feminist, long before the term became fashionable. Remember that her first book of poems 'Fix' was published way back in 1979.

One aspect of her work that I'd like to emphasize are the poems that she wrote on her father. There are a number of them that refer to him. I'm not sure what his profession was, but in the poem 'One Man's Poetry', Eunice writes: 'He left a desk, a chair/a typewriter and a notebook', which only provides some hints. What does come through is that he died when Eunice was very young and that he passed away prematurely, quite evident from the title of her poem 'For My Father, Dead Young'. There's also another poem called 'She and I' and another called 'Untitled', directly mourning his passing. She also wrote equally touching poems on her grandparents.

Central to her poems is the Roman Catholic community of Bombay. She wrote some pretty sardonic poetry on her community, but the inherent humour elevated them beyond mere mockery and satire. Though she was of Goan ancestry, I could find just two poems that related directly to Goa, 'Varca, 1942' and another called 'Idyll', though the Goan Catholic community in Bombay is a recurrent motif and is at the core of her poetry. And she was 'Catholic' in more ways than one—by 'Catholic' I also mean 'of universal interest and all-embracing'.

At a more personal level, I first met Eunice in the early 80s, though our acquaintanceship grew into friendship much later. After I moved to Goa back in 1985, we often kept in touch with long telephone calls and by email. And whenever I visited Bombay, I made it a point to visit her at her flat in Vakola, near Santacruz. I remember her two pet parrots on which she wrote a couple of poems. She also regularly fed the stray dogs around. And during the Goa Lit Fest she came round to my place here in Dona Paula. Apart from poetry, she, like me, was also interested in detective fiction. I think her taste in literature was, again, quite Catholic. I've been told she was a wonderful teacher and many of her students from St Xavier's College where she taught for over thirty years have very fond memories of her. She was definitely not, to quote her line, 'a sour old puss in verse'. Quite the reverse in fact, with a strong sense of the ridiculous, even on the Church and the establishment in general.

2. Sting in the Tale

The poetry of Eunice de Souza

(First published in 'Mundo Goa' (Panjim), 2014)

It is often believed that the more obscure or difficult a poem is, the more profound it is. While complex poetry does abound, especially in literary journals in the US, a poem's quality should not be dictated by its ability to mystify a reader. Note, for instance, the poetry of Ted Hughes, Thom Gunn or Douglas Dunn, who rarely wrote poems shrouded in mystery or those that needed repeated readings to 'crack' open as if they were walnuts. In this age of Twitter, alleged dwindling attention spans and instantaneous solutions, one would have imagined the pursuit of poetry would also have imbibed qualities of clarity and lucidity. Indeed, one would have thought the turn of this century would usher in the era of poetry; of short, snappy novels and a great flowering of short stories. Inexplicably, this has not happened; the opposite has. The outsized novel is still queen and conqueror. And even a cursory glance at literary journals provides sufficient evidence that the opaque poem still prospers; those that apparently have to be 'mined' over and over again to get to the apparently rich 'vein' of meaning, even if such meaning was not originally intended.

With so many incomprehensible poems on offer, poems too remote or dense for even the intelligent reader, it is little wonder that the vast majority are simply turned off by contemporary poetry. Or given the laissez faire climate and the leeway modern poetry offers, it would hardly be surprising if it were discovered that there are hundreds of young (and old) poets around who don't even read their contemporaries. There are now possibly more 'poets' writing what they perceive to be poetry than those who actually read poetry. In any case, there is too much else available in the creative arena to try and figure out the world of contemporary poetry, immersed as it is in various

‘schools’ and other esoteric and incomprehensible affiliations.

Those daunted or put off by the perceived ‘difficulty’ of modern verse would do well to read the poetry of Eunice de Souza. Her work is not a Rubik’s cube or imbued with seven types of ambiguity. Pithy, direct and unclouded by lofty metaphor or hidden meanings, de Souza speaks with the sharpness of a cat-o’-nine- tails, laced with incisive and often sardonic wit. Here is an early example; a terse little poem called ‘Conversation Piece’ from her first book, ‘Fix’, published in 1979.

My Portuguese-bred colleague
picked up a clay shivalingam
one day and said:
Is this an ashtray?
No, said the salesman,
This is our god.

Though the poet has inexplicably substituted the originally published ‘aunt’ in the first line with the more generic ‘colleague’ in her ‘Collected Poems’, this streak of cutting wit graces much of her poetry. Readers will be struck both by the economy of the language and the knack of piercing observation. This is a trait that has never left de Souza’s poetry or been substituted by such notions as ‘gentle wisdom’ and ‘the maturity that comes with age’, phrases poetry critics are overly fond of. That maturity and incisive tone came very early on and has never left her. From the very beginning, de Souza’s work appears fully grown and complete. The razor-edged, ironic tone continues even in her most recent work. Consider this poem called ‘It’s Time to Find a Place’, published more than two decades after ‘Conversation Piece’:

It’s time to find a place
to be silent with each other.
I have prattled endlessly
in staff-rooms, corridors, restaurants.
When you’re not around
I carry on conversations in my head.
Even this poem
has forty-eight words too many.

The apparently easy, conversational tone of de Souza’s poetry is often marked by a sting in the tail—or tale. Though she taught at Bombay’s St Xavier’s College for thirty years and retired as the Head of the Department of English, she has never indulged in a species of poetry barely understood even by her fellow professors. Her language has always been terse with a pincer-sharp focus. Here are some lines from a later poem, ‘Pahari Parrots’, which make for an identikit picture of herself: ‘Soon I’ll be a whiskery old lady/mumbling in my gums/hobbling about/two parrots in my hair.’

