

THE
MISSING
SLATE

Issue 16

*Howl at
the Moon*



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Howl at the Moon

Issue 16

A Message from the Editors

We are immensely grateful to **our contributors for trusting the magazine with their work. We hope you, dear Reader, enjoyed the issue and continue following the work of these special people as they move forward in their creative journeys.**

- Maham Khan, Zahra Hamdulay, Maryam Piracha, and Orooj-e-Zafar / The TMS Editorial Team

Presenting our second issue with a mix of eclectic art, searing creative nonfiction, thoughtful and impactful poetry, and stories and perspectives across eight countries.



The Shredder

'by The Young Lass

Introducing a range of voices from across mediums, our *Howl at the Moon* issue features diverse work from across eight countries. While we focus on profiling emerging voices from marginalized communities and who identify as women, we also feature pieces from people outside of that demographic. Presenting the rockstar contributing lineup of Issue 16.

Contributors A-Z

Adan Fatima is a 19-year-old from Pakistan. She studies psychology and writes about her feelings so she can understand the why's and hows of this world better. When she isn't overthinking every single thing she has ever done she listens to music and reads poetry.

The Young Lass, AKA Alexandra Berry, is an illustrator with a BFA in Illustration. Her work is well known for depicting the same four original characters doing humorous, raunchy, and sometimes dangerous activities in the illustrated desert community she has created. The inspiration for her work comes from her upbringing in rural Idaho and regular family trips to the Southern California desert community of Palm Springs, USA.

Alexander Perez (he/they), gay, non-gender conforming, Hispanic/Latino, in 2022, has published poetry in *Queer Toronto Literary Magazine*, *New Note Poetry Magazine*, *Variety Pack Literary Magazine*, *Literary Yard*, *The Voices Project*, and *Whiskey Blot*. Two separate poems have also been selected to appear with accompanying artwork at gallery exhibitions entitled 'Poetic License – Albany' sponsored by the Upstate Artists Guild and Hudson Valley Writers Guild; and 'Poetic License 2022', sponsored by the Poetry Barn and Arts Society of Kingston. Alexander Perez lives in Albany, NY, USA. He can be found on [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#).

Aamir Arsiwala is a product design student studying at the Srishti Institute of Art Design and Technology, Bangalore. His work ranges from material explorations and furniture making to logo design and branding. More of his work can be found on his [Instagram](#).

Amal Hamid is pursuing her Ph.D. in education at the University of Manchester. Outside of that, she fulfills her creative aspirations through her [Instagram](#) where she writes book reviews and shares her reflections on living life as a 30-something brown girl and all the joys and sorrows that come with it.

Ansuya Mansukhani is a third-year college student who lives off cinema, coffee, and writing. She enjoys ordinary things and prefers to believe that every thought she has can be turned into poetry.

Barbara Lazzarini is an artist from Italy. The country is and has always been inspirational to her vega use as she feels she is surrounded by beautiful art wherever she goes. Since 2017, she has been dedicated to self-portrait photography. She also paints and creates 19th-century-inspired dolls and other handicrafts.

Elisabeth Murawski is the author of *Heiress*, *Zorba's Daughter*, which won the May Swenson Poetry Award, *Moon and Mercury*, and three chapbooks. *Still Life with Timex* won the Robert Phillips Poetry Chapbook Prize. A native of Chicago, she currently lives in Alexandria, VA, USA.

Born to Pakistani parents in Jeddah, **Hera Naguib** is a Ph.D. candidate in creative writing at Florida State University. Her manuscript in progress *Atlas of Disquiet: Poems* engages in cross-cultural poetics to confront the affinities and tensions of migrant living. Her work has been published in *The New England Review*, *Poem-a-Day series* by the Academy of American Poets, *The Cincinnati Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Copper Nickel*, *Gulf Coast*, *World Literature Today*, among others. Currently, she serves as an Editorial Assistant at *Guernica* and Contributing Poetry Editor at *River Styx*. Hera lives between Tallahassee, USA and Lahore, Pakistan, and can be found on [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#).

James Hutton is an artist based in England. Working mainly in pen and ink on paper, his artwork takes inspiration from artists such as Brueghel, Dore, and Edward Gorey, comic books, and outsider art and often uses occult/mystical and mythological motifs and symbols to explore everyday human and social/economic and environmental states- love, hope, hopelessness, poverty, politics, the natural world and ways to try to live in closer symbiosis with it.

Jamie Holman lives and works in Blackburn, Lancashire. His work is multi-disciplinary and is often fabricated using industrial processes or with heritage crafts makers and artisans. He works under commission, interrogating history through the lens of personal narratives, exploring archives in order to understand the past, while also engaging communities to understand the present in order to make visible who we were, are now, and may yet become. He is represented by The Second Act Gallery.

Jessica Faleiro's work has been published in various anthologies, journals, and magazines including *Asia Literary Review*, *Forbes*, *Indian Quarterly*, *Himal Southasian*, *Bengaluru Review*, *Coldnoon*, *Mascara Literary Review*, and the *Times of India*. Her debut novel *Afterlife: Ghost stories from Goa* (2012) was followed by *The Delicate Balance of Little Lives* (2018), a collection of interlinked stories about five women coping with loss. She lives in Goa, India, where she also teaches creative writing.

Kamil Plich's haiku can be found, among others, in *Frogpond*, *Presence*, *Modern Haiku*, *Sommergras*, *Hakara*, and various anthologies. He is a winner of the Haiku/Senryu Contest organised by the Austrian Haiku Society (Haiku-/Senryū-Wettbewerb der ÖHG, 2022) and the 1st runner-up of the International Haiku Contest for the Radmila Bogojević Award. His haiku have been translated into Croatian, Hindi, and Japanese. He lives in Lübeck, Germany.

Kivilcim Gurasik was born in Turkey in 1991. After completing her undergraduate degree in Economics, she worked in finance. Since her childhood, she never stopped painting, which she believes is her natural talent. Hence, she decided to express herself through painting professionally. These days, she participates in various online auctions and mixed exhibitions and continues to work in abstract painting.

Kristia Vasiloff is a disabled, queer poet living in North Carolina, USA with her (amazing!) Spouse. For her, poetry is a reflection of hard-won victories. Recently, Kristia was privileged to serve as a featured poet. Kristia is honored to share her heartaches, heart joys, and ever-beating battles with y'all.

Lynn Bianchi is a fine art photographer and multimedia artist who has shown her work in over 30 solo exhibitions and in museums worldwide. Her work has been shown at [Brooklyn Museum](#), [Yale Art Gallery](#), Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography, Musée de l'Élysée in Switzerland; Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto among others. Bianchi's art has been featured in over 40 publications, including [The Huffington Post](#), [Juxtapoz Magazine](#), Encyclopedia of Food and Culture, Vogue Italia, [AnOther Magazine](#), Phot'Art International, and GEO. In 2011 Lynn began working in the video field and has, to date, produced about 30 multimedia works.

With a background in communications, **Mariam Tahir Butt** has freelanced for various print publications over the years, however, she considers reading and writing poetry to be her anchor, her catharsis, and her way of making sense of the world. Currently, she is a SAHM and an ever-willing conduit to the "spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions" that she shares on [Instagram](#).

Mario Navarro's signature stamp is a vigorous stroke that leaves behind a trail of chromatic emotions, as well as some brushes, and spatulas, that caress the canvas over and over again to melt into it, get lost in the interwoven threads of the canvas, to leave a mark on the soul that resonates beyond what the gaze first perceives. His work has been exhibited in Australia, New York, Spain, Italy, and Mexico. He currently works in Mexico City and Guadalajara.

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Ruben, better known as Sensetus, is a 22-year-old from Spain who started making collages and photo edits about 7 years ago, but it was only two years ago that he started uploading them to [Instagram](#) and sharing them with everyone. His collages play with reality and surrealism, and he seeks to provoke emotions and feelings in those who see them. He makes all kinds of images, but he stands out for focusing mainly on the theme of space, something that he has found curious and fascinating since he was a child.

Sarah Short is a mixed-media collage artist from the woods of Rhode Island. Her background as an English teacher explains her love of books, which she also enjoys using as the primary material for her collages. She is inspired by faded book covers, foxing on pages, and vintage ephemera.

Srishti Saharia is a junior in high school from India. She is an artist and activist who, with a hand on her heart, considers language to be the most fantastical of her blessings and survival tactics. She wants to study English Literature and Political Science. She can be found on [Instagram](#).



Spotlight: Alexandra Gallagher

interviewed by Zahra Hamdulay



Alexandra Gallagher

Your artwork is visceral and borders on the fantastical. Do you draw inspiration from reality at all and in what ways?

The narratives I want to communicate in my work are inspired by reality and the reality of women. I want to turn something negative into something beautiful. to take power back, which I feel is empowering and cathartic. I don't want to put more misery or horror into the world, although there is always a place for that in the creative world—to open a dialogue is important. But for me, I feel it's more powerful to take it and spin it into something else. To do this, I use a lot of symbology in a surrealist way within my work. Some viewers will look at my work and just see a beautiful image, others will see something deeper that speaks to them in a personal way.

I love the recurring flowers, and the circle patterns the run through your work.

What draws you to these elements?

Circles are neverending, and are used a lot, not only in symbology, but also mathematically in nature. They're not harsh, there's a softness but also a protectiveness about them. I also just love to work in circular format aesthetically.

Flowers have so much symbology, colour, and vibrancy. They've been used by artists since the beginning of time and it is nature, fragments of magic that beautify our surroundings.

Circles are never-ending ... They're not harsh, there's a softness but also a protectiveness about them.

Can you tell us a little bit about your typical workday and the small things that keep you going? Where do you like to work best? Do you have a mug of coffee or a lucky pen? A cat that curls up on your lap while you work? How long do you spend on a piece?

My typical day starts with me half asleep, checking my messages and emails over a coffee. I know it's probably really bad for me to start the day like that, but it gets me prepped. The dog is usually curled up with me, while I read, reply and make lists for the day. I make a list everyday of what I want to achieve, although it's usually more than I can do in a day but I always think I can fit in more than is possible. Depending on the project, I then start working in my office at home (usually still not dressed) as I'm not leaving the house other than to walk the dog and run errands. I feel getting dressed is a waste of time that could be spent creating haha! I look like a mess most days if I'm honest. If I'm painting I've usually got my headphones on with my music loud and I like to just get in the zone.

My days though are usually very bitty, as I work on different things. I don't get to paint and create all day as I'd like, unfortunately, as I also have to do admin, print wrapping and organization of artwork to go out, social media and marketing, etc., and that's every day. But it's fun and no two days are the same.

What makes you feel fulfilled as an artist? Do you think an artist can ever feel fulfilled?

