



L I T S C R O L L   V O L U M E - I I I

# Oneirataxia

*When Fantasy and Reality Collide*





## EDITOR'S NOTE

Dear readers,

We are thrilled to present to you *Oneirataxia*, an enchanting collection of tales that explore the interplay between two contrasting worlds of Fantasy and Reality. Embark with us on a journey and experience the magic to see the lines of fantasy and reality being blurred.

Within these pages, we have masterfully woven intricate narratives that transport us to realms both magical and mundane. Capturing the essence of the inherent duality of our existence, these tales have been written to create a world where the extraordinary and the ordinary co-exist in scintillating symphony, through captivating storytelling and an artistic imagination.

The stories within this collection will walk you through an extensive palette of themes; from epic quests and mythical creatures, to everyday situations tinged with a touch of the fantastical. Each tale unfolds like a door opening to an alternate reality, where imagination unfurls its wings and the extraordinary becomes an inexplicable part of our lives.



I extend my heartfelt gratitude to the contributors for their extraordinary talent in crafting these mesmerising tales. Their ability to seamlessly blend fantasy and reality is a testament to their imaginative prowess and literary acumen. The dedicated team of editors and designers, would also like to thank our TIC, Ms. Purnima Topden for her guidance and support, and faculty members, Ms. Aneesha Puri, Ms. Sameera Mehta, whose valuable insights ensured that this magazine maintains its magical allure. We would also like to thank Ms. Ishita Singh for helping us put the finishing touches to the magazine.

Dear readers, the wand has been waved. Fasten yourselves to be transported to a world of *Oneirataxia*. Drown yourself in the pages of "Fantasy and Reality" and let your imagination know no bounds.

-Signing off



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# ACADEMIC PAPERS





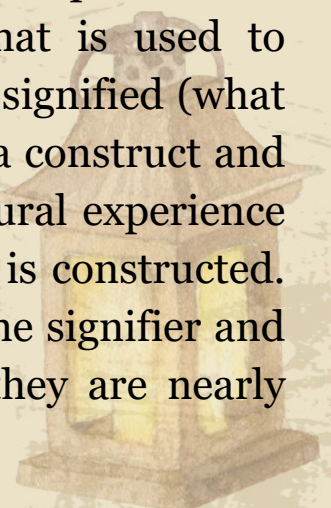
# Which Comes First? The Egg, or Its Angel?: Sign and Meaning in Angel's Egg

BY AARUSHI SINGH



The art of *Angel's Egg* is breathtakingly delicate, sublime and has a solemn stillness to it. Hazy and softly illuminatory in their watercolor blooms of blurred minimalist juxtapositions with stark inked hatches and shadows - it shows two unnamed characters, (one I shall call a “Girl” and the other “Man”) and is incredibly abstract and confusing. *Tenshi No Tomago*, trans. *Angel's Egg*, is a rush of visual imagery constituent narrative, existential ponderings in surrealist landscapes - with little to no plot or dialogue to guide one alone its depths. Good thing, then, we have film semiotics to help us learn to read the language-like film. This essay attempts to describe, explain and apply semiotics as discussed by Monaco to shots from Mamoru Oshii's work, *Angel's Egg* (1985).

Semiotic theory understands meaning making, i.e. the process of signification, as a relationship between the signifier (what is used to represent something i.e. the alphabet, or an image) and the signified (what is represented by the signifier), who together create a sign, a construct and byproduct of optical pattern and mental experience by cultural experience and which in film, is the main means with which narrative is constructed. The advantages of film, Monaco explains, lies here, where the signifier and the signified in film form a “short circuit sign” because they are nearly identical to each other.



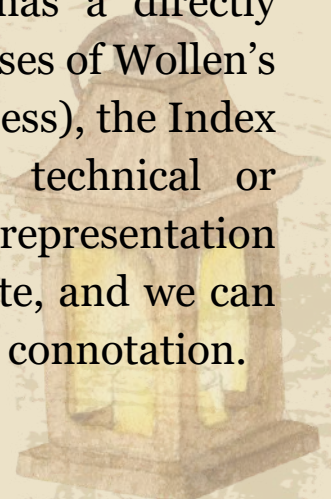


Films, thus, do not suggest, instead, they state, allowing for meaning to be received by the viewer, depending on their capability to properly read and interpret the image still only within a specific, circumscribed manner - as the filmmaker chooses to freeze their object; and repeatedly does so, through such successive choices, which may not be easily broken up into small, basic containers of meaning. This allows us (or Monaco, rather) to further declare that film is then “a continuum of meaning”, depending on an ambiguous system, which cannot be described quantitatively.

The aforementioned delineation, however is only one out of the 3 ways that images (and thus films) may be read: the one other is the saccadic, after the saccadic patterns of the eye i.e. the physiological semiconscious movements lasting 1/20th a second, and the cultural reading level, which draws on experience and knowledge of cultural visual conventions, archetypes etc. These three all combine in different relations to essentially result in meaning being expressed denotatively (intentional meaning) and connotatively (extended, symbolic meaning). (These are not mutually exclusive, instead existing on a continuum).

Connotation of a shot may be paradigmatic, where the question of choice in the depiction or shot sets it apart from its possibilities in the same paradigm, giving it meaning in comparison with those potential choices, or it may be syntagmatic, where meaning is adhered compared to other actual, realized shots before or after the subject shot. Monaco goes further to vaguely distinguish subtypes/categories for denotative and connotative meaning, building on and around a borrowed trichotomy of Peter Wollen.

The denotative mode in film is one when the image has a directly representative meaning; “it is what it is”, and mainly comprises of Wollen’s three orders of signs: the Icon (a representation in/of likeness), the Index (a measure due to an inherent relationship, for e.g technical or metaphorical)) and the Symbol (an arbitrary sign of representation through convention). These three categories are not absolute, and we can even see how the index is the type of denotation that implies connotation.



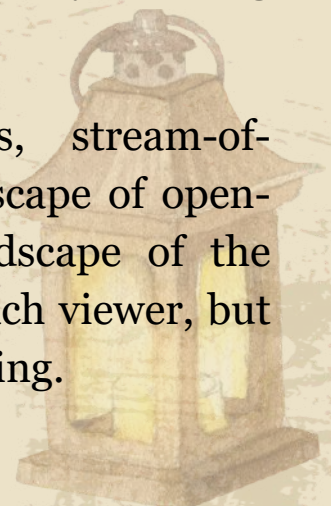


Monaco goes on to portend that (cultural) connotative meaning is further conveyed through “metonymy”, wherein “an associated detail or notion is used to invoke an idea or represent an object.” and through “synecdoche”, where “the part stands in for the whole or the whole for the part”. Indexes are often at times metonymic, where associated details are invoking abstract ideas. The connection between the denotative and connotative in cinema is termed the trope, allowing for dynamic possibilities in film semiotics. Film not only has the ability to mimic or utilize the tropes of other art forms, but may also invent new ones.

Now to apply these to the designated movie.

**Synopsis:** A girl (‘the Girl’), or “shojō” guards a precious egg, drinking water out of droplet like glass baubles. She runs into a man (‘the Boy’, ‘the Man’ or ‘the Solider’) curious about its contents. She wishes to nurture it, he points out that it must be broken to discover its contents. They become questionable companions surveying the broken down city, watching a fruitless battle of ghostly soldiers (? , referred to as “They”) battling shadows of coelacanth-like fish, moving onto a cathedral and back to the Girl’s place, discussing their memory loss, reality of existence and perception. The Girl’s faith in the egg increases, as does the Man’s curiosity. In a climactic moment, the Man breaks his promise, and breaks the Egg. The Girl awakens, horrified, and runs off after the Man. Rushing her way, she trips into a ravine, aging in the water, and her last exhalation causes multiple eggs to float till the surface. Structures that the Man had described appear, and we see a mechanical, looming contraption of statues has a new addition: that of the Girl, smiling mysteriously, cradling her Egg.

As mentioned earlier, the bleak, surrealist visuals, stream-of-consciousness like narration, transcendent gloomy dreamscape of open-ended emptiness and post-apocalyptic otherworldly landscape of the movie ensures not only a deeply differing experience for each viewer, but also a lack of clarity on the story’s aims, narrative and meaning.





Oshii himself has remarked to not understand what the film is about, commenting, “When it comes down to it, I think the director doesn’t know everything about the movie. [...] I think the answers lie inside every viewer.” (Ruh, 60-61)

Some little nuggets of direction are present, notably the haunting question, that the first dialogue (of the very little there) is: “Who?”/”Who are you?”; we cannot but tread into the murky waters of existentialism, of being and non-being, of liminal spaces in uncaring places. The second notable piece of dialogue is a monologue by the Man, that details a vague retelling of Noah’s Ark (which eventually loses its way and changes) and suddenly a lot of the imagery and symbolism is illuminated: the question is of religion, most immediately and overtly Christian, though such a flat reading would be doing a disservice to the movie. Critics have been able to trace Celtic, Buddhist, Japanese and Hungarian myths and ideas. We seem likely to be contending with ideas about seeking and finding, losing, creating and destroying: ideals, beliefs, systems, identities and the Self.

Holding this as a broad idea, I will proceed to examine shots (or stills) from the movie. Two interesting notes before I truly begin: the animated style is already iconographic representation, a distancing from verisimilitude or realistic portrayal that aids in increased identification of the viewer with the character, and perhaps we should keep in mind how Susan Napier characterizes the “anime image” as a “fragmented mirror”.



*Fig 1. First shot of the movie.*





**Denotative:** hands together > icon

**Connotative:** seeking faith, hands clasped (as if in prayer, as if asking for mercy) > religious

**Synecdoche:** representing the body (literal, physical)

the Girl's hands. is she seeking faith, guidance, praying, pleading?

soft lighting glows against the dark background. Does she carry the light of enlightenment, as the Angel or does she carry faith?

**Syntagmatic:** hands open up, one hand falls away, one remains. it turns and becomes the hand of the Man, clenches and then is made into a fist. a crushing sound is heard > does it imply the forced loss of faith for the Girl? or for the Man? or is that something that needed to be destroyed. does the Girl carry anything at all? Or is it hollow ideals?



*Fig. 2. Egg.*

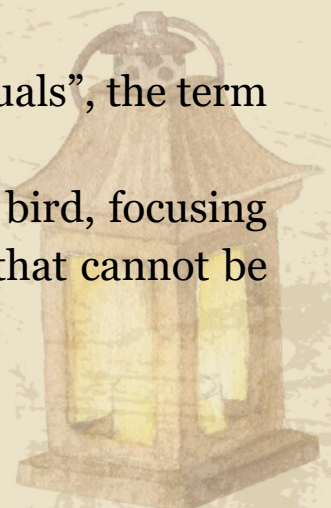
**Denotative:** egg, specifically bird.

**Denotative/Connotative:** symbol; birth, fertility, life

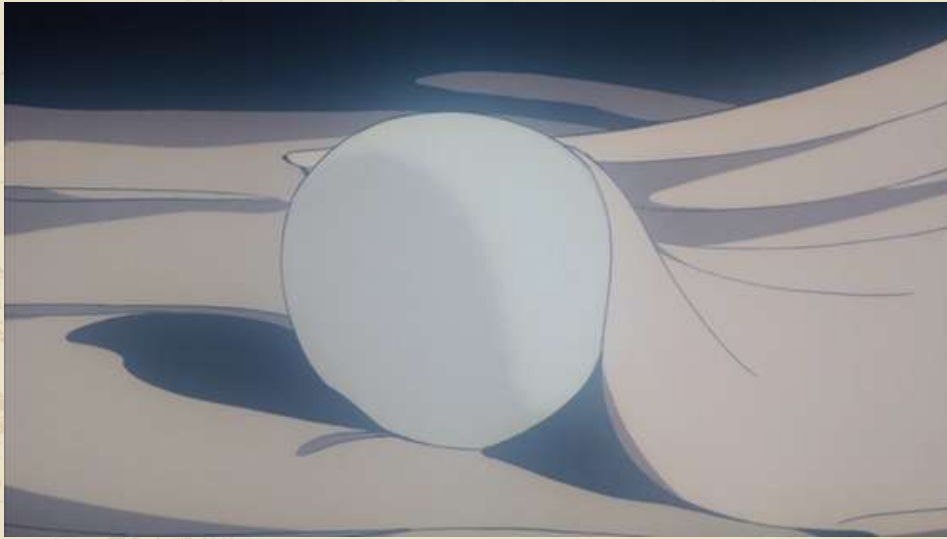
**Connotative:** hope, faith, potential religious implications: Easter, something that Must be broken, destroyed to have something new come out

**Trope:** the idea of “inteli no tamago” or, “budding intellectuals”, the term tamago (egg) may connote a sense of incipience (Ruh, 55)

**Syntagmatic:** the next shot has a extreme close up of the bird, focusing on its eyes quivering. it does not open them. > something that cannot be born, cannot exist. An actual or implied possibility?







*Fig. 3. The Egg  
the Girl protects*

Denotative: an egg

Denotative/Connotative: symbol; birth, fertility, life, part of many myths  
> trope ? a myth of the Letts involves “demons and angels hatching from the egg that became the world.” (Ruh, 57); the Japanese myth of creation in the Nihongi (Ruh, 57)

Connotative: hope, faith, potential religious implications: Easter, medieval Christian belief: new life, resurrection from lifelessness. Something that must be broken, destroyed to have something new come out.

Trope: the idea of “inteli no tamago” or, “budding intellectuals”, the term tamago (egg) may connote a sense of incipience. (Ruh, 55)

It is uncertain whether the egg truly contained anything, before it is revealed to be empty later on, or whether it is the titular Angel’s Egg or if it contains the sofar absent Angel. Or it contains the mythic bird that the Man claims to have seen.



*Fig. 4. The Girl  
carrying her Egg*





**Index/Symbol:** pregnancy, nurturing. the womb, the chora

**Connotative:** carrying something, a container, a vessel. Interesting, considering she is a girl or at least a teen. Also the Girl as woman, as Other, as abject (Tembo)

Is she the Angel, carrying her Egg? Or is she an incubator of faith or hope for what the Egg represents? Does she have any purpose, meaning or identity separate from the Egg?

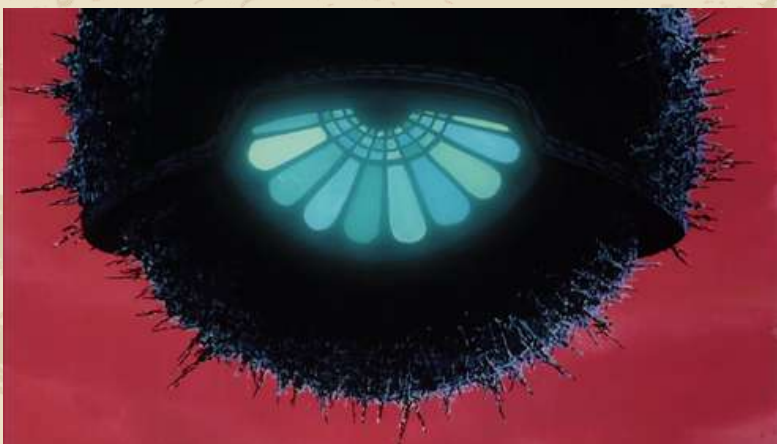


*Fig. 5. Shot after the first appearance of the Man.*

The establishing shot: extreme long shot

**Denotative:** mechanical structure

**Connotative:** overpowering, humans insignificant in contrast  
contrast of the blood red sky vs cool tones of the machinery (also to be seen in the town)



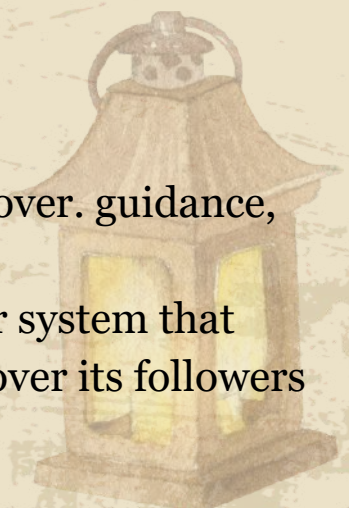
*Fig. 6. An orb like machination descends from the sky, as the Man watches*

**Denotative:** machine

**Icon:** an eye

**Index/Symbolic/Connotative:** surveillance, watching over. guidance, overseer. seeking.

**Synecdoche:** a surveillance system, law, order. any larger system that assumes power and authority and the need to keep watch over its followers or adherents.





**Metonymy:** the assemblage looks mechanical, dangerous (sharp)

**Syntagmatic:** the next shot, *Fig. 6*, reveals more about it and extends our understanding.



*Fig. 7. A close up of the orb reveals what it is comprised of.*

**Denotative:** statues of goddesses/priestesses/maidens and knights/protectors/military

**Connotative:** (index?) religion, or institutionalized ones as power hegemony, controlling the masses, keeping check.

**Synecdoche, Symbolism:** representing a mass of belief/faith, or representing God.

**Syntagmatic:** gain new understanding through the link between the two images, the power or belief comes not from itself, but from the mass who believes in it. also, an inextricable connection of humanity to machine: as parts of a larger machinery? System, as a literal understanding with respect to technological advancements.



*Fig 8. The view through the glass flask the Girl fills up, then drinks from. Distorted, almost fish-eye lens perspective.*

**Denotative:** distorted perspective through a flask, icon





**Symbol/connotative:** an alternate perspective, lens, mirror, viewpoint, water as a lens for different reality, reflections as unseen truth, shallow land vs deep waters > water & reflections important for the movie and themes of self recognition, identity and reality.

**Paradigmatic:** the sense of unreality and altering perception that water acts as a medium for would not have necessarily worked without the warped visuals.

**Syntagmatic:** is followed by a surrealist montage of elongated abstractions of gaps between tree branches, the warping of their shadows on the currents of the water source, to shots of flowing seaweed, which ends with the ripples moving rapidly towards the viewer in first person POV, and the Girl opens her eyes, in the same position as before. > thus, a dreamscape sequence is shown. or has the Girl been in a dreamscape sequence all this while and just had her first glimpse of the “surface” or reality?



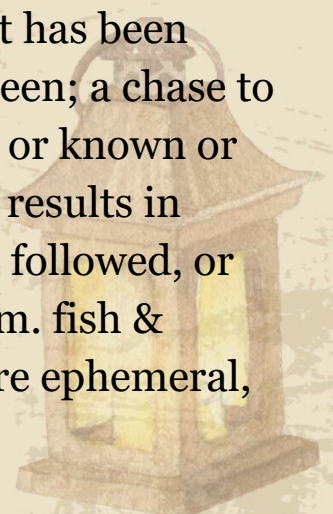
*Fig.9. The ghostly soldiers who chase after fish “[...] even though there aren’t any fish anywhere.”*

**Denotative:** a battle, a fight, soldiers, shadowed fish

**Metonymy:** the architecture of the town: neo-gothic/art nouveau. both have implications of their own and add to the tone and setting.