The distaff side plays a central and pivotal role in de Souza’s poetry. Indeed, they are a recurring presence, from early poems like ‘Sweet Sixteen’, ‘Miss Louise’ and ‘Advice to Women’ to much

later ones like 'Aunt' and 'My Mother Feared Death'. A feminist long before the term became fashionable, her poems are imbued with a direct emotional investment in her subjects, and are not determined by any de rigueur political trends of the times.

Accompanying this is an uneasy relationship, founded on skepticism, with the Catholic Church. This is much in evidence in early poems like 'Varca, 1942' and 'St Anthony's Shrine', though her own preoccupations have always been with the disadvantaged and the inequities so apparent in the longitudinal sprawl of Bombay, her home, and where she has spent most of her life.

An immediacy and edgily-poised quality has always underlined her work, and often, her poems can hurt like ice pressed into a carious cavity. But many are also laced with a spiky brand of humour and invoke an instant appeal, as this piece, called 'My Students', does:

My students think it funny
that Daruwallas and de Souza
should write poetry.
Poetry is faery lands forlorn,
women writers Miss Austen.
Only foreign men air their crotches.

Like 'Conversation Piece', this is a complete poem in just six lines, concise and to the point, and not as easy to do as a haiku or an 'imagist' poem. Given the kind of precise poetry that de Souza writes, it would be unwise to expect a 'Collected Poems' as voluminous as Nissim Ezekiel's or Keki N Daruwalla's. Her 'A Necklace of Skulls' barely touches 120 pages. But each poem is carefully cut and polished like a gemstone. There is not a single obscure poem in the book. Each one of them has been a hard-won victory.

Apart from her collections of verse and her long career as a teacher, de Souza has edited several anthologies and published two slim novels. She is also a regular and widely-read columnist for the Mumbai Mirror, a leading tabloid in the city. It has well and truly been a concerted literary life. Indeed, along with Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, she can be called the last among poets from the academic field. Unlike in the West, very few genuine poets among the younger set here teach literature in colleges or in schools.

The critical appraisal of poetry in India has much too often been obscured by extraneous factors such as academic excellence, social background, or a poet's own cultivated image. Or it has been coloured by a poet's achievements in other branches of art or even by such skills as being an eloquent reader. But the poems eventually must speak for themselves on the printed page. And de Souza's poetry does so with clarity and a sense of immediacy and urgency.

Jacob Silkstone

Child Zero

Like anyone suffering, I slip quickly into the role of fool.
When my pre-school class ask that old, eternally awkward question
("Where do babies come from? I remember a bird carrying me...")
we make up a story that grows beyond storks
and ends with babies descending on long silken ropes
from the moon.
"How do they know when it's time?" the class ask,
and we decide that two people in love have to walk
hand in hand into the night and make a wish,
but only when the moon is full.

Trite, I know, but I remember how we made our wish
and you really came, though the rope never swung
all the way down to us. You never mastered that old art
of navigating by the stars.
Our story ended differently, the way stories do sometimes —
an evening of tears, a month of numbness, wretchedly alone
away from the company of a person who'd never been with us.
Walking home one afternoon in those first fervid weeks,
I made a promise to love you every day for the rest of my life.
Don't imagine I won't keep it.

To a quiet road beside the tracks

a wall does not
separate us

a slowness defined itself
while i looked at you.

like the parakeet outside
the window of my bathroom

looking through the blinds
surreptitiously,

its tail lingering
in the morning light;

this day, when the winter
is like a great experiment --

unknown to repercussions
of sadness and happiness --

You wind into yourself
after the roar of a bike.

a grave silence returns to you,
and a quiet joy returns to you.

*

is it only me? or even you? or
all of us here in this moment together

or no one?

like the supplications
we pay no heed to,

we have forgotten how
nothingness is slow.

does nothing happen,
when nothing is happening?

or has it all happened already,
or is it waiting to happen?

the questions pop up and fly away.
the parakeets fly away.

The train winds around another of your brothers -

and then, without saying anything,
it screeches to a halt at the next station.

Debarshi Mitra

Wasteland

I

A gecko
climbs up the wall,
one limb at a time,
the night with its
wires unplugged
waits
with bated breath.

II

Electromagnetic waves
curl around the spine.
Inside my head
a name makes its way
through the clutter,
and then shifts
ever so slightly
out of focus.

III

Somewhere a glacier melts,
my memory hardens like ice.
Ears pressed to conch shells
we hear the night
calling out to us.

IV

Through waves that continue
to crash against the rocks,
with our speech slurred
and pens outlawed,

we reflect on our gradual erosion.

V

Moths hover around
traffic lights,
a sliver of light
from a slightly
ajar window

slips into my dreams.

VI

Fingers move
over glass screens,
only the sound
of clocks ticking,
for company.

To the man
that does not appear
in the mirror anymore,
there is not much
that remains to be said.

VII

The night
sticks out
its antennae
tongue,

android dreams
coalesce
into ours.

Menake and the Smoked Beedis

Bitter. Krishna's fingers held the sticky aftertaste from pounding lemons. On hot days like this, he made a tall jug of lemon sherbet or kokum sherbet for all of them. There was no question of adding sugar, of course. He allowed a tea-spoon of sugar in his son Parikshit's glass. But none for him and his wife Sudha. *We have to look after ourselves, Ammu. Look what happened to Suresh. Heart gave out at fifty.* On some days, when Krishna wasn't in sight, Sudha would pour her glass of juice into the bushes. He had seen her do so himself. On other days, she gagged through each sip, throwing him angry looks. Parikshit too would pretend gag on the first sip before assuming a brave face and finishing off his glass. At six, he was already learning the ways of acting and of the world. Krishna drank his juice in quick gulps. He scrunched his eyes shut and didn't stop until he was done. He enjoyed making the sherbet more than its taste. It was a ritual, like most things in Krishna's life. The leathery roughness of lemons on his palm, the sour tang on his tongue and the smell of lemons on his fingers were all rituals. He had to see them through.