For me it's the connection with other people. I love that! But creativity wise, I'm not sure. Creatively I want to do so much! It's like I want to do everything and it can be so frustrating not being able to, due to lack of time or resources. I'm also someone who always wants to push what I do, to take it further, to learn something new. I don't really think about what I've already done or achieved, I just think about what I want to do next.

Overall though, I feel very fulfilled, privileged and lucky to be doing what I do and being able to live my life full of creativity. I sometimes can't believe this is how I live my life, it's very humbling.

Lenore

Gritty, full of lamentation, work that unapologetically explores the ugliest parts of grief and connection.



Tired of Being an Estuary

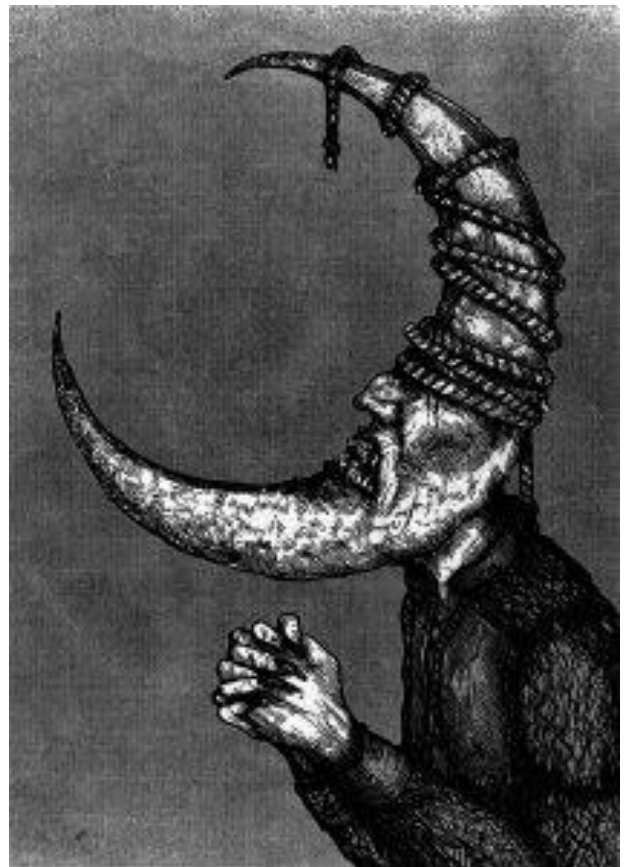
By Kristia Vasiloff

"will you love me baby when the sun goes down," – Sonia Sanchez

I.
i am littered beads,
haven't you noticed? all the little
parts of me that rattle? all the little
parts so carefully placed, unstable

until ironed flat? i can bear it,
for I do promise,

if you give me just one more soft
straw of hair, one more sweaty
hug, one more kiss on the forehead,
one more cheek-to-cheek



Untitled by James Hutton

II.
lay one
single finger, &
i'll scream until negative
space holds itself in wait—
you'll find messing with
me was a mistake, can't
you see that i am
tired of being an estuary,
begging you let me go/let go
of me. teach me
what can be found in fetal moments
i am not asking for
much,
just a kindness
I have not
known for years.
Just a
kindness
I have not known for year



Sanctuary

by Jessica Faleiro

Flavia Rodrigues wanders into her sister's garden and walks down the laterite path. Her footsteps are measured. She's staring at the bit of the path in front of her as she propels herself forward. She tells herself she just needs to get to the back gate. She moves closer to the bounty of pink bougainvillea twisting around the back wall, farther away from the lively chatter drifting out of the house. She's in search of her sanity while escaping the platitudes of mourners. The voice in her head says that this is a good thing, a much-needed thing. Fresh air. Footsteps. Movement forward.

She hears the fresh click of the latch as she passes through. Later, she cannot recall walking past the boundary.

She wanders onto the beach, stands on a stretch of sand, and stares out to sea. There's a blue-grey sheen over everything. She shuts her eyes and waits for her heartbeat to match the pulse of the waves pouring froth on her feet. She looks up at the sky and lets its brightness hurt her eyes. The clouds cannot unite. The monsoon rains have been struggling to live up to their reputation. She notices this thought as it passes through her mind. It seems foreign to her. It shouldn't be. After all, she's made a living from this stretch of the coast.

A cool wind bears down on the beach and wraps itself around her. She hugs herself tightly, and then finds she can't let go. No matter how still she is, the restlessness won't let her be. She doesn't move until she can't take a breath, then releases herself and inhales deeply. Something unfamiliar is caught in the salt-smell. She tries to catch the thread of it in her nostrils again! There it is! A vein of rich chocolate entangled in the breeze. Why? How? There's an irrepressible pleasure in the surprise of this sensual encounter. She turns her head around, looking for the source of the genesis of the scent. She smiles in wonder, then catches herself smiling and the tears start to fall.



Untitled by James Hutton

She lets them come, lets the salt air sting the wet. She knows her kajal is running. She only wore it to draw away attention

from the bags under her eyes. She hugs herself again, lightly this time.

A man walks past her, along the edge of the water, carefully dodging the waves, They're teasing him. He's wearing a collared, fitted shirt that rounds over his protruding pot belly. She notices his strong calf muscles defined by the knee-high white socks he's wearing and his Adidas sneakers. He's walking with the gait of a man determined to heed his doctor's advice. She doesn't try to hide her tearful face. He glances up at her with curiosity, then looks away quickly, discomfited by her show of emotion disturbing his early evening walk. She notices the momentary absence of feeling that comes upon her quite suddenly and relief floods her. There's a soul-deep weariness underlying it all.

She stares out to sea again, watching the dark charcoal line forming on the horizon; a trick of the setting sun and the darkening clouds, both at play with each other. She looks down at the waves catching at her feet, watches the water swirl and pull away from her blue Payal slippers. The waves are forming light criss-cross shapes as they run over the sand. She sees the hermit crabs burrowing around her. She wonders if she's outgrown her shell too; if this is the knowing that comes. Something in the light caught in the white foam of the waves makes her smile and the tears start to form again. She feels done with everything. The weight is suddenly unbearable.

There is silence all around her. Silence in the rhythm of constantly crashing waves. Silence in the wind whistling down the beach and whispering long-lost secrets to her. She lost

Santan to these waters. She is used to the idea. Most of the people she knows are used to the idea of losing their persons to the sea. This small, tight-knit fishing community are her people, but this grief is hers alone to bear.

She sees the back gate from here. Her sister is waiting behind it. She is watching. Her arms are folded. As Flavia comes out of the water, the edges of her black dress drip bits of the Arabian Sea onto the sand, punctuating the beach with dark circles. She watches the expression on her sister's face as she returns to the gate.

'I was watching you,' she says.

Flavia avoids her eyes when she asks, 'Would you have been angry with me?'

'Angry at what? What's there to be angry about? You wanted to feel something different, that's all.

As Flavia comes out of the water, the edges of her black dress drip bits of the Arabian Sea onto the sand, punctuating the beach with dark circles.

Is that what I was doing? Flavia asks herself. *Trying to change how I feel?* Her knowing adjusts itself within her.

'You know what I was doing,' says Flavia.

Her sister hesitates, then says quietly, 'It's understandable. First your husband to the water, now your children to the fire.'

Flavia is silent.

'We were all on the beach, waiting for the boats to come in. There was nothing anyone could do in time.'

'It should have been Agnelo. Why did he need a smoke so early in the morning?'

'He said he couldn't sleep. It was an accident. He didn't know the cylinder pipe was leaking. No one did. When are you going to forgive him?'

'Forgive him? He survived. Isn't that enough?'

'His legs were badly burnt. He'll suffer for the rest of his life.'

Flavia's breath catches. 'I hear them calling for me when I fall asleep. Other times, I see their mouths moving in large hollows and feel the heat around them, but I can't hear them. No one comes.'

'Give it time.'

Flavia says nothing. She's been hearing this all day from the others. She adds it to the collection. 'Maybe it was their time.' 'This will only make you stronger.' 'They're in a better place.' 'They're with their father now.'

'They've all gone,' says her sister. '... And the plates are done.'

'I wanted to help you.'

'It's fine. There's nothing left to be done.'

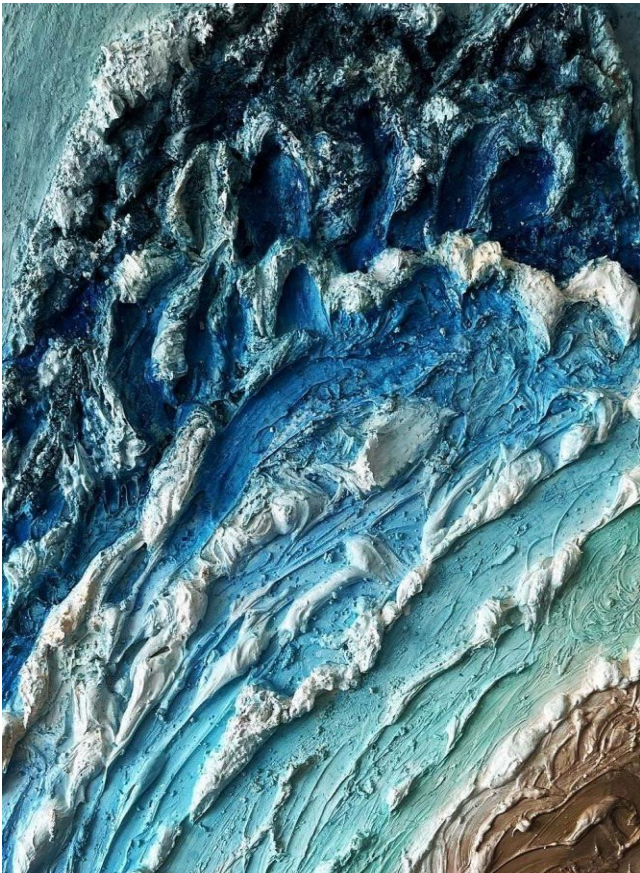
They enter the sitting room together. The sun is setting and Flavia notes the shadows cosyng up to each other in dusty corners of the room.

'Will you sit with me, like we did when were children?'

Her sister nods and sits next to her on the threadbare, reused sofa that is the most expensive piece of furniture she owns, and lets Flavia lay her head on her lap. Her eyes fall on the figurine of Our Lady of Succour sitting on the small altar her sister's husband built for their family. There's a framed picture of the Sacred Heart of Jesus mounted next to it on the wall. Flavia stares at the crown of flames hovering over the heart for a moment, then shuts her eyes, turns towards her sister's body, and lets herself feel the warmth of sanctuary on her skin.

Her sister strokes her face gently and runs her hand through her hair until she falls asleep and the nightmares come.

