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nether



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Dear Readers,

Things have been awfully quiet lately on the nether front, and we must apologise for the delay in publishing our latest issue and give some clarity on the way forward . Though the issue was mostly ready, we were unable to publish it sooner: We needed more time to address a number of individual personal issues while also managing the full-time (often precarious) jobs we do for a living. Moreover, we've realised over the past couple of issues that with the guest editorial format our calls have become increasingly complex and demanding and that a substantial chunk of time is needed for contributors to respond to new calls, for the editors to solicit submissions, and for translations (a top interest of ours) to get going.

But we understand that it's not ideal and right for the publication of an issue to come to a standstill, and the journal needs to be able to come through despite the hurdles. A literary journal is more than just a collection of writings; it's a community of writers, readers, and editors who come together. In order to maintain our readers' continued support, we need to be consistent and reliable in our publication schedule. We've been sensing the need for more people to come on board, full-time, and an urgent overhaul of how things have been functioning. Sharing editorial responsibilities will be a step towards our goal of a more stable journal that is greater than the sum of its parts. We will continue with our guest-editor format that we adopted when we revived, but we also would like to open the floor to our readers: if you'd like to guest edit an issue—if there's a particular kind of work you'd like to see or if you feel that a certain kind of work is underrepresented or needs focus, please write to us with a proposal. As a community-driven journal, we want to know what our readers want to see in future issues.

In other news, we have some exciting developments to share. Firstly, we have a new guest editor, and the call for submissions will be announced soon. Secondly, we have collaborated with InSAF India (International Solidarity for Academic Freedom in India) on a podcast, 'Ideas Behind Bars,' where we discuss the ideas, thoughts, and works of thinkers, activists, artists, and scholars from India who have been incarcerated for their work, or whose work has been censored/silenced. You can listen to monthly episodes on Spotify or InSAF India's podcast page. Thirdly, the 'New in Poetry' section is undergoing a change, and we want to make it more systematic and representative of the work we publish there. With that in mind, there is no 'New in Poetry' selection in this issue, but do look out for a renewed section from our forthcoming issue. There are other key changes that we'd like to bring in and we'll keep the community notified of them as things progress.

Our current issue, guest edited by Huzaifa Pandit, is our shortest issue ever. There are several reasons for that but it brings us back to the belief that over time the calls have become rightfully challenging and complex, and writers responding to them need more time to do justice to them. With that in mind, going forward, we intend to discontinue a quarterly-bound publication schedule and rather have one that is sensitive to the particular issue and the time it needs, but at the same time is rigorous with the schedule it sets for itself. We sincerely apologise for this delay. Ironically, the theme of the issue was 'banality,' and in the times we live in, there may be nothing more banal than silence.

With love,
The editors

Anam Tariq

Teucer's nil desperandum

cliques ... cliques do you
discern when you
watch the passing
grey, four-legged
heavy creatures?
another clique of
say pink-white dyed
flamingoes as they stand
on pink sticks
head-butting,

passing all, through
the capturing lens.
one clique devoid of
the members of
another, one species
kept from the other
but some in their societies
their own kind skip
who thus rove

upon the desolate wind
in deserts of grief,
like tattered, spotted,
discarded dolls,
clothes, books,
with identity non-human
the streets, camps
and borders measure.
searching for a place
in people's hearts
who assume them viruses
that've come to take their part.

okay, before a plush
property when you say:
I wish we were
in that balcony viewing,
and comes a *no child*
ours it may never be,
curls under the same niche
of despair, a graver loss—
of the skies, the land
the bread, the generations,
the barbed wire bound dreams
of the displaced, the in-betweens
die a manifold, silent deaths.

atop a fighter's bod
and upon an idyll lost,
across a telescreen
strains a tear alike,
still, unaware about the occasion.

Uma Gowrishankar

Erasure

I remember six instances:
the dusty edges
in the twilight of a dull prism.

The first: Did he
 see I was bleeding
incised by the giant pandanus skirting

the rugged path
 in the forest, on the trail
 where tall grasses wove the breeze?

He gave his hand,
hefted me from doubt

 that summer as we climbed the hill.

The third: The light on the river teased
 our eyes.

 The trees zigzagged—the vertigo
was from the astonishment of seeing the halo
rearrange as we
 pulled a chair at the dhaba
 to look
at the redbush blossom set fire
the millet field - warriors bearing torches.

The sixth: Posthumous.
In Kali temple,

the swirl of camphor smoke
hovered
over limbs of lies and tentacles of delusions.

Fourth & fifth: He flashed
light
down
the crack.

A flame sparked the rope,
then firm hands
braided him in a bed of green fronds.

The Sea

The waves without prying steal
 into the morning, leaving unmoved the uncovered feet
 sticking out of the boat

Like finches caught in wild grass, the sand
 in his hair and the countless salt crystals in particles
 of air chisel the shifting wind

The blanket of grief is tucked under the chin
 untouched by the cyclonic squall stirred in the Indian Ocean:
 what else can splinter him more

The horizon is taut in an unplugged circuit
 the light of the red-hot copper brushes the wings of geese, curl
 between looped fingers—his son's

The mother, unable to toss loss in crates
 that men haul to fishmarkets, pictures the sea in squares:
 a picture card of sunset—her son's

Anubhuti Vashist

In Dust till Dawn

Dbool, dbool, dbool

Mitti, mitti, mitti

Dbool-mitti, dbool-mitti

These words matching the tune of a popular '90s rock 'n' roll Hindi song buzz in Dimple's head as she runs the dust cloth over the marbled top of the coffee table; its specifics made perfectly clear to her on the first day of work.

For coffee purposes only, Miss Dimple. Imported from foreign! You understand foreign? Italy, Spain, America are all foreign, Miss Dimple. Your sir wants it spick and span at all times. No water, no scratches and no stains. Mulmul cotton duster to be used at all times please, Miss Dimple.

Ab-Ab- nothing.

The instructions came her way regularly for three weeks. It was, for Dimple, her second training session. The first was at the agency where she had been assumed by the CIA, Chief In-Charge of the Agency, to be a thief, a liar, a seductress and an extortionist.

The lessons that followed were a list of how not to be any of these to the extremely generous people called the benevolent employer.

The benevolent employer will pay you handsomely so don't steal. The benevolent employer will give bonuses so don't lie for extra leaves. The benevolent employer will provide good food so don't pester him for a bonus. The benevolent employer will be extremely busy so don't be late to work. The benevolent employer is highly respectable so wear decent clothes. The benevolent employer lives in a cultured society so don't hang out with your aashiq-washiqs in the building compound.

Ab-Ab- nothing.

The long list of don'ts was followed by *Yes ma'am* and *Yes sir* tutorials. Saying no to the benevolent employer was never an option in the eyes of the CIA. A polite refusal

with pleading eyes might work now and then, but if it didn't, then a slight nod and a gentle smile was enough to indicate submission.

To top it all off, mastering that perfect 'yes' came with a whole package of tone, pitch and volume.

Not so loudly, but gently. Yes sir, please. Yes ma'am, please. Always stretch your please a bit to sound sincere. A please goes a long way, you know. Now lose that coquettish smile. Are you there to be a maid—oh, sorry--domestic help or a mistress? Ha ha ha! Okay back to business. Gita, don't smile too wide. No one wants to see your tobacco stained teeth. Now look, Dimple, soften that gaze. Are you planning to shoot bullets from your eyes like that Govinda song? Ha ha ha! Don't...

After 6 months of loyalty, punctuality, diligence and honesty, Dimple is yet to see a full salary paid on time, let alone a bonus. The CIA eats half her salary, calling it a concession for his contribution in her success as a domestic help--not maid as the CIA loves to keep up with the changing climate at least in verbal terms. Her pleading eyes are ignored by the master's roving fingers; a slight brush on her bare back as she stoops to mop the floor. The promised good food is nothing but the cold leftovers untouched by children reluctant to try something new or a partially finished meal handed over to her when the guests are full.

Ab-Ab- nothing.

Dusting and sweeping, she glances sideways. Dimple sees sahib getting ready for office and madam running after Shlok baba.

*Ab-Ab-*nothing.

Dhool, dhool, dhool

Ab-choo! Ab-choo! Choo!

Shlok baba calls it Dee-Yoo-Ess-Tee.

"Dimple aunty," baba says in his sweet baby voice, "repeat after me, Dee-Yoo-Ess-Tee."

