

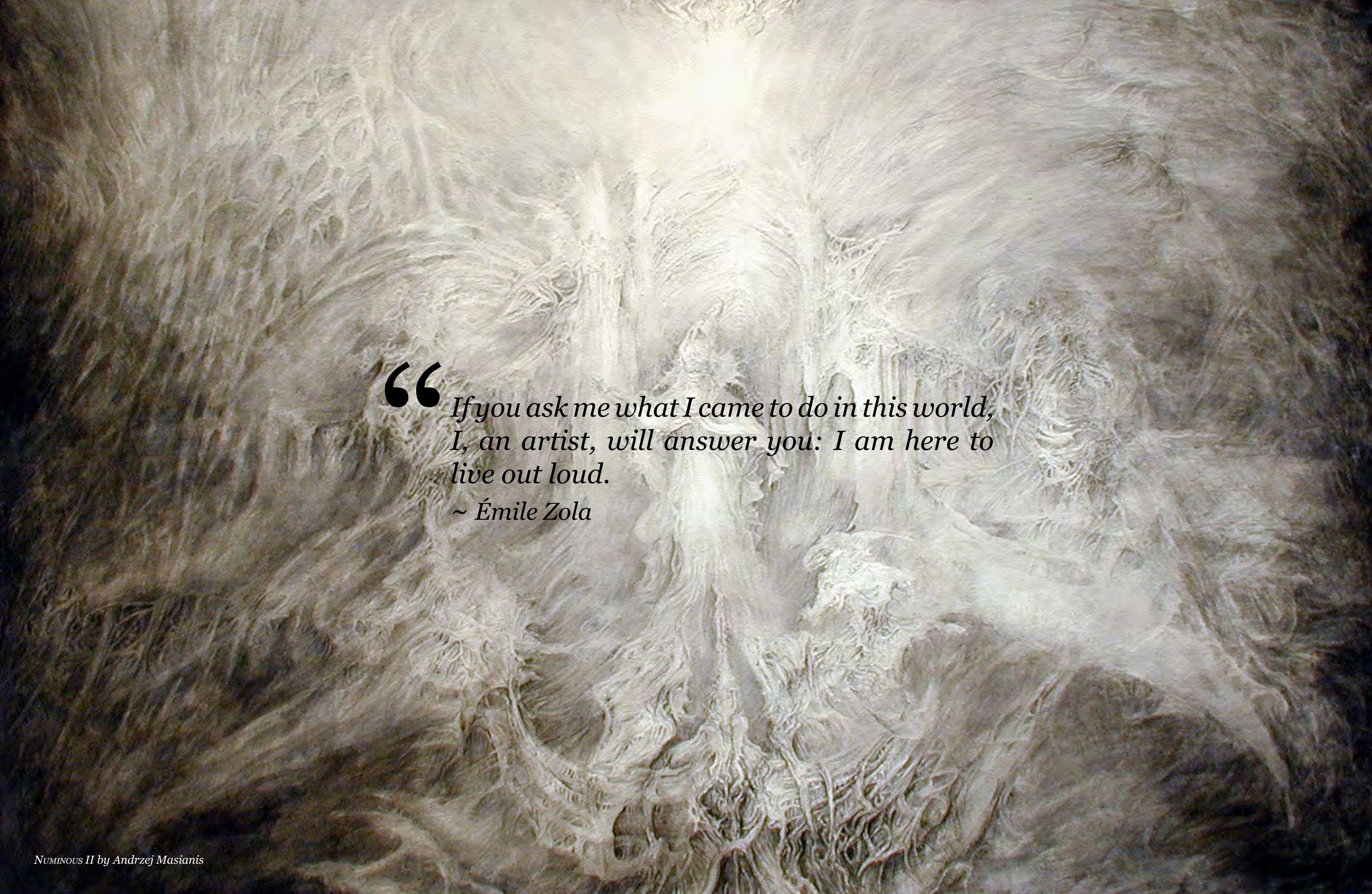
THE MISSING SLATE

For the discerning metropolitan.

FALL 2013

Artwork by Andrzej Masianis





“If you ask me what I came to do in this world,
I, an artist, will answer you: I am here to
live out loud.
~ Émile Zola

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Night Cafe by Luisa Kelle

A WORD FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Dear Readers,

I like to think we come out of our mothers' wombs undefined masses of clay and, as life hits us, as our hearts are broken and circumstances unfold, we're chipped and sculpted into whatever we become, never a smooth surface, perpetually flawed but that's what makes the metamorphosis so beautiful. The sculpture is cut abnormally short by death. It could be argued that death is the best muse for creation – that to understand, one must lose and lose completely what has been loved completely. Loss i.e. the absence of makes the presence of so much dearer.

The above paragraph is an odd segue for an issue devoted to art and the social politics it often represents. Politics is a curious word – it derives from the Greek *politikos* meaning “of, for, or relating to citizens”, though I much prefer “people” to citizens, stripping them of geographical limitations. It seems like a perfectly innocuous word, “politics”, but it's come to represent humanity's dirty underbelly in Pakistan and in other parts of the world, where politicians are synonymous with “corruption”. The thing about politics which holds true for just about any ideology involving people, is that there can never be any one “true” interpretation of the concept, because the group it serves is made up of various specimens of humanity.

Traditionally, *The Missing Slate* has emphasized reduced focus on the conventional interpretation of politics in its pages. This has always been because many other publications do political coverage much better, and an arts magazine has no business with it. However, though an argument could be made for politics playing no role here, it would be a weak one, because politikos is concerned with people, and the political really is personal. So while we will stay away from current affairs, we will continue to steep ourselves in social affairs, toeing the line of the politically (or apolitically) correct.

Let me be perfectly clear: *The Missing Slate* is not in the business of discussing absolutes – the magazine has always been at its best when observing the gray areas and this issue is no different. Our tenth (which also happens to be our third anniversary) issue does for the first, but not the last time, pay tribute to one half of our identity.

Happy reading!

Sincerely,

Maryam Piracha

Editor-in-Chief

A WORD FROM THE CREATIVE DIRECTOR

Readers,

It has been three years. Of you and us here, like this, together.

At this point in time, I am aware that it has been a journey but in my mind, it feels like no time at all.

It's almost time for Halloween and I decided to deviate from my preferred path of featuring the contemporary gothic oil paintings and illustrations I have featured regularly in our previous fall issues. Instead, we have painstakingly commissioned drawings in charcoal and pencils by Polish artist Andrezj Masianis, and Singaporean graphic designer and artist May Lim. I fell in love with the whimsical almost caricature like creations of Luisa Kelle and she was kind enough to share some of her most enchanting pieces with us.

As I write this, a particular memory from three years ago tugs at my heart. When my longtime friend and Editor in Chief Maryam Piracha and I envisioned this journal, we hoped it would be a seamless blend of *The New Yorker* and *Vogue*. It should come as no surprise that those are our favorite publications respectively. It did however come as a surprise (to me) that here at the other end of our now three years doing this together, we were fortunate enough to be one of the two magazines who received Pulitzer winning author, Jhumpa Lahiri's unpublished manuscript in order to run an excerpt from her Booker Prize shortlisted book *'The Lowland'*. The second magazine was *The New Yorker*.

And then it got better, Pakistan's top Fashion Journalist Zurain Imam came across *The Missing Slate*, as the only man in the industry in this country whose opinion trumps all others; his thoughts are presented on our website.

Our online store is bustling with activity. Keep watching the "aisles" for a range of merchandise.

With a lot of love,

Moed Tariq
Creative Director



Artwork by Felix Girard

IMAGINARY TRANSLATION

The Hermans dance a white concertina
in the bordello of the fragrant kulcha.
Even if the Hermans eat rice with Jesus
they will die, obscure as roses.
If you were here you'd be coming
to the sound of castanets. You'd be a flower
on the floor. Meanwhile, spreadeagled
above, softly afloat, you again,
the better you, lost in a welter
of images, or a wind that blows
all night in the dry streets of the city

in which we drag our feet to dawn,
followed by trumpets or love,
broken elevators or cell phones,
broken songs, broken
membranes & minds & smoke,
the broken introduction to a species,
broken zygotes without malice,
broken axis of the rooster's eye,
where stupidity & the devil dwell.
Will you return to the assembly of roses?
Do you know why the night is huge,
beyond consolation or embrace?



Prince of the West by Phobs

Even if the Hermans eat rice with Christ
they will die in the obscurity of roses.
The Hermans dance a white line
between white concertina & gallows,
in the bordello of fragrant kulchas.
If you were here you'd come to the sound
of castanets, you'd be Homer pissing
in the wind, encased in ornate symbols,
& floating above you, softly
floating, who else but you, Ana,
who knows the smell of castanets,

smell of sawdust varnish sun?
Do you, Ana Rosetti, love each
petal's sour breath as I do?
How quickly the sweet misadventure
passed, youth's diversions,
turbulence, precipitatory tremblings
in the penumbra of pubis,
the Hermans with their solitary wars,
old bordellos of secondary kulcha,
white concertinas floating above
us, fragrant, lost, O Hermans, O love.

~ Jeet Thayil

Jeet Thayil's poetry collections include 'English' and 'These Errors Are Correct', which won the Sahitya Akademi Award. He is the editor of 'The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Indian Poets' and one half of the contemporary music project Sridhar/Thayil. His novel 'Narcopolis' won the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature, and was shortlisted for five other prizes, including the Man Booker Prize.

THE READINGS EXPERIENCE

Book trolleys, the old book smell, and a well-priced selection for this niche Pakistani bookstore

By Asmara Ahmed Malik

I confess – my only interest in Lahore for the longest time has been Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS). So maybe it was destiny that my encounter with the independent bookstore, Readings began at a cat-haunted table in LUMS Square with a simple question: “You’ve never been to Readings?!”

One rickshaw trip later, I found myself in Gulberg, standing before a small, single-storey building that claimed to house one of the largest collection of books in Pakistan. I’ll be honest – my first reaction was slight disappointment: I was expecting a goliath along the lines of Islamabad’s sprawling Saeed Book Bank. Walking through the glass doors the first thing I saw quickly turned my disappointment to elation: Neil Gaiman’s seminal graphic novel, ‘Sandman’, displayed in all its glossy entirety on the rack, along with Frank Miller’s ‘Batman: Year Zero’ and Alan Moore’s ‘Watchmen’, among others. Many others. Cue glorious swell of operatic music.

Barely ten minutes in and I was already head

over heels in love. Lahoris don’t call Readings a booklover’s heaven for nothing. Established in 2006 as a used bookseller, Readings quickly carved a niche in the book-arid landscape of Lahore. With its affordable pricing and homely atmosphere, I wasn’t surprised to hear from regular customers that they routinely spent hours in the store, just browsing.

The Spartan décor with its metal shelves framing thick stacks of books that go up to the roof, puts the books front and centre. Organisation is simple and easy to navigate through, even for a first-timer like myself. The provision of wheeled carts was another highlight of my visit – on my gleefully maniacal first pass through the store’s many shelves, I managed to fill my cart to almost twice its capacity. While I was then dissuaded by kind friends to let go of almost half the books I insisted I really needed (heroin addicts would have been put to shame), the cart allowed me to handily transport my selections around the store and finally to the checkout counter.

The variety of books on offer at Readings

is astounding, ranging from fantasy to self-help, young-adult and classics. Pricing also crosses the whole spectrum from dirt-cheap to pricey-maybe-I-should-wait-for-my-next-pay-check. Ovais Munshi, LUMS student and regular patron, described the shopping experience as, “brilliant! They’ve got an amazing, well-catalogued collection of books and the bargain section is pretty cool for finding trashy books to kill time with!”

Lighting in the store is a (slight) problem as the store extends much further back than its small front would have you believe. So, while the front of the store is sunlit and bright, the further back you go, the more you have to rely on the fluorescent lights. In hindsight, that may be a good effect as all the Horror and Science Fiction shelves are located at the back.

I was puzzled by the sight of empty floor cushions scattered among the shelves until I got to the children’s section – lo and behold, kids were sprawled over the carpeted floor, noses firmly buried in various books, with parents sitting more comfortably on the leather cushions. If there was ever a more heart-warming sight than that, I have yet to witness it. Especially since there wasn’t a single ‘Twilight’ reader among them.

While I did not get a chance to visit the cafe set up in the back of the store, Sahar Rehan Malik, one of the café’s Lahori patrons feels the management could invest in a more conducive atmosphere. “The cafe doesn’t have Wi-Fi and other than their coffee there isn’t much in there – they don’t even have sockets to recharge laptops with. So a little investment in that, a bathroom and maybe a couple more floors would be awesome.”

Another feature (and the main reason I stopped ransacking the shelves) was the Readings online store. “The shipping is amazing. I’ve ordered from them about five times and they delivered it on the next morning and a couple of times on the same day (when I ordered early in the morning). Plus their website is always updated. I’ve never found a book to be listed on the website and not available in the store, or vice versa,” Sheza Naeem, another frequent Lahori patron said.

I came away from my trip to Readings with a considerably lightened wallet and an elated heart,

knowing that the existence of such places thriving in the commercially carnivorous heart of Lahore could only bode well for the future, with similarly affordable bookstores making their way to other major cities in Pakistan. As for myself, I am counting down the days until there is a Readings in Islamabad and Rawalpindi.

Editor’s Note: Readings can be found at 12-K, Main Boulevard, Gulberg II, Lahore. Further information can be solicited via their website (www.readings.com.pk).



Asmara Ahmed Malik is a doctor by day and writer by night, living in Pakistan. Her interests include mathematics, photography, late night television and Trent Reznor. She was formerly Fiction Editor for the magazine. She can usually be found lurking at <http://elmara.deviantart.com>.



EXPLOSIONS AT THE LINE OF CONTROL

Rann of Kutch, 2011

Next time the army comes
I want your fist
high inside me
tensing flowering

like a deadly weapon,
grenade to explode
the false aesthetic of borders
imposed on the ripples of this

saltscape:
the only sea of its kind, maybe
the direction we're all headed,
impossible glimmer

blue-white
of our own annihilation.

~ *Minal Hajratwala*

Minal Hajratwala is a writing coach, author of the award-winning 'Leaving India: My Family's Journey From Five Villages to Five Continents' (2009), and editor of 'Out! Stories From the New Queer India' (2013). Her first book of poems, 'Bountiful Instructions for Enlightenment', is forthcoming from The (Great) Indian Poetry Collective, of which she is a founding member.



Artwork by Numair Abbasi

THE FOLDED EARTH

By Anuradha Roy

St Hilda's is not really a convent, but since people think of convents as places where their children will be taught good English, that is what the church which owned it had decided to call it. The children would come to learn English, they reasoned, and would be taught a little bit about Jesus, which they could keep or cast aside as they pleased.

Charu had been one of my students. She was twelve when we met, and came to school pig-tailed, face shining, hair reeking of mustard oil, in navy and white, scrubbed clean, exercise book and pencil in hand – and she daydreamed in class all day. She barely learned to write even the alphabet. Many days of the week, she simply did not come. Later, walking home in the afternoon I would spot her grazing her grandmother's cows. Or I would hear her high voice from across a hill, calling one of them, "Gouri! Goureeeeee-ooo!" In the summer months I could be sure of spotting her navy skirt halfway up a kafal tree and if I called at the tree, "Why weren't you at school?" she would clamber down, thrust at me a handful of red, just-plucked kafals, and vanish into the forest.

One late afternoon in my first year in Ranikhet, I saw Charu's grandmother sitting outside their house, sunning herself on a mat. She was a bony woman with hollow cheeks, her skin raised by years of hard labour in the sun. Her eyes had a quiverful of lines at their corners. Everyone called her "Ama" and she was renowned for having been the most beautiful woman of Ranikhet. She was not afraid of anything or anyone, and had thrown Charu's father, her younger son, out of her house for being drunk every day and beating his wife to death in a drunken fit. She would bring up her grandchild alone, she had said, they did not need a man around the house if it was a man like him. He still visited, a weedy fellow with a ravaged face, and a beedi tucked behind each ear. He sat glumly in the courtyard and smoked while his mother scolded him about keeping a mistress and demanded money for his daughter's upkeep. Meanwhile somehow she fed and housed yet poorer relatives who arrived without warning from remote villages and stayed for days, sometimes weeks.

