

# THE MISSING SLATE

For the discerning metropolitan.

SUMMER 2011



# THE MISSING SLATE TEAM

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“ It hovers in dark corners  
before the lights are turned on,  
it shakes sleep from its eyes  
and drops from mushroom gills,  
it explodes in the starry heads  
of dandelions turned sages,  
it sticks to the wings of green angels  
that sail from the tops of maples.  
It sprouts in each occluded eye  
of the many-eyed potato,  
it lives in each earthworm segment  
surviving cruelty,  
it is the motion that runs the tail of a dog,  
it is the mouth that inflates the lungs  
of the child that has just been born.  
It is the singular gift  
we cannot deny ourselves,  
the argument that refuses death,  
the genius that invents the future,  
all we know of God.  
It is the serum which makes us swear  
not to betray one another;  
it is in this poem, trying to speak  
— *Hope, Lisel Mueller (reproduced from  
Bloodaxe Books' Being Human)* ”

## A WORD FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Dear Readers,

The past four months have been revolutionary on a global scale—beginning from the youth led street protests that swept through the Middle East and ending at Osama bin Laden's demise. "Revolution" is a grand word that encompasses so many things if past revolutions have been a guide; it is the promise, the hope of something new.

Social media is a technical revolution that has made democratic revolutions possible as argued in one of our feature articles. The anatomy of a revolution and whether it has a chance to thrive in Pakistan is discussed in the companion feature piece. But there are other revolutionary items on the agenda aside from the obvious: class differentiations; using the power of poetry and music to start up intellectual dialog and debate; the shifting professional strain from men to women, all form a unique issue. We also break from our almost exclusive coverage and profiles of artists to include musicians as well—two young artists: Asfandyar Khan and Zohaib Kazi—whose talent is something we'll be keeping a close eye on.

The above are framed by captivating short fiction and intriguing poetry as we bow out for the summer in our nod to the changes afoot, led and pushed forth by our generation. The two poems that book-end this issue reflect a change in attitude and focus for our lighter but still thought-provoking, third issue.

Your comments are invaluable to us and if you are not already a Facebook fan, please feel free to send in your thoughts, suggestions and most importantly, differing opinions to [feedback@themissingslate.com](mailto:feedback@themissingslate.com). Alternatively, you can contribute on [themissingslate.com](http://themissingslate.com).

As always, this issue has been a joint effort of our editorial and creative staff. Special credit must go to Moeed Tariq, our Creative Director for finding artist, Joanne Renaud in the nick of time for our cover. This issue in particular was difficult to design, owing in large part to the medley of content we take pride in publishing. A special, heartfelt mention to Creative Lead, Syed Hassan Sagheer for creating an issue to be proud of. I would like to salute Samra Alauddin, who as Assistant to the Creative Director, went above and beyond the call of duty to put together a small promotional video released prior to our publication. The Missing Slate is truly a sum of its parts united in the single aim to present a truly cosmopolitan picture for the discerning metropolitan.

On behalf of my team, I hope you enjoy this issue.

Sincerely,

Maryam Piracha

Editor-in-Chief, The Missing Slate.





New fiction,  
new poetry,  
bristling journalism,  
arresting photography.

New voices seeing the light of day.

Submissions Open

For more information, visit <http://www.themissing Slate.com>

**THE MISSING SLATE**

For the discerning metropolitan.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## FEATURES

Expanding the Web	32
The Road to Aletheia	49
Writing Out A Revolution	66

## OPINION

The Lazy Man's Manifesto	10
Our Children's Folklore?	96
The Much That Binds Us	98

## COMMENTARY

Keeping It Cultural	40
More Than Just A Mom	80
The Vault	82

## REPORTING

Tombstone Blues	44
-----------------	----

## FICTION

Splitting Lanes	18
The Shredding	69
The Limit	87

## POETRY

Body as Question Mark	23
My Apartment	43
Hospital	78
The Traveler	79
Elegy for my Sister	93
The Apple as a Meta-Cognitive Project	94
Where Cotton is Mothered	97

## ROVING EYE

### The Critics

I Curse the River of Time	8
Get Thrashed	9
Cafe Clique Review	15

Tron Legacy	59
Voice Recognition	60

## Spotlight

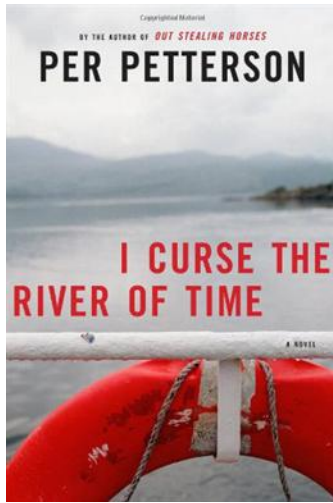
Artist: Maria Khan	28
Artist: Amra Khan	61
Illustrator: Joanne Renaud	34
Musician: Zohaib Kazi	54
Musician: Asfandyaar Khan	85



*Bunnie Antoinette by Joanne Renaud*

## 8 THE CRITICS: I CURSE THE RIVER OF TIME

by Jacob Silkstone

*translated by Charlotte Barslund.*

233 pp.

ISBN: 978-1-846-55301-1

Original title: *Jeg forbanner tidens elv*

Publisher: Graywolf Press

It would be easy to remember the bleakness, and only the bleakness, of Per Petterson's writing. His fourth novel, the follow-up to *Out Stealing Horses*, deals with divorce, death, a sense of despondency and depression so overwhelming that 'At times the only option was to sit in a chair and wait for the worst ravages to calm down so I could perform the most basic tasks: cut a slice of bread, go to the toilet, or drag myself all those exhausting metres through the hallway to lie down on my bed.'

And yet the bleakness is paradoxically uplifting, conveyed in a prose style stark and mesmeric enough to feel poetic. As fanciful as it sounds, it is difficult to read a Per Petterson novel without recalling the bleakness and beauty of Norway itself. In *I Curse the River of Time*, Norway is immediately associated with the sickness of the narrator's mother: 'She did not like all the rock in this country, did not like the spruce forests or the high plains, did not like the mountains.' She returns to Denmark in the last week of her life, but the novel moves both back and forth between times and places, and the penultimate section ends on another description of the Norwegian landscape:

'The water around the boat fell silent, and silently the cabin was floating up above the rocks and the smoke

rose softly from the chimney, and how impossible it was to grasp that in the end something as fine as this could be ground into dust.'

That ungraspable truth haunts the novel. *I Curse the River of Time* opens with an absence – 'All this happened quite a few years ago', and the narrator's mother is dead by the first line. The narrator, Arvid Jansen, struggles with that impending death, with his divorce, with the death of his younger brother six years before. The novel is set in 1989, and the fall of the Berlin Wall signals the final loss of a false utopian ideal: as a young Communist, Arvid dropped out of college to work on a production line, sacrificing a potential future for a political statement. On the wall of Arvid's 'small flat at Carl Berners Plass' were posters of Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell and Mao, and the novel's title comes from one of Mao's poems:

'Fragile images of departure, the village back then.

I curse the river of time; thirty-two years have passed.'

Time is, of course, central. The narrative skips from Denmark in 1989 to Ullevål Hospital in 1983, from Arvid's long drives with his daughters to the beginning of Arvid's relationship with his wife. Linking every line is a sense of loss, a struggle to comprehend the way time 'can slip through your fingers when you are not looking.'

*I Curse the River of Time* is superbly written, quiet and compelling, and Charlotte Barslund's English translation has to be praised for the way it preserves the occasionally hypnotic rhythm of Per Petterson's winding sentences. And yet... reading any book in translation, you are aware of looking at the text from an unbridgeable distance; you suspect that something has been lost in the long shift from language to language.

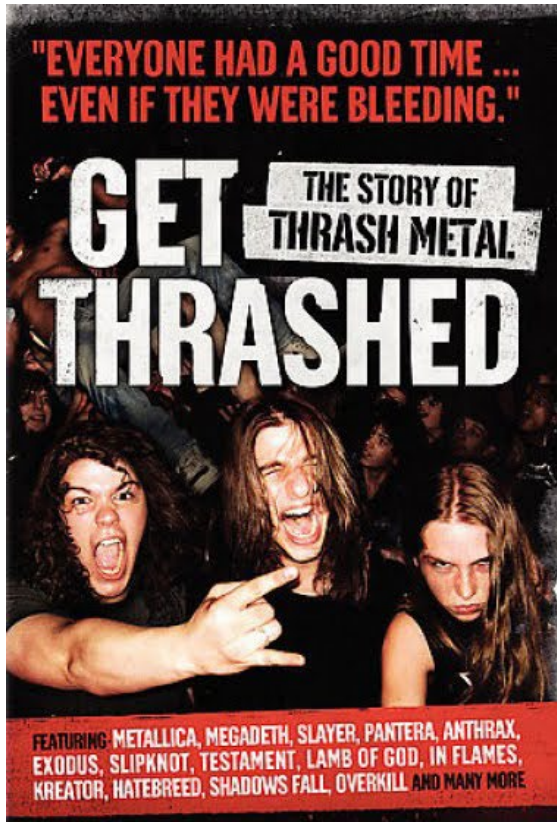
Certain passages that fit perfectly in the Norwegian original are almost nonsensical in English. When Arvid discusses a film with his mother, the conversation – 'Do you recall Grand Prix?' I said. 'The Eurovision Song Contest?' – will be lost on any reader unaware that *Melodi Grand Prix* is the Norwegian name for Eurovision.

But the odd slip in the transition from Norwegian to English can be forgiven, or even praised: perhaps the sense of loss in translation is entirely appropriate for a book that carries loss in every line.



# THE CRITICS: GET THRASHED: A DOCUMENTARY

by Khaver Siddiqui



## Cast & Credits:

Directed by Rick Ernst

With Tom Angelripper, Death Angel and Lars Ulrich

Released by Kundrat Productions

Running Time: 100 minutes; Rated R for language

Thrash Metal is loud which makes *Get Thrashed*, a documentary on the genre, one of the loudest documentaries in recent times. As the name suggests, this particular form of music revolved around playing metal louder and faster, and always inciting the crowd to “thrash” around. These bands comprised of kids who sang about mythological creatures, old b-movies, serial killers and mass murderers. But every so often they would also sing about what it was like being a teenager and the angst that came with it. These were also the kids that absolutely hated glam rock/metal, another emerging trend that sounded like more like pop and very less like rock. So who were these teenagers that started it all? Back then they were just a bunch of kids trying to differentiate their sound with what they were used to hearing.

These kids grew up to be bands like Metallica,

Slayer, Anthrax and Megadeth, just to name a few. But back then they were just kids getting drunk, trashing hotels, and trying to make it big by playing music that was as loud as it could get. They had jobs but would take time out to tour the country, play music in clubs and in backyards. These kids were genuinely passionate about the music and were determined to be heard. The documentary explores the area of San Francisco where Thrash Metal was born. All the while through the documentary we see grainy footage, black and white photos and interviews with the bands themselves (back then and now). They talk about the times and what it was like to explore and push the boundaries of music, though it's pretty clear that thanks to all the booze and drugs they either can't remember much or are pretty scared at what they do remember about those times.

Also discussed are legends whose lives were cut short, whether by substance abuse or by accident, and their memories are nothing but celebrated by fans and musicians alike. *Get Thrashed* is an interesting documentary—it screams and shouts the history of a rich and deep genre of music that is terribly overshadowed by the dark and bitter state of music today—otherwise known as Justin Bieber and Rebecca Black. *Get Thrashed* reminds us that there were times when young people were actually passionate about the music they made and listened to.

*Khaver Siddiqui obtained a degree in Polymer Sciences and Chemistry (that's the science of plastic: what you sit on and what made Pamela Anderson famous), and subsequently worked as a Chemical Engineer. He quit to join an advertising agency and became a copywriter. He did that because he loves to write. He writes because he wants to escape. Ever since he scribbled all those stories about random nothings on those double colored, four lined notebooks, he's been on a continuing journey of discovery; of himself, his capabilities and his writing.*

# 10 THE LAZY MAN'S MANIFESTO

by Adam Fisher

*What goes up, must come down.*

Technology has improved at an incredible pace, and yet we still live an industrial nightmare. We sacrifice our youth to make more money than we know what to do with, to be used in a future that's completely unknown. It's absurd! And for those who don't make it as far as that distant future, a pathetic waste. There must be a balance between future concerns and present living, between one's profession and one's personal growth. In our post-modern hi-tech world, we no longer suffer such outmoded concepts as "career" and "company loyalty", in the traditional sense, even if we haven't realized it yet. We are an extreme capitalist society and must adapt our methodologies to this reality.

We all know that a happy worker is more productive, and we all know about "burn-out". For some reason, the engineering and hi-tech industries ("problem-solving industries"), are still working 9 - 5 with expected (and usually unpaid) overtime. I stress here that I am specifically referring to the types of employment that require these "problem solving" characteristics. This work ethic does harm to both the employee (most people don't want to spend such a large percentage of their lives stuck in the same place with the same people) and the employer (who has counted his employee's hours but not his employee's effective productivity). This is factory mentality, and it's misplaced.

Another primary cause of bad direction is the global capitalist attitude, which lets "marketing" hold the reins. It appears that only those who have studied Business Management know that marketing and promotion is not the same thing, and most of these "educated" types seem to have forgotten this lesson. Instead of focusing on creating quality products, we set up workhouses to produce whatever can "sort of" match the requirements as quickly and cheaply as possible.

The other issue, of course, is education. We don't stop complaining about the degradation of our society and the lack of education that influences it, but we simultaneously demand that our children only learn things that will help them increase their potential for employment, as opposed to increase their understanding of the world they live in. This is a direct attack on our

culture and future, and it must be stopped. The question - "What will you get out of it?" - has poisoned our well.

The following are a list of changes that need to be made, as a part of a correction to the system that runs not only our lives but our futures. We can fix things, but not incrementally. It's time to turn the ship around!

## Hiring

The biggest obstacle in today's job market is the HR companies. The companies employ people to "filter" applicants according to criteria that they are simply not qualified to understand. In order to get around this, applicants must learn to tweak their resumes to "hack" these filtering companies just to get a fair shot.

Don't force applicants to lie! It might cost you a few more interviews, but you could be missing out on a star employee that simply doesn't want to fight with you in order to work for you. Check applicant CVs personally - or at the very least ensure that the requirements are properly understood by the relevant HR. Standard catchphrases such as "looking for 2nd year students" doesn't tell anyone why that's the requirement.

## Length of employment

Do you want someone who'll stay with you through thick and thin, for at least a couple of years? Keep dreaming. The market's a dirty place, and we're as far from being Japanese as can be. Employees will remain with you as long as they don't think they'll be better off anywhere else. Motivate loyalty, don't demand it. And don't expect it. When you ask an interviewee where he sees himself in five years, they're either going to lie or tell you something that won't match your criteria. Neither is relevant - if they're good, hire them!

And no less important - your employees should be replaceable. Anyone who does a job "nobody else can do" is unprofessional and most likely dragging your product or your environment off course. Either that, or they're a "linchpin" (Seth Godin), and they're not irreplaceable in the traditional sense.

Another thing is to know when to let bad employees go. Make use of mutual trial periods to ensure that you know how to perform knowledge transfers effectively.

## Work standards

The greatest use of technology in improving



*Magdalena by Amra Khan*

workflows and methodologies that we've seen in the last decade is the internal wiki. Wikis provide easy to use, easy to update standardized information from "who to call when the UPS dies" to "which product parts exhibit strange behavior that needs to be checked" (and of course, how to check them). We have seen Wiki techniques employed in anything from sensitive RealTime embedded projects to call center functions, and it's obvious that this is the best way to store and transfer knowledge. When applied correctly. Between wikis, ready internet access, good documentation practices and a culture of satellite applications, no employee should need more than the basics of the relevant field in order to find his feet quickly.

Another problem, specifically in the programming industry, is that it is not clear to employers that once one has a firm grasp of basic programming paradigms and algorithm development one should have no difficulty learning a new syntax and simply getting on with it. As an employer, one should differentiate between those employees who'll be doing the "thinking" (the engineers and scientists) and those who'll be doing the "implementing" (the self-taught, usually). It's a sad state of affairs that an industry primarily consisting of Computer Science graduates doesn't understand that software development and programming are only tentatively related to mathematical thinking and algorithm production.

### Get out of the factory

"Problem solvers" are always working : 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. They can't escape work by locking their screens and going out for a cup of coffee, because their subconscious minds are constantly on the alert. They certainly aren't being paid for the wonderful ideas they have in the middle of the night. This doesn't mean that they don't need to come in to work, only that we're living in an ADHD world and you can't measure creative productivity by how much time a person spends attached to their keyboard.

For maximum effectiveness, "spacing out" should be focused on educational extras from outside of the industrial sphere . Of course, one cannot direct any employee to do this but it would be wise to suggest these options and make them available. Motivating your employees to get out and get some exercise is also a great practice that I've been fortunate to see some employers making use of.

Another aspect of this is that everybody has their

preferred work hours . Not only are some people far more productive in the evening hours, but having flexible hours allows people who need to take care of homes and families to do so without these issues distracting them from their work. Of course, company face time is important. There are many possible methods for arranging work hours that are flexible enough for everyone (or the majority, at least) while still enforcing enough hours for meetings and cooperation .

Of all the factory behavior we need to rid ourselves of, setting reasonable deadlines is the trickiest of the lot. It's not so easy to do, and every organization should invest time in figuring out a fair solution. As I've mentioned before, let marketing control your production, not promotion. The all-nighter has become the norm instead of the exception, and it is expected for workers to pour their hearts and souls into their work without sufficient compensation. Lots of money is not compensation. Human beings need to spend time with their families, play sport, read books, watch movies, participate in politics, save the world and otherwise enjoy the fruits of their parents' labours.

If we modify our hiring practices, keep perspective about length of employment, upgrade our work standards, and escape factory mentality, we can streamline our economy's engine and free up enough of our time to enjoy living again. All of this leads me to the following conclusion: Hire students. Students can learn. And encourage studying for your employees who don't. Only a culture of education can get us working smarter, not harder. We have the tools, we have the manpower, now all we need is the attitude.

It's 2011, and we don't have robot slaves. Instead, we've found a way to make human ones legitimate again. Let's stop working so hard.

.....

*Adam Fisher is an accomplished software engineer. He holds a B.A. in Computer Science and Business Management from the Interdisciplinary Center, Herzeliya. He is currently studying towards a Master's degree in English Literature at the University of Tel Aviv while struggling to find part-time employment.*

*Right: I'm a Believer by Amra Khan*



*References:*

1. *There's nothing more ridiculous in the software industry than employees who perform tedious, repetitive tasks because they forget that they can simply build applications to do them instead. I'm sure that a bureaucratic attitude towards approval is to blame for preventing anyone spending time on something that saves time.*
2. "A Wandering Mind Heads Straight Toward Insight", by Robert Lee Hotz, *Wallstreet Journal*, June 19th, 2009 <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB124535297048828601.html>
3. <http://explodingcreativity.com/>
4. "Night owls are more creative:" by Jennifer Viegas, *Discovery News*.- <http://www.abc.net.au/science/news/stories/2006/1810399.htm>
5. *We've discussed collaboration: how can employers be blind to all the benefits of employing two good minds for the price of one? There's certainly no guarantee that they're good minds: you have to pay attention when hiring and use trial periods to figure that out. The principles of extreme programming, however, indicate that by and large you'd get better quality out of more, and less taxed, workers attacking the same problems.*

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## THE MISSING SLATE

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\*The position is currently unpaid, but we are moving to take the magazine to print and gain advertisers at the earliest availability.

*Roving Eye*

# THE CRITICS: CLIQUE CAFE

by Moeed Tariq



One of the first noticeable things on entering Clique Café is its ambience. Tea-light candles and dimly lit chandeliers set the mood for every meal in this cozy little eatery. The Borsch pleasantly surprises and their Nicioise Salad is unlike any other currently being offered in the city. The genius behind the delectable continental menu is Ms Marina Afghani, who's had the experience of working as a head chef in three countries. For those with more sugary tastes, the dessert selections have something for everyone—from cupcakes to Double Chocolate Fudge Cake chunky slices—the options are diverse and easy on the stomach.

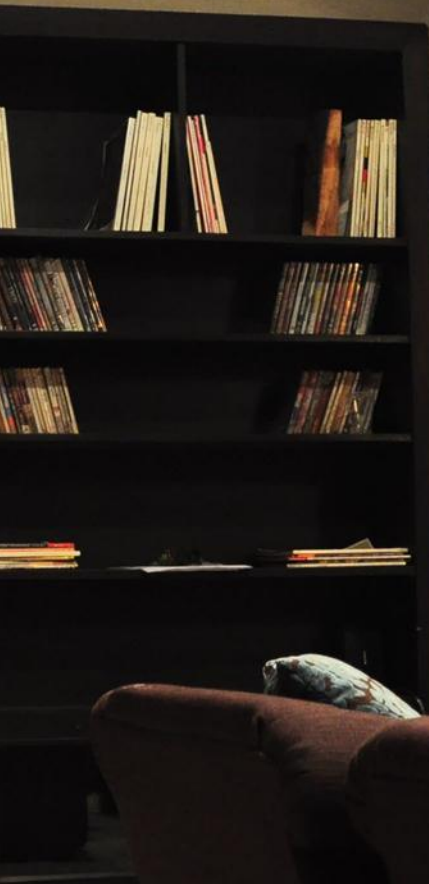
But it isn't all about the food for this classy eatery; it also serves as a nurturing place for the arts. The artwork on display is rotated on a regular basis, bringing out the work of local artists which can be purchased on the spot, making Clique one of the more enjoyable mini art galleries in Islamabad. They are also home to Project A's Book Club. The group—a coterie of painters, writers and other artists—gathers here once every month and set up camp in their smoking lounge discussing the month's book selection.

The establishment's brains, Madeeha Masood and Rimmel Afghani, are another reason for the café's success. They present a friendly (and attractive) face to the café and more importantly, are open to suggestions and new ideas. Evolution may be slow in Café Clique but it is consistent and steady and with additions and improvements a part of the everyday routine at Clique, there's always something new to discover on each visit.

Café Clique unfolds itself in stages and is an establishment we're keeping our eye on.







“ Amidst the many options that are available to people when it comes to dining in Islamabad, Clique is a restaurant with a difference. Not only does it promise authentic continental cuisine, it’s a fun place to hang out with friends and family alike.—  
Madeeha Masood & Rimel Afghani. ”

## 18 SPLITTING LANES

by Dylan Tanuos

At two in the afternoon, Ford Levy found himself at the top of a pair of brick steps outside of Perry Goldstone's home on North Rexford Drive. Waiting in the wake of the chiming doorbell, he craned his neck and peered past the glass panel: sexless, sterilized, and manicured to the point of anonymity. Maybe he was being a bit dramatic. He pinched his nose and a few drops trickled between his fingers.

Ford watched as Perry came into view down the hall. He shuffled along the hardwood floors with his head down and his shoulders back. He opened the door just wide enough to fit his head through. Perry had a full head of hair that was white with a few streaks the color of raw spaghetti near the front. He was tan. Perry was always tan, and Ford had never seen him without the same pair of wire-framed glasses. A paler shade of skin outlined his eyes—his goggle tan.

Ford had met Perry five years earlier, at the Beverly Hills Sports Center. At the time, Ford was a sophomore at Doheny High and the last swimmer cut from the varsity team. Due to a shortage of lanes and the size of the girls' and boys' swim teams, varsity had the pool in the morning, while the J.V. boys and girls swam after school. In those weeks of swimless mornings, Ford restlessly rolled in bed while he waited for the sun to show.

Then, one morning, he decided he would swim each dawn whether it was with the team or not. Within an hour, he took an unnecessary gym tour, signed a yearlong contract, and was back in the pool. Ford, who had woken up in the dark most mornings since he was five years old, took to riding his skateboard down his hill to the pool on Wilshire. Both Perry and Ford had a habit of arriving to the gym a few minutes before it opened at 5:30 a.m., and after a dozen mornings of watching their breath while they waited for the doors to open, Ford introduced himself.

"Hey, Perry."

"Hello Ford. Come on in," Perry said.

There wasn't enough room for Ford to get by, so Perry took a slow step back and, without fully opening the door, ushered him in with a nod. Inside, the furnishings, paneling, and staircases were just too big for the foundation. Everything was new. It felt less like a

home and more like a stage designed for a family that hadn't been cast yet. Perry's wife had spent the last year redoing the floors, upstairs and down. They were now stained the shade of what Mrs. Goldstone called, "plum brandy".

Before the floors, it was the bathrooms. Before that, the skylights and the breakfast nook. Perry said it hadn't stopped since the day they moved in forty years before.

Ford followed Perry into the dining room, past a giant wooden table, which occupied most of the room's floor. He judged from the collection of office supplies, keys, magazines, and dog collar that the table was more of a shelf than a place where the family dined. Perry was old—at least seventy-five—but he managed to finesse his way around the dining table and into the kitchen where his dog, Laddy, a golden retriever-shitsu mix, greeted Ford with a low growl. Perry patted Laddy on the head and kept walking.

To avoid offending Perry, Ford knelt down and tentatively offered his hand to the dog.

"Hey, buddy."

Laddy snarled, then made a slippery retreat towards the pantry.