**Symbolic/Synecdoche:** soldiers, representing the military, law, RSA, the superego

**Connotative:** shadowy fish, ghostly figures > a battle of the idea, of the immaterial, of thoughts, shadows and hauntings. a battle that has been fought in the past that continues today, in ways seen and unseen; a chase to capture something illusory, something that cannot be caught or known or understood. a lost, futile, Sisyphean battle that paradoxically results in homeostasis. enforced codes or strict guidelines that must be followed, or persecution follows. blind faith in religion & religion’s fatalism. fish & Christian connotations, extremely important when the fish are ephemeral, remnants, illusory.





We thus realize that the city, too, is empty and filled with hallucinations. there seems to be no real accessible material reality or people save for the Girl or the Man and the areas/objects they come into contact with. what world/reality do they inhabit? Or are they the ones divorced from it, wandering in an illusory reality of their own?



*Fig. 10. The actual breaking of the egg happens offscreen.*



*Fig. 10. & Fig 11. The breaking of the Egg by the Man.*

**Denotative:** destruction, a weapon Symbolic: the weapon resembles a cross

**Connotative:** destruction, rebirth after death, freedom, removal, revelation.

Destruction, rebirth after death, freedom, removal, reveal. Its connotations change depending on the interpretation of the Angel in the movie: either the Angel is powerless to stop faith, hope etc. (the Egg) from being destroyed & so is unreliable - and by extension, God is as well. Humans must destroy these ideals and learn to depend on themselves for salvation, meaning and purpose. Identity and knowledge must not be constricted by institutionalized, empty rhetorics and discourses. Shells and other obstructions to the essence of things must be removed. Or, conversely, we live in a hopeless and faithless world, abandoned by ourselves (if the egg was simply the Girl's and not the Angel's faith) and/or the gods, moving towards death and destruction. Or the Man destroys the Egg, the illusions and misguided, hollow faith of the Girl, allowing her to be reborn.



Perhaps the roles have changed - or were always different to what we initially thought. Perhaps the Man was the protector of the egg all along, by breaking it, he paradoxically saves it, releasing its inner contents and thus allowing it to be “born”. The Girl’s actions meant to arrest its development, as its status remains that of a “potential”, in stasis.



*Fig. 12. The Girl picks up the shattered eggshell. It remains ambiguous insofar as whether or not there was something in there, but it is established that the Girl picks up the Egg empty.*

**Denotative:** eggshells, empty egg

**Symbolic:** freedom, emptiness, nothingness, reveal, fragments, loss

**Connotative:** depending on the interpretation, the Girl is reborn or is lost forever, she lives on as a symbol of faith (in the statue) while the Man is doomed to wander forever, lost. If the Egg was empty it means either the faith the Girl needed was faith of the self, or that her faith was held in an illusion.



*Fig 13. & 14. The Girl falls into the ravine, chasing after the Man.*





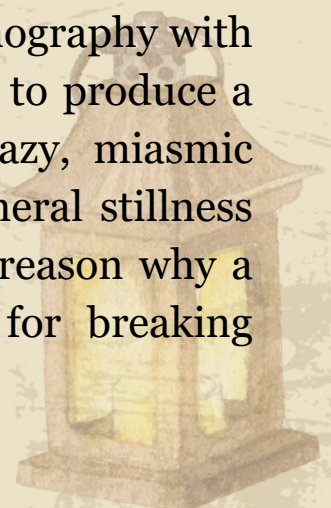


**Denotative:** drowning, reflection in a water source

**Symbolic/Connotative/Metonymic:** mirror, reflection as another self, and thus being reborn, water ripples indicate a new realm of knowledge and perception, a meeting of the Lacanian self and ideal self, baptism, water of life. The Girl may be washed of her sins, or may be purified and reborn, or may have become truly at one with herself, fully recognizing and comprehending herself. entering a new plane or realm or space of existence, an awakening. Interestingly, water would be dangerous for the egg, esp. if it seemed to contain a bird (as was shown in Fig. 2.) the porosity of the shell would mean the chick would drown before hatching.

## Conclusion

*Angel's Egg* is a multilayered weaving of realities, metaphors, and symbolisms that produce new, ever-shifting means each time they are disturbed by the ripples of interpretation. A complicated network of signs and symbols are at play in this movie, combining iconography with mythic allegories and religious narratives and frameworks to produce a visual masterpiece, a playground of the referent. The hazy, miasmic slow-footed visuals lend to the veil of mystery and ephemeral stillness that shrouds the message it aims to convey, precisely the reason why a semiotic analysis proves itself to be a suitable choice for breaking through the film's "shell" to see what lies within.





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# Use and Function of the Rhinoceros in Ionesco's Play of the Same Name

BY SANAH MUNJAL

Eugene Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* features the modern 'metamorphosis' trope, man becomes beast, not metaphorically but literally. The titular 'rhinoceros' never appear in full form on stage, however, looming rhino heads and theatrical sound effects- with trumpeting, booming, and later, 'singing'- make the beasts' presence tangible to the viewer. *Rhinoceros* has received a great deal of critical attention perhaps because the rhinos lend well to multiple meanings, especially in the context of post-WWII Europe. Indeed, reading the play as Ionesco's protest against the rise of fascism in Europe, and later the rise of communist extremism, is nigh encouraged by the writer's own vehement disavowal of excessive state control in regimes across Europe. However, there is a credited body of criticism that insists that reading the play, and the beast figures it's titled after, as a mere allegory is a disservice to *Rhinoceros*.

The playwright's use of these beasts is multi-dimensional. An analysis of the use and function of the rhinos in Ionesco's play requires a broader understanding of possible 'meanings' embedded in the play, or the existential rejection of 'meaning' on the other hand. Rhinos in the play must also be read in the context of conventions of the 'Theatre of the Absurd', as conceptualized first by Martin Esslin and then re-assessed by others. Ionesco's use of these beasts is simple at the onset but leaves audiences befuddled by the final tableau, as good 'Theatre of the Absurd' is wont to do.



The animals' first appearance in the town square is met with shock, though characters recover absurdly quickly. The idea of rampaging rhinos is absurd in both the colloquial sense and in Esslin's sense of the term- this lumbering beast, in a picturesque French town, kicks up dust and demonstrates its destructive potential by trampling a domestic lap cat. That Ionesco uses the rhinoceros, a beast foreign to Europe, a large and potentially dangerous animal that is, however, not particularly aggressive, is interesting.

When *Rhinoceros* was first performed in 1959, the wounds of WWII were fresh in collective memory, for audiences in France, and in fact, much of Europe- reading the green rhino as the green uniformed Nazi required no great stretch of the imagination. The politics of the play remain ambiguous, as was its writer's. Anne Quinney in her essay studying Ionesco's Franco-Romanian identity argues for the acknowledgment of the writer's Romanian roots, and his personal experience of 'Rhinoceritis' under the rule of the fascist Iron Guard. The "ultimate display of cowardice" Ionesco saw in Bucharest in the '30's when the 'Intelligentsia' pledged itself to the Guard triggered an impulse, Quinney suggests, appears in *Rhinoceros*. Quinney cites interviews in which the writer explains the progress of the Iron Guard:

"All around me men were metamorphosed into beasts, rhinoceros . . . You would run into an old friend, and all of a sudden, under your very eyes, he would begin to change. It was as if his gloves became paws, his shoes hoofs. You could no longer talk intelligently with him for he was not a rational human being." (48)

pellentesque id nibh tortor. Risus sed vulputate odio  
blandit volutpat maccenas. Tincidunt arcu non sodales  
ales ut etiam. Lectus arcu bibendum at varius vel.  
net consectetur adipiscing elit pellentesque habitant  
ne. Sed velit dignissim sodales ut eu sem integer.  
tortor aliquam nulla facilisi cras. Mi bibendum  
ongue quisque egestas diam. Ut tortor pretium  
tisse potenti nullam ac tortor vitae. Quis viverra



Ionesco, like Berenger, is left with a "strange responsibility" (48)- that of being the last man standing.

Ionesco, to Quinney's mind, uses the trampling beasts to represent all manner of betrayers of intellectual idealism- the Parisian leftists such as Jean-Paul Sartre, who could defend Lenin's atrocities, the Romanian youth joining the Guard, or the French persecutors of Algeria.

While *Rhinoceros* as a politically charged allegory has received critical attention, the play has also been read as a parable- one that seems to espouse individuality over mindless collectivism. In this second sense, critics seem to imply, then, that the rhinoceroses that feature in the play are an undistinguishable horde, thus the 'individual' who retains his sense of self, i.e. Berenger, stands out.

However, as Michael V. Bennet argues, if the general idea was to imply a 'herd'- would sheep or any other conforming herd animal not do the trick? Bennet claims that the rhinoceros is chosen precisely for its strangeness to the scene; it functions as a part of the narrative in a very specific way. The rhinoceros, he argues, is not easy to herd, the collective is thus no easily controlled group with a hive mind.

In fact, Bennet, whose analysis posits Berenger as the eventual Sisyphean hero, also points out that Ionesco insisted that the play be called '*Rhinoceros*' and not '*le Rhinoceros*'- allowing room for a great deal of ambiguity. The title can imply a single rhino, one individual beast in the group, or the group as a whole- the word '*rhinoceros*' functions in both singular and plural forms. Bennet argues that this ambiguity intentionally allows one to entertain multiple ideas about what the rhinoceros, singular or plural, function as in the play.



Ambiguity is the name of the game in an Absurd play. If one can challenge the nature of the rhinos as the 'conforming herd', one can perhaps also question, as Sartre does, if they are indeed the "tide of evil" Berenger must defend his own humanity against. (Quinney, 48) Sartre questions if the play ever definitively argues that it is better to be a human and not a rhinoceros. After all, when Jean argues in favour of the destruction of civilization and a return to 'nature'- a startled Berenger can mount no real defense. Similarly, if the monster is the minority, as Berenger states quite baldly "It's the rhinoceroses that are anarchic because they're in the minority" (188), then why must one assume that it is the rhinos, not the sole human left, that function as agents of 'anarchy' in the end?

More so than the rhinoceroses, it seems that it is the stubborn man who refuses to "Move with the times", as Botard puts it, that functions as an agent of anarchy. If the rhinoceroses are to function as an allegory or as a symbol of conformism, exclusively; and often inebriated Berenger is humanity's last defence, then, the ending appears rather bleak.

As G. Richard Danner argues, Berenger's defence for humanity is at best dubious. Bennet argues that the 'Theatre of the Absurd' does not aim to produce such bleak ends, and dubs Berenger a Sisyphean hero, who ultimately must find meaning in resistance itself. Where Bennet continues to read the rhinoceroses and Berenger as opposing forces in the play and believes that back and forth between these forces is 'functional' to the play, Danner makes a different argument. Danner ends his analysis stating – "The play's ultimate lesson might indeed be that individualism in defence of non-humanity is no virtue, and that bestial conformism as an alternative to unreasoning human existence is no vice" (Danner, 216).



Here, rhinoceroses may be bestial conformists, but in a world wherein human existence is reduced to meaninglessness anyway, does preservation of 'civilization' even merit an attempt at resistance?

Rhinoceroses in the play, characterized as "ugly" (53) and then "like Gods"(140) by the same character, metamorphize even as they are the product of metamorphosis themselves. As one critic notes, they enter the stage first as presences that only the characters see, phantoms that the actors follow with their eyes. From the street to the office, to the private domain of a home, 'rhinoceritis' travels inwards.

Theatrically, the rhinoceroses move the plot and allow one to understand space- the public and the private. On another level, the rhinoceroses function as symbols- of a conforming collective in general or as part of some political allegory. Simultaneously, they are an evil horde of cowards, or morally neutral entities making choices in a meaningless universe. The rhinoceros is absurdly anarchical, or perhaps, is the antithesis of the true anarchist.

In a play that seems to delight in evading meaning, as is expected of Absurd theatre, the rhinoceros serves many functions, the audience laughs, shudders and winces as beasts appear on stage, but the rhinoceroses never cease to evoke a reaction.

...os urna  
...pus urna et.  
...ia urna ac tortor dignissim.  
...ac ut consequat semper viverra nam.  
...id consectetur purus ut faucibus pulvinar  
...pellentesque id nibh tortor. Risus sed vulputate odio  
...blandit volutpat maccenas. Tincidunt arcu non sodales  
...ales ut etiam. Lectus arcu bibendum at varius vel.  
...net consectetur adipiscing elit pellentesque habitant  
...e. Sed velit dignissim sodales ut eu sem integer.  
...tortor aliquam nulla facilisi cras. Mi bibendum  
...ongue quisque egestas diam. Ut tortor pretium  
...lisse potenti nullam ac tortor vitae. Quis viverra



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...os urna  
...pus urna et.  
...ia urna ac tortor dignissim.  
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...ongue quisque egestas diam. Ut tortor pretium  
...lisse potenti nullam ac tortor vitae. Quis viverra



# “Why Would I Ask Him to Let Go?” – Queer Love and Sufi Yearning in Madho Lal Hussain’s Kafis

BY SANAH MUNJAL

Madho Lal Hussain, born Shah Hussain, much loved Punjabi Sufi poet who sought liberation through degradation, presents a unique challenge to readers and critics alike. Most accounts, old and new, present the poet-weaver-saint as a red robed Dionysus-like figure, perpetually intoxicated and, perhaps, deeply in love with a Hindu Brahmin boy, Madho Lal. Some claim that in fusing his name with that of his lover- ‘Madho Lal’ Hussain represents not only a queer passion, but also the Sufi desire to fuse with a divine Beloved.

The queering of Hussain’s poetry has ruffled quite a few feathers in recent years, with some taking exception to any allusion to queerness with regard to the venerated figure and his poetry- while others set out to specifically read the queer undertones in the kafis. These kafis frequently feature a maiden speaker, often a weaver, and the theme fluctuates between patiently waiting for and restlessly seeking a beloved, a sense of deep longing characterises much of the poetry.

Those reluctant to allow interpretations of queerness insist that the beloved is, as he ought to be, God. The Sufi seeks union with a ‘beloved’ above all else and is willing to debase himself, wander aimlessly, and court disapproval. Madho Lal Hussain’s Sufi mysticism emerges, as a site of conflict- it is an asset to those who attempt to concretise the queer undertones in the text, finding footholds in Sufi longing and love- at the same time others who invalidate these readings often tout the poet’s religious Sufi credentials as ‘evidence’



Much of the challenge posed by Hussain's work to those attempting to find a queer voice in the poetry is the ostensible lack of eroticism or sexuality- unlike the clear eroticism of Urdu Rekhti, with its references to queer sex, or the earlier works of Amir Khusro, in which the poet imagines himself as a bride waiting for the Nizam in their marital bed. One must read the queer undertones in these kafis without the aid of obvious eroticism or clear innuendo. The act of reading 'queerness' in poetry can be rather difficult, with many such as Michel Foucault debating what makes any art 'queer' in the first place, if there is anything identifiably 'queer'- one answer lies, by many accounts, in the inclusivity implied by the word 'queer' itself.

In "Cavafy, Proust, and the Queer Little Gods," Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick draws on Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*, which asserts that silences function alongside what is said within the discursive production of sexuality to discuss how silences, i.e. what is not said, function in queer art and poetry. The 'lack' of reference to obvious queer sexuality, along with literal silences as rhetorical devices in the kafis themselves encourage one to seek existing queer undertones in the text. Naveed Alam makes a similar reference to the unsaid in the Kafis, wondering why no one denies that Hussein *did* drink and that themes of intoxication *can* be found in the poetry, though there is only a single 'real' textual reference to intoxicating substances.

One finds literal references to silences as well in many of the Kafis, the 10th speaks of a self-enforced silence-

I shan't let out a cry lest you be defamed

Says Hussein, the worthless devotee,

I lie awake night and day. (Hussain, trans. Alam, 31)



In an alternate translation, the line becomes- "Out of shame I don't cry out loud" (32)- the restless lover quietens their cries in both translations.

A mediaeval biography of Shah Hussien, the *Haqiqat al-Fuqara*, written as a long piece of poetry, is analyzed by Scott Kugle in *Same-Sex Love in India*. This text features passages describing similar situations of enforced silences within the queer relationship described between Madho Lal and Shah Hussain. In one conversation Madho Lal frets about people learning of their relationship and shaming them- he seems to believe that as a Sufi of good standing, his lover may escape the worst of the censure, Hussain settles this anxiety by essentially promising silence. Interestingly, the mediaeval author worships Hussain as a Sufi, and doesn't attempt to hide any of this discourse between lovers. The biographer instead paints disapproving onlookers as ignorant, for their non-sufi gaze doesn't allow them to see the 'true' spirituality of this relationship. The Sufi form of the kafi nurtures queer undertones in otherwise conventional poetry- Sufism, with its love of Love and acceptance of fluidity, allows one to read queer meanings into even Hussien's silences. In part, this frank acceptance - surprising to Alam and others, may be attributed to what Love means in the Sufi sense.

Love and self knowledge are the two essentials in Sufism to eternal union, self knowledge implies a sense of one's identity, place in the world or one's purpose- love is simpler. Huston Smith, in his foreword to *Essential Sufism* describes three Sufi paths to God, followed by three kinds of Sufis- the Estatics, the Intellectuals and the Lovers- the Lovers, according to Smith, are the source of all Sufi art, poetry and music, tapping into the most primal of all human emotions.



The best known Sufi poets, Rumi and Rabia describe in their own poetry, all encompassing Love- for all Creation.

In the 3rd kafi Hussien writes-

My string in my lover's hand, I'm his kite

You'll regret the moment you find yourself in a pit

Says Hussein, the Sain's fakir, the whole world drowns

(Hussain, Alam, 24 )

The ecstatic lover willingly gives up agency to the beloved, and "the whole world drowns"(24)- what does the 'world' mean to the poet, held aloft by love and beloved? Sufi 'love' is also evident in Hussain's reference to nights spent waiting in an open 'chaubara' for a Divine or mortal Beloved in the 10th Kafi. Saleem Kidwai in his work on Queer Sufi poets in India, notes that the distinct fluidity of Sufi poetry was attractive to Indian Muslim poets, who borrowed freely from the "Radha-Krishna tradition of love poetry"(117). This tradition included practices of spiritual revelry or rasleela, the *Haqiqat-al-Faqra* traces Madho Lal's acceptance of Hussain as a lover to this sort of rasleela during Basant or spring. In his 5th Kafi, Hussain's refers to said revelry in the form of an invitation to dance "the luddi", this is followed by- "My string is in my lover's hand"(24). The notion of rasleela as an especially queer space is not new to Indian mythology.