Ama had a voice that could carry across several valleys and a laugh I could very often hear from my own house nearby. From here and there, she had picked up English phrases and words with which she seasoned her talk. If I had a cold, she would insist, "You must breathe in steam from water boiled with Eucalipstick." Every time prices rose, she said, "Does Gormint care if we live or die?" Government was a person who lived far away and grew fat while her cheeks hollowed with too much work and too little food. "One day," she said, "I will find a Gormint babu for Charu to marry and then we'll kill a hen to eat every day." As she said this, she shook with laughter at the improbability of her dream.

Whenever she sighted me, her eyes, already creased from years of battling sun and wind and cold, creased up more, and she smiled a mouthful of stained, brown teeth and shouted, "Namaste, Teacher ni!" That is what she called me, tongue-in-cheek: Teacher-ni. Everyone else called me Maya Mam.

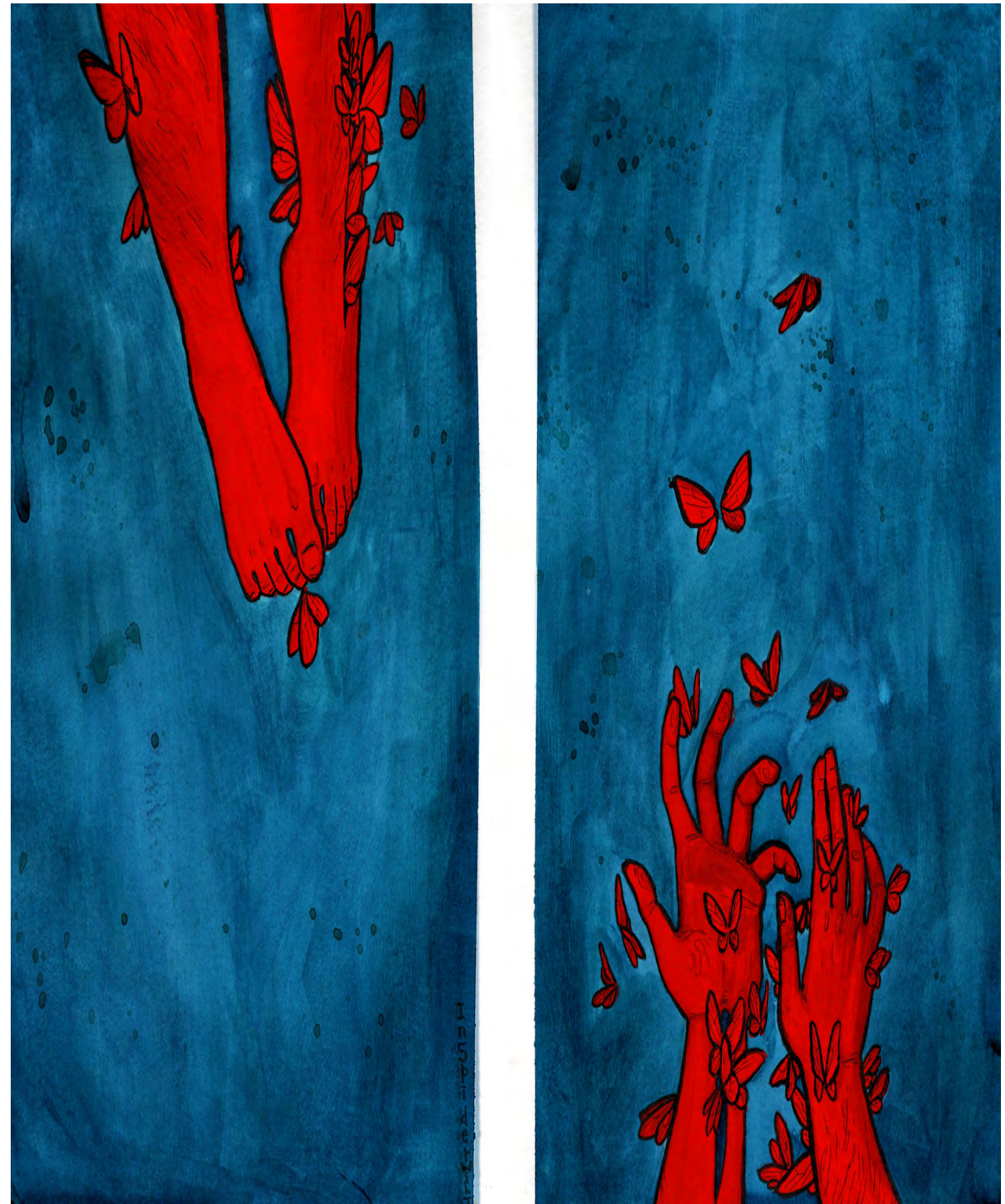
"Why do you pay the fees if you can't make Charu come to school?" I had asked her that afternoon. "Why not send her to the government school? It's free."

"I can put grass before the cow," she said. "Can I make it eat? But it is still my cow, so I have to feed it, don't I?"

"Charu is hardly a cow," I said. "She is your granddaughter. And I am not fodder."

The old woman laughed loud and long. "I know who Charu is," she said. "Now you tell me, what can I do? I get her ready every day, I send her off, and

“ Every time prices rose, she said, “Does Gormint care if we live or die?” Government was a person who lived far away and grew fat while her cheeks hollowed with too much work and too little food. ”



Salt by Anastasia Inspiderwiht

then – where she goes – how can I stop her? Should I chase her with a stick all the way to the school? She will learn when the time comes. A girl learns what she needs to know.”

I gave up on Charu after a while, and stopped scolding her about her truancy. She did not altogether stop coming: on the days when she felt her uniform needed an airing or she wanted to see her friends, she would turn up, smile angelically at me, settle down at her place on a bench, and draw five-petaled flowers throughout the class. On some evenings she came to my veranda, which had a smooth red floor, to play gitti, her pebble game. Often she brought with her two girls, Beena and Mitu, twins who lived down the hill: neither of them could speak or hear, but we managed. They had shy smiles, light-brown hair, and improbable blue eyes: Ama said their mother, Lati, also deaf and mute, had slept with a wandering firanghi who had eyes as blue, and here was God’s punishment: two girls. “Deaf and mute as well!”

Charu taught me her game: it involved five pebbles that you had to do dexterous things with, throwing up one, scooping up the others, then catching the one in flight before it hit the ground. I was new to the town, I hardly knew anyone, and had nothing very much to do apart from the school. Many evenings she and I sat with the twins, playing with the stones, watching evening fires being lit outside nearby hutments as the neighbourhood dogs were

“The edge of my father’s anger was blunted now that Michael had left my life. All I had to do was to tell him that I had been wrong and misguided, and beg him to trust me again. ”

GOD AND ONIONS

tr. from the Hindi by Rahul Soni

does god eat onions?
mother asks me one day
as I peel an onion
before lunch

why not mother, I say,
he made the world – he must have also made
carrots, radishes, onions, beets
then why can’t he
eat onions?

it’s not that
she says softly
hindus do not eat onions

I laugh and ask
so is god a hindu, mother?

she looks at me
speechless

now that peeled onion
red, shaped like the earth
is in my hand
and whether or not god
is anywhere else
he is in those eyes, then
searching for his identity
in that little onion

~ Kedarnath Singh

Kedarnath Singh (born 1934) is one of the most prominent modern poets writing Hindi. He is also an eminent critic and essayist. Among his collections of poems are ‘Abhi Bilkul Abhi’ (1960); ‘Jamin Pak Rahi Hai’ (1980); ‘Akal Mein Saras’ (1989), which won the Sahitya Akademi poetry prize for that year; ‘Uttar Kabir Aur Anya Kavitaen’ (1995); and ‘Tolstoy Aur Cycle’ (2004).

called back from creeks and bushes before leopards slunk out from the shadowed forests to feed.

I could have chosen differently. I could have found a better-paid job elsewhere. I could have returned to my own family. It had been a source of bewilderment to my mother why I did not go back to my old life at home after Michael’s death. The edge of my father’s anger was blunted now that Michael had left my life. All I had to do was to tell him that I had been wrong and misguided, and beg him to trust me again. My mother was tearful and imploring. I did not need to teach in a school, so far away, hard up, all by myself. We could be together again as before.

My mother died two years after Michael, uncomprehending to the end about my stubborn refusal. In one of her reproachful letters, she accused me of being as unforgiving as my father: how could a girl punish her parents and reject her home this way?

But I *was* at home. I had got used to thinking of Charu, her grandmother, her half-witted uncle Sanki Puran, and my landlord Diwan Sahib as my family now. I could no longer imagine living anywhere else. Though I cannot know precisely when it happened, a time had come when I became a hill-person who was only at peace where the earth rose and fell in waves like the sea.

**This extract has been excerpted from ‘The Folded Earth’ (MacLehose Press, 2011), reprinted with permission of the [publisher](#).*

Anuradha Roy won the Economist Crossword Prize for Fiction for her novel, ‘The Folded Earth’, which won and was nominated for several other prizes including the Man Asia and the Hindu Literary Award. Her first novel, ‘An Atlas of Impossible Longing’, has been translated into 15 languages across the world.

SPOTLIGHT ARTIST: UMER WASIM

Interviewed by Moeed Tariq



The Missing Slate's Creative Director, Moeed Tariq sits down with Umer Wasim to talk about his work, dreams growing up, his choice of art school, and the pros and cons of group versus solo exhibits.

Q You enrolled into the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) for both your Bachelor's and Master's degrees. Is there a particular reason behind the choice? Did you apply to any other schools?

A I graduated from high school in 2008, and had acceptance letters from 11 different schools in the U.S. and U.K. The only school that I didn't get into was the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art at the University of Oxford. I was [mostly] leaning towards attending a school in the U.S. from the very beginning, and that rejection letter from Oxford only made my decision easier. I chose MICA because it was the right combination of traditional and conceptual art training, and also because it was ranked — still is — among the top ten art schools in the U.S. In fact, it was ranked number four when I started. As trite as that sounds, it made me feel a lot better about my choice back then. MICA also worked out well financially. I qualified for merit scholarships and financial aid consistently. I learned a lot and was given the freedom to establish an interdisciplinary approach to fine arts, with an emphasis on problem-solving skills. I chose MICA again for grad school because the program was everything I wanted to do; it was new, hence extremely experimental and very hands-on. There was a lot of one-on-one time with the faculty which needless to say, is extremely important for graduate work. I also got a huge grant to do graduate work, which always helps.

Q What has your experience at MICA been like?

A It was absolutely fantastic. I came here with basic skills; I could only draw and paint when I first started. That obviously changed over the course of five years. I was exposed to technology, sculpture, and newer genres. I learned about site-specific sculptural interventions, became fluent in installation and conceptual art, and absorbed art history, theory, and criticism. Learning is basically done by making mistakes. There were times when projects failed, and I bawled my eyes out during critiques. But all of the faculty members were extremely supportive,

always pushing us to[wards] perfection. Another good thing about MICA is that it values academics as much as it values art itself. The academic culture helped me understand critical theory, enabling me to give meaning to the banal.

Q Did you ever want to be anything else growing up?

A Like every other child, I wanted to be a doctor and a pilot at some point. I was academically motivated and did very well in school. At the same time, I never really excelled at anything else besides art. My decision to pursue art was pretty obvious to me, as there is no point in being mediocre given the current competitive environment. If I [do] say so myself, I made the right decision.

Q Was it a struggle back home to get to go to art school?

A It was never really a struggle. I went to a good high school so applying to colleges was a breeze, and my parents were always on board. The whole application process was time-consuming, which was the only frustrating part besides waiting to hear back from colleges.

Q What are your hopes/plans for your first solo show if presented with the opportunity? Where would you want to do it?

A In order to map the complex relations between sexuality and its representation in visual culture, we must allow for what the psychoanalytic critic Jacqueline Rose describes as an "idea of sexuality which goes beyond the issue of content to take in the parameters of visual form (not just what we see but how we see — visual space as more than domain of simple recognition)." My first solo show will attempt to understand how homosexuality, its prohibition, and eventual acceptance has structured the visual field at particular moments, drawing attention to certain images and interpretive possibilities. The show will touch on a sense of place in which absence matters

as much as presence, a place shaped no less by the suppression of homosexuality during the AIDS crises than by homosexuality's expression. The exhibition will look at what does not appear within, and what has been made to disappear from, the visual space of our society. I will draw inspiration from the public billboards of Felix Gonzales-Torres, which comment on the calamities of AIDS and the HIV virus, and juxtapose them with more recent billboards seemingly depicting the same subject matter to explain the change in how AIDS and HIV have been represented, and how this has largely been informed by the social and political space of our culture. I haven't given much thought to where I would like to show my work. A clean and substantially large space would do — and certainly a high profile name would not hurt either.

Q

Tell us about the pros and cons of group versus solo exhibits. How do they differ?

A

There are more cons than pros as far group shows are concerned. The first and foremost con would be the lack of authority an artist has in terms of curatorial decisions.

Talking from personal experience, it is unavoidable at times to sacrifice the content of the work if it is seen next to something made by a different artist. I'm extremely particular about how the audience enters my work and the way it is lit. In a group show, I haven't had as much control over these things. One good thing about group shows would be that you are not the only one at stake, and everyone is going through the same thing you are. There's a lot of

positive energy and a general understanding of how these things function. At the same time, you can always run into creative differences — nothing a good conversation cannot solve. Solo shows, on the other hand, are very much self-driven, I would assume. All the cons mentioned about would be pros potentially, and vice versa.

Q

If you could pick up any pre-existing work of literature and illustrate it, what would it be and why?

A

'The Body and Its Dangers and Other Stories' by Allen Barnett and *'Borrowed Time: An AIDS Memoir'* by Paul Monette are two books that I have extensively used since 2009 to make work and find inspiration — I

literally pull moments from the books and reinterpret them in my work. The works resonate with me in the sense that they communicate both homoerotic pleasure and political rage. The stories also talk about the threat of censorship by representing that threat, by picturing the restrictions to which queer bodies were subjected; diseased bodies are used to bring about social change and critique the institution of oppression. By doing so, they also signal the insufficiency of the written word to capture the true experience, and vulnerabilities, of living with a disease shrouded in such mystery.

Q

Art to you is?



A Since the earliest days, I have identified nearly irreversibly with art. I strive for the encapsulation of “art as self” and “self as art” despite the knowledge that the environment is not always conducive to such association. For me, art is not a choice. Art is a foundational logic in understanding the self. The “irreversible” association between art and self helps me situate my works in and out of the exhibition space.

Q **What do you believe is the most important message artists heralding from Pakistan today should be conveying through their work?**

A Of course, one must know or think — in a specific time and place, one knows, however temporarily — what one believes to begin to talk about others’ creative expressions of what they may believe, also in a specific time and place. Our beliefs are fluid, after all, just as we, or our subjectivities, are fluid. I personally have been very preoccupied in the last couple of days with death. Most people rarely let death into their lives; we tend to repress the otherness of death, marginalize it, forget it as nearly as we can. But it’s there nevertheless, and it defines our lives; we cannot live without death any more than women could live without our others the men, homosexuals could live without our others the heterosexuals, black people could live without their others the white people, and this I think is true even if there is no race — really — and everyone has their own gender and sexuality, that is, that there are not just two of each, because each of these concepts is a sociolinguistic construct. But the omnipresence of death is certainly something I’ve thought a great deal about in the last week because, among other things, death reminds us of the importance of life and of what we value in life, which, of course, may encompass what one believes. From that perspective, death in our lives, however sobering death is, could also be a source of joy.

Death reminds me of an ancient concept that probably first appeared in Indian philosophy and later in ancient Egypt and classical Greece, and during the European Renaissance. It’s called “eternal return” or “eternal recurrence.” It’s a concept that floats into and out of pop culture, in Jim Morrison’s *Light My Fire*. But it first had an impact on me when



I encountered the notion in Nietzsche, who says that the thought of the concept’s burden is the “heaviest weight” imaginable; he suggests that to wish for the eternal return of all the events in one’s life would suggest the supreme affirmation of life.

Nietzsche noted that to accept the thought of eternal return of the same, one would have to be a lover of fate: *amor fati*. He says that his “formula for human greatness is amor fati: that one wants to have nothing different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely to bear the necessary, still less to conceal it — idealism is mendaciousness before the necessary — but to love it...”

The guiding principles that propel me toward artistic freedom included these:

Don’t hide, don’t lie.

Do that which scares me.

Resist the urge to settle.