'I hear them calling for me when I fall asleep. Other times, I see their mouths moving in large hollows and feel the heat around them, but I can't hear them. No one comes.'



Untitled by Kivilcim Gurisik

She dreams she is sleeping on the beach, writing something in the sand. The light of the full moon reveals the words *Ria*, *Pedru*, *Santan*. She is writing their names repeatedly. Fine grains bite into her knees, but she cannot stop. She glances up only once to take in the silver-tipped wave crests roiling towards her. She notices that oddly, everything is silent. The waves make no sound when they break. She can't even hear the rasp of sand as she moves her fingers over and over the beach. She realises then that this is an incantation. She's invoking the names of the dead.

She realises that it has worked when she senses another presence. She stands up. Her hair is longer now and has formed a sort of cape around her. She sees *Ria* and *Pedru* holding hands and walking towards her.

Santan is gently pushing their children in front of him. The afterlife doesn't seem to have softened him; his face bears a serious expression. *Flavia* is suddenly anxious when she remembers that face. He's going to scold her. Probably for letting their children die. It's the same face he wore during their first year of marriage, when they had calmed from the euphoria of frequent sex and the rose-coloured lenses had fallen away from their eyes.

She'd forgotten to take the spare house keys and had to call him. He drove his scooter right up to the gate, nearly running her over as she waited for him. He was annoyed at the inconvenience of missing a lunch-time tittle with his friends at their usual beach haunt. He threw the house keys on the ground and told her to pick them up. She refused and stood there, arms folded. He started the scooter, determined to drive away and leave her like that until she said: 'If you leave now, you can eat and sleep somewhere else because I will be at my sister's place.'

He turned off the scooter, picked up the keys, and unlocked the front door. The he walked past her, got on his scooter, and drove off. But he had that look on his face the whole time. She learned later that it was the look he wore when a mistake was made. A mistake he could not forgive.

Agnelo sits down next to her, but at a distance still. She sees him wince and realises what her heart has become.

She cannot see *Ria* and *Pedru* anymore, only *Santan's* face, wearing that look.

Flavia is being shaken awake now. She resists—the urge to stay in the dream is strong. She opens her eyes and everything evaporates.

She's in her bed at her sister's house. She doesn't remember how she got there from the living room sofa.

'You were cursing,' says her sister.

'It was Santan.'

'Oh.' Her sister's eyes are wide. 'It's been a while.'

'No, this was different. He'll never forgive me for what happened.'

Flavia turns over in bed and away from her sister. Her sister sighs deeply, glances at the wall clock, and then crawls into the small single bed next to her and puts one hand on Flavia's arm. Flavia stares at the wall until sleep overcomes her. She braces herself.

She's washing off the stench of the fish market from her body. A cold water bath to jolt her to the present and distract her from her thoughts. Her sister is in the kitchen. She sneaks out of the house and down to the beach to watch the sunset. She used to be struck by how each one of was different from the next. Now, she barely notices when it has turned dark. She knows she is being watched.

She walks all the way to the broken shed at the other end of the beach. It's away from prying eyes. she hasn't been there since her children passed. She sits cross-legged next to

it and draws spirals in the coarse sand. Just before the sun's edge touches the horizon, she hears a deep sigh.

'I've been waiting for you to come here for weeks.'

'I'm here now,' she says.

Agnelo sits down next to her, but at a distance still. She sees him wince and realises what her heart has become.

'Why now?' he asks.

She watches the sun drop into the sea and frowns slightly. 'Santan,' she says. 'He blames me. It's a curse.'

Agnelo snorts. 'I thought you didn't believe in that stuff.'

'First Santan, then my children, my home, your legs. What should I believe?'

He stares into the distance.

'I don't believe in coincidence. I stopped praying and now...'

'So you regret it?'

'I didn't for a very long time, but now... yes, I do.'

'Do you think Santan knew about us?'

'No.' She stops drawing. 'I don't know.' She tries to recall her dream, looking for any detail that suggested he knew.

'Maybe he knows now.'

'He wasn't real.'

'He was real to me.'

Agnelo traces over the spirals she has drawn.

'I'm going to go.'

'Go.'

He struggles to stand up. She doesn't want to meet his eyes.

'When will you forgive me?'

She knows that he is suffering, too. But her grief seems more than one lifetime's worth. 'Ask me again tomorrow.'

As he limps away from her, she spots the pot-bellied walker in the distance, hurrying back before it gets too dark.



My Nose Was God's Afterthought

By Shrishti Saharia

i wake up to the face my ancestors
brought with them—stubborn eyes
that refuse the refuge of uv-tinted
tents of prescription glasses,
instead borrow light from the blind;
the only language of their prayer is sleep.
my morbid mouth is sinking deeper
with every glint of moonrise into
the bird's nest of my throat to
incubate the hunger for guilt and
forgiveness inside my body.
my ears have rented silence on
an expired lease—the sound
i fear is the only sound they hear

my nose is sitting in the centre
of this poem like a prey waiting
to be devoured, or a bleeding bible
that doesn't know its religion;
this nose, it feeds on april's feasts,
snorts pollens and political poems;

my nose pokes patriarchy in
the shin and ends up bloody
and broken too often;
it dreads to decipher
the scent of loss from
love because it has inherited
the tender tendency to 'mis-smell'
one from the other;
the famine of forgetting the smell
of my history is plaguing my nose.



Untitled by Mario Navarro Rosales

my nose was god's afterthought—
hurried and incomplete,
stuffed between the eyes and mouth
like foreign vowels forced
amidst confused consonants;
its bridge from where my pride goes
skinny-dipping early in the morning
is arranged to pose as a question—
an anathema or a crucifix?
the river of my ancestors' bones
in my nose, is clogging my ability to sniff
out
ruins from other realms

there is a love poem waiting to
be written about the mole on
the left edge of my nose
[where all the treasure of
my self-love are stashed]

and i am a poet,
so of course i am conceited enough
to conceive one myself.

and so i write tonight,
to my ancestors this angry
attempt at an apology from
my longest-held breath, because this
nose?

it is one of the buttons of
god's own baby-blue linen
shirt that she hand-picked
and sewed on to my face,
the kind she planted on
my mother's face,
and i owe every seed of
moment in the womb of this earth
to that round, little button my last breath
baptized
a bullet. When the time
comes, let the desire of living through
death knock on the doors of
my chest to elope with the flesh
of my heart.



First Morning

By Kamil Plich

first morning together
he asks for
sugar



Accident by Sensetus



Self-Portrait of A Sinking Orphan

By Srishti Saharia

it is summer,
my mother is wearing a quarter
of her watermelon ice pop
cherry chapstick over her lips,
and the sun is throbbing inside
her throat as she narrates
tales about the sea beneath us,
playing kabaddi with our native feet;
her eyes morph into christmas lights,
as brilliant as the sun crawling,
and crumbling—almost birthing,
from inside of her mouth
when she is spinning
the memories of her maiden days
which she spent devoted
the sea like the was
a prophetic cult in vogue
and she was the swiftest,
most fanatic of followers,
and the blindest of believers.
she is threading gauze-like
syllables with her teeth to dress
the wound of shame my naked
body is—a mass of evidence,
and the witness that confronts
and confirms the life she could
have lived had i(t) never been
excavated from the ruins of her body.
we spend our gloomy monsoon
afternoons sleeping in,
my mother's hand on my heart
is a prayer i memorise like a promise
all of the two-hundred and

six bones i inherited from her are
safely tucked inside the fortified cave
carved out from her abdomen and arms.

i wake up to the sun-tinted stain
of my urine on my bed the size
of my grief that i cannot gulp
like i have been taught to
swallow my thirst;
my hunger for her tenderness
is only as valid as my will to
mortgage my mouth to
the crown of cutlery.
sometimes i feel like i can go
to war for just a glass of water
that does not taste like war



Balance by Lynn Bianchi

because, you see,
the flood of last summer did not
recognise
her scent of history and misread
the hymns of my mother's devotion as
her consent to be consumed
and the last breath that fuelled
her lungs was a cry for help
that drowned unheard with

the limbs of her body i am made of
and i look like i have been dissolving
ever since

she used to count the pennies
of rain like we count our gods,
her mouth was only as big as
the prayers that feasted from
her palms. my mother pickled
her tongue with salt and water
so whenever she breathed
on me, i felt the roots of my
hometown written on my skin.
but a mole grew on my body
wherever she kissed me,
and now my body is saran-wrapped
i am trapped inside with teething
monsters of her memories
and my mourning.

what i mean when i say
i am blind to the colour
of rain is that when i hear
the rain banging on my doors
i find my mother's sun-dried
face plastered against the windows—
she looks as foreign as the language
of my grief and the absence of
her skin and my faith;
i look for her, to find whatever
is left of her but i avoid the water
to avert my gaze from
my reflection and inevitably
digesting all that is truly left
behind by and of her is my body,
and that one day
with me,
she,
an addict who used and
abused till she overdosed,
will finally cease to exist.

I Piss in a Bedpan

By Kristia Vasiloff



Luminescence by Sensetus

My sheets have cradled tears and shit
Burst bags have been washed and dried

I have fallen. I can't get up.

Crawling is my sport, but it's grinding
my grown-up knees into minced-meat

I've got emails and mails and the Holy
Mary herself
asking why I don't make money like I used
to

Doctors call me: I answer
If I love you: it's straight to voice mail

I keep my wheelchair like a packet drawer
I am a nomad in my own home

Duty free shop

By Kamil Plich

duty free shop
grabbing the last bits
of this country



*A Midsummer Dream by
Barbara Lazzarini*



Like Plates Thrown in the Air

By Elisabeth Murawski

When it happened,
all was quiet as a church.

He stirred her flesh,
toy of the present.

The full moon
silvered the crime scene.

His silhouette
burned in, to return

in blips of memory,
desire. After supper

he sang to her. Even
the dog listened.



Untitled by Kivilcim Gurisik



Love as the Centre of it All

by Adan Fatima

I bet there have been many, many instances of a person on the verge of passing out, walking around a city aimlessly after dark, thinking they've discovered the meaning of life but I swear, *I really* might be onto something.

I got my heart broken a while ago. I can say a thousand things about it, but to put it in the simplest terms: it felt like having someone reach inside you and pull out a piece of you. And sometimes you forget about it for a while and you think you're okay but then one day, unknowingly, you reach for that same piece just to be met with the realisation that it's still missing. You're still a little empty and you might never be whole in the same way again. But it's not all bad. My heartbreak has returned me back to my own self. It has led me to take many walks where I've gone around my apartment complex in circles listening to music, mostly just Taylor Swift, because I didn't want to go back home and sit, "marinating" in my own thoughts. I've walked through the markets of Islamabad alone, headphones in my ears, rediscovering both the city and myself.