L. Ramakrishna's work on Punjabi poets, published in 1973, was among the first works of literary criticism in English on Madho Lal Hussien. Ramakrishna, who believed that there was "no immoral flaw"(40) i.e. queerness, indicated in the kafis, focusses on the interreligious 'friendship' between Madho Lal and Hussain- yet she still acknowledges the 'liberality' inherent to the rasleela and its manifestations in the kafis.



If in the 3rd kafi the lover revells, the 10th is marked by suffering, the kafi brings to mind Heer-Ranjha and the many other folk stories of separated lovers, the poet writes-

Go wherever dwells the Sweetheart

Go there and ask: Is it time?

Go tell him: Nights are a pain,  
the days full of anxiety.

Death's become obligatory. (Hussain, trans. Alam, 31)

The female speaker then turns gypsy- shedding shame, ego and convention, seeking only the Beloved's embrace. Shaikh Mahmud ibn Muhammad Pir's depiction of Hussain's queer longing for Madho in the mediaeval biography *Haqiqat al-Fuqara*, reads much like this kafi- Hussayn would stand weeping before Madho's door.

Crying with passion he would remain immobile  
standing day and night in Madho's alleyway.

Even when his tears ran dry Hussayn stayed restless,  
without sleep, without patience, without sense, without peace.

(Quoted in *Same Sex Love*, Muhammed Pir, trans. Scott Kugle, 147)

Hussain ends this kafi with a defiant declaration of faith from the gypsy lover who has forsaken all identity for the beloved "He'll dust off my ashes, embrace and refresh me." (31)- 'He' accepts his lover- without reservation. This, James Fadiman argues in *Essential Sufism*, is the Sufi way, "Love brings lover to union with the beloved" (15).



Queer longing and spiritual longing hardly seem mutually exclusive- in Sufi poetry, descriptions of Divine love and mortal love are written together- while some insist that the latter only exists as an allegory for the Divine, the author of the *Haqiqat al-Fuqara* appears to disagree. Describing erotic play between Madho Lal and Hussien, he says that in order to cultivate spiritual love within Madho, Hussain offers his beloved physical- mortal, queer- love “he plays this love off against that love, intensifying each.” (Muhammad Pir, Kugle 131, emphasis mine). Similar erotic play appears in the 13th Kafi-

My lover grabbed my arm  
Why would I ask him to let go?  
Dark night drizzling, painful  
the approaching hour of departure  
You'll know what love's all about  
once it seeps into your bones  
(Hussain, trans. Alam, 35)

Here, love is offset by the longing implied by the “approaching hour of departure”- this is characteristic of both Sufi and queer longing and loss, union is still awaited, but love inexplicably “seeps into” one’s bones. Beauty, and love, in the Sufi context appear also in the second Kafi; here, like in a few others, Alam offers two translations of the original- one with more salacious connotations. This kafi features a young woman speaker and her red painted loom, her happiness gives way to weeping post pubescence when her beauty attracts weavers from far and wide, but her own lust whetted by the handsome weavers earns her public scorn. The innocent wonders what she did to “madden the whole damn neighbourhood” (32).



Alam opines “In the literal translations the gender of the narrator (or the spinner) is invariably female” however “the desire--as opposed to identity--is invariably queer” (2020)

The queer undertones in Hussian’s references to public scorn and the speaker’s desiring gaze have their own history in Sufi discourse. Kidwai notes that in the eighteenth century, some criticised mystic poetry on the grounds that it could be poison for the illiterate masses; the poisonous potential of mystical poetry rested in part in it’s queer desiring gaze. Others, like theologian Abu Hamid al-Ghaali, argued that since all beauty was derived from God it could not be a sin to admire it, countering this criticism.

While some ‘defend’ Hussain against charges of queerness citing his ‘virtue’ as a Sufi, others like his Persian biographer defend the queerness itself as part of Divine practice- and thus ‘clean’ of its usual base meaning- still others seek answers in the poet’s specific brand of Sufism. Hussien as a Malamati Sufi- i.e. of the community of ‘People of Blame’, engaged in non-shariah practices that are ostensibly haram- such as drinking, in a bid to extinguish ego and humble himself entirely.

The use of phrases such as “My Master”, “I have no virtue” and most shockingly “I’m the bitch at your doorstep”(31)- speak to Hussain’s Malamati Sufism- queer undertones in Hussain’s work enter the discourse here when one wonders, as Alam does in a recent article, if Hussain’s queerness is part of his attempt to court social disapproval.



For the Malamati sufi, disgrace, social disapproval and the exhumation of the ego was the path to unification and Truth- but for all Sufis, Love was important beyond measure spiritually- and Sufi poets were self declared lovers- “Says Hussein, the humble fakir, look into the lover’s eyes, and let the gaze remain interlocked” (35).

Sufis seek union with their divine beloved, yes, but Hussain who calls himself ‘Fakir Sain da’ also identifies as ‘Madho Lal’ Hussain- achieving a metaphorical union with his mortal beloved on this plane- must the existence of queerness be denied to grant primacy to spiritual identity?

Queer undertones in the kafis can be found in Hussien’s silences, in the desperate longing of lovers in his poems, in *luddi* and in *choubaras*, even in the lusting weaver girl, and in the disgraced Fakir’s faith as he prostrates himself before a Beloved. These undertones, discovered and defended by means of Sufi ideas here, are fascinating. Perhaps corporeal in the kafis before they are contextualised within the Sufi tradition- queer undertones in the kafis are finally concretised by means of their poet’s Sufism.



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CURIOUSER

AND

CURIOUSER



# A UTOPIAN DREAM

KAASHNI PAHWA

Oh, what a world it would be  
If there would be no darkness  
just glee  
No filters  
No violence  
Just truth that sets free  
No shadows  
Just light  
No matter how blinding it might be  
I will look at the sun  
With no shame or guilt in me  
Time and space would collapse  
And there will be nothing but peace  
The trees will move  
And the air will be heard  
Silence would be the solution  
And the souls would be free  
Some would be pink  
The others blue or green  
The significance of black and white  
Would not exist to be  
How would one differentiate  
between good and evil,  
if there would be no duality?  
No hate for darkness  
No celebration of the light  
it would all just be experiences  
There will be no day or night

A mindless existence  
No chain of thoughts pulling one  
back from what they want to be  
No gender inequality  
No men or women as categories  
Just heart and mind  
In all power and functionality  
No hidden agendas, no word play  
Just sincerity as the reality  
No treaties between the states  
No contracts between human beings  
No requirement of business  
as a reason to build something,  
Just humanity in all its shapes and  
forms  
as a core to provide and be in service  
We all may have come  
a long way  
But have we forgotten humanity?  
In our endless desires  
and wish lists  
And the sound of blames and sirens  
We live in fragments  
with walled castles and boundaries  
Our perception no more combines,  
it separates  
We have forgotten how  
to experience things in their totality



Communication would not break  
And language would not burn  
Words would not exist  
And speech won't be necessary  
I would have the superpower to read  
their minds  
And I would foresee what's meant to  
be  
Past would have room for correction  
And words once said would be taken  
back if need be  
A Fantasy would not be an escape  
It would be something I'll see in  
front of me  
I'll go and mend all the ways I was  
ever broken  
And stitch my injuries  
The wounds would be mended  
The voids would be filled  
The ones who have been lost  
Would come back like they never left

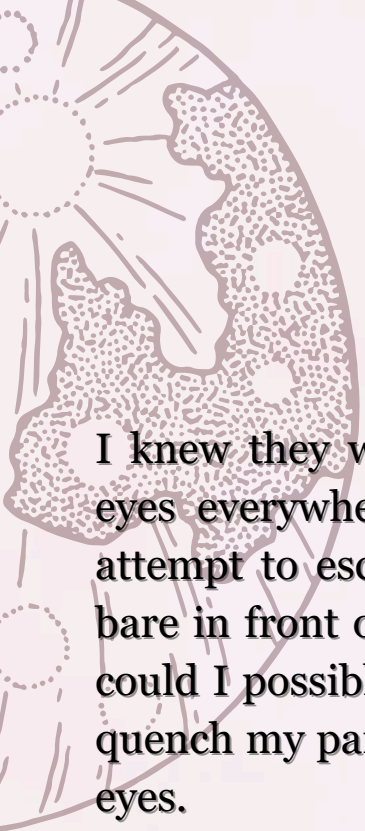
The hearts that once were torn  
Would no more cry themselves to  
sleep  
Hunger and grief would all just be the  
part of a bad dream  
Voices won't be created  
Yet they'll be heard  
A world where love would be the fuel  
that empowers  
And Kindness the Mountain peak  
Lies would be illegal,  
No suffering  
No history  
Just the present moment without all  
its complexities  
The world that I ask for  
Will it ever be more than  
just a dream?





# THE CHOSEN ONE

MAHAK PANDEY



I knew they were watching me, tracing my every movement. They had eyes everywhere. I had no choice but to keep running. However, any attempt to escape was a shout into the void. The vast dusty terrain lay bare in front of my eyes as I wiped the sweat off my forehead. How long could I possibly hide? My feet hurt, and there was not a drop of water to quench my parched throat. Clouds of dizziness started forming before my eyes.

I lay on the grounds of the abandoned land, with my body limp on the dry and hot sand surrounded by no trace of life. The buildings destroyed during the time of war could shelter me no longer. Suddenly, the thick noise of the rotating blades of the helicopter reverberated through my ears- they were here to get me. The wound on my arm, which I had inflicted to pull the tracker off, seemed to cast a sinister smile at my futile efforts.

I could hear the ground thudding beneath their boots. Yes, they're closer now. With barely any energy left to keep my eyelids from trapping shut, I still refused to give up. It's said that Bravehearts laugh in the face of danger. Ironically, fear is all that's left in me. Fear of the fate which awaited me. I wish I didn't have to wake up to another horrid reality, but death is the easy way out and they wouldn't let me have it.

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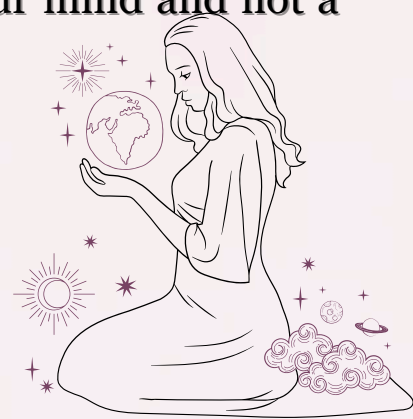
*Consulting dreamer (n.) a person who dives into the unconscious of their client and lives their worst fear or nightmare for them.*

In case you're wondering if you could find this profession on the web, the answer is no. Why would you? After all, there's only one person known to possess the ability to teleport itself into the unconscious of others, and that's me. A scientific miracle to some, a threat to others- I'm just a dreamer. A dreamer who is awake.

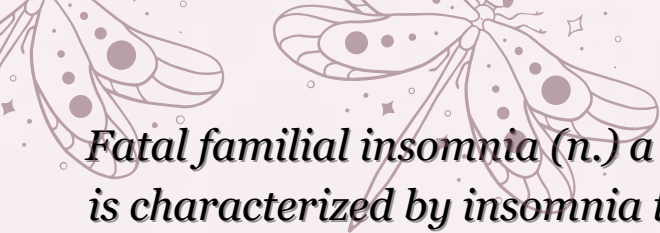
Everyone is always busy escaping something- their past, their desires, doors they're too afraid to open, insecurities they can't face, and sometimes, reality. I'm often called the 'Chosen One'- the woman who can enter the third world. The constant awe and admiration I receive for being different is something I have come to accept over the course of time. But little do they know, I am running too.

I'm dismissive of ordinary reality, uncomprehending in the face of the need to oversimplify every complex phenomenon just to fit into the brackets of understanding. Mysteries are not meant to be solved but explored. I've had the fortune of living various dreams, residing in the ocean of unconsciousness. From being an outlaw, fighting aliens, meeting a dear lost, to surviving an apocalypse- I've had a slice of every cake.

My clients view my profession as a service to them. 'The most selfless act'. The government views me as a threat- a person aware of the pressure points of every being who consults me. But my purpose is far more simple. I'm not a saint and neither am I a predator. I'm just looking out for a host, an unconscious that will serve as an exit door from this reality. After all, how can anyone be so certain that dreams are just a part of our mind and not a road, linking one reality to another?







*Fatal familial insomnia (n.) a rare genetic degenerative brain disorder. It is characterized by insomnia that may be initially mild, but progressively worsens, leading to significant physical and mental deterioration.*

I was blessed with one power, cursed by another. Sleep is a sweet fruit that I haven't had the fortune of savoring since I turned fifteen (the youngest case of FFI). It was always easier to face the demons of someone else than confront the reality which lay exposed in front of my eyes. I've never had much time and neither has my memory been very kind to me. The race against time was to find an alternate reality, where I would enter, only never to return.

Life has always been about balance. Forces always exist in pairs, acting in the opposite direction, nullifying the other. Gods and demons, addition and subtraction, birth and death, black and white. My final session is equally symmetrical. A person in desperation to overrun his demons to find peace and a woman, ready to find her life in it. The timer starts to tick and I know, it's now or never.

\*\*\*\*\*

Leilani literally translates to *flower of heaven*. A world thriving on perfect harmony. Cleansed from every memory of their alternate life, only the worthy succeeded in their quest and were allowed to step foot on this holy ground. And one day, like we had been anticipating, she appeared out of thin air. Her mysterious amber eyes couldn't be mistaken for anyone else's. Her aura radiated across the room. And even if the fear of being surrounded by new faces gripped her, she didn't show it. The Chosen One had finally entered her reigning land.





# UNTIL THEN

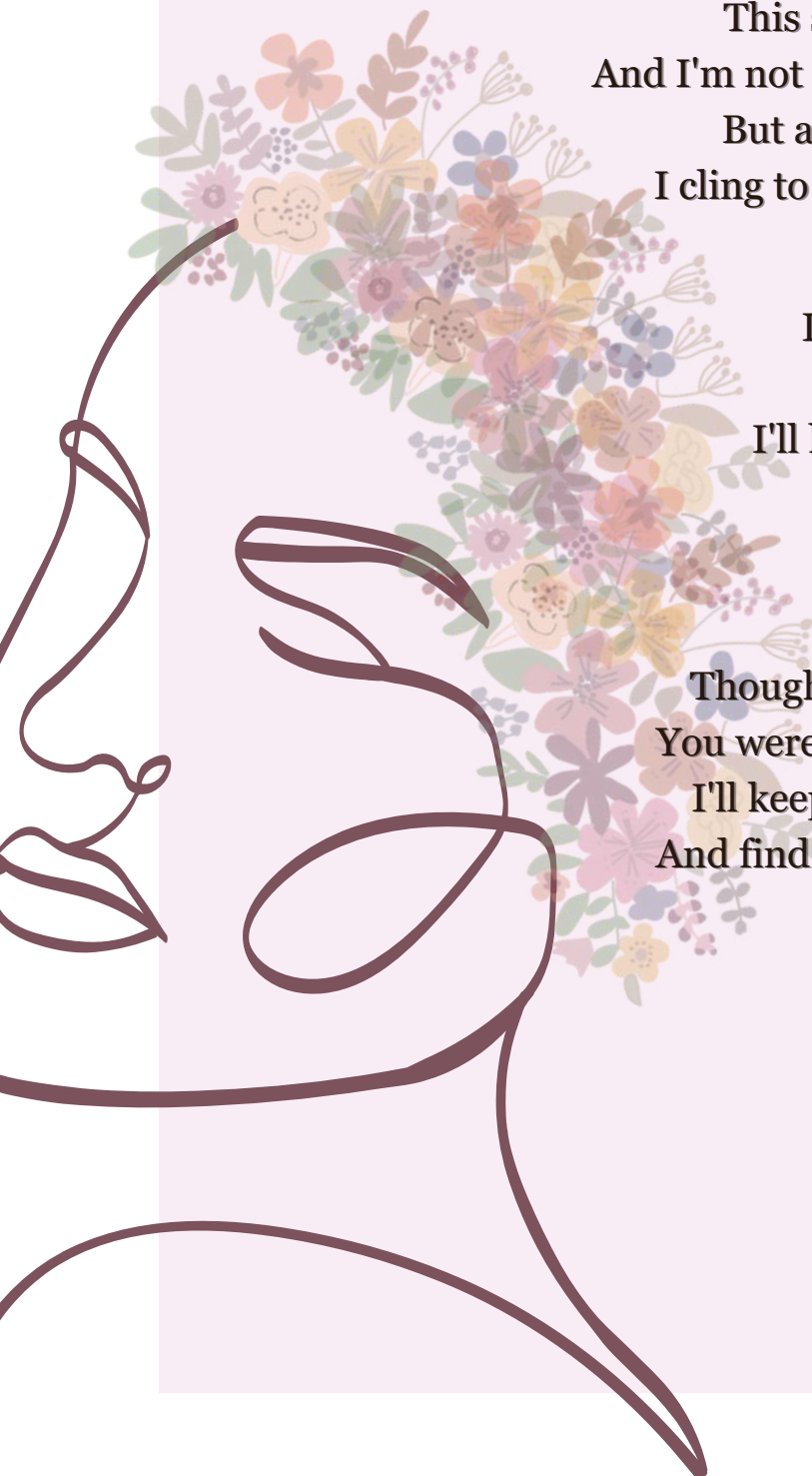
SNEHA ANAND

I close my eyes and yearn to escape,  
To leave behind the pain that won't abate.  
I wish I wasn't expected to be strong,  
That I didn't have to heal before too long.

This suffering feels all too real,  
And I'm not sure who to blame or how to feel.  
But amidst this pain and strife,  
I cling to hope and hold on to dear life.

I know there's a world out there,  
One that's meant to be mine.  
I'll look back at this time with a laugh,  
In the future I once dreamt of,  
now a thing of the past.

Though you were once a part of my story,  
You weren't the one meant to bring me glory.  
I'll keep moving forward, brave and bold,  
And find the happiness that's forever mine to  
hold.





# STONES AND SNAKES

PRASHASTIRAJ

“A decent, chaste woman like you should have known the difference between your husband and the one not.”