When he sat down to make beedis on his front porch, he took covert whiffs of his hands. The lemon smell and the tobacco leaves were his home. He wished to carry these scents with him wherever he went. Today, he licked the edge of his little finger and tasted sharp lemon bitterness. He opened his bundle of tobacco leaves, powdered tobacco, thread and scissors. This batch of beedis was for him and his friend Raghu to smoke before the performance. This too, like lemon sherbet, was a ritual. Krishna and Raghu would stand outside the makeup tent and smoke two beedis each, before going back inside. Then, from beedi smoking men, they would turn into mythical beings. In the *Katil Yakshagana Troupe*, everyone took on different roles. But not Krishna. He always played the female roles. He was the pious *Parvati*, the powerful *Devi*, *Amba* in her rage, the flirtatious *Menake*. You have the face for it, he was told, in his training days – rounded angles, big lips, sharp cheeks, and playful eyes. *Like the luminous moon.*

Sudha was lying next to him, face up, her arm-pits soaked with sweat, hair gently drooping wet into the contours of her face. Her lilac saree draped tightly around her body was now bunched up and wrinkled. She had returned after watering the rose bushes. Krishna wondered what it must be like to water the rose bushes in a saree. Would it feel different from seducing a pious sage through erotic dancing? In a few hours, he would go on the stage as *Menake*, the celestial being sent down to earth to seduce Sage Vishwamitra and break his penance. Krishna would meet *Menake* somewhere in the middle – between painting his lips lush red and placing a tiny black dot just off to the side of his left upper lip. What is more womanly, Krishna wondered; the hand gliding in air, feet stepping to the beats of the drums, or the sticky saree on a sultry May afternoon, watering the rose bushes?

Sudha and Krishna were distant cousins with overlapping connections to various aunts and uncles. Naturally, when it came time to arrange a bride for Krishna, Sudha's name came up. They met at a mutual Aunt's house, Krishna thirty five and shy, Sudha, twenty one, shy at first, then full of questions. *How long have you been training? When will you play the big parts? Do they let you say lines yet? Can you make me look like Devi?* She then showed him all her lipsticks and powders from

Bombay. *Do you use these?* The mutual Aunty had had to interject at one point and ask Sudha to *please leave the boy alone and don't bother him*. Krishna however was not bothered in the least. He imagined how they would look next to each other in the wedding pictures. She was slightly taller than him. Her curls outlined the edges of her large forehead and her chin was sharp. Her skin was earth brown. There was an intense pain in his chest at the thought of leaving this girl and going back to his own house. Would he see her again? Would she want to marry him? Six months after that evening, they were married. This was eleven years ago

Krishna now looked over at his sleeping wife. He was filled with love for her. Her beautiful curls, the shape of her eyebrows, the mounds of her breast, her hands smooth and wrinkled. He loved her for the withered beauty that she possessed without the façade of paint and jewels. He revered her body for the way it could simply exist. He was in love with the way she ate her food, open-mouthed, fingers pushed deep into her tongue. Her womanhood did not need labels. With this rush of love also came repulsion. Not for her body but for the mere fact that it could be without even trying. Of late, he realised that this repulsion ran both ways. In the past, Sudha would sleep all afternoon, so she could sit all night and watch the plays. She gave him advice – *you were so over the top, were you dropping a child out of your womb on stage, hababa*. Now, they would not speak of stage or performance. Increasingly, she avoided going to the shows.

Krishna wished to light his beedi and smoke it in his saree. He touched the powdered leaves and took it up to his nose. The smell of tobacco wafted through his nose. When he was in character on stage, he smelled like sandalwood and sweat and jasmine. He wanted to blend scents, jasmine and cigarette, sweat and beetle leaf. He furrowed his brow. He wore his big red bindi even when he was out of costume. It was a part of *Menake* that he couldn't separate from himself. In a way, it tethered him to her. He didn't need to grapple. He looked at his cracked feet. A centipede curled just below it. His toes too mimicked its motion. These feet, he believed, were his greatest strength. He did mundane activities with poise and grace. When he cut the leaves to fill it with tobacco, he paid attention to the movement of his wrist. He believed that there was beauty in movement. He buttoned his shirt with precision and combed his hair back from his face into a tight bun. He was collecting beauty in each step; it was important to him, this assortment of decoration.

Parikshit ran circles around the front yard. He had turned six last month and had started to take note of the characters in Krishna's plays. They were no longer moving colours and lights. He remembered Parikshit, Appu as he called him, as a little boy, afraid of the demon characters. The boy wailed at the sight of them. He trembled and hid behind his mother and cried himself to sleep at the sounds of the drums. Now, he could stay up longer. On some days, he stayed up to the very end. *Wake me when Mabeeshasura comes Amma*, he would say on other days. Appu now parted his legs, squatted and yelled a guttural scream. "I am Abhimanyu", he screamed. Abhimanyu, the warrior prince. "Look, Poppa, look", he began doing vigorous spins, his hands flailing about him. "Careful, you'll get dizzy", Krishna said. Just watching the boy was making him dizzy, he was spinning so fast now. "Come now, if you stop, I'll paint your face". This got his attention. He kept up the spin for a few more rounds, his head tilted to look at his father, mouth wide open in a grin, before slowing down.

He skipped up to where Krishna sat. "Go and bring my makeup box", Krishna said. Appu rushed into the house. He returned with the box, his little arms straining to hold them upright.