Dimple obliges as if programmed to follow every whim and fancy of her benevolent providers. "Dee-Yoo-Ess-Tee, small master" she repeats in a robotic voice with her arms moving like one.

Shlok baba smiles with content which Dimple senses is not over her articulation but his progress as a teacher. His face says “Oh! These types can learn too.”

“Now say dust, all the letters together” he chimes.

“Dukhst” she replies.

“No-no, Dimple aunty, dust, say dust.” Baba adorably slaps his forehead in exasperation.

“Duh-kst” she tries again.

“Oho! So dum....”

Madam carries away baba quickly. “Dum-duma-dum-dum,” madam croons innocently, sweetly. “Dimple finish soon” she fires sternly.

After a few days, Shlok baba asks Dimple to forget the word. It makes him bitter; his endeavour as a teacher gone to *dubk.st*.

Dimple forgets the word as quickly as she had learned it. It’s never been her favourite word. *Dee-Yoo-Ess-Tee*, *dukst*, *dub-kst*, *dbool* are all same to her. Throat scratching, skin itching, throat itching and skin scratching dust of the city can never be her favourite.

Mitti, now *mitti*, she misses in this concrete jungle.

She becomes forlorn whenever it rains. Longing for the smell of wet earth; pining for a glimpse of the dense forest enclosing her village, all spick and span after being washed by the rains; but mostly yearning to get soaked and for once not in sweat and dust.

There is a lush green park in the middle of this meretricious concrete jungle called The Grand City Village. The park is lined with tall palm trees. Sahib boastfully calls it The Grand Garden of Eden in front of his *bi-fi* friends.

During her house calls in the evening, Dimple sees residents jogging in the park. Her eyes move from one to another till they settle on the couple that brisk walks with their dog, Poodle. *Modern Couple Goals* is what they call it on their YouTube channel. *New India’s Adam and Eve gracing our very own Grand Garden of Eden* is what sahib had teasingly commented on one of the couple’s videos.

Whoever this Adam and Eve were at least they would've been more sensitive to their staff is what Dimple thought after sahib had read out to her in Hindi what he had written. It was his way of forcing her to chuckle at his stunning display of wit which madam openly labeled as cringey.

The agency had first assigned her to the couple, but Dimple left when she had been sophisticatedly requested to clean Poodle's crap. Maybe it wasn't considered by Master Adam and Miss Eve as a modern enough couple's goal. She still remembers the look on their faces when she had outrightly refused; their bewildered eyes, scanning her body to trace the source of self-respect, seemed to echo their preconceptions.

But aren't these types okay with crap? Isn't it their job to clean everything? Aren't their slums full of it? Aren't they used to smelling it, touching it? For money don't they... do they really care?

Crap and dust are two words she now loathes with all her might. The crap and dust of brand new India with its luxury villages and modern gardens thrown to her lot.

"Let Poodle go to crap" she had screamed. The incident has since then brought her Service Satisfaction Rating to three stars. Soon she will start hating the stars too. The *very very important* twinkling wonders, which her CIA adores the most, shall no longer remain her favourite.

Mind you all, the stars are very very important. Less than four stars and thousand rupees cut. Less than three stars and two thousand rupees cut. Cut, cut, cut.

On her evening round today, Dimple spots Shlok baba racing with other kids in *The Grand Garden of Eden*. She can't help but feel sorry for the watchful nannies hovering about them like eagles.

One cut and the job is gone. No cut, no cut, no cut. She imagines the CIA of the nanny agency shoving instructions down their throats.

Today her roving eyes miss the couple and settle on the metal structure in one corner. A cylindrical butterfly with wings of steel. She is amused that she'd never noticed it before. But again it could be a recent installation by the mighty RWA which is forever competing with the RWA of the newly built and classy-looking Grand Condo City in the area.

But what RWA sees as a competition, Dimple and her CIA view as an opportunity. More houses will mean more work and better Service Satisfaction Rating or that is what the CIA says.

She smiles as the metal butterfly suddenly shoots a jet of water. “Oh! A butterfly water fountain” she gasps in shock. Excited to get tickled by the water spray, she rushes towards the gate of the park but is stopped short by a deafening shrill.

“Don’t trust our walking style or what? Our feet will ruin the *mulmul* grass or what? Haven’t I seen dogs here many times or what? Do dogs have a better walk or what?” Dimple shouts at the security guard when she turns and finds him running in her direction with a stick to shoo her away.

“*Mana bai. Mana bai.* Not allowed. Not allowed” his pitch matching the shrill of his whistle.

Ishan Marvel

The Census

It was noontime and the dogs of Mettheschrang lay about the village square, soaking in the summer harmony of hot sunshine and cool mountain breeze. The usual group of old men sat smoking their hookahs and playing dice in the small temple compound as little children ran about, teasing the elders now and then before scurrying out of their reach. Everyone else was busy weeding their terraced fields. Suddenly, the children stopped their games and launched into excited chatter, pointing towards five strange men walking uphill towards the village – four of whom were carrying sticks and wearing identical dirt-coloured clothes. They were saying something to the people in the fields, who then called out to each other and followed behind the strangers. The game of dice too came to a pause.

— Oh my, it's the police!

— Say, what?

— The police, I said!

— Oh, the police? Yes, yes, it is the police. Right there, look.

— That's what I said you idiot!

— But brothers, what is this police?

— Don't you remember? They are like soldiers of the white men.

— Oh yes, yes! They came once before when our children were still children.

— With that white man who wanted to measure the mountains, yes?

— Ha ha ha, precisely! They stopped here for a meal before moving on to the high passes, remember?

— Oh brother, that was fun, wasn't it?

— Yeah, he was a nice fellow – gave us those fancy cigarettes, remember?

— Yes, yes, white people are nice. Remember the Kristan missionaries who came long ago?

— Oh yes, they were here only for a single moon-cycle before the pandits and the lamas came and drove them away.

— Oh wow! That was ages ago, wasn't it? Our balls had just dropped around the time I believe.

— Ha ha ha ha, yeah, those missionaries were nice too. And they never had any police or soldiers with them.

— Remember the way they spoke our language? So funny!

— O yes, I couldn't stop laughing each time that white priest tried talking to me
— *When meat smell, you no put it to mouth!*

— Ha Ha!

— Hey, but they gave us a lot!

— Yes, would we have potatoes without them?

— And what about the iron tandoors?

— Of course, what a blessing! And they even taught us how to make them.

— Sure, they were nice people alright.

— Ennh, but always going on and on about their Jesu. Jesu this and Jesu that.

— Oh yeah, that was boring. So what if he could walk on water or make it into wine?

— Absolutely right brother! Didn't our elders tell us of the glorious old days when we had hundreds of lamas and yogis flying around these mountains doing all sorts of magic?

— Exactly, what's so special about their Jesu?

— Lord Ghepan knows! Wonder what these five have come for though . . .

The official party had reached the square with pretty much the entire village in tow. After taking a few moments to catch his breath and wipe his perspiring face with a crisp white handkerchief, the bespectacled middle-aged man wearing a grey safari suit stepped forward, cleared his throat and began, "Namaskaar, Mettheshrang people! You understand? Good, good! I, Junior Development

Officer Ram Pratap Sharma. I come here far and bring good news of, err 1-9-4-7.”

— Good news of what?

— 1-9-4-7.

— What is that?

— Year number 1-9-4-7.

— What do you mean?

— I don’t understand either, and why does he have such a weird long name?

— Yeah, none of us understand. What do you mean, man?

The JDO looked towards the line of young constables behind him but they seemed even more confused. He turned back to face the crowd and resumed, “This year – you know, summer to summer – number 1-9-4-8. Coming summer 1-9-4-9, gone summer 1-9-4-7.”

One of the old men spoke up, “Ohhh, it’s like how the Kristan missionaries used to say! We were just discussing them right now. You kids won’t remember. They came much before you were born, back when we dotards were still young. Eh, Suntu, you used to be friends with that white priest, tell them!”

— Oh yes, yes, white people have been counting the days and years all this while. So as this man says, it must be 1-9-4-8 years from when they began counting.

— What? Are they crazy? Why would anyone do that?

— I think they started counting from when their god Jesu was born.

— But why count?

— Gods know! Or at least their god should.

The JDO intervened, “Yes, yes! This year 1-9-4-8. I bring good news of gone year 1-9-4-7 when white sahibs leave our nation. You free now!”