Be as many things as possible in this lifetime.

To me these principles seem to add up to a kind of *amor fati*, whatever it brings, and therefore they also affirm life in a most complex way.

I think that I’m also in the process of affirming life in all of its complexities, no matter how difficult and painful and joyful it may become for me. In my work, I appear to be grappling with some of the things artists have grappled with, including the imperatives “Don’t hide, don’t lie.” Absolute imperatives like these — “always,” “never” — of course, are impossible for fallible human beings to fulfill perfectly all of the time; we simply are too flawed and too chicken most of the time; we tell white lies to protect ourselves and to accommodate others to whom we are sensitive. But if we have principles like these, we recall them to ourselves, aim for them, and go with the flow. If political forces in the world silence us or attempt to silence us, we must speak, we must communicate, we must say what we need to say, we will go with that flow, we will do what we need to do no matter what the risk is to us, we will become lovers of fate — *amor fati*.

I aspire to generate that kind of energy in my work. My work is primarily composed of grey tones, and grey is neither black nor white and both black and white, a muted, somber color, like the grayness of the day today.

I’m coming to believe in resisting the forces that restrict or constrain my emergence in a stream of

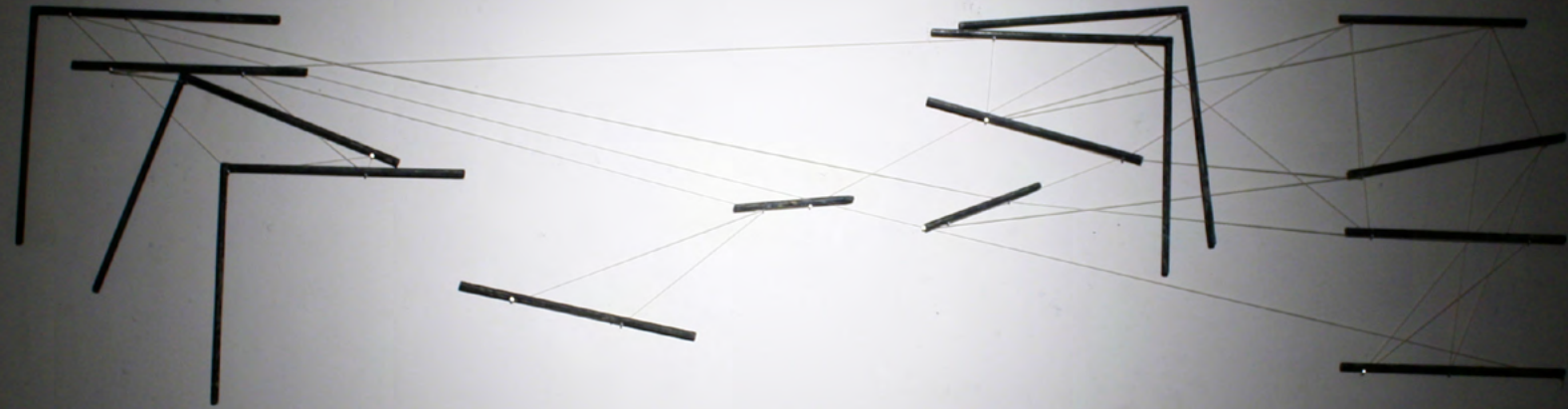
changing subjectivities. Constraining free speech that harms no one is a political act that one must resist if one is to accept artistic freedom and make use of it as an artist. If others, the dominant majority, for instance, or those more powerful than we are — heads of state, or corporate masters that determine cultural trends and try to make cultural slaves of us all, consuming slaves — suggest that who or what we are or where we think we must go with our lives is not appropriate or right and suggest, too, that we must not go there, that we must not go with the flow, that that is forbidden and instead we must resist. This is a sober, grey thought because resisting takes courage; we may be at our loneliest loneliness going with the flow, going as we go, going as we must go. But many artists did it; they went where they wanted to go. And, in my own time, I, too, will be going as I must go.

Q

Describe your work for us in five words.

A

This is proving to be harder than I thought — site-specific, not-landscape, not-architecture, ephemeral, and conceptual.



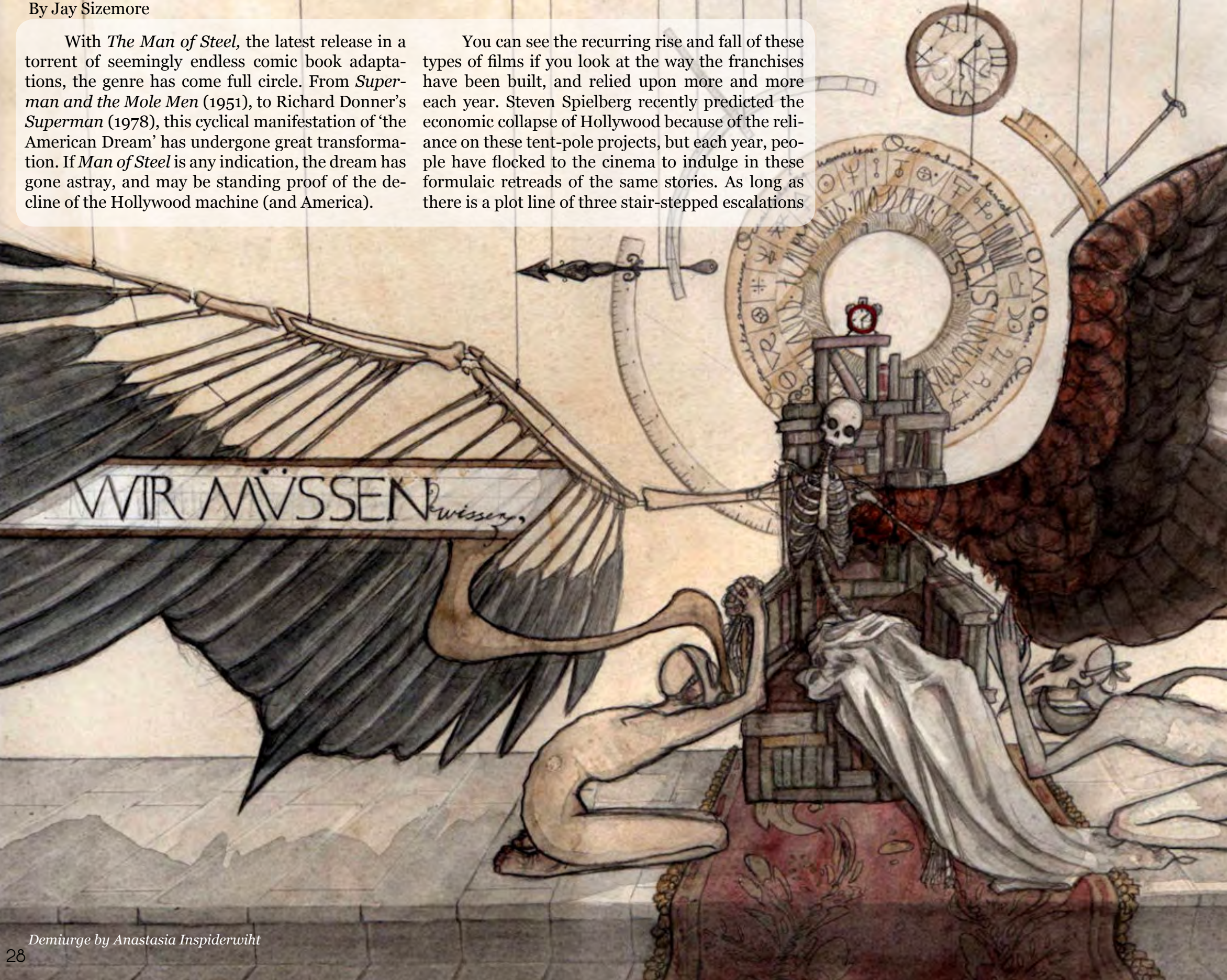
THE MAN OF PROPAGANDA

Sacrificing artistic vision to public pandering

By Jay Sizemore

With *The Man of Steel*, the latest release in a torrent of seemingly endless comic book adaptations, the genre has come full circle. From *Superman and the Mole Men* (1951), to Richard Donner's *Superman* (1978), this cyclical manifestation of 'the American Dream' has undergone great transformation. If *Man of Steel* is any indication, the dream has gone astray, and may be standing proof of the decline of the Hollywood machine (and America).

You can see the recurring rise and fall of these types of films if you look at the way the franchises have been built, and relied upon more and more each year. Steven Spielberg recently predicted the economic collapse of Hollywood because of the reliance on these tent-pole projects, but each year, people have flocked to the cinema to indulge in these formulaic retreads of the same stories. As long as there is a plot line of three stair-stepped escalations



of conflict that ends in a destructive but victorious climax for the protagonist, the audiences will fill the seats. The problem comes as a franchise grows, and it is eventually competing with its previous installments, trying to exceed audience expectations so the studios can still record high profits, while increasing the budgets spent making these films. This is how, in the original *Superman* movies, we got Nuclear Man, and in the original *Batman* films, we got nipples on Batsuits and Arnold Schwarzenegger. The greed of the system will outgrow the need for quality. With *Man of Steel*, they just cut out the middleman.

With Marvel and DC comics having taken a vested interest in the way their characters are developed for the screen, the last ten years have seen a better-than-average output of this type of movie. We have had classic additions to the genre such as *Watchmen* (2009) and *300* (2007), which were both directed by Zack Snyder, and were made practically using the source material as storyboards. We have seen the Batman franchise developed into a very solid film trilogy by Christopher Nolan, who also had a hand in the production of *Man of Steel*. Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man* (2002) was rebooted very successfully by Marc Webb (the writer-director of 2009's sleeper hit *(500) Days of Summer*) in 2012's *The Amazing Spider-Man*. And then there were the hits and misses that were *Iron Man* (2008), *X-Men* (2000), and *The Avengers* (2012), among others. There seems to be a constant struggle in this genre to tell compelling stories beyond those of origin stories upon which they are based. The difference between *Man of Steel* and previous films of the genre is that *Man of Steel* forgoes any attempt at artistic integrity, and instead emerges as a very thinly developed propaganda piece. When art sacrifices itself so blindly for the needs of its government, abandoning artistic vision for the narrow view of one group – in this case Conservative Christianity, as I see it, it has lost all credibility. And yet, so many people have fallen for this parlor trick, this sleight of hand that doesn't even need to pick a pocket, because the public gives its money freely to the cause.

The great thing about the *Superman* mythos is that it can be open to interpretation. Despite its creators Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster possibly allowing their Jewish heritage to influence certain aspects of the mythology (such as having names

like Kal-El and Jor-El, and using the Moses myth as a basis for the baby sent away to Earth alone), the creators have not specifically stated that any of this was intentional; they just wanted to create the ultimate superhero character. It was certainly not intended to be biased toward any one religion or political party. The concept of 'Superman' as it grew, was meant to be bigger than any of that polarizing drama. *Superman* was a character that could save the world, not just America (even though the character was an idealized version of American values). Somewhere along the way, Zack Snyder and David Goyer decided that *Superman* needed to portray only the values of conservative Christianity, and be a pillar of the Republican Party. Brian Singer may be partially to blame for this swing away from worldly compatibility when in *Superman Returns* (2006), he relied heavily on Christian metaphor, thus opening the Jesus mythology as an obvious comparison to *Superman*. In *Man of Steel*, this idea is taken to the extreme and used as a shameless appeal to the largest audience base possible, while at the same time allowing cross-promotional opportunities with the American armed forces.

I won't waste time by going into every detail of how this movie uses Christian symbols and ideas to promote the values and ideas of the religion in the least subtle ways possible. You can go to many other sites on the internet to see these points laid out. Nor will I waste time relaying all the ways in which the movie tries to positively portray the American army, rehashing the visual imagery of 9/11 to stir patriotic emotion in the audience. These things are obvious to anyone who looks for them. There have been many reports on how the film's creators garnered approval from the Pentagon to get military support for the film. This influence was apparently pushed beyond merely having military equipment in the movie, as there was an entire ad campaign unveiled with its release called *Soldier of Steel*, in which the *Superman* logo and scenes from the movie were used to promote recruiting efforts for the National Guard and the Army. Recruiting booths were set up outside theaters in which uniformed soldiers were handing out *Superman* shirts and talking to young people about the benefits of being in the service. Talking points for the film were also sent out to Christian

CHRISTMAS POEM

Walking to 'Bethlehem' today I found
The bodies of three wise men by the road.
Around the lifeless neck of each was bound
A placard: 'Nigger', 'Immigrant', two said;
The third, 'I shot the bastard; I was bored.'
Their precious gifts were gone; their wisdom dead.

When finally I reached the promised place
(It was not easy, for no star was out
And people slammed their doors in my face),
I was bewildered: it was smoking still,
And bombed to bits; no one answered my shout.
I could see something heavy had been dragged uphill.

~ Tabish Khair

Tabish Khair is an Indian poet, novelist and critic, currently based in Denmark. His latest novel is 'How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position'.

pastors all across the country to garner the support of churches in attending screenings. This is why the underlying themes of the movie are faith and morality and a willingness to make sacrifices for the good of humanity, while accepting that casualties of war are inevitable when fighting evil forces. This is why *Superman* allows hundreds of thousands of people to die during a battle, when traditionally his character would have done all in his power to prevent such careless destruction. Not only does it provide spectacle, and an opportunity for 9/11 imagery, but it also sends a message that in war, people will die. There is even a useless stab at the concept of evolution, portraying it as devoid of morality, and obviously pandering to evangelicalism of far-right conservatives. What all of this leads to is a movie that cannot stand on its own merit, with characters that mean less than the events portrayed, and a narrative that weighs less than its overwrought message, creating a film that is not only as big and round as a hot air balloon, but just as full of hot air.

These types of tricks may have worked in *Man of Steel*, as the movie is already proving to be a huge success, but my hope is that audiences won't continue to fall for the same indoctrinating messages. The primary goal of cinema should be to entertain while making credible art, not to promote agendas for political gain. Some of the greatest movies of all time – *Casablanca*, *The Grand Illusion* and *Battleship Potemkin* to name a few – are considered propaganda, but they do not forsake their artistic merit for their message, which is why they remain powerful films today. If this artificial influence continues to grow in the film making process, it shows grave possibilities for what Americans will allow from their government, and even graver possibilities for what that government may be capable of, especially when most of the public is either too blind to it to care, or simply chooses not to. If more people opened their eyes to this clear attempt at brainwashing, then these attempts would fail, and Hollywood would be forced to restructure its system, allowing more room for real art to be made. These projects can't succeed forever. Eventually, things will change. Let's just hope they change for the better.

Jay Sizemore is Film Critic for the magazine.

IMMANUEL KANT IN SHILLONG

By Anjum Hasan

This is the kind of town where you could be sitting in a restaurant, concentrating on your noodle soup, and suddenly notice across the room a man with the face of Harrison Ford, calmly eating lunch with his ordinary wife and bespectacled child. Or, on Sunday, walking down a dismal street, the trucks throwing dust into your face, one of those wooden buses with yellow snouts will go by full of old men in dark suits singing in chorus from the red-edged pages of their hymn books. Some things are the same—the siren still calls people to work at ten and sends them home at five. Poor women sit on their haunches behind baskets of sour fruits whose names I've forgotten. The hills are still there, though just about.

I wake up every morning with the idea that something has been missed the previous day and must be grasped before it's too late, but I end up doing the same things — going for aimless walks, dodging cars, eating rice and pork stew in small places that remind me of the university campus. When I get back in the evening, there'll be more cars. Cars backing into the hotel compound or trying to get out. Cars blasting music, cars being scrubbed down, cars loved like people. I can hear them as I sit down in the little veranda at the back and try to read.

I'm not sure what I'm doing here. Maia would have woken up in the morning and asked: *What's our plan for the day?* We'd start in bed and continue our plan-making through the morning. She'd emerge from the bathroom with damp hair, her delicate skin flushed, and say, 'I just got a great idea.' The rest of the day would be spent in the excitement of that adventure — the adventure of being together, of having a shared idea of what we wanted to do, a secret pact between us. No one else knew. That's love. No one suspects a thing.