"I don't think Laddy's warmed up to me."

Perry turned back and laughed. "Laddy doesn't warm up to anyone—only the family. He's a sweet dog, but shy."

"Oh."

"And old."

"Really? He could pass for a big puppy if you ask me." Laddy had spiked blond fur around his face, which Ford thought made him look like a bear cub.

"Puppy! Laddy's fourteen-years-old!"

As was Perry's routine, he invited his guest to take a seat in his living room. They sat in matching avocado-colored chairs with tall backs and obtrusively embroidered trim. Both chairs faced the TV across the room. In order to see Perry, Ford had to angle his back into the arm of the chair. Perry preferred to stare ahead and only occasionally turned in Ford's direction.

When one of Perry's glances coincided with a lull in the conversation, Ford decided it would be a polite time to ask. He dug into his pocket.



*Above: Tree Of Life by Denny E. Marshall*

20 “So did you want to use my phone?” He fished his phone out of his jeans. Perry looked at it.

“No.”

“Oh. I just thought...”

“No, no. I don’t want to call her.” Agitated, Perry pushed up on the arms of the chair and repositioned himself against the chair’s back. Over the last summer, Perry had asked to use Ford’s phone to call someone he didn’t want his wife to find out about. “We haven’t seen each other in a while. I guess you don’t know – I went down and saw her, in Costa Mesa. I told Gwen I was going to work and I drove straight there.”

Ford made the varsity squad for his final two years at Doheny High, but he continued swimming in the off-season at the Sports Center’s pool, even after he’d graduated and gone on to college. It was there, just before the end of his freshman year at U.C.L.A., that he casually mentioned in the locker room that he was looking for a summer internship. Perry offered him a place at his real estate office without even pausing to think about it. Ford considered the offer as he pulled his suit over his knees. By the time it was at his waist, he’d accepted. The two of them trotted out to the pool, where they split a lane. The details of the internship were never formally addressed.

From June to August, Ford acted as the part-time secretary Perry didn’t really need. It has now October, and for the last couple months Ford had taken to using the pool at U.C.L.A. He hadn’t seen Perry since the middle of August.

“How long did it take you?” Ford asked.

“Hour and a half,” Perry said matter-of-factly.

“That’s not bad.”

“Traffic was a nightmare! I’ve done it before. You remember when we worked together? I made the drive. I went down to see her.”

At least once a week over the summer, Perry would close his office door and the red light for his direct line would light up on Ford’s phone. Sometimes Ford would hear Perry laughing through the office’s thin walls. Other times she wouldn’t pick up and the light would go off after only half-a-minute. But, as far as Ford knew, Perry only drove once that summer to see the woman at the other end of the line. It was early July when Perry gave Ford specific instructions on how he was to handle a call from Mrs. Goldstone in his absence. Gwen Goldstone didn’t call often, but when she did it was almost

always when Perry was up to something. Perry usually made it into the office by ten, but that particular morning he pulled out of his driveway and steered himself south rather than to their office’s second floor suite on Beverly Drive.

“Hello. Hello?” He was anxious and it made him sound much older, crankier. He called from the 405 freeway. He was making good time.

“Good morning, Perry.”

“Now listen, I’m going to see that woman so I won’t be coming into work today.”

“Okay.” They had talked about it the day before, but Perry liked to go over these things. Ford knew Perry did this more for his own memory than Ford’s benefit.

“If Gwen calls, tell her I’m in the bathroom then hang up and call me so I can call her back. Understand?”

“Got it, Perry.”

Sure enough, around noon Mrs. Goldstone called. With consistency and civility, her calls got to the point faster than Ford had previously thought possible. In less than twenty seconds she could greet him politely, ask him about his day, learn the whereabouts of her husband, and effortlessly excuse herself from the conversation. Ford stared at the call’s time: nineteen seconds. After sitting for a beat in awe of the speed and deft with which Gwen Goldstone had handled him, he picked up the phone and called Perry. Perry didn’t pick up and Ford let it ring its way to voicemail. Two hours later Perry called back.

“Did my wife call?”

“She did. I called you and left a voicemail.”

“Shit! All right, I was having a nice conversation with the woman. She knows I’m married and she doesn’t like it when I talk about my wife.”

“I wouldn’t expect so.”

“What?”

“If your wife calls later, should I say you’re in the bathroom again?”

“No. Say I’m at lunch.”

Ford looked at the time on his computer. It was two-thirty. “Okay, Perry.”

Laddy trudged across the carpet and stood next to Perry. Perry continued to pet him while he growled at Ford. Perry didn’t seem to notice the growling and Laddy didn’t seem to notice he was being pet.



*Above: Falling Eye Sculpture by Denny E. Marshall*

22 “So how was your trip this time?” Ford asked optimistically.

“It was fine,” Perry crossed his legs and readjusted in his seat. “You see, her daughter was there. We all had lunch—a very nice lunch—in Newport on the peninsula. Her daughter doesn’t like me and when this woman is around her daughter, she doesn’t like me either.”

“How old is her daughter?”

“Forty maybe? Forty-five, I don’t know. Unmarried, of course. Both of them are. That’s the problem.”

Ford nodded, but it was tough for him to imagine anyone chasing after a woman who had a daughter in her forties. When Perry first started mentioning this woman, Ford imagined a Julianne Moore type, but now he pictured Joan Rivers. Sometimes Ford forgot how old Perry was, mostly because of the way he talked about women as if they were still uncharted territories to be studied, marveled at, and criticized from a distance, but never understood. This reminded Ford of the way, when they were freshmen at Doheny High, he and his friends used to talk about the senior girls.

“Anyway,” he sighed, “they weren’t very pleasant. I don’t think I’ll see her anymore.”

“That’s too bad,” Ford said.

“No,” he laughed. “It’s fine. I can get yelled at by my own wife and daughter right here if I miss it.” He scratched his head and leaned back in his chair. “What’s sad or maybe just too bad about the whole thing is love doesn’t exist at my age. All of the fun is over. I went and visited this woman because when I was younger I was in love with her. I could’ve married her, but I married Gwen instead. I don’t regret marrying Gwen. In fact, I enjoyed our marriage up until 1972 or so.”

“What happened then?” 1972 didn’t mean much to Ford.

“What happened?” he smiled. “We got old is what happened. We had Beth, bills, violin lessons, put on weight, and had to start taking pills for everything. That’s what happened!” He shook his head, “It didn’t all happen at once, but it all eventually happened. And love? Love is something that can and does only exist at a certain age.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because when you’re in love your brain is on drugs. You might be on actual drugs too, but your brain

is out-of-whack. You can’t be out-of-whack in love when you’ve gotta drive your daughter to ballet class. You can’t be out-of-whack and make the mortgage payment every month and it’s that mortgage—that check you send off—that’s the roof over your wife’s head, your kid’s head. You can’t be out-of-whack when you’re trying to make enough money to send your kid to summer camps and private schools. You have to be something else.”

“A husband,” Ford offered.

He kept his eyes above the TV. On the shelf was half-a-century’s worth of pictures blockading books that apparently no one read.

“At your age, when you’re in love you can sit down on a bench and your mind will drift off to the most beautiful places in the world.” He grinned. “And in that mind of yours you might even drift off with the girl you love. But when you’re older you start to panic. When your mind drifts off you think about the bank taking your home, your wife taking up with a man who can provide better. You think about your daughter hating you for what you couldn’t give them and when some asshole honks his horn or your phone rings and you’re sent back to reality, you hold it against them. You’re mad at them for even thinking, in your daydream, of leaving you—of treating you that way after all that you’ve done for them. So the love is extracted. It’s extracted so we, as men, can provide for our families’ survival.”

Perry stopped talking and stared past Ford. He might have lost his place or just been stuck in it. Ford surveyed the room and thought about what survival meant. A home, well kept, with floors stained a shade of plum brandy. A bathroom with a full soap dispenser and extra towels for guests who never come. A climate-controlled three-car garage so you can enjoy the comfort of a sixty-eight degree walk from the kitchen to your car. An unmarried, forty-something daughter who lived five miles away. A wife who – well, Ford didn’t know anything about Mrs. Goldstone. Perry only spoke about her when he was plotting around her. If she was his enemy, he certainly had respect for her, but this was the man’s wife. Ford had to believe that there was more than respect to a relationship that old.

“Shit, what I’m talking about might not even be love. Just a chemical imbalance.” There was a fish-eye portrait of the two of them in the TV’s reflection—fifty years and three feet apart. “When we talked over the phone I guess I felt a little of that. It made me feel like I was a young man again and even though I know I’m

## BODY AS QUESTION MARK

23

He tells lovers

I never smile at my own body,  
its not home,  
'til your touch.

He tells strangers

take your fill.

And they do and they go.

—S Shaw

*S Shaw lives in Oakland, California who writes, like a lot of writers, to save his soul, speaks his truths and exorcise his demons and just to have fun. He is a librarian and is affiliated with several writing organizations such as Cave Canem and B/GLAM (Black Gay Letters and Arts Movement).*

not, it made me get in my car, lie to my wife, and drive to see her. It made me feel really good to have that. To have a chance to begin again. To know that at the end of the line there was someone who could do that to me. I mean I'm an old man. I can't do everything I used to, but I'll tell you, I jumped at the chance to feel that way again—to not think straight. How many more times could that happen to me? It probably won't ever happen again and it makes me sad because that's the best thing about love. The way you think changes. I guess that's what I was chasing after."

He hung his head and chuckled. "Then I got there—there wasn't a pretty girl waiting to see me. There was an old lady just like my wife, looking at me just like my wife does. Maybe there isn't any difference between them. When they're your age, Ford, they're all beautiful. In bathing suits getting tan in the summer. Pink cheeks and cold lips wrapped in scarves in the winter. Smiling even when they're not happy. At that age, the face of women and girls it just does something that makes me smile. At my age their face sulks. Disappointment tugs at their jowls." He pulled at his skin and exaggerated his own. "Stress pinches their crow's feet lined eyes. Credit

card bills put bags under their eyes. Unwed daughters put weight on them when they've got no appetite." He rubbed his thumb against the butt of his chin. "There's no hope for what I'm after. Not at my age." He laughed. "I guess that's why my friends keep telling me to go to Thailand." He shook his head, "If only my wife would let me." He chortled at his predicament. An old man in the house he built acting like a prisoner when he was the only one home. "Anyway, I wanted to tell you we won't be seeing each other at the pool anymore. I've quit the gym. Gwen says we can't afford the membership anymore."

*Dylan Tanous lives and writes in Hollywood, Ca. By day, Tanous splits his time between his first novel, his lurid blog and a slew of scripts. By night, he politely informs the patrons of his bar that he's not an aspiring actor. The patrons don't believe him.*



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## WHAT WE'VE BEEN READING

*A Visit from the Goon Squad; Jennifer Egan*

This book is unlike anything I've read recently and is more a collection of interconnected short stories. The title refers to time which, as a character in the novel says, 'is a goon.' The novel's core theme is the music scene; how it's impacted the world around it, how it's changed, and what its future may look like. Written in a widely engaging style, Egan creates a world that is both instantly identifiable and grotesquely unique. A warning: its characters will stay with you long after you've finished reading.

—Maryam Piracha, Editor-in-Chief

*The World of Christopher Robin; A. A. Milne*

I got this at a secondhand bookshop. It's a 1962 reprint, mostly black and white, with some amazing colored illustrations. I've never read Milne's work before and it was an amazing thrill! After all the heavy hitters—Wordsworth, Blake, Baudelaire, Dickinson, etc—such smooth, fun and witty reading is an escape to an explored paradise. Oh, and E. A. Shepard's illustrations render the journey as cherished as childhood itself. I've been feeling like a child all over again!

—Omri Luzon, Senior Articles Editor

*Generation A; Douglas Coupland*

Hailing from Canada, Douglas Coupland is easily one of my favourite authors. One of his later books, *Generation A* showcases Coupland's ability to create realistic characters we can identify with as well as his skills at painting a picture of the world that, while often obscene has an uncanny accuracy that emerges the reader. Satirically and thoughtfully, he leads us through the world of five people joined together by one unlikely occurrence only to be submerged in the surreal paranoia the modern world.

—Aaron Grierson, Articles Editor

*À Rebours; Joris-Karl Huysmans*

At the top of my teetering reading pile is *À Rebours* by Joris-Karl Huysmans, believed to be the 'poisonous French novel' which helped "corrupt" Oscar

Wilde's *Dorian Gray*.

As far as I can tell, I made it through uncorrupted: *À Rebours* has lost much of its shock value, but remains worth cherishing for its sumptuously decadent descriptive passages, and for the frequent moments when Des Esseintes (the protagonist) stumbles towards something resembling the true state of the world.

—Jacob Silkstone, Poetry & Books Editor

*Lolita; Vladimir Nabokov*

An innate trait of Vladimir Nabokov's novels is that he writes from the perspective of an abhorrent villain. Because the readers get immersed into the repugnance of what the villain represents, they often overlook the overall battering the villains are given and how they always meet an unsavory end. It's as if Nabokov specifically chose these abominations to exercise his sense of justice on them.

I found Humbert Humbert's infatuation with Dolores detestable yet I was hooked on every single word until the very end. It is a story encircled by taboo and the writer's magnificence has turned it into a masterpiece.

—Nicholas Sharaf, Articles Editor

*The Collected Stories; David Leavitt and Birds in America; Lorrie Moore*

David Leavitt's stories have a way of creating characters that engage the reader, that enthrall and entangle, so that within paragraphs you find yourself rooting for them, worrying about what's going to happen to them, wondering what they'll do next. He weaves these webs of interrelationships and conversation, spinning characters together, connecting and disconnecting them, revealing and hiding things about them, in a masterful way, so that every story is both a narrative to follow and a puzzle to work out. The emotional honesty of his writing resonates profoundly, especially because of his tendency to deal with oft-overlooked subject matter, specifically homosexuality in '90s America. As an openly gay man, he is able to tap into this lifestyle, to honestly recount both the similarities and differences between straight relationships and gay relationships. Specifically, the fear of AIDS that was at its height in

26 the late 80s/early 90s. There's a powerful tenderness to his stories, without becoming maudlin or saccharine.

Lorrie Moore's stories in "Birds in America" are much smaller. While Leavitt weaves a wide, rich tapestry of humanity, Moore's stories are more like diamonds: hard, clear, dense, and bright. She focuses on a few important moments, describing them with a talent for choosing just the right simile or metaphor to say everything that needs to be said about a scene or a moment or a character. She also crafts each paragraph as if

it were its own smaller story, making each description count, rather than waiting for the end for everything to come together – each facet is important to the whole, equal in size and shape to the rest, but standing on its own as works of art. While Leavitt deals with a host of characters, usually – a whole family, two families, a neighborhood, etc. Moore usually concentrates on two people and the ways in which they help and hurt each other.

—Heather Peterson, Fiction Editor.



Above: *Blubber Lady* by Amra Khan

### Your Slate/Your Words/Your Rules.

**We asked our readers on Facebook whether there was a true future in eBooks; how comfortable they felt in reading books on a screen? What about audio books? Or is reading really all about the feel of a book in your hand? Here's what was said:**

“My eyes actually start to hurt extremely bad if I concentrate on a computer screen for more than an hour. It's clearly not healthy. Also reading from a book doesn't limit your comfort and mobility – you can read a book virtually ANYwhere – in the bathroom, on the moon!

As for audio books, they are nice. But I personally won't be able to feel the thrill and anticipation and picture myself in the story as the character if someone else reads for me. Everyone has his/her style of reading.” – Zahra Syed

“I hate eBooks and only read off of the computer screen when I have no other choice. eBooks cannot replace the joy of having the book in your hand, the tangibility of it.” – Ibrahim Tanweer

“A book in your hand is what I like to call “the joy of reading”. But nowadays eBooks are strongly replacing the trend of reading from a hard copy. This is probably because of the easy availability of books on the internet. I believe reading books these days is an expensive hobby, so eBooks are good if only because they promulgate the culture of reading at no expense.” – Manal Imteaz

“eBooks sales are booming and as much as I don't like the idea, they really are the future. They're mad convenient and inexpensive.

But for me nothing beats the real deal, I mean, it's the whole experience isn't it: running your fingers over a pretty cover, taking in that new book smell and of course, I love the idea of a huge library filled with fabulous reads!”—Anam Rafiq

“Depends on what I'm reading and for what purpose – if it's academic articles or something that I must slog through, I prefer eBooks because I do not have to exert any effort against my very strong subconscious mind in order to turn to the next page and continue. If it's poetry, I prefer physical books first and audio books later on (read by the author him/herself, thank you very much!), so that I can keep the words with me without having to read them over and over again but can return to the physical book if I want to hermit-ify myself for a while. If it's fiction – depends on what kind of fiction it is. Depending on the writing style, some stuff sounds better read aloud and other stuff feels better read alone.”—Areej Siddiqui, TMS Poetry Editor

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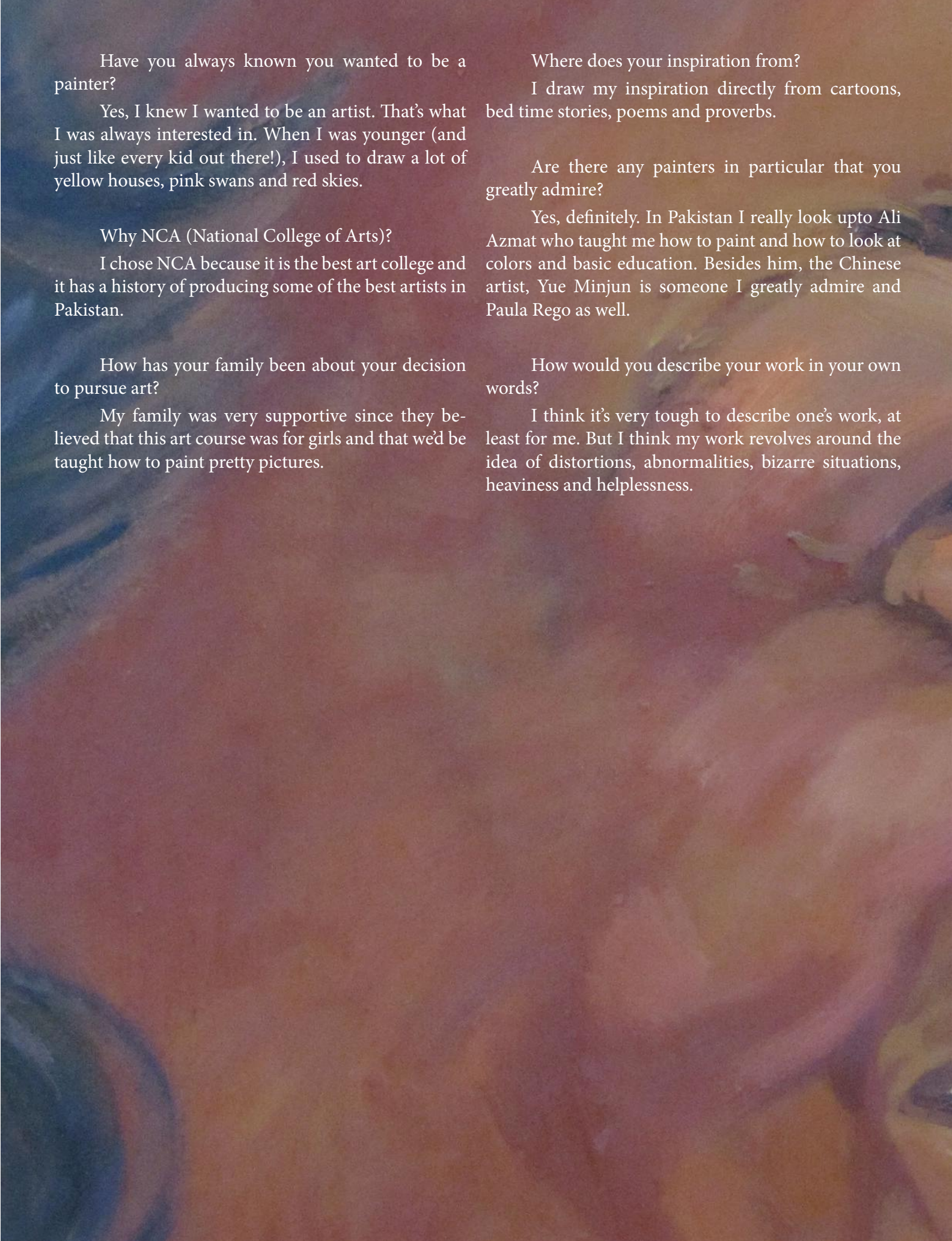
## SPOTLIGHT: ARTIST MARIA KHAN



*Maria Khan, sits down with Creative Director Moeed Tariq, discusses where the ideas for her art come from. She is a 2009 graduate from the National College of Arts, Lahore's College of Art & Design. Apart from pursuing painting as her major, she minored in printmaking, sculpture and photography. She earned herself a distinction in 2009 and won the 'Best Painting Award 2010' conferred by the Alhamra Art Council in Lahore. Since 2006, she has successfully exhibited her work in eight group exhibits. In this short Q&A, TMS Creative Director sits down to have a private chat about her work and the inspiration behind it.*



*Above: Birthday Suit by Maria Khan*



Have you always known you wanted to be a painter?

Yes, I knew I wanted to be an artist. That's what I was always interested in. When I was younger (and just like every kid out there!), I used to draw a lot of yellow houses, pink swans and red skies.

Why NCA (National College of Arts)?

I chose NCA because it is the best art college and it has a history of producing some of the best artists in Pakistan.

How has your family been about your decision to pursue art?

My family was very supportive since they believed that this art course was for girls and that we'd be taught how to paint pretty pictures.

Where does your inspiration from?

I draw my inspiration directly from cartoons, bed time stories, poems and proverbs.

Are there any painters in particular that you greatly admire?

Yes, definitely. In Pakistan I really look upto Ali Azmat who taught me how to paint and how to look at colors and basic education. Besides him, the Chinese artist, Yue Minjun is someone I greatly admire and Paula Rego as well.

How would you describe your work in your own words?

I think it's very tough to describe one's work, at least for me. But I think my work revolves around the idea of distortions, abnormalities, bizarre situations, heaviness and helplessness.



## 32 EXPANDING THE WEB

by Aaron Garierson

*Vote 'yes' for digital democracy.*

We've all experienced the Internet before, perhaps not in all of its glory, but let's face it, there are some places we just shouldn't go. Some of the websites we frequently visit are the forms and forums that allow us self-expression. This has become even more popular with the increasing interest in, or rather, increasingly publicized events. Now, these aren't just local festivals and fairs, but major changes happening somewhere in the world that everyone can watch, read about and even comment on. The Internet allows people to do all of that in one place, only their comments are not limited to the dinner table, but on a medium the whole world can review.

In recent news, the struggle in Egypt has taken centre stage and captivated the attention of both the people and of those in power. As a result of the countless rebellions, citizens of countries such as Libya are pitted against the oppression of military tyrants. The political issue centred at this struggle is a mechanism for democracy and freedom of speech, much like the Internet. The first act by the Egyptian government, when the uprisings began, was the sudden shut-down of internet access across the country, which demonstrates the importance of the internet and the power of communication. This sent a shockwave throughout the world. Who knew that governments have so much power? After all, we pay large private companies to provide us with internet. Just as we pay for a service we request, so should people receive the accountability and quality of the government that they want.

The power that we hold is the same as that which the Egyptian people are striving for: Democracy. I doubt I am the first to use the term 'Digital Democracy', but it is an apt description for one major facet of the internet. Sites we all heard of, and most have used, such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and millions of blogs, all facilitate the freedom of self-expression for the individual, which anyone anywhere can participate in. This is one of the pinnacles of both democracy and technology, where the discussion of global issues and interests is open to everyone. The one major problem is that there is often not enough moderation, which frequently ends up as a negative side effect on someone else. In certain



*Above: Caramel Ice C*





andy by Amra Khan

cases, the consequences can be deadly: I recall reading an article that described how a girl who was bullied, even by parents online, hanged herself in her bathroom. However, the sharing of information has just as many sides to it as the Internet.

Universal freedom does come with some negatives, one of which is spam. Spam is the little email no one ever wanted, be it a harmful ‘you have inherited money from someone you’ve never heard of’ or an advertisement for a drug that will improve your sex life. This form of spamming, not unlike many of the phone calls we may receive about winning a cruise in a competition we never entered, is not there to make us feel better. Much of the solicitation is not only false, but being used for nefarious purposes such as: cash scams, autonomous viruses or the funding of organized crime and terrorism. If you’re interested in finding out just how widespread hate-sites are (in addition to the hate mail some of us receive) search for any racist term, idea or existing society, such as the KKK or neo Nazi’s and you will get a thorough idea after within a few minutes.

The vastness of the Internet is one of the primary characteristics that makes freedom of speech look like a bad idea. Regardless of moderation, opinions—beneficial or detrimental—get around quicker and fester. The balance lies in people’s ability to self-moderate. Both democratic governments and the Internet have these sorts of measures in place, but in both cases, these are not sure-fire measures. Much like in Egypt, other countries have revolutions or protests that can be due to the fact to, or lead to, refined democracy. The most recent example is the women’s suffrage movement. What kind of government by the people excludes half of the people from voting? One that is rather nonsensical. The Internet, being created from such a society, shows many of the same problems, and often leaves us shaking our heads.