— What do you mean? When were we not free?

— And who are these sahibs, you mean those white missionaries?”

— No, no, white sahibs who rule our nation long time.

— Your nation? Which one? Chamba, Ladakh, Kangra or Kullu?

The JDO was getting visibly agitated while the constables struggled to suppress their laughter behind his back. “No, our nation, India! Great nation, new nation, we all part of India!” he cried.

— Aeeey man, what nonsense do you keep talking? What is this India business now?

— Yeah, we’ve never heard of this new nation.

— India, Hindustan, Bharat! Our motherland! Our new nation! We all part of it!

— Really? Just like that?

— Yes!

— So what now?

— Yeah, do we get something?

— Or do we have to give something?

— Err, we soon find out.

— Hmm, so how big is this India?

— Big, very big!

— Are the far-off places like Udaipur and Malana also part of it?

— Is it bigger than the Chamba kingdom or smaller?

— Big, very big. Chamba, Udaipur, Malana, Ladakh, Kullu – all part of India! Big country – from mountains here till open seas in south. We all part of India.

— Wow, are you really speaking the truth?

— Yes, yes, truth, our India big nation!

— Strange name, India.

— And who made this India by the way?

— New government make it.

— Lord Ghepan, there's no stopping this man! What is this new government now?

— Uhh, your new rulers, like white sahibs before.

— What? White people never ruled us!

— Come to think of it, not even the kings! Just their Thakurs and Ranas. Curse them bloodsuckers!

— True, brother! We never see the kings, but these lords come each summer and take almost all our grain.

— These sons-of-their-wives are the ones who forced our grandfathers to start growing wheat, remember? What's the point when we barely get to eat it!

— Hey you, man from the plains, will this new government also come to suck us dry?

— No, no, new government help you. And no more kings! No more Thakurs! Only government of India!

— Wow! No more kings, really?

— Ennhh, he's lying!

— Yeah, no way any of this is true!

— Wait, where is this new government?

— In Dilli, you know Dilli?

— Of course we know Dilli, you think we are idiots?

— I am getting real tired of this clown.

— Yeah, somebody give him a nice kick in the arse.

— Right brothers, we could have weeded a quarter of our fields by now.

— True, what a waste of time! Bloody cocksucker!

“Hey, hey, calm down!” Tsering Gyaltzen, the ageing village chief checked the crowd before taking a few steps towards the outsider. “Truth is, none of us have seen Dilli, but we have heard it is a huge flat city far to the south of our mountains. So the new government lives there and its powers reach all the way here! Hmm, this India really is big, eh?”

The JDO regained some of his enthusiasm, “Yes, very big! New government in Dilli. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru Prime Minister! Now we choose our leaders . . .”

— What minister?

— Yeah, what are you saying, fool? Are you stoned or something?

— Who is this Pandit now?

— And how do we choose our leaders? Like we choose our village chief?

— Yes, yes, this is all getting too much. Ayee, people, let’s get back to the fields. This man is just wasting our day.”

“ENOUGH!” the JDO screamed; and before anyone could react he pounced upon the closest man, that is Tsering Gyaltzen, and grabbed him by the collar. At that instant, a deep heavy voice rose. “LET HIM GO! He is our chief. Remember, you are in our village and there are just five of you.”

All necks turned in unison to where Shivchand was standing straight and formidable with his chest puffed out. His familiar anger brought heart to the villagers, and murmurs of approval and mild cheering took over. The JDO, still holding Gyaltzen, was set aback. “Anything hap-happen to us . . . M-more police come,” he stammered.

Shivchand remained calm. “That may well be. But the five of you will already be dead and burnt by then. All I am saying . . .” He paused and turned around to look at his fellow villagers. Reassured by the kinship in their eyes, he continued, “All we are saying is you treat us with respect, for we have done you no harm and it is you who have come to us.”

“Okay, okay. But people ask many questions, stupid questions!” the JDO muttered, trying to regain some ground. Then, realizing he was still holding on to Gyaltzen’s collar, the officer quickly let go and forced a weak smile to his face before removing his fogged-up glasses and nervously wiping them with a handkerchief.

Meanwhile, the crowd became merry and many of Shivchand’s relatives and friends came around to hug him and pat him on the back. “JAI TTHAR NAAG!”

he screamed, and the whole village echoed the cry: “JAI TTHAR NAAG!” “JAI TTHAR NAAG!” “JAI TTHAR NAAG!”

Gyaltzen placed a hand on the subdued official’s shoulder and spoke warmly, “You see, we have never really been ruled before. Annually harassed by lords, yes, but we have always lived free. Otherwise, no outsiders come here and rarely have any of us ventured beyond the next mountain. So try to understand – we really don’t know what you are talking about.”

Something inside the JDO finally broke. He put his glasses back on and whispered, “I no know too. Sahibs send us to write your names.”

— Our names, but why?

— I no know. They want names of all India people.

Gyaltzen scratched his chin for a bit and turned to the crowd. “This new government wants to know our names. It’s strange but I don’t see any harm in it. Who knows, maybe they will even help us like this man claims . . . So what do you say people of Mettheschrang, should we give them our names?”

After quick chaotic discussions, everyone agreed, for the whole thing was so novel and exciting – that someone powerful from the world beyond the mountains could care enough to ask for their names. The JDO got some of his vigour back. “Great! Come one-one. Go to policeman with notebook. There, good, good! One-one.”

The chief walked to the designated constable. “I am Tsering Gyaltzen.”

— What Khayal Singh?

— Tse-ring Gyal-tsen.

— Okay, okay . . . Zerín Khyal Sen . . . And how many years you lived?

“Oh, like in your numbers? Only Lord Ghepan can tell!” the old man replied with a shrug.

The constable looked him up and down. “Okay, seventy. Your family?”

— My wife is called Palzom Butri and we have four – no, five children. Three sons and two daughters. As for grandchildren . . .

— Wait, I write. Pal Som Bhutti . . . Three boys and two girls . . . Your wife old as you?

— A little less.

— Okay, sixty-five . . . Your children names? And how old?

— Eennhh, I've had it with your questions boy! All of them are here only, ask them yourself. I have told you enough . . . What a headache!

With that, the chief stormed off towards a circle of young men who had just lit a chillum. The constable let out a deep sigh. It was going to be a long day.

Ramesh Karthik Nayak

Feast

In quest of food in field lands
birds walk through the heaps of leaflets,
they hunt and search, breaking the lumps of clay.

As the greedy-hearted birds look out
for earthworms and beetles,
they only find insects, broken twigs,
or ants carrying grains on yellow leaves.

The sun tickles their heads
as a needle in the sky-clock;
the world boils, and the air becomes vicious
and the glow of day daze the birds,
few die and few are about to die.

The corpses of birds apply features
to the summer air
Clots of blood flow through the veins
passing from the heart to beak.

The summer days of blue clouds
look charred in the eyes of birds
that lose their memory
to the vanishing sun.

In the night, an army of ants appears
as a royal family invited to a feast,
they munch miracles of clouds,
and disappear to the chilling night

Creation

The frozen snake,
guarding the egg of earth
doesn't have life or death

The egg of earth breaks,
forming a language on its shell
as it gets old

There are cowrie shells
corn, jowar, sand and
the water inside it,

The creatures reincarnate
inside the egg, mortgaging the
language after they form
a heart to understand.

Sangeetha G

Paappuamma's Loudspeaker

We did not have an alarm clock during our school days. But we always woke up at six o'clock in the morning without fail. My twin and I relied on the 'Loudspeaker' that would sound 'Paappuamma' thrice at six in the morning. The 'Loudspeaker' would wait for five minutes and then start the basic language lessons for Paappuamma in both Malayalam and English, which would go on for the next hour. In one hour, we too would have finished our homework and started preparing for school. This routine continued for years and the 'Loudspeaker' gave a wake-up call not just for us, but the entire neighbourhood.

Paappuamma's husband Padmanabhan, better known as Loudspeaker, was a clerk of a lawyer practising at the sub-judicial court in the nearest town. No one in our tiny village in central Kerala dared to compete with him when it came to decibels. Once he opened his mouth, he could even turn around a moving bus; walkers on the road were still mortals. Whenever 'Loudspeaker' uttered a word while travelling in an omnibus, the startled driver would apply brakes, bringing the moving vehicle to a screeching halt and forcing the vehicles behind to bump into each other.