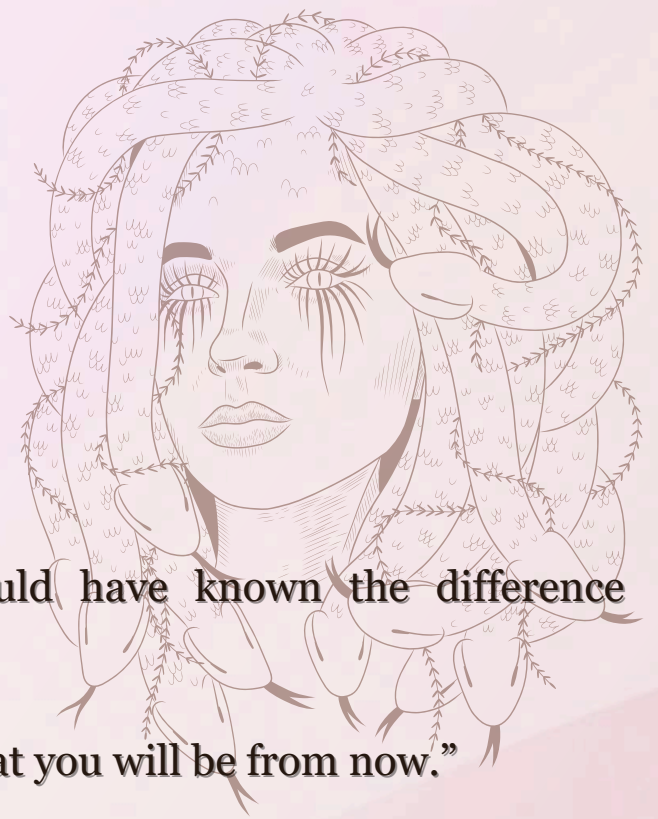
“I curse you for your betrayal. A rock is what you will be from now.”

Such was the wrath of Gautama, who was in complete ignorance of the violation his own wife just suffered. Instead, poor Ahalya was cursed, and her destiny set in stone. The helpless cries of the woman were unheard, just like her voice. What wrong had she done, apart from trusting herself with someone who clearly looked like her own husband? She knew the answer though.

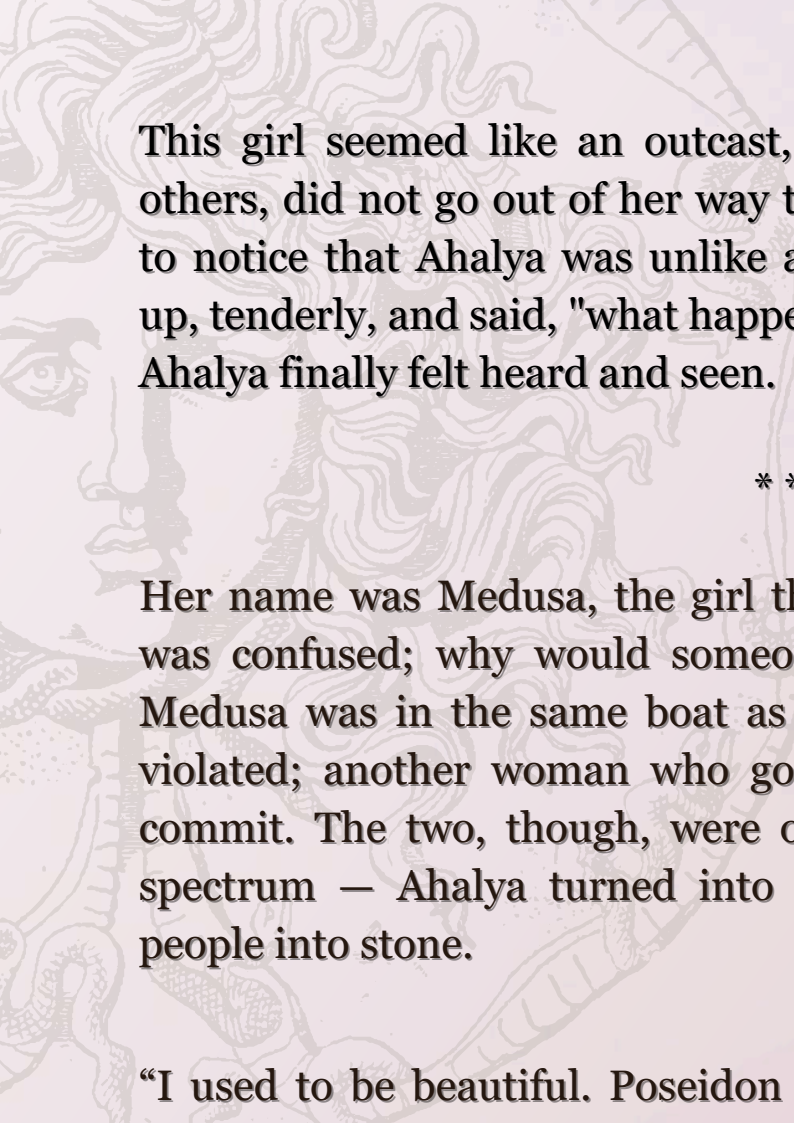
No man will ever want to look beyond his own ego when rage is concerned. Why would he consider the nuances, when he can just penalise and vindicate the women in his life?

The stone—once, the first Panchakanya—could do nothing, but wait. Wait for divinity to touch her; to absolve her of sins she never committed in the first place. She had just become a minute part of a macrocosm, when once, she was the ideal wife—now, marked with accusations of treachery.

Living life (and waiting) as a stone was, safe to say, hard and monotonous. Ahalya, at least, did not have to worry about food anymore. However, her solid form was kicked around by everyone who walked past her. Everyone, but one.







This girl seemed like an outcast, Ahalya thought. The girl, unlike others, did not go out of her way to kick Ahalya. In fact, she seemed to notice that Ahalya was unlike any other rock. She picked Ahalya up, tenderly, and said, "what happened to you, you poor soul?" Ahalya finally felt heard and seen.

\* \* \*

Her name was Medusa, the girl that saved Ahalya that day. Ahalya was confused; why would someone want to save her? Turns out, Medusa was in the same boat as Ahalya. Another woman who got violated; another woman who got punished for a sin she did not commit. The two, though, were on the opposite ends of the same spectrum — Ahalya turned into a stone, and Medusa could turn people into stone.

"I used to be beautiful. Poseidon touched me. They punished me. My hair was snatched away from me; I was snatched away from myself. They swapped my hair for snakes.

Who wants snakes on their heads?" Medusa was angry, the suppressed rage now unleashing. "But you know what, friend? This curse gave me a boon as well. I could spot you. You see, I can now differentiate between actual stones and people-turned-stones. I can talk to those other-than. I can hear you clearly, my sister."

Medusa was adamant about one thing, she would never let her sister get hurt by anyone ever again. She would never let any man cross the thresholds that her sister wants around herself.

Ahalya is in safe hands now.

\*\*\*



Countless days passed, and never did Medusa leave her sister's side. Curses seemed to form a solidarity stronger than the stones themselves. Anyone who dared to enter the sisters' territory would run away on seeing Medusa's hair. The girl was compassionate; and did not want anyone innocent to turn into stone. So, she turned her back on the humanity that passed through those cursed forests.

On one not-so-monotonous day, Medusa heard the giggles of two little children. She could also hear their horror when they spotted her snake-ridden back. It hurt her, being a subject of horror, when she knew herself as a human being and not just a cursed subject. However, she made sure never to turn her back and face the children, for she could sense something good was about to happen.

After a couple of minutes, Medusa could feel another presence near them. She held on to Ahalya tighter than ever, unsure of what's about to come. The unknown presence came closer to the two. Medusa soon heard the person, who she realised sounded like a very gentle woman, speak, and good things she spoke.

"I can sense that you have been harmed by something. My two kids, Luv and Kush, were just here, and they told me about you. I had to come and see you, for I can feel that you have been wronged. I am Sita, by the way. You can feel safe around me."

The most love Medusa had ever received came from a stone—her sister, Ahalya. Medusa almost wept, for this is all she ever wanted.

"Ma'am, thank you for noticing my pain. You see, I was cursed, and if I were to look at you, you would turn into a stone. That is the last thing I would want to do. And this little stone here, she is my sister. Ahalya. Her husband cursed her, and now she is suffering. I wish I also knew how to turn stones back into people."



On hearing the stories of the sisters, Sita felt her heartstrings being pulled. Unknowingly, Sita let out a few drops of tears; some landed on Medusa and some on Ahalya too. Maybe it was the anger of betrayal, or pure solidarity for her fellow women, but those tears contained some magic in them.

The stone that once used to be Ahalya was not there anymore. Instead, there stood the first Panchakanya, back in her human form. The snakes that once reigned over Medusa's head disappeared. Medusa was back to her old beautiful glory.

The sisters were shocked. They questioned, "how did you do this?" It did not make sense to them, and why would it?

Sita then narrated her own story. Of how she was once wife to the ideal gentleman, Rama. Of how the same ideal gentleman doubted her, betrayed her, and left her. Of how she was violated by every man around her. Of how she was kidnapped; of how after "saving" her, her own husband accused her of adultery; of how the same husband left her alone pregnant with their two kids. Of how Rama knew of her innocence, and yet he abandoned her because his reputation was at stake.

Thus, what remained in that forest was a newformed bond of three sisters—all three so different from each other, yet suffering the same fate. It was as if the red string had tied their lives together.

And for them, that solidarity was enough.





# EXPECTATIONS

AMRITA CHHETRI

They cover me in layers of their standards,  
hiding my flaws behind their pressuring hands.

They push and pull until I fit in,  
but I am getting tired.

The thick layer of fake-perfection is heavy on my  
shoulders,  
so I rip it off with all my strength.

I have to walk down these unknown streets,  
but I am not scared.

Their emptiness is calm and welcoming,  
take a deep breath and smile.

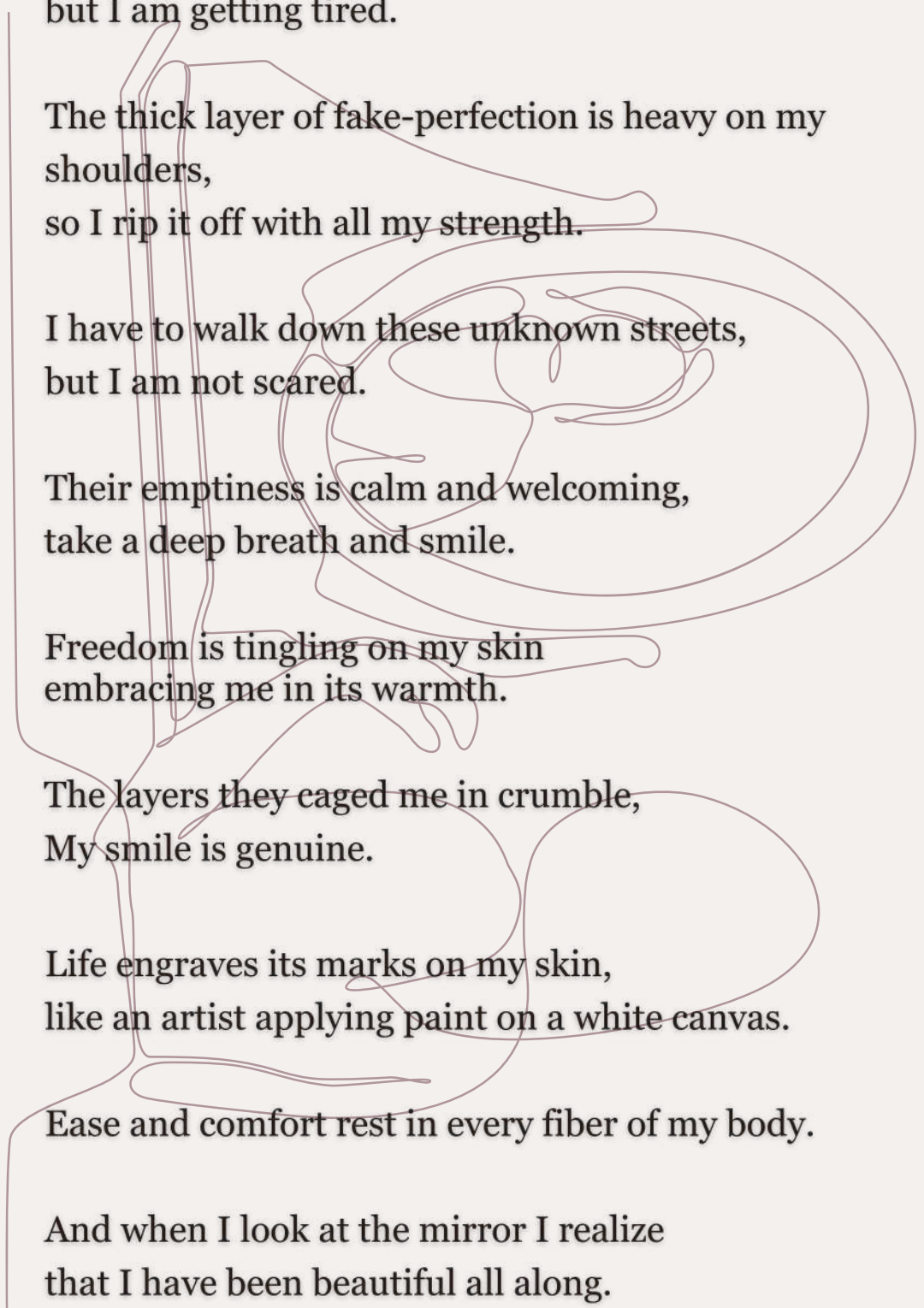
Freedom is tingling on my skin  
embracing me in its warmth.

The layers they caged me in crumble,  
My smile is genuine.

Life engraves its marks on my skin,  
like an artist applying paint on a white canvas.

Ease and comfort rest in every fiber of my body.

And when I look at the mirror I realize  
that I have been beautiful all along.





# THE LAND OF THE LIVING CORPSES

ANIKA CHOWDHARY

**D**istantly, Lily thought she could hear the women of the neighborhood talking in an excited manner, perhaps just as she was used to in her town. They seemed to be exchanging gossip, but their voices were coarse and without even a hint of amusement.

She could also make out voices of children; the verve of childhood audible without much effort. Insurmountable joy filled her heart. How she wished she could join them!

“Oh!” she squealed with delight. Mark looked rather peculiarly at her, as if she was one of the oddest creatures in the world.

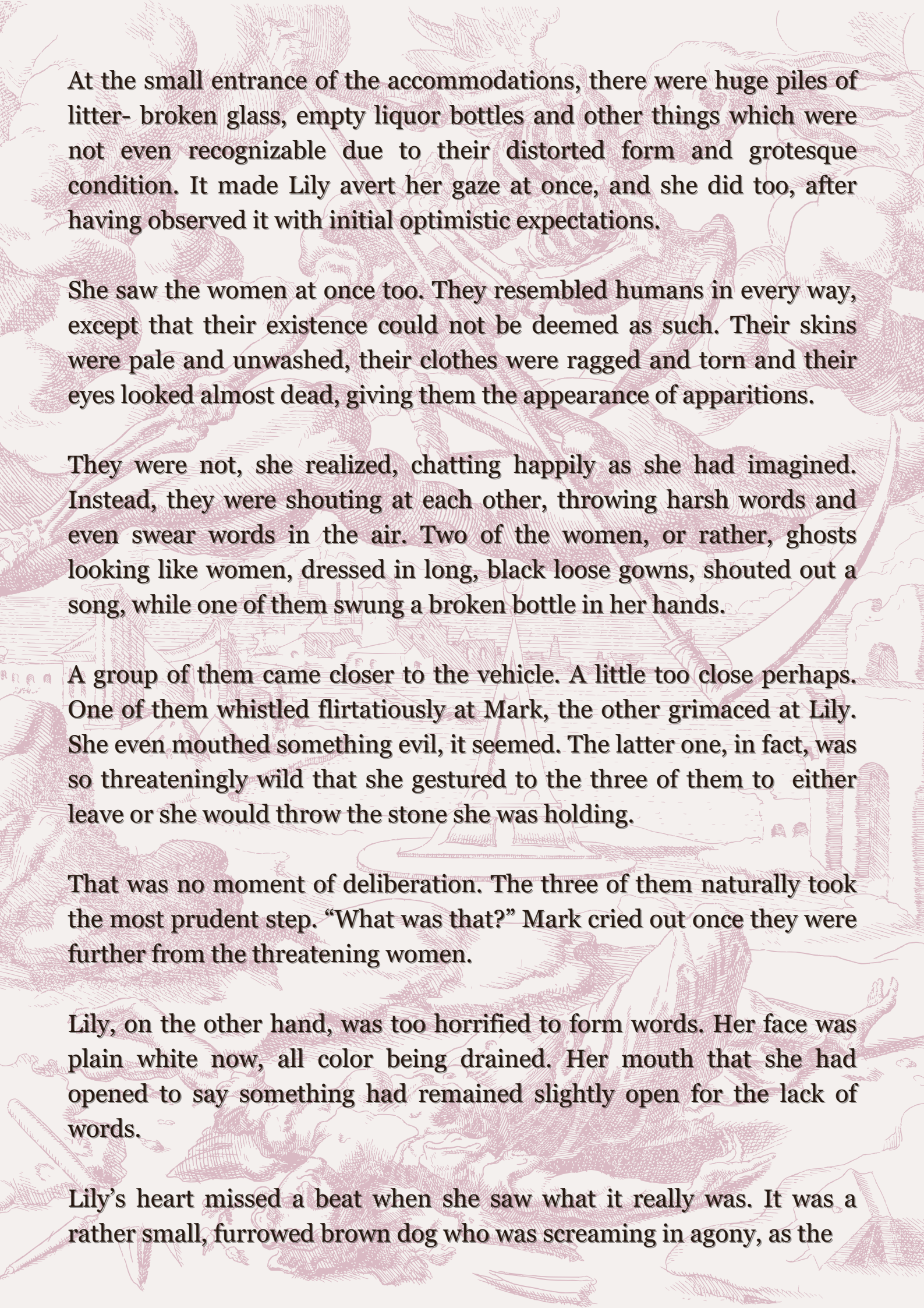
As they neared, however, the reality beckoned her to look closely. Or in other words, look at least.

While she had squealed with delight before, now she was compelled to squeal with horror. Within a few shattering minutes of revelation, the world that she had been painting in her head with sounds as clues melted away, taking with it all her positivity and enthusiasm.

The first awful sight, which filled her with horror, was of the houses. The structures were rickety and rotten, and indeed to call them accommodations would have been to give them a compliment never intended for them.