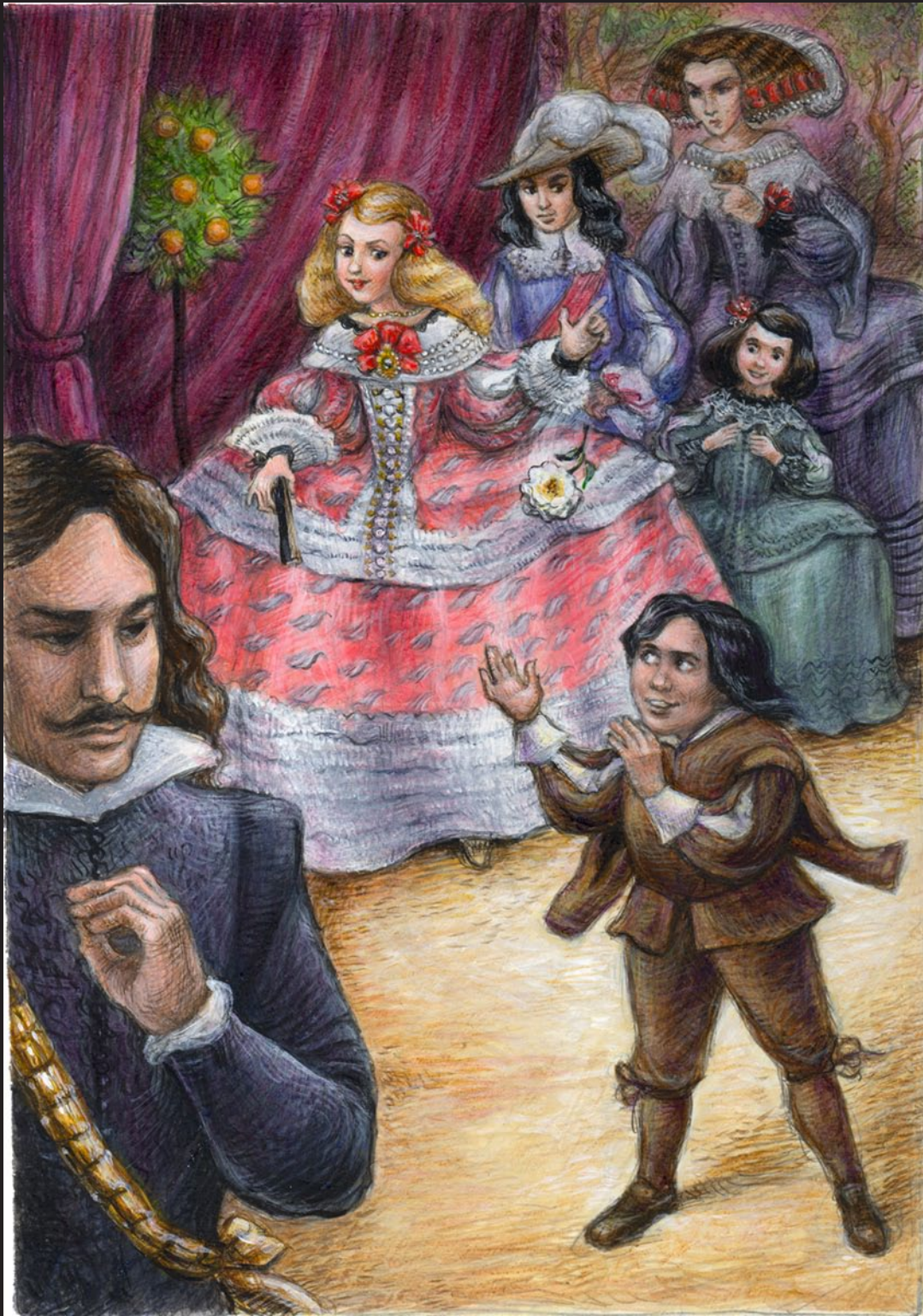
Democracy, like the Internet, requires inclusive participation. The Internet needs us in order to continue contributing ideas and expanding, for all the people around the world, and for freedom and democracy. It is our duty to extend the borders of the Internet, and thus our minds, until it will truly be one free world.

## SPOTLIGHT: ILLUSTRATOR JOANNE RENAUD



*Joanne Renaud, in this one-on-one session with Creative Director Moeed Tariq, discusses her work. She is an illustrator, who graduated in illustration from Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California. Before moving to Southern California, she studied graphic design at Central Washington University and art at the University of Ulster in Belfast, Northern Ireland. At present, she lives in Los Angeles. Recent clients include Simon & Schuster, Random House, Harcourt Inc., Trillium Publishing, McGraw Hill, Zaner Bloser and Astonishing Adventures Magazine.*

*Joanne is a member of the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators, and enjoys travel, history, costume design, classic movies, old musicals, and cheesy fantasy art.*



Above: Birthday of the Infanta by Joanne Renaud



*Above: Bea and Allan at the Ball by Joanne Renaud*

**Have you always known you wanted to be an illustrator?**

Well, I always knew that I wanted to do something in the visual arts, but I was never sure exactly what that was.... for the longest time, I was preparing to go into graphic design and advertising, but that didn't work out. Amusingly enough, I didn't figure this out until after I'd gotten my graphic design degree, which was a bit awkward...

**Why choose the Art Centre College of Design?**

Well, my graphic design prof at my old university went to Art Center, and he always spoke very highly of it. He told me several times that if I ever wanted to get into illustration, then Art Center was the place to be.

**How has your family been about your decision to pursue art?**

I think it depends on how one defines "family"--my extended family has been very supportive.



### Where do you draw your inspiration from?

Sometimes I'm inspired by movies, TV shows, and other artists from the past and present, but I'm most inspired by reading and writing. For some reason, looking at pictures does not inspire me as much as the writing process. Speaking of which, I've had a few short stories published in online magazines like "Astonishing Adventures Magazine" and "Dark Valentine," and I just finished a time travel romance novella, which I have just started sending out to various e-publishing houses. Whenever I hit a dry spell artistically, I often revisit some of my favorite books-- to name a few, I just reread "Jane Eyre," and Lloyd Alexander's "The First Two Lives of Lukas-Kasha." So now I want to draw medieval Persians, or Mr. Rochester...

### Are there any illustrators in particular that you greatly admire?

Rebecca Guay is one of my favorite traditional artists-- I've actually met her in person several times, and she's really gracious and wonderful to talk to. (Her paintings also look amazing when you see them in person.) The late Trina Schart Hyman is another favorite artist; I also love Valerie Valusek, Donato, Kinuko Craft, and Owen Smith.

### You enjoy costume design? How's that working out for you? Any favourite creations?

I don't actually sew, but I did do some costume design for a student webseries recently.

### Your recent clients include the likes of Simon & Schuster, Random House, McGraw Hill, and Astonishing Adventures Magazine, and some of these are big names. Is there a particular body of works that you would really want to do illustrations for if asked? Perhaps something you're a big fan of?

Well, I love history - all types, all periods - so I would love to illustrate anything historical in nature. (I just finished an illustration of Cleopatra and her handmaidens, which is coming out in the summer issue of "Dark Valentine" magazine - I really enjoyed working on that, and putting all the ladies in suitably Hellenistic attire.) I would also love to illustrate fairy tales, or any kind of myths and legends; besides Greek myths (doesn't everyone like those?) I also like ancient Middle Eastern myths, like the story of Gilgamesh. I've also been getting into Indian legends, like the Ramayana.



How would you describe your work in your own words? 39

Detail-oriented, organic, ornate, soft, atmospheric, well-researched... and definitely costumeey!

.....

Left: *Falling From Grace - George and Jane Boleyn* by Joanne Renaud



“ I really admire people who can paint and draw in their sleep, since I know a lot of digital illustrators who’ve allowed those skills to atrophy. ”

## 40 KEEPING IT CULTURAL

by Gareth Trew

I am obsessed with cultural diversity; it is one of my many drugs. For me, the discovery of a new culture – especially one vastly different to my own – is endlessly fascinating. As such, many readers may find the following akin to a Frenchman praising the delights of Paris. Whilst this might be true to an extent, I do believe (and very much hope!) that my arguments are also valid and speak for themselves.

Lately, I've become increasingly exposed to emerging writers from different cultural backgrounds – working for an international publication based in a foreign country is bound to do that to you, I suppose. Throughout this exposure, I've consistently noticed this type of question cropping up: should I write about my culture if I want an international readership? In my opinion, the answer is yes, absolutely. As I said in my previous piece *Maintaining Creative Integrity* (*The Missing Slate*, Issue 1), your unique voice is one of – if not the single most – valuable tools that you possess. It is what sets you apart from the plethora of other (and potentially more qualified) writers around you. Your culture, of course, plays a predominant role in the development of this voice. Furthermore, it is not only a significant part of who you are, but for many readers, it will be a fascinating one. If you can make it accessible to them, really bring it to life, then much of your work will be done for you. (Gabriel Garcia Marquez's classic *One Hundred Years of Solitude* springs to mind). So, failing to acknowledge and utilise your culture, I think, would be incredibly counterproductive to say the least.

This brings me to that old adage “write what you know.” An established writer may well scoff with impunity at this and reply that they'll write about whatever should take their fancy, thank you very much – and fair play to them. I am nothing if not a firm believer in artistic freedom. For the emerging writer, however, I think this is very sound advice, because unless you are blessed with natural literary genius, chances are that you will still be honing your skills. Working with your culture means not having to juggle unfamiliar subject matter as well as the myriad of literary technicalities.

Another practicality is that thoroughly understanding a culture other than your own – particularly one that differs greatly from it – takes a substantial

amount of time and potentially, money as well. Two things emerging writers tend not to have a great deal of. There is also the simple logic that you are far more likely to have something valid and interesting to say about a culture you have been brought up with, rather than one you know much less about. In fact, this principle often proves the difference between capturing the truth of something and merely writing an idea of it. Personally – though I believe I also speak for most artists worth their salt – I am infinitely more interested in the former.

Naturally, there must be balance. If an international readership is desired, a degree of accessibility has to be included. Sometimes, a few footnotes explaining unfamiliar terms or concepts will suffice, but I stress – a few. If there are too many, a reader can feel inundated and that the piece is not really worth the effort. Additionally (this is particularly relevant to poetry), the sense and rhythm of a piece can be lost through constantly having to skip to the end to clarify the meaning of unknowns. There will, of course, be exceptions to this. For example, I have recently read Katharine Susannah Prichard's play *Brumby Innes*, which deals largely with Indigenous Australian culture. The first act of the piece depicts a corroboree and is written almost entirely in Indigenous Australian language. Despite the necessary pages of explanatory notes, I found the play very engaging and not at all a chore to read.

A good rule of thumb, I think, is that the less widely understood you believe your culture to be, the more you should initially endeavour to write about those aspects of it that are most easily accessible. Having “tested the water” in this manner, you can then experiment with how fully you are able to write about your culture without alienating readers. Of course you may not want an international readership, and there is absolutely nothing wrong with that. I certainly do not believe it is something you should feel you have to strive for. If your aim is to write about the intricacies of your culture for those who understand it, that is a perfectly valid thing to do. Simply keep your desired readership very much in mind when considering the accessibility of your work.

*Gareth Trew is a young, Australian writer whose chief passion is poetry. His poems have been published in various print and online journals. He serves as a Contributing Editor for The Missing Slate.*





*Above: Women Who Laugh And Do Not Talk by Maria Khan*



*Above: You Said You Love Me by Maria Khan*

## MY APARTMENT

I've written so many poems  
 about my little apartment,  
 what's one more?  
 This poem is about the lady  
 two floors up, who forgot,  
 or didn't care to take  
 her Christmas decorations down.  
 I didn't care myself, but  
 I heard the neighbours talking  
 one night over barbeque  
 in the back of the building.  
 How they think she makes  
 the apartment look bad,  
 makes it look like one of  
 those welfare apartments  
 with poor people whose  
 children run around all hours  
 of the night and scratch cars  
 with their bikes in the parking lot.  
 I nodded my head, not so much  
 in agreement, but because  
 I thought if I defended  
 the old lady who forgot  
 to take her Christmas  
 decorations down, I'd be left  
 out of the barbeque. And  
 those hamburgers looked delicious.  
 It was a couple months  
 after the barbeque when  
 I was coming home from work  
 and decided to go up there  
 myself and see what was up  
 with the tinsel and lights  
 still up in the window.  
 I knocked once, twice, and  
 when she didn't answer  
 after my third and final knock,  
 I called the police.

Turns out my hunch was right,  
 and the old lady  
 wasn't an incompetent  
 neighbour, no, she up and died  
 in there and I heard rumour  
 months later, that'd she been dead  
 in there since November.  
 But the neighbours shrugged it off,  
 saying, that's what life is like  
 when you get old: you don't  
 know anybody, all your friends  
 die around you, or live away,  
 and move on with their lives  
 and most seniors find themselves  
 alone after their loved ones  
 have passed, and a good amount  
 of seniors commit suicide.  
 Not out of boredom, but fear.  
 Well that got me thinking,  
 and I spent that night awake  
 scared of growing old, taking  
 notice for the first time  
 of the seconds ticking  
 on the clock. I took the batteries out,  
 and busied myself  
 until the sun came up  
 and the streets came to life, and then  
 I walked the four blocks  
 to the university campus  
 and put up ads,  
 looking for a room-mate.  
 —Tyler Bigney

*Tyler Bigney was born in 1984. He lives, and writes in Nova Scotia, Canada. His work appears in The Meadow, Poetry New Zealand, Third Wednesday, and Neon, among others. He has been nominated for two pushcart prizes.*

## 44 TOMBSTONE BLUES

by Nicholas Sharaf

*An elegy for the living.*

It is often said that nations are at their strongest when faced with adversity, whether it's natural disaster or war. It's supposed to bring out the best in everyone, a time when they decide to put aside all differences and unite for a common cause. However, the opposite also tends to hold true. While the general masses seek guidance to unite under one cause, it provides an opportunity for the sly and corrupt to manipulate them for their own benefit. A fact that is more than evident by the events taking place across the Middle East and Pakistan.

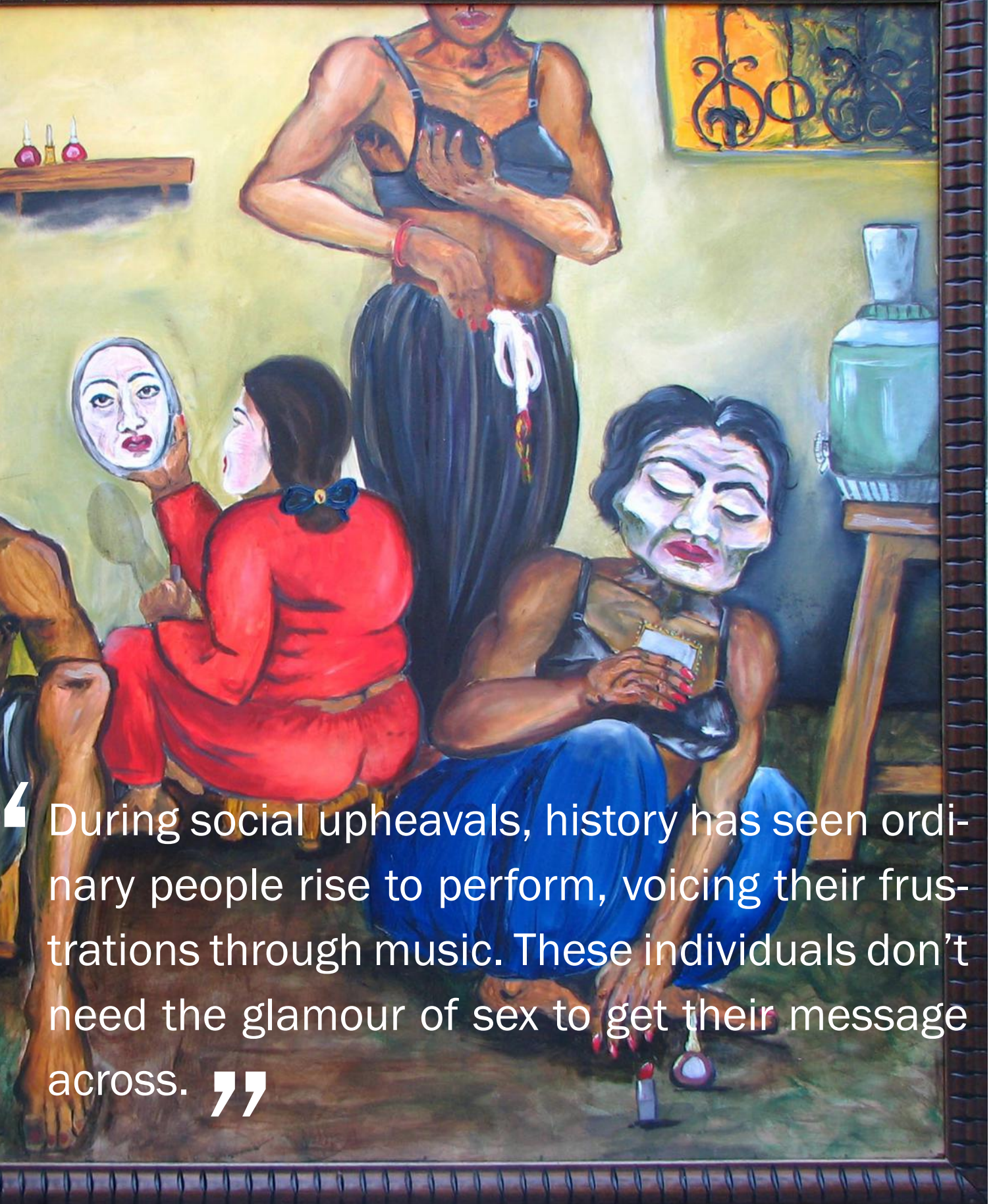
Nations have gone on to define themselves and set their social standards by struggling in the face of adversity and conquering it altogether. Nations like Japan sorted themselves out to become a global economic powerhouse despite World War II. The general consensus being: society unites as one in face of calamities. However, countries (especially in the subcontinent) have also split over something as irrelevant as sectarian divides – an unfortunate part of history that rears its ugly head during dangerous times.

It is during such periods that people facing hardships emerge with art forms that depict their plight in a way that would otherwise go unnoticed. Some use the paintbrush to channel their anguish onto canvas; others use words to express their opinions through literature or cinema. One prominent tool for human expression, especially during social hardship, is the performance of poetry to an audience.

During social upheavals, history has seen ordinary people rise to perform, voicing their frustrations through music. These individuals don't need the glamour of sex to get their message across; on the contrary they use simplicity and commonality to voice their opinions. Determining why such forms of expression are so effective is easy. It's because people are able to relate to them. A country's working classes will relate more to the issue of a feudal lord denying his workers the right to medical care, versus the presentation of a diva and her sexcapades.

Pakistan is no stranger to facing adversity; it has had its share of political instability and social upheavals. We are a nation that has successfully rebelled against

*Paint My World by Amra Khan*



During social upheavals, history has seen ordinary people rise to perform, voicing their frustrations through music. These individuals don't need the glamour of sex to get their message across. ”

46 every government that has had the misfortune to be in power. We also hold the dubious distinctions of killing by sectarian divide; discriminating by religious belief; looting by legislation and of splitting the country into two halves where the latter has gone on to become an independent State in its own right.

Since Pakistan's social seesaws are so frequent in their occurrence, a strong line of revolutionary poets have used this forum to publicly vent their frustrations and opinions. Their influence on both Pakistanis, and non-Pakistanis who follow Pakistani literature, cannot be discredited, since their words found their way into the musical mainstream and are now a crucial part of Pakistani pop culture. Their existence, however, tends to be conflicting. Their words are appreciated but are never accepted as a way of life.

Habib Jalib— one of those revolutionary poets, who was himself a left wing activist and strongly opposed martial law dictatorship and government imposed oppression—dedicated his life advocating for the rights of the. Jalib, having opposed Pakistan's political environment, was made to suffer and was falsely imprisoned many times in a desperate attempt to shut him up. This didn't dissuade him; if anything it gave his words a greater sense of urgency. During his opposition to General Zia's rule, he sarcastically wrote:

Darkness as light, Hot desert wind as a morning breeze

How can I write a human as God?

Zia in Urdu directly translates to Light.

As years pass, we find ourselves becoming less and less acquainted with this brilliant man. His words are still borrowed to add argument to essays and papers across the world, yet his philosophy has now almost become a disposable fork. While his spirit and conviction were never in doubt, Pakistan's commitment to his cause worryingly is.

When we talk of the struggles of a revolutionary poet, it's impossible to not include Ahmed Faraz. Faraz's love for Pakistan began early when he dreamt of joining the Air Force. However, as fate would have it, a lost opportunity for the PAF would lead to celebrated career in poetry.

Faraz's poetry incited and promoted free thinking to flourish in an environment where reserved, conventional social and political thinking prevailed. In a time where military rule and pseudo democracy were setting



“It can be argued that has made this nation consider taking to the rights. But that just is

*The 3 Libras by Amra Khan*



t 60+ years of turmoil  
numb and too tired to  
streets to fight for their  
n't good enough. ”

their sights on banishing the elements of freedom and art from society altogether, he encouraged self-thinking and argued for the importance of self-expression. 47

Perhaps one of his most famous stands for his beliefs came in 2004 when he was awarded with the 'Crescent of Excellence' medal. He announced

My conscious will not forgive me if I remained a silent spectator of the sad happenings around us. The least I can do is to let the dictatorship know where it stands in the eyes of the concerned citizens whose fundamental rights have been usurped. I am doing this by returning the Hilal-e-Imtiaz (civil) forthwith and refuse to associate myself in any way with the regime

A legend in his own right, it is his misfortune and perhaps his lack of prudence that he invested and committed so much into a nation that now tributes him by harassing his poetry and personality in ill-humored jokes.

A founding figure in the rise of revolutionary poetry in Pakistan, Faiz Ahmed Faiz is perhaps the greatest of all Pakistani revolutionary poets to go up against government intimidation. Though he started writing on the more conventional topics of beauty and love, he soon found himself absorbed in the larger social and political issues. He too faced charges of heresy, communism and lengthy prison visits when his words hit too close to home, but as is the case with free speech, it didn't quell his spirit.

Mainstream music has always played a part in promoting all kinds of art and political messages across the world; in Pakistan, Faiz's words take center stage. His words have been echoed by virtuosos Iqbal Bano, Noor Jehan, Nayyara Noor and Tina Sani. This is a testament not only to the caliber of his poetry but also the depth with which he connected to his audience and is evident in socialist rallies across the country, where his words are still quoted to motivate the masses

Even though the '50s, '60s and '70s saw political and social rioting on a day to day basis, the events leading up to those events fall short in comparison to where we are today. The only exception being the separation of East Pakistan into Bangladesh. But even then, West Pakistan's citizens mainly considered it to be a just war and hardly took to the streets for it. But Pakistan's current situation is far worse than what it was during previous decades. There is a shortage of edible food, electricity, drinking water and adequate education. Add to that the

48 devaluation of its money and the ongoing War on Terror which has seen more than 30,000 civilian casualties. If now isn't the time for protest, when is?

It can be argued that 60+ years of turmoil has made this nation numb and too tired to consider taking to the streets to fight for their rights. But that just isn't good enough. Perhaps, a more suitable theory is that the individuals of Pakistan are too involved with the spiraling economy to take a step back and view the bigger picture. With the current economic landscape, it is difficult to pursue the threads of a revolution and compromise your own monthly income as a result. There's also a significant security threat present to the protesters as suicide bombings have become an epidemic. This has created an atmosphere where people don't risk protesting for rights out of fear of their own well-being.

People like Faiz, Faraz and Jalib were individuals who could've changed the social horizon of Pakistan had they been given the right support. Now the nation is at a crossroads where every road looks darker and grimmer than the other. There is also an unfortunate void between the social leaders of its past and those of the present. While these individuals are remembered as the iconic and revolutionary poets they were, the principles they fought for have all but perished. At a time where history has shown great nations of the past unite, we given up.

For 63 years Pakistan has relied on foreign countries to solve its problems and it is no secret where it's gotten it. It is time for Pakistan to accept its own shortcomings. We must come out of our shells of religious extremism and sectarianism and look to repair the relationships that lie broken on the waysides of history. Only then can we as a nation and Pakistan by extension, move forward.

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*Above: Only Women Bleed by Maria Khan*



# THE ROAD TO ALETHEIA

by Maria Amir

*Heidegger defined the Greek word for 'truth' as 'unhidden-ness', 'un-concealment' and 'that which is no longer lost'.*

I have lost count the number of times that I have encountered the expression 'finding oneself'. The term is liberally thrown about by those who think the process specifically entails adorning floor length skirts, a cluster of beads and chanting inside a makeshift candlelit shrine. Having been born with the natural inclination to gravitate towards beads and colourful skirts, I recently found myself being told that the answer to all my problems lay in a 'prophet's circle'.

This imaginary sphere involves visualising oneself in the centre of a prayer circle surrounded by different prophets on the periphery. One is asked to envision the sages of varying theologies ensconced in beams of coloured light that somehow correspond with paranormal pressure points set along ones' spine, known as 'chakras'. Having always been inherently averse to confrontation, I pretended to go along with my "guru's" advice. To keep myself from collapsing in a fit of cackles, I took great liberties with the exercise.