Once, a worker from the electricity department came to fix a faulty power line. He had climbed up the electric post and was precariously holding on to the post while handling the wires when an anxious Padmanabhan enquired whether everything was alright with him. The man who never feared playing with the live wires was shocked by the voice and fell off the post. He broke his back and remained bedridden for months. A guilty Padmanabhan would pay him visits to check on his health. But the doctors and hospital staff would let him in only if he promised to shut his mouth. The worker could not afford another shock, they warned him.

The lawyer appointed him as a clerk on a single condition that he should communicate only using hand gestures and written words. After eight hours of keeping mum at the office, he took revenge upon hapless neighbours and family members. His house was at least 200 metres away from ours, but limitations of space were only applicable to others. Loudspeaker's voice could pierce even the hardest stone and travel faster than light. There were no secrets in Loudspeaker's

house, even his romantic whispers to his wife could interrupt the conversations in our house.

But Paappuamma always felt ashamed to travel with him as everyone would turn around when he spoke and then give her a sympathetic look. An embarrassed Paappuamma would keep admonishing him, “speak softly”. We would debate among ourselves as to how many times Paappuamma would have uttered that phrase in her life - one lakh, two lakh, or more. All his private conversations with her were in the public domain. His family had forsaken their right to privacy. They always felt embarrassed like a few naked women walking in a street full of burqa-clad people.

Paappuamma never had to get into a verbal fight with her husband. At the very onset of the fight, all the residents in the vicinity would queue up to mediate as they needed some peace of mind. In her conversations with the neighbours, Paappuamma always complained about his high-decibel voice and wished he always remained quiet.

She was married off to Padmanabhan at a young age. Padmanabhan never uttered a word till the marriage was fixed, apparently on strict instructions from his parents. Paappuamma discovered the truth about her husband only after marriage. It seems Paappuamma jumped out of her bed on the wedding night when she heard him for the first time. She even stopped attending marriages and family functions when people started teasing her as ‘Loudspeaker’s wife’.

During Paappuamma’s pregnancies, she would gag him with a cotton cloth and ask him to communicate in gestures. Whenever he talked to her, the baby would jump inside the womb. Till the babies were big enough, he would tie the cloth over the mouth while they were asleep. He was never allowed to baby talk with them as they would get scared and start crying. Even his mother used to gag young Padmanabhan whenever she went for a nap.

Though Paappuamma was embarrassed by her husband, he doted on her. He was a tall stout man and she a short woman. For us, they were an awkward pair. She was not quite keen on studies during her childhood and stopped going to school after the teacher scolded her for wasting the time of others in the class. Her mother too felt that Paappuamma’s decision was right as years of schooling had not made any impact on her. Her real name was ‘Padmini’. After she left school everyone forgot her real name and she became ‘Paappu’ forever.

Once Padmanabhan's colleague discovered that she could not read or write her mother tongue, leave alone English. When he called her 'illiterate', Padmanabhan got offended. Then on, Padmanabhan started imparting language lessons to Paappuamma at home. He vowed to make her proficient in Malayalam and English and classes continued for years despite Paappuamma's reluctance to learn.

Over time, we learned to live with the loudest man. He was our alarm clock and sound that broke our dreary silences. Children in our locality never feared thunderstorms. In the early '80s, before the arrival of television sets in our living rooms, Loudspeaker was the main source of entertainment for the women in our house. Our mom and aunts would play the 'Loudspeaker game' almost every day in the afternoons. So, it went like this. You would have heard the dialogues delivered by Loudspeaker and as part of the game, you have to reconstruct the conversation of his family by guessing what would have been the lines uttered by the other members.

We would be shooed away like dogs or slaves if seen around. "Are you overhearing conversations of adults? Go away, girls".

"Adults can have their secret conversations and we can't keep any secrets. We too should have the right to privacy - of keeping our exam marks and report cards private, the signature we fudged in the report card, and the banana fritters we gobbled up in a single sitting...." we had a strong urge to revolt.

"But what if the adults stop making banana fritters?" Banana fritters weighed heavier than privacy and we remained perpetually under slavery.

Our college-going elder brother harboured a certain bitterness toward the hapless Loudspeaker as the latter interrupted his creative process. Always seen wearing a loose shabby kurta and unkempt beard, he called himself an intellectual. We discovered that his creativity resided in his beard like Samson in the Bible; hence, he never washed it or shaved it off. He would scratch the beard hard and his creative juices would flow through his fingers and arms up to his neck and reach his head establishing a 'creativity circuit'. Once that happens he would keep on scribbling about things that none in the family could make head or tail of. The Loudspeaker's voice will break the circuit and turn the intellectual into an expletive-hurling hooligan.

Then one day, we missed school as our alarm did not go off. Padmanabhan had severe throat pain and fever till the previous day and when he woke up that day no voice came out. A soundless whiff of air escaped his mouth. His fever subsided in a few days, but his voice did not return.

Neighbours and family members looked relieved for the next few days. But a world sans Loudspeaker's voice was a different experience for us. First, there was a solemn silence reminding us of a mourning house. Then we started hearing subtle sounds of chirping birds, barking dogs, and squeaking squirrels. Our brother kept on churning out "intellectual stuff" in reams and reams of paper, contributing immensely to deforestation and global warming. Most importantly, we had to find out ways to wake up in the morning. Father bought an alarm clock for us, which spooked our hearts every morning. We missed our Loudspeaker alarm.

Padmanabhan went to the office and continued his hand gestures even at home. The unspoken words congested his chest and he hunched under their weight. He dragged himself to the office and back home. Padmanabhan was eating less, lying down more, and keeping himself away from others. With his silence, his presence in the family went unnoticed.

His broad smile was long gone, but he did not take out his frustration on his family. For them, life was more peaceful and private without Padmanabhan's voice.

Paappuamma's initial relief soon faded away. She missed her language classes and the loud voice that had become a part of her life. She had lived with that voice for years, but had never realised the void its absence could create in her life. Silence started terrifying her. Padmanabhan had become just a shadow of his former self - mute and insignificant.

Meanwhile, Padmanabhan and his family were out of the afternoon gossip topics in our house. Women had to discover new ways to entertain themselves. But none were as interesting as the 'Loudspeaker game'. Then they once again got something juicy to discuss for a couple of sessions - Paappuamma had sold her gold ornaments.

"How could she sell her gold?" women were terrified as if Paappuamma had lost a limb. They discussed in detail each ornament she owned. Women in our neighbourhood had the designs of each other's jewellery so deeply etched in their minds that even Alzheimer's could not erase that memory.

It was only after a few sessions that they bothered to think about why she sold the ornaments. “Paappuamma is taking her husband for ‘advanced treatment’ to Madras! It seems none of the doctors here have been able to cure him and Paappuamma is determined to get her husband speaking again. Has she gone mad? Nobody else in the family wants to accompany her. How will illiterate Paappu, who has not even stepped out of the village, communicate with the doctors and others in the local language Tamil or English in such a far-off city?” The women got something to harp on for the next few days.

By the time that discussion got over, Paappuamma and Padmanabhan returned. Now the discussion was about the surgery performed on Padmanabhan. “If the surgery was done, why hasn’t he got back his voice? I think they would not have gone to Madras,” mother opined.

“It seems the post-surgery medication is going on,” one aunt remarked. The heated debate on whether Padmanabhan will get back his voice or not went on for a few days.

Then one fine morning, we woke up hearing our dearest alarm ringing. ‘Paappuamma’, Loudspeaker called thrice and resumed the English language lessons.

Once again, our lives became normal. We threw away the alarm clock into the attic. Loudspeaker’s voices and loud laughs filled the neighbourhood and we all woke up on time.

But Paappuamma had changed. She started going out with her husband without any hesitation. She spoke to her husband inside the bus and let him talk loudly, ignoring the curious co-passengers. She proudly introduced herself as ‘Loudspeaker’s wife’ at weddings and other social gatherings and no longer skipped any. ENDS

Anuradha Prasad

Solus

Burrowing into yourself, bumping into bones, squeezing past flesh, tiptoeing over blood, sidestepping spongy organs, you become more than skin and nose and hair and hips even as your hands, fingertips shiver over clavicles, pubic bone, a world map slapped against thigh till you are water and breath and whole.