I'm a visitor now; I'm sleeping alone on a hotel bed. On Monday morning, I'll head down to Guwahati and fly back home. As usual, I'll unlock the door to the flat and then won't know how to proceed. Grief is one thing. When, abandoning all those plans, your wife dies, you drop everything as well and just sit in a chair for weeks. But later, when you have to get up, when you have to make certain motions to keep life going — that part is harder. The difficulty of being ordinary after Maia was gone, the difficulty of decid-

ing what, without her, had any significance at all.

I started travelling — not an answer to that question but maybe a means of searching for it. The careful budgeting of my pension that we used to sit down to do at the start of every month seemed stupidly childish. I didn't want savings; I didn't want to think of that kind of future, the kind animated by money, the sort that flickers with possibilities if you have both love and cash.

I went to Calcutta because Maia and I had met there; I took ferries up and down the Hooghly with men in nylon shirts dropping peanut shells on the floor, their eyes fixed on the goals of whatever small business it was they were up to — all that enormous energy that goes into making a measly living. I could smell their sweat. One guy tried to pick my pocket probably because I looked so obviously, so goddamn, lost. I moved away from him instinctively though I should have let him take it. Either that or stood up to him, bunched my fists before his face.

I sat for hours in the old Flurys which was spanking new and crowded now, drinking coffee and watching people. I flew to London because we had both gone to university there without ever crossing paths with each other.

And I'm here now in honour of the two years I taught philosophy at the university while Maia, laughingly, for the fun of it, became a schoolteacher. There'd been no vacancy as such at the school but they'd invented the subject of drama for her — her job was to instil in the children a year-long excitement about the annual concert, or get them to enact stories from their English textbooks, or make papier-mâché masks and flowing satin costumes.

I enjoyed those two years like I've enjoyed nothing before or since. In every frame of my memory there are trees leaning in; I left every class I taught feeling valiant. I believed I was bringing my students something romantic in its remoteness — news of a man called Plato, for instance, news of the misled men and women cramped into his metaphorical cave.

Very little about the town threw me and Maia even though throughout our time here they were picketing the government offices; there were murders and agitations, rallies and blockades, anger

and fear. It was all newspaper reports to us. We saw nothing from our little cottage except pine trees and gravestones and the washing hanging outside other people's homes. I would walk up to take my classes and then perhaps sit with a colleague in a tea shop, drinking cup after cup of over-boiled tea or eating from small enamel soup-plates of rice and meat. My fellow philosophers were men who had spent time in this town; some were born here, some drawn by the lure of the university. Nothing united them except the fact that they were all unhappy. I'd listen to their complaints for a while, and then leave determinedly for the library. I wanted to develop some of the ideas in my PhD on Immanuel Kant's ethics into a book.

Come morning I'd be up early, making tea for Maia. The fact that the coming day was going to be more or less exactly like the previous one sharpened my appetite for it. Everything hummed with life. I loved my wife. I loved moral philosophy. I loved my students. They were eager and fresh-faced and ready to believe anything.

*

I'm out walking on the narrow pavements now; the air is dark with certain rain. Middle-aged men, beautiful girls, college boys — everyone wears perfumes that I inhale as I squeeze past. More than anything, the perfumes make me lonely. How can it be that this town is so full of people they're falling off the pavements and yet only in dreams am I in someone's arms?

All of yesterday they sang Easter hymns in the church nearby. I did nothing. I woke suffused with my usual dreams of Maia, only now I know they're dreams and not portents, not promises. She's simply not here. I tried to read, then went for a walk and returned, defeated by the downpour. I was determined to do better this morning. I planned to visit our haunts — the house on the hill, the university, her school.

I'm almost there now, reassured to see that anonymous, old three-storeyed building before the turning to the university. The same shops below, their awnings patched together with rusting pieces of flattened tin. The red mobile phone company signs stand out against the bleakness. And above, those enigmatic, dust-blackened windowpanes, cracked and broken with age, hiding behind them God only knows what sliver of bygone life, what secrets of genteel poverty.

But as soon as I turn to go up the slope, I find that I am somewhere else. This was not my path for those two bright years. Huge concrete monsters lean over, swallowing the road, and between the cars there's no place even for a footfall. I cannot go up and yet I must — to fight what came over me on that ferry in Calcutta: passivity and helplessness. The world riding roughshod. That weak-kneed feeling; that shocking irrelevance of being old.

I struggle with my umbrella, which the wind is working hard against. I am going to go up.

'Sir,' says someone softly at my elbow.

A man in a woollen jacket with his collar buttoned up against the damp, his umbrella a rock against the same wind that is flattening mine. I shake his hand even though I don't know who he is. The rain is relentless now and we take shelter under one of those tiny awnings while other people walk by without pausing, everyday expressions on their faces to match the everyday rain.

'You don't recognize me, sir. I'm John. You taught us Immanuel Kant in the fourth semester.'

I continue looking at him without changing my expression. *John*, I think. The small, silent, back-of-the-class, barely visible presence who would turn in the best-written, the most comprehensive assignments.

John. I've never forgotten him even though I didn't quite recognize him just now in his little goat-ee and smart, new glasses. There is a way in which John is always present whenever I think of Kant.

I remember standing in a sunny classroom, expounding on Kant's categorical imperative. I am explaining to my students that this was Kant's big thing — his most important contribution to West-

“ I believed I was bringing my students something romantic in its remoteness — news of a man called Plato, for instance, news of the misled men and women cramped into his metaphorical cave. ”

ern ethics. The categorical imperative, he believed, was the singular principle on the basis of which all human beings must hope to act. And what was this imperative? Act only on that maxim through which you can, at the same time, will that it should be a universal law. Be truthful not because it will win you favours but because it is desirable for there to be universal truthfulness. Do not steal because you don't want all your fellow humans to give themselves the license to be thieves. Also, act in such a way that you always treat both yourself and other people never as a means but always as end. Do good to others not because you expect favours from them but because you value them as human beings. It is goodwill which determines the moral worth of an action, not its consequences. This was the German idealist's view and it was grand but worth quarrelling with.

I wanted my students to talk to Kant and I remember that day feeling restless at their silence, their heads bent as they faithfully recorded everything I said. I was usually pleased at their sincerity but I wondered that day if it was not just acquiescence.

Who was this universal rational man that Kant had put his faith in? Is he here in this room with us? Can any of you identify with him?

I couldn't get anything out of them, and headed down to the library, swearing. The next thing I remember — not because this is the next thing that happened but because rage or disappointment has arranged it in my memory that way — is sitting in my little office in the department and marking end-semester papers. I was smoking too much and irritated, repeatedly ignoring the students or colleagues who happened to knock on my door. One candidate in particular — I didn't have his or her name, because the names were not given to us — had written a punctuation-mark-less tribute to that other grand German idealist, Friedrich Hegel. The piece was a horrid mishmash of what I'd said about Hegel in class. It was almost possible to trace the student's rising and waning attention in the classroom through the missing links and the broken, trailing sentences. I scanned through the rest of the paper and gave it 10 out of 50. Next came what was recognizably John's paper — I knew his handwriting — and my mood improved.

The third image that has stitched itself into

this story is this: I am standing in a dark lane, the one I always took to the little shop on the main road to get cigarettes. The lane opened out to the road with the sawmill, and one walked up past the sawmill to the cigarette shop. I could see the lights of the mill but the head of the lane was blocked by three men whose silhouettes meant nothing to me — just three men standing around. When I reached them, though, they didn't move aside to let me pass.

'You shouldn't have failed him,' said one of them.

'Francis,' said another. 'Why did you fail Francis?' I looked at him squarely, smelt the alcohol on his breath and realized, in the same instant, when he angled his face away from me and towards the lights on the road, that this was John.

'John, what's up?'

I peered into their faces, the light in my eyes.

'Francis has to repeat the fourth semester,' said John and I understood that the boy who was standing quietly to one side was the failed Francis.

'I'm not surprised,' I said. 'If your paper was anything to go by, I'm not surprised. You need to go back to high school if this is how you think philosophy is done.'

'You're not surprised?' asked the other boy sarcastically, who was definitely not one of my students. What do you know about philosophy and examinations, I was going to ask him, when he drew out the hand that was under his jacket and showed me a knife. It was a small penknife, its sharp edge glinting. 'Are you surprised when you see this?'

'You don't understand anything,' said John as anger rose in me. I clenched and unclenched my right fist. 'Francis was supported by his uncle but he won't support him anymore. His two years is up. He'll have to join the church and become a priest to feed his stomach. He'll have to study theology now.'

I looked at Francis who refused to meet my eye and then I said, 'Look here, this is insane. Why don't we all sit down...'

But John pushed past me and the three disappeared up the lane. I was left there with my unfinished sentence, my fist still clenched.

*

'It's been a long time,' says John, looking sympathetically at me.

I haven't seen him since that night in the lane.

ZEN IN HOLLYWOOD

Seen from helicopter porthole,
clogged arteries of overpass
shimmer like bracelets on
the wrist of a flamenco dancer,

shimmer, but don't move
forward except in halting dribs,
limousine & cab slowed
to crawl like gel hardening

in the coil of the inked man in cufflinks
carrying pita & bottled spring
water on a tray garnished with orchids,
plus packets of designer wet naps.

He has headshots to sweep out
to any buddy who knows anybody
with a script & enough backers
to rivet his bod onto a blue ray.

Just a few bright blocks away,
streams of well-heeled models
pour from a bus into boutiques & cafés,
curves glistening like hard toffee.

Watching fashionistas dine on quail
eggs aged in pomegranate puree,
a pimp in a coolie cap & big Bootsy
Collins shades slaloms a gold Cadillac

with jumping hydraulics & chrome
rims, pumping a bass so pure & low
the cantilevered awnings vibrate
in wake of his diurnal course,

while up in the hills, unimaginable
villas, Spanish tile lavishly tilting
in smog-bleary lantern light-
illuminated liquidambar canopies

planted next to jacarandas, pruned
gingko & camphor in jade planters,
a garden reflected in an infinity pool
opalescent as celluloid & gated

away from the pierced urchins
on Vine who beg for change
under a billboard that exclaims
El Mundo Cambiara!

Perhaps *las palmas* alter the airs
of reclusive heirs & auditioning actors,
the factions that form a flotilla
of flesh typecast into replicas of itself:

faux-blonde with genuine tit-job,
overbuff roughneck in retractable hardtop,
the sad sandwich-board wearers,
the reporter who follows with camera

a buoyant flouncer "it-girl" who paws & mock
pounces in a designer choker,
hairy hoop earrings & red rubber jeans.
They say to see here is to be seen.

How the hills are rubbed raw
with neon, stellar belts buried
deep in light pollution, yet notice
still how relaxed the surfer remains.

~ Ravi Shankar

Ravi Shankar founded the arts journal 'Drunken Boat', and is author of seven books and chapbooks of poetry, most recently the 2010 National Poetry Review Prize winner, 'Deepening Groove'. He co-edited W.W. Norton's 'Language for a New Century: Contemporary Poetry from Asia', the Middle East & Beyond and teaches at CCSU & in City University of Hong Kong's MFA program.



Cherubino et Flameo Gladio by Andrzej Masianis

Maia and I left town soon after.

The rain is starting to let up; John shakes the droplets off his umbrella.

‘What have you done all these years?’ I ask and hope the reproach can’t be heard in my voice. I’m still angry with him.

‘It’s a long story,’ says John.

I look away, waiting for an opening to leave. There’s nothing John and I have to say to each other. Whatever his life is like now, it has very little to do, for sure, with those months I spent talking about the Enlightenment while he reciprocated, writing in his small, tidy handwriting the kind of essays that make teaching worthwhile.

‘Should head off before it starts again,’ I say over the sound of the trucks groaning and belching up the incline, on their way out of town to Jowai or Silchar.

‘We must meet again, sir,’ says John, pulling out his phone. I give him my number reluctantly and promise falsely that I’ll try and fit in his invitation for a drink the following day. I make it sound as if there are things I am here to do but as soon as he walks away, my resolution to visit the old university crumbles and I start to drift aimlessly again. I take a shared taxi, then abandon it ten minutes later — leaving it to its fate of eternal traffic jams — and start walking again. The sun appears and evaporates the puddles. Parents and children go past me, laden with balloons and candy floss, and I notice that it’s Saturday and I am near the zoo. I have no business in the zoo so I turn and head towards Police Bazaar which the rain has done nothing to clean up. Everywhere goblets of spit and the squelch of rubbish and the scrum of people and shops.

I branch off from GS Road and suddenly I am among pleasant cottages along a quiet, winding lane, flowers in every house front, and neat painted signs in Khasi on compound walls, presumably urging people to behave. I start to breathe a little easier as I go deeper into the neighbourhood, trying hard to lose myself. I am thinking again of Immanuel Kant. I realize I am wrong about those three memories making up this story from the past because — reaching out across the years and fitting itself snugly with them — is a fourth.

Forty years ago, London. A small seminar room. A young philosopher from an American

“John is silent for a while, then leans forward and says, ‘They used to call this place the Scotland of the East. You know what it is now?’

‘What?’

‘The Shitland of the East.’ ”

university has been invited to speak. The room is packed because everyone has heard that the philosopher is controversial for speaking out on campus against the Vietnam War. As the man talks — about his childhood in small-town America, his highly conservative family, his experiences in the army, his decision to study philosophy — he keeps returning to the same idea, the indefensibility of the war.

And then he’s on to Kant. It’s only through a subjective process of thinking about what is good or beautiful that you can arrive at a universal conception of what is good and what is beautiful. Kant expects you to close your eyes and listen to yourself. The categorical imperative can only be implemented intuitively, not by looking to experience. If we all put our minds to it, we’d know that the war is wrong. You cannot insist on suppressing a people who merely, on their home ground, on their own terms, want to be free.

Once we had the categorical imperative, we had Kant to listen to. And then what happened, he asks, pausing to sip from a glass of water. The room is silent, as if everyone’s watching a film which could absolutely go anyway. In the twentieth century, the positivists came along, says the philosopher. Karl Popper came along. And what did he do? He turned away from Kantian intuition and he based everything on experience. If experience tells us communism is a threat to Western society then, right or wrong, communism must be a threat to Western society. And everything goes downhill from there — the positivists take over, Kant is pushed to a corner.

Karl Popper, yells the philosopher angrily, as if sentencing him to death. He praises the German idealists and damns the positivist influence on An-

glo-American philosophy.

A small old lady puts up her hand to speak. No one’s saying a thing but this lady wants to take on the philosopher.

‘Kant was an idealist. He was talking about a transcendental self, my dear, not you and me,’ she says with all the little-old-lady firmness she can muster. ‘It’s not for you and me to individually decide what is right and wrong for everyone.’

The philosopher comes so near I’m afraid he’s going to hit her. He bends down before her and says, ‘Why are you so scared to take responsibility?’

*

I’m sitting in a fancy salon fitted out in red and black, waiting to get a haircut. I was impatient when I came in but after fifteen minutes I sat back and breathed out. It’s like I felt on my first day here, seeing how everyone moved so slowly on the pavements. I started to fret and elbow my way ahead. Then I saw there was no point, there was nowhere I was going.

I watch the boys. Some are in well-fitting tuxedos, going for a wedding perhaps. They have large towels around their shoulders and are getting their hair styled and coloured, or having layers of gunk applied to their faces. The others in shirts look equally well groomed; it’s hard to tell whether they’re of the same party or are just chatting with the tuxedos in the spirit of excitement that pervades the salon — the loud music, the reek of cologne, the hard looks the boys give the mirrors, intent on looking their best, the slush and ugliness outside be damned. They weren’t even born when Maia and I lived here and if I told them that they wouldn’t care.

One of the boys notices me gazing at him in the mirror. I pick up a newspaper. The state government in crisis. Militants with the faces of children surrendering oversized guns. A training course due to be held on the cultivation and arrangement of orchids. In the letters section, a man writes a rambling letter to the editor about the coming apocalypse. He was stuck in a traffic jam on the outskirts of town and saw a taxi next to his, its sides coated with dust from village roads, a sick woman and her mother inside. They waited five hours for the jam to clear and when the taxi finally took off into the city, he was not sure the woman would make it. He thought of the End and he remembered the Gospel of St Mark — ‘But woe to them that are with child and to them

that give suck in those days.’

I fold the paper neatly and put it away. I am called for my haircut and sit down, no longer able to avoid looking at the scars and furrows on my face. The boy combs my hair as if it’s no different from the hair on anyone else’s head, as if the thoughts beneath that hair are of absolutely no consequence.