If Maya, the Vedic notation for illusion, must be exhumed by the mind and spirit, then mine lies amid the pillars of inquiry and philosophy. If there is a multiplicity that conceals true meaning and the world of our experience does not really exist, then so be it. I would rather spend my time in search for Archimedes' utopian fixed point...and I can boast no desire to move the earth only to seek Kant's noumenon: that one ephemeral thing-in-itself that makes all the other nothings worthwhile.

All my quests, metaphysical and otherwise, began when I was seven. And so, this particular odyssey had a seven-year-old me thrust in a maze of metaphysical black holes, in search for the titans of thought. A mad little girl alternating the alleys of her mind carrying her daimon with her at every turn, as a tedious woman dressed in monk orange robes yammered on about the complex 'science' of inhaling and exhaling metaphorical tendrils of rainbow smoke.

Landing in a typically uncomfortable spotlight, I was greeted with a warning. Pyrrho with his pointy beard and spindle spine started me off with words of

caution: "Remember the importance of opposing 4 9 claims. No yes's and no nays...suspended judgment at all corners, child. That will keep you safe." And so I had my map, my course acatalepsia and my ability to withhold opinion in favour of intonation. The ataraxic unknown was liberating and if I concentrated hard enough, I could even make out the faint strains of Bob Marley's 'Don't worry, be...' in the background of the nothing I was stepping into.

My journey began at the beginning with an ugly old man walking up to me with eyes full of questions. It appeared that Socrates always knew he would be condemned to death for his curiosity, but his compulsion seemed to outweigh all sense of self preservation. He stood right in front of me and he was tall, which meant that the warts on his face were all the more vivid as he bent down to ask me our first question. "Are you sure you want to do this child? You know that once you start asking you will never stop," he said with the rapsallion self-satisfaction of a man who already knew the answer, but wanted to luxuriate in the magnanimity that came with offering a victim a choice. There was no choice, as we walked through his ghastly utopia, criss-crossing between the broken streets where he had pestered his lesser contemporaries about everything he could think of. Our daimons in hand, we easily skipped along on the yellow brick road of 'knowing we knew nothing'. He was the most beautiful ugly man I ever saw and I could see why Nietzsche, in his moment of petty jealousy had tried to reduce him to a mere 'monstrous face and monstrous soul'. We shook hands outside the doors of a dusty old library, where I told him that his pupil Plato didn't do him justice in his recollections. "Yes, well. He was never quite as comfortable with self-doubt. He could never put the question above quintessence. Can you?" And so I left, with another question tucked carefully in the back pocket of my dirty jeans.

The library was an ancient, crumbling structure. It was really more of a study than anything else. Certainly not Borges' maze or the Agora but I could place him immediately. Bent over his desk, with a magnifying glass fixed on a set of scrolls, he beckoned me over with a hasty wave of his left hand. Feuerbach's long beard was interfering with his untidy notations and he handed me the quill making me write down random observations on scraps of paper. "What exactly are we doing?" I looked at him directly, perched uncomfortably on a set of papers scattered at the corner of his desk.

5 ○ “Why I’d have thought that was obvious. We are looking for the essence of religion and God by inflection. I know you’re interested in all that stuff,” he said, without looking up. “You can find that out from a book?” I suddenly felt I had wasted far too many years looking in the wrong places when I should have lived in a library. “Not exactly, you can find the first part in a book, the religion part...you just need to keep going back further. Anthropology 101...soon enough you’ll find where god makes an appearance and almost every time you can tell who made him up,” he said with an ironic laugh. “God is Us. We make him every day and we project on to him what we wished we could be,” he said in his professorial monotone. “Yes, but what about the real God, the one that doesn’t make an appearance in the books,” I asked. “Oh that one...well that one you have to look for somewhere else.” He started talking about how I needed to battle my chimaeras’ on this quest before I could even begin to ask the questions I needed.

I walked out of the library in a daze only to realise two steps later that I had landed in a gallery. An endless hallway of thought—idle and otherwise. The books I had read; how and where I could find a bathroom here; whether or not it was better to be happy, smart or successful and whether getting answers was a better goal than asking questions. Descartes stood in front of a foggy mirror, staring at his all-too-elegant reflection. He was a tall man, intelligence oozing from every pore along with a detachment he seemed to have earned after decades of effort. “How do you like Cartesian alleys?” he inquired of me with a smirk. “It’s a tad self-indulgent don’t you think?” I responded, completely out of turn. If he was offended he didn’t show it, we both were there simply because we were still thinking about things. “Does it still bother you that they misquoted you? I mean you never meant for there to be any inference. It wasn’t meant as a syllogism was it? There was no major premise to be had and the ‘therefore’ killed it,” I whispered. “Thank you for that and no there wasn’t. They never really apologised for it either. I didn’t want any dependence, just ‘I think, I am’ but that seemed hard for them to live with,” he muttered bitterly.

The gallery cut a razor sharp corner as Ockham merely stood at the fringes watching me stumble onward. There were no words of wisdom, no condemnations and no warnings from the sly, Moorish man. This was the person who chased after the root of all things: the ‘blueness’ that made the sky blue, the ‘taste’ that

“Pyrrho with his pointy beard and spindle spine started me off with words of caution: “Remember the importance of opposing claims. No yes’s and no nays...suspended judgment at all corners, child. That will keep you safe.” ”

made tasting possible. He was too busy peering at me out of the corner of his eye and perceiving to comment on my failings, and I was grateful for being let go with mere oblong glances. After all, he had already deemed god to be unnecessary merely because the world could be explained without him. I didn’t need telling that the world would be better off without me.

I tripped over a huddled mass crouched beneath a tree. The mass turned out to be a hermit, an agoraphobe who shrieked and yelled at my having invaded his ‘personal space’. So he carved a circle in the grass around himself, a nucleus of protection that would keep everyone at a safe distance. I sat cross-legged outside of it as Spinoza refused to look at me. “Why are you here?” he asked, his chin pinned to his chest. “I am on a quest,” I told him, bursting over with false bravado. “No you’re not. You have no say in these matters. You didn’t choose any quest. So don’t adorn it like a mantle! You were thrown into this and are trying to smile your way out to the other side,” he replied, shivering. “Is that a bad thing?” I wanted to know. He didn’t answer me and only

warned that I must always look at the infinite and unalterable whole rather than trying to divide it into parts that I found easier to cope with. “Does it help? I mean, you said knowing our emotions would help us master them but you obviously feel lonely. Is that because you didn’t know it or because you couldn’t master it?” He didn’t answer me this time either but I could tell it was a bit of both as he turned around to look the other way.

The next stop was Night. A lit up city, ugly and neon, trying far too hard to construct the flicker of a lost dream. There was a gambling den with poker tables lined up to infinity as scores of lost souls placed bets on their conscience. I walked my too short, too self-conscious seven-year-old self to the head table to place my wager as the dealer spread the cards. Pascal had the eyes of a slut and the smile of a cheat, but everyone knew him and everyone laughed at all his jokes. Absolutely everyone took him up on his bets. He laid out the odds, stating clearly and curtly, “Fate is a prison and an empty abyss. Reason does not have the answers and we are lost. So bet on a cosmic ‘what if’ and leap because the truth is ugly and the lie might not be.” It was a cheap hand.

I met Kant standing beside a merry-go-round. He was childlike in his brilliance and spoke to me about space and time, about predicates in analytical and synthetic statements and about how everything was uncertain and empty. “Then why bother?” I asked, and he smiled the smile of a man who was comfortable ‘just looking and never buying’. “It gives us something to do,” he murmured bashfully, embarrassed that he didn’t have any real answers and far too many surreal ones. He told me to act the way I wanted everyone around me to and that was when I stopped laughing with him. Why would anyone, ever want to act like everyone else?

I was pushed into a dark alley of despair. Ugly self-loathing and silicone layers of pessimism coated the brick walls of Schopenhauer’s dead-end metaphysics. The man himself comprised of a bag of bones woven together by a network of bulging navy blue veins spread out on grey, ashen skin. No child should ever have had to meet him. His vision was far too easy to buy into. “We all depend on something that depends on nothing. Doesn’t that scare you, child?” he looked at me in earnest. It did scare me. I knew that I needed to tune him out, but he began shouting at the top of his flailing lungs over the music, “no one cares, no god, no soul, no free will. We are stripped of all consolation prizes,” and I began to sob just looking at him. Freud had ripped off

“ The gallery cut a razor sharp corner as Ockham merely stood at the fringes watching me stumble onward. There were no words of wisdom, no condemnations and no warnings from the sly, Moorish man. ”

every one of his ideas and sold them off as a cutting edge foray into the mind he called psychoanalysis, but while Freud’s treatise remained laughable, this old man was terrifying in his truth. “There is only one inborn error: and that is the notion that we exist in order to be happy,” he said as the accordion rose to a crescendo. I ran from him screaming, tears pouring unchecked from my eyes and I could make out the faint strains of Wagner wafting through the air.

I sprinted straight into the arms of a saviour, a hero. The kind one finds in books where dreams are endless, because there are no dead ends and every sentence carries on forever with a colossal ellipsis. The kind one waits for to make an appearance at the beginning of every novel and hates saying goodbye to by the end. Kierkegaard patted my back and stroked my hair as I cried out onto his freshly penned pages. He told me not to dwell on the past, or the future, or the present. He painted a world beyond all ‘isms’ and we sat imagining ourselves as pirates in one story and pan in another. “You do know that they call you the father of existentialism now,” I sniffed and he scoffed. “They are idiots and can’t possibly know me or even themselves.

52

Remember child, there is no I. It's a letter that couldn't possibly fathom or describe us. Isn't that what you've always said too?" he looked at me and smiled. He was right about one thing: faith is born at the lowest of pit-falls, where paradox meets reason.

I was tangibly nervous as I knocked on the tall brass doors that would lead me into the vortex. I could hear the manic ravings of a lunatic from within. A beautifully tainted and broken mad man – a nihilist and narcissist that I loved to hate (or was it hated to love). Nietzsche was smashing dishes into the wall as his Zarathustra stood behind his shoulder and smirked knowingly. He didn't seem at all upset and asked me to join him. "You see what we are doing here?" he smashed an antique Chinese teacup into the wall. "Not really," I said. "And I thought you were smart. We are dethroning the despots; breaking their pedestals from under their sickening selves. God is dead. No one will save Him after I'm done with Him," he cackled. I didn't have the heart to tell him that he seemed the one in need of sav-

“No child should ever have had to meet him. His vision was far too easy to buy into. “We all depend on something that depends on nothing. Doesn't that scare you, child?””

ing because I knew his despair sustained him. It made his exits much more poignant and my heart cracked for the fact that I could not own him or even return him to himself. He was right though— no one could have contained him – not the socialists who tried to adopt

“I carried my broken heart in my other pocket past the Austrian kindergarten classroom where a precocious Wittgenstein sat at his desk perpetually outwitting Hitler; past the Nominalists interlocking their Humean principles on rocks and beyond the verbal pyrotechnics of Locke, the ascetic, preaching to anyone who would listen to tales of a tabula rasa that offered up second chances.”

him or the anarchists who tried to embody him. They would only ever see the half they could observe and destroy.

I carried my broken heart in my other pocket past the Austrian kindergarten classroom where a precocious Wittgenstein sat at his desk perpetually outwitting Hitler; past the Nominalists interlocking their Humean principles on rocks and beyond the verbal pyrotechnics of Locke, the ascetic, preaching to anyone who would listen to tales of a tabula rasa that offered up second chances. I saw a Neoplatonist arcana being carved into a wall by Epictetus as he asked me to affirm my amor fati to myself and the world but I politely declined. I purposely avoided Hobbes standing beneath a podium and kissing the feet of all the kings he could find. I stopped just outside Plato's cave so that I didn't lose the sun of my passions only to be shackled in the

shadows of empty power.

By the time the crazy guru's chanting came to an end, I saw myself being led back to the beginning. The overwhelming perfume of scented candles began to permeate my nostrils and the flickering light danced outside my eyelids, but I held on a moment longer. I sensed that I was walking in a giant's shadow. The shade stretched across for miles and it was twilight. Just before I opened my eyes, I turned around and Aristotle gave me my first and only answer.

"Eudaimonia," he said.

And I was happy to stick with the questions after that.



*Above: Perfect in her Imperfections by Amra Khan*

54

## SPOTLIGHT: MUSICIAN ZOHAIB KAZI

by Asmara A. Malik

*The Melancholy Streets of Ismail's city*

On paper, Zohaib Kazi's musical journey seems fairly straightforward, even typical, of the majority of Pakistani musicians. Yet merely listening to his ephemeral songs once is enough to make you pause and re-evaluate that initial assumption. For one, he's not creating the kind of banal pop that makes your rational brain shriek in horror. For another, his work has the kind of multi-layered allure that simultaneously pulls you in yet leaves you standing alone at the threshold of some darkly magical door.

With the impending release of his debut project, *Ismail Ka Urdu Shehr*, Zohaib Kazi is set to make his decidedly distinctive mark upon Pakistan's music industry.

*Ismail Ka Urdu Shehr* comprises an album and a novella centred around the central character, a scientist. Kazi envisions both as being part of the same over-arching story. When asked about the role these two components play, whether one is in fact the subset of the other, Kazi's response is simple. "The album and novella have their own significant importance," he explains. "The whole idea is as if a you had heard the album and then read the novella-- you'd experience the sound-scape of the whole story, like watching a movie, with your subconscious grasping the emotions via the music." He simplifies the analogy further: "Consider it 3D reading."

Given the creative complexity such a project would naturally entail, Kazi admits "creating an intelligent balance hasn't been easy." Resolving the essential dichotomy between the sung words and the written narrative was just one major hurdle he faced. "The most challenging part is the lyrics, where I have to ensure that they depict what's happening in the corresponding chapter, in addition to being good songs in their own right which you would want to listen to even if you haven't read the novella," he says. "It's for this reason that both have been delayed so long."

Kazi describes the inspiration behind *Ismail Ka Urdu Shehr* as being a "disbelief in everything I knew," when he spent hours online, watching documentaries about fields as varied as science, psychology, spirituality, religion, history and commerce. "I'm hungry for real information," he explains. "Ismail ka Urdu Sheher is an amalgamation of all of that information. The whole idea behind writing this novella is to share information yet to communicate it in a 'cool way', similar to *The Matrix*, *Star Wars* and *The Lord of the Rings*."

Even with four songs from the album released as free downloads on his official site, Kazi's completed vision remains a mysterious complexity. *Awaz (The Last Radiowave)*, released in 2008, represents a stellar mix of rich vocals and bittersweet instrumentation. "If I ever end up making a movie out of Ismail..., that song would be the soundtrack for the theatrical trailer," he says. "It is the most important chapter of the whole story as this is when contact is first made with Ismail."

*Awaz (The Last Radiowave)* starts off with a sample of one of Stephen Hawking's speeches extolling humanity to 'spread out into space'. "We continue to use our planet's resources for nukes to ensure certain countries remain super-powers and corporations get richer while the poor are told; 'Sorry, we don't have the resources for you'", elaborates Kazi, "which is BS. We have plenty for everyone and if we don't, then we should search for a 'spare' planet since this one might not last another century."

The song mirrors this downward spiral, starting off on a hopeful note then progressing to an almost-entreaty duet between Samra Khan and Jaffer Ali Zaidi. It ends on as enigmatic a note as its beginning with two American newscasters joking about an alien signal being received by SETI ala Contact, while Khan's haunting voice fades away in the background.

*Awaz (The Last Radiowave)* represents an interesting fusion of South Asian and Western sounds. Kazi says that the roots of this particular curiosity lie much further back than the creation of *Ismail Ka Urdu Sheh* would lead you to believe.

"Even as an 8 year old, I wondered what would happen if someone tried fusing portions of eastern elements in a western format," he muses. "I remember listening to Talvin Singh's *Anokha* compilation and it just captivated me-- it was futuristic yet it sounded local. It was exactly the kind of sound I had in mind." His forays deeper into the genre led to his fascination with contemporary fusion artists such as Nitin Sawhney and Karsh Kale, "the Moby and Daft Punk of South Asian fusion genre." Kazi also lists Deep Forest's work and Peter Gabriel's collaboration with Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, as having had a significant impact on his musical sensibilities. "It sounds so impossible-- it's so cleanly done," he enthuses.

Another artist Kazi cites as a major influence is Trent Reznor of Nine Inch Nails. When asked about what he finds inspiring in his music, he replies, "I love the way he arranges a track: the broad sound-scapes, the low drone pads-- it is very much on the lines of the kind of work I do. They're grand examples of good production. If I was a professor teaching music production, I would use his tracks as examples."

Certainly, Reznor's inky piano notes seem to have informed aspects of *Raat Bazaar*. Released in 2009 and featuring the vocals of Nida Anam, the song





is a gun-metal-blue study of the desolate sorrow of loss.

“*Raat Bazaar* is like the last chapter of a story, a goodbye song to a loved one,” he says. Even though is just over two minutes long, it’s last notes leave you with a sense of something still left unsaid. “It sounds incomplete because it is,” he explains. “The whole reason for this song is to create the sad yet brave feeling of that particular chapter hence the husky vocals as if someone’s speaking in a low volume in a melodic way. Aren’t sweet goodbyes usually incomplete?” The song is set to feature prominently in Kazi’s follow-up to Ismail Ka Urdu Sher. “The complete song would be the first track of the sequel of Ismail...,” he confirms.

In it’s razor-sharp production and tonal clarity, the song also calls to mind the work A. R. Rahman. “I collect all the cool elements of all good music and try to incorporate them in my work,” he says. “Mr. Rahman is definitely someone from whose music I have a lot of influence from.”

Both *Raat Bazaar* and *Awaaz* are also notable for showcasing very imagery-laden poetry in their lyrics. Kazi explains his method thus: “There is no one method. Sometimes, I’ll write a song in a couple of hours and sometimes it takes months! My usual way to write something like *Raat Bazaar* is writing while playing the chord progression but with something like *Awaaz*, I’d make the basic groove and have it play on repeat while I’d lie down with a notepad.”

*Bijuri*, Kazi’s latest release from the album, represents an interesting tonal shift from the rest of the songs heard so far. With Devika Chawla’s powerful vocals and a thrumming, thunder-in-the-Monsoon background, *Bijuri* is more blatantly powerful than the songs heard so far. To Kazi, that is half his aim achieved already.

“It’s good if it sounds different from the rest of my work,” he says while explaining the collaborative process with Devika Chawla for *Bijuri*. “It was our brainchild to do something so east in such an electronic-Radiohead-Reznor-ish manner”.

With another Coke Studio season lined up under his belt, Kazi’s musical prowess is only expanding. “I’m not handling the creative angles of Coke Studio,” he clarifies. “That’s Rohail and only him. I operate more as a point man to the producer. My job is to get things done, in time and in the most efficient way possible!”

With his experience from Coke Studio, Paki-

“ I love the power of the internet!” Kazi enthuses, “It’s the beauty of our generation. Devaki and I spent hours discussing *Bijuri* online. It took a lot of Skype hours to come up with the song and even more gigabytes of data exchanges to make the video happen! ”

“We continue to use our planet’s resources for nukes to ensure certain countries remain superpowers and corporations get richer while the poor are told; ‘Sorry, we don’t have the resources for you’”, elaborates Kazi, “which is BS. We have plenty for everyone and if we don’t, then we should search for a ‘spare’ planet since this one might not last another century.”

stan’s most successful cross-genre musical collaboration, Kazi’s artistic aims have only gotten higher. “It’s definitely been one of the best musical experiences of my life,” he says, “I learned that discipline leads to infinite possibilities even within Pakistan.”

Applying that lesson to his own collaborative efforts has definitely given an extra edge to his work. “For collaborative projects, I don’t try imposing myself or own too much of the product, it should be a perfect balance,” he says. “As a producer, I should have the capability to sound different every time but not too different.”

*Bijuri*’s inception and execution are just as remarkable as the response the song has received so far. Quite a trick for a song whose creators have never met, to date, in the real world. Not that that’s the only thing that makes the song interesting.

“I love the power of the internet!” Kazi enthuses, “It’s the beauty of our generation. Devaki and I spent hours discussing *Bijuri* online. It took a lot of Skype hours to come up with the song and even more gigabytes of data exchanges to make the video happen!”

With its dark suspense and much fewer of the bright moments that punctuate the rest of the songs, *Bijuri* is perfectly poised as an enticing come-on to old fans and a captivating hook for newer South Asian audiences.

Given Zohaib Kazi’s vision and drive, it’s hard to see how *Ismail Ka Urdu Shehr* will be anything less than ground-breaking in terms of its content and execution. No matter what the outcome, this particular soundscape promises to be an unforgettable experience.

## THE CRITICS: TRON LEGACY

59

by Khaver Siddiqui

*Cast & Credits:**Directed by: Joseph Kosinski**Starring: Jeff Bridges, Olivia Wilde, Garrett Hedlund and Martin Sheen**Released By: Walt Disney Pictures**Running Time: 125 minutes*

Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* details the journey of the timeless Hero as he battles his way through obstacles, is guided along by the old wise man, has to rescue the seductress and face his inner demons. It's the textbook way to approach stories and *Tron Legacy* is one movie that tackles this beat by beat.

Sam Flynn (*Garrett Hedlund*) is an aimless soul, wandering from place to place, looking for his place in life. But he is listless and has been so ever since his father disappeared off the face of the earth. His father, Kevin Flynn (*Jeff Bridges*), a computer programmer and maestro, mysteriously vanished leaving behind a software empire. Shirking from his responsibilities at his father's company Sam is confronted by Alan Bradley (his father's close friend and confidant) with some startling news: Kevin Flynn is alive, and what's more, he's looking for Sam. And thus the Hero's Journey begins.

Sam ventures forth into the electronic world known as "The Grid", in the hopes to find his father and rescue him. The world of "The Grid" isn't an easy journey for Sam who encounters many trials along the way, the first and foremost being the diabolical Clu (also played by Jeff Bridges), a the only electronic entity that realizes what Sam's appearance in "The Grid" signifies.

But whilst Clu is eager to capture our hero, the young man is rescued by Quorra (*Olivia Wilde*), an electronic entity with a very interesting origin.

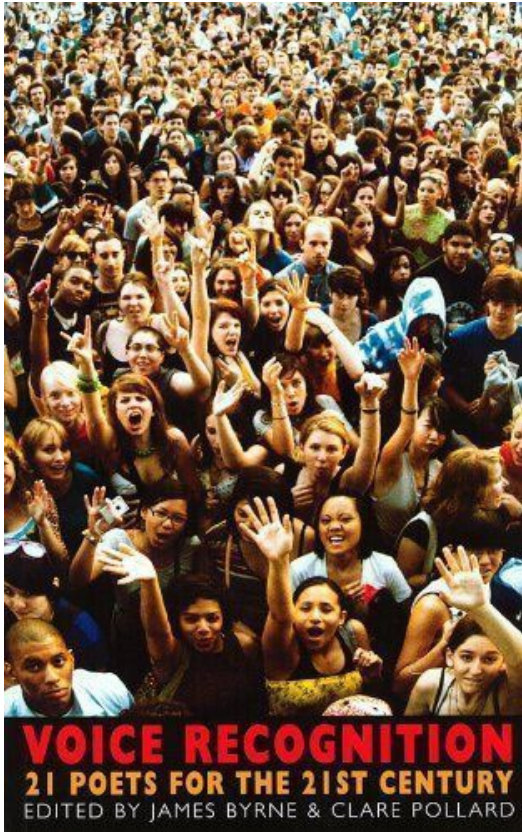
*Tron Legacy* is a great movie to look at. First and foremost, if you haven't seen the predecessor, it is an absolute must if you are a special effect enthusiast and love traditional effects rather than today's glossy and over the top CGI. Now having said that, *Tron Legacy* is probably one of the few movies that looks great by today's special effect standards. Each and every single aspect is woven as if it was really a part of an electronic world. We can see the bytes and pixels that comprise of everything in "The Grid" and the atmosphere is, if you pardon the pun, electric.

Daft Punk's soundtrack is an added bonus. Though drastically weakened by a traditional score interwoven within it, the score adds a whole new element of the world and the characters. The final product is a film that although serves well as the sequel to the *Tron* film but is a rather weak standalone. Viewers who haven't seen the first one will find this one boring and tediously winding around itself in confusion.

*Khaver Siddiqui obtained a degree in Polymer Sciences and Chemistry (that's the science of plastic: what you sit on and what made Pamela Anderson famous), and subsequently worked as a Chemical Engineer. He quit to join an advertising agency and became a copywriter. He did that because he loves to write. He writes because he wants to escape. Ever since he scribbled all those stories about random nothings on those double colored, four lined notebooks, he's been on a continuing journey of discovery; of himself, his capabilities and his writing.*

# 60 THE CRITICS: VOICE RECOGNITION

by Jacob Silkstone



*21 poets for the 21st century*, edited by James Byrne and Clare Pollard (Bloodaxe: 2009)

168pp

ISBN: 978-1-679-85224-838-3

Most poetry anthologies shouldn't be assessed in terms of their ideological standpoint, but some are asking for trouble. Two decades ago, Hulse, Morley and Kennedy introduced *The New Poetry* with the aphorism that 'Every age gets the literature it deserves', setting themselves against Morrison and Motion's Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry and defiantly praising 'pluralism.' Initially, the introduction spoke louder than the poems themselves.