For as long as I can remember, I've felt this need to be on foot and wander through places on my own. To smoke a cigarette on a sidewalk though I can't stand the smell. To drive around after midnight with the windows down, playing my music so loud the whole car vibrates. I know the feeling of desperately

longing for small moments of freedom all too well. Longing—for mobility, for liberty, for independence. And life has been kind enough to let me have a taste, even if it's short-lived and even when it leaves my mouth sour. I still welcome these moments of freedom with my arms wide open.

The truth is that love has saved my life once and it continues to do so every day.

Whenever I go on these little adventures I'm always on the verge of tears but I am not one to hide my tears away just so I can save strangers from a bit of discomfort. I'm the exact opposite. I sit in public and cry my eyes out as passersby glance at me and quickly look away. "This is me," I want to say. I've loved and I've lost. I've probably loved more than any of you have and that love has changed my life. And I'd do it again, and again even if I have to pay for it with grief. But there are only so many times that a person can cry in one spot—only a few hundred, in my experience—before they grow extremely tired of themselves and then they do the next best thing—they walk.

As I walk, I notice all kinds of things. I look up at the flowering trees; Islamabad is marvellous when it comes to that. There are trees with flowers of so many colours that bloom throughout the year. Spring brings pink and purple ones on Kachnar trees. Summer? Yellow ones—they hang from the branches like bunches of grapes, and winter brings you the deepest shades of maroon. I look up at the changing flowers and smile

through the ache in my heart. Sometimes I meet a stray cat who sees me as a fit companion and stretches her paws out next to me. I watch mynas walking through the grass on their little orange feet. And I watch people.



Day to Day by Sensetus

On a similar walk last night, I saw a woman feed her partner a spoonful of cake. I saw a girl struggling to ride a bike in an empty parking lot; she pressed the accelerator and pushed the bike forward with her foot only to lose her balance, stop, and repeat the whole process. I saw another one giggling as she left a boy's car. Our eyes met and I smiled. She smiled back. I saw a group of guys sitting on the pavement, drinking lemon malt and just talking.

I let the city envelop me and I let the music playing in my ears carry me away. Lights shine through the darkness, the cool summer breeze tousles my hair, and people and cars move around me. I watch life happen in the simplest and smallest of moments and I fall in love all over again; with strangers, with the world, with being alive to witness it all, with myself, and with God. And that brings me back to the whole point of this, the meaning of life. I think to myself that I've found it, again, for the hundredth time, perhaps under a Kachnar tree, and it's always the same thing: love.

Now everyone owes me several pats on the back here for having a heart that goes back over and over again to the same thing that broke it, but the truth is that love has saved my life once and it continues to do so every day. It has been my anchoring force. At times when everything else in the world felt hazy and unreal my mother's warm embrace became the one thing that tethered me to reality. And on days when the lumps in my throat wouldn't let me swallow, a friend would stay on the phone with me till I could eat. When nothing and no one could convince me to get out of bed, I'd get up just to feed my cat.

And love doesn't leave when the person who showed it to you is gone. Even now as I grieve my loss and it feels like there is no air left in my lungs, the warmth of the kindness that was shown to me stays behind and helps me breathe. Love breaks me down just to build me back up again, only softer, kinder and warmer. Like I'm made of porcelain and I get shattered into a million pieces, and every time they're glued back together, there are more and more cracks left on the surface so I

mourn the smoothness I once had until the sun comes out and its light bleeds through every single crack.

That's when I see it—how I've been lit up on the inside.



by Adenah Furquan

When I was 9, I had my first heartbreak.

It was a seemingly ordinary Karachi morning, the aroma of *halwa puri* wafting through the alley, the waves of Seaview crashing in the distance, the surfeit of motorcycles roaring past civilians to yet another 9-5. June enveloped the city in its sweltering embrace, but I had never felt colder in my life.

Apprehension makes its arrival loud and clear, swallowing you whole with an adamant urgency of sorts. You sense the pervasiveness of dread in every bone in your body—a feeling you'd grow to recognize all too well—but you push it down into the deepest trenches of your gossamer guts. We don't talk about our feelings in this house. We blame it on an upset stomach. The trepidation was as ubiquitous as the dark gray clouds of summer monsoon—but then Mama told me to get ready, and so I did. I adorned myself with a *dupatta* (scarf) far too big for my little body and the overpriced *jhumkay* I begged her to get for me. Mama never ever said no.

She was an exceptional woman, my mother—a vibrant coalescence of courage and strength, of wisdom and humor, and a laugh that could revitalize all of Karachi. But I saw her silently weeping at night when she thought no one was looking. I suppose I was a bit too observant for my own good. And I didn't quite understand it back then—nor would I until the naivety of my adolescence departed years later—but I still implanted the image in the crevices of my brain. I see you, Mama. You're not alone.

Shareef nine-year-old girls didn't dare talk back. It was their principal duty to stay quiet. And I was always a good girl.

She grabbed my hand and quickly whisked me away. We're running late for the *dawat*, she had said—so I hurried down the stairs, my tiny feet rumbling and tumbling as fast as they could. I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror as I cascaded and smiled at the sight before me. I felt pretty. And with a 2000s Atif Aslam song playing faintly in the background, we were well on our way, whizzing past the browns and grays of Karachi in a blur.

Upon arriving, I instantly felt that overwhelming sense of doom looming over me again. *Dawats* were never my forté. It was a strange feeling—to not belong in a room full of people you supposedly shared blood with. I was always a quiet kid, asked to talk more—but I never seemed to have the right words to say. And so I focused on my plate

of *samosay*, counting the tiles on the marble floor to keep my insides intact.

It all happened very quickly. From the corner of my eye, I saw Aunty make her way toward me. She had just heard Mama and Nana deliver a monologue about my achievements, the likes of which included straight As, spelling bee trophies, and whatnot. Always my biggest supporters, these two. I knew I was a bright kid—and I took pride in that.

So as Aunty's brown eyes gazed into mine, I expected her to congratulate me like the rest of them. What I did not expect was this: "*Gori hoti tou zyada acha hota. Baad mein jaa ke shaadi hi karni hai.*" ("It'd be better if you had fair skin. You're going to have to get married later.")

In retrospect, I've imagined myself interrogating her—questioning the blatant nerve to share uninvited *totkay* for fair skin and claim I am not "marriage material" on simply the basis of my melanin, to rid me of all that I was and strip me to flesh and bone. I've pictured myself yelling at her for fueling the self-loathing, the feelings of inadequacy that would haunt me for years to come. It stung more coming from a woman. You were supposed to be on my side.

But *shareef* nine-year-old girls didn't dare talk back. It was their principal duty to stay quiet. And I was always a good girl—the embodiment of respect, the most compliant and law-abiding of them all. I had to be. I was told to be. So though my appetite had long since faded into oblivion, I quietly stuffed the remnants of *samosay* down my throat and shot Aunty a meek smile. Then I stumbled out

of the room, catching a glimpse of Mama's furious expression as I left.

I never once looked back. But I carried her words with me for the entirety of my youth.

They entangled themselves in the fragile wiring of my brain—in the habits and actions and thoughts and feelings that eventually merged to define my very identity. My existence was not an entity of my own creation then but rather a wretched devotion to someone else's opinion of me. It was pitiful, really. And I was so very ashamed—but I was also so very sad.



Untitled by Kivilcim Gurisik

The words then accompanied me to school where I glanced at my classmates and felt inferior in my own skin and to department stores where my hands itched toward the shelf with whitening creams.

No accolade, no recognition, no accomplishment was able to rid me of the weight of them. I became too small for my own body—a bottomless chasm of insufficiency, a perpetual amalgam of what-ifs and if-onlys. Never pleased, never satisfied. Always too much, just never enough. (Is that why Daddy never made it to the awards ceremonies?) Resentment twisted and turned like a beast inside my belly.

I was nine, and I had already had my first taste of what it was like to be a woman in Pakistan—to be met at every turn with unfeasible, incessant demands; to be patronized and reduced to a marriage prospect above all else; to be told that no matter how smart or successful I was, no matter how otherworldly, those qualities would always be irrelevant in the grander scheme of things. I was a future wife before I was a woman. I was everything before I could ever be myself.

It was at the cusp of a rebirth. And I resented every bit of it.

—

At 17, heartbreak came knocking on my door again. But this time, it was louder, demanding even. And it embedded itself in my brittle bones with the sort of unwavering ferociousness that left me struggling to breathe. Four years later, I still find myself gasping for air.

When I arrived in Karachi, I didn't consider it home. I still don't. But as a gust of muggy air caressed my face at the arrival gates of

Jinnah International, I found my home in the warmest arms and the kindest eyes I'd ever seen.

Good women never complain—and if they do, they lack the quintessence of womanhood itself.

Nana was an old man, but time had not dimmed his bright light. A successful lawyer and a consummate family man, he was my best friend—the epitome of exuberance, of love and tenderness, and an absolute force to be reckoned with. My first night in Karachi, Nana didn't ask why Mama and I flew halfway across the globe all of a sudden. He understood. He always did. So he simply brought a Ludo board and my favorite paratha rolls from Crescent Roll Corner, and then we stayed up all night, playing, talking and laughing. It was one of those moments I wished I could've preserved in a bottle and kept on my nightstand, especially after what followed.

Cancer was a merciless, bloodthirsty behemoth. It was remorseless in its attack, sapping his vitality and transmuting it into something entirely unrecognizable. November 26th was supposed to be just another monotonous day. But it wasn't. It was a late-night trip to the hospital, a straight line on the heart monitor, and a cacophony of wails and screams. And it was a jarring blend of wires and medicines that gave up on the life I loved more than my own.

I don't remember much of what happened next, but as I dragged my feet to a house that would never quite feel like home again, I knew I had left a chunk of myself in that suffocating hospital room. And to this day, it remains.

He was the reason the sun shone. He was everywhere. And then he wasn't. And the sun hasn't risen since.

Time is a rather cruel force, paying no heed to the depths of my desolation. It goes on with or without you. And so the next day, it was time to say goodbye. An influx of guests came rushing in at the funeral, offering pitiful glances and words of consolation that did little to ameliorate the ache in my bones. What do you say to somebody whose life collapsed before their very own eyes overnight? What *can* you say? I didn't want to hear about how strong I was. I just wanted Nana back. Pure, unadulterated rage of this magnitude was a feeling foreign to me until that day. I was furious at the world for having the audacity to go on without you. How dare it? How *could* it?

At the funeral, I looked at the untouched biryani on my plate and then at the hungry guests devouring the food on theirs.

"Beta, aur aloo mil sakta hai?" ("Child, can we have more potatoes?")

I nodded. I walked over to them numbly with a bowl in my hands—only to hear a sound that would go on to resound through my core for an eternity.