The only thing that kept the houses from falling down altogether was their compactness. They were, in fact, packed so close together so as to rob them all of their individuality, and merging their dilapidated selves into a much bigger dilapidated but firm commonness, the mortar of black and green filth like grease smeared on all of them in thick strata.





At the small entrance of the accommodations, there were huge piles of litter- broken glass, empty liquor bottles and other things which were not even recognizable due to their distorted form and grotesque condition. It made Lily avert her gaze at once, and she did too, after having observed it with initial optimistic expectations.

She saw the women at once too. They resembled humans in every way, except that their existence could not be deemed as such. Their skins were pale and unwashed, their clothes were ragged and torn and their eyes looked almost dead, giving them the appearance of apparitions.

They were not, she realized, chatting happily as she had imagined. Instead, they were shouting at each other, throwing harsh words and even swear words in the air. Two of the women, or rather, ghosts looking like women, dressed in long, black loose gowns, shouted out a song, while one of them swung a broken bottle in her hands.

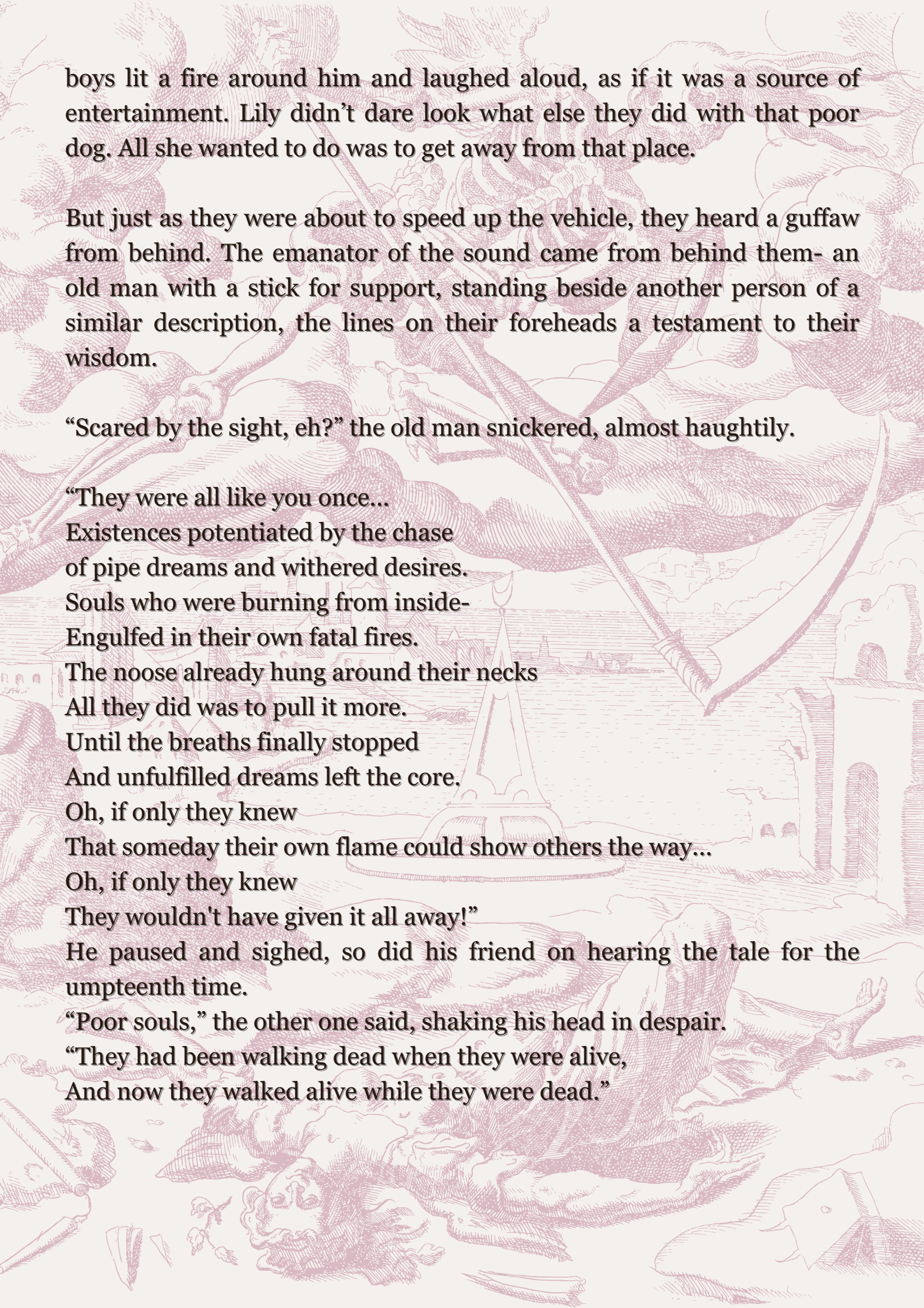
A group of them came closer to the vehicle. A little too close perhaps. One of them whistled flirtatiously at Mark, the other grimaced at Lily. She even mouthed something evil, it seemed. The latter one, in fact, was so threateningly wild that she gestured to the three of them to either leave or she would throw the stone she was holding.

That was no moment of deliberation. The three of them naturally took the most prudent step. "What was that?" Mark cried out once they were further from the threatening women.

Lily, on the other hand, was too horrified to form words. Her face was plain white now, all color being drained. Her mouth that she had opened to say something had remained slightly open for the lack of words.

Lily's heart missed a beat when she saw what it really was. It was a rather small, furrowed brown dog who was screaming in agony, as the





boys lit a fire around him and laughed aloud, as if it was a source of entertainment. Lily didn't dare look what else they did with that poor dog. All she wanted to do was to get away from that place.

But just as they were about to speed up the vehicle, they heard a guffaw from behind. The emanator of the sound came from behind them- an old man with a stick for support, standing beside another person of a similar description, the lines on their foreheads a testament to their wisdom.

"Scared by the sight, eh?" the old man snickered, almost haughtily.

"They were all like you once...

Existences potentiated by the chase  
of pipe dreams and withered desires.  
Souls who were burning from inside-  
Engulfed in their own fatal fires.

The noose already hung around their necks

All they did was to pull it more.

Until the breaths finally stopped

And unfulfilled dreams left the core.

Oh, if only they knew

That someday their own flame could show others the way...

Oh, if only they knew

They wouldn't have given it all away!"

He paused and sighed, so did his friend on hearing the tale for the umpteenth time.

"Poor souls," the other one said, shaking his head in despair.

"They had been walking dead when they were alive,

And now they walked alive while they were dead."



# ZUGUWULU

ANANYAA SAHA

Mama otter,  
Has lost her only daughter.  
She eloped with a cuckoo bird,  
Gone with the wind, away from  
water.

The simple owl forgot night duty,  
He was lost in the squirrel's beauty,  
Now he'll be up all day  
Keeping greedy gators at bay

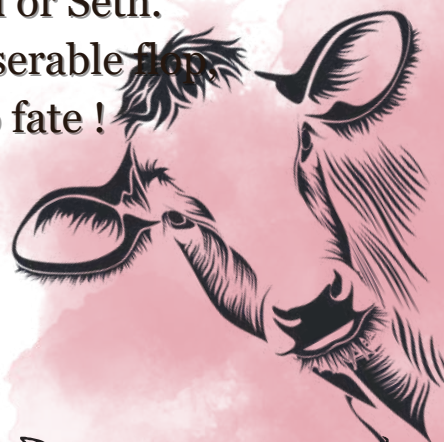
The big cat,  
Needs his SPF and hat.  
He's done praying for prey,  
Dinner at night means hunting at  
day.

Polly the cow last night,  
Had a little too much to drink,  
Her black patches have  
disappeared,  
Just like that, in a blink!

The mouse Jimmy Choo,  
Can't find one shoe.  
He has a meeting with the  
Woodpecker's Association,  
And he's underdressed, what  
to do?

Silly the snake,  
Wants an almond cake.  
He was served fried frogs  
instead,  
Indeed, a s-s-serious mistake.

The author of this poem begs  
your pardon,  
She ain't no Carol or Seth.  
Super hit or a miserable flop,  
Let's leave that to fate !







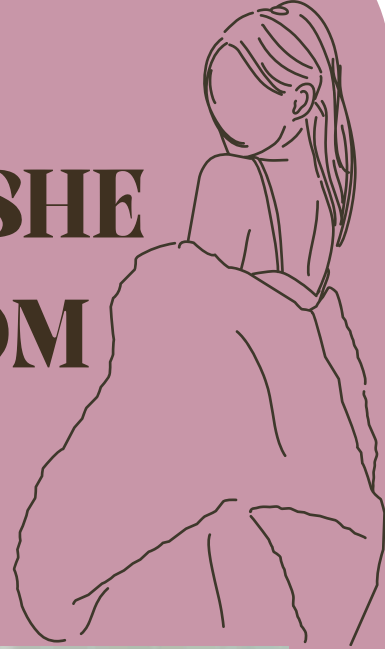
# LENSPEAK

NO ARTIST  
TOLERATES REALITY



# THE WONDERLAND SHE DIDN'T RETURN FROM

MAHAK PANDEY



Enchanted by the woods, never to return again.





# INTO THE WOODS

LEKHA NATH



The quest to find ourselves often takes us through the  
uncharted terrains of the unconscious





# MY BLIND DATE WITH LIFE

LATASHA SHARMA



And when she saw her eyes were gone, she summoned a vision to finally see the world.





# MYTH AND MAGIC



# ENCHANTMENT'S LURE

AISHANYA

Beneath the moonlit sky of myth and magic,  
A world of wonder and mystery, so tragic,  
Where ancient tales of gods and beasts  
Whisper secrets that haunt our dreams.

Amidst the realm of enchanted things,  
Where fairies flit on gossamer wings,  
And dragons breathe fire into the night,  
Myths and legends dance in delight.

In this land of make-believe and fable,  
Where the impossible becomes plausible,  
We are bewitched by the power of imagination,  
And seduced by the allure of fascination.

The wizard's spell and sorcerer's charm,  
Cast shadows that weave a spell so warm,  
And the mermaid's song upon the breeze,  
Entices us with sweet melodies.

Yet in this place of wonder and awe,  
We must remember what we saw,  
For within the tales and magic's grasp,  
Lies a truth that's ours to clasp.

The myths we hear and legends we tell,  
Are more than just fanciful tales to dwell,  
For they reveal the depths of our souls,  
And the stories that make us whole.

So let us embrace the wonder and mystique,  
Of this land where myth and magic speak,  
For in their tales and legends, we find,  
A wisdom that touches the heart and mind.



# IN MY TOWN

ALEENA ANN VARGHESE



The small town of 'Stranded' was in panic. Rumors of two mysterious young ladies had been spreading throughout the town like wildfire. They had features like that of a bizarre fantasy, a rare and dangerous affliction. They were mesmerizing to watch, yet dangerous to approach.

The description of the two young ladies was always the same. They had red, glowing eyes and exoskeleton like structures on their necks. One had short hair, while the other had hers up in a bun. They both had horns and mystical wings, and they were both fair skinned.

The two mysterious young ladies seemed to be looking for something, but no one knew what it was. However, the townspeople knew to stay away from them, as they were said to be able to enslave anyone who came too close.

The town of Stranded was in a constant state of fear and confusion. No one knew why the two had chosen their town, but they were determined to stay away from them.

One day, a brave young man decided to approach the two mysterious young ladies. He was determined to ask them what they were looking for, even if it meant his own demise.





To his surprise, the two young ladies were not dangerous at all. The man asked them what they were looking for and they replied that they were searching for a way home. He offered to help them find their way, and the two young ladies were overjoyed.

The man and the two young ladies left the town of Stranded and returned to their place of origin, a mystical realm called, 'Lozivion'. But, they never returned. No one knows what happened to them. Was the young man very slyly seduced and abducted, or did something else happen? Everything was wrapped up in the hands of mystery like their short time in the town. Many questions were yet to be answered. The town of Stranded was left with a newfound appreciation for the mysteries of the world.







# WALKING DOWN THE MEMORY LANE

MAHIMA MINJ



Walking down the memory lane  
of folklores and stories all over again.  
The unforgettable myth and legend,  
told by my granny were so unimagined;

Were her narratives of fairy tales true?  
Story of naive princess gives me déjà vu;  
Could I get my prince Charming too?  
Looked perfect and too good to be true;

Did the evil witches ever exist ?  
Doing black magic to create a beast  
such as the greedy-vicious goblins  
and one eyed cyclops always wobblin'

The fairies showering their magical dust  
were the figures of positivity and trust.  
Their favourite was always apple pie crust.  
For them, being just, was a must;

The boogeyman's sole purpose was to scare me.  
From the shackles of dragon-fear, I'm now free;  
The saga of a bloodhound vampire lives forever;  
Can't forget the shape-shifting werewolves ever.



# DARK SHADOWS OF A NEIGHBOURING LIGHT

TRIKKUR S LAKSHMI

I recall those memories  
Lost in the past;  
Every smile and trouble  
From first to last.

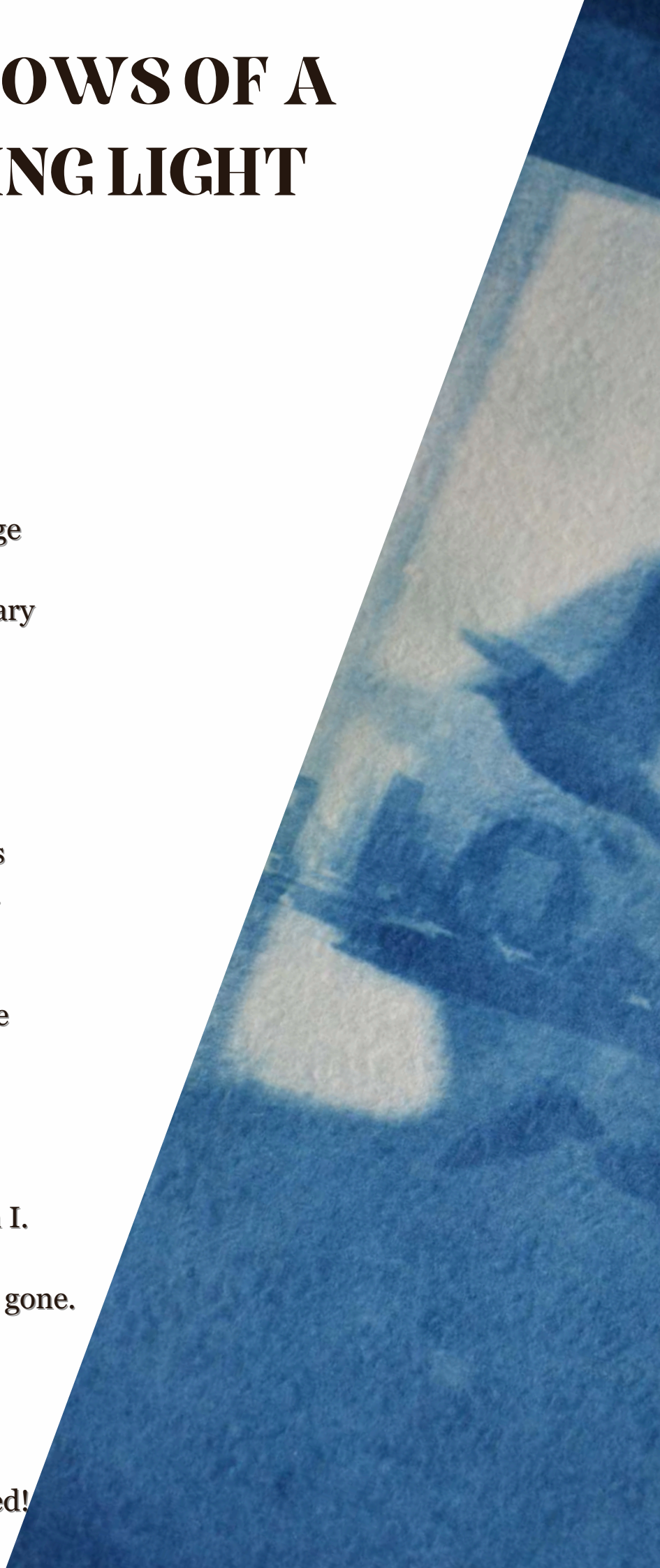
Wandering through the passage  
Is my lost soul;  
Nothing special, merely ordinary  
But sacrosanct and whole.

It flows now to a dead end.  
In the corner,  
Stand three men.  
Neither mortal nor God, Lords  
Of weighing judgement for all.

It is then,  
That my former life engulfs me  
Mortal inconsequence  
And lost opportunities.

A quick scan and they decide  
That of no real importance am I.  
My path set. I float on;  
A feelingless spirit with all life gone.

I cross the Fields of Elysium;  
Pure bliss.  
If only I had been kinder  
That chance, now I have missed!





Pulled away from marvellous  
heaven,  
Toward terrible Tartarus  
I now descend.

Slinking away from its wide abyss  
I pray thanks to the Lord;  
The escape from this prison  
Is my only solace.  
Handed down my verdict  
I read my name, March 12th  
And the Plains of Asphodel,  
Engraved on a stone edict.

There, I meet other souls  
With wan smiles and eyes damp,  
Listening to distant wails  
And close everlasting laughs

This meadow is steeped with regret.  
The bright torch of Asphodel  
Mocks our meaningless death.

Those here have no heroic history  
Nor pasts of villainous treachery.  
Just normal people, an everyday  
sight;  
Dark shadows of a neighbouring  
light.





# NIGHTMARE

ANNA GRACE MATTHEW

I walk through the dark pits  
Of Tartarus,  
Without you by my side,  
And danger lurking overhead.

I seek comfort in the fact  
That you are safe  
Though being away from you,  
Has broken me completely.

Everytime I think of giving up,  
Your perfect face appears before my eyes,  
You urge me to keep moving,  
Keep moving towards you.

I endured the darkness of the pit,  
Only with the hope of seeing you again,  
But when I finally escaped my nightmare,  
You weren't there to meet me.

The war was over,  
And we were the victors,  
And everyone's head was hung low  
As they stood beside your lifeless body.

I broke down and refused to believe  
That you had truly left me,  
I refused to accept that  
I escaped one nightmare only  
To enter another  
Where there isn't any  
Hope of ever seeing you again...





# AS LONG AS SHE LIVED

ANNA GRACE MATTHEW



He rushed to her side,  
Her half closed eyes looked up,  
A faint smile danced on her lips,  
Her lips parted to say something,  
But alas, no sound came.