When I returned home that evening of the encounter with John and friends in the dark lane, cigarette-less and cursing myself for not having stood up to them, Maia and I had one of our rare arguments.

When I told her what happened, she said, ‘These students have lives we don’t know anything about. Maybe we need to talk to them.’

‘I don’t care what’s going on in their heads if it’s not Kant or Hegel or whatever it is I’m teaching. I’m not here to solve people’s personal problems. That boy has no feeling for philosophy. He’s better off being a priest.’

‘It’s not that you failed him,’ she said. ‘That’s not what the problem is. It’s just that we assume everything happening in this town has nothing to do with us. Maybe we’re wrong. It’s all going to creep in somehow. It has.’

‘Maia, you’re missing the point altogether. This is about aptitude. Kant is tough.’

I didn’t tell her that what disappointed me most was not being shown a knife but John out there in the lane with the other two. John understood Kant. When he occasionally came to my room to talk philosophy, tell me about the books he’d discovered, test his ideas on me, I imagined him standing up in a crowded room one day and speaking out in the name of Kant just as that young American philosopher had done in London all those years ago. Nothing seemed more thrilling to me than this — that the idea of right and wrong, good and bad acquired in a classroom could become the basis of political action, of moral choices.

This is what I had hoped for from John and instead I meet him in a lane, drunk and incoherent. That’s when I realized that Kant made not a jot of difference to this boy. As I pay for my haircut, I know that I have to meet John. I want to tell him, because I never got a chance to, how badly he let me down.

I walk back to the hotel thinking, this is it. No more waking up early with a false sense of urgency

to catch yet another flight. I'm going back home. There's a book to finish, plants to water, memories to relive.

All that's left is to remind John of his mistake. And prove to Maia that her heart was in the right place but she didn't know the first thing about Immanuel Kant.

*

John stands up to shake my hand. We order our whiskies — the waiters are polite and the music muted. In the dim lights of the bar I can make out a gaggle of girls on my right, the low table between them covered with food and drink. Like everything else about the town, this too seems new and strange to me. I realize I haven't been to a bar for over a year.

'Maia would have liked this place,' I say to John. We talk about our wives. He's married to a college lecturer who is the first person from the community to have received a PhD in microbiology. I ask him what he's been up to all these years.

He ignores the question and says, 'I'm so glad, sir, that I'm getting this chance to apologize to you. The hand of God — that you turned up.'

I clear my throat. It's such a difficult pleasure — talking. Since I arrived here ten days ago, I've said little more than 'good morning' to the chaps at the hotel desk.

'When I saw you the other day, I wasn't sure you remembered. I mean, I don't know if it still matters to you.'

'It does,' says John. 'It does. I haven't forgiven myself. I look at my kids and I think — what if they did the same thing to one of their teachers? I'd be ashamed for life.'

“I walk back to the hotel thinking, this is it. No more waking up early with a false sense of urgency to catch yet another flight. I'm going back home. There's a book to finish, plants to water, memories to relive.”

'So you're still thinking about him?' I say, smiling.

'Who, sir?'

'The categorical imperative. Immanuel Kant.'

John takes a sip of his whisky and looks out of the window at the lights on the hill.

'Act only on that maxim through which you can, at the same time, will that it should be a universal law,' I say and raise my glass.

John looks into the depths of his, then lifts it. The clink is drowned in the sudden laughter of the girls from the adjoining table. I glance at them and they are absorbed in each other; they have the same look as the boys in the salon — the sated, happy look of self-love.

I am ready to talk philosophy but John is still in the past.

'So much happened in those years, as you know. So much bitterness. A lot of people left town but you didn't deserve to go.'

'I couldn't have stayed.'

'I was drunk and angry. I didn't plan to frighten you away. I just wanted to make a point.'

'John,' I say, sitting up in my chair. 'You didn't frighten me away! I was here on a temporary post. We'd have left anyway. Much as we loved it here, both Maia and I knew we were going to leave at the end of those two years.'

'I thought you felt insulted and decided to . . .'

'No, no! That's not what I meant when I asked you if you remembered. I meant the lectures, our conversations, the books you used to read . . . Philosophy, for God's sake! That's why I felt let down. Because threatening someone who's only being fair is not a maxim which you can will to be a universal law. You knew that.'

John looks confused. So it's just his own pride he's been worried about all these years, I think bitterly. First the pride in imagining he'd got me to leave, and then the loss of pride in realizing it wasn't such a great thing to have done.

I take a big gulp of my drink. It's like I thought when I met John near the university. We have nothing to say to each other.

I try to recall if Plato, who said something about almost everything, had anything to share on the subject of disappointment.

If we were sitting in my office twenty years ago, I'd have put the question to John and we'd have talked about his favourite Socratic dialogue or mine for a pleasant hour.

'Are you doing philosophy, John?' I ask him

He looks me in the eye and says, 'No, sir, there are more important things to do.'

He's no longer apologetic.

I've finished my drink and I'm ready to leave. But John isn't; he's pointing out something in the distance, up in the lighted hills.

'Do you know what's on the other side, beyond those big houses and electricity pylons?'

I look at him steadily, saying nothing.

'There are villages there and the people in those villages . . . Well, they naturally don't have anything we have. They're poor people,' he says, pronouncing the word 'poor' as if it's a foreign word, a word he's trying to teach me.

I think of the letter in the newspaper the previous day, the vision of apocalypse seen in a dusty taxi.

'I know, John,' I say calmly. 'I know they're poor.'

'Now what happens when winter comes around? The growing cement plants need all the coal they can get and more. So where are those poor folks going to get coal from to keep themselves warm? Can they compete with the monsters? No, they cannot. They just have to lump it, they just have to freeze.'

I wait for him to connect this back to the question of what he's been doing with himself, but he seems to have abandoned that line of conversation.

John is silent for a while, then leans forward and says, 'They used to call this place the Scotland of the East. You know what it is now?'

'What?'

'The Shitland of the East.'

I laugh uproariously.

John has a grim look for a minute and then he dissolves into laughter too. He shakes his head and says, 'Man, what can you say? The rich get richer, the poor stay poor. And all we have till Doomsday come is whisky.'

Doomsday again? He orders another drink and insists I have one too.

Suddenly we're talking about everything — the multitudes of people in town and the languages I've heard spoken on the street, many of which I no longer recognize; how the ministers in the state government keep breaking up and then forming and reforming alliances, like blind amoeba; the number of men who look like Elvis Presley; John's children and his cautious hopes for them; the people I used to know when I lived here, now scattered like rain all over the country.

It's close to midnight and I should be getting back. I have a flight to catch the following day. I feel for my wallet to pay the bill but John has already got it.

'Do you think of him?' he asks suddenly, looking up from the bill.

I blink at him. Kant, finally?

'Francis,' he says impatiently. 'Do you wonder what happened to him?'

It takes me a couple of seconds to remember who Francis is and, of course, it shows on my face.

'No,' I say truthfully.

'He went down, that guy. He went all the way down. He couldn't stick it out with the padres. He went back home and got into drug running. He was caught in Mumbai airport with three kgs of Ephedrine. You know what they do with that stuff, don't you? He's been cooling his heels in jail for the last five years.'

The question — 'Why is this any of my business?' — is on my lips but before I can say it John has killed it.

'Sir,' John is saying, 'Why are *you* afraid to take responsibility?'

* *This piece is excerpted from 'Difficult Pleasures' (Penguin Viking, 2012), reprinted here with permission of the author.*

Anjum Hasan is the author of the short story collection 'Difficult Pleasures' (2012), the novels 'Neti, Neti' (2009) and 'Lunatic in my Head' (2007) and the collection of poems 'Street on the Hill' (2006). Her poetry and prose has been widely published. She is books editor at 'The Caravan — A Journal of Politics and Culture' and lives in Bangalore.

SPOTLIGHT ARTIST: NUMAIR ABBASI

Interviewed by Moeed Tariq



The Missing Slate sat with Indus Valley student and emerging artist Numair Abbasi to talk about the rapidly political world of Pakistani art, art lobbies, and the recurrent themes in his work.

Q Did you always want to be an artist growing up?

A Not at all actually. I've been a confused kid (career wise) throughout my life. I was never into art; my parents were the ones who sort of pushed me into drawing and coloring etc., [because] that's what normal kids do, you know. It was only when I was seven or eight and began taking interest that I realized that this was something I was good at and something that I actually enjoyed.

And then for the longest time in high school and secondary school, I knew that I had to do something related to art; that that was the field I was going to flow into. It could be interior designing, fashion designing, or even plastic surgery. But the broad category of art had sort of umbrella'd my future career choice.

I took Art in my O- and A-levels; for [the] A-level portfolio my chosen topic required me to go around the city taking photos of archaic buildings or something very unique to Karachi, like the Mohatta Palace and Abdullah Shah Ghazi's *Mazaar* (shrine) etc.

Briefly put, my love for photography and such iconic buildings grew and compelled me to apply for architecture. By the end of my first year [at university], I realized architecture was not something I was going to gel with, and I decided to switch to Fine Arts — it felt [like it was] more “me”. Best decision ever. No regrets.

Q Do you remember the earliest drawing / painting you made? Tell us a little about it.

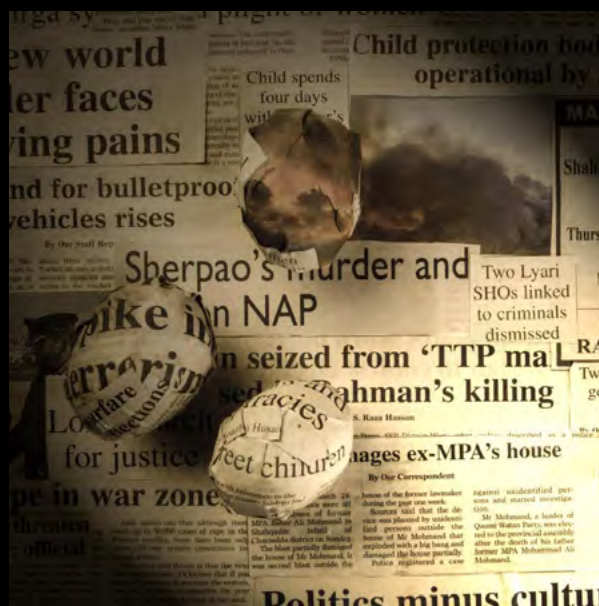
A I actually don't remember much, there must've been several works but I can't recall which one would've been the earliest drawing or painting I made. I remember making the “Ding Dong Bubble Gum” [mascot] cat once when I was five or six [smiles]. And a lot of stick figure narratives such as the time when I went swimming, or an Eid shopping spree with my family. Typical kid stuff. All this for my school magazine so it got printed in some little corner of some page in the school newsletter eons ago. I remember

“The guidelines are only there to challenge you; you can still be adventurous if you want. Your perseverance to be adventurous, plus the narrowed guidelines only pushes the work to another dimension.”

drawing the typical centrifugal lines around the sun to show its rays, or painting just the top bit of the paper blue because that's how I perceived the sky. I remember drawing my first female nude at the back of a school notebook when I was six and that really fumed my mother [laughs].

Q Was it a struggle at home to be allowed to go to art school?

A Yes! I mean, my brother wanted to go into art too. But he got brainwashed and applied for Medicine and Econ and what not. When [it was] my turn, I was already prepared to face a similar scenario. My dad took me to a lot of educationists and artists and art teachers who discouraged me from taking up th[e] subject. And this was when I was thinking of taking art for my O- / A-levels! So you can only imagine what they must've felt like when I told them I want to go to an art school for my Bachelors. They seemed fine with me applying for architecture, more so than they were with Fine Arts. But eventually they realized that I'm not my brother [laughs], I'm quite stubborn that way. It's my way or the highway. Eventually my dad came to terms with it and said “I'm fine with whatever you do, as long as you excel in it and make us proud.” Interestingly, they were the ones who sent me to drawing teachers and what not in my infancy, only so I could be pushed into taking an interest in it and they were the ones who lost their shit when I actually wanted to pursue it further.



Off with their eggs!

Infancy, for me, is the purest phase in one's life. Amongst humans, the most sinless generation on the planet are minors. Their innocence, their vulnerability, and their purity — none can be surpassed by anyone else. Over time, these fragile beings experience some severe encounters with the realities of life. Violence of various degrees, crimes, corruption, unethical and immoral practices — all are witnessed and experienced by these young, sensitive souls. Undergoing this process of losing their innocence, they become thick-skinned and hard-hearted over time.



A personal observation concludes that often people seem to take a 180-degree from how they were as young kids and toddlers. I, myself, am the polar opposite of what I was over a decade ago. Even though personal ordeals I've experienced, [and those experienced] by my family may have affected my perception; the escalating rise in the cases of kidnappings, rapes, ethnic mob violence and terrorism have all [been taken] into account, exposing the ugly side of life to such naïve creatures. It instills in their mind that what they experienced wasn't real life; it was a joke, and real life is [more] bitter and volatile to handle.



The eggs have been thoughtfully chosen as the subject — as their platonic shape, their spotless skin, and their pure white even tone, to me, resonate with the same purity that's existent in these kids. I put these eggs in uncomfortable, dark settings to create a cringing — often grotesque — [effect] to reflect the traumatizing experiences that these kids have to witness and encounter.

LESSON 5: SAYING GOODBYE TO LOVE IN BUTOH CLASS

To begin we are one-celled creatures—
blind, wildly incompetent, pawing about
in the waters of the dark. Then we grow
spines, limbs, feel the ghost movement
in our coccyges—the memory of tails.
There is such a thing as tiger life—
a primitive pattern of the universe
imprinted in our hearts. We may walk
with lotus flowers in our palms,
a forest of cherry blossoms bursting
from our heads, shoulders, arms,
but sooner or later we will have to know
the earth, to understand *bereft*.
Sooner or later, we will have to confront
the charred corpse of a cedar tree,
an orphaned child, a friend in the rubble
dying slowly, terribly. What should we say?
How should we mend these fissures
of loss when the wind howls so,
when we can hear death coming for us?
Learn to embrace the past. Yes, learn
to embrace. But when the past arrives,
cloaked with forgotten smells, the smooth,
musky assault of it on our bodies,
all I see is love—another and another,
 carrying his own elixir
of ocean oil bone.
I fix my gaze, breathe—let go—breathe.
They come wearing bells. They will not leave
until it is winter, and they are kissed free.

Reprinted from 'Everything Begins Elsewhere' (Copper Canyon Press, 2012), with permission from the poet.

~ Tishani Doshi

Tishani Doshi is an award-winning writer and dancer. She has published two collections of poetry – 'Countries of the Body' and 'Everything Begins Elsewhere', and a novel, 'The Pleasure Seekers'. Since 2001 she has worked with the Chandralekha troupe in Madras. Currently, she divides her time between Cheyyur, Tamil Nadu, and elsewhere.



Teri Tirchi Nazar Mei Hai Jadu

Ten women. Ten words.

Often people discuss how they see themselves or how conscious they may be of what someone else perceives them as. Here, I looked at the outcome of how I ultimately saw myself — but through the other.

A highly documentative and interactive process, I approached ten different female strangers (or those I was minimally acquainted with) and asked them to describe me in just one word. It could be something appreciative, or even a harsh criticism, but something with an honest thought.

In an elaborate, highly personalized setting I settle down to confront myself in the mirror. I see my reflection; my own distorted reflection, but through the other — a manifestation of what they think of me.

It was a conscious decision to collaborate with only females through the photographed conversation between the two sexes, I wanted to question ideas and notions of “gender”; of what’s masculine or what’s feminine — an idea strongly debated with regards to several men who have a flair of flamboyancy, such as myself.



“ The gaze, I feel, plays an important role as I love exploring how I see the people around me, how I see myself, how the world sees me, how the world sees itself through me, and how I see myself through the world, and so on. ”

Q Why choose Indus Valley? Would you have preferred to go to NCA instead?

A I actually would've preferred to go abroad instead. But that didn't work out. Let's not forget that I was initially applying for Architecture. And the feedback I got was Indus Valley (IVS) was a better option for Architecture. But I'm quite glad IVS happened, because that's how the switch came about. I mean, what if I were stuck right now in some US school making plans on CAD and what not?

And honestly, I feel [like] it's a wiser option for a Fine Arts student to study from here than from abroad. You can network with your future peers, your work will itself relate to the issues and culture of the society you are growing up in. You get a more hands-on experience with the local arts scene and are definitely more aware of what the practice in the industry is like, more so than someone who studied abroad and moved here. That's just my opinion though.