It was the ugliest laugh I'd heard in my life, ugly in its impertinence, in its utter

insensitivity. I found myself curling my lips in disgust as I listened to the latest gossip about whose son was getting married and whose daughter just got divorced. It was bewildering to me how you could be light years away from those within just a few feet of you. It was a perplexing juxtaposition, the sheer contrast between the casual conversations and the tear-stricken faces of Nani and Mama.

Even as they are engulfed in the vast and bleak pits of sorrow, women are to prioritize their *izzat* and the delicacy of the *khandani* ties over the vacancy and wrath in their own selves—to remain quiet against their will when someone complains about the lack of *aloo* in their biryani, about the *chai* being too cold. Women are to accommodate at all times, to wholly and fully sacrifice themselves, to serve others even when their own world has crumbled in the palm of their hands. Like all aspects of womanhood, mourning, too, is conditional.

I heard the heavy thud of the bowl hitting the ground. As I turned away, I waited for the sickening feeling to leave my body. It never did. It never does.

—

I am a woman—a profound synthesis of ambition and bravery, of empathy and kindness and warmth. I am also nothing but an outsider in my own skin, belonging to everyone but myself.

At 21, I find my heart breaking a little every day.

I am nothing and everything all at once. I am a woman—a profound synthesis of ambition and bravery, of empathy and kindness and warmth. But I am also nothing but an outsider in my own skin, belonging to everyone but myself. It is a brutal awakening, a realization that follows me relentlessly. It follows me as I am chastised for staying out in my own neighborhood past 10 pm, for wearing a sleeveless *kameez* that reveals the bare brown skin of my shoulders. I was asking for it like the *beghairat insaan* that I am.

I am a woman—berated just for existing, for sitting and dressing and talking and breathing a certain way. You realize in those moments that *mera jism* was never *meri marzi* to begin with but rather the *marzi* of all those around you—of the state, the society, even the strangers on the street.

How could *mera jism* be *meri marzi* when unknown, entitled men in markets groped with their clammy hands as I walked by? How can it be *meri marzi* when I must hunch my shoulders and lower my gaze and pray to God up above to let me reach home safe and sound, when I must clench my fists and remain silent to avoid getting killed?

In Pakistan, womanhood is synonymous with the resilience you demonstrate when life throws its greatest catastrophes your way, the patience you display when you are tested beyond your limits. Good women never complain—and if they do, they lack the quintessence of womanhood itself. And good women never question the occurrence of these incidents either. They simply accept it as the harsh reality of their *qismat* instead. To be a woman is to surrender to the prototype

of a woman—and only then is it ever considered acceptable.

Unity is a powerful phenomenon, but why must we, as women, be brought together by agony and by hardship? Why is it that womanhood has metamorphosed into the universal experience of pain and forbearance rather than the celebration of our excellence and joy? Why is it that suffering is seen as an inevitable certitude of life instead of a byproduct of the patriarchy? Why is it that boys will always be boys—but women never get to be people? Why is it that change is hesitantly proposed but eventually always dismissed?

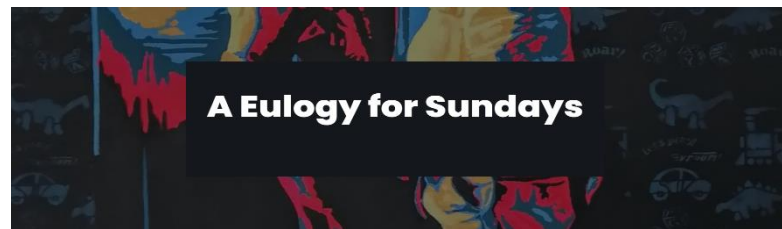
In Pakistan, womanhood is synonymous with the mutual understanding of anguish, the compassion toward each other's adversities. You know that her pain was yours because you felt it in your veins. She didn't deserve that. None of us do.

Your heart goes out to your own Mama, the superhero combating the stigma of divorce whilst raising a child all on her own. Sometimes, it is a subtle nuance—the curl of the lip or the raising of the brow. Other times, it is the shameless pointing of fingers, the callous plethora of criticism: you could've done better, you *should've* done better. It is the erasure of decades of glory, of diligence, of sacrificed dreams. And for what? The decision to choose yourself for *once* in your life? You deserve to be happy, too, Mama. I love you.

And your heart goes out to the victims of every honor killing, every acid attack, every sexual assault case on the news. You recoil at the never-ending discourse on the *behaya*

aurat, the transparent shifting of blame from the perpetrator to the victim, the repulsive discrimination in the judicial system. Justice, essentially, is a distant reverie in nations that run on patriarchal fuel.

In Pakistan, to live as a woman is never to live and only to exist. It is a painful epiphany—a paradox in itself. It is death within life. And I die every day.



by Ansuya Mansukhani

A eulogy is reminiscent of something lost, so it is perhaps apt that I write this with some ambivalence for Sunday. Mourning my Sundays is like mourning a cruel relative. I never know how to navigate the labyrinth of uncertain emotions that I am thrown into when I am confronted with a goodbye.

I faintly remember what Sundays used to taste like—mornings of *kaapi* that was a little too sweet with freshly steamed dhoklas and mutton biryani evenings that reminded me of my grandmother. I remember the smell of the *mitti* from the freshly-watered garden and the staunch smell of way too many cigarettes that my father had smoked by the afternoon. Most days, there were two post-lunch cigarettes that my and four post-dinner cigarettes. But Sundays were special—he'd smoke at least 10, maybe 15, and the dining room went from smelling like coffee and meat to something more herbaceous, yet poisonous. My body is trained to

recognise the smell in any room now. My reflexes are trained to avoid the smoke, to my chair further away, to try and clear the air so that my hair doesn't smell like home. Even if I miss the smell.

I barely remember what Sundays used to sound like—hour-long arguments about where “the bonsais we made together” would look best while Nina Simone defiantly sang through her entire discography in the background. I don't remember the sound of my own voice complaining about every Kumar Gandharva song that they would play before dinner anymore, but I used to. I used to remember a lot of things. Like how we would spend the days of our collective lives in the dining room.

Four years ago, I would bang my head against the wall, but four years later, I have realized the importance of dinner table discussions.

From waking up and sharing coffee with my father, to reading the newspaper during lunch, throwing ashtrays at dawn and breaking bottles in the morning. I haven't seen the dining room in nine months, but why should that matter? I remember chocolate-brown and orange-peel walls, curtains with holes in them from the *agarbattis* my father lit, stained charis from the coffee I spilled, splintered wood on the chairs from when our dog chewed on the table corners, and a single step that my mother fell over every time she got a little too drunk. I remember everything in that room, but I cannot

remember what it felt like. How does one negotiate the presence and now absence of memory? Or navigate the emotion-laded echoes of the past? From “Please Maa, I love you and I'm sorry” to “Dad... I don't want to leave you.”



Untitled by Mario Navarro Rosales

The thing about feelings is that they suggest the absence of a secure and certain meaning. I have never been able to truly *define* a feeling. It is in the exact same way that I remain unable to define the pain in my ovaries as I am in defining how I feel about home. I feel sick but nostalgic. I am repulsed and yet stuck in the hallways of memory. I don't remember the sick feeling in my stomach when my and sister and father kept the dinner table awake with their endless debates and philosophical rants about the state of human existence, the structures that governed us, and how the only certainties in life were uncertainty and death. They would spend hours discussing the answers to these questions, just as they would spend hours deliberating over whether life is pleasurable or whether it is a search for pleasure. Four years ago, I would bang my

head against the wall, but four years later, I have realised the importance of dinner table discussions. Now, I struggle to fall asleep as I dwell on what love means to me—this and other questions keep me awake at night. I seem to have inherited the acts of deliberation and rumination, at once enjoyable and unstable.

I can barely recall my mother's curt responses to both of them as she asserted her opinions every Sunday. Not with grace, as you would expect a woman to. We would all watch as she used her hand movements and the passion and grit in her voice to assert both her presence and her stance. That was the woman my mother locked up before her first drink. You see, my mother was a different woman before her drink and after. The first woman would offer you poetry, but the second woman would offer you insults. The alcohol brought out the hysteria of a woman who was torn at the very centre. The hysteria prompted a certain violence that was directed at us, but mostly at herself—the way she would slam the bedroom doors, throw *diyas* at our walls, smash old photographs, and break the kitchen crockery. This was the hypsteria of a woman locked in her body, desperate to get out. She had every reason to be angry, like most women do, after years of being subject to disrespect and insult. Even then, the direction and veracity of her anger were misplaced. I can love the woman she was before drink number two and regret it after her third, wishing I'd never left my room at night.

This was the hysteria of a woman locked in her body, desperate to get out.

The years went by, and as I grew up, everything coalesced together. Our ghosts haunt our hallways now. Every Sunday smells like the ashtray filled with cigarette butts my father forgot to throw away and the same coffee I made for him every day, but on Sundays, he forgot to drink it because he was too busy hiding on the roof, a cigarette in one hand and newspaper in the other. Every Sunday comes with memories of "I should have never had you! Where the fuck is your father?" and "I never want to see your fucking face again. Fuck off. Fuck. Off." Every Sunday brings me my third lonely meal of the day. Every Sunday reads like the text messages my promises to respond to, but never does. Every Sunday morning sounds like my light footsteps at 5AM wishing to wake up the beasts my parents transformed into after four drinks, but never having the guts to.

And Saturday nights? They sound like my mother's laughter, my father's chuckle as he narrates the same terrible jokes and the clanking of their whisky glasses. These evenings hum with the smiles on their faces accompanied by "I guess we finally made it. Look at the children." But for me, Saturday nights are a deadly cocktail of hope and fear. Hope, that maybe this Sunday will not repeat itself. Fear that it will. And hope again that even if it does, it will be the last.

The old Sunday died. I don't know when it happened or how, but it was murdered and replaced by a lookalike. How can I pretend to know how to mourn this loss? How can I continue to pretend when I do not grant myself access to these memories?

Annabel Lee

Hopeful, lasting love, and an exploration of the transformative power of grief and connection.

The Imposter as Perennial Obstacle

by Maryam Piracha

My [last editorial](#) was a lot easier—new beginnings are always easier to address than murkier middle grounds and this issue’s theme feels more like a throwback to my angrier twenties than it is a testament to my later thirties. Anger was easier when I was younger—raging against the machine felt like a rite of passage, whether that was towards an organization I was a part of, a society in which I didn’t fit, or an ideological mindset espoused by my family who was, in a very real way, a product of the milieu of their time. Adulthood doesn’t always bring emotional maturity, but emotional maturity almost always brings understanding and forgiveness.