“Go help him. He’s going to drop it”, Sudha said, straining her head up to look between father and son. “No I can carry it”, Appu said. He stopped grunting, and arranged his face to appear relaxed. Krishna noticed how well the boy managed to do this. He was like a dancer, adjusting the eyes, the mouth easing out of its rigid line, cheeks releasing the hold of breath. *Lasya*. He was a natural, Krishna thought with envy. Parikshit ran the last few steps and dropped the steel box next to his father.

“Slowly! It’ll break, Appu!” Krishna yelled. Sudha was also startled. She jerked and then twisted on her stomach to look up at her son in annoyance. The tin box was thirty years old. It had many a dent on its skin. In some ways, this box felt like Krishna’s body. This is where he kept *Menake*, *Kunti*, and *Sathyavati*. Their longing, their desire, and their dreams were stashed within brushes and powders, blunt eyebrow liners, and blood red lipsticks. Its dents and crevices mirrored the pains in his body – the aching knee, the joints rattling every now and then and the constantly piercing spine. Last year he had a slip disc. L4, L5. His lower back and left leg felt battered to pulp like meat. Getting out of bed was a task and often left him in tears. He still managed to go to rehearsals and walk to Sattu’s tea shop every evening. He started to live with the pain. Slowly, it became him. In this pain, he began to see love, longing and rage. The whole breadth of female emotions. It reminded him, when he bent to take off his anklets that his other selves hadn’t let go of him. They were like the curved top of flower stalks, gently twisting his spine. He usually needed Raghu to help him stand upright.

Appu sat in front of Krishna, his face angled towards his father. Krishna looked at it now, his round plate-like face with the assortment of features, like tiny bowls haphazardly arranged. He had Sudha’s eyes, fish-like, curved eyelashes thickly framing. Krishna started with lining his eyebrows. “So who do you want to be today?” This was their game. There was a list to pick from- demons, princes, queens, jesters. “Abhimanyu, Poppa”, the boy said, assuming the quiet seriousness of the prince. Krishna continued with powdering the face and drawing the eyes. When he was done with the peach pink face paint, he lifted the mirror for Appu to see. The boy looked disappointed. “This is not enough. I want a crown.” Krishna sighed. He wasn’t allowed to carry the jewellery or the costume pieces home. In any case, Appu’s little coconut head would not be able to hold up the heavy head gear.

“You don’t need a crown. My Appu is already a Prince”, Krishna said.

Appu did not look convinced. “No one will believe me. That Praveena will laugh. Even Rupesh and Rakesh. They’ll all laugh”, he said, his eyes welling with tears.

“Don’t start now”, Sudha yelled. “Just go play with your toys. You’re not a prince.” Her voice had the edge of someone who dealt with these tantrums every day. It was directed at both of them. Appu’s tears broke out of his face. He began to kick the makeup box, picking up and throwing items from it one by one, his whole body emanating rage. Sudha sat up and grabbed his leg. She gave it a stern shake. Streams of pink ran down Appu’s cheeks and he began rubbing it vigorously, as if to erase every trace of this afternoon. Sudha pulled the boy’s hands away and administered a tight slap on his face. The boy was palpitating now, his hands clutched to his chest. “Stop, stop that!” Sudha said. “You’ll pick up everything and clean it up if you don’t want another slap”.

Appu continued to cry, lifting a stray brush to only drop it back on the ground. He touched his cheek and gave a howl, his gaze on his father's face, beseeching him to take note of his pain. Sudha lifted her palm up once again, gesturing a beating. The boy shuddered and bent down again to pick up the brush he just dropped.

"Will you stop that?" Krishna yelled in horror, looking up at Sudha. "Leave it, Appu. Come here. I'll get you a crown later on." Appu ran to his father, clutching him tightly, and cried into his chest. His sobs were directed at Sudha, full of self pity and accusation.

Sudha gave Krishna a withering look.

"Look at what you've done", she said. "He was playing by himself and you had to do this makeup business."

Krishna looked at Sudha in shock and indignation. Was she really blaming this on him?

"Are you listening to yourself, Sudha? The boy was only playing. What mother treats their child like this?" Krishna continued to rub Appu's back. The sobbing was quieter now. It was just a silent stream of tears.

"You made this happen", Sudha yelled. "Your makeup box is no toy!"

"Don't blame me. I could have handled this without terrorizing my child," Krishna continued. There was an invisible circle of tension now. Appu became smaller and smaller in this circle. He got out of his father's lap and receded behind a pole.

"What are you saying?" Sudha yelled, her voice cracking at the end. "Don't act like I don't care about my son."

"There was no need to be so harsh. You think I couldn't have handled this?" Krishna said, trying to pick up his brushes and pencils.

"You always do this. You're hardly here. I'm the one who's here for everything while you're off playing with your lipsticks."

"Shut up, just shut up Sudha. Now I know. This is about me and my job. And you want to use my son in your twisted games."

"You think your necklaces and anklets are keeping us fed? Everything, everything comes from my Amma's house".

"Just fuck off then! Go back to your mother's house if you want to", Krishna yelled back. This was not said in the manner of an everyday tiff between two individuals. There was something dark and ugly about it. It was meant to hurt, frighten even. Sudha recoiled at this.

In a voice that was quiet, broken, she said "You would want that, wouldn't you?"