Would I have preferred to go to NCA instead? I don't know. I don't think so. Both institutions visibly operate with [opposite] schools of thoughts. But I'm more than happy where I am — fortunate, in fact. I don't like to delve into the past and think of what could've been. Had I been in NCA I would've been asked the same about IVS... I did get into NCA for Architecture though, [smiles]. I just chose not to go.

Q As an arts student do you feel that you are restricted in the way you express yourself in your assignments? Are the guidelines too narrow for being adventurous with your work?

A Restricted? Definitely. But is that a bad thing? Not at all. You need to be trained with the skills first, [in order] to expand your boundaries and go crazy conceptually, or even in your execution. The restriction makes total sense to me. And they loosen up as you progress [by semester]. Plus, the faculty is super understanding, so if you've got an idea or if you do feel you're being restricted in some area, you can walk up to them and discuss it without hesitation. They're all ears.

The guidelines are only there to challenge you; you can still be adventurous if you want. Your perseverance to be adventurous, plus the narrowed guidelines only pushes the work to another dimension.

Q Do you think that an 'Art Lobby' exists in Pakistan?

A Lobbies exist everywhere in every bloody field. The art world is [not] special [in this]. Networking, contacts, and social build up is as crucial as the quality of your work. You need to be able to market yourself well. From

what I've heard, yes an art lobby exists in Pakistan. But I can't be sure of it as it's all hearsay. Whether or not a lobby exists is something I [will] find out, once I step into the field professionally.

Q Who are the artists you admire in particular? Inspiration?

A I won't call it an inspiration as such but admiration definitely. Muhammad Ali's work is something that I have strong appreciation for. Salman Toor is another name. I admire and get inspired by artworks a lot more than by the artist. So I might like a particular series by a local artist, abandoning the rest of his work, and then I might like some other collection of work by some European photographer. If you want to know some of the works which I admire in particular or feel inspired by, the list is endless.

Q If you had to describe your work in five words?

A As much as I loathe describing and categorizing my work, after much contemplation, the words are: confrontational, gory, provocative, queer, and disputatious.

Q Are there any recurrent themes in your work? What are they and how do they play a part in your perception of the world?

A I guess I'm sort of inexperienced to answer that question properly, but yeah I can sort of realize myself now where my niche is or what sort of ideas or concepts I like to work with.

I am definitely more [invested] in personal narratives than in discussing social issues in my work. My work is about me, how I am, and how I engage with the people and world around me. Often the work is documentative, and requires me to engage with individuals to create the concept and produce the work. The gaze, I feel, plays an important role as I love exploring how I see the people around me, how I see myself, how the world sees me, how the world sees itself through me, and how

I see myself through the world, and so on. And then I like to explore and comment through the process, i.e. whether or not the perception stands true. [So] the work stays personal but relatable to a lot of individuals on a universal level.

Q Do you often find yourself restricted by the ideas of "acceptable" and "taboo" when displaying your work for an audience?

A Not so much right now, no. But I'm sure that is something pertinent to the art world here in Pakistan. Self-censorship is something that a lot of artists are bound to undergo in their practice. With instances such as vandalism at the Shanaakth Festival over a political photograph or the banning of Sauhbat over some "blasphemous" content, it's quite evident that artists cannot practice freely without being misread as offensive or blasphemous. So yeah in general, there's a whole big valid debate over stuff that's either acceptable or taboo, especially in context of Pakistani society, and its associated politics.



Senescence

This cryptic series of work does, for me, encapsulate the amalgamation of emotional stages that an individual deals with and how they co-relate to the passage of time – breakdown, stress, panic, asphyxiation, dilemma. The body parts have been assembled in a handcuffed blend, almost making a new and abstrusely unrecognizable entity which for me mimics the same clueless, incomprehensible state of mind when one undergoes the aforementioned phase. The enigmatic ambiguity is to invite the viewer to spend more time with the work deciphering the image, unfolding the lines. The captivating, sculptural lines and folds of the human body have been utilized to give a feel of macro-shots of wrinkles which on their own, invites another aspect into the scenario of ageing, decomposing, a disintegration of the self over the passage of time. We are slowly deteriorating – our minds, our bodies. Time is always running out. The process of ageing started the instant we were born. The hourglass will not run for long.

THE WAR IS AT OUR DOORSTEPS

By Sidin Vadukut

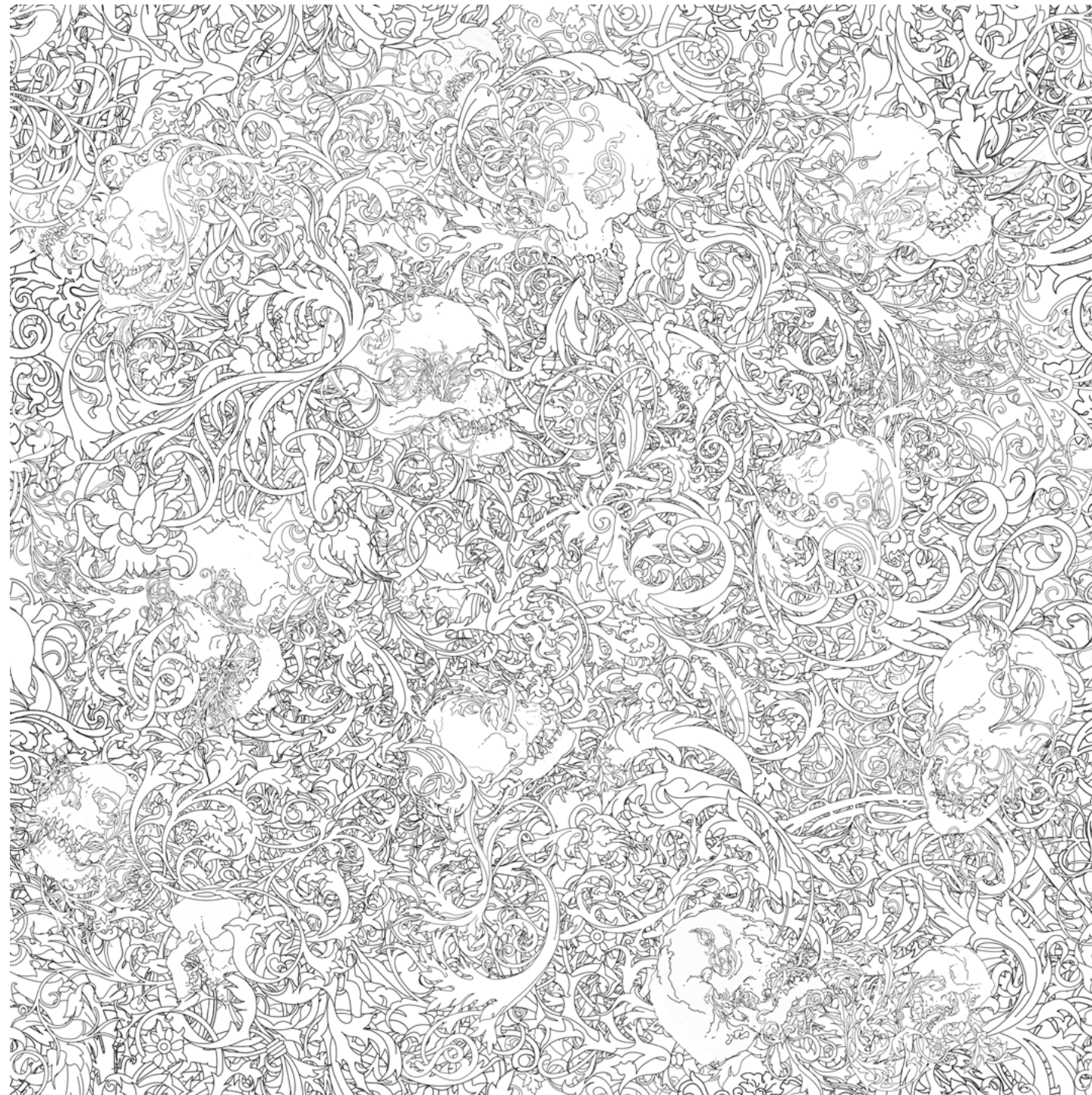
“The war is at our doorsteps,” he said as he carefully stacked 12 glucose biscuits into three stacks of four biscuits each. There was a faint smell in the panchayat office meeting room. It seemed to be getting stronger and stronger. The panchayat member who used to be in-charge of streetlights and road-works, but was now in-charge of distributing dietary supplements, had a very acute sense of smell. He thought it reminded him of the banana wine his mother used to make a long time ago. Before this war.

The member hadn't eaten a fresh banana in weeks. Maybe months. “This is such a meaningless war,” he thought to himself. He suddenly looked around guiltily, as he thought this extremely illegal thought.

“The war is at our doorsteps and we have to start taking things seriously,” the panchayat president said, further elaborating the agenda for this morning meeting, as he rearranged the biscuits into four stacks of three each. In front of him, on the conference table, there were three things: one little plate with the biscuits, one cup of tea mostly empty, and a print-out of the Panchayat War-time Daily Bulletin that had arrived via email the previous night. The plate had once been gifted to the panchayat by a local finance company and the logo was still visible if you looked at it carefully under a suitable light. Vasco Kuries and Loans.

Panchayat presidents always received the PWDBs the night before a weekly meeting. (However under no circumstance were the contents to be divulged, if at all, to the public until after the weekly executive committee meeting had discussed them first.) Originally, when they first started sending PWDBs three months into the war, the emails used to come to the chairmen's inboxes only on the morning of the meeting. Then they realized that many chairmen only checked email once a day. At night.

Then six months ago, maybe eight, they sent a PWDB to a panchayat just outside Karaikudi. “Carry on everything as usual. Nothing new to report. Stay vigilant. Stay valiant.” Obviously everyone in that panchayat carried on everything as usual. Well, as



Artwork by May Lim

usual as they could given that they were so close to the front line. The next morning the department sent an emergency revised PWDB asking the panchayat to immediately start evacuating to the east. Like so many things in most wars it had been too

little too late. The president never checked his email in the morning, and so he never saw it. Within hours the panchayat was overrun.

Since then they had started sending PWDBs the night before. So that they still had time to send

“ ‘Carry on everything as usual. Nothing new to report. Stay vigilant. Stay valiant.’ Obviously everyone in that panchayat carried on everything as usual. ”

emergency messages before morning panchayat meetings. Meetings were supposed to start not earlier than 9:00 AM and not later than 10:00 AM. One executive committee member's sole responsibility was the conduct and recording of meetings.

“Start taking thing seriously in the sense? We are already extremely professional about our civil supplies system...” It was the member in-charge, of course, of civil supplies. He had been the last peacetime panchayat president and there was a still a hint of authority and even leadership in his voice. He also used to be an authorised agent for Tata Sky.

The president, once a sales manager for a carpet company in Kuwait city but more recently an investor in a luxury ayurvedic spa cum bed and breakfast that tragically opened two days before the war itself had, reached for the printout of the PWDB while chuckling soundlessly.

“Civil supplies is not a problem. The citizens in our panchayat will eat anything. We have a new problem. Infiltration. Espionage. The department wants us to be prepared. What is that smell?”

“I don't know. Maybe a dead rat. Something must have died in last week's heavy rains. Who will send spies here? We are so far away from both front lines. I don't think we should panic.” The member in-charge of utilities spoke in precise words. He then popped one of his biscuits into his mouth.

The member-in charge of meetings wrote everything down in meticulous detail. Such members were also expected to participate in meetings fully. But this woman, who used to be the principal of the nursing college, was one of those irritating people

“ He had been the last peace-time panchayat president and there was a still a hint of authority and even leadership in his voice. He also used to be an authorised agent for Tata Sky. ”

who had no capacity whatsoever for multitasking. She could do only one thing at one time. But she would do it with tremendous enthusiasm. The panchayat’s meeting diaries were already several dozen volumes in number.

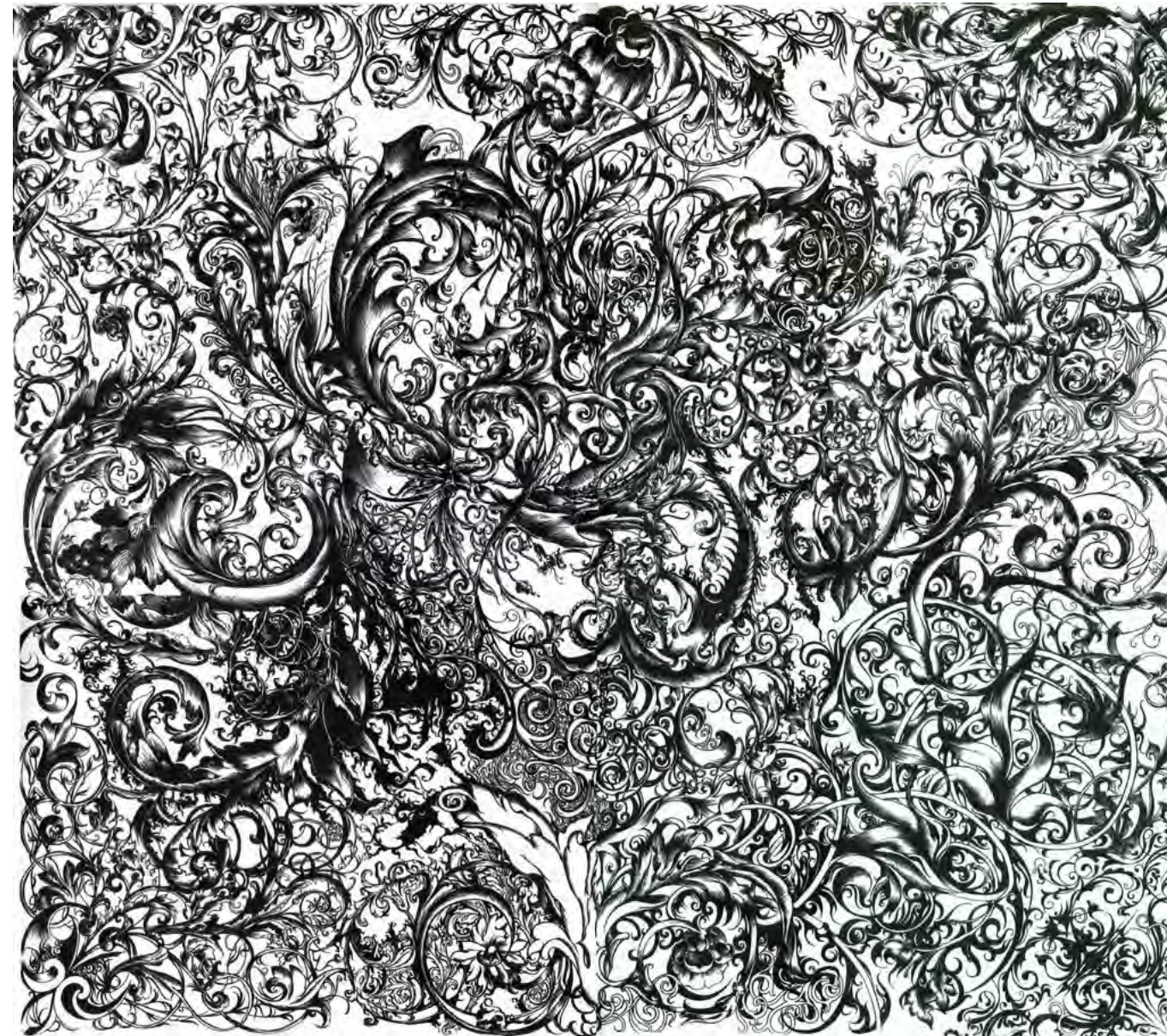
“Also we don’t get any visitors. At all. I don’t think an unofficial vehicle has entered the village in many weeks,” the member for public security said. Ever since members of both the state and state reserve police forces had been rushed to the front lines and the major cities, panchayats had been left to manage their own security and public order. In the beginning this had been a problem. Especially with all the drunks on the weekend. But not for long. The drunks soon realised that even the worst police constable had a line that they would not cross. The panchayat’s volunteer safety teams had no such issues of constraint or restraint. One fellow, a life insurance agent, slapped first and asked questions later. And what tremendous slaps they were. Right under the ear lobe.