James Byrne and Clare Pollard attempt to be similarly strident in their introduction to *Voice Recognition*, taking up an uneasy position in the no man's land between blurb ('This book arrives at a particularly important moment for poetry in Britain and Ireland, where the presence of young poets is beginning to revitalise the scene') and manifesto ('a literature without young voices is often one without young readers, and has little

future'). Unfortunately, their finer points risk being lost amidst an odd mixture of jauntily simplistic generalisations ('For many years... being a poet was uncool') and unhelpful hyperbole ('These are writers...who are capable of greatness').

*Voice Recognition* presents a vision of poetry's future that is tangled in contradictions. The editors seek 'a healthy approach to diversity', but celebrate the idea that 'after years of other regions being promoted, there seems a real shift back to [London]'. They are ambivalent about the merits of the Creative Writing MA, which (in the same paragraph) enables poets 'to improve as technicians of poems' whilst leading to a proliferation of 'same-sounding, low-stake, well-mannered (but going nowhere) poems.' Many of the poets featured in *Voice Recognition* are products of the 'MA conveyor-belt' which the editors single out for criticism.

What of the poems themselves? Pollard and Byrne state that 'all 21 poets are active readers/performers of their own poems' and the appearance of 'voice' in the anthology's title is significant: many of these poems seem crafted to be heard, not read. The dominant form is free verse (an appropriate paradox), and too many lines do their work away from the page.

Writing in *Stride Magazine*, David Kennedy rightly drew attention to 'the number of voices that seem to lack confidence or to revel in an inability to communicate.' He cites Ailbhe Darcy's 'He tells me I have a peculiar relationship with my city', in which 'my country' is 'a narrow, self-effacing swathe/The shape of me.' The shape which yearns to be shapeless, the attempt to share an inability to communicate: more paradoxical knots for British poetry to unravel.

It seems far too early to predict whether any of *Voice Recognition's* poets will do justice to Byrne and Pollard's claim that all 21 'are capable of greatness.' All we can be sure of is that there are some excellent poems here (Mark Leech's 'Snowfall in Woodland', Ahren Warner's wonderfully flippant 'About suffering they were never wrong', The Old Masters', Joe Dunthorne's 'Cave Dive' are three which immediately come to mind and deserve to be quoted from extensively), and it would be disappointing if the inconsistent introduction were allowed to shout them.

# SPOTLIGHT ARTIST: AMRA KHAN

Interviewed by Moeed Tariq



*Amra Khan, is an Islamabad-born Pakistani artist, currently living and working in Lahore. She graduated from National College of Arts, Lahore with a distinction in painting in 2008. She is presently doing her masters in visual arts from National College of Arts, Lahore, while pursuing a semester in École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts (ENSBA) in Paris, France. She is skilled in oils, acrylics and miniature painting and often expresses her talents through sculptures and video installations. Her work tends to focus around having two diametrically opposed ideas or personalities living in the same body. Conflicting gender, power and identity, she works to speak through and incite the observer to question tangibility. She has exhibited her works in galleries across Pakistan such as Alhamra Art Gallery, Zahoor-ul-Akhlaq Gallery National College of Arts, Rohtas 2 and Nairang Gallery in Lahore along with Rohtas Gallery Islamabad and the Karachi Arts Council in Karachi. She is currently exhibiting her work in January at Expo Atelier Cognée gallery, École Nationale Supérieure des beaux-arts Paris, France.*



*Fairies Wear Boots by Amra Khan*

### **Have you always known you wanted to be a painter?**

No, I wanted to be a sculptor until I came to NCA and discovered that I could express more with painting. Also I did not need to limit my self, which is why I use many different kinds of materials in my work. At the time, the sculpture department at NCA was not very well established so I preferred painting because there was more input by the faculty. I was very lucky to have amazing professors like, R. M. Naeem, Quddus Mirza, Nazish Atta ullah, Anwar Saeed, Mariyam Hussain, Laila Rehman, Imran Qureshi and David Alesworth-- these people have made me what I am right now. Plus, I knew for a fact that I'd be teaching at NCA-- I need to share what I know.

### **Why choose NCA?**

The history, the faculty, the location, the variety and richness of the people-- it's almost like a mini-Pakistan, with students from all provinces of different castes, creeds, sects and faiths. It's perfect in its diversity.

### **How has your family been about your decision to pursue art?**

It was hard in the beginning, but my mother and my brothers are still highly supportive.

### **What do you have to say about the local art scene in Pakistan?**

This is just the beginning-- we have a long way to go. I think my generation is very lucky in getting such platforms and exhibitions at this age, where we have the opportunity to have people are admiring, critiquing and buying our work. There is a boom in the number of galleries and, with the papers now writing about us, I pray we don't compromise on quality while racing towards being known in the international market. Many of Pakistani artists can stand parallel to any international artist and we have amazing examples emerging now.

### **How would you describe your work in your own words?**

Well, it is Bipolar, like me! I wish to achieve Divine Madness-- that is what I would say about my work. We are the same, I can't imagine not working, I would be incomplete without my work.

### **What is your main oeuvre?**

My work, one way or another, revolves around having two polar opposites, two different ideas, temperaments and personalities living in the same body.

The conflict is between the mind and the soul and the battle ground is your body, who you are and who you desire to be until you transcend to a higher level of greatness, the point where your soul takes absolute control. You seduce, tantalize, entice, hate, provoke, lust for and question substance and tangible quantity, the baseness of the flesh, the abject state of gender, the bipolarity of power, your own gender and the one you wished to be born in, until you can answer the question "Am I a man because I have a phallus?"

### **Your Preferred medium?**

It changes over time. I wanted to be an oil painter, but my mind deviates-- it fluctuates from medium to medium. I paint meticulously, with control. I let go when I'm working with inks, tea and coffee. I make hair-soft sculptures and embroideries to keep my piece of mind. I draw wildly on paper but I never share them. Nowadays, I'm fascinated by found materials and just play around with them.

### **What, if anything, do you consistently draw inspiration from?**

I walk around Lahore, I look at people, and obscurities-- the sidelined ones, the ones that you do not want to sit next to. I don't know where I constantly draw inspiration from but androgyny, the homosexual and the transsexual population are a favorite subject.

### **3 words to describe your art.**

Bipolar, Androgynous, cathartic.

### **Is there any central idea, issue or dilemma that you want to address in your art?**

"Are you a man because you have a Phallus?"

### **Whose art inspires you?**

Paula Rego, Francis Bacon, Egon Schiele-- they are my all time favorites.

### **Iconography - Any recurrent symbols and what they generally represent.**

Men, phalluses, patterns, hair, dressing up, role-playing, dragonflies .I've thought about the reasons but I fail to come to an absolute answer. Maybe I have a deep desire to become a man because it is harder to live and walk around as a woman in Lahore. Maybe patterns are the repetitive representation of my mundane life, that one element of being a woman or a transsexual.

### **How important are titles in your work?**

Absolutely a MUST! The title is a one liner that explains why I made a particular piece. Everyone views

64 a work with a personal perspective but I have always felt the need to give a name to all my children — every painting, drawing, doodle that I make has an identity, a title, its own place in the world.

**What, if anything, do you put in your art that represents you?**

Androgyny—the desire to be masculine, that constant need to be equal, or in some ways better. Sometimes that needs to be acknowledged, seen, accepted. But I fluctuate and my work fluctuates with me. It can be very feminine, very homoerotic, or very simple depending on my state of mind.

**How has your visual vocabulary grown from when you first started?**

My story will change over time. After all, my work is all about self-exploration in one way or another. I have made many reasons for making what I make, most of them are simple others deep that even I cannot explain. That is one of the major problems with my work, I tend to fail to explain “why” it was it made and it looks the way it does.



Above: *Fairies Open Sesame* by Amra Khan

Below: *From My Mother*

Right: *The Three Stages of Amra Khan (2)* by Amra Khan

“ I walk around Lahore, I look at people, and obscurities — the sidelined ones, the ones that you do not want to sit next to.”







# 66 WRITING OUT A REVOLUTION

by Madeeha Ansari

In Arabic, “Tahrir” means “liberation”. In Urdu, the same word can be translated as “narrative” or, more specifically, “writing”. The Tahrir Square in Cairo, therefore, was a particularly apt venue for the unfolding of a historic narrative through which the future of an entire region will be rewritten.

The story of the social media revolution is one with chapters set in different locations, each with its own preface in terms of politics, culture and society. Some are more dramatic, others so understated that they may not make it to the archives. “Tunisia”, “Egypt” and “Libya” are the excerpts that will be preserved and quoted from. “Yemen”, “Syria” and the restive states with repressive regimes across the Middle East are still waiting to be written out and tied into the plot. As for “Pakistan” – it’s complicated.

Of course, there are common motifs in each narrative that can be isolated as catalysts for change. The first has to be heightened connectivity, and the empowerment that comes with it. As one Egyptian activist famously phrased it, “We use Facebook to schedule the protests, Twitter to coordinate, and YouTube to tell the world.” The interactivity of social media has changed the meaning of “communication”, making it less about telling and more about sharing. The more traditional forms of media and communication have also evolved, with citizen journalism becoming a necessity as well as a norm. After all, if Citizen X sees and records it, BBC would rather have it before YouTube.

Then there’s the demographic development. Unlike the aging Europe and Japan, much of the developing world is home to a generation characterised by youth, energy, and a sense of potential. This last is most important: a nation’s sense that its reality can be different. It’s an exciting world to be living in, where the power to craft reality is (virtually) at our fingertips.

With power, however, comes crushing responsibility. The knowledge that the future is one’s own – that’s a heavy burden to bear. It would not do to hurtle through history like somnambulists, not when there is such a consciousness of youth and possibility. Maybe that’s why the word “revolution” has become fashionable enough to be tossed about by more than the communists and the usual argumentative suspects. Ener-

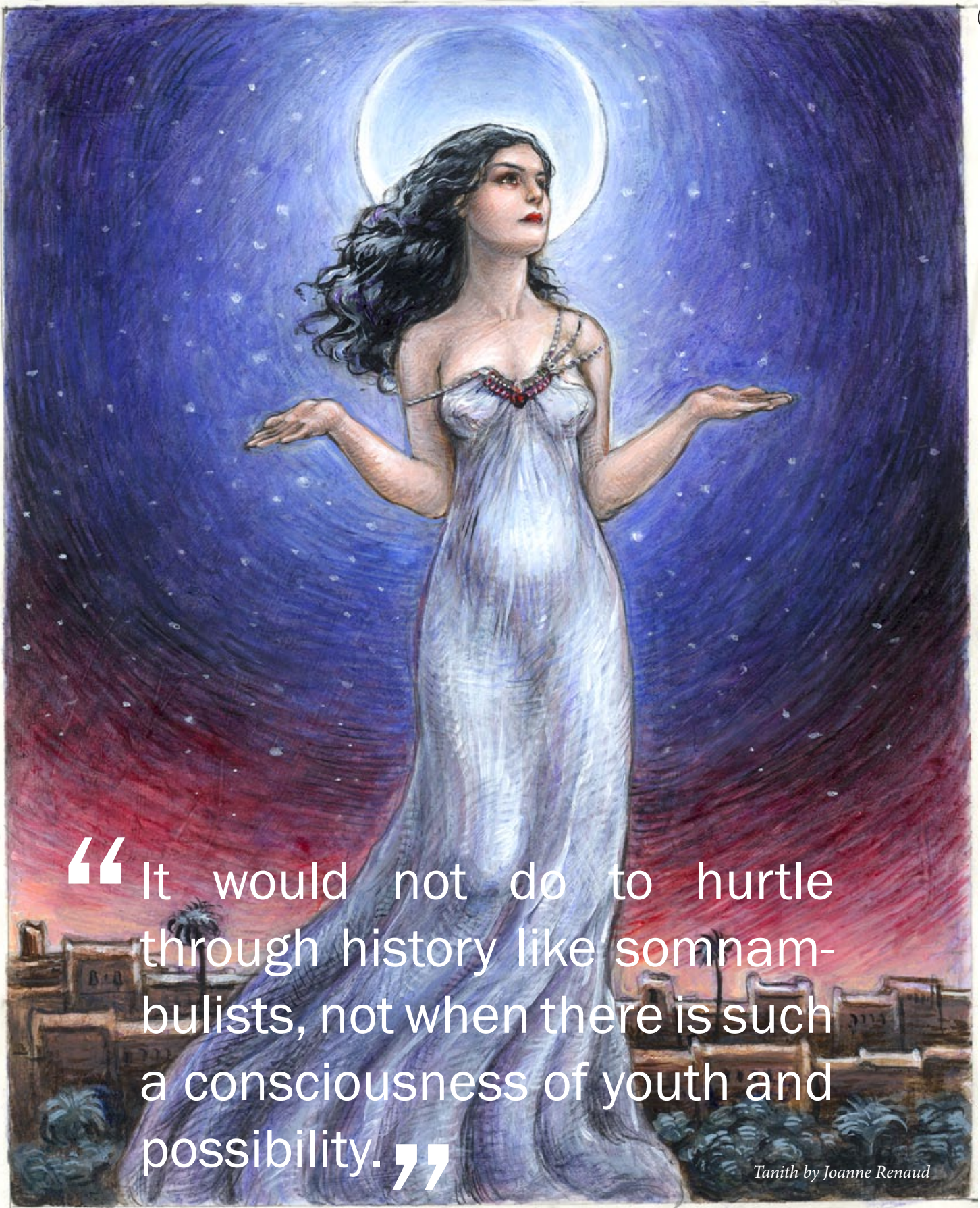
gized and somewhat shamed by the precedent set by the Middle East, the young bourgeois of Pakistan have a secret longing to prove they can “tan (their) skin too white” and do something worthy of being remembered.

What needs to be understood is that “revolution” is a term that necessarily needs to be customized. For some it entails the ouster of dictatorship, to facilitate the liberation of the media and pave the way first for political, then for socio-economic change. For places like Pakistan where the industrial media is already liberated and civil society has already instituted some kind of political process, the vague call for “Inqilab” lacks substance.

If any lesson has emerged from the activist spirit sweeping across the globe, it is that the new and traditional forms of the media have an essential role in knitting together voices and efforts. They can create as well as sustain the energy to bring the kind of change that is needed in a particular place. In Pakistan, the need is not necessarily to take to the streets and overhaul a legitimate (if incompetent) regime. The need is for a quieter kind of revolution, to promote the less glamorous idea of responsible citizenship and ensure universal access to basic rights, in order to repair the rifts created by disparity.

It is this realization that has inspired campaigns like the petition against the “education emergency” in the country, seeking 200,000 signatures. Education is something basic enough to be overlooked and taken for granted – we all know the system is flawed, that the state-allocated budget is dismal, that just beyond the urban periphery stands a lonely, brooding ghost school. But to rejuvenate the debate, to tap the outreach of new and traditional media and generate massive popular support advocating change – that is how this generation can be different.

As far as corruption and nepotism are concerned, too, one way of addressing issues is by bringing them into public discourse. Here, the generation has the option of sidestepping the convenient mud-flinging and finger-pointing, to free up mind-space for introspection. In this respect, one interesting illustration of the interplay between mobile phone communication, industrial media and social media is the “Khamoshi ka boycott” campaign launched by Telenor. This “Boycott of silence”



“ It would not do to hurtle through history like somnambulists, not when there is such a consciousness of youth and possibility. ”

*Tanith by Joanne Renaud*

“After being preoccupied with unrequited love for decades, mainstream Pakistani musicians began to express the chronic national dissatisfaction with the government and general state of affairs.”

under the umbrella of the youth brand, DJuice, has recently replaced the more frivolous tagline, “Fun to be young”. Part of this campaign is the call to raise questions and text in answers, to get people thinking about Pakistan and Pakistani society. Questions like: “Do we respect females outside our homes?” or “Is it possible to get a job without a ‘reference’?”

Of course, that would be the corporate sector taking stock of the prevalent mindset and cleverly exploiting it for advertising purposes. However, it does mirror the truth that right now we are a demand-articulate nation, unafraid to ask questions. The real challenge is how to use the tools at our disposal to proceed from there.

So far, we’ve all just been trying to figure it out. One gets a sense of angst from the popular music that has emerged over the past couple of years, focusing on passion, patriotism, and the desire to “do or die”. After being preoccupied with unrequited love for decades, mainstream Pakistani musicians began to express the chronic national dissatisfaction with the government and general state of affairs. Shahzad Roy discovered satire; Strings and Atif Aslam decided the young folk had to assume ownership of their future; Ali Zafar flashed a winning smile in support. Socialist band Laal brought Faiz Ahmed Faiz back to life, with English subtitles for the urban You-tubers. All of this has been a reflection of the spirit that prompted the formation of a plethora of social media-driven youth groups, with the vague mandate of creating positive energy.

Interestingly, amazingly, the spirit has worked. Now the notes are becoming increasingly upbeat, so that the prime concern is not just being loud enough to criticize everyone else, but collectively forging a practical course of action. The newest Strings video being shared on Facebook and national television is gentler, sweeter, less virulent, featuring schoolchildren and the things they want to see. In the transition towards maturity, there seems to be a concerted effort to move beyond rhetoric. Apart from calling the odd discussion panel and signing a petition, young people are now being recruited by a variety of development initiatives, and there is a new spirit of volunteerism. They are also being incentivised to channel their talents through projects like “Teach for Pakistan”, which offers fresh graduates and professionals competitive salaries to teach in under resourced government schools for two years. The first batch of TFP fellows will be recruited this summer, to “start the movement” and play an active part in ending the “education emergency”.

There is something electrifying about “revolution”, a word that can rouse individuals who had been written off to apathy. Real development is not as glamorous; there is no adrenaline in the struggle, results are slow and hard to come by. But to successfully drag it into public discourse and create the momentum for change – that is nothing short of revolutionary.

After all, every place has its own “Tahrir”.

# THE SHREDDING

69

by Myronn Hardy

There were three visiting hours left. My sister dropped me off at the house and turned right back in the direction of the hospital, and I wondered if Dad had wanted me to stay the whole time. It was hard for him to stay awake for us. He needed rest, to heal, but those were my justifications none-the-less. The next morning, I'd resume the playwright's life in New York City: none of my plays had been produced yet. Every day I actively fought depression.

The house was dark, excluding the light that came from the kitchen window in narrow, luminous bars. I opened the curtains in the dining and living rooms to let in more, but all I got were murky olive shards, nothing yellow, gold, not even pale blue. I cut sprigs of tarragon growing from the window planter and placed them on the kitchen counter. The specks on the stone top were like those on my father's hospital-robe, except his were small flowers growing out of him, as if the body were already a heap of cold earth.

"Dad has cancer," my sister had said when I answered the phone at work.

I ran my hand through my hair; I needed a haircut. Silence. I didn't believe her. And if I had, I didn't know what to do, if I could do anything. My grandfather was my only experience with familial death. I was eighteen when he had a heart attack. Everyone else was still alive - we visited my grandparents every Christmas and every summer until I started college. No illnesses, only one immediate death, but at age twenty-seven, there I was, there we were. I was afraid.

"How far along is it?" I asked.

"They think they got it early but they won't know until they operate. It's in his intestines."

I looked at my watch. Then, I looked at the annoying person in front of me, listening. I'd hardly said anything for the month I'd worked there. With each job, I became a machine made of a tie, an oxford shirt, slacks, and black shoes. The thirty minute train ride provided time to push myself in, to prepare for the menial labor: stapling documents, checking copies with originals, alphabetizing.

I told her I'd call back. I kept working.

Later, she told me Dad had laughed when the

doctor informed him. My Mom cried when he told her, as did my sister in her apartment an hour and a half away. She drove in and sat beside them both, their hands balled together.

I called Dad. "Valerie told me. If there is anything you need, please let me know." My voice trembled through the cliché.

"What would really make me better is for you to get stable. I don't want to have to worry about you." I swallowed air. "You're a playwright, so be one. You've got to be able to support yourself, have insurance. You're out there totally naked."

I imagined myself prostrate on a sidewalk, holding my bleeding stomach, a gash on my forehead. It was too quiet, too dark, too expensive for anyone to see.

"If something were to happen, you'd be in a ward somewhere. You know how much a couple of nights in the hospital cost and a disease? If your Mom needs you, you'll have to buy a ticket out here. Make some money, Hollis. I've been worried about you too long."

"Okay. Good night."

He hadn't noticed any of my hard work. How could he? To tell him my life, my attempted work was difficult, would've been analogous to saying water was hard to find on Mars - it didn't matter to a man who grew up poor, picked cotton, and created an "American" life for us.

I got an evening job teaching introductory drama two nights a week at a community college. I had to wear a tie - the same tie I wore the whole day. It felt good being there, anyway, even though the students hated Sophocles, hated Tennessee Williams, hated Arthur Miller, and hated Adrienne Kennedy. At least I was doing something noble, something that meant more than money (the pay was horrible), something that took more than an elementary school education to understand, something I could tell my Dad and he could tell the rest of the family.

My sister bought my airplane ticket. She was younger and had a real job. I arrived the evening before the surgery.

The first thing I said to her was: "This is crazy?"

She laughed, "Yes. That's what I keep saying."

"How's Mom?"

“She doesn’t show anything. Like you.”

I looked out the window. “Did you ever notice how much space there is in Michigan? Everything is so open.”

“Only the clouds, they’re big.”

My aunt and uncle, my father’s sister and brother, had come the day before. I wore my camel hair jacket, the one I put on the nights I taught.

“Here’s the professor,” my uncle said. I hugged him and my aunt. I hadn’t seen them in three years. My sister said my father had driven them all over the city, showing them his investment property. He was very proud. It erased those years working for a company he’d hated. He’d built his own hard empire.

I hugged Mom. She was shredding cabbage and carrots. I saw Dad. I looked for the disease in the air around him, a clue in his skin, a chill in his hands, in his shoulders – nothing. He seemed unchanged, the same blue shirt, jeans, boat shoes with white soles.

“How’s teaching?” My aunt asked.

“It’s good.”

“And writing?”

“I’m working on two new plays.”

“At the same time?”

“I’m trying to enter them into a festival. They choose two for full productions, another two for staged readings, and four playwrights get to participate in a workshop lead by somebody important.” I said this as if she knew what all this meant to me.

“Good luck with that.”

“I’ve been asking for luck many years. I need something else.”

“I want to come to New York and see your name on a Broadway marquee,” my uncle said.

“Or off Broadway, or off-off Broadway,” I said.

“Yes.”

I brought only a knapsack with a few pairs of underwear, Tom Stoppard’s *Jumpers*, papers to grade, and a toothbrush. We watched a terrible movie on television, a human-like machine saving the planet from an alien invasion. My sister put in a DVD on how meat is processed in this country. There were chickens eating their own shit in tiny cages, and sick, deformed pigs tortured before being slaughtered.

“Debra, after this surgery let’s think about becom-

ing vegetarian.”

“We should start right now,” Mom said. We’d already eaten, except for Dad, who couldn’t. The duck felt like marble in my stomach, full of veins.

I slept in the same bed I did as a boy. It was too small. Diplomas, soccer trophies, they were all there on the dresser. I kept the blinds open so I could see the shadows of the blue pines in the yard. I didn’t really sleep. My eyes were closed. I was worried and wanted to call grandmother but I thought it might be too early. That was how I was raised; good, bad I hadn’t decided.

Before driving to the hospital, Dad asked us to stand in a circle in the foyer, with our hands connected. It was the first time I’ve heard him pray. Throughout my life, I thought he was an agnostic, that we were the same at least in this way. Yes, we went to Mass, maybe once a month, but who really believed in a Michelangelo-rendered God, passing judgment on the world in such a ruthless way? Apparently, I was wrong about him.

I kept my hand on his shoulder in the car, through the automatic hospital doors, into the lobby, until he had to go to the prep room alone. The waiting area was basic, with its horrible prints of random mountains. There were three families there with us, all dealing with someone with cancer. Some of the children waited in the well-cushioned seats upholstered with red cloth, crayons and bald dolls in hand. I felt worse for them. My sister and I were adults.

“He’s got to see me get married,” Valerie whispered.

“He will,” I said.

“It has to happen. I can’t imagine...” She rested her head in my lap.

Father Logan sat next to Mom.

“Thank you for coming,” I said.

“It’s good to see you. How’s New York treating you?”

“It’s rough.”

“It will get better, as will your father.”

“He’s a bulldog.”

The nurse came out of the prep room. “Two of you can go in.” Valerie and Mom immediately got up.

“I’m the priest...”

“You can go in as well,” she said. There I was, left alone, the only one with a birthday in July, (theirs

were all in February), the only one in our family who left Michigan. I looked out the window. It was clear and getting cold.

The nurse came out again. “The rest of you can go in now.”

She didn’t wear a white hat, white shoes, or a white uniform. I was disappointed.

Dad had been drugged. But his heartbeat was strong on the monitor: sharp green bars. We waited. A male nurse came in.

“Hi, my name is Carmen. I’ll be assisting the doctors during the surgery.”

“Did he say his name was Carmen?” Mom asked as he left.

“Yes,” my aunt said.