The lines on her face shattered into grief at first, the eyes shadowed by the weight of all those

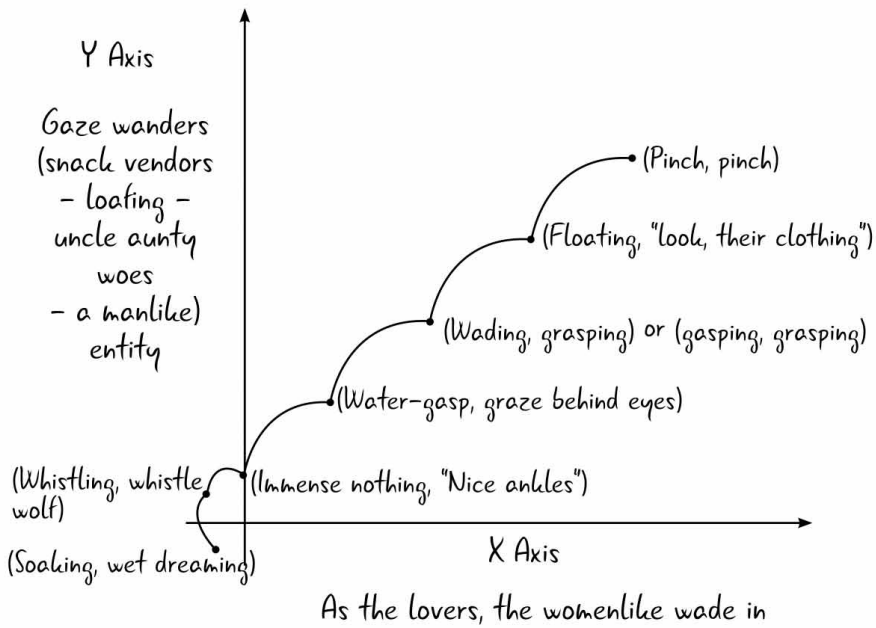
words, Krishna's words, and then it slipped into nothing. She looked at the ground, trying to hold back the pain, her shoulders drooping away in disgust, with him, and with herself. It was trance-like for Krishna to witness this grief. He felt it so heavily in his being. It was soul stirring. He felt like a murderer, like he'd wielded a sword into her flesh and broken her open. His heart ached. He wanted to reach out, put his hand on her head. In this instance, he was no longer Krishna. He was *Amba*, a woman wronged and ridiculed by men. He was angry on Sudha's behalf. This rage was different from the one he had just experienced. He wanted to hold her in the folds of his saree, wipe her tears with their edge, and sit into the night with her and discuss the cruelties of men. Appu hiccupped from the corner. This jolted Krishna out of his trance and from the circle of Sudha's grief. The child was trembling now. He looked both sorry and guilty. Krishna picked him up in his arms and walked back inside, leaving Sudha crying on the porch.

Aashika Suresh

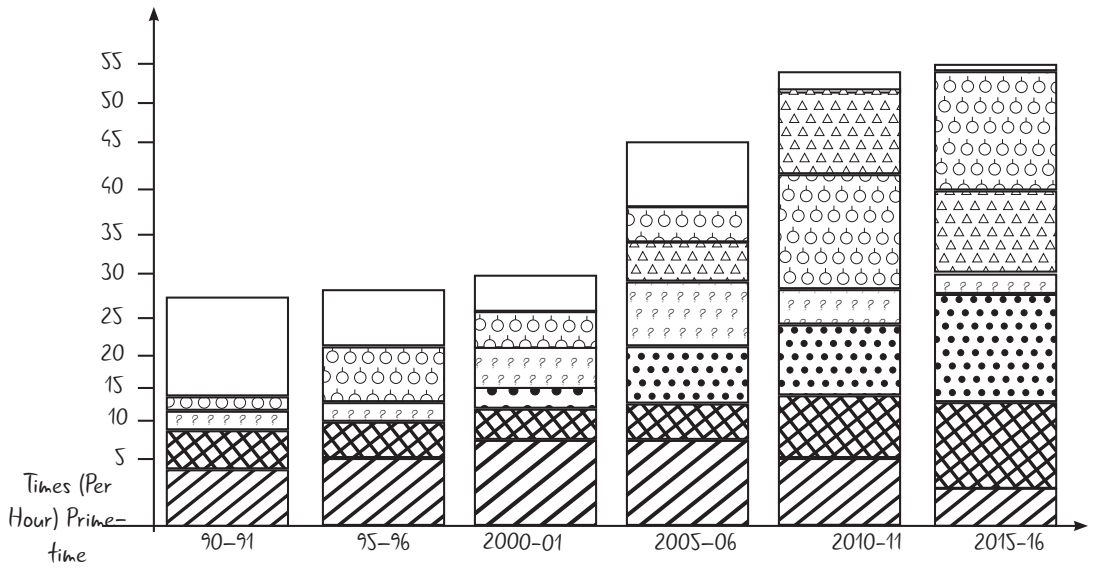
Down a Bridge

a blue van goes,
filled with apple-
shaped balloons: red and ripe,
ready to pop
any moment now.
Suddenly,
a little fist appears
from behind the grills, squeezing
past the iron. One finger
uncurls, and then one
 more, and then
 a whole palm
 waving goodbye.

Beach Violations



Subvertisement: Ladies, please (phrases)



Key



Husband headache



Baby bottom powder



Lick, no guilt



Flash that smile



Wipe away (99.9%)



Iron crease spots



Condemn/Condom
(Nirodh Public Service
Announcement)

Meenakshi Nair

When I say home

I mean Delhi
of autos and amaltas
and momos and metro rides;
the present honey-thick
with the past,
like summer air Loo-churned
and reduced on consistent heat
to possibility.

That airborne glimpse
of teeming pulsing population
glittering
flickering
as cabin lights dim and
deviyon aur sajjanon
Indira Gandhi Antarashtriya Havayi Adde
mein aapka swagat hai.

Bhaiya bas yaheen
agli gate pe utaar do
and a little pocket of green silence
just off the Yellow Line
where I know and I am known.

Back-lane-turned-creek
overflowing with ill-mannered mazha-vellam
along which bob paper boats
drinks and memories
framed through net windows
by riotously unruly bougainvillea.