Allowing waves of yourself to wash over you, some bits of you snag like insects in a web, some you catch in a fist like you would a mosquito, merciless, others tenderly like you would a butterfly, powder pigments coloring fingertips, some sit upon your head, shoulders, dark grandfather crows you don't want to see but you have to for this too is you just as the hummingbird is you, the bee-eater is you, the hawk with the careening whistle is you. Hanging off you like pearls and diamonds, your lover's kiss, your bully's menace, your mother's song. You who are naked and robed in silks and perfumes.

Discovering mirror islands you swim into seas and mount terrains lost, brandish swords, bleed into language, a bewitchment called love you found and still find again, again, again, there it is in the storytales, there it is in the crunch of a granny smith, it is in the song that is off tune/full soul, it is in black and white nana shot and dead, in the tongues and mouth making plosives and fricatives, in the strokes of carmine and cobalt and crossed paths and destinies, the dance of belly and serpent, hips tracing infinities, what was once never the same.

Closing and opening you become blinking eyelids, the open sky and a huddled bird in the fork of tree trunks, the underworld where ants break lines and refuse to work, the river that skips pebbles on banks, the constellation that dropped a star and is now a gummy, toothless smile.

Tabish Nawaz

The Window

A riot was imminent in the city. The RCB fans in the stadium were livid, blaming poor umpiring for their defeat. The police in time had prevented a CSK jersey going up in flames. At the office, a few colleagues had been engaging in a heated discussion in the canteen since morning. In the name of their opinions, no one agreed to anything another said, though they paused in their speech whenever someone spoke, and without almost listening, immediately put forth their point, unfazed by what was just said. While pretending to listen, they organized thoughts within their heads, carefully selecting words for the counter-argument. It seemed that they were on guard against themselves in appreciating one another.

This was going on in the name of conversation. Many who participated in it, considered it a discussion and every once in a while reminded themselves by saying that *we are only discussing*. *We-are-only-discussing* had an air of snootiness to it and everyone uttered it at some point during their speech. The expression somehow had a mellowing effect and it often transformed the yelling voices to calming whispers, which everyone appreciated as polite on part of the speaker. It was all a game in saying *I say so*. What omniscience was contained in the *I* of these people, I wondered. I amused myself in learning in what diverse ways each came up with their own version of *I say so*. From the crudest *I say so* to a nearly harmless *In my opinion* to a much sophisticated *I once read somewhere*, mentioning a certain philosopher or a writer or an influencer said so. Each pretty much said the same thing - "*I say so*" and nothing else mattered.

Worried about these verbal exchanges and the rumors of fist-fights breaking out in the canteen, the boss, who considered himself non-partisan, had asked us to leave early for our homes today. He came out of his cabin and stared at no one in particular, but in a manner suggesting that he watched everyone, the boss yelled at an imaginary person - "you get the hell out of my office, if you need to discuss the umpiring decisions, do it out of here". The people who everyone anticipated would be offended, remained calm and smiling. It seemed that they were satisfied by his dramatic behavior. After his outburst, even the boss was seen talking jovially to someone on his cellphone.

While coming out of the office, many expressed joy for this little diversion from their routine and rushed to their families. It was a little unsettling for me to go to the house at this hour. It had been a while since I came home this early. I could not remember when I had seen the sunset last. While Hira was there, on one pretext or another, I often came early from work. Most of the time, it was just me putting up some appearance, to preserve our lives from the routineness of our affairs. I would find her curled up in the bed, taking her siesta, stooped on the table, trying too hard solving a math problem, or standing next to the stove with a ladle. Every time I stepped in, I thought of giving her a surprise, but finding her in the ashen light of the afternoon, filtering through the curtains, I would be surprised myself, as if I had seen a giant flower, and any sudden movement on my part, would make the petals fall. Seeing me at the door, she would only smile and offer no surprise. She understood that why I am home early, that folks who need orderliness in their affairs are those who lack someone to lean on to, like a child they need a ruled notebook to put their words in, else their words would be blown over the pages by the uncertainty of their own hands doing the writing.

While returning home early, I was worried if I would find Hira. I knew she was not there, but by repeating a forgotten task, I wishfully thought of a possibility, that what if she would be there, just like the old times. I believed that the memory of the act might actually bring her back. With the nostalgia, my pace quickened, but after a while the rational side convinced me that my hopes were as misplaced as a full-stop in the beginning of a sentence, and I began to vacillate in my path.

I loitered outside the company's gate for a while, after the security had checked my bag, unsure of where to go. A movie theater stood across the gate. It had been a long time since I last went to a movie theater. Therefore, I walked to the theater. I noticed a large fighter jet and a military tank kept in the theater compound. A dog with its mouth wide open was resting in the jet's shade. The dog looked at me with curiosity. I also thought of patting its neck, but I could not bring myself to the act. The ticket counter was deserted. I walked past it to look at the movie posters before buying the ticket. The posters were pasted in a window behind a mesh of steel wires, to protect them from some stealing hands. An LED light glowed around the inside edges of the window. An obscene-looking plump lizard, decolorized as if exposed to vehicle exhaust for its whole life, sat inside, unconcerned at my gaze.

When I first looked at the poster, I failed to recognize any of the actors. I realized that it had indeed been quite a while. On peering hard, I could recognize ARK, which gave me a feeling that he was not much important to the movie, though, I

believe, he was a superstar earlier. I noticed the Supreme Leader smiling in the corner of the movie poster. I smiled back looking at him. I remembered a person who was reported a few years ago for seeing a poster of him without smiling back. The news channels were aghast covering that story. I recalled he was sentenced to forty-eight hours of continued smiling while watching the cherubic face of the Supreme Leader. I looked around to see if anyone else was there. I noticed a stern looking man staring at me. There was an iron-like feel to his gaze. I smiled with more vigor now, to convince him of my devotion.

The poster had failed to arouse an interest in me for the movie. Therefore, I came out from the other side, where the dog was not sitting. I avoided the dog, for it had elicited in me some affection, walking away from it would have been difficult. I exited the theater complex and forgot about the dog, though I felt that iron-like stare of the man on my back for some distance, as if he tapped at my back with his gaze, asking me to look back. Had I been forgetful, I would have turned back to check what was sticking at my back. But I was aware, therefore, I walked out ignoring his gaze. These days people report one another at the drop of a hat; a matter concerning the Supreme Leader can be grave – I thought as I came out on the street.

The afternoon was now on the decline. The sunlight was lengthening the shadows. It had a faded glow to itself, seeing which I felt a little sadness within me. I could not bear to roam any further. Therefore, I walked to my house, with a strange determination to overcome the nostalgia awaiting there.

After reaching the house, as I unlocked the door, I wondered what a knock at it sounded like. Entering, I noticed the plinking of droplets, leaking from the faucet. The sound, though persistent, was unable to disturb the stillness of the house, rather it floated above the silence, like an oil slick on water. Soon a weariness came over my eyes, making them heavy. Like a fallen leaf, I settled over the sofa and sank into a nap.

When I woke up, it was quite late into the night. There was nothing else I could have done at that hour except to turn over on the sofa and look at the ceiling, waiting for the dawn to whiten the curtains. I found that the bulb's luminosity was unwavering, at no point it looked tired, becoming any less intense, as if ready to sleep. I thought of myself as less fortunate than that bulb, for it could be turned-off and rested. I also smiled when I remembered my fear of returning to the house early today. How blown out of proportion it was! I had not imagined that the house

would so easily dissipate the nostalgia, turning it into vapor. I began to doubt that the nostalgia even existed in me before the arrival. Staring at the ceiling, yawning on the sofa, I thought of moving to the bed, to complete the sleep.

I left for the bed, but on my way, I stopped over a half-opened window. I felt a sense of loss seeing the opened window. It reeked of a failure.

“What on earth might have led to the idea of windows?” – I muttered as I reached the window like someone on pilgrimage reciting holy verses. How terribly someone’s inner world must have failed that he invented a window, I wondered for a while.

I opened the window, with a push so gentle that I remembered putting the wedding ring in her finger. The night outside was soft and inviting. The leaves stirred on the peach trees, caressing the silence with their rustling. The full moon lent a whiteness to the meandering street. Whatever darkness remained, poured from the trees, and fell on the still vehicles and houses, making them interspersed in the engulfing light, like isolated words printed over a white sheet of paper. Outside, the night revealed itself like a poem, suddenly and at once, mystery at equilibrium with comprehension, one moment glass-like clarity, and in another carbonaceous obscurity.