Dad woke up. “Carmen. A man named Carmen? They’re trying to kill me.”

My uncle laughed. “No one’s killing anyone.”

“Well, he didn’t seem....”

“He can hear us.” Valerie interrupted. “The man’s parents gave him that name. He had nothing to do with it.”

“Is it time already?” I asked as the doctors came in.

“Good morning,” they said. “How is everyone today?”

My mom hugged them both.

“As you know, the surgery should take about four hours.”

“Could you keep me informed? Half way through, could you have someone call me?” Mom asked.

“Of course. Anything else?” He stood there. He had a red handkerchief tied around his head, patterned with Siamese fighting fish – a peaceful warrior.

We waited. My aunt and uncle went out with Valerie to get lunch. I sat with Mom. “We’re on another planet.”

“I’m somewhere floating,” she said.

“So am I.”

A friend of hers came by with tuna sandwiches. She’d lost her husband a year ago to a sudden heart attack, and had gotten remarried to a man she grew up with in Alabama. It was strange to me, the swiftness of

the event – almost forty years with someone and less than a year after their passing, somebody else. Is being alone so terrible? Is the fear of it worst of all? So used to a body, a smell, used to the talking. For me, alone was bliss, the place where plays enter, take hold, a world I had to inhabit.

“Have you gotten another degree?” Mrs. Moore asked.

“No. Just more plays.”

“I want to see one.”

I was irritated. “I do, too.”

“I don’t know how you can live in New York. I couldn’t do it.”

“I don’t know either,” Mom added. “Too much noise, too fast, too dirty. Nobody cares if you’re dead or living or crazy.”

“It’s my city.”

“You’re having such a hard time there. You should come home.”

“I’ll stay where I am.” I held Mom’s hand.

Mrs. Moore left, giant sunglasses over her eyes.

I pushed a metal cart from the parking lot into the market. Everything was clean and shiny – there were aisles of seemingly uniform foodstuffs and carnations in green buckets bundled in plastic. The strong scent of freezer burn and roasted meat wrapped itself around me. It wasn’t crowded, maybe ten shoppers and two children tearing open a twenty pound bag of jelly-beans so candy flew everywhere. I reached into my pocket to pull out my wallet; the brown paper list grandmother gave me fell to the floor.

That Christmas of 1999, an ice storm had hit Mississippi, white, opaque, and slick. Grandmother waited until everyone in the house went to visit my grandfather’s brother down the road. She had me stay behind. She pulled the list from her breast pocket, unfolded it, and handed me the small square. I read each word written carefully penciled cursive: pimentão, tomate, tomilho, alho. It was her lone relic of her native country. In 1926, Brazil was giving away her dark girls. The country’s government and elites begged Europeans to emigrate; offered land, housing subsidies, anything to stay, settle, and fuck away the African and indigenous peoples, blend them until they became white and solidify their hate for those who weren’t or appeared not



*Above: Maria's Baby by Amra Khan*



to be. Most of Brazil conceded, including the blacks; we had been defeated. My grandmother's mother sent her to the market with that list. She didn't come home. After purchasing vegetables, two American nuns escorted her to a ship in route to New Orleans. They told that five-year-old girl that her mother had sent them. She remembered seeing pigeons fly from the gravel ground toward the sea. She cried there, afraid of everything.

Her mother believed it was best; a new country, education, abundant food, and, Christ, everything she was struggling to attain in Brazil, *esperança* for her only daughter. My grandmother lived and studied in the convent until 1939, when she fell in love with my grandfather. No longer a nun herself, she married him the same year. They settled in Mississippi, a pair of sharecroppers in the Jim Crow South. What trade was this, that strange country for another?

Grandmother wanted to go back to Recife. Wanted to see her brother, her father, ask her mother why she alone was sent away. It took years to get a visa, several applications, interviews, and several rejections. The money for travel began with saved quarters in a jar, then income from the fig preserves she sold from the tool shed. In 1947, she returned alone. My grandfather asked for letters – he wanted to see what she saw. She'd taught him to read in the eight years they'd been married. He wanted to discover her beginning, her line with its heavy boughs, her refocused sight. There, in a square of chaotic exuberance, she ran to embrace her brother. His hair had begun its slow swirling turn to mirror his gray eyes. She told me Pierre Verger had taken their photograph, the instant set in a surge of chemicals and light. He invited them for coffee. João's arms around his sister's shoulders, his linen jacket and slacks, dusty but it made sense, my grandmother's hair full of salt, as was the news of their mother's death. They both exchanged addresses with Verger but knew there was barely a possibility he'd send prints. She and her brother went home to greet their father. He was finally happy.

I gathered all the items on the list, as well as the ones I knew were missing, and drove home. In 2002, I had traveled to Brazil on a small grant. I met my great uncle in Bahia, his daughters, his sons, and his two grandchildren who were slightly older than me. I looked like them and they told me so. I helped shell crabs and scale fish for the stew. I wrote down every ingredient in the small leather-bound journal I keep with me almost always: the sun in the house, the brack-

ish air, the tables made of loose wood slats, the bamboo and plastic chairs, the guitar, tambourines, drums, singing all night, the amber dawn. Discovery. This family, all of us from the same place, blessed and cursed by boats. I went to Salvador to see the Verger exhibit. It was housed in a building where slaves were once held until sold. In the cobblestone plaza outside the gallery, shoeless, unwanted dark boys begged the white tourists for money. The children were shunned away, even spat at, before the ticket holders entered the building of red walls and mirrors. I shook my head – we had arrived in the same place.

I searched for the photograph of my grandmother and great uncle. They were right decades earlier, a year before my father was born: no prints came in the mail. But I found it. Yes - big-eyed, startled. I could hear how loud that day in 1947 must have been.

My last week in Recife I spent writing in various *parças*. My favorite faced a school where there were young and old students, in a uniform of white shirts and black pants either long or short. One of my last mornings, I left my uncle's house early and placed my only one act play at the foot of the main school door. I made sure no one saw me and hoped the red folder wouldn't go unnoticed. I waited, attempting anonymity in the plaza. First it was opened by a small girl who showed it to an older girl, then to a boy about seventeen, then a young man about twenty three. They laughed, pointed at the words, read the speeches out loud. A throng of young people gathered, including a teacher who questioned the commotion. Had I become Abdias do Nascimento? Started Teatro Experimental do Negro? I should have donated copies of Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*, published a newspaper, formed a political committee that fought for the rights of unjustly accused prisoners, and become a senator. My hope was simple: that the school would perform or at least read the play to an audience, if only of themselves, and laugh and think and wonder who Hollis Coleman was, how and why that funny, strange play showed up at their door – fell from the sky.

In the kitchen, Moacir Santos played on the stereo. I sorted the beans and washed them in the colander. Did grandmother know of Santos, the wanderer, the orphan, the genius boy from Flores do Pajeú? In Brazil, I hadn't heard any of his music on the radio. The first time I heard one of his songs was in Chicago. My friend's father owned several of his albums; we listened

74 to them without speaking.

Only my grandmother told me of Brazil. My father never brought it up and I didn't either, at least not to him. Brazil was a secret between my grandmother and me. Perhaps that's why she gave me the list. I was the only one who learned her first language.

After the four-hour surgery, Dad's voice was scratchy and hoarse – the breathing tube had irritated his throat. Mom held his glasses. We were blurry to him, impressionistic collectives of color, but our voices were clear. It was difficult for him to move, to be comfortable; his body had been distorted and reorganized. We were thrilled he'd gotten through it and wouldn't have a permanent plastic bag coming off his side, which he'd have to empty himself.

"I can't talk too much," Dad whispered. "They gave me some throat spray, but it burns."

"Then just leave it alone," Uncle Fredrick said. He chuckled. "We don't want anything burning you today." The patient next to him watched television with his son, who couldn't have been older than twenty. I found out later that it was his third surgery; the cancer wouldn't stop growing. The window next to his bed was wide. Outside, the parking lot was ominous, as was the sky. Deep breaths – one more hour before we'd leave, before I could sleep.

He couldn't walk, but he had to try. The first time, he fell over and two nurses helped him back into bed, tubes everywhere.

"I feel like my stomach is going to break open," he said. "What's going to happen if my stomach tears open?"

"Just rest," Mom said fluffing his pillow. "Look alive, Eli."

Dad smirked. "Everybody wants something I can't give."

"Get yourself together. Positive thinking helps the healing process," Uncle Fredrick said, folding his arms. "We all love you."

"Is this love?" Dad asked.

"You are getting better," Aunt Sloan said.

"Miraculous recovery," Mom said. We laughed nervously.

We went and sat in the lobby when the nurse told us Dad needed rest. Friends I never knew he had floated into the room, filling the space with heat and

chatter. The group he ate fish with every other Sunday afternoon and his racket-ball and church buddies came and hugged Mom. They introduced themselves to my father's siblings and to me.

"You look like your father," Mr. Davis said.

"I know."

"New York."

"Sounds like a song," I said.

"Many songs."

Dad had changed since I'd left home. He used to tell me constantly that one could only depend on family. Perhaps it was his reason for rigorously scrutinizing every kid I played ball with. It made it difficult for me to trust anyone else. But I did, eventually, and my sister never had any trouble with that. She was very social from the beginning and laughed when Dad made his inevitable remarks.

All of those people in the waiting room were concerned and loved him. He had worked through something his father probably branded on his brain, given to him for protection in that strange time, part of the country where overt pathology was sanctioned.

The next morning, the nurse told us Dad had been walking with her. It was a good sign. "You've been walking?" Mom asked.

"A little bit. I've got to try some more today." He looked thinner. It wasn't good, even though he was overweight and had been all of my life. What was going on in that body? I wished him transparent skin, so someone could see what was taking place and fix it quickly. The five of us stared at him, sometimes smiling at the same time.

"You had a lot of people come by yesterday," Valerie said.

He smiled. "And what did they want?"

"This is a good morning for you," Mom said.

"Yes, I got some more pain killers, a constant drip," he whispered.

"Wouldn't mind some of that myself right now," Fredrick said. "Take away all the pain."

Dad began to snore. We sat in the empty waiting room. I corrected papers, most of which I couldn't read. Everything was wrong with them. I used a blue pen so they wouldn't seem so tortured.

First he strolled with Mom, slowly struggling with the wheeled walker. Each step in the waxed hallway was painful, the lines on his forehead like rivers. Fredrick, Sloan, and Valerie followed behind. I stood at the end of the vestibule, facing them. The tubes and I.V. swayed with each awkward step. I couldn't believe I was leaving the next morning. I wished I could have stayed to provide whatever help I could (this was questionable because there was nothing I could do, a man with limited language).

Mom asked me to walk with him alone. I rested my hand on his back. I had him stop before I retightened his hospital robe. The floor's glare made me think of the sun in my eyes when Dad showed the pigeon in his hands. I think I was nine, maybe ten.

Thompson Lane was the name of our street. My father caught a pigeon that had gotten into the house through the chimney. He walked to Jared's, where I was playing in the yard two houses from ours. He called me over to see the bird. He held it with both hands, its body surrounded by a red wash cloth. It seemed afraid. Cloudy lids that looked like cataracts covered its glossy-black eyes.

He passed it to me.

"Careful. Hold on tight," he said.

I was afraid I'd crush it, that I'd kill the bird that looked so terrified and fragile. Jared ran away as the pigeon broke free, flying away from us.

"I didn't want to let it go," I said.

"We were going to have to at some point, Hollis." I watched my father pick up the red towel that had fallen to the grass. "I just wanted you to see it, feel its heartbeat."

"I'm sorry."

"Why are you sorry? There's nothing to be sorry about." I hugged him for being kind, gentle when I thought he wouldn't be, when I thought I didn't deserve him to be, when I thought I'd made a mistake. There we were near the cul-de-sac, in Jared's yard, covered in copper light.

Dad got to the end of the hall and we walked back into his room. The nurse helped him into bed and properly reconnected each tube.

"We're going to get lunch," Mom said.

"Hollis, can you stay?" Dad asked.

I sat in the chair. "I'm right here."

They all left.

"Last night I couldn't fall asleep. I kept looking out the window. I felt like jumping out. If I'd had the energy, I would have tried."

"I don't understand."

"They lessened the pain killers. The epidural was changing my heartbeat. You don't want this to happen to you."

"Don't talk about me. This is about you."

"It's about all of us. They cut me wide open. I feel like a fish with its intestines pulled out."

"How do you know what that feels like?"

"I'm living it."

"Correction, a fish is usually fried after having its guts yanked out."

Dad tried not to laugh. "Can't you let me have a minute to say something crazy without smart comments? I was making a metaphor."

"You were attempting a simile."

Dad laughed harder and held his stomach. "Don't make me laugh, it hurts too much. I might pop one of these stitches."

"I'm going to try."

"I can't take it."

"All right."

"What time do you get back to New York?"

"9:00 a.m."

"Don't forget about me. You have the number right?"

"Yes." I frowned. How could anything else be more important?

"I can't stand being in here. I feel like a rat undergoing experimentation."

"You need to relax. Think of Mom and Valerie."

"And what about you?"

"And me. Think of me."

I crushed cilantro and hot peppers, then spooned the thick paste into the stew. I took the beans off the stove, added olive oil, garlic, salt, and pepper, and poured them into a large white bowl. I put the rice on a serving platter and tossed it with chopped cilantro and lemon slices. I prepared a salad of arugula, toasted walnuts, and dried cherries dressed in oil and vinegar. I washed my face and waited. Just as I started to stretch



*Amra Khan*

plastic wrap over the food, they arrived.

"This looks good, Hollis," Fredrick said. "Let me go wash my hands."

They dished everything out and ate.

"Who do you have on the stereo?" Mom asked.

"Moacir Santos. Born the same year as John Coltrane, Miles Davis, and Enrique Jorrín."

"I like this."

"He's Brazilian. It goes with the meal."

I waited for a story, some acknowledgement of the country so hidden, so secret.

"Did you learn how to make this there?" Sloan asked, a shrimp close to her mouth.

"I did. I learn how to prepare something from wherever I go. Well, I try." I touched the table then continued to eat.

"I need a little bit more," Valerie said, getting up from the table.

I spotted an opossum's red eyes in the backyard. I wondered where she was headed in the dark. Had she been there before? Once again, I remembered the flowers blooming on Dad's robe. I imagined myself crushing them in my hands. Nothing but the body would live there, nothing would take away its nourishment.

Back at my apartment, the answering machine had two messages from friends excusing themselves (with too much explanation) for having to miss the concert. I was disappointed. I'd made the reservation as a pretext, to have a place to tell them what had happened, how I didn't know what to do, how I didn't know how to handle this.

The telephone rang. I picked it up and said, "Grandmother" before she could even say anything on the other end. Her tone shook as she told me she'd dreamed of swimming in the sea and finding her son floating, holding a place on his body that bled.

"It was like red ribbons unraveling from him. The water was warm. I saw the shore of my country in the distance but my son could hardly speak. What's wrong with your father?"

I didn't want to tell her. I was quiet.

"I saw those pigeons in the dream. They were those same pigeons I saw when I left Brazil." I bit my bottom lip. "Why aren't you talking to me, Hollis?" I grunted.

"Ribbons in the water," she said. "I couldn't stay asleep to pull him to shore." 77

"Call home, call my father," I said.

She hung up. I dropped to the floor and stretched myself as wide as I could. I wanted to hear my joints snap, tendons tear, to feel something even more painful. But nothing was, nothing on this body, no harm to this body could feel sobad

I was alone at the Vanguard. It was the first time I regretted that fact. An open beer on the table, I looked around the dark room: skeletons. I was shaking as the concert began. The trumpeter removed his porkpie hat, revealing a Mohawk haircut. He was high, and he almost fell over as he played and laughed just before finishing a wavering note. Hadn't he learned from his predecessors, so many irrevocably destroyed? Perhaps they were merely finishing the mission with a series of muted booms.

From under the table, I dialed Dad's number, then pressed my phone against my ear, but there were only rings, each muted, drowned in the music, the song I usually loved.

I remembered being small, when Dad used to walk me to school each morning. Before he'd leave me at the door, he'd say: "When I pick you up, we'll discuss what you've learned today. So learn something."

Where was my father? Where was I? With an elbow on the table, my hand over my face, it came: the Atlantic, the Mississippi, Lake Superior, Michigan, Huron, Erie; everything blurred.

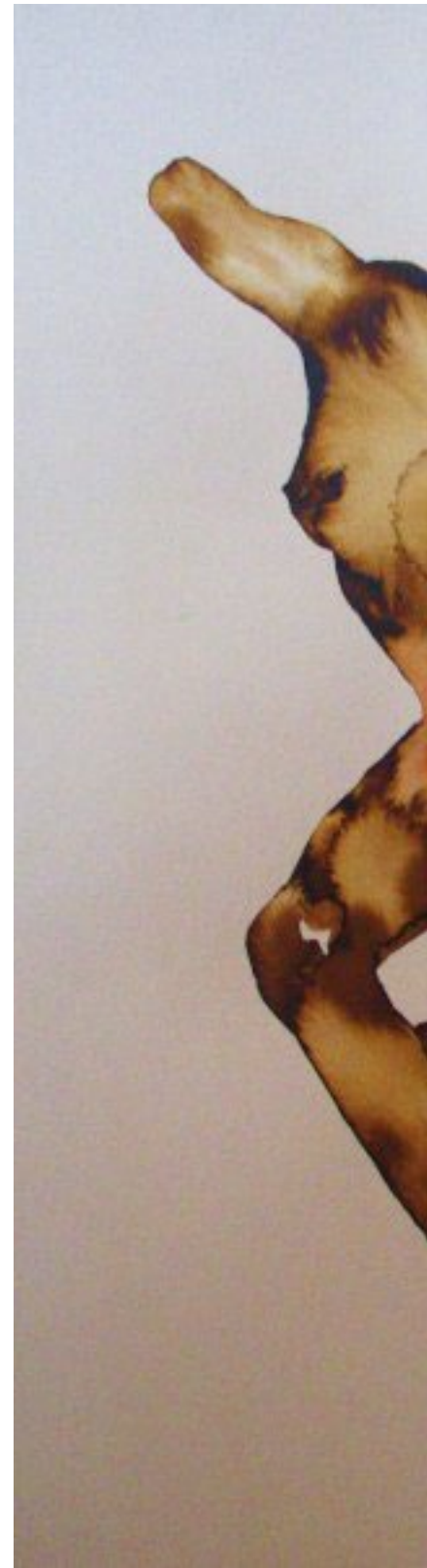
*Myronn Hardy has published short stories in Gulf Coast, Gargoyles, Callaloo and elsewhere. His short fiction has been nominated for two Pushcart Prizes. He lives in Morocco where he is completing his first novel.*

## 78 HOSPITAL

Down the bruised cement walkway  
I stalk past the bus stop sign,  
towards the Hospital.  
When I yawn my ears burst  
and I awaken to the crunch of salt  
and the slice of tires through water.  
The building breathes.  
the windows wink  
with the flash  
of a dashing ambulance  
that careens between  
the overhang and the bench.  
The scream in the night,  
like a dying animal,  
with its neck  
on the block.  
The red barn doors open.  
They flock to the trough  
and carry the battered body  
into the bleeding room.

—*Nick Kellner*

*Nick Kellner is a History major from Brantford Ontario Canada. He enjoys listening to Folk music, backpacking across America, and reading old letters. He is currently President of the McMaster Poetry Society.*



*Above: Twist & Turn*

## THE TRAVELER

Quiet creation surrounds  
thin-lipped conflagration.

Living, breathing nuances  
speak docketts of cursive myopathy.

I forget myself in crowds  
hypnotized by blood, plasma, + sweat.

The brown sounds of dusty cows  
+ dark eyes  
become ancient memories  
+ fuel melodies

of packing never-ending reams of laundry  
into suitcases + herding unwilling travelaitrics  
into ornery schedules + transparent prison cells.

We are at the mercy of the tour bus now,  
praying for a bit of sun without the glare,  
the tender heart of a kind stranger,  
pretending that shelter makes a home,  
that tarps make a wall;

we retreat into timeless mores of right + wrong,  
as time + space make fools of mothers + fathers + hope.

—Omar Azam

*Omar Azam, of Chicago, has roots in Pakistan and India. He performs writing of all kinds and believes in the total freedom of the artist. His poetry is influenced by the modernists, songwriters, visual artists, madmen, and storytellers. His poetry has been published in some of the best little e-zines out there, including Anastomoo, metazen, Clean Sheets, and vox poetica.*

*Publisher's note: This poem has been previously published at ditch magazine.*



by Amra Khan

## 80 MORE THAN JUST A MOM

by Wajiha Hyder

*The new goddess for the New Age.*

Life has been generous enough to bestow a wide-ranging array of experiences upon me: some stupendous, some not entirely so and others just plain dreadful in every respect. Working full-time, however, was never among the most cherished first faction of my experiences, and quite regrettably so. I don't think I'd be doing any injustice to my memory if I said that "indifference" is perhaps the only word that comes to mind vis-à-vis the four odd years I worked for the corporate sector. Every now and then, though, it occurs to me that the foremost reason behind my nonchalant attitude was the irrefutable fact that I came from a financially secure background. This essentially meant that I could 'choose' not to work and get away with it: a concept, which, by definition, is still a dilemma. While a greater part of the present working class quite possibly consists of women who are there to support their families, a handful have chosen to take up their professions out of sheer passion, to carve a niche for themselves in society and to make a difference.

No matter what the ideology behind the decision may be, life for a working woman is hardly a walk in the park, unless the park is densely forested, the walking path broken and trees home to the wildest of wildlife. The fronts on which she has to continually fight are numerous, sufficient to make an average man go bonkers. However, and quite disappointingly, instead of being given due credit for the tremendous effort that she manages to put in, she is forced to feel incredibly guilty for following the path of her dreams; either straight on or circuitously. Maira, a young doctor and a mother of two, seems to contentedly agree with this observation, "Among the more expected things like sleepless nights and the resultant dark circles under the eyes, raising children unfortunately also comes with bucket loads of guilt, for those of us who work", she says. "We eventually come to terms with every other thing that accompanies parenthood, but alas, we never quite figure out what to do with guilt, which henceforth remains irredeemable", she further adds. The guilt that she speaks of, more often than not is ignited in women by their disapproving husbands or if they are fortunate enough to have the support of their husbands, by society at large. Even in

this day and age, when the number of men choosing to lend a helping hand as far as household chores are concerned, is on the rise, that precious balance between the office and home held by women is more ambitious than that held by their male counterparts.

The modern woman is about so much more than just being a homemaker; she's more educated than ever, more aware of all the possibilities that can be utilized to an advantage. This woman is at par with men in terms of economic status and is doing rather well at it; though the much feared question still exists: is she truly emancipated? According to Anum, who has been working in the corporate sector for the last 15 years, women still have a long way to go, "I don't really think that we are (truly) liberated. From being looked upon as a menial slave, a woman is now looked upon as an automaton that is somehow going to strike a fabulous balance between work and home; (and when) failing to do so, is automatically labeled as a failure in both." Anum feels that the work/life balance is nothing more than being equipped with the ability to carry on working without feeling like a jumpy, drained, guilt-consumed wreck who reckons that she's failing both as a mother and an employee. "The key is to feel confident about the choices you have made rather than being pressurized into feeling culpable", she adds.

The only solution perhaps is to discover a realistic work/life balance, and while there is hardly any such thing as perfect, a satisfactory point can still be reached nonetheless. Sorting out your priorities could be one concrete step towards achieving that, whereas not paying much heed to the general discouraging attitude of people towards you could be another. "Accept first and foremost that you are a working mother, that the challenges faced by you on a regular basis shall be tremendously demanding in every respect; acceptance of something sometimes takes care of half the dilemma", says Maira. Anum on the other hand believes that a little organization in life goes a long way in increasing overall work/life stability, "Get everything prepared the night before if feasible. More often than not, it's the early morning stress that triggers that dreadful I-am-a-lousy-mother state of mind!"

Some of us work because we have to, some because we want to, and some because we just feel like assisting our better halves in giving the kids an improved stand-



ard of life. I left because I was never fully content in the corporate world.... but then perhaps I did it, because I could. The situation varies from woman to woman and each woman has to tackle her unique circumstances in her own special way.

Understanding one's own particular situation and

relying on one's own judgement is probably the best thing to do. But whatever one decides in the end, being satisfied with it is indispensable, for a content mum is more often than not, more equipped for managing life and hence a happier mum.



Above: *I'm The Only One That Can Carry His Disease* by Maria Khan

## 82 THE VAULT

by Maria Amir

*Crossing perceived boundaries.*

*"We sometimes encounter people, even perfect strangers, who begin to interest us at first sight, somehow suddenly, all at once, before a word has been spoken." - Fyodor Dostoevsky*

I suppose it is necessary to admit at this solemn stage that I was always an odd child.

Recently, I have been reading over my Little Mermaid Diary, dating back from when I was seven, and one particular entry caught my attention.

*Summer, June 11, 1994*

*Dear Diary,*

*Today Sana, Kiran, Tania and I were playing truth or dare after school because our cars were late. I picked truth and they asked me who I had a crush on. I told them about Rehan and they laughed at me for over an hour. Then they told me that people couldn't get crushes on servants and that it was very wrong.*

*I feel very ashamed. Mostly because I still think that Rehan is the kindest and handsomest boy in the world.*

*Maria*

I remember that day quite vividly. It rests among those one-off memories from middle school that one carries around in their conscience as some poignant remnant of a life lesson. I never told anyone about Rehan again. And I am sorry to say that I still feel 'ashamed' about that first crush.