I mean Ammuma, I mean Muttachan
I mean both of them and a life built
when I imagine the world was monochrome,
and the certainty of love and care.

Home is still there in me
around me, on the map.

Now I am unmoored.

Satya Dash

Love Poem with Ghost Pauses

At the opening line, I always flounder.
Of all my recurrent failures, I love this the most.
The idea to begin rusty lightly scrapes the feet
of God. No one came prepared for life. So everybody
won. The last time I loved you, I wasn't aware.
How do you climb the mountain of tender rubble
a body leaves behind for another? Sugary shadows
of shapes only two animals could conjure
now sheath your somnolent gaze. Shadows
taking on the benevolent scent of concerned
ghosts. I searched for ghosts in the chest
of drawers at my grandmother's house
in the room my grandfather died. Since I never
got to see him, a thorough rummaging
of personal faultlines was easier. It's here I saw angels,
depending on moods, double up as midnight ghosts
which made them— even without the raw rub
of flesh— animals. The heart felt lighter than a hot
flame; resting on my palms your milk jaws purred
when tendrils of violet breaths traced slowly
memoirs on mute collar bones. Nearing death,
the pause between breaths became a home for our small
dwellings of smoke. When I couldn't and wouldn't
walk, your broken wings flew me past the ancient fog.

The Insomniac's Goodbye Dance

Since everyone around, I saw, was kissing
with their eyes closed, it felt extremely
excitable for some reason in this split-
second paradise of awareness

to keep mine open. I laugh at the mention
of love these days. You do realize it is more
circus than feeling; this spectacle of gym-
nastics peppered with virtuositities far more
luminous in aftermath than any conscious
meaning gleaned. Consider lessons in object
permanence for the always invisible observer—
how the dog scrapes for bone where his past

whimpers linger and how we walk around the park
in amniotic laps. When you say you saw cherry
blossoms and thought about my cherry
blossom poem, I become the brilliance of a toy
train steamrolling water. I forget that so often
I think on tired nights about hands and feet
on tangled bedsheet. I forget that once for days
I was draped and disrobed simultaneously

by a hunger of ravishing teeth. I forget that
it petrifies me how pleasure atrophies into the faint
pop of body hair. Now see, this failure of logic
is real magic. We embrace for a while before

I rediscover the acute grace with which one
wrist slips away from another. In the next
second our skulls slip away into inscrutable
knots of nightfall. Goodbye is the crunch
of approaching thunder that masks in one
jaw-carving crack all things that shiver
tender. Wine colored sky, the only thing
connecting our harmless breaths.

The Insomniac is Hungry at Dawn

Last I checked, the cafe was serving at dawn and armies
of teeth were glimmering, having woken up to want. Birds had just
discovered their voice and humans were looking for one. I imagine
the assembly line of fluff bellied idlis washed by the divine

rinse of filter coffee helped in this endeavor. At the counter,
the queue, restless and bristling, the length of which might
have tickled the theater of a blue whale's stomach into coin
pleasures. A chewing and swallowing of such gumption,

it made sense why any early morning pleasure concerning
the mouth always sung its way into arias of deep hunger.
The days I didn't eat breakfast, my consignment
became white water rafting through a vertigo's

rapids. You might ask, why the wrestling? Why cast soft
breasts in shapes of new metal? But under the table my feet
inadvertently shake and the day presses to uncork the newness of night.
Once the bed of my parents, there my insufferable body likes

to whimper. And of all the polyphonic pleasures
spotting a vein, where light touched scrim, curious
lines became skin. I became a muse of time. You wept past borders
of receding shadow. Gobsmacked aliens on the teary shore

watched you snore. Like an eagle flying into a wind-
shield, now I see the mirror slamming— in it the many grams
of your moth-eaten face. Despite sharing the same head, each
shard's mouth praises differently.

Jeet Thayil

The Lover

He stands at the door,
watching her,
watching the woman swoon.
His eyes are red things,
his lips are unhinged
hurtling from doom to doom.

Up on the wall
two shadows crawl,
foretelling doom and doom.
The simpleton waits,
his fingers shake,
perhaps he's mistaken the room.

He's done this before,
stood at a door
until the sky fell from above,
but nothing can change
the shape of each pain,
he lives from love to love.

* 'The Lover' was published in *Gemini* (1992) with Vijay Nambisan.

February, 2020

The climate's in crisis, to breathe is to ache in India.
Too cold or too hot, we freeze and bake in India.

They police our thoughts, our posts, our clothes, our food.
The news and the government is fake in India.

Beat the students bloody, then file a case against them.
Criminals in power know the laws to break in India.

Pick up the innocent and lynch them on a whim.
Minorities will be taught how to partake in India.

Hum Dekhenge, the poet Faiz once said. But if you say it,
You're anti-national. You have no stake in India.

Women and students and poets: they are the enemy.
Come here, dear, we'll show you how to shake in India.

The economy's bust, jobs are few, the poor are poorer.
Question is: how much more can we take in India?

When you say your prayers make sure you pick the right god.
Petitions to the wrong one you must forsake in India.

Jeet, if you don't like it here, Pakistan isn't far away.
If you want to stay, shut up, learn to make in India.

Author bios

Aashika Suresh is a writer, dreamer, and sunlight seeker. Her poems have appeared in *Under the Basbo*, *InFrame*, *Rigorous* and *Chestnut Review*, among others. Suresh was shortlisted for the 11th Srinivas Rayaprol Poetry Prize in 2019. She co-runs *Mockingbirds*, a poetry collective based in Chennai.

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Amrita Singh is pursuing a doctoral degree at the Department of English, University of Delhi, studying graphic narratives. She also teaches literature to undergraduates. Her creative and critical work has appeared in *Muse India*, *Cafe Dissensus*, *Closure*, and in edited volumes.