To forgive people for not living up to the ideals we imprint upon them is perhaps the hardest thing to do, but nonetheless integral to long-term mental health. Forgiving them means in some small way, forgiving ourselves. For recovering perfectionists, self-

forgiveness is perhaps the greatest mountain to climb.

A former boss and one-time mentor, when I confronted her about what I felt was a “poor” performance appraisal, told me something that I have kept in the bank for many years. She told me that when I first joined the company, she had no expectations from me and so it was easier for me to exceed them. But what was stopping me wasn’t her already high expectations. It was the fact that they were no match for my own. She was saying, in the softest and most diplomatic way that she could, that I was setting absurd expectations for myself. Expectations that I could never realistically meet and was then judging myself for not meeting them and asking her what I could do to increase the odds.



Encompassed by Light by Lynn Bianchi

As someone who has long considered herself as being a familial black sheep, everything that I have done has been to combat this idea. An idea, it must be noted, that I kept and perpetuated, based on an offhand or callous remark someone said or that I overheard,

and that I just accepted wholesale as being completely true. I've spent too many years fighting an idea that existed only in my mind. So whatever I did, by definition, would never be "good enough" for that voice in my head. Whose voice that is or was no longer matters because it's mine now.

For recovering perfectionists, self-forgiveness is perhaps the greatest mountain to climb.

During one of my many Tumblr prowling sessions a couple of years ago, I came across the following quote, which has illuminated many a murky rabbit hole.

"We are our own dragons as well as our own heroes, and we have to rescue ourselves from ourselves." ~ Tom Robbins

For far too long, I have been the fire-breathing dragon of myself, infusing my soul with self-limiting beliefs and sabotaging my success as a means of staying in the box that I've trapped myself in, so that I can continue to berate myself for all my supposed transgressions and "not good enough-ness". What tragic webs we weave around ourselves.

That entire mode of living became a self-fulfilling prophecy and has stymied me for years in ways that only became clearer as I turned inward with a magnifying glass.

"They are not always quite sure of what they are doing here. They spend many sleepless nights, believing that their lives have no meaning. // That is why they are Warriors of the Light. Because they make mistakes, because they ask themselves questions, because they are looking for a reason, they are sure to find it." ~ Paulo Coelho, Warrior of the Light, p12

The more I excavated and investigated what I found, the more my self-doubt made its way into plain view until I discarded the devices and came face-to-face with myself.

For years I had bought into the lie that I was an imposter, that I had only made it as far as I had—which also wasn't very far—because of the efforts of others who had offered me words of wisdom, or whose efforts had trumped my own, or whose experiences I had built off of. I didn't notice that there were two people in this exchange—that the person implementing everything, no matter the source, was me. That's what the imposter syndrome whispered in my ear: that I alone was nothing. That part is true, but not in the solipsistic way my imposter claimed it was.

I am a sum of many parts. Multiple identities, varied experiences, and happenstance encounters with the countless souls who have crossed my path and whose paths I have intersected. I alone cannot achieve greatness... but together with others? Oh, my! I am a force to be reckoned with when I believe in something, operating on visions and plans for the future, and channeling them into a dream that others can buy into. I can lead through empathy and shared experience and love and emotion because

that is what I bring to the table. Belief and empathy and acceptance.

That's what the imposter syndrome whispered in my ear: that I alone was nothing. That part is true, but not in the solipsistic way my imposter claimed it was.

A few years ago, I worked with an editing mentor who cracked open the doors to the novel that I had been struggling with because I hadn't been able to access the real emotion that lay hidden inside it. When she saw the new iterations of what I had written, accessing sides of myself and the story that I couldn't believe existed, her words still carry me through the darkest of nights: "I've never seen anyone take to this process the way that you have... or seen it create this much of an impact than with you". She showed me the door, but I chose to walk through it and traipse down the path.

Reading the books and implementing what I was learning was all me; finding time to write in the company's basement parking lot where there was no internet was all me; digging deep into the cavernous depths of my writing unconscious was all me; finding the courage to write what I was discovering was all me.

I owe writing a debt that I will never be able to repay in this lifetime because it continues to bring infinite returns. It did, in a very real way, save my life. By helping me step into this reality, it made space for me to realize that

I've done a lot in my life in service of continuous learning, even when the lessons were difficult to confront. That thirst for learning and bettering myself isn't just a means to self-flagellate myself for all the things that I "should" be doing. It can also be used for good.

It was at a recent job interview when it hit me while recounting my experiences to date and noting my interviewers' wide-eyed looks of surprise and awe: I am pretty fucking awesome and I've done some pretty fucking awesome things. Saying that acknowledges the help I received from the people around me and integrated into my life in a way that worked for me. And if there's a lesson to be learned from all of this, it's that interdependence is the future, not the enemy.

That's how I can counter the imposter syndrome inside me. I am fucking awesome and so is the village around me. I am only as strong as the people in my circle, the people who, in Rumi's words, "fan my flames". The people in my corner, the ones in the ring with me. There is no shame in admitting that, when I don't have the strength to continue, someone from my circle will step forward, lean up against me, and whisper "I've got you".

And I can sink into the comfort of knowing that I am not in this mystical fun ride known as life alone. That this can be the end and the beginning of a new journey.



Dedication

By Hera Naguib

زرد پتوں کا بن جو مرا دیس ہے
درد کی انجمن جو مرا دیس ہے

فیض احمد فیض | Faiz Ahmad Faiz

If I could see, simply, where to get to
in that city where I stood,
blunt as a rickshaw flat.

Neither seen nor hidden

If I had tossed rupees
into its river's murky sleeve,
its litter floating—

If I could say one true thing to it,
like *fuck this place*

If I had said *let me break free*

If I could walk its river's cusp
like the pilgrims who haunt its sludge,
who fling from gaunt arms
chunks of meat for crows

If I held out a lump and waited for one to
clutch back,
my stillness loosened—
my benevolence like grease

If the river wasn't hurt
its toxic belly with bloated minnows,
pharmaceuticals, and lovers
routinely scavenged

sometimes dumped

If I hadn't turned to leave
that river, that city, the wet mud
at my feet trapping rainbows
bubbling, hissing, *you will carry*
this burden:

these scabbed walls, fissures,
this city that daily orphans its own
miasma, flaccid mynahs
the evergreen minister's grin
fraying the banner's slogan;
these streets with makeshift earth ovens,
with livestock and farmers razed
off

for Urban Transport and Housing
schemes

If I could spin away & still sing
under each bridge's black lung
of the woman who sweeps
the pavement with one foot short
of toes sliced clean from a factory
machine

of laborers who flank the back streets,
with backs kissed

to the scrape and dirt of earth
with snores humming in the sewer
and ribs that throb
with echoes of hard-hit drums
sent from a flaring of wedding tents;

of the vagrant children who huddle
like matchsticks in sewers,
with fists pumping needles, their
bloodstream
like the raceway beltway overhead;

of the lurker in alleys who moves panther
slow,
his heart at war-beat, an artillery rattling
at the barking dogs

at the quiet
& its whistling, misty specter;



Blithe Spirit by Sarah Short

of those irked clerks who slouch
before strident, ringing phones,
whose imagined, impossible lives
sometimes float nameless
through writhing phone
cables;
of spring winds
of rippling kites of burnt brick
rooftops
& those youth who open soft
to endless, porous ache
that blisters awake to dissipate like
bagasse;
of the funk
of tobacco and marigolds
beneath his collar;
of the salon worker who softly thrums

to Bollywood tunes, who breathes
into my supine nostril
something of fuchsia lips
and riflescope eyes she'll wear
one day
for billboards of ghost
theatres;
of the dancer who flees in time to the
airport
on cracked, bleeding heels
by the invisible rope of a blackout,
against the thought of her own hacked
body,
heedless of the hash the cleric-pimp slips
into her suitcase—
& of the activist who peacefully knocks
municipal doors that mete out her protest
for clean air and water
in body bags or a hit-and-run;
of the drivers who daily sling in car seats
outside the boys' school to steal a last
drag
of smoke before home time, before the
last
chickpea dunks moist
into their newspaper cone, before their
slobbering
little masters herd
inside
heaving stink &
orders—
of each empty hour
in which my mother spores ears
to her disconnect, its fungal wool
& of my father, whose swilled dreams
no longer scramble before him, like TV
static—

If I could speak, simply

outside

assonance,

If I could speak plain as tarmac

to that shady, vigorous,

fortressed city

that spills tedium like

ash and so much shit

would it

condescend to me,

a stone splitting my

absence, its far seas?

Till Death Do Us Part

by Alexander Perez



Untitled by James Hutton

[Link: Video Poem](#)

[Transcript]

foreign

he tried to train me to mimic sounds

as if I were a young Canary

so then you plucked me bald Raw

yeah not even a chirp

how dumb he said after all these years

what happened to our oath

I said Solitude with my eyes but you

mistook it for midnight grievance

how sad you could not celebrate my

ending useless speech stock still as if

a damned wedged water wheel

the children are all grown thank God the

endless evening meals the conjugal

mourning manly right you claimed before

serious business began

always leaving me displeased

depressed alone with women's work

so why not stop up clog and cumber

what

a relief from insincerity from how was

your day my darling

another Scotch my dear

now you finally heard what I've been

saying with a yawn

When the Children call I hand the phone

to you

they do not understand what's wrong with

her perhaps she's gone start raving mad

they say

ironically

and they would be right I've gone away

to myself

even now I pack my bags stuff them with

incomprehensible sounds

do not expect a memento

not even a postcard for you



Eight Axioms of Homesickness

by Maham Khan

I.

Woke up today and Googled 'sleet'. I was waiting for the bus when I looked down at my blue jacket and noticed—what can only be described as—*crumbs* of ice. As I tried to lift one with my finger, it melted immediately. When I came in from the cold, I felt my face warm up and then begin to ache. The cold wind had slapped me numb. Standing in line for coffee (if you must know: cappuccino, oatmilk, extra shot of espresso), I want to cry because my hands have the clammy, blue look of certain newborn babies. But then the barista remembers my name, my compact hum of a name (which unexpectedly, everyone here finds difficult to pronounce) and I smile. And then frown, because this means I buy coffee more often than I can afford to.

This city is small and always feels half-full, like an emptied-out auditorium. Come winter, the streets will be emptier still. The houses and buildings, rectangles of warm light, swallow people up. Walking to the bus stop after class in the evenings, I see them huddled in the classrooms and study halls, far away from me. My apartment complex, surrounded on three sides by deep, dark woods, seems like a

lighthouse when I spot it in the distance. My breath rises like mist before my face as I wait for my bus. And the bus is always late.

II.

Pablo Neruda describes her as "compact and planetary". I read those lines several times to myself at night. My name means moon, in Farsi. Or rather, *our moon*. The meaning is like a lasso, anchoring me to myself, bestowing a sense of belonging.