He clasped her hands between his,  
Pleading her not to leave him,  
He sat on his knees near her,  
Near her semi- conscious body.

A tear ran down his cheek,  
As he held her blood stained body,  
He pressed his ear near her mouth,  
To hear what she had to say.

“We won! The war is finally over!” she  
said,  
He nodded his head,  
Unable to say,  
He was okay if they had lost,  
He was okay if the war was still raging,  
He was okay with anything as long as she  
stood beside him,  
He was okay with anything as long as she  
got to live.



# THROUGH TUNNELS AND SLIDES

DEEPIKA GARG

It's been twelve years since Karla left her hometown at the age of nine.

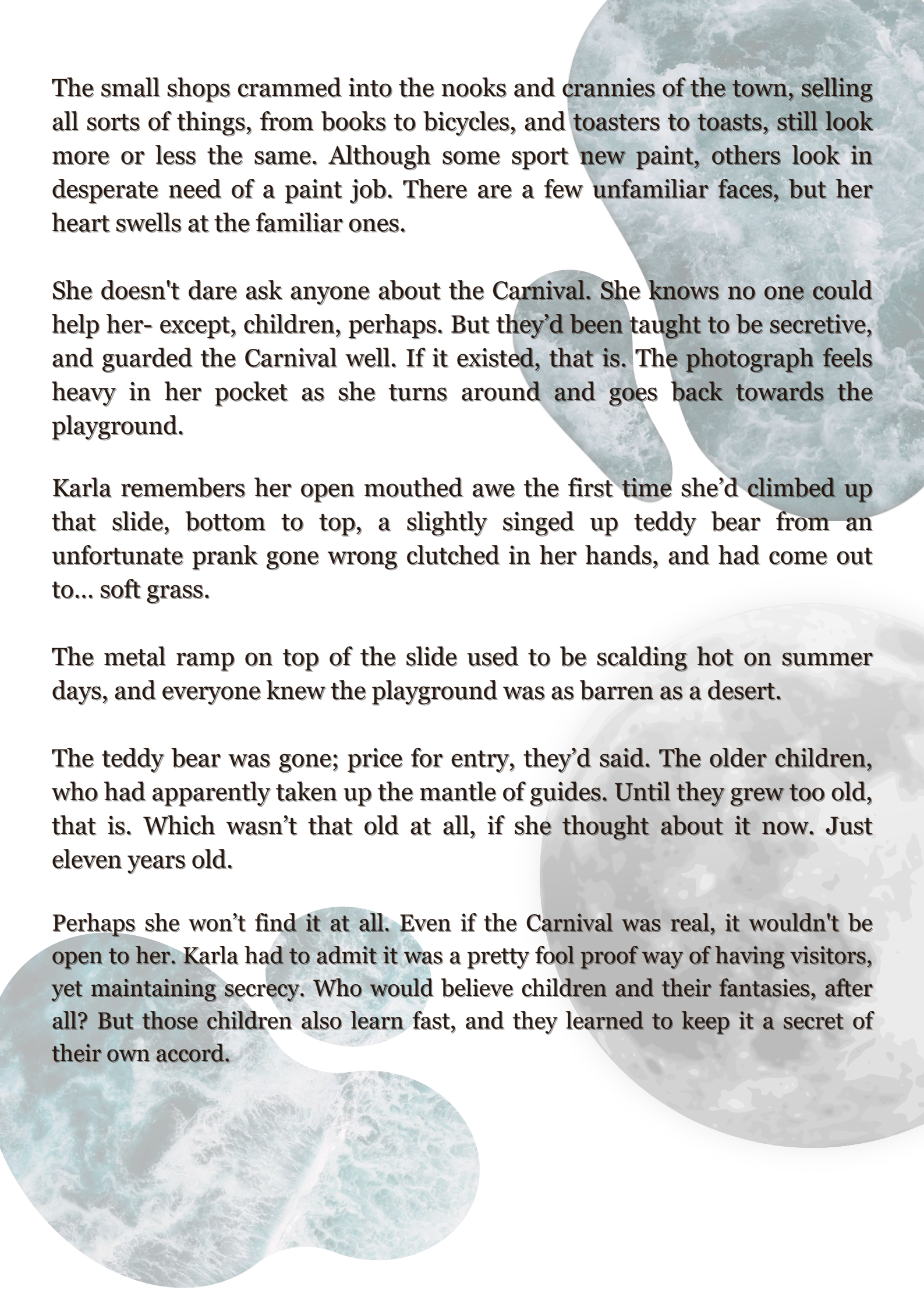
She wonders if Lady Vel grew old over the past years. It doesn't seem likely. Karla feels for the worn photograph in her pocket, walking almost aimlessly.

Lady Vel had been a peculiar person and the owner of an even more peculiar place. One that Karla isn't sure exists. They just called it 'The Carnival.'

The old decrepit playground is just as rundown as she remembers, and the broken swing still hangs on one chain. The tunnel slide, too, is there. Turning, scratched blue plastic that used to leave static in its wake. Not very long. It is clearly not for her anymore. It had been one of the longest slides when she'd been little, for every child in the small town. And everyone's favourite.

There is no one in the playground right now, not a single child. It makes a kind of strange sense, confirming Karla's suspicions, even though they still feel quite impossible. The Carnival isn't supposed to exist. Perhaps the town built another playground? Unlikely. The town authorities barely had enough money to fix the roads, let alone build a playground.





The small shops crammed into the nooks and crannies of the town, selling all sorts of things, from books to bicycles, and toasters to toasts, still look more or less the same. Although some sport new paint, others look in desperate need of a paint job. There are a few unfamiliar faces, but her heart swells at the familiar ones.

She doesn't dare ask anyone about the Carnival. She knows no one could help her- except, children, perhaps. But they'd been taught to be secretive, and guarded the Carnival well. If it existed, that is. The photograph feels heavy in her pocket as she turns around and goes back towards the playground.

Karla remembers her open mouthed awe the first time she'd climbed up that slide, bottom to top, a slightly singed up teddy bear from an unfortunate prank gone wrong clutched in her hands, and had come out to... soft grass.

The metal ramp on top of the slide used to be scalding hot on summer days, and everyone knew the playground was as barren as a desert.

The teddy bear was gone; price for entry, they'd said. The older children, who had apparently taken up the mantle of guides. Until they grew too old, that is. Which wasn't that old at all, if she thought about it now. Just eleven years old.

Perhaps she won't find it at all. Even if the Carnival was real, it wouldn't be open to her. Karla had to admit it was a pretty fool proof way of having visitors, yet maintaining secrecy. Who would believe children and their fantasies, after all? But those children also learn fast, and they learned to keep it a secret of their own accord.



Lady Vel had been an occupying presence. Taking up every strand of attention, filling your view with nothing but her. Sometimes, quite literally. She'd been pretty tall, even the tallest of the kids only ever came up to a little above her waist. Her outfit made it harder to look at anything else. A bright white and red striped suit, boots that clicked with every step she made, and a very tall black magicians hat, along with that long, heavy black cane she would spin around sometimes.

Not to mention the garish purple bowtie, polka dotted with large white circles.

They never actually saw too much of her, but she was actually always there to greet the newcomers in her loud booming, yet pleasant voice.

"Welcome, my darlings. To the Carnival, this is Lady Carn Vel speaking,"

Karla circles around the slide, the whole structure, with slides, ladders, and a small tilted climbing wall with plastic footholds. Or, it used to be tilted, as some elders will tell you. But for as long as she'd known, it had been more horizontal than diagonal. Almost touching the ground but not quite, barely leaning on the metal poles, threatening to slide down with every jostled moment but never actually falling. No one dared to climb it up anyway.

The carousel in the Carnival had always been her, and many others', favourite ride. There weren't that many there, but none as strange as that one. The animals that made up the carousel were unlike anything she'd ever seen before. They weren't horses, or ponies, not even unicorns. Not even Pegasus, for that matter. But some strange creatures, sometimes with both wings and horns, sometimes with lion faces, sometimes with too many heads. Thinking back now, she could probably identify one of them as a gryphon.

It had spun at unimaginable speeds, and every time Karla had been certain she'd go flying off. But miraculously, there had never been an incident of any one of the children falling. Although there had been a lot of vomiting.



There were other things to explore there, too. Like the food stalls, items which almost never tasted like they were supposed to. Or things no one had even heard of before. Cotton candy had been perhaps the most recognisable of them all, but it had always felt like eating ice.

Time had always seemed to move strangely there, even if they'd come to the playground late afternoon, and spend several hours at the Carnival, they'd always come out during the sunset. And if they spent mere minutes there, they'd come out during the sunset too.

Not everyone got many opportunities to go to the Carnival, though. The price would always need to be something... worthy of entry into the Carnival. And worth was subjective, for some children, it could be an expensive bracelet, for some it could simply be a ragdoll they'd become attached to.

She takes out the photograph from her pocket, and stares at it. It is a picture of five children, gathered around the same playground structure she stands in front of. Two of them sit atop the blue slide, legs dangling on the sides as they wave at the camera. Karla's head peeks out from inside the tunnel, while the other two stand on either side of it.

Cameras, or any other electronic equipment, wasn't allowed through the tunnel. But they'd all wanted to commemorate the Carnival, take a picture. The slide was the next best spot. The entrance.

She'd cherished the photograph, further proof of the Carnival's existence. Taken it out and run her hands and eyes over it so many times, the photograph was now so worn it felt like brittle fabric in her hand.

Then a raindrop falls over it, followed by another. Karla gasps and puts it back, rushing under the high ramp of the slide to protect herself from the worst of the onslaught.



Her town had always been known for its erratic weather, and really, she shouldn't even have been surprised. It had been a fairly cloudy and dark day. As she crouches down, the ends of her long coat getting sullen in the dirt as her hair grows damp from the few drops hitting her even under the slide, the sudden urge to climb in and up rushes through her.

For a moment, she considers resisting. But then starts climbing up, unheeding of her quickly wetting clothes, if only for nostalgia's sake.

When she comes out on top of the slide, onto the dented ramp, collecting puddles of water, she can't help the rush of disappointment. She knows she couldn't really have found herself in the Carnival, she isn't even sure what she expected, but it hadn't been this.

Now already soaked through, she sees little point in trying to protect herself from the rain and leaves the playground, futilely putting her hands in her pockets to warm them up.

Then she freezes, her fingers closing around the object in there as she slowly pulls it out. She stares, for a long moment, the rain pattering down around her, unblinking. Disbelieving. But it's hard to doubt something when it's literally in your hands.

Karla stuffs the large purple, white polka-dotted bow tie into her coat pocket and abruptly resumes walking, the soggy ground splashing beneath her boots.

The photograph is gone.





# THROUGH THE WINDOW OF MY FANTASY

SHARON PAUL

Why is it dark? So dark?  
Wait, I see some light!  
Oh! the curtains are drawn,  
But look, streaming in sunlight!


Stretching my arms  
With a tired yawn,  
I sat on my bed, having  
Slept, well past dawn.

But wait, it is my room,  
But not the same,  
For never had the sun shone  
So bright and insane.

Rushing to the window  
I look outside,  
Oh, how green and lush,  
But this is not where I reside.

This is not home, neither  
the region same!  
This is not where constantly,  
The winters have me chained.

I step outside, to see,  
The truth of this place unreal,  
But what is to lie,  
Everything feels surreal!



The leaves are green,  
The flowers bloom:  
No snow anywhere,  
No icy gloom.

And cherishing the sight  
I sigh, what serenity!  
For is it not just the sight,  
I have waited for since eternity.

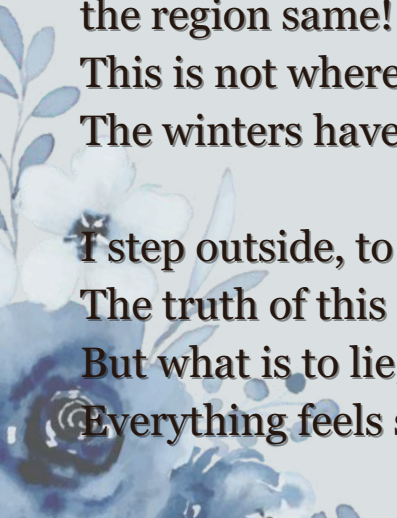
And suddenly I realise,  
That this not,  
How it is supposed to be  
This is indeed not reality.

I live in a dark,  
Very dark place:  
Where sun goes up  
Only in fantasy.

And something calls  
Well, back to reality?  
And I jerk awake  
Back to confinity.

Was it all just a dream,  
All a facade?  
Was it all just my dream,  
The one to achieve I wish so hard?

A land with lively melody,  
Lush with blossom and greenery,  
A land with many possibilities,  
The one that is my fantasy.







# LENSPEAK

*NO ARTIST  
TOLERATES REALITY*



MAHAK PANDEY

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# THE WITCH'S HOUSE



The most terrifying thing in the house, was she herself.



VANSHIKA GUPTA

# THE ENCHANTED ONES



**Mystic:** A person who is puzzled before the obvious but who understands the non-existent.



# DAUGHTERS OF WITCHES

SALONI UTTAM



They tried to bury us, they didn't realise we were  
seeds

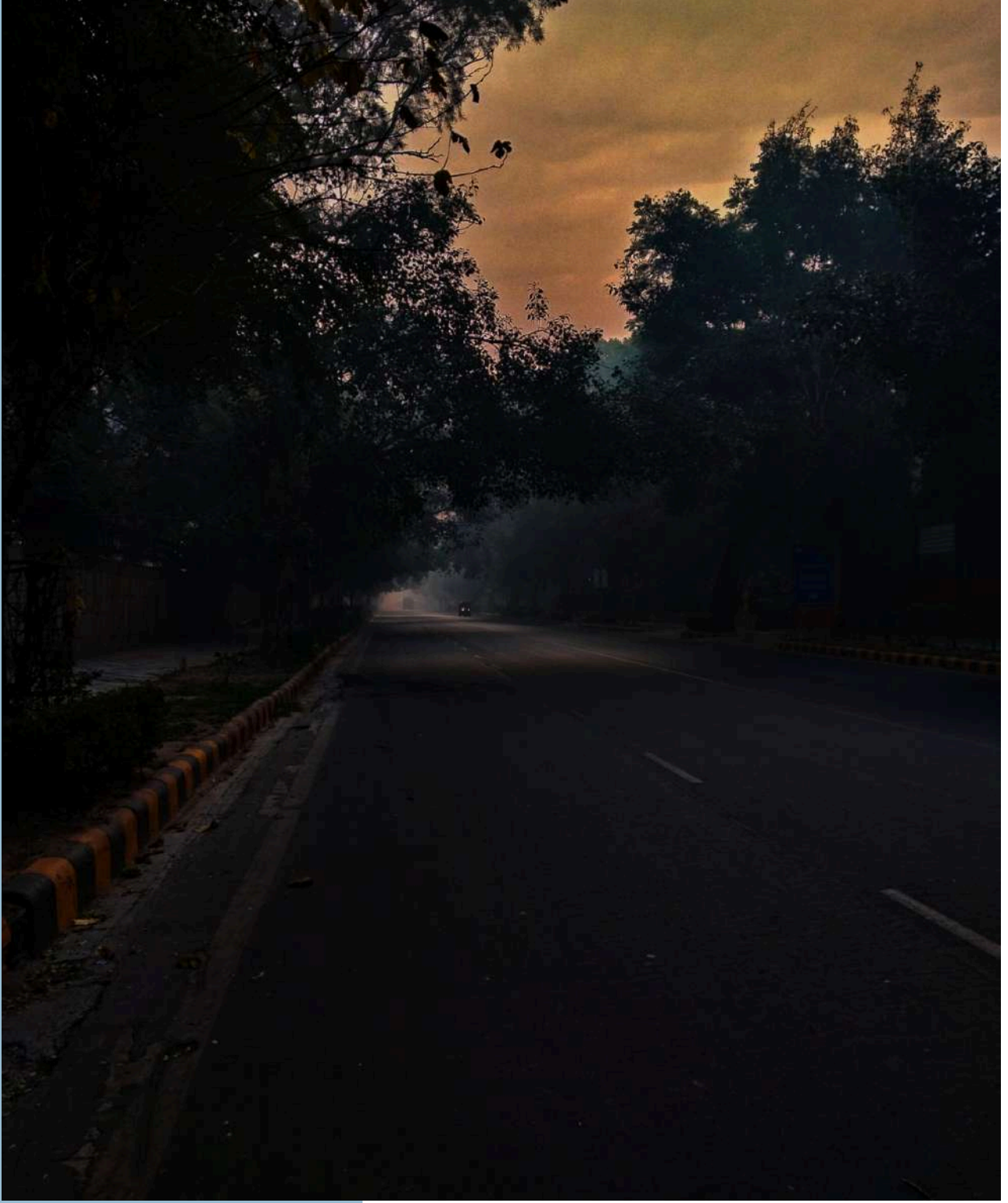
Saloni



A trip to that which doesn't exist, the luminous darkness and the light of hope which envelops  
what this picture rightly claims to capture- The Oblivion

# OBLIVION

LYDIA LYNETTE DANIELS







# YINYANG

ASTHA MARY VARGHESE

Merging the polars, the dynamics and the friction to create harmony,  
known to all but felt by few





# THE ELIXIR OF FAE

SAMRIDDHI  
NARAYAN

The thirst of she, who wishes to know the realm of the unknown; quenched by  
her who dreams of the crooked darkness



# CROOKED CRESCENT

SAMRIDDHI  
NARAYAN



# THE GROTTO OF LILITH

IKSHITA  
THEOPHILUS



The sacredness of the unworshippable- the beauty of the forbidden





A LONG  
TIME  
AGO IN A  
GALAXY  
FAR  
FAR  
AWAY





# SKIN HUNGER

SHAONI DUTTA

Skin Hunger

noun

/skɪnˈhʌŋɡə/

NEOLOGISM

n. the desire for physical touch from another human, especially after a period of deprivation.

“Go on. Say it. You’re probably used to saying it.” The boy mutters groggily under the ever-present influence of sedatives. A web of tubes, complete with catheters and surgical drains entwine his body.

“Yeah. You’re dying.” The doctor says, reading more intensely into the screen than necessary. He refuses to meet the boy’s eye. “Saying it doesn’t get easier, disappointingly.”

“Haha. Big surprise. We’re aaallll dying.” He crackles out a dry laugh. “Damn. These drugs are very very real.” He laughs again, his papery face wrinkling under the exertion.

“You’re too young to be so dark.” The doctor is amused. “You want me to inform anyone? A mother perhaps?”