Arjun Rajendran is the author of *SNAKE WINE* (Les Éditions du Zaporogue, 2014), *The Cosmonaut in Hergé's Rocket* (Paperwall, 2017) and a chapbook, 'Your Baby Is Starving' (Aainanagar/VAYAVYA, 2017). His third book, *One Man: Two Executions*, is forthcoming from Westland in 2020. Arjun is the founder of The Quarantine Train, a poetry workshop that is an answer to the great pandemic.

Aswin Vijayan has an MA in Poetry from the Seamus Heaney Centre, Queen's University Belfast and is an Assistant Professor at the Zamorin's Guruvayurappan College, Calicut. His poems have been published in *The Bombay Literary Magazine*, *Verses of Silence*, *The Tangerine*, and *Coldnoon* among others. He is also the Managing Editor at The Quarantine Train.

Debarshi Mitra is a 25 year old poet from New Delhi, India . His debut book of poems *Eternal Migrant* was published in May 2016 by Writers Workshop. His second book of poems, *Osmosis* was published in 2020 by Hawakal Publishers. His works have previously appeared in anthologies like *Kaafiyana*, *Wifi for Breakfast* and *Best Indian Poetry 2018* and to poetry journals like *Gustugu*, *Sonic Boom*, *The Seventh Quarry*, *The Scarlet Leaf Review*, *Thumbprint*, *The Punch Magazine*, *The Seattle Star*, *The Pangolin Review*, *Leaves of Ink*, *The Sunflower Collective*, *Coldnoon*, *Indiana Voice Journal*, *The Indian Cultural Forum* among various others. He was the recipient of the The Wingword Poetry Prize 2017 ,The Srinivas Rayaprol Poetry Prize 2017 and was long listed for the TFA Prize 2019.

Deepankar Khiwani's first collection of poems, *ENTR' ACTE* was published by Harbour Line in 2006 to critical acclaim. Khiwani was a quiet master of metrical verse, and was deeply committed to promoting literary activities in India.

Devanshi Khetarpal is from Bhopal, India, and currently lives in Manhattan, New York. She is a BA-MA candidate in Comparative Literature at New York University. Khetarpal is the Editor-in-Chief of *Inklette Magazine*, a Translations Coordinator for The Quarantine Train and

the host of an Elena Ferrante reading group called Ferrante Fever. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in *The Bombay Literary Magazine*, *Scroll*, *Diacritics*, and *Vayavya* among others. Website: www.devanshikhetarpal.co.

Jacob Silkstone has worked as an Assistant Managing Editor for Asymptote and a Managing Editor for The Missing Slate and has taught at international schools in Bangladesh and Norway. He is currently based in Bergen.

Jeet Thayil was born into a Syrian Christian family in Kerala in 1959. He worked as a journalist for twenty-one years in Bombay, Bangalore, Hongkong and New York. In 2006 he began to write fiction. His first novel, the bestselling *Narcopolis*, was awarded the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature and was shortlisted for the Man Booker prize. His five poetry collections include *These Errors Are Correct*, which won the Sahitya Akademi Award. As a musician his collaborations include the noise quintet Still Dirty, the experimental trio HMT, and the opera *Babur in London*. He is the editor of *Extinction Violin: The Penguin Book of Modern Indian Poets* (forthcoming). His most recent novel is *Low*.

Kathryn Hummel (kathrynhummel.com) is an Australian writer, researcher and multi-media artist constantly on roaming. She is the author of seven books of poems, the latest of which is *Lamentville* (Singapore: Math Paper Press, 2019). A widely-travelled performance poet and artist-in-residence, Kathryn holds a PhD in Social Sciences and is currently posted in India.

Manohar Shetty's *Full Disclosure: New and Collected Poems (1981-2017)* was published by Speaking Tiger. His new book of poems *Borderlines* will be published later this year. His poems have appeared in *London Magazine*, *Poetry Wales*, *Poetry Review*, *The Common*, *Shenandoah* and *The Baffler*, among several other journals. He is currently a Raza Foundation Fellow. He lives in Dona Paula, Goa.

Manya Mishra (@pretendinghere) is a Poet and Artist from India, who is currently stuck in the nine-to-nine of education and internships. She likes to create art through words, photographs, paints and sometimes even paper. Her work has appeared in a few magazines curated by colleges like NIFT, her short stories and poems are published in three books, one of them being a curation by UK Poetry Library. She is currently working on becoming her own person.

Meenakshi Nair is working towards her MA in Comparative Literature. She is a third generation Malayali who lives in Delhi and loves it. Her poetry is forthcoming in *Porridge Magazine*. Find her at @meenusbookcase on Instagram

Meera Suryanarayanan resides in Mumbai and hopefully in the hearts of her beloved pets. She teaches UG and PG students affiliated to the University of Mumbai. In her spare time she authors books on Communication and Media with the intention of making a lot of student lives a little easier and learning fun.

Meghna Prakash is the founder of *Poetry Dialogue* and is a published poet and journalist. Her debut book *Trigger Warning* has been published by *Hawakal Prokoshana* in August 2020.

Pitambar Naik is an advertising professional. He's a Poetry Editor for *Minute Magazine* and has been featured in journals across 13 countries. His work appears or forthcoming in *Mason Street Review*, *Packington Review*, *Rigorous*, *New Contrast*, *Ghost City Review*, *Glass: A Journal of Poetry*, *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal*, *The Indian Quarterly*, *Vayavya*, *Charge Magazine* and *The World Belongs To Us (Anthology)* HarperCollins India among others. *The Anatomy of Solitude (Hawaka)* is his debut book of poetry. He grew up in Odisha, India.