III.

Autumn leaves fall. I wind my way around the sidewalk, making sure to step on as many of them as possible, relishing every *crunch*. One afternoon, I was so preoccupied with my little leaf exercise, I didn't realize a man was hesitantly walking my way, trying to figure out how to bypass me on the narrow path. I quickly stumbled to the side and walked on like nothing out of the ordinary had taken place. Often in the mornings, I'll hear the mournful song of a bird I cannot name. Solitary, it calls out through the dense foliage from the woods I can see across the parking lot outside my window. Five times in a row, and then silence. I listen with bated breath.



Ampersand by Lynn Bianchi

IV.

My first day at the library, I wander about, getting a feel for the place. The clunky elevator makes mildly ominous sounds as it jets up the floors (the library is the tallest building in the entire county, or so I am told). Sometimes, I'll make eye contact with other students, and we'll smile nervously, as though saying, *this is probably dangerous but what can you do?* I like walking through the maze of bookshelves, feeling like I am the only person there, in this library, in this university, in this county, in this world. The fact that there are books I have never read, and will never get around to, will never hear about; the fact that some may have made me cry if I had read them, or have made me feel less alone—it never ceases to stun me. And when I round the

corner, I see someone has taken over my usual study spot.

V.

Here's a secret: I love living alone. I can spend hours, barefoot in the kitchen, experimenting with recipes, singing to myself. There's also a lot of crying involved, sitting at the kitchen counter with my head in my hands. I read voraciously (is there anything else that is done *voraciously?*) and retain most of it. For class, we are doing *Bewilderment* by Richard Powers. A widowed father, an astrobiologist, struggles with raising his autistic son. They look for life on planets eons of time and space away, and find a promising one. But it is inhospitable because it has no moon to keep it steady as it spins across the galaxy, cataclysmic and out of time. His son is devastated, but does his best to hide it.

VI.

Lake effect. I had never heard the term before, but it helps explain why the clouds here seem so much lower. They lurk overhead, a little closer than you would expect. Bright and luminous, more beautiful than usual, too. At times, it feels as though the sky itself is pressing down, or as though the earth has lifted me up to be closer to the sun. Strolling one afternoon in the library, I see the Poetry Center. I make a beeline for it. On the shelves, I spot Li-Young Lee. I settle down in the chairs nearby and flip greedily

through the book. I love Lee—his words always slice through me like a gentle and loving knife. Under the table of contents, I see a poem titled “Lake Effect”. I am still for a moment, looking at the title of the poem, thinking about where I currently am. The opening lines:

She said, "The lake is like an open book,

day like the steady gaze of a reader."

I said, "The day is a book we open between us,

the lake a sentence we read together

over and over, our voices

ghost, bread, and horizon."

I envy their sense of a shared moment, the ease of familiarity it will take me too long to cultivate here in my new ‘home’. Perhaps I never will, I remind myself. All my life, I have prepared for perpetual unrootedness. It makes everything easier, and it makes everything more difficult.

VII

Homesickness is eternal. Once you move away, you can never return to the same place. Just like the terrain within you, the people and places you leave continue to change and shift.

Through my east-facing bedroom window, I gather the weak morning light. I take my coffee and sit cross-legged on my pink prayer mat, close my eyes and let the sunlight dapple my face. I imagine my cat is curled up beside me, his fawn fur tickling my leg. There is a poster with jellyfish and siphonophores on my wall. I love siphonophores; each is a colony of single-cell organisms, a collection of working parts reliant on one another for survival. They can grow longer than a hundred feet, so they become pulsing, bioluminescent, alive ropes. Floating on the expanse of the ocean floor, they can snap in half easily. So each part works with the other, diligently, letting the soft currents guide it through the waters.

A floating community. I wonder if I will find one. I comfort myself with the idea that I, too, can be natural.

VIII

Homesickness is eternal. Once you move away, you can never return to the same place. Just like the terrain within you, the people and places you leave continue to change and shift. You remain stunted in some ways, made to fit a different, older place. Seeing the flooding back home in Pakistan in August made me feel like the world had changed drastically in a matter of moments, like it had tilted sideways. I went careening over the edge. It made no sense to me how life could still carry on; that I had classes to attend, dinner to eat, conversations to make. At

the same time, I was completely removed from the scene, locked out, feeling guilty I was not there, and yet, eternally grateful for the life that has been afforded to me.

More lines from Lee:

A wind blows, the book is
open

to a voice at evening

asking, *Are we many or one?*

I travelled so many miles so I could find myself outside of the parameters that had been laid down. Is it possible to escape something without running away? Beyond the binaries—of being home or away, being man or woman, free or trapped—there is only wilderness and bewilderment. When I look up at the night sky, it's the same moon I would see back home. The air is cleaner, clearer. When I take a deep breath, it cuts through me, like glass. Homesickness is deferral. I will constantly lose my home, and I'll never find it again.

Scheherazade

Playful, clever, and chaotically just in the face of atrocities, always holding a mirror to society.

Endless Nights

By Mariam Tahir Butt

I want to sing, to turn
my voice seam-side out
to invoke the shape
of things as they could be,
but the past comes
between us and the
words lose their way.

Now, I must rediscover lost
languages in your face
when it was a face still, in
your eyes when they were eyes still,
and not graveyards of unborn stories
never completely suppressed,
never really forgotten

The moon could be with me
like an old lover,
but romance is dead,

so I must stay awake,
alone.

No silver threads of radiance turning
this skin to moonstone
no vines of moonflower, caressing
these limbs, no
moonlit glances illuminating my
shadow's dances.

The candle to my moth—
my undoing—resurrection—daylight—
towards which I must journey,
across the breadth
of this moonless,
this sleepless,
this endless night.



Blue Lagoon by Barbara Lazzarini



Lately I Can Only Watch Two Things

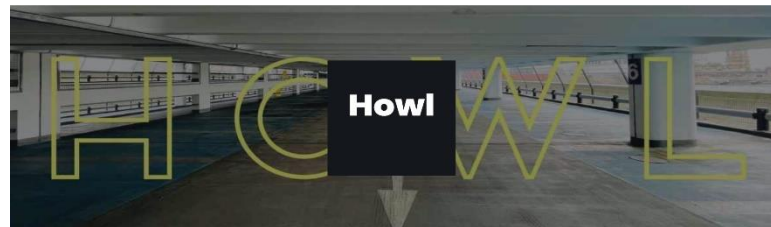
By Kristia Vasiloff

Cinderella, sweet nightingale, it's true my heart is grieving, and I'm wondering when I wheel over to my window and see oak trees and houses and children and my neighbor's anti-suicide garden, will I w a l k one day to find myself outside these walls? Will I see the black eyed suzies take back the sun, have a conversation, sit without being eaten

Three days stagnate until I find her – I don't know her name, I don't have a tiktok. I rewatch her post until the spine is broken:
a casual watcher would see a woman walking to a stop sign
Listen to the gravel and see how each clink of glass finds a beat in my starving heart.
I'm thinking keep going girl,
keep *me* going girl



Untitled by James Hutton

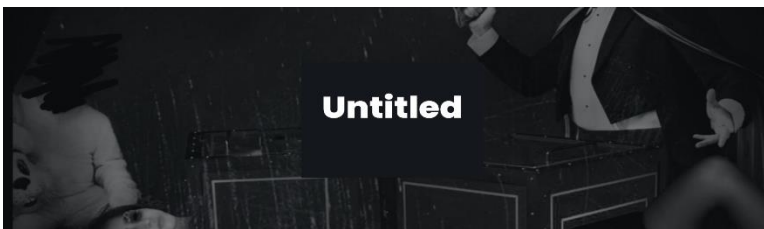


By Jamie Holman

[Jamie Holman produces and directs this visual interpretation of our theme.](#)

Madeline

An uncertain, half-person existence, notorious for giving men sleepless nights.



*Untitled by
Aamir Arsiwala and Zahra Hamdulay*

CHARACTERS

Magician

Masked Man's Assistant

Commentator

A dark stage engulfed in smoke. Deep red velvet curtains on either side of the stage, drawn open with gold string. A harsh yellow spotlight blares, revealing a wooden table centre-stage, much like an operating table. There is a large box with gold borders on the table. Let Me Entertain You by Robbie Williams is the background score.

COMMENTATOR:

Presenting to you... the Man in the Mask. The world's greatest magician and here, with the hypnotising hips, his live prop, his Spicy Ornament.

COMMENTATOR makes obscure gestures and claps twice.

COMMENTATOR (commands over his shoulder):

-come here Darlin'. Give us a twirl. That's the way. Isn't she faya?

I dare you to take your eyes off this stunning vixen as she's SAWED IN HALF. Well, the outfit's a two-piece so she's already halfway there. She looks like she knows what he expects her to do as she slowly climbs over the table.

Silence. THE MASKED MAN *pulls the box over her head as though swinging a garage door shut. A single click echoes, sealing her fate.*

He yanks her left arm out of a hole in the side of the box. She waves.

COMMENTATOR (*excitedly grinning*):
What a tease.

THE MASKED MAN *yanks out her delicate legs one at a time.*

COMMENTATOR:

The stockings are a nice touch. Let's hope we can see them again. Here's a nice steely blade, ladies and gentlemen.

THE MASKED MAN *splits her in half, divvying up her assets.*

COMMENTATOR:

Oof, that is one messed up girl!

Let's see what condition she's in.

COMMENTATOR *walks around the box.*

(*His voice grows soft*) Beautiful as ever.

THE END

Fitting

By Alexander Perez

i put on my mother's sundress
corn-flower colored, flowing.
what a false sense of freedom.
poised as summer in the center
of a cold house, yellow joy
in the midst of blues, a girl
at a woman's time of descendance.



in front of this full-length mirror
who thinks about the woman
she cannot be?
you see
it's her
covered in butterfly tattoos

with the belly-button ring
proud of her color
ok with birthmarks
ok with no hips
ok with a full belly
ok with flabby arms
ok with no breasts or one
with the hair below her navel
re-gendered, un-gendered, all
who is smart, quick, strong
who is slow, weak, befuddled
able to be loved
loves herself unconditionally.

there are too many ways to be in this
dress.
i never saw my mother in it.
she lived a battleship grey life
always at war with the world, with herself.
in a frayed, faded housecoat, defeated
she sat all day in the dirty kitchen
playing some symphony's sad second
movement
on the record player over, over, over
again.
maybe i should get out of this dress
return to being her son
the son who could not help loving
the men he loved
ones who broke mirrors violently
the son who understood grey
the disappointment of yellow
that knew a music that repeated
over, over, over again in his head.
one who tried on a dress that didn't fit.