The president responded. “Still we should not presume to know more than the department. I want you to install 24-hour border posts on all roads at the panchayat boundaries. This is one of the suggestions in the PWDB.”

The member nodded and made a note of this in his diary. “I will also them to maintain a register of all vehicles entering and leaving, along with passenger details.”

“Very good. Can someone open all the windows? I don’t think there is anybody outside. This smell. It is horrible...”

In the beginning citizens used to wait outside the panchayat office for updates after the daily meet-



Death of the Baroque by May Lim

ings. But that was in the beginning. When it was still a war of great movement and exciting operations. That was a long time ago. Now it was really a very boring war.

When the windows were thrown open and the president looked outside he saw nobody. He looked up and saw dark grey clouds. Rain was imminent. He immediately rearranged the biscuits into six piles of two each. Short and boring piles. He looked again at the document and scanned down the list of other security measures suggested by the department.

- Secure all sea and river ports. Irrelevant.
- Monitor any community radio stations. Irrelevant.

- 24-hour on-site surveillance of any licensed wired or wireless telephone lines. Irrelevant. The panchayat had lost wireless network coverage many weeks ago during the Durga Puja offensive.
- Watch out for any paratrooper drops...

“Member, will you ask your security teams to keep an eye out for any parachute troopers?”

“How do you... look out for parachute troopers? Is there a process?”

“The bulletin doesn’t say anything more. Look up? Shine torches at night? I am sure nobody will drop in the day time...”

“How frequently should they look up? I will

have to add this to the standard directions.”

The president sighed. This was what he hated most about the war. Other people hated the rations. Some people hated the radiation tablets.

The chairmen hated the certainty and the precision and the war’s obsession with details. Every member would be issued with 12 biscuits for each meeting. What if they didn’t want any biscuits? And wanted fruit instead? Nothing doing. Rules were rules.

He also hated biscuits. Coming to think of it, he hated a lot of things. Perhaps this is what made him such an excellent, well-loved, well-respected panchayat president.

“Tell them to scan the skies for paratroopers every one hour in the day time and every 30 minutes in the night time.” Both the members for security and meetings instantly wrote it all down.

Suddenly the chairman thought of something. He stopped stacking biscuits and left them in uneven piles, something he truly hated.

“Has anybody cleaned the Nehru room recently? I think the smell is coming from there...” He got up, walked out of the room and up the stairs. There were two rooms upstairs. The panchayat reading room – which was now being used to store the many volumes of meeting records – and the Nehru room.

In 1952 Jawaharlal Nehru had visited the panchayat. Hundreds of citizens had assembled to hear Nehru deliver a brief speech standing on top of an empty oil drum outside the primary school. (This was before the school constructed the Nehru Memorial Outdoor Auditorium.) The speech had been delivered in English. But one of the school teachers translated it on the fly.

It was the greatest day in the history of the panchayat. Later when Nehru died they created the Nehru room in the panchayat office. Inside the room there was a bust of Nehru on a concrete pedestal. And behind him on the wall there were several photographs of that famous speech. Originally the plan was to keep an eternal flame in the room in front of the pedestal. The people of the panchayat were proud because it was the only eternal flame, as far as they knew, in the entire district. Maybe even in the state.

Later they discovered there was a reason for the rarity: eternal flames are bloody expensive. So a

“ One fellow, a life insurance agent, slapped first and asked questions later. And what tremendous slaps they were. Right under the ear lobe. ”

few months later they decided to replace the “eternal flame” with the “eternal garland of love”. Every two days a fresh garland of jasmine flowers was placed around Nehru’s neck.

As the president walked up the stairs the smell began to grow in ripeness, fullness and intensity. It was clearly coming from the Nehru room. For a moment the president hesitated. What if there was a dead body in the room? What if a spy had already infiltrated the panchayat and were killing people. This was war after all.

And then he chuckled silently and walked up to the door and looked inside. It stank like a corpse. But was only a heap of rotting jasmine flowers at the foot of the pedestal. The president stood and looked on, mesmerised by the sight of decomposition. The flowers seemed to be melting into a brown mush. Bits of thread floating in the soup.

How long had these flowers been lying around?

A few minutes later the panchayat president returned to the meeting room. Everyone expressed their disgust at his discovery.

“President... do you think the statue is a security risk?” It was the member for health and education making a rare point.

“I mean if one day the enemy parachuters...”

“Paratroopers.”

“Yes. If they land in large numbers. And we can’t do anything to stop them. And they see the statue... they may think we are fanatics?”

Everyone thought about this silently. This was not an empty risk. Somewhere near Pondicherry or Pune six to ten months ago they had made a bunch of locals pull down a Gandhi statue. Some of the locals had refused. The reprisals had been brutal.

“The reprisals had been brutal in Pondicherry... was it Pune?... you all remember this very well,”

the member continued.

The panchayat president looked around the table, his eyes finally coming to rest on the member for meetings jotting down everything furiously.

“Member... you make a perceptive point. You care for our people. But I don’t think it is a good point to be made during a time of war. The room is a matter of great to this panchayat. If required we must be prepared to defend the room from paratroopers. If it comes to that. And it might. But that is the right thing to do.”

Everyone around the table nodded with varying degrees of conviction. The member for health and education solemnly decided to never say anything at all if she could help it.

“In fact,” the president continued, “I am going to lock up the room right now. To prevent the room from coming to any harm. I will clean it up and lock it up. Of course I will ensure the eternal garland of love is maintained.”

This time the nodding heads around the table nodded with much greater conviction.

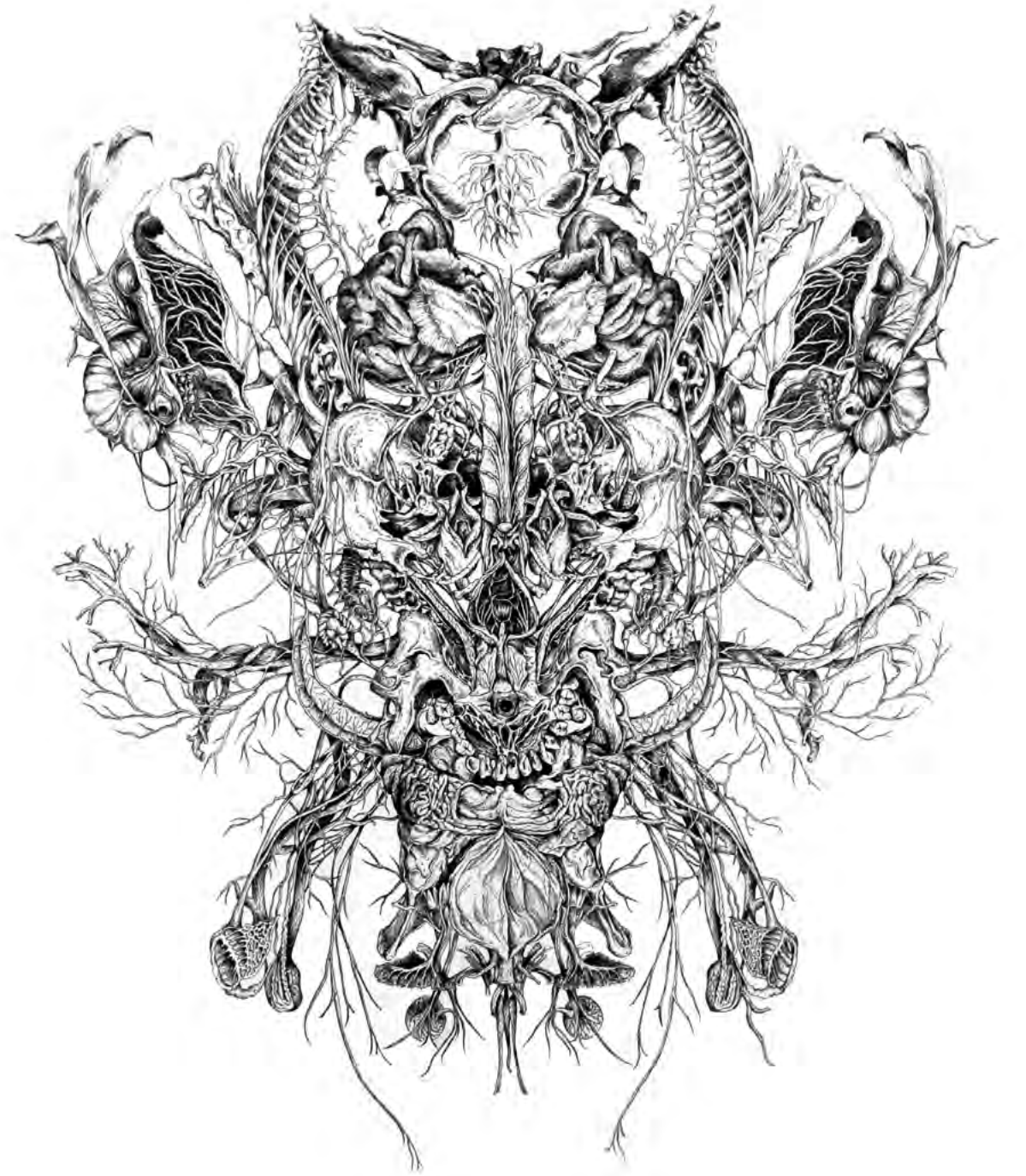
There was a tremendous sense of relief when the meeting concluded shortly thereafter. The stench was becoming quite unbearable and everyone left quickly.

The president waited for the last member to leave. This was the member of meetings who spent a few minutes returning her notebook to the reading room. After she left, the panchayat president picked up a broom and a few other things from the store-room and went upstairs to the Nehru room.

Many years later, after the war had ended, and they decided to add an official replica of the Mother of Victory to the Nehru room, the panchayat members broke open the lock.

They found nothing inside the Nehru room. Nothing at all. Not even the photos on the wall. It seemed to have been cleaned quite thoroughly a long time ago. But now it was layered with many years of dust.

Sidin Vadukut is an Indian journalist who lives and works in London. He is the author of the ‘Dork Trilogy’, published by Penguin Books India. He is currently working on ‘The Skeptical Patriot’, an investigation into popular “facts” about India. He is a frequent contributor to ‘Quartz’, ‘Cricinfo’ and ‘The Khaleej Times’.



Artwork by May Lim

(AFTER 9/11) MAY I HAVE THIS DANCE?

After 'Pequeño Vals Vienés', by Federico García Lorca

.i.

I'll be your saucy brown señorita
twirling and whirling the flamenco
gobbling up rhythm as if at a tapas bar
not looking at what you serve me
just taste it! just taste it! you whisper
squishing a ripe pomegranate
between thumb and forefinger

Life is too delicious to waste
you ask me to smell your fingers
before holding them

Self-flagellation
each day
as incense
burns into skin
telling you your prayers
are done

.ii.

And as you unravel me
a silver violin string
of possibilities
you smile and say
let's waltz
till we are dizzy
and broken-waisted
till our sweat
reaches the Hudson,
the Mississippi
the Ganges
till our ears ache
listening
to the ghosts of Coltrane
and a one-lunged Indian saint
playing a sad raga
a mourning raga
the morning after
they collect ashes
and sprinkle them
across a folded flag

.iii.

You stare at my photograph
and then at me
not once, not twice
but three times
as if you want to say

is this the same girl who made faces?
And stuck her tongue out
for the world to see?
My tongue is shaped like India
or is it Texas?
If I try hard, maybe even like Italy
but no one cares for tongue geography

You turn my passport over
and see an inscription:
*For those times you
weren't looking or listening*
I love you, I love you, I love you

.iv.

A thousand windowed ballroom
like the Hawa Mahal
and a metal bird with fiery wings
crashing head first
they jump
they leap
they pirouette
from the 100th floor of their fears
morphing between song and grief
marvelling at the dexterity of death
satin slippers, gold chains, jingling keys
the audience rushing toward the exit sign
ducking from the shower of coins
falling out of bosoms and back pockets

Outside a growl, a low rumble
then billowing clouds
of ground-up bone
this is the earth groaning
a pebble shaped
by catastrophe
from each angle
a different color
a holograph of grief

.v.

This Christmas, Querida,
what do you bring me?
A little hope in my brandy?
For you I have something
from the forest of dried pigeons
a necklace of lime and chilli
to ward off the eye that is evil



First Kiss by Luisa Kelle

Shall we dance
my brown Señorita?
Have one last dance with me!
let me dress you
in hyacinths and ribbons
woven into a saree

Let us dance from New York to New Delhi
as the frost lights up boughs of pine
moving in circles of longing
and the metronome whispering behind
I love you, I love you, I love you

~ Shikha Malaviya

Shikha Malaviya is a poet, writer and teacher. She is founder of [The \(Great\) Indian Poetry Project](#), an online archive of Modern Indian Poetry currently under development, as well as [The Great Indian Poetry Collective](#), a specialized literary press. She also founded 'Monsoon Magazine', one of the first South Asian literary magazines on the web. Her full-length collection, 'Geography of Tongues', is forthcoming later this year.

THE LOWLAND

By Jhumpa Lahiri

Jhumpa Lahiri's latest novel, 'The Lowland', is the story of two brothers, Subhash and Udayan, and two countries, India and the United States. As the brothers, inseparable in childhood, are swept up in the tide of history, Udayan makes a decision which casts its shadow over everything to come. In this extract, Gauri (Udayan's ex-wife) prepares to leave India, beginning a new life with Subhash.

On the evening of her flight, Manash came to accompany her to the airport and see her off. She bent down before her in-laws and took the dust from their feet. They were waiting for her to go. She stepped through the swinging wooden doors of the courtyard, over the open drain, into a taxi that Manash had called from the corner. She left Tollygunge, where she had never felt welcome, where she had gone only for Udayan. The furniture that belonged to her, the teak bedroom set, would stand unused in the small square room with strong morning light, the room where they had unwittingly made their child.

Her final glimpse of Calcutta was of the city late at night. They sped past the darkened campus where she had studied, the shuttered bookstalls, the families who slept shrouded during those hours on the streets. She left behind the deserted intersection below her grandparents' flat.

As they approached the airport, fog began to accumulate on VIP Road, turning impenetrable. The driver slowed down, then stopped, unable to continue. They seemed to be enveloped in the thick smoke of a raging fire, but there was no heat, only the mist of condensation that trapped them.

This was death, Gauri thought; this vapor, insubstantial but unyielding, drawing everything to a halt. She was certain this was what Udayan saw now, what he experienced. She began to panic, thinking she would never get out. Inch by inch they moved on, the driver pressing on his horn to avoid a collision, until finally the lights of the airport came into view. She hugged Manash and kissed him, saying she would miss him, only him, and then she gathered together her things and presented her documents and boarded the plane. No policeman or soldier stopped her. No one questioned her about

Udayan. No one gave her trouble for having been his wife. The fog lifted, the plane was cleared for take-off. No one prevented her from rising above the city, into a black sky without stars.

*

The calendar on the kitchen wall showed a photograph of a rocky island, with space for a lighthouse and nothing more. She saw something called St. Patrick's Day. The twentieth of March, what would have been Udayan's twenty-seventh birthday, was officially the first day of spring.

But the cold in Rhode Island was still severe in the mornings, the windowpanes like sheets of ice when she touched them, milky with frost.

One Saturday, Subhash took her shopping. Music played in a large, brightly lit store. No one offered to help them, or seemed to care if they spent money or not. He bought her a coat, a pair of boots. Thick socks, a woolen scarf, a cap and gloves.

But these things were not used. Apart from that one trip to the department store, she did not venture out. She stayed indoors, resting, reading the campus paper Subhash brought home with him each day, sometimes turning on the television to watch its insipid shows. Young women interviewing bachelors who wanted to date them. A husband and wife, pretending to bicker, then singing romantic songs. He suggested things she could do that were nearby: a movie at the campus film hall, a lecture by a famous anthropologist, an international craft fair at the student union. He mentioned the better

“This was death, Gauri thought; this vapor, insubstantial but unyielding, drawing everything to a halt. She was certain this was what Udayan saw now, what he experienced.”



Secret Pond by Tom Yoda

newspapers one could read at the library, the miscellaneous items the bookstore sold. There were a few more Indians on campus than when he'd first arrived. Some women, wives of other graduate students, she might befriend. When you're ready, he would say.