Pooja Rathnakumar Sengottuvel is an ESL educator teaching English to elementary and junior high school Japanese students in this tranquil city called Yonago in Tottori, Japan. She enjoys writing subconsciously-driven short stories about characters who seem to emerge from a space unbeknownst to her: a space that both surprises and challenges her very core. She is a huge fan of Indian women's writing in English, spiritual writing, and American short fiction. When she's not writing, she likes staying still, and waiting for the stories to unfold in their own course of time, cause, and effect.

Prashant Parvataneni is an independent writer from Bangalore, who also teaches courses on cinema and literature. He won the Srinivas Rayaprol Poetry Prize for 2019. His creative and critical writing has appeared in *Seminar*, *The Bangalore Review*, and *Deep Focus Cinema* among others. Prashant works with the *Kabir Project* and is part of an arts collective called *brown-study works*.

Prithvi Pudhiarkar is a student of English and Creative Writing at Ashoka University. His poetry and prose have previously appeared in *Himal Southasian*, *Berfrois*, and is forthcoming in *The Helter Skelter Anthology of New Writing Vol. 7*. He lives in Kandivali, Mumbai in whimsical discontent.

Priyam Goswami Choudhury is an Assamese poet who lives in Berlin.

Ranjani Murali lives in suburban Chicago. She's the author of *Blind Screens* (2017) and *Clearly You Are ESL* (forthcoming).

Rishitha Shetty has a Master's degree in English Literature from the University of Sussex. Her work has appeared in *Isacoustic*, *Punch Drunk Press*, *Califragile*, among others. She is a pushcart nominee for the poetry prize, 2019. She lives in Bangalore, India.

Saheli Khastagir is a painter, writer and an international development consultant based between New Delhi and New Orleans. Her work has appeared in or is forthcoming in publications like the *Economic and Political Weekly*, *Prairie Fire*, *The Bombay Review*, *The Globe Post*, *Guftugu*, *Kitaab* and *papercuts*. She has been awarded the emerging writers' residency at Studio in the Woods (New Orleans) to work on her first poetry collection this year.

Satya Dash's poems have been published or are forthcoming in *Waxwing*, *Wildness*, *Redivider*, *Passages North*, *Cosmonauts Avenue*, *The Florida Review*, *Prelude*, *The Cortland Review*, *Poetry@Sangam*, among others. Apart from having a degree in electronics from BITS Pilani-Goa, he has been a cricket commentator too. He is a two-time Orison Anthology and Best New Poets nominee. He spent his early years in Odisha and now lives in Bangalore, India. He tweets at: @satya043

Siddharth Dasgupta has written three books thus far, scattered across poetry, fiction, and that special somewhere in between. His words have appeared in *Kyoto Journal*, *Mekong Review*, *Poetry at Sangam*, *Spittoon*, *Cha*, *Madras Courier*, the *Bombay Literary Review*, *Scroll*, and elsewhere. Off-and-on, Siddharth also dives into the fragments and textures of travel and culture for a gathering of publications—*Travel + Leisure*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and *National Geographic Traveller*, included. He lives within the Irani cafés and swirling nostalgias of Poona. | @citizen.bliss

Sophia Naz has been nominated twice for the Pushcart Prize, in 2016 for creative nonfiction and in 2018 for poetry. Her work has featured in numerous literary journals, including *Poetry International Rotterdam*, *The Adirondack Review*, *Blaze Vox*, *Scroll*, *The Daily O*, *Cafe Dissensus*, *Guftugu VAYAVYA* and many more. Published poetry collections are *Peripheries*, *Pointillism* and *Date Palms*. Shehnaz, her biography of her mother, was published by Penguin India in the Fall of 2019. Her site:

Subimal Misra (b.1943) is a Bengali writer, whose name signifies 'anti-establishment' and 'experimental' to his readers. He worked as a school teacher and began writing in 1967, choosing to publish only in 'little magazines'. His first collection of short stories, *Haran Majhi's Widow or the Golden Gandhi Statue*, was published in 1971. His stories have been called 'anti-stories', for their departure from conventional narrative form. Misra also introduced the language of cinema in Bengali literature. Misra attacks the mores of middle-class society (including himself) in his writing and exposes its hypocrisies and oppressions. By the end of the 1970s, Misra was the uncrowned prince of Bengali parallel literature. The 1980s notably saw Misra writing three 'anti-novels', collectively called his anti-novel trilogy. The first, *Actually This Could Have Become Ramayan Chamar's Tale*, is a meta-fiction. Misra stopped writing in 2012, owing to poor health and eyesight. His stories, novellas, novels, a play, essays and interviews comprise over thirty volumes. His last book, *Cupid's Corpse Doesn't Drown*, an experimental prose work, was published in 2010.

Tan Tzy Jiun is a poet and artist based in Vienna, Austria. She is a co-founder of Exit 11 Performing Arts Company and writes occasionally for *Postscript Publication*. She tends to her plants and embroidery in her spare time.

V. Ramaswamy lives in Kolkata. He is a literary translator from Bangla, of voices from the margins. He has been engaged in a long-term project of translating the short fiction of Subimal Misra. His Misra translations include, *The Golden Gandhi Statue from America: Early Stories* (2010), *Wild Animals Prohibited: Stories, Anti-Stories* (2015) and *This Could Have Become Ramayan Chamar's Tale: Two Anti-Novels* (2019). He is currently completing the final collection of Misra's anti-stories..

Vishnu Bagdawala is from Surat, Gujarat. He currently lives in Mumbai. His work has previously featured in *VAYAVYA* and *Jaggery*. Currently, he is trying to make it as a screenplay writer and is working on his first novel.

Vivekanand Selvaraj currently lives in Delhi and likes to think of himself as a poet. He is also interested in theatre, short stories and translation.



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