“Nah. I’m surrogate-born. No one you need to inform.”

The doctor reaches for the boy’s hand, hesitates, then stops himself. The boy giggles, “You wanna risk touching me?”

“Yeah. And get my licence cancelled. And you—”

“Hilarious. What’s the worst they can do? Kill me?”

Outside in the garage, the doctor lights a cigarette and drags on it roughly. It’s risky being out here without his elaborate mask. He could get his licence cancelled. He could die. The garage isn’t properly sterilised. Rows of ambulances come through here, each carrying its own story of touch-starvation or the virus, or some morbid combination of the two. But this is his favourite form of self-harm, a way of ‘touching’ danger and getting away with it, relishing its hypocrisy.



For him to be so close to other humans is especially dangerous. He is one of only two doctors at Kliniken who had actually experienced physical touch in their life. He had had a mother, not a surrogate. She passed, of course. She was stupid enough to keep her child close to herself, to let him have physical affection. It was a miracle that he had survived.

Those ancient Indian myths of “mothers having a healing touch” may not have been entirely untrue. But then again, seeing as their entire population went extinct almost overnight is evidence to the contrary. It was now like a muscle he had to flex every day, being inches from other humans and withstanding his need for physical contact. An everyday confrontation with his hunger had somewhat numbed it. Doctor Laurie was like him, he had experienced physical touch, but he was not as strong. He got through the day by stealing painkillers from postoperative patients. Everybody knew; nobody cared to report. The drugs kept Laurie in check with a high and patients preoccupied with pain. Either way, better than the alternative.

“So I was thinking...” the blonde boy said, having briefly awoken from his drugged stupor. “Since I’m dying anyway, can’t you take these... weird tubes off me?”

The doctor had dozed off on his chair at the other side of the room. He felt compelled to keep his dying patients company... especially this one. “You’re in no condition to urinate independently. We don’t appreciate smelly bed sheets. The catheter stays on.”

“Who told you that’s the only one bothering me?” He had a slight smile playing on his lips. The doctor just shot him a look. Even with the pallor of death, the boy was beautiful. It would take every ounce of his will not to give in. The boy tried again, “Alright. Look. How bad is it without the drugs and all?”



"Pretty bad. You're looking at gut-wrenching pain." replies the doctor, grave in his expression. "Once the high wears off, it's just pain and sheer desire for physical contact."

"You know that's why I'm here in the first place."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, doctor, not everyone is a good boy." again the dry laugh.

"I paid a girl to... you know... she needed drugs."

I figured what the hell, I'd kill for someone's skin under my palm. Until that horrid official separated us, it was great. We hated him for it. Now she's dead. And I'm dying. Who knew, right? Like of all the people in the world, how could I have chosen an infected one?"

The doctor was discomforted. The last thing he wanted to do was discuss it. "Was it worth it?" he asks, very quiet.

The boy makes an attempt to shake his head from side to side. "It was just a few seconds. Not enough to die for. She just patted me on the back... I can't tell you how good it felt."

"Please stop talking."

"Damn, am I tempting you?" the boy said, wearing a toothy grin.

"And anyway, shouldn't you be in some cold, grey, sterilised, clean-smelling cell instead of here? Even with your mask on, I'm like a time bomb."

"I don't mind. I stay with my... ailing patients."

"You can say the word. What does a dying man have to be offended about?" he chuckles. "Why is that doctor? It excites you or something?"

The doctor frowns. "No."

The boy sits up, groaning with the effort. "Tell me?" Curious sympathy twinkling in his eyes.

The doctor exhaled, "My mom died and I wasn't around."

"So what, those big corporates didn't put her in an isolation unit?"

"She didn't want to be like that. She believed in affection and family and when UNHS came to take us to isolation, she ran away with me. I was seven years old."



“Hardcore.” the boy nods, like a man philosophising grave matters. “I like her. Running away from the UNHS like that. Serves ’em right.”

“You don’t like the UNHS?”

“What’s to like? ‘Healthcare Service’, my sweet behind. They’re taking drugs off the streets now.”

“Well, they were pretty successful in their isolation programme. That’s a win in my book.”

“Yeah, it’s a real wonder what billionaires can do once they realise they’re the ones in danger.” A spark of bitter resentment stained his eye. “But it’s sweet. What your mother did. Kinda ancient, stuff you read in books.”

“wizards. My mother used to tell me those stories.”

“Jesus. So much better off with being a surrogate-born. Look at you now. All sad and nostalgic and squishy.” The dry, high laugh comes on again.

“My mother deeply disapproved of the whole surrogate thing. Something about compromising the sanctity of motherhood.”

“I don’t like them very much either. It’s not fair, they just... punch out babies like ready-made factories and get rich on it. It’s hardly fair.”

“It’s pretty smart if you think about it. How are we going to repopulate otherwise?”

The boy smirks, a sad smirk. “Do we really need to?” He turns his head to the side. The sky has darkened outside the window. It looked like it would snow. He recognises his voice a little lesser each time he speaks. This could be the last sundown. “I’ve never known any kind of life. Isolation units, being touched by that girl and getting infected. That’s all there ever was. Repopulation does jack.”

The doctor switches on the lamp. The e-book that lay on his lap had remained unread for hours.



“Doctor,” the boy cranes his head to look up at him. “Do me a favour and take me off these drugs.”

“You sure?” the doctor asks, stretching his legs as he gets up.

“Yeah. Liquid stupidity hardly becomes me.”

The doctor obliges, doing his best to keep the boy comfortable. In these moments, he wonders if someone had done the same for his mother. He reaches out to the boy as if to say I’d touch you if I could. It’s very hard to resist running his fingers through that golden hair.

The boy smiles, a split at the corner of his lip spreading almost hurtfully. “What do you have to lose?”

The lump in the doctor’s throat is too big to swallow. That mental muscle that he exercised so diligently was tired for a change. “I’ll be right outside.”

‘Outside’ makes no difference. His skin tingles to touch, to be touched. He could feel its tangible quality. In glaring letters, a poster outside reads “SKIN HUNGER: It’s real” and then goes on to state its symptoms—weakened immune system, increased aggression, cardiovascular disease, mental health issues, growth retardation—he could rattle them off like ABC. It didn’t list, however, the menace of what one moment of weakness could do to him, to the people around him.

“What do you have to lose?” the boy’s words echoed in his ear, with its groggy, drugged voice, its gentle nasal undertone with that hint of a wicked quality. It had been a long time since he had risked being so close to feeling something for someone. What did he have to lose? When would it be good enough to risk everything and give in? How long could he lie to himself? He wasn’t helping anyone, his life was just a tug of war of desire and restraint.



The door opens softly, the doctor walks in. The boy looks up, the absence of drugs kicking in hard. Sweaty, shivery, he offers a knowing smile. The doctor comes up to sit at the edge of his bed. He doesn't look scared.

"I never got your name."

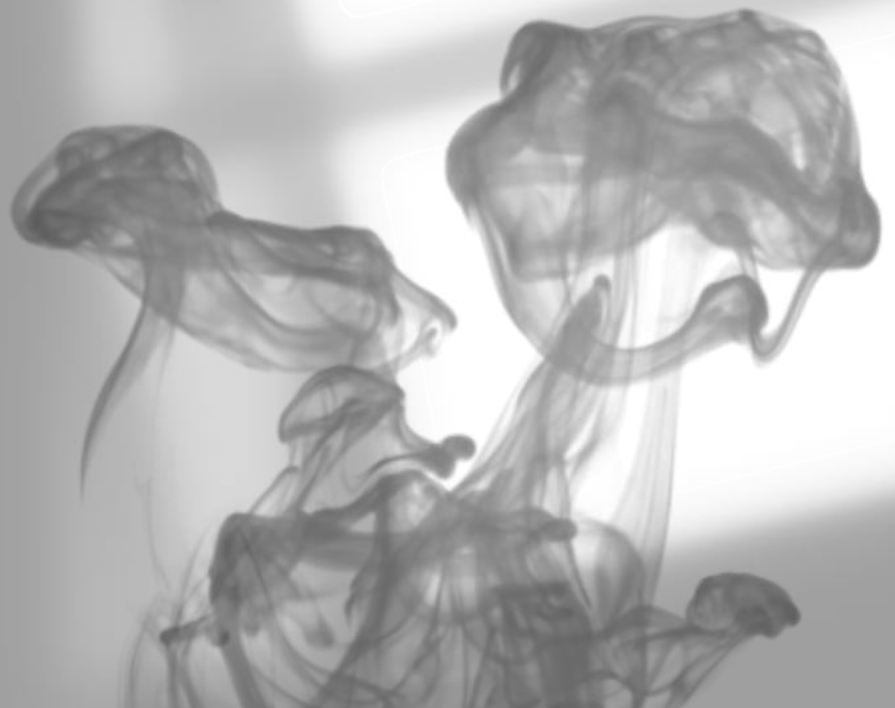
"Simon."

"Good to meet you, Simon." He reaches out, and for a moment Simon expects him to stop himself like usual, until he feels his fingers on his forehead, running softly through his hair. "I could die right now," Simon says, his humour unaffected by the absence of drugs.

"So could I." The doctor smiles, the new sensation festering like a malignant wound beneath his palm. "All these years of living, and I never imagined dying would be so beautiful."

The boy closes his eyes to feel the touch, "We're deeply doomed."

The doctor takes his hand in his and kisses it. "What do we have to lose?"





# A DYSTOPIAN SCIENCE FICTION

TRIVENI  
GOSWAMI

Eight times eight. Five times five. Three times two. A magical world. A cup, a cake, a dance, a ball. Some blush, some contour, some gibberish, some sense. Some words, some numbers, some never-ending sentences, some slow-moving pictures. Some eyes, some glances. We've seen it all. Endless phenomena tumbling through the air, falling like comets that overburden the eyes. I don't understand humans. And humans don't understand themselves. They run, they laugh, they kiss, they kill, they sit and they run again. They are a jumbled world and their language, just as jumbled. I would have communicated in my language to you, but you too are a human and clarity is beyond your conception. I've thrown questions to you, to which you have no answer. Why do you run for the train that you can catch again? Why do you eat in five minutes when you can eat in an hour? Why do you watch a thirty second video when you can watch an hour long movie? Why do you work so hard to reach the top when you can work just as much as you need to and feed your stomach? Why do you think of matters that do not exist when you have eyes, skin, nose, tongue and ears to experience yourself?



You throw puzzled looks at me as if I'm a stupid alien.  
You see, in our world, we breathe so we  
don't get your-

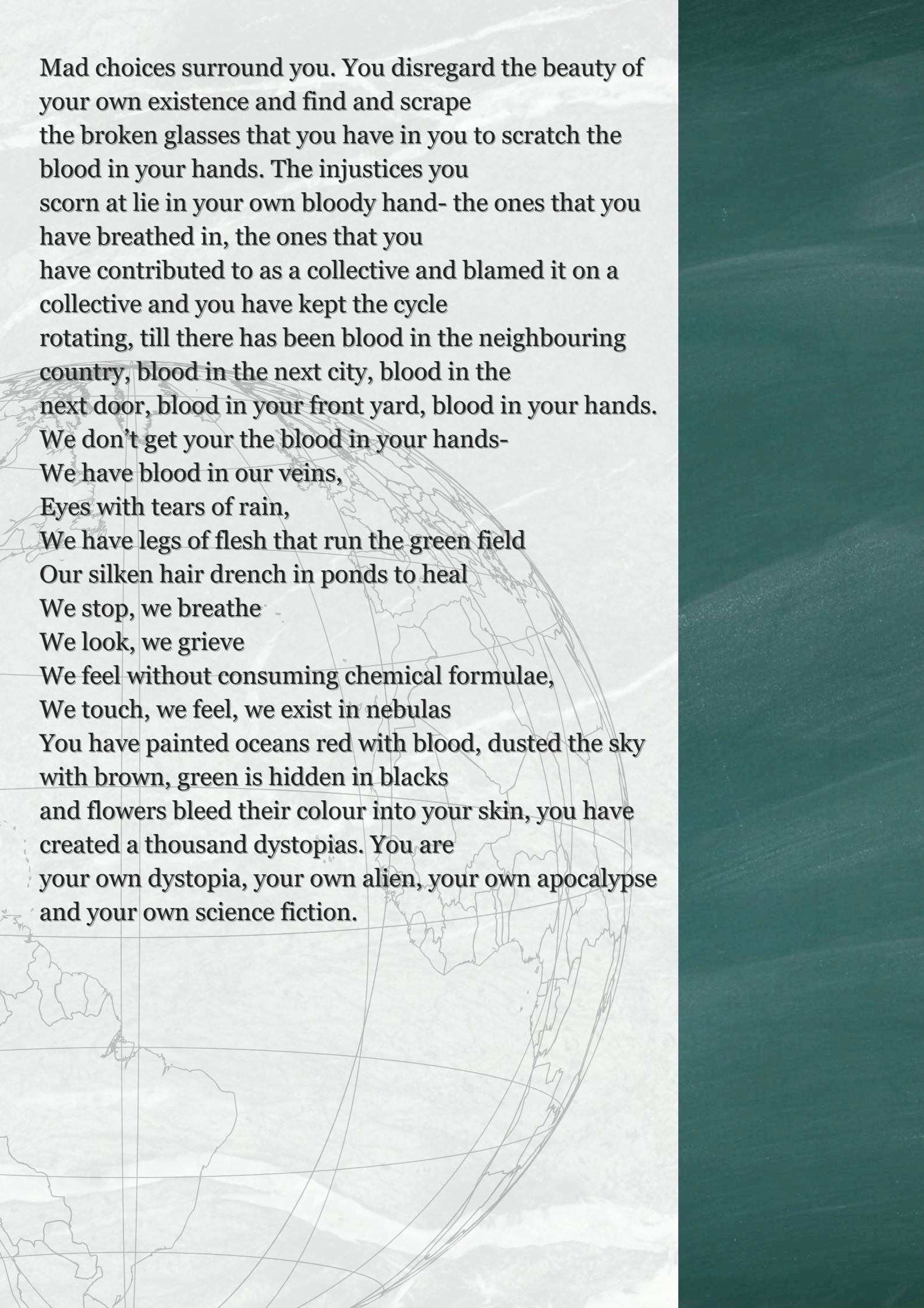
Bows, your columns and rows,  
Your lines and borders,  
Your rules and orders,  
Your hurry, your files  
Your deadlines, your lies

Okay, I'll stop. I know my efforts are in vain. You need  
art, poetry, fantasy- a world outside your  
world to tell you to go back into the world you belong to.  
The world in which you live apart from  
yourself, you live for a system, for a mirage in a desert  
that you chose for yourself. Your choice  
is your mirage and you need twisted words to tell you  
that perhaps the philosophies you scoff at  
as being niche, privileged and unrealistic are only a  
reminder of your own lost self that cannot  
find the meaning behind the gibberish in the life you  
chose. Choice, a puzzling word, a free  
token to a liberated self that lies in confusion. Not that  
choice is bad, but choice in a vacuumed  
self is no choice at all.

In our world, you see, we just breathe. So we don't get  
your-

Ministers, your clerks  
Your heroes and jerks,  
Your little humdrums about your perfect society,  
Your web of up-in-the-air theories  
Your solitude in an utopia,  
That disregards the one you live in.





Mad choices surround you. You disregard the beauty of  
your own existence and find and scrape  
the broken glasses that you have in you to scratch the  
blood in your hands. The injustices you  
scorn at lie in your own bloody hand- the ones that you  
have breathed in, the ones that you  
have contributed to as a collective and blamed it on a  
collective and you have kept the cycle  
rotating, till there has been blood in the neighbouring  
country, blood in the next city, blood in the  
next door, blood in your front yard, blood in your hands.  
We don't get your the blood in your hands-  
We have blood in our veins,  
Eyes with tears of rain,  
We have legs of flesh that run the green field  
Our silken hair drench in ponds to heal  
We stop, we breathe  
We look, we grieve  
We feel without consuming chemical formulae,  
We touch, we feel, we exist in nebulas  
You have painted oceans red with blood, dusted the sky  
with brown, green is hidden in blacks  
and flowers bleed their colour into your skin, you have  
created a thousand dystopias. You are  
your own dystopia, your own alien, your own apocalypse  
and your own science fiction.



# THE INCONSEQUENTIAL EXISTENCE

LAKSHITA TRIVEDI

I once read somewhere that a déjà vu happens when your present self aligns with another version of you across time and space. If it's true, then I do not want to believe that this pain has been felt by me in another time dimension as well.

An odd, unsettling feeling washes over me as I enter the attic. Not just any attic, but rather, THE attic, which for the last 29 years of my existence, I've been told never to set foot near. My thoughts wander to my grandfather, a man of steel, a man I loved so much, a man who 2 years ago, left with no explanations, on this very day. Today, I stand in one of the places he devoted half his life to, in the hopes that I'll get some answers. So here I am, Jane Evans, a 29 yr old lawyer by day and creepy investigator by night. I stand in one of the places that haunted my childhood but also induced my curiosity about things not meant to be seen.

This one's for you grandpa, I thought to myself, as I flung the door wide open. Little did I know, opening this door would shut all the others forever.

It's often said that your entire life flashes before your eyes, when death inevitably hits you.

2 pairs of shining eyes smiling at their little girl, a beautiful girl cutting a cake with her friends, a grown woman giving her valedictorian speech, the funeral of her grandfather, an empty casket...

Bright white light rendering me blind, I waited for death to consume me in its sweet oblivion, but it never came. With uncertainty in my heart, I opened my eyes and felt the air in my lungs turn to water, making it difficult to breathe.



The sight before me was the same, and yet somehow, completely different. It was beyond my wildest dreams. The air didn't reek of claustrophobia, as it did in my heart. A little piece of heaven had fallen from grace and I was fortunate enough to stumble upon it. A wide expanse of ocean blue sky as far as the eye could see, enveloped me. Finding myself getting lost in it, words from my granddad came rushing to me. "It's always easy to walk into a trap, because no one suspects things that are too good to be true". Throwing caution to the wind, I followed wherever the divine powers wanted to lead me.

The land seemed strange. Peaceful. Where was I? Although, the better question would be, when was I? My feet started moving in the only direction they knew. It's strange how the feel of your home doesn't change even across times. I stood before my house, in a time long before I knew it to be my home. Without much ado, I headed straight for the attic. My heart grew heavier with every step I took towards finding answers, never knowing that I would end up losing myself instead.