Unable to keep myself inside, I jumped out of the window. I landed on a soft piece of earth. Like a fallen house lizard, I lay there for a while. After I rose, I failed to decide what direction to take, where to go. The pause was long, and it was only out of habit of walking on the streets that I took the first step. On the sidewalk, the slipper made a feeble sound, as though I was furtively walking away from myself, as if my own footsteps would startle me. The streetlights were not working. I walked watching the moon, thinking of reaching a point located directly underneath it.

I had hardly come to the end of the street when a bike stopped in front of me, almost to the point of crushing me, as if the rider knew that I would step aside and save myself from it.

“Going where *Bhaiva*?” – a question came in two voices from the bike. I looked up, figuring out how to answer the question. “The moon?” – Again the two voices spoke as if one echoed the other. I had to peer to see them. They looked like two people, all wrapped in long blankets, long enough to cover the bike as well. Bodily, only their faces were visible, that too their eyes.

“Are you on something?” – one voice trailed the other. I struggled to speak, coming to terms with the sudden movement of the bike. It was not that this one bike had perturbed me in particular, but whenever I walk on the street, moving vehicles horrify me. I shudder with a thought that the driver would fail to notice me and run me over. I believed I would have been crushed by the bike, and the driver would have argued in front of the law that he failed to see me, for it often happened that I too failed to see myself.

“Hey, check his eyes, do they look red and smaller?” – the one riding the bike spoke to his partner. His words pulled me out of the reveries. I asked who they were. It irritated them further and both got down from the bike and removed their blankets. I noticed their crumpled police uniforms, some of whose buttons were broken. Their round bellies protruded through their shirts. Perhaps, to emphasize authority, one of them farted. The other one grew angrier in his voice.

“Let me tell you who we are” – he held me by the arm.

“Are you coming from the stadium? Are you one of those rioters, venting anger at the poor umpiring?”

“These people do not understand the game and want only their team to win.” – confided the angrier cop to the one who silently peered at me, as if looking for a chink in my response, finding he would pounce and take me down.

“They have never even touched the bat and ball, I can tell you, all they have done is to watch them on their smartphones.”

Frightened, I mentioned that I was just roaming around.

“At this hour, roaming around?”

“It is only 12 in the night.”

“Why are you roaming around 12 in the night?”

By his riposte, I realized how difficult, even impossible, is explaining anything to a man with power.

“Where do you live?”

“790/21”

“Okay, take us there”

Where I live, diffidence is often an admission of a crime, and sometimes can be the only crime. Therefore, I spoke trying to sound assertive – “May be, after I roam”

“Roam my ass, you hard of hearing or what?”

“What do you do?”

“I work at a paper mill”

“That paper mill, where government papers are printed, the one near *Shyam Talkies?*” – said the other cop, who so far calmly witnessed the interrogation by his colleague.

“Yes, that one, I am a government employee too” – I spoke expecting that the nature of my job would cut some ice.

“All sorts of papers are printed there, what division do you exactly work in?” – the cop asked with interest.

“I am not allowed to disclose that” – I spoke thinking that the cops would consider the nature of my work as serious, worthy of confidentiality.

“Okay, sir, please listen, and take us to your house, we need to check if you’re fine” – he spoke, sounding earnest. The other cop, who at first was aggressive, perhaps he was subordinate to the quieter one, had become silent since the other began speaking. It seemed that they had sensed an authority invested in me, or perhaps they were not sure, and therefore, proceeded with caution. I enjoyed the brief moments, as though I had tamed a wild animal. I nodded and that brought the interrogation to a pause. I realized how complete was the silence of the night. The sound of our existence only floated above it, like water over a lotus leaf, fragmenting over the surface, failing to wet it.

The policemen gestured to me to sit between them on the bike. I was reluctant to sit between them, and therefore, made yet another attempt in getting away from them.

“We can meet in the morning, at my place.” – I pleaded to the one who looked reasonable.

“Is something troubling you, son?” His calling me son, made me more vulnerable, open to conversation perhaps. I had an intense rush to pour my heart out. But thinking of them as cops, I became hesitant.

“Don’t worry, go on, we will help.” – he assured.

I thought of sharing with them, but when I began formulating my speech, I could not decide where to begin. I suspected that they might take advantage of me, once they had heard me. Though I was still protected under the law, pretty much anything can be done to me, and no one would worry too much about it. A judge might even say that my presence was enough provocation for the cops to put me down.

“What sir! what we got to do with his story, let’s just check his apartment and papers, and be done with him.” – the persuasive manner with which the junior cop spoke not only broke the pause, but it also had a momentum that the thoughts

inside our heads became mangled. Confused, all I needed was a simple nudge to make me sit on the bike, between the two cops.

The bike moved on, lurching and real slow. The engine's sound, penetrating through the silence, lulled me, weeding out my inner worries. And it was pleasant to be driven along by another human being, to feel his straining flesh transmitting the vibrations of the machine, relaxing me into a sleep. Even the smelly blanket, which now covered me, felt like a piece of cloud – fluffy and ensconcing. The cop sitting behind me, poked me with his finger, asking for the directions. His finger felt real, as if reality itself had appointed and sent his finger as its sole representative, to wake me up and bring me into the world that awaited me. With that poke, reality rushed back at me, making me aware of the rattling bike and the streets and buildings drifting behind me, as if running away from us. The blanket was so variedly smelling, that my nose felt a feeble pain in adjusting to it. Whenever I was trying to overcome one kind of smell, another kind was creeping into the nostrils. I almost vomited, at which the junior cop laughed hilariously.

On reaching the house, I jumped from the bike, and immersed my face into the jasmine flowers growing at the doorstep. The cops pulled me back and chided me for destroying someone else's property. I came out of the nausea and indicated that the house belonged to me. The cops were surprised, looking at the house, particularly the open sky above it. They had not imagined that someone who had a house with an open sky in the city would roam around elsewhere. They had never been to such a house before. All they had known in the city included only apartments – those long pieces of concrete, vanishing into the sky, from whose tops sunlight barely crept down. Even when it rained, the streets were rarely soaked. The rain as soon as it fell got absorbed into the tiny network of tubules beneath the concrete, and was harvested in a tank somewhere. Whenever I saw a blade of grass squinting out of any crack, I felt hopeful. I understood that there is an underground rebellion underway by nature, and it would liberate the rain someday. The idea of liberation assured me of the fragility of these structures, which looked solid only on the surface. Someday, it would all be free, no hiding, like these blades of grass – I smiled often thinking.

“Isn't this the place where the refugees from the other side were settled?” – the junior cop spoke, pointing a finger over his shoulder, as if the other side was just behind his back. It was a figurative manner of asserting, though much of it had rather been acquired through social conditioning than any real lived experiences,

that the other side is always at the back, trailing behind, and against whom he always needed to guard himself.

“Yes, it is that place. It was previously a cemetery of those people.” – the voice of the senior cop was solemn, smothered with despair. I sensed it was about time, they would ask me, who I was. It was a difficult question to answer, not philosophically, but for a simple reason of survival, that I had grown over me a callus of identities, that protected the one that mattered to them.

“Were you allotted this apartment after *purification*?” I felt that the cop’s question was at best a hesitant attempt to approach the final question of who I am. He himself appeared reluctant to broach the subject, as if he too was staring at something or someone whom he had faced much difficulty in leaving behind.

“Yes, the purification was done, for each house here. I also returned to the fold.” I uttered the last line swiftly, with confidence. I thought they would not bother too much if I was upfront and confident about it. But the junior one, picked up the last line, pretty much the same way a hawk picks up a running, desperate mouse from earth.

“He returned to the fold, reconverted to his ancestral ways, that happened a long time ago, isn’t it, sir? I have only read about that time and those people, never actually met one, it is hard to determine just by the look of a person!” – the junior was elated, as if in his present he was witnessing a relic. His stare made me realize the historicity lurking within me, as if I was merely an object used by my own earlier living form, and who has somehow passed into history. The senior grew solemn, as if around someone dead.

“Okay, open your house.” – said the senior one, watering down the junior’s enthusiasm, but more visibly it seems he was trying to douse something burning inside of him.

From his command, I felt the feeble authority that I had gained being a government employee, slipping away from my grip. By knowing my identity, they had somehow gained an upper hand over me. I had no choice but to do as they said. But when I put my hand into a pocket, to fish out the keys, I realized the folly of jumping out of the window. I looked for words, for explaining my feeling that impelled me to jump at once out of the house. Sheepishly, I spoke – “The keys are inside”

“The keys are inside” – repeated the junior cop and laughed in disdain.