A Woman in Public, from Karachi to London

By Amal Hamid

I feel ashamed to admit that this past Friday was the first time I stepped out alone on a Friday night ever since I moved to London. I didn't move to the city alone, to lose myself amongst the throngs of people already trying to make this city their home. I moved to London to be with my partner, to try and make a life with another person, when I had previously only made a life for myself. I moved across oceans and suddenly found myself as part of a "we". We went out on weekends together, to eat ice cream or meet some friends, we found ourselves sprawled on the sofa watching tv or cooking biryani. But this past Friday, I stepped out alone to meet some friends. We saw a musical and danced in our seats to pop songs from our teenage years. On the way back, I texted my husband telling him that I was a bit nervous to walk from the tube station to our flat as it was past 11 pm. He came to pick me up, and on the way back I kept thinking about how I should have been able to do this ten-minute walk on my own even if it was 11 pm. It has almost been a year since I moved to the UK, and about seven months since I moved to London, but I have still not allowed my body to adapt to the ways of being in this country/city. My body is still following its instincts from being in Karachi, where it did not have the liberty to walk outside alone at 11 pm, or even 7 pm or 5 pm.

And so, I am admitting something that my feminist self has not been able to share with

anyone, not even with the empty air around me. I tell myself it makes sense; that my body has every reason to become nervous and anxious if it finds itself alone outside after maghrib. Even in England, where it is okay for women to walk outside alone, to travel alone, to dine alone, to just be by themselves alone. But my body has internalized how to function for so many years, it does not know anything else.

post about a scary incident happening to some girl in an uber or rickshaw in the city. I would beg my friends to pick me up, would try to convince my mum to change her plans so I could get the driver to chauffeur me around. My body did not know how to navigate itself in empty streets or crowded streets. And so, when I found myself in London, a 29-year-old independent woman who had just started a PhD, I hesitated making plans that would mean being out alone after maghrib.



Untitled by Mario Navarro Rosales

London is not much safer for women than Karachi, though. The difference was, in Karachi I lived in a privileged bubble where a car took my body wherever it needed to go, accompanied by a driver in the front seat. I rarely found myself alone in public on a daily basis, apart from the few times I had to take an uber or a rickshaw to get to places. And these infrequent rides would lessen every time I would come across a social media

The first month after moving to London, I made sure to come home just as the sun would start to set. I was being cautious because that is how my brain was trained—to start mapping its way back home before dark, inside walls where the body will be safe as the city transforms in the absence of daylight. As soon as the sun begins to set, my body stiffens, my feet hurry their pace, my anxiety makes me hyper aware of my surroundings. Every time I get home safely, I finally exhale all the air that I start holding inside of me the minute I start my journey back home. Our bodies give us away, regardless of what we wear or how we behave outwardly; our bodies give us away because we can't breathe until we step foot inside our safe spaces. This is the process I repeat every time I venture out alone in the evenings. Because even if this is not Karachi, nowhere is really safe for women, is it? I have noticed the way my chest does not clench when I am out late at night with my husband, because his body is there to protect me, his maleness adds a layer to my safety. I know how patriarchal this sounds for a feminist to admit out loud, but even if I didn't say it, my breathing admits it, if my pulse could speak it could not deny this.

We still go about chasing our dreams, but I constantly have this image in my head—the soul of my body floating above and watching my physical body engage in activities. My body does not go out for chai at 2 am in Karachi.

I guess it is also because I have not had much practice being out alone after sunset. I moved to Manchester for my PhD and the three and a half months I spent there were consumed by the effort of adjusting to a new city and a new program, in studying and learning the ropes of being a doctoral student, of cooking meals and doing laundry and spending my spare time in the evenings planning a wedding across oceans in my very small room. I did not have much opportunity to move around after maghrib, and the few instances I did step out in the night, it did not feel difficult for me because I was living in central Manchester—close to everything, the streets always busy and bustling with people. My body actually loved the freedom, appreciated that it could walk to the grocery store and the gym and to my office on campus. This was the freedom I had craved back in Pakistan. This was the freedom I wrote about on Instagram.

But then I picked up my books, my belongings, and my body, and moved them to London. I got married, moved to my husband's city, with his job and his friends and his (our) apartment in a residential area of London. The city felt big, out of reach for my mind that was used to the parameters it had drawn around central Manchester, my

university, and my small student accommodation. I didn't know anyone in this new city, so I went with my husband to meet his friends, we went shopping together and went to eat at restaurants and explored new parks. I was getting to know the city, we were getting to know each other. I did not even know my way around my own new neighbourhood. There was no reason for me to step out alone. And I was okay with it because London scared me even in the daylight.

Eventually, I found myself needing to step out alone. To get cheese because the pasta I was cooking needed cheese we didn't have at home, and it was early evening when my husband was still working. To go to the gym because I wanted to go swimming in the afternoon and my husband did not want to go to the gym at that time. Slowly, I started venturing out later in the day; I went from being comfortable going out alone in the morning, to being alone in the afternoon, to walking by myself in the streets in the early evening. It was such an important step, and I am embarrassed that it came so much later after I had moved. I craved this independence in Pakistan, and then I found myself actively trying to avoid it.

As Pakistani women, choice is not a verb many of us can act on—and those of us who do have this privilege never take this freedom for granted. Freedom to choose where to live, who to live with, how to be in your body, how to spend your days as the world continues to move around you—the freedom to choose. It sounds simple enough and yet it never is. How much did I choose to live in Karachi, Lahore, Nashville, Manchester (for a brief moment), and now London? Do any of these

cities feel like mine? Do I move around freely in the cities that I do call mine? Or do I call cities mine only if I can move around freely in them?

A few months ago, I read an Instagram post where a girl wrote about how she doesn't know Karachi like boys do because she can't be out in the city till 2 am drinking cups of chai in a dhaba, in a neighbourhood she has never been to before, she hasn't sped her cars through empty roads in the middle of night, finding new shortcuts on her way home. She does not have memories of belonging to the city like boys do; the city is not mapped in her brain the same way. We still go about chasing our dreams, but I constantly have this image in my head—the soul of my body floating above and watching my physical body engage in activities. My body does not go out for chai at 2 am in Karachi.

My body was never a part of me, it was a performative tool to help me fit into a world that I was not even sure I wanted to fit into.

My brain and my feet have restricted my movement in a city that prides itself for allowing every type of citizen to be mobile and free. I am just so aware of my body, of being a woman, of being a brown woman in London. Growing up in Karachi, movement and mobility were just a part of the equation that were restricted; my whole being was restricted. I don't recall a time when I didn't struggle with my body. As soon as I was old enough to understand that I had breasts that

needed to be hidden from everyone around me it was as if I was always concealing myself. And in doing so, I was concealing my own body from me. How do I really like to move in this world? How do I like to dress, to be seen, to just be? I started grappling with these questions around my mid-twenties when I began to feel suffocated in my own skin. I was working out for external validation and dressing for approval from my family, I was fitting my body into spaces and company deemed appropriate for a young Pakistani woman and navigating it away from anything that would bring disapproval. My body was never a part of me, it was a performative tool to help me fit into a world that I was not even sure I wanted to fit into. And I absolutely hated the dupatta, for the relationship I had with it, for the stress it caused between me and my mother, for the idea that somehow the dupatta would hide my breasts and therefore keep me safe when we know that clothes do not matter.

London has improved my relationship with my body. I step out to go to the gym in my tights and sports shirt and I don't feel conscious. Some days I feel like wearing a cute dress, on other days I just want to wear baggy jeans, and on others still, I wear skinny jeans and a form-fitted shirt. For the most part, people do not stare, and you can wear what you want. As long as you feel comfortable and good about yourself, you can open yourself up to all that the city offers.

I never felt this freedom in Karachi. And this summer, I found a bit of peace with the ideas of bodily autonomy and choice that wrestle in my brain. It was a sweltering 39 degrees in London. Our apartment does not have air

conditioning like most apartments in the city. The only solution was to grab my swimsuit and head to the council gym to use their pool. I walked to the gym alone, feeling safe because it was broad daylight and because I know my way well around my neighbourhood now. I put on my swimsuit, and no one cared about what I was wearing, no one even turned around to gawk. I was tentative as I got into the water; I had not swum in years. But then, I swam one lap and then another. And it came back to me; why I loved swimming so much as a teenager, why I loved being near the water when I later returned to the city. You dip your head in the water, and as you kick the wall of the pool and start your strokes, you can no longer hear judgements and inquiries about your choices, you can't hear society, you can't even hear your own thoughts, your phone is far away, the world is not at your fingertips. And you choose to swim, my teenage body chose to swim when I had little liberty to do much else with my body. Diving into the water for my first swim is my favourite part of the week now. I can see my body on the clear floor of the pool, gliding through its length the way it can never glide in any city. I know the corners of the pool intimately unlike the girl who does not know the corners of the city she was born in and spent her entire life in.

Maybe I can mark my one-year anniversary in this new city by taking myself out alone to a café or a bookstore. To be able to separate myself from the "we" and be okay with being an "I" out alone in the dark. I know it is not sustainable to keep myself safe in this bubble of a partnership. In Karachi I had the bubble of being driven around out of necessity and need and my parents' requirements. None of these factors are restricting me in London; it is my pre-trained brain and Karachi instincts.

But I think my body is learning to adapt to this new sense of freedom. It still knows it's a brown woman in this world, though; it will always know its limits. I will always be hyper aware of my surroundings, I will never walk down dark unlit streets alone. But I hope I can begin to trust this freedom and enjoy it.

Patterns

By Alexander Perez

her bedroom window
looked out on the pine barren.
open, the air, cool, cleansing, cleared
up the rotting past. she was not
sure she wanted to finish dying.
she could glide out, not a spirit
or a ghost, a woman desperate
to be, desperate to leave her aged
broken body behind. this is not
a death-bed scene, but a
temporary stilling, a river dammed
but unstoppable, pushing, pushing
against its limitations, her body
merely a pile of uprooted tree
stumps, dead leaves, twigs. alone
she left no witnesses to her decay
naked under a sweat-drenched
quilt, inherited from her mother
blocks depicting farm scenes
plantings, harvestings, thanksgiving,
not depicting her mother's ten
childbirths, the endless tasks,
the numbing late winter mornings,

constant tending of fire.
dying just another chore left undone.
the daughter will leave behind
her well-worn dirty slippers
faded violet cotton pajamas
her tawny bathrobe, soot-stained
from stoking the woodstove, bereft
garments, disordered, hastily
disgarded, as she if she were
trying to escape the saints in
the gold chariots directed
to preserve her, to resurrect her.
she thought, now i am not a mother
not a wife, but force, annihilation
havoc and ruin, something that is
and is not a woman, power
the thing i have been waiting for –
to be.



Attain by Sensetus