Time is a funny thing. It has a tendency to completely still itself when you can bear it the least. Sometimes, an hour can feel like a minute, and a single second could last a lifetime. A lifetime. That's how long I've been stuck here now, watching my granddad for days, months and years. A man devoted to science and technology, hell bent on finding the truth and saving the family he lost to the world war, a man so passionate that he created a way to skip through time. Driven in his madness, he never realized the repercussions of his actions. When you cheat on the universe, it makes sure that life comes full circle with you.

And then it did. And he's been suffering ever since. How do I know that? Because his granddaughter shares his madness and got herself the same fate as he did. I watched as he lost himself to his obsession, and how ultimately, the universe consumed him. Fragments of his mind and soul got scattered across multiple times and spaces he'd ever set foot into. What remains is the mere fact that he once existed in this very place. His



absence so loud, it breaks through the silence that has seeped into me. A haunting reminder that I am condemned to the same fate, for once you leave a place and time, you shall never be able to return to it again. I got my answers. I know why there was an empty casket at his funeral. But now the nightmare is the ghost of my empty casket.

I barely exist now. A lifeless creature that waits for death in agony. But doesn't death come to those who are alive? As for me, my existence has been wiped off of the face of the Earth. I exist now merely in the unfathomable years I live each day.

I realize now that the true adventure was not in exploring the past or the future, but rather in exploring the infinite potential of the present moment. The true magic lies in the mysteries of the present, waiting to be uncovered. But this realization came with a price. No longer being able to discern my present from the past or future, I weep in my heart longing for the life I once had, the life I could've had, the life I dreamed of, and the life that now, like me, doesn't exist.

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# THE MAD

SANAH MUNJAL

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The Madness in the streets had forced the sane into their homes. One would assume that they'd seek cover under the veil of night to claim the streets, but the Mad sought daylight. Left with no recourse, the sane had to shutter their houses and seek refuge in the darkness. The darkness took its toll on bodies and souls—children grew pale, fat men grew thin, and everyone grew sick.

The council, elected with full ceremony two years prior, now declared that their "precautions" against Madness had proved futile. The numbers of the Mad were increasing, and a permanent solution needed to be found.

The beginning of the Madness was a mystery. Only the very old, the few who had lived for centuries, remembered a time when the Mad did not exist. They remembered when the city was full of Citizens, sometimes too full.

A hundred years ago, the white coats had surveyed the population and discovered the Number. The Number was the secret to the city's perfect harmony and beauty. It marked the exact number of viable and Productive Citizens the City needed to maintain a balance of resources produced and consumed. In this delicate balance, no law enforcement, other than the ceremonial Council, was required.

The City did not maintain this number through repressive force. Those who grew older knew to remain productive or choose peaceful termination. Families knew not to produce too many children, especially if the parents hadn't set a precedent of high productivity in their bloodline. Extras, as everyone knew, would meet the same natural fate—Madness followed by a dishonorable death. The only difference between an Extra and a Dependent was a Productive Citizen pulling the weight of an elderly parent or sickly child.



Now, the Mad threatened the peace on the streets. The Productive Citizens were restless, wondering how much they would have to scale up production to ensure none of their Dependents became Extras and fell prey to the Madness that now threatened the City. Scholars and scientists collaborated, and at the convergence of history and science, they found the answer. The scientists quickly received credit for the discovery, while historians, poets, and other purveyors of the humanities were dismissed as unproductive or even decadent.

At the edge of the city, where the forest began, there lay a corpse on the tallest and oldest tree. It wasn't truly dead. For as long as recorded history, it had lain on its stomach, in a morbid state of balance. Now, this corpse needed to be retrieved and brought into the city. An officer of the State, decorated and recently promoted, was given the dubious honor of choosing an Undesirable for the task.

Undesirables were a fact of life, though so unsightly that most outside the council had never seen one. However, all were aware of their existence. These creatures were destined to go Mad and eventually end their lives by hanging themselves in the forests at twilight. While the Mad continued to filter into the forests, they seemed to have collectively decided not to die.

Like the Mad, Undesirables were a mystery. Those who still believed in such things thought of them as punishment for Productive households that had been insincere in their service to the City. At the outskirts of the City lay the village of the Undesirables, whose lives of squalor were unimaginable to most Citizens. The officer had no desire to stay among these creatures any longer than necessary. The Undesirables had no sensibilities, little understanding of language, and quite often were horribly deformed.

The corpse had to be carried into the city during a single precious twilight hour, and an able-bodied individual was all that was truly needed. The Undesirables, having no community or family, would not be missed, even if they were to perish in the attempt.



The Officer stumbled upon an individual whom he assumed to be a woman, though it was difficult to discern the creature's gender. Regardless, the broad-backed figure seemed suitable for the task at hand. Without much ceremony, the Undesirable was assigned the duty, and her compliance was presumed. After ensuring that the instructions were understood, the Officer hurried back to the city, relieved to be away from the Undesirables.

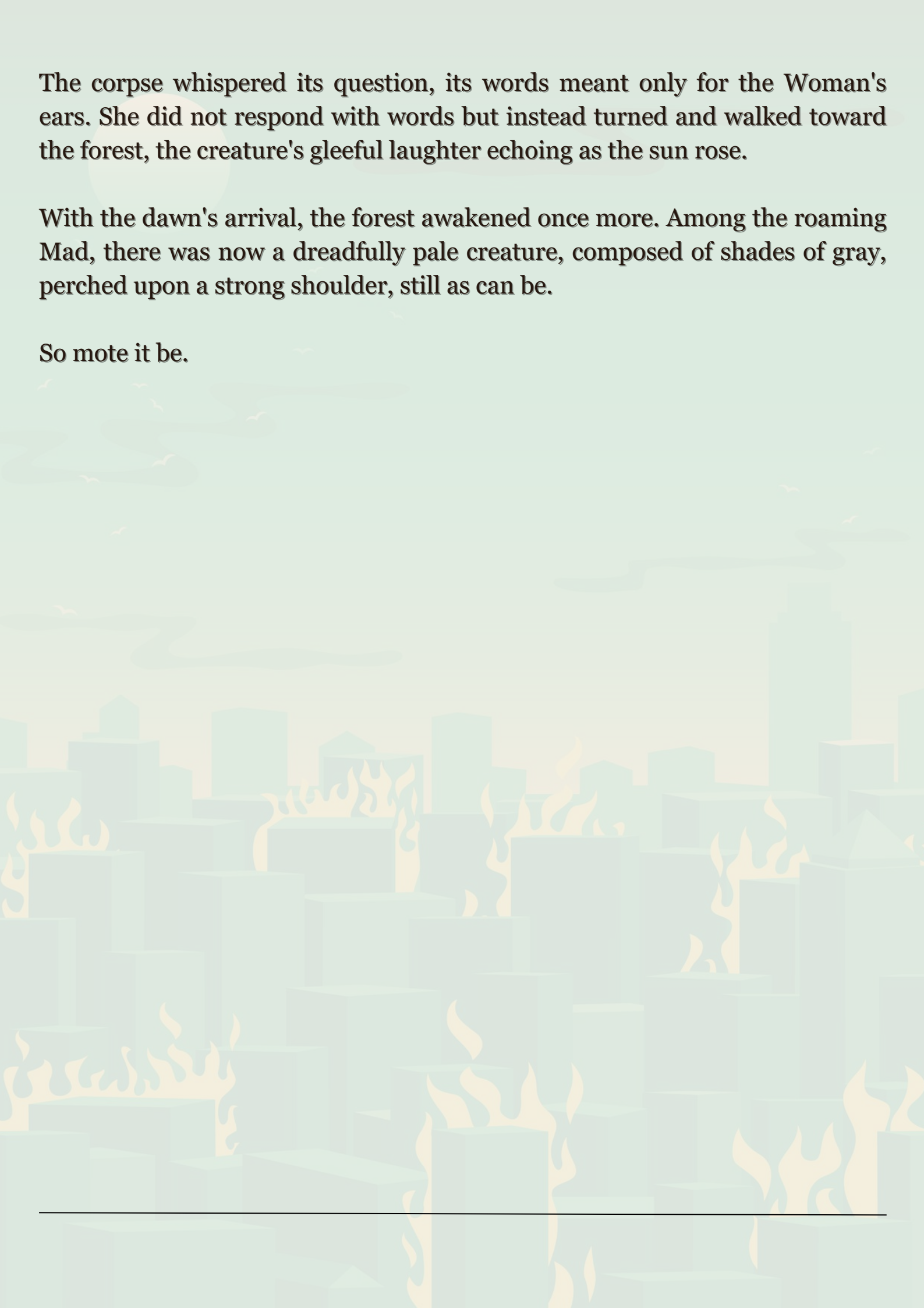
The following day, as the sky began to brighten and the sane boarded up their windows, the Woman embarked on her journey. Everything appeared to be going well until she slung the corpse over her shoulder, and it suddenly awakened with a shrill scream, shattering the silence. The sane flinched in their beds, disturbed by the piercing sound.

The corpse emitted an odor reminiscent of the tree it had clung to—earthy and green—creating a stark contrast with its bloodless pallor. To the Woman's surprise, beneath its obvious lifelessness, the creature bore a striking resemblance to the prettiest and noblest of the City's ladies, with her petite stature and delicate features.

The creature curled itself around the Woman's shoulder, whispering instructions into her ear. It demanded that the carrier listen to a story in complete silence. At the story's conclusion, the creature would pose a question. If the Undesirable spoke, the corpse would fly back to its tree. However, if she knew the answer and remained silent, she would join the corpse on the tree. Trapped in an absurd double bind, the poor Undesirable had no choice but to agree.

In its ghastly voice, the creature began its tale. "Once upon a time, in a land far away, a queen killed her firstborn. A vision had foretold that this child would bring about the demise of civilization, unleashing unceasing violence. The queen believed that sacrificing the unfortunate child would appease the fates. Although deeply enraged, the king concealed his fury until the queen bore a second child—a girl this time. Torturing his wife and daughter, the king drove them to Madness and emaciation, all while maintaining a façade of just patriarchal rule over his people. However, his sadistic appetite only grew with time. It was rationalized that, for the king's sanity to endure, some had to be sacrificed to Madness. So mote it be."





The corpse whispered its question, its words meant only for the Woman's ears. She did not respond with words but instead turned and walked toward the forest, the creature's gleeful laughter echoing as the sun rose.

With the dawn's arrival, the forest awakened once more. Among the roaming Mad, there was now a dreadfully pale creature, composed of shades of gray, perched upon a strong shoulder, still as can be.

So mote it be.

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# NEW WAVE SCIENCE FICTION AND ENVIRONMENTALISM IN NAUSICAÄ OF THE VALLEY OF THE WIND

A MOVIE REVIEW BY MARIA CATHERINE KURIAN

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This Studio Ghibli movie is arguably Hayao Miyazaki's most complex environmental work. *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, a manga-adapted film, uses a wide range of historical and literary tropes and references to construct a New Wave Sci-Fi film. To demarcate this film solely into the environmental genre would be an understatement due to the myriad of political metaphors it illustrates.

*Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* is Ghibli's first-ever movie. Released in 1984, the film would arguably be classified under the sub-genre of New Wave Science Fiction (SF), which was a counter-cultural movement. In the New Wave era, SF took a paradigmatic shift. So as opposed to looking outwards and having extraterritorial villains, SF writers started looking at the problems of the existing human society.



We observe the shift of having more human-like or human-related antagonists. SF writers would heavily borrow from disciplines like history, political science, anthropology, psychology and sociology, and incorporate them into their works. And these are precisely the elements Miyazaki weaves into this film.

The antagonists in *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* are humans themselves. Antagonism in this story is displayed in conflict. What this means is that as opposed to focusing on a person as the main rival, this film focuses on collective antagonism caused by the dispute between a set of people. So there are no singular villains in this story and the only few characters who may be considered the antagonists, are not necessarily evil. If anything, the reason for their deplorable actions is portrayed in a nuanced manner; therefore they are a lot more realistic.

The story takes place in a dystopian era, where human civilization is on the brink of its existence. The sea of corruption leaves behind a toxic jungle that poisons the earth, leaving its landscapes dilapidated and its air unbreathable. Nightmarish gigantic insects swarm these lands hostile to anybody who threatens to disturb their troop. The only few chunks of human civilization that remain alive are at war against the jungle and among themselves. One of the peaceful communities, Valley of the Wind, is a peaceful agrarian kingdom, protected from the toxic jungle by its strong winds. The princess of this valley is Nausicaä, who is dedicated to researching and understanding the sea of corruption.

Nausicaä's character is often linked to Nausicaa from the Greek epic *The Odyssey*, where Nausicaa was a lover of nature and the mother of Odysseus's rebirth. Similarly, this character also draws a significant biblical parallel to the Messiah, the saviour of mankind.



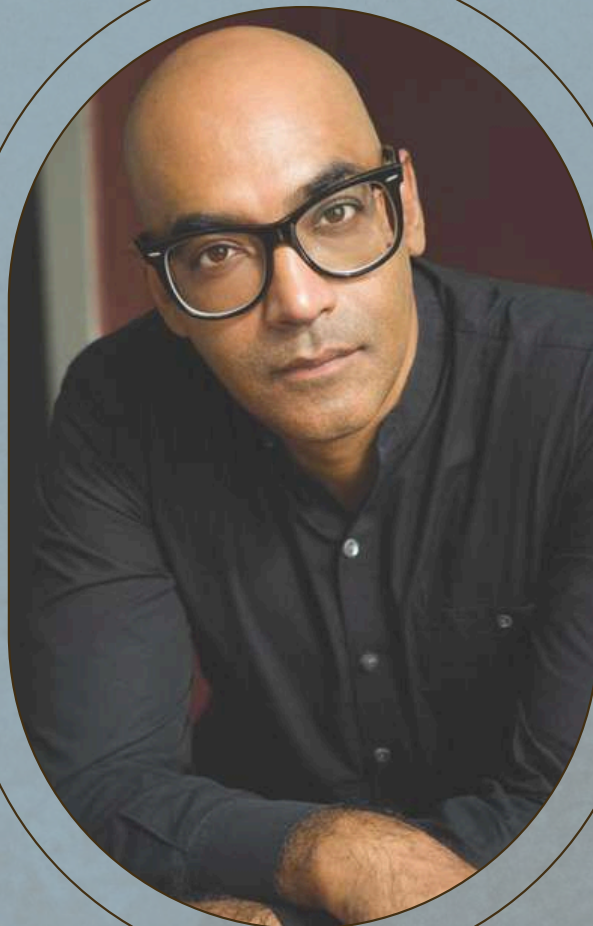
Miyazaki's Nausicaä is also the saviour of the people of this universe. She is well-equipped in combat, and she has also mastered the art of flying. She seems to have a deep understanding of the landscape of the toxic jungle and the wrathful insects. She realizes their potential of having a positive and growing impact on the earth, which she deduces from her research and experimenting. One could also say that Nausicaä redefines the western notion of a princess due to her individuality and deep connection to nature, as opposed to the frivolous portrayal of Disney princesses.

I don't intend on spoiling the plot or giving away much of the story, but I would highly recommend watching this film because there's something very comforting about it. Miyazaki uses the Shakespearean idea of feminine healing to bring back earth from the wars of men. He executes this very subtly and cleverly without following the tropes of cliché princesses. The film is also visually stunning (as expected from Ghibli), and even as a casual viewer, you are once again drawn into Miyazaki's art without having to put in much effort.

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# IN CONVERSATION WITH SIDDHARTHA DEB



Siddhartha Deb was born in northeastern India and lives in Harlem, New York. He is the author of the novels *The Point of Return*, a New York Times Notable Book of the Year and *An Outline of the Republic*, longlisted for the International Dublin Literary Award. His non-fiction book *The Beautiful and the Damned* was a finalist for the Orwell Prize and received the PEN Open award. Deb's journalism and essays have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *The New Republic*, *n+1*, *The Nation* and *Dissent*.



**Litscroll Team (LT): What inspired you to start writing?**

Siddhartha Deb (SD): The desire to escape the drudgery, routine, conventions, and materialism that middle-class life, especially in India, seems to revolve around, and the desire to find a place of freedom, imagination, and play.

**LT: What are some literary works you draw inspiration from?**

SD: Roberto Bolaño's 2666, Karen Tei Yamashita's The I Hotel, Marlon James's A Brief History of Seven Killings, and Quarrutulain Hyder's Fireflies in the Mist.

**LT: How do you deal with writer's block?**

SD: It's not something I suffer from. If I don't feel like writing, it's usually because my body, mind, and soul are tired, and I wait until I feel refreshed again.

**LT: "The Light at the End of the World," delves into a variety of pressing issues, such as cultural identity and globalisation. How do you navigate the challenges of representing diverse issues in your work?**

SD: I follow the story, which means working with the character, the plot, the language, and the world the story is moving in, and the issues work their way into those things.

**LT: The protagonist, Bibi in "The Light at the End of the World" embarks on a journey of self-discovery and personal growth. Can you discuss the influences and motivations behind the character's development?**

SD: She is haunted by a sense of failure, which to me is more interesting than the idea of growth or self discovery. She has layers to her, selves that she has consciously buried, selves that the reader isn't aware of, and this is what really interests me in a character or a human being, that we have layers to us, sometimes in conflict with each other.



**LT: How did you bridge the gap between fantasy and reality with reference to your latest work or overall artistic oeuvre?**

SD: It was fun to do because there was the pleasure of doing something new. South Asian fiction in English is often so well behaved, and I found it deeply satisfying to take serious issues like authoritarianism and climate disaster and then bend them away from realism towards the horizon of the weird and the speculative.

**LT: What do you prefer, more canonical literature or mainstream literature, and what makes you gravitate towards one or the other?**

SD: I'm fond of canonical literature, the mainstream I generally tend to avoid, and I seek out the alternative and the strange. At the moment, I am reading *I Named My Sister Silence* by Manoj Rupda in a translation from the Hindi by Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, *Welcome Me to the Kingdom* by Mai Nardone, *Tentacle* by Rita Indiana, and *Space Invaders* by Nona Fernández. I am not always happy with my writing, but I am almost always happy with my reading.

**LT: Past and present are interwoven with alternate realities in "The Light at the End of the World". How do you envision the future of this unique amalgamation of political fiction and thriller in writing? What exciting directions do you see it taking, and what do you believe is next for you in terms of your own creative endeavors within this realm?**

SD: That's a great question. This amalgamation blasted open a creative path for me, and I'd like to keep going down this passageway for a while and try out other genres I haven't yet attempted. Maybe a revenge story? Maybe horror? Maybe more of the weird? Maybe speculative fiction? But always cross-cutting genre with the literary and the political.



# MEET THE TEAM



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