“How did you come out then?” – the senior one spoke, believing me. I pointed them to the open window.

This made the junior cop frenzied. He concluded that I was some crazy thief.

“Who would come out of the window at night?” – he spoke, repeating “who would” as if not questioning me, but himself. The senior cop intervened, ignoring his junior, and gestured to me to get back inside, through the window.

“Why do you believe him so much, sir? What if it turned out to be someone else’s house?” The question about why he believed me seemed to have lodged within him somewhere, as if in his inside, a fire was lit, reddening his face. He struggled to put it out, by repeating himself the question a few times, however failing to do so, he ended up saying – “because I say so.” For a senior cop to say *I say so*, is a veto to end all questions; after that only action follows. This also meant that the two cops were no longer two individuals talking to each other, but now a system spoke through them – impersonal, unattached and vengeful. A systemic being becomes most visible, when he comes to punish its own kind, acting with little attachment while punishing, so as to re-integrate the member once the message has been delivered and lesson taught. The junior cop recognized in his voice the familiar tone of the system, the force of collectivized ego resonating within his words. He obliged, waiting for his boss to overlook the trespass. “You go up” – pointed the senior one to his junior. “Tell him where your keys are, he will throw them from the window.” – he spoke turning to me while his fingers remained pointing to his junior, as if it was a gun, held toward him, to keep him in his place. In those brief moments, I noticed how deftly he carried his individual self as well as a systemic creature within himself. Bodily, his face spoke to me in a manner suggestive of a friend, standing by my side and his finger pointing to his junior kept him immobilized, reminding him of his position in the hierarchy.

The junior cop, perhaps feeling diminished, shouted a loud “Yes Sir” and began assessing the wall to climb to the window. I bowed and offered my shoulder for him to climb on, as I told him that keys were on the table next to the sofa. The cop gripped the window sill and slithered inside. From outside, below, it looked as if the window had swallowed him in, after dangling him for a while. The house looked ominous.

Left behind with the senior cop, I remained quiet and looked away, unsure of who I would talk to – a human being or a systemic being – if I spoke. I kept looking at the window, pretending to keep myself occupied with the task of looking up. The junior cop appeared at the window and threw the keys. As it fell down, the keys jangled in protest, as if they were fast asleep inside the house and were irritated to be roused like this. When I picked it up, I felt like consoling it. The senior cop had a satisfied look on his face. His punishment was over. Now he would act in a routine manner, showing no trace of flare up, he had a few moments ago. I sought his permission to open my door. If a system is around, all things become a matter of law, impersonal, coded in legal articles. Everything belongs to the system then, even your words, doors, home, family, kids, wife, all become the property of the

state, including yourself. If you killed yourself, you will be charged with killing yourself. The senior cop nodded at me to go ahead. When I opened the door, the junior cop stood at it, just inside. I was startled by his sudden apparition. He laughed like a kid, barely hiding his humanity. The senior cop had also somewhat slipped into his human skin. He too laughed uncontrollably. After a brief pause, I too joined them in. Laughing, we all began to enter the door.

When we walked inside, I offered them to sit on the sofa, while I brought them my ID papers. The senior cop followed me till the door of the room, behind him the junior one. Both stayed there, staring at me. I heard him asking to stay outside, near the bike.

When I turned on the light, the senior cop noticed the bookshelf inside the room. “They were long banned, right?” – he merely seemed to confirm.

“Yes, they were digitized by the Supreme Leader.”

“Yeah, I remembered one evening the Supreme Leader had appeared on TV and talked about the environmental harm of reading books. He had gone on to ban all use of paper, outside of government use. We collected books from door to door, and nobody knows what happened to them.” – a sense of complicity surfaced as he spoke.

“The Supreme Leader while making the announcement had warned against burning any books or throwing them away in a river. He was smart, he knew the environmental harm that would cause.” – I praised him for sounding like a reasonable person to the cop.

“Can you recite some poems to me?” – spoke the cop as he picked up a copy of *Divan – e – Ghalib*.

“You ask me to recite since you believe I belong to this culture, to which you do not?” – I spoke, taking back the book from his hand and holding it toward him. The question was more of a statement, against his attempt at making me look like an exotic being, the other.

“You are not able to recite this” – I spoke holding the pages to him – “because you are cut off from your past, your roots and your offshoots are disconnected, you are deracinated, not I am the other.”

I wondered where this outburst came from. I am usually angry when I am alone. Perhaps, the senior cop pushed me to the brink of my loneliness, by holding up to me what is private. The cop looked at me in silence, unmoved.

“I understand your complaint. It is valid. When it was happening, I was there.” – the cop sounded apologetic.

“I did not realize then, but it was not too late, when I felt the sorriness of myself, but still I could not do much, what is an individual against a machinery that is oiled by hate?” – he asked me as if seeking from me an approval, some certificate that would absolve him.

When I did not speak for long, he added – “You remember a video that came up when the big protest happened? Where a few protesters were lying on the street, in pain, and a few policemen stood over them, beating them with sticks, pulling their beards and hair, and asking them to shout a slogan, “I was there in the video, I was the one shooting the video.” I listened to him, unimpressed.

“I felt like avenging the history from you people while making the video, but a few days later, when I saw the video circulating everywhere, I realized that for a victor, the sight of a defeated man is as defeating. I felt the helplessness caused in them by me. There was nothing I could do to redeem myself from the guilt that crept into my core.”

“But you know, in the department, no one said a single word of approbation to us, no criticism, no condemnation either, as if nothing ever happened. The colleagues who belonged to your tribe, occasionally brought it up, but more to play down the incident as insignificant and calling their own kinds as hooligans, who deserved nothing better.”

“In their words and my actions, I felt how a system speaks through its most fringe elements, only to reinforce itself. I realized when fringe speaks, it is the hidden core that comes out.”

He suddenly turned to his right and shouted – “But I say, shame on Truth, shame on you!”

He spoke as if Truth actually stood there, in person – “You sleep with everyone, each takes from you, as if taking a graft from a tree and growing them into one full orchard of you, shame on you, Truth, that you never refused to share yourself with the undeserving ones.”

In those moments, the cop seemed withdrawn within himself. He had forgotten that I also stood there. When he realized I had been staring at him, he tried to brush everything off with an empty laugh – his voice felt as if emanating from a deep well, when a stone is hurled into it.

“Ohh! just forget it, it's just me, let's have a look at your papers.” – he began examining my papers, and repeated – “fine, fine” to himself.

“You live here alone? Where’s your wife, it says you’re married.” – he looked up from the paper, the light falling on the bottom half of his face and the top half covered in shadow made him look mysterious.

“You are separated?” – the cop further added, drawing an inference of his own. I did not know the answer. Presuming she is dead, he said – “I am sorry.” I thought of letting the silence fill the need for an answer, but a feeling bordering on guilt took me over and I clarified – “No, she is not dead, nor we are separated, it’s just that we are not living together. The cop perhaps found the answer mysterious, and he asked me to explain further.

“She lives with our son elsewhere.” – I gave an evasive response.

“On the other side?” – his fingers curled in a fist and thumb pointed behind his shoulder.

“No, not the other side, she lives in a friendly country, I visit them once or twice a year.” – As I spoke, I held my passport to him, showing the arrival and departure stamps to assure him that my travels were approved by the authority.

“Wise decision, sir. Your kid will have a better future there, but why didn’t you leave this country and settle with your family?” – the cop’s words had an air of disbelief within them.

“I mean to say, why would you return to the fold and live here, like a refugee, dependent on a few pieces of papers, when one has the option to leave?” – he clarified.

This thought I myself had mulled over the years. I began speaking by reminding the cop that the locality where we are, used to be our cemetery.

“Yes” – he added, with curiosity that dug further.

“My parents are buried here; I cannot leave them.” – I was not sure how plausible I sounded.

The cop looked around the house, at each undulation his eyes rested, doubtful if someone was buried there. “You mean to say, within this house, are your parents’ graves?”

I nodded and pointed toward my bed – “Both my parents are here, below it.”

The cop was visibly moved, bordering on fear and shock, staring at the graves. “This is what the nation has been reduced to.....for you, a cemetery.” – he spoke softly, his words as fragile as bubbles, swam in the spaces between us. We stood still, observing the buoyant movement of his words, vanishing into the darkness around us.