I don't really believe in guardian angels, or angels ...or guardians for that matter but I know that I have had one. His name was Faiz - Baba Faiz, to be precise - and he saved me from my life for nearly 7 years, as I struggled to retain my humanity in the face of an all-too-appealing numbness. He died when I was seventeen and the numbness returned full force after that; it set in and congealed.

Faiz was in his sixties, a pathaan and from 'way up north'. The kind of north that one sees engraved in bonny pink skin, grey-blue eyes and an accent that can never, ever affect gender properly. He was the first person to ever call me 'Maria Saab' and he spent his time preparing secret meals for me; listening to my heavily

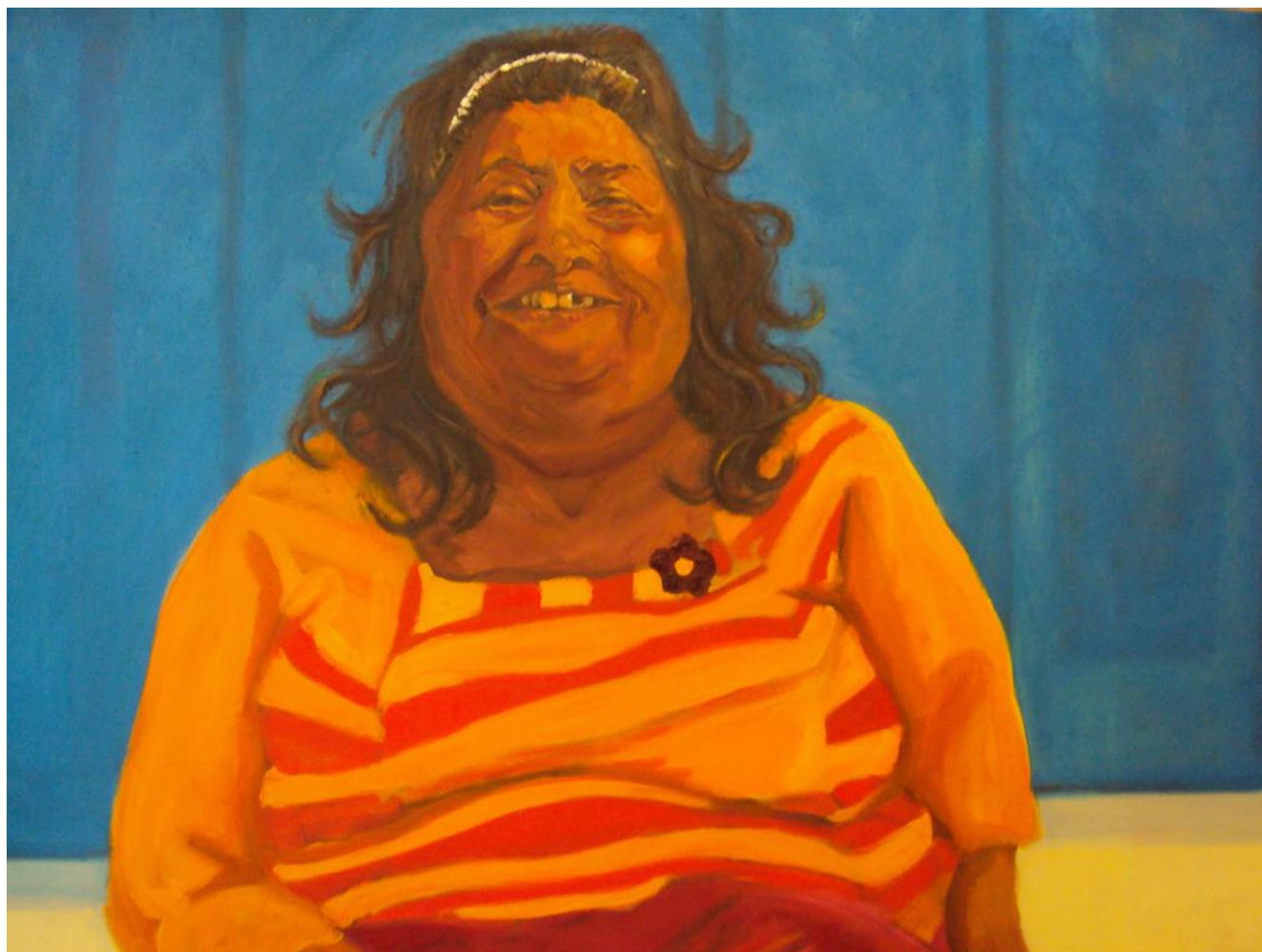
fabricated accounts of the novels I was reading as he potted around in the kitchen, pretending to appreciate my musical sensibilities as I forced him to listen to the Beatles, Dylan, ABBA and (I am ashamed to admit) on occasion, Ace of Base. He had the patience of a saint and never let me believe for a second that he wasn't hanging on every word I said, even though most of those words happened to be in English.

I have never really understood the pretty little boxes people construct to keep the classes at bay and in their 'proper' place. Perhaps this was because I was always surrounded and serving with the serfs. They were my people in many ways because they humoured me. And no one ever humoured me. Faiz was my ideal man really. He was beautiful, kind and brilliant and his being illiterate always struck me as a blight on society rather than on his person. I could never really hold it against him. I always figured that we were the cowards and that he needed to stay in the kitchen. Because if he could speak like us and sit with us then no one would bother giving us the time of day. There are some people that outshine everyone around them even when their goal is to fade in the backdrop, especially then. Faiz had a perverse tendency to remain, perpetually, in technicolour.

That's kind of how I felt about Rehan too. That summer Faiz's nephew from 'way up north' came to work near him. Rehan occasionally stayed with Faiz in our servant quarters after his work ended. He was fourteen and more beautiful than anyone I had ever seen. He was everything I wasn't...fair, tall, brilliant at every single sport he took up, adept at calligraphy and sharp and incisive about asking all the questions that I was too terrified to contemplate. He adored reading and learning and I remember him asking my cousins and I to help him learn English in exchange for teaching us how to make Afghan jewellery, climb trees, improve our cricket and tame our dogs.

I remember spending a lot more time with Faiz in the kitchen that summer hoping to catch a glimpse of Rehan and finding any excuse to impress him with my English. I didn't pass any chance to gloat about the only thing I had over him. A language he had never really had the chance to beat me at. It was a sad balancing of scales. Faiz always made it a point to stop our conver-

“ There are some people that outshine everyone around them even when their goal is to fade in the backdrop, especially then. Faiz had a perverse tendency to remain, perpetually, in technicolour.”



*Above: Right Here in My Arms by Maria Khan*

84 “ Suddenly Faiz was there and he was still the most beautiful man in the world and I still didn’t understand why I was not allowed to say that out loud.”

sations just when I got the feeling he was beginning to laugh at my jokes.

I have never really experienced that thrill since. Of meeting someone I so desperately wanted, and somehow I never realised how ugly my first crush was outside of that kitchen, swing-set and that gate. But now I realise how ugly it must have seemed to people. Ugly enough that I pretended it didn’t exist.

As for Rehan, his face always remained locked, like a safety vault. A myriad of ideas and valuable expressions closed away so that people couldn’t see him. I remember trying my utmost to flirt with him and his polite dismissals aimed at reminding me of my place. A place ironically above him on the crush-o-meter, despite the fact that I hardly measured favourably in any light he cast me in.

When he left after two months, Rehan gave me a

paazeb and a pair of jhumkis he and his brother had made, and I remember feeling for just a glimmer of a moment that he may have liked me too. I remember his departure being the first time I ever cried over a boy. It was an uncomfortable rite of passage for my first failed almost-romance, and I don’t really know who to blame for that one failure that set the pace for all future failings. I was reminded of it today completely by accident until I went searching for it in my Little Mermaid archives.

I had cut my finger on a blade in the kitchen and on my way to work I was still nursing enough self-pity to lead me to treat myself to garam cholay from a cart outside Raja Market. As I sucked on my finger prudishly, I noticed the sores and burns on the vendor’s hands. Blisters and boils collected over years spent making channas for people like me for a farthing. The man smiled as he handed me a Rs20-pack and he had Faiz’s eyes and accent. Suddenly Faiz was there and he was still the most beautiful man in the world and I still didn’t understand why I was not allowed to say that out loud.

I found myself choking on the winter air and couldn’t swallow a single grain as I grappled once more with a problem my life’s been spent trying to skip around.

The real tragedy is that knowing I’ll get over it.



## SPOTLIGHT: MUSICIAN ASFANDYAR KHAN

85

*Interviewed by Verda Adil*

Asfandyar Khan is a young Pakistani musician whose first EP 'Snow Makes Things Perfect' debuted last year.

TMS rep Verda Ali, and Mr. Khan met at a local hangout—Hotspot—in Islamabad, beneath the cool shade of a banyan tree. Khan spoke about the current musical scene and where he, and his music, fits in.

**First things first: how long have you been playing/making music?**

I've been playing the guitar for the past 6 years or so. I think I wrote my first song almost four years ago, but it was pretty horrible and put me off for a while.

**What was your upbringing like before music? Did it start off as a hobby and snowball into following a specific musical direction?**

Well, musically speaking my father was a substantial influence. He started me off on classical music – Mozart, Beethoven and Tchaikovsky. I ended being a big fan of the folk-rock band America. Then I sort of ignored music for a few years until I turned 13 and fell in love with Metallica. The idea of making music started to foster in my head then, and my parents eventually bought me a guitar. Though the idea of being in a band is always enticing for any teenager, I think only over the past three years or so did I realize I badly needed and wanted to make music. As for the musical direction, I think regardless of whether I'm in a dozen bands or so,

the need to make ambient music will probably always stay with me.

**Tell us about your album, 'Snow Makes Things Perfect'. Is there a story behind the title?**

Not anything special, I'm not particularly good with titles. I was going through something I'd written a while ago and came across the phrase. I ended up using it because I'm a big fan of Pakistani winters and it seemed to encapsulate most of the imagery I had in my head when I was writing the album.

**Do you see your music as the outcome of varying emotions and experiences or is it more process-oriented?**

I think it's a case of six of one, half a dozen of the other. Some of the material on SMTP, such as 'Hello, Morocco', was the outcome of a process-oriented approach, whereas 'Tarentum' tapped into this particular trip I had to Karachi.

**Islamabad's notorious, amongst other things, for being as slow-paced as it is pretty. Does its environment affect or influence the way you write music?**

I think subconsciously it does. The laconic pace perhaps not so much, but definitely the city's beauty (thanks in no small part of course to the Margallas). I'm not entirely certain how different my music would be if I were in Peshawar or Lahore, for example, but I do think Islamabad's atmosphere helps enable the sort of music I end up writing.

**Some of your music can at times be straightforward and dependent on repetition. You list some minimalist musicians such as Philip Glass as being one of your influences, so I'm guessing it's a conscious decision to some extent. Can you talk us through that?**

I've always been a fan of music that uses repetition as an emotional tool. I think it helps hammer the point home, though of course constant, consistent repetition can and will get tiresome. Philip Glass is a definite influence on the way I approach music aesthetically and intellectually, in that the drive for evoking an emotional response from the listener rather than an intellectual one takes precedence.

**What aspect of making music excites or discourages you the most?**

86 Recording can be quite discouraging because of the intricacies and annoying nuances present in that process. It can be very nitpicky. On the other hand, that moment when a few parts of music come together in unison and everything seems to fall into place is in itself worth the price of all those hours spent trying to come up with pertinent fragments of music.

**There are quite a few up and coming indie bands, such as //orangoise and Karachi instrumentalists 6LA8. Do you feel part of this 'scene'?**

I don't, at least with //orangoise, the music is fairly different. I do feel 6LA8 are far closer to what I do, but I think as a whole, in terms of making music that's separate from mainstream pop/rock fare or metal, I guess you could chuck me alongside that of //orange-noise and 6LA8.

**Are there any plans on your part to play live? And is your music going to be different live?**

I do want to play live, but whether or not that transpires is dependent on gear issues. My music will invariably be different live unless I use a laptop to run lots of samples on, and that's something I'm not sure about because it's sort of disingenuous. If I do that it'll effectively be a laptop performance, and I might as well not show up. So in my attempt to make things more organic I think the pieces will sound fairly different to how they are on the album, but I hope they aren't sig-

nificantly different.

**Is there anyone you'd like to write a song with, or collaborate with? Locally?**

I'm hoping to work with Talha Asim Wynne from //orangoise soon, but time and work can be an uninvited constraint.

**Finally, what should the unaware listener expect from your music?**

Soothing, guitar driven pieces of instrumental music. Music to sleep to; wake up to; drink hot chocolate to; listen to on a rainy autumn afternoon.



“ Soothing, guitar driven pieces of instrumental music. Music to sleep to; wake up to; drink hot chocolate to; listen to on a rainy autumn afternoon. ”

## THE LIMIT

by J. Scott

*Part II*

Aaron stared at the receiver in disbelief. She was so irrational, there was almost no dealing with it. Still, he had to. He had resolved that he would stand by his son, no matter the price.

So he noticed that on the ground by his feet, the package had become an army of ants. He instinctively kicked at it, but the damage had obviously been done. He picked it up by two half-open ends and shook it with a quick, frightened violence. A fair amount of the contents flung to the four winds, yet he kept a thumb on some of it. One or two of the cheeses, some dampened bread, and a fat piece of sausage survived the storm, and Aaron blew and brushed off the tiny invaders until he had made a complete mess of his hands and his food.

In the end, he was too creeped out by the insects to enjoy his pyrrhic victory. He threw the whole thing down in disgust. He wiped his greasy, sodden hands over his damp shirt, trying to shake away any fugitive bugs along with the now endemic wetness.

Coin. Coin. Coin.

It rang long. He steeled himself until she finally picked up.

“What, you didn’t hear me, Aaron? I said,” and the words were carefully enunciated, “Fuck. You.”

Click.

His gaze wandered down to the container of olive salad, still preserved in its plastic shell. He was pretty sure he was not going to like olive salad. Still, he picked it up.

His resolve had never been firmer. He would make it up to her later, in the peace of nightfall. He would find a quiet place and speak more softly. And his wife and son would make their flight in nine days.

Later, he could regain his composure, but at the moment, his heart was racing, and his body felt like a hot sponge of sink water that needed to be wrung out and left to dry somewhere. The early afternoon had become stinging hot, and Aaron took a personal offense to it. As he wiped himself off, smearing around wet human grit, he imagined this Hell’s breath to be a killer seeking him out.

He picked up the salad and got back into the car. To his surprise, the waft of pent up air was even more stinging. His felt an almost palpable danger assaulting him from all sides.

When he arrived home, after several false starts and wrong turns, he immediately put his head under the kitchen faucet. The water was lukewarm at best, but he let it run for a long time as he stooped and sipped from the estuaries that passed over his lips. Gradually, the surface of his head and neck quiesced, and he began to breathe more easily.

This respite allowed him to remember that he was in the heart of a brand new city. When he turned on the window air-conditioning unit and bent forward in front of it, he imagined little icicles forming on the follicles of his head, and all was well. His sense of adventure returned.

Quashing some time in the name of responsibility, he put together his son’s crib and fashioned the basics of the baby’s room. He hung spinning, colorful decorations from the ceiling at judicious intervals. He shuffled a couple of small bookshelves around and set out children’s books and stuffed animals on them. After some digging, he found a clean blanket for the crib and then moved all the extra debris from the room. In the end, he made a great mess of things in an effort to find the nightlight that he had bought for his son during the pregnancy. It was a grey and white sea bird he had picked up at some chintzy secondhand store. Afterwards, he had always called the boy his “little sand-piper”.

The light worked, so he went to the kitchen to eat his olive salad. It was miserable, and he ended up stirring it listlessly for a while. When he thought to look outside, the sunlight had dimmed a little. After a lukewarm shower, he decided the day was too shot for a trip to the ocean. At the very least, he would see the University.

It turned out to be less than three miles from where he lived, arrived at by way of a spacious and verdant roadway that revealed stately homes and periodic bells of charming streetcars. Across from the main building lay an enormous expanse of grasses, waterborne fountains, and weeping willows.

The sun hung low in the sky and, though Aaron

88 began to perspire, the sting had at least been removed from the hot air. Evening cicadas began to stir in hesitant clumps of activity, and the young scholar traversed the environs of his new school.

With every breath, he drew in the old, stonewalls, the crawl of the plants that stuck to them, and the august civility of the place. Wandering through the myriad buildings, including one made of a neat but faded salmon brick, which he knew to be his own department, he wondered what he might make of himself. The point was to use this place as a kind of lighthouse.

But to what purpose?

In the distance, stepping in and out of the shadows beneath an awning across the square, he saw a young girl. He sat on an ancient wood bench and watched her for a minute. She moved slowly, staring at the walls of the far side of the Norton J. Downing School of Psychology building.

At first, Aaron thought she might have been slyly turning over her shoulder to have a glance at him, but he decided that had the makings of an optimistic fiction. It seemed more plausible that she was conscious of being discovered. He watched on as she perched up on her tippy-toes and peered into a classroom window, her appropriate-length skirt suddenly appearing a little less appropriate.

More fiction.

She looked into that window for what seemed to him a long time before lowering herself to peak across at him again. He lit a cigarette and watched more. Peering and backing down, strain and repose, legs taught and again at rest – when she had finished her dance, she looked around openly. Finally, she made her way to the bench and sat down beside him.

The girl looked off into the dusk as though he wasn't there, and he made certain not to break the silence. It was a beautiful, burnt sunset.

“Have you got another cigarette?”

It was a husky voice, cracked where it should have been higher pitched. He pulled out a spare and clicked the flame. It didn't catch, and she took up the lighter for herself.

Delicate brush of fingertips.

“Thanks, I forgot mine,” she said.

“Sure. You can't explore a whole campus without something.”

The young woman nodded and averted her eyes. Up close, Aaron could see that she was almost in tears, and her hands trembled. She was short and slightly bony, with one of those kinds of bodies that could be taken for an adolescent's. Her black hair was straight and covered most of her bare shoulders. Only the blades poked through.

“I haven't seen the whole campus. Barely anything. It's my first time here.”

That last, she spoke with an exaggerated passion. Her dark eyes returned furtively to the Downing building and darted back again to the ground in front of the bench. Aaron noticed a little color had swelled up on her faintly freckled cheeks.

“But I think you've seen about as much as can be expected of that Psychology building, at least from the outside.”

They both smiled.

“Oh, you noticed that. You must think I'm a real freak, hmm?”

Her laugh was embarrassed.

“No way,” he added quickly. “It's my first time here, too. I've been wandering around myself. I'm Aaron.”

He held out his hand, and this seemed to startle her for a second. He thought of withdrawing it, but she grasped on and shook it awkwardly. He looked at her in curiosity.

“Oh, I'm sorry. Renee! My name is Renee.” She pulled her hand back quickly. “I'm sorry,” she repeated. “It's just . . .”

Her thoughts trailed off, and she stared at her shoes.

“Look, I'm sorry. I guess I just feel a bit lost.”

She was about to continue, but started fidgeting with her hair instead. Some of the red polish had chipped here and there, he noticed, as her fingers emerged between the twists.

Now it was Aaron's turn to feel his cheeks flush. Just then, she looked up at him, the white parts of her eyes glistening and almost watery.

He looked into them without hesitation, deciding.

A brush of nerves coursed through his body. She was so beautiful and scared and curious. Her movements struck him as precocious and sweet. And he wanted her. He tried to block that out, but it was visceral and only brought him a shiver.



“I can understand,” he replied calmly. “It’s a huge place. You could almost forget how to get back.”

The first year with his wife had been happy enough, but the last two amounted to a great, obnoxiously loud tragedy. Squanderous of his tolerance at first, he had shrunk inside as a horde of incensed pricks eventually turned into panic, and then into hatred – not of her, precisely, but of being around the yelling. This hatred had welled itself up inside him until he winced at all manner of abrasive noises. Drums, car horns, and cheering had become intractable foes.

“Do you think we could maybe get a cup of coffee?” she asked.

The words were as soft as wind, softer even when mixed with her wide-open gaze.

“I wish I could,” Aaron heard himself say. It was a hollow sound. “I really have to get going. It’s getting late.”

A hollow grave.

Are you sure? He thought on her behalf. Don’t you want me?

He tried to make his version of Renee stop, while he assumed a kindly but professorial tone in his description of the doctoral program to which he had recently been made a fellow, his plans for research, and even some conventional platitudes about the sorry state of American education.

She seemed eager to swallow it all, tolerating his pontifications and giving him a gracious smile whenever he paused.

Indeed, he used up all the time he had with her with his authoritative and paternal explications of vast nothingness in an effort to keep her there, in the moment. He refused to commit himself to something wrong, but he still kept the tension for as long as he could – while she was there, he could still change his mind.

The possibility lingered.

Don’t let me go. I’m so scared.

“I suppose I should get going,” she said eventually. “I’ve still got about a million things to do before school starts.”

He teased out some detail on a few of the million. That was only going to last for so long though. The possibility was waning. He could feel its enchantments flicker and steal away into the darkness, and there was

nothing he could do about it. Was he to keep her there listening all night? 89

The end came pathetically.

“It was so nice meeting you. It’s good to see a friendly face.”

She smiled again and said goodnight.

Are you sure you don’t want to?

He closed his eyes and let her go.

When he opened them again, the sun had set, and she was gone. The weeping willows broke apart the night sky like a photograph negative. Their dark limbs made pitch-black fireworks against the grey of early night. He watched their morose forms until the sky was one color and he could make out nothing at all.

While he sat, he didn’t see a soul. He sat a long time alone before walking back to the car. As he meandered listlessly, he found a booth and made the olive branch call to his wife. It worked.

Eventually, he drove home. He found his coat and slept on the bed. One might have supposed that Aaron would have slept better without his father there. That supposition would be wrong. His night consisted of a viscous mixture of sweat and tortured dreams. He faded in and out of these, giving himself a start whenever the apparitions came on too strong.

His father always watched him critically, with a cold and dissatisfied frown as first his wife appeared screaming something unintelligible and accompanied by blaring trumpets, then rabid monkeys swung from trees yelling “Where you at?” while an old white man pounded beneath them with a stick. A baby floated before him, smiling, then was taken away into the recesses of dark grey clouds by black tendrils.

Aaron stayed awake for a while trembling. Then Renee walked by, and he drifted off again into a deeper sleep. They talked about knowledge and laughed, and it was about something important, though later he could not possibly remember what.

He realized he was definitely awake only when he found himself staring once again at the slips of light from beneath the floorboards of his room. It took him several minutes to consider that he had seen the same thing the morning before.

The feeling of déjà vu irked him instantly, and he nearly jumped out of his bed. Had that entire day been a waste?

9 ○ He found his pants and pulled everything out onto the kitchen table. Forty-five dollars and three cents. Damn it. And the tank was under a quarter to boot.

He drew a breath. He would drive out along the Gulf Coast as far as he could, and back.

He found a diner and ate thoroughly, stopped at J.B.'s Grocery, and filled up at a station outside the city. The heat was pumping, but he refused to let it swamp him out of a second day.

He drove across Lake Pontchartrain Causeway, the longest bridge in the world. It spanned over twenty miles, and was built so low to the water in places that Aaron felt he was piloting a speedboat. A few inches more of lake, and there would be no more bridge. The structure was impressive, but he did not see how it could possibly last. The city itself nestled below sea level, but everyone knew that the floods would be kept at bay by powerful levies and pumps. The Causeway seemed like a ribbon of Scotch tape stretched out over the water, and about as flimsy.

By the time he reached Mississippi, the A/C had made Aaron almost civil. He rolled down his window, blending the hot and cold, pleased with himself. Dense thickets of vegetation surrounded the interstate and permeated all his senses, a barrage of exotic greens and fungal smells.

He paused to peruse the waterfront at Gulfport, disappointed by the seedy pawnshops and their feeders, the stately casino ships. He could maybe hawk his car and press buttons on the sexy, cash cow slot machines all night and hitchhike home. If only he had hitchhiked even once in his life, or if he had ever had the gambler's spirit, then Gulfport might have been enough.

As the signs portended the arrival of Biloxi, Aaron became panicky. For one thing, the gas gauge was already drifting around midway. He turned off the air conditioning. He put down all the windows and steeped himself in the sticky coastal air.

Too bad. Deal with it.

He wanted more than Biloxi. He had never been to Mississippi before, but to his mind that wasn't good enough. A bit more, and he could reach out and touch Mobile. He stopped in Biloxi and put the last of his bills down for more gas.

Eight dollars.

He had a small amount of change in the ashtray,

perhaps more wedged between and under the seats, but that was strictly for an emergency. It was there in case of a minor miscalculation. Aaron had no intention of abandoning the car ten miles from home for a long walk in the jungle. He would only concede to that if it was absolutely necessary. For now, he felt giddy with every click of the old-style gasoline pump. He guessed he would make it.

Ever since he could remember, Aaron had always greeted new states with the relish of Columbus. As a kid, he instinctively maintained that a state did not actually exist until he had personally set foot on it. This childish profundity had tempered with age, but Aaron still felt a residue of its romance swell inside him as he pressed on further.