“You should bring back your family” – he spoke in quick succession. “Else, one day your son would come looking for you, sons do that for their fathers, it becomes their destiny.” – the cop spoke, as he walked to the door. “If you are present in

your son's life, he would not think of looking back for you when you are gone, you would be present even then." – he added, with a smile on his face.

"We will see each other often, bring your kid back, it's fine." – he spoke and vanished into the darkness outside. A smile flickered on my lips in response. I realized, it was after a hiatus, I had developed a bond with another human being. Only a few fragments of his conversation with his junior reached inside. I heard him saying that my papers were alright. Next, I heard the roar of the bike, which gradually vanished into the silence.

I walked to the window again. I wondered if there is something interfacial about the essential self, like this window in front of me, existing at the periphery of the house and the street – revealing enough to hide one from the other, in one moment inviting, in another punishing for the venture.

I stood there, listening to a dog barking, thinking that maybe its master locked it up in the house and left for the weekend.

Savita Singh

Translated by Medha Singh

Adieu

All of darkness has turned back,
now the night, that leaves the streets
empty, too, has turned back—
Morose, within me, some of its light
stayed on; I gathered it
in my hair and shaking my head
gently, I said
again, adieu!

Adieu, to the quick winds of the night
I now say adieu to its torque that never ceased
In fact, it turned breathless yesterday, after all

Adieu to the sea whose foamy waves
that coil at my feet—
like a mystery, all of the universe
where things are always mixing
the way death is enmeshed
with living
and in a blink, turning
into one thing, then another.

What should I do?

What does one do so the wind runs in the other direction
that birds return to their nests without losing track?
What does one do to ensure water stays in the river
that this wooden body doesn't break by bending
that the light in these patient eyes stays luminous

What should I do
when what is leaving
appears, also, to be arriving.

Takbeer Salati

The Tea Cake Dance

It was learnt that they were selling Azadi on a nearby bridge. After Sheikh Abdullah came as a warrior through the crises; the second time my Grandmother (nanai) wished and announced that she would like to dance with him. It is here my Nanai learnt about Pakistan, this new country, and had desired to stay there with her first husband. She was eighteen or so when she was married and didn't know what she was looking for. She was short, weakly-built, shoulders shrunken, had pretty-large greyish eyes, straight sharp nose and light skin. My grandmother lost her first husband when this new country was created. Azadi failed, she failed to conceive. Subsequently, her mornings would start with All India Radio blasting fauji songs - songs only meant for army men and their families. Nanai had no desire of getting married at such an age but her father knew the man through his professional contacts, and got them married. She was brought into this house not knowing that it would be a short visit before returning to her maternal house. On a regular day, with AIR playing at a distance, two to three men came and asked for their family's record. Perhaps naively she did not answer when she was asked about the number of men in her house. In those days in Kashmir men were hunted and gunned down in their own house. Her new house had thirteen rooms and wooden architecture inside. The kitchen had green painted walls surrounded with white bricks and a chimney which helped them to get the smoke out of the room. It had a nicely cut A-shaped door where old stuff was kept, baskets and other kitchen things. It reminded one of the old Victorian houses where every person would either bake buns, or make porridges. Her bedroom had four windows and a transparent curtain through which for a few hours light would penetrate and make her white skin glisten. She would wait for her husband who would come late after work, tiredly look at her all powdered with makeup and always head to sleep. For Nanai, every day was Sheikh Abdullah's victory day. It was well known that Nanai, out of all the people, would fast until the man appeared on screen. It was also settled that her growing love for him would be the death of her too. One day when Abdullah was about to give a speech, Nanai dressed in her favorite emerald green dress and put on red lipstick. She looked like a bright white light ready to illuminate the Eidgah where his speech was to proceed. It was like Eid. Scores of people gathered around Eidgah in their new clothes, from various places in Kashmir. Nanai wore her wedding dress that day. Not all were quite happy with the choice she had made.

Most of them mockingly asked, “are you marrying him”? “You look like you are his bride”. She had hoped that Abdullah would notice her amidst the crowd but that hope was soon doused when in the fever of the speech mobs from nowhere came and ruined every arrangement done by the organizers. Stalls were toppled down, flags were crushed and a lot of men were shot at. At a distance, in the corner, Nanai stood quite horrified staring at her dress. Her green dress had turned red from the blood of a man in front of her who had been shot. That was the last time Nanai ever went to a rally. She rushed back to her house and hugged her newly wedded husband who didn’t even bother to know about the blood and the condition she had returned home in. That night she dreamt of her migration, but that hope was soon doused by the reminder of her marriage. Her husband who was only interested in her for children was very disappointed in her. It had been a month since their marriage, and Nanai couldn’t conceive. Once when it was too much she asked her husband, “Why don’t you look at me after sex”? He didn’t reply. The people of her mohalla knew something was wrong, they came to Nanai to ask her if everything was okay. When Nanai heard the question, a kind of anxiety set into her. She was reminded of nights when her husband would sleep on the opposite side all tired and disappointed. She remembered how she would bleed until her husband had an orgasm. An old neighbor wasn’t wrong. He was right in his questions and concerns. His anxiety had changed into fear and he said to Nanai, “You will find love once again”!

‘How can I?’

‘He doesn’t love you! You Must!’

‘How?’

‘Patience, my Daughter’.

‘I am married and have a family here now!’

‘Ah!’

Nanai had not felt less assured with anyone but that old man’s words. Kashmir wasn’t a place where women could marry more than once. She could not clearly remember when she had last fallen in love.; though she knew the exact date and time when she had fallen out of love. She went to her room, opened her old brass trunk and looked at the cuttings of newspapers which had Sheikh’s private and family photographs. Nanai couldn’t recall when they were from. The photos had an aura of history; the black and white tinge, her husband’s grandfather on the

horse riding it with extreme fervor. The men inside the photographs had ancient turbans – dastaars mostly of white color wrapped around the head like Sikhs do it with their turban. But the men were Muslims. So was nanai and so was her love for Sheikh. On Fridays especially she would wear her best ironed pheran, prepare zaffrani kehwa in a Samovar; in the evening she would listen to the AIR and his speeches. Unlike other love stories where two people meet and fall in love with each other, she had fallen in love with his voice far away. Nanai recalled that day of March in 1990 when men barged into her house and asked for any man of the house. She had said that he was out for work and that she knew nothing else. But the next morning,, she didn't find her husband on bed lying half naked. The town had encountered a sudden military siege and a midnight operation. She knew that her husband had been taken away at night. She had no place to flee to. Nanai, who had just turned nineteen years old, was brought back to her maternal house. It was a shame. She was hardly married for a month....It was where her name was Hajra Begum.

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Her maternal house was a beautiful two storied house shaded by a tall mulberry tree. She spent a lot of time there during dusk. The house was built by her mother and father in the 90s with handpicked stones and marbles. It looked like a typical Kashmiri house with a rooftop to let snow slide off during winters. Hajra knew about the people who lived around her house but seldom reached out to them. The sky was blue and it had started to gather clouds. That day, she knew a lot of time had passed from her childhood; in fact she had descended from her staircase twice in an hour. She had called to her mother several times and she had replied back. She had no idea of what was happening to her. She had gone to handpick saag from the garden. She wasn't the same Hajra but a Hajra with dementia. She had never seen anyone with the loss of memory at such a young age. It was an ordeal for her and her mother. Some years passed from Hajra's separation from her first husband. She knew his name as a blurred thing clouding her mind. She knew it but didn't know it. What was his name? She thought to herself after having spent one hour sipping that God knows what tea. She would ask everyone about his name but everyone felt alien to her. All this while, the dreams of nanai still remained there. She still wanted to dance with Sheikh Abdullah - the victory dance. Everyone around her, especially children, would gather to hear stories about times when she would cook on what is now called the stove. Down her fragmentary lane, dipping that tea cake in her noon chai cup, she remembered her father in parts. She remembered him as a kind-hearted and a giving person. Nanai, who had grown past all these memories, read namaz on newspapers that had the Sheikh's photos;

the only beloved of nanai who never went out of her memory. On one autumn night while she was praying on a newspaper the lights went out. Both of the room and her eyes. Neither the dance happened nor did the Sheikh come to meet her. The room smelled of the tea cake dipped in her last cup of noon chai.

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