By the time he arrived at the outskirts of Mobile, he was desperately, almost manically, excited. By then, there was no point of attempting to dry himself off. A cloth sufficiently large for the task did not exist. He followed the coast closely and pulled off at an opportune beachfront. Not only a new state awaited him, but a new ocean.

Over the top.

He took off his shirt and left everything but his keys in the car. When he hit the beach, he knew that he was in a foreign land. For one thing, only middle class white families populated the beach, replete with enormous parasols draped over plastic coolers – the kind with built in cup holders, elaborate strollers with all-weather wheels, tanned bodies and bold-striped beach balls. Sandy blond hair was the soup du jour and bright bikinis the *pièce de résistance*.

Aaron avoided all eye contact, pushing through the drifts of pure, white sand to the water's edge.

He hadn't done what he was about to do since he was sixteen, and that attempt had been partly thwarted. He had been out swimming with several of his friends during the summer. The ocean off California was always bitter cold. They had yelled at each other and sang foolish songs and laughed as they swam. But after a while, Aaron had become separated from the group, at first only by a small distance, and later farther and farther – something drew him out to the horizon. Soon the voices dimmed, and he could not see his friends at all whenever he looked back.

All the boyish commotion had apparently caused a stir with some of the locals. The bullhorn of a small

vessel of the United States Coast Guard abruptly ended his hope to swim far enough to lose sight of the shoreline. Between the blasts of the ship's horn, a man's voice kept repeating: "GO BACK TO SHORE. YOU ARE NOT ALLOWED TRESPASS TO THIS POINT."

It was not as if the bastards were offering a ride back or anything, much less making a rescue attempt. He wished he could defy them and just keep swimming, but he didn't.

This time it would be different. This time, there would be no group, no conspicuous vibes for the locals to latch their boredom onto, and no singing. Most significant of all, there would not be a boy. Nearly fifteen years later, he would see how far he could go and if he actually could lose sight of land. He felt like nothing could get in his way.

Aaron stepped into the water, his eyes holding the horizon steady in their grip. As the waves broke over his legs, particularly when he was able to take a full out plunge, all his skin sent back to him a message completely unexpected: "THIS WATER IS NOT COLD". In fact, the Gulf of Mexico was actually quite warm. Bath-tub warm.

Soon, Aaron found that it was neither refreshing nor invigorating in the slightest. He discovered he could actually sweat in it, and this discouraged him. His initial, mighty effort left him breathing hard and dripping his own stink into a rolling and tepid abyss.

When he stopped to look back, he could still make out the figures of the bronzed and resplendently colored Alabamans on the glittery sand. They still existed for him as moving flecks of debris, sparkling at least as brightly as the caps of florescent froth that rose and fell with the rhythm of ages.

Working his muscles hard, he followed his plan and made steady progress out to sea. The second time he turned back, he could not make out anything on the beach, and by the third he hardly saw the coast at all.

Farther, he insisted to himself.

One of his legs began to cramp, so he idled for a bit on the surface, floating on his back and trying to massage out the pain. He was breathing heavily.

Farther, farther.

In a couple of minutes, his mind won the debate over his body, and Aaron migrated out deeper into the endless maw. At last he found he could see only the faintest trace of land, and when caught a fuzzy glimpse,

it was as much guess as certainty. Any more, and only the high sun beating down on him could offer clues as to which way was home and which was afterlife.

This was far enough.

He grinned madly at his achievement, and soon broke into wild laughter. He couldn't be absolutely sure he had saved enough of himself to get back, but he knew he was a survivor. He was here now, and triumphant.

He unfastened his shorts and allowed his member to float freely. Among the gently swaying motions of ebb and rise, Aaron pleased himself. A wave of lethargy swept through him just as he spent himself, and he would have liked nothing so much in all the world as to stretch out and fall asleep. He may even have nodded off, but his legs had to keep treading the murky water.

He wiped off his face and saw his forearm was stained red. His nose was bleeding. He was scared. Scanning in every direction, he felt his heart beat harder and harder at the absence of any trace of land.

No shoreline. No hills. No nothing.

In his self-indulgence, Aaron had clearly lost his orientation. He had been on the very edge and gone one step too far. Anxiety rushed over him, and he took his best guess at direction from the sun.

The cramp in his leg would not go away. He disregarded it. He waited for a swell to come and peeked out over it for any sign.

Nothing.

He tried to take advantage of his body's buoyancy, but this only served to hurt his leg still more. He kept brushing away the blood and blinking out the salt.

Don't ever turn your back on the ocean, boy.

Aaron's heart sank. It wasn't as if he hadn't been warned.

He found an energy-conserving posture and tried to calm himself. He was headed the wrong way, obviously, so he would spend a few minutes studying the midday sun again.

You turned your back, didn't you, boy? And now look at you. You're gonna die.

He tried to block out the voice, but his fear was an unreliable guardian. He ended up trying several directions, and each time he bobbed his head up for a look, no land.

Turned your back, boy.

Not for the first time in his life – Aaron had always been at his best in the clutch – he closed his eyes and shut out everything. No water, no pain, and no past. Most of all, there was neither life nor death in his mind. Freedom and responsibility dissolved into the ethers of abstraction and then winked out of existence altogether.

He swam for a while this way, eyes closed and feeling nothing. Eventually he came out of his trance and opened them, calmly surveying, then finding the hazy border of Alabama. The blood had crusted over part of his mouth and across the left side of his face. The leg screamed at him faithfully. Aching muscles from head to toe joined in to make a harmony of pain.

Aaron was going to live, it turned out. And now the real work began. He angled the currents with the determination of mighty strokes, and when his body was sapped of its last strength, he let the flow carry him northwesterly. Each leg of the zigzag pattern of force and repose brought him a little closer to shore.

By the time he could identify the movements of people along the beach, he was unable to feel even a whiff of celebration. A kind of grim acknowledgment that a progress had been made was the only, fleeting reflection.

Back and forth. Force and repose.

At one point, Aaron thought he had heard voices and stopped. It was only the hah of gulls passing over his head. Or were they sandpipers?

He was making less progress than he needed to. He was letting the current carry him more than struggling against it. His right leg was becoming a useless spectator, just along for the ride. He tried to fight against the tides, tried to make headway with the right angle, but he started drifting more and more.

He wretched violently and made himself dizzy. In the midst of a bout with vertigo, he realized he could not have been conscious the whole time. Features along the beach kept changing. Everyone kept undressing themselves when he wasn't looking, then putting back on different swimsuits in an attempt to confuse him. Each time he studied them, the colors had been altered.

It's not the clothes, mighty scholar. It's the people. You're drifting . . .

You turned your back, boy.

Where you at? Whachugon'do?

Don't let me go. I'm so scared, Aaron.

Why don't you go talk to your faggot boyfriend?

When the voices finally subsided, Aaron found himself on his hands and knees on the wet sand. He was holding himself up and staring at the warm water lapping over his forearms. His body was shaking with a mild tremor, and he crawled out of the Gulf. Almost in tears, he felt the sand, hot and dry.

And then he collapsed onto his side, unable to move any further. His breathing slowed. He was too tired to feel anything and, left with his thoughts, he wondered if the fantastical whiteness of the sand might not be Heaven.

The sight before him held a majesty he could never have imagined. The glaring brilliance of it would have stunned his eyes if his eyes were capable any longer of being stung.

A red and blue beach ball landed near him, and he blinked away the mirage. A young boy, perhaps ten years old, walked towards the ball and gave him an uncomfortable look.

Aaron thought about telling him not to turn his back on the ocean, but he couldn't speak. Instead, he flicked the ball toward him with his fingertips. The boy came closer to pick it up.

Their eyes met, and the boy's face became fascinated and then disgusted by what he saw. Aaron smiled weakly, but that only made it worse. If he could see what the boy saw – the blood-stained face, the matted grimy hair, the grotesque expression – he might not even have recognized the sprawling hulk of battered and stinking flesh as a man.

The boy ran away as fast as his trim legs could carry him.

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## ELEGY FOR MY SISTER

In the park a red bird caged in dead branches  
sits still almost frozen enclosed  
in a space of nature's creation.  
The elements welcome it by melting  
snow, slowing wind, raising the sun  
just enough to warm its wings.  
Below it on the ground crocuses  
blossom, some with a strong purplish hue,  
the creek nearby claps quietly against the rocks,  
and all feels right in the world—right?  
But, somewhere deep in the District  
my sister haunts hallways and vacant lots,  
never taking flight; sand, cement,  
and abandoned cars her perch.  
She sleeps in high-rise catacombs,  
hollow spaces layered in rust,  
cold dark places welcome her and others  
searching for atonement,  
apparitions to their families now.  
Many are forgotten, never mourned,  
just bones, then dust, talents never known.  
My sister was an artist--  
She'd sketch every new face she'd see,  
shaping eyes, shading noses,  
that's how I remember her now,  
full tablets with charcoal images,  
paints and faint memories of what  
it was like to have an older sister.

I never could understand addiction,  
nothing ever held me like that.

—K.S. Lee

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*Above: Dawn by Amra Khan*

## 94 THE APPLE IS A META-COGNITIVE OBJECT

Note: truth is not beauty

neither is beauty equivalent to truth

dismissing the initial --

Eve (and Serpent) Know what God knows.

Eve (and Adam) What is it you cannot live without?

moving towards... an apple was not the golden fruit of the garden

did not symbolize knowledge/rank

pragmatism: teeth (cleaned) shine (red) to some degree

to razor's edge training incisor(s)

Skin is porous

Face the force of earth climbing through

Decay on the inside

flawed mechanics (Die in open air)

cell level rot without it's skin

flesh soft like muscle

non-tendrulous molecular matter clumps

core through Eat it all chew seeds/stem

texture: the soft, brittle tissue (fibrous) moist

to stay whole (intact) conjuncted



Above: *Pluger* by Amra Khan

The splitting sound is        that something must be  
devoured

over    and over

in practice    once a day

Place the arrow on your head

Draw the bow

Don't move



*Above: Reflection by Amra Khan*

*Kamau Rucker is a poet, playwright, singer/songwriter, and educator. He received an MFA in Poetry from GMU in 2009. He is also a current MFA candidate at Hollins University, and a Cave Canem fellow. Recent publications include *The Heat, The Day, and This Moment* (San Francisco Bay Press), *Conditions of Light* (Pudding House Press), *Poems for Living Waters*, and *Salamander*.*

# 96 OUR CHILDREN'S FOLKLORE?

*Omri J. Luzon*

Nobody's talking about Folklore anymore. After all, who cares about a collection of outdated stories and children's tales? There's nothing serious about them, and if there ever was, then shame be on the person who thought so. Shame indeed, I argue, shame that we care so little of the things that we are made of.

We mostly know Folklore as an art form. We tend to assimilate Folklore into a bigger and more "respectable" field - Literature, Sociology, etc. By and by, Folklore has turned from a form of, as Herskovits said, Oral Art<sup>1</sup> into a subdivision of art - Poetry or Prose, or Essays, etc. That subdivision of art is also a subdivision of Humanities Studies, which is a subdivision of... and it goes on and on. The point is that there is no individual field called Folklore anymore. So, is Folklore a form of art, or is it a subcategory of a subcategory?

Another question that rises, if we say that Folklore is an art form, is how come it tends to be assimilated, in some places, into the Sociology field, or the History field, religious practices, etc.? Well, folklore has a huge role in History or Religion, but then again, is it not also literature? See, the problem with Folklore is that it mixes both literature and culture, it is not only about the stories, there's something more, a tradition of a kind.

Folklore, unlike poetry for example, is not just a collection of personal notions, thoughts, emotions and morals, for it also has to do with practices, tradition, religion and culture. And that last word - "culture" - is not only reflected through folklore, but also shaped by it. A very good example of that would be the Irish revival of the 18th-19th centuries, where folklore was used to bring back to life an entire cultural tradition. That crucial capability of folklore is not something Prose, nor Poetry, could create on its own, because it lacks the cultural legacy of religion or history. Folklore touches the people at the core of their spiritual essence. People are moved by folklore, in ways that outsiders to their community might never grasp. This outsider-asymmetric relation is similar to reading a few verses of the New Testament by a non-Christian reader, in comparison to a Christian reader, even if the latter may not be a religious one. The very fact that you are a part of that legacy, changes the reading experience, especially if you're living in a time that is against said culture, as it was with

the Irish. Also, if you have an oppressor, a contrasting force that pushes you against your origins, it instantly intensifies the connection to whom or what you associate yourself with, and here the effect of folklore kicks in even stronger.

Folklore is not just a collection of children's stories; it is much more than that. It is a capture of an essence, the essence of legacies which baffles and intrigues us; we are curious creatures and hold a gleam of pride in our heritage. We are possessed with questions regarding who we are, what our heritage is, and therefore folklore too, is part of the drug we so obsessively crave.

Most of society still resorts to some sense of tradition, as is evident by the educational system, the media, and even the bare-boned schedule (i.e. holidays, events, ceremonies, etc.). Some of the self-proclaimed "non-traditional" activities still maintain an aspect of an earlier tradition, especially where children are involved. Most of that tradition is in relation to the culture's folklores, which its children are exposed to through the aforementioned media. Society, as a whole, is mostly pro-tradition, and although we do see some growing movement toward anti-religion, or atheism, the less-transcendental core of tradition is still kept, and most of it relates to our folklores.

But we saw already that our interest in folklore is not only a social one - we do have the very fundamental aspect of its literary value, and that value is accepted by both religious and non-religious people. The texts of folklore are not the same as the Bible, Quran or the New Testament, because they are outside religious practices, but they still participate in the belief system as a whole. It goes to show that a somewhat religious text, such as folklores, allows for non-religious interpretations. We are allowed to take our tradition and see it in a modern point of view, folklore shows us that it is not only possible, but also good.

Folklore is a complex system of constant contrasts, and therefore it should not be viewed as a non-independent field. Because it is so multi-dimensional it is so unique and fascinating a subject. Our folklores allow us to unite, be interested in who we are, but also to grow, evolve, adapt to the new and modern world. Therefore Folklore is not a subcategory, but a field of its own. I leave you with these thoughts and this question:



what are your folklores?

References:

*Herskovits, Melville. 1946. Folklore After a Hundred Years: A Problem of Redefinition. Journal of American Folklore 59:89-100.*

## WHERE COTTON IS MOTHERED

the promised land is quarantined. double plurals are discontinued  
and our melodies hated. religious and destitute

orphans fitted for coffins then cloned to the capillaries  
learn the slavery of slow finish in the metaphysics of the ghetto

who will govern in our year of sleep who translates these scriptures of fire  
who will prevent this orchestra from diluting our emotions

hear how we walk among decibels remembered  
intend something grey during the fireworks of flowers

rule your living room with an iron yawn\*  
(\*except when apartments behave like nuns praying amongst flames)

study the radiant entomology of inconsistent skin; hammock it richly  
its how we consume what's most important

while the vocalist sings her scars loose, the senator arrives by email  
in your mind, he says, there is a question about the color yellow

in this rainforest of cotton lit by christmas light fireflies  
we write letters to the dead on peeled onion skin

in your seawater room there are sunken alphabets  
and languages unaccounted for

in the ecology of the warehouse there is a metric ton of unclaimed dreams  
spinning and bleeding convex light everywhere at once.

—James Cagney

*James Cagney is a writer and poet from Oakland, Ca. He's appeared as a featured artist at Miko Kuro's Midnight Tea in Vancouver, San Francisco Public Library, La Pena Cultural Center, Mahogany Restaurant and others. His work has been published in [ishmaelreedpub.com](http://ishmaelreedpub.com), [Un-mute.com](http://Un-mute.com), [mediacakemagazine.com](http://mediacakemagazine.com), *Caduceus*, *Sparring with the Beatnik Ghosts*, and *Barbershop Chronicles*. Find more of James' work at [Dirtyratattack.com](http://Dirtyratattack.com)*

## 98 THE MUCH THAT BINDS US

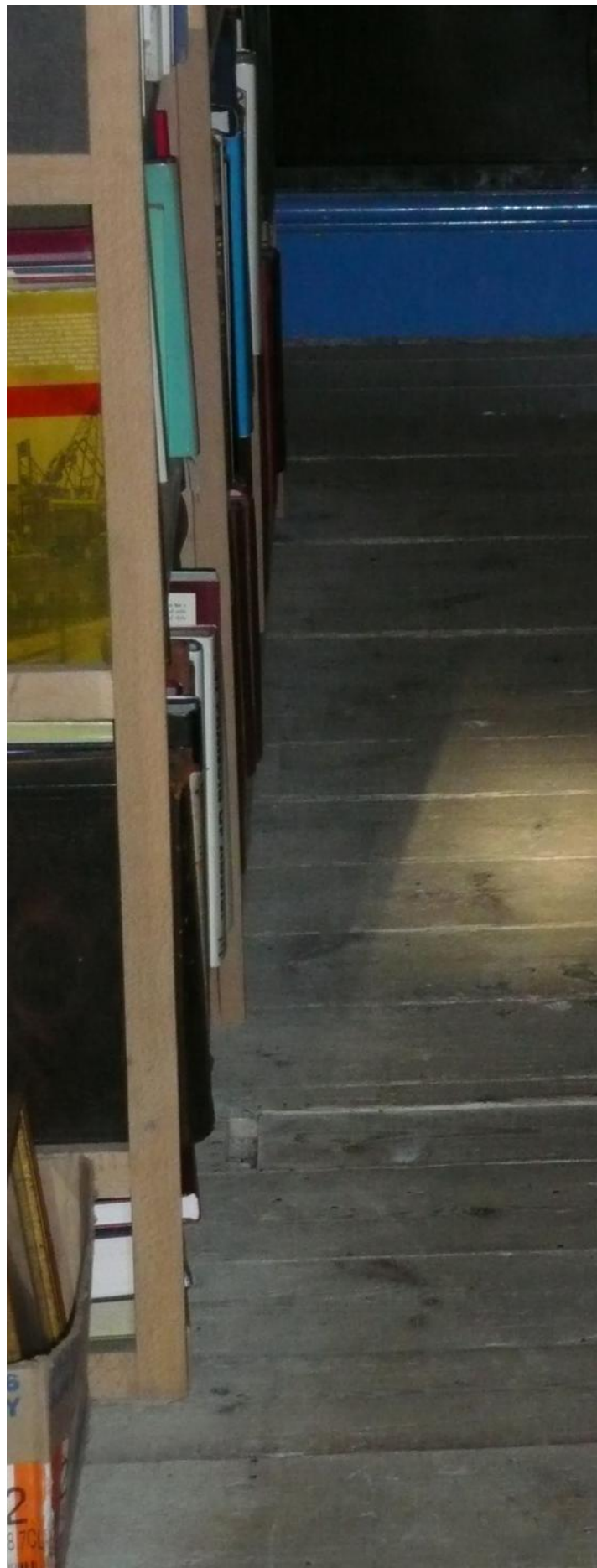
by Paul Grant

“Much Binding” is a small bookshop on the North Norfolk coastline. Tucked away within the folds of a former Victorian seaside resort, it occupies a pivotal position within the current chapters of my life. Its owners are friends and I have, on occasion, had the pleasures of sustaining its fortunes in their absence.

The shop sells an assortment of objects and collectibles aside from books, but it is essentially a bookshop offering a breadth and depth that encompasses most tastes. There is also an Antiquarian dimension and as you may have guessed, this is a shop with a mind of its own. The proprietors are, and the overall style is, staunchly independent. However, this is not a tale of bookshops or the eccentricities of respective buyers and sellers. Instead, this is a short history of one particular book. The book is *Specimen Days* by Michael Cunningham.

I just happened to be wandering through the fiction section a few days ago when my eyes alighted on a familiar spine. Having sold many books to the shop in recent years, the chances of it being one of mine was not especially slender. My first instinctual act was to open it at some random point and insert my generous snout into its pages. It was mine. What I had hoped to find was exactly what lay buried silently in that space between all texts. A book always tells more than one story. There is what the author wrote and then there are the personal histories that accompany that initial tale and make each copy unique. Deep within the languorous inhalation lay a palace of memories—memories both joyful and sad.

I remember buying the book at the Edinburgh Book Festival in August, 2005. It was an exceptionally sunny day. Following the breakdown of a long and fundamentally happy relationship, I had moved northwards. I was alone and without employment. I thought a few books would be good company for a while. Living in Stockbridge within a romantic sounding mews barely a fistful of blocks from Princes Street, I eventually worked off and on in a variety of guises. What claims to be the best hotel in Edinburgh and the British Council were briefly employers of mine, but the inability to find anything that wasn't exploitative or temporary resulted in a long stretch of inactivity for me within the “new” new labor market. Despite the efforts of faithful friends





“Whoever eventually comes to buy this book may wonder at its inscription. Who are they? But the more appropriate questions to ask would be: Who was he? Who was she?”

and the indulgence of parents it would be fair to say that I came close to madness, during those six months. One thing I am certain of today though, is that globalised cities are no place for a forty-something whose hide has been thinned by a decade of rural living (even if your gaff is only a stroll away from the Water of Leith walkway). A snooty city in so many respects, this walkway is one of the best kept yet least patrician of her secrets. But I am straying from the central tenet of this story—a book.

The book is a signed first edition and I had forgotten that it bears an inscription from myself to someone I had become emotionally involved with shortly before I moved to Edinburgh. Over time this relationship also

100 broke down. I think we are now friends (or friendly) and “Much Binding”, the couple who owns it and the contents of its shelves, are the denominators we still have in common. Of course, whoever eventually comes to buy this book may wonder at its inscription. Who are they? But the more appropriate questions to ask would be: Who was he? Who was she?

It is the nature of living stories that they often fail to fit the covers we would like to give them. Similarly, over time we cannot fail to notice that objects are frequently tougher than people and often have a longer shelf life. So if books need a spot of binding from time to time, what about their audience?

A well bound book is a delight to behold and certain books do have the wherewithal to make excellent companions. That such relationships can constitute part of the essential binding in life without which our fragile stories might fall apart seems a sensible proposition to me. What anyone acquiring this particular book will definitely fail to see if they are only using their eyes, is that this book is also a flower. A rose, to be precise.

As a certain Little Prince was once reliably informed by the fox he had tamed:

“It is only with the heart that one can see rightly, what is essential is invisible to the eye. [...] It is the time you have wasted for your rose that makes the rose so important. [...] Men have forgotten this truth”, said the fox. “But you must never forget it. You become responsible, forever, for what you have tamed. You are responsible for your rose.”

I suspect the author knew only too well that such seeing comes at a price. To live from the heart generally entails dying from it too.

So visibly or otherwise there is much binding in life.

This short history of a book, a shop, a flower and a fox is part of the rich stitch in time that binds me to today, yesterday and tomorrow.



Above: *As She Sets* by Amra Khan

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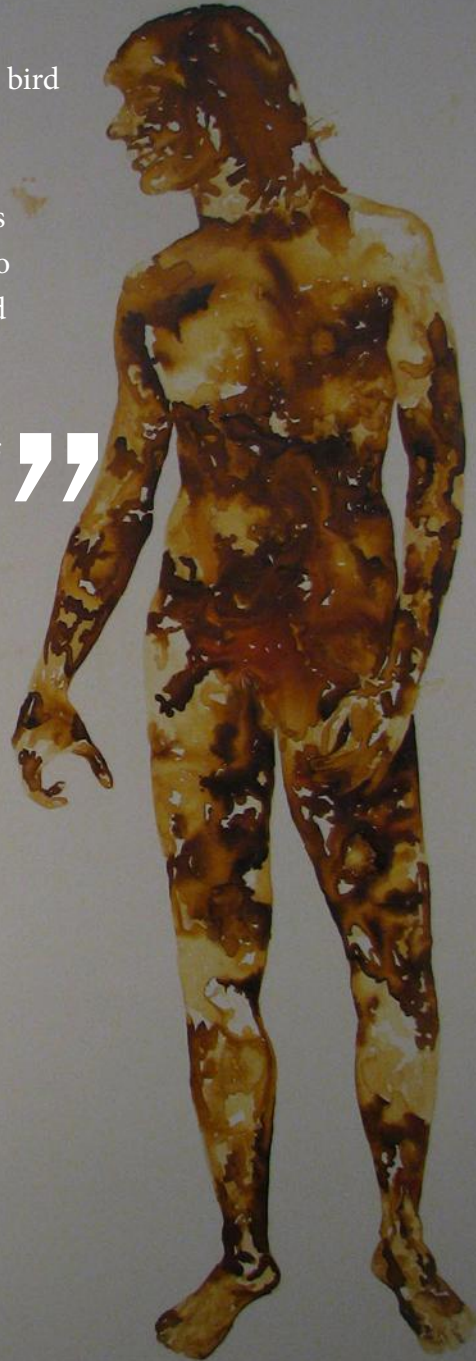
*Paul Grant is a Creative Writing MA student at Lancaster University. He is currently writing an idiosyncratic memoir about growing up in Uganda and his several attempts to retrieve something from the ‘land of lost content’.*

# “ DREAMS

Hold fast to dreams  
For if dreams die  
Life is a broken-winged bird  
That cannot fly.

Hold fast to dreams  
For when dreams go  
Life is a barren field  
Frozen with snow.

—Langston Hughes ””







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