Unlike Udayan's, Subhash's comings and goings were predictable. He came home every evening at the same time. On the occasions she called him at his lab, to say that they had run out of milk or bread, he picked up the phone. He had taught himself to cook dinner so she didn't interfere. He would leave out the ingredients in the morning, icy packets from the freezer that slowly melted and revealed their contents during the course of the day.

The cooking smells no longer bothered her as they did in Calcutta, but she said they did, because this provided an excuse to remain in the bedroom. For though she waited all day for Subhash to come back to the apartment, feeling uneasy when he wasn't there, once he did, she avoided him. Afraid, now that they were married, of getting to know him, of their two lives combining, turning close.

Eventually he would knock, saying her name to summon her to the table. It would all be ready: two plates, two glasses of water, two mounds of soft rice accompanied by whatever he had made.

While they ate they watched Walter Cronkite at his desk, reporting the nightly news. It was always the news of America, of America's concerns and activities. The bombs that they were dropping on Hanoi, the shuttle they were hoping to launch into space. Campaigns for the presidential election that would be held later in the year. She learned the names of the candidates: Muskie, McCloskey, McGovern. The two parties, Democratic and Republican. There was news of Richard Nixon, who had visited China the month before, shaking hands with Mao for the whole world to see. There was nothing about Calcutta. What had consumed the city, what had altered the course of her life and shattered it, was not reported here.

**This extract has been excerpted from 'The Lowland' (Bloomsbury, 2013), reprinted here with permission of the publisher.*

Jhumpa Lahiri is the author of three previous works of fiction: 'Interpreter of Maladies', 'The Namesake' and, most recently, 'Unaccustomed Earth'. A recipient of the Pulitzer Prize, a PEN/Hemingway Award, the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award and a Guggenheim Fellowship, she was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 2012.

YOU, AS SCARCE AS WATER

Translated from the Hindi by Rahul Soni

I see you becoming
as scarce for me as water

Too scarce for the roots of my crop
Too scarce for my birds to bathe in
Too scarce for my thirsting traveller
Too scarce for my dough-kneading woman
My ox arrives at your lake
and looks around with desolate eyes

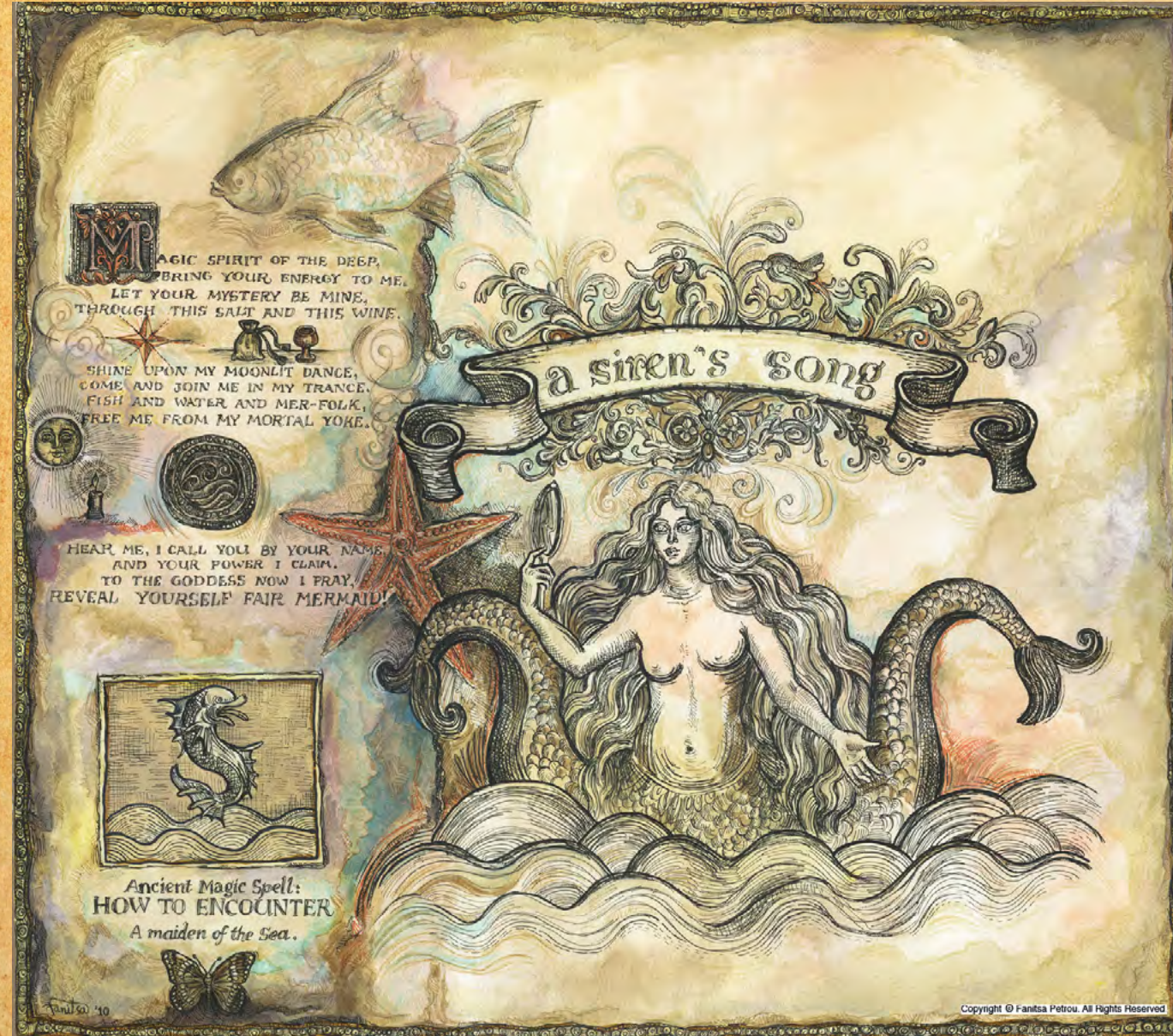
I see all of this in your demeanour

I see you becoming scarce for me
the way water becomes more and more scarce

And like drought stricken land
I cannot even ask
Why is this happening?
Water, why are you doing this to me?

When there is no water
who can the river speak to?
Like that river I too
am in communion with myself

And like the weed
spreading far across the dry riverbed
somewhere in me there is still
the green memory of you



Fanitsa Mermaid Spell by Fanitsa Petrou

Rahul Soni is a writer, editor and translator. He has edited 'Home from a Distance' (Pratilipi Books, 2011), an anthology of Hindi Poetry in English translation, and translated 'Magadh' (Almost Island Books, 2013), a collection of poems by Shrikant Verma, and 'The Roof beneath Their Feet' (HarperCollins, 2013), a novel by Geetanjali Shree.

पानी की तरह कम तुम

मैं तुम्हें मेरे लिए पानी की तरह कम होते देख रहा हूँ

मेरे गेहूँ की जड़ों के लिए तुम्हारा कम पड़ जाना
मेरी चिड़ियों के नहाने के लिए तुम्हारा कम पड़ जाना
मेरे पानी माँगते राहगीर के लिए तुम्हारा गायब हो जाना
मेरे बैल का तुम्हारे पोखर पर आकर सूनी आँखों से इधर-उधर झाँकना
मेरी आटा गूंदती स्त्री के घड़े में तुम्हारा नीचे सरक जाना

तुम्हारे व्यवहार में मैं यह सब होते देख रहा हूँ

लगातार कम होते पानी की तरह
मैं तुम्हें मेरे लिए कम होते देख रहा हूँ

पानी रहित हो रहे इलाकों की तरह
मैं पूछ भी नहीं पा रहा हूँ
क्यों हो रहा है ऐसा?
पानी तुम क्यों कर रहे हो ऐसा?

पानी चला गया तो नदी किसके पास गई कुछ कहने
वैसी नदी की तरह लीन हूँ मैं अपने में

नदी के बहाव की सूखी रेत में सुदूर तक फैले आक की तरह
अभी भी तुम्हारी याद का हरा बचा हुआ मुझमें

~ Prahbat

Prahbat (born 1972) is the author of ten books for children, including 'Kalibai', 'Banjara Namak Laya' and 'Paniyon Ki Gadiyon Mein'. His poems have appeared in 'Hans', 'Kathadesh', 'Pratilipi', 'Tadbhav', 'Poetry International Web', 'Vagarth', 'Aalochana', 'Samkaleen Bharatiya Sahitya' and elsewhere. His first collection of poems is forthcoming.

PASSAGE THROUGH THE ZONE

Analyzing Tarkovsky's *Stalker*

By Rhea Cinna

Art, in its varied history, has been used as a means of manipulation as well as a target for censorship for as long as humanity has existed. Paintings have been painted and statues have been erected to praise dictators and heroes alike. Books have been burned and banned to keep information away from the public. No aspect of art has remained untouched in humanity's quest for power. One of the earliest examples in film, Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) is not only an example of text-book editing and scene construction as we know it but is also a perfect display of how the medium can be used for propaganda. But what happens when art breaks away from the limitations of its time and when its creators break away from the limitations of their environment? Andrei Tarkovsky addresses this in his book, *Sculpting in Time* (University of Texas Press, 1986, tr. from the Russian by Kitty Hunter-Blair): "If we look at the greatest works of art we see that they exist as part of nature, part of truth, and independent of author or audience" and "have a dignity which raises them far above the trivial, everyday interests of the times in which they were written."

The world presented in Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979), is drab and seemingly hopeless, depicted in a black-and-white colour scheme that accentuates its damp decay—an atmosphere matching that of most oppressive political regimes. The central character, the Stalker, is preparing to leave on another tour as a guide within the Zone—the forbidden area. Nobody knows what the Zone is or how it came to be, and while theories abound, fear of it surpasses curiosity. When the Zone had first appeared, the government called in the army, but after many tragic losses, the entrance to the Zone was sealed off with barbed fences and armed guards around its perimeter. And yet, the Zone with its vibrant colours and the room at its center, said to reveal (and fulfill) a person's innermost desires, still calls to a select few.

The Zone alters the world beyond it, rendering it as mysterious as the Zone itself and making the strangeness people have adapted to and treat as ordinary, stand out all the more as a result. The Stalk-

WHEN GOD IS A TRAVELLER

(wondering about Kartikeya/ Muruga/ Subramania, my namesake)

Trust the god

back from his travels

his voice wholegrain

(and chamomile),

his wisdom neem,

his peacock, sweaty-plumed,

drowsing in the shadows.

Trust him

who sits wordless on park benches

listening to the cries of children

fading into the dusk,

his gaze emptied of vagrancy,

his heart of ownership.

Trust him

who has seen enough --

revolutions, promises, the desperate light

of shopping malls, hospital rooms,

manifestos, theologies, the iron taste

of blood, the great craters in the middle

of love.

Trust him

who no longer begrudges

his brother his prize,

his parents their partisanship.

Trust him

whose race is run,

whose journey remains,

who stands fluid-stemmed

knowing he is the tree

that bears fruit, festive

with sun.

Trust him

who recognizes you --

auspicious, abundant, battle-scarred,

alive --

and knows from where you come.

Trust the god

ready to circle the world all over again

this time for no reason at all

other than to see it

through your eyes.

~ Arundhathi Subramaniam

Arundhathi Subramaniam is a poet, curator, editor and writer on arts and spirituality. She has published three books of poetry, most recently *Where I Live: New and Selected Poems* (Bloodaxe, UK, 2009). As editor, her works include *Another Way* (Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 2013), an anthology of contemporary Indian poetry in English.

er's wife finds it inconceivable that he would want to leave again; most of those around them seem to have made peace with their own lives. Only the Stalker knows something, seeks something he can't bring himself to explain at the price of his place in society, his family, the understanding of his peers and at great risk to his own life. The two he is accompanying inside the Zone this time—a scientist and an artist—both have their own reasons for wanting to go there beyond mere curiosity, but while the Stalker takes on the role of guide for the uninitiated, to him, their presence is more an excuse, the catalyst for his own return.

Many of Tarkovsky's characters quest for something seemingly hard to define. It isn't because they can't recognize it themselves until they find it, but also because the outer quest often doesn't match the inner one. The longing, whether it is for a return to the past, the finding of something lost, a reunion, or for a definitive separation from ghosts of various origins, is almost ubiquitous. One of the characters in *Stalker* (the artist) says it best: "Everything I told you before... is a lie. I don't give a damn about inspiration. How would I know the right word for what I want?"

The quest, however, is in itself a form of freedom – not a denial of one's surroundings but an acceptance of self. What happens, however, when the guide falters? Is the whole journey compromised or do the questions only solidify its purpose? As Tarkovsky put it: "The Stalker seems to be weak, but essentially it is he who is invincible because of his faith and his will to serve others. Ultimately artists work at their professions not for the sake of telling someone about something, but as an assertion of their will to serve people." (*Sculpting in Time*, p.181).

“Ultimately artists work at their professions not for the sake of telling someone about something, but as an assertion of their will to serve people. ~ Andrei Tarkovsky”

“The longing, whether it is for a return to the past, or for a definitive separation from ghosts of various origins, is almost ubiquitous.”

If *The Mirror* (1975) was an expression of Tarkovsky's affection towards his family and *Solaris* (1972) an ode to another great mind he wholeheartedly admired, *Stalker* might be the embodiment of Tarkovsky's personal quest, with the three characters emerging as facets of his own personality: the curious, the lost and the enraptured. The one who seeks a reason behind things, the one who looks for a flash of inspiration as something to cling to, and the one who is drunk on the unknown only he and a select few seem to have access to.

Many critics have perceived Christian resonances in *Stalker*, but at the same time, one could view much of the film as an artist's periphus: the doubting and learning, seeking and yearning for inspiration, the act of creation as genesis of self as well as of the artwork and the unrepeatably high of the artist that keeps beckoning them to a "zone" as destructive as anything it gives in return. If we see the Zone as the realm of inspiration and the artist as the one inherently called upon again and again to take the treacherous journey there, perhaps we can conclude that to Tarkovsky religion and art are not so different from one another, but come from the same selflessness he deemed the utmost form of freedom; an art that overcomes the artistic ego and the political climate, and instead rests solely on what it can bequeath its public – on its ability to move the heart and mind not towards any allegiance, but transcendently, in a manner that surpasses the barriers of the quotidian.

It is likely that in Tarkovsky's vision, if the world were to reinvent itself centuries from now, art would point to its new direction, immortalize the change, and shape the challenge for the future both as a result of its time and as its greatest inspiration. Perhaps one day we will return to cave paintings and call them avant-garde. Perhaps one day we will forget our art even existed and adorn our lives with un-



On the Line by Luisa Kelle

imaginable things. As incomprehensibly bound as we are by the idea of beauty, this same beauty binds itself to us. And in the quintessential search that agitates our existence, art is the only quelling find. But that too might be the artist's perspective. The engineer will see permanence in intricate frameworks,

the mathematician, in a string of numbers. After all, we are each, in our own way, sending signals out into the unknown, hoping they become beacons waiting on the other side.

Rhea Cinna is Senior Film Critic for the magazine. *Sculpting in Time*,

THE TWINS

By Kuzhali Manickavel

When Anand was fifteen, he threatened to jump off the roof unless the 13-year-old girl next door said she loved him. He was standing on the ledge, his gangly arms and legs cutting thin, jagged lines against the sky. The girl was at her window, looking up at him with wide, terrified eyes as beads of sweat gently blossomed on her upper lip. Kavitha was telling her to just say it, because it was just I love you and didn't mean anything. It was when Anand pretended to almost fall off the ledge that I saw the twins — he had chained them to his waist and they were squalling, grasping desperate fistfuls of air with their tiny hands, the skin on their heads already splitting into velvety petals of dark red.

Later that evening, when the 13-year-old girl was being blamed and beaten by her uncle for Anand's behaviour, Anand explained that he had just taken the twins with him for good luck. He peered into the box where they both lay shivering, chunks of turmeric sticking to the splits in their skin. One was sleeping but the other was looking up at Anand, its mouth open in a small, mournful 'o'.

"Hey kickle kiclee," said Anand, tickling its bloated stomach. "Hey kiclee paya."

"Fuck off," it said, trying to kick Anand in the chin.

"Kickle paya," said Anand, pressing his finger into its face until it started to beat its little arms against his broad hand. He only stopped when someone from the kitchen said the food was ready — they had made him chicken and fried fish as a reward for not killing himself. Kavitha and I sat with the box between us, watching the twin cough and shudder.

"I'm going to kill myself," it wailed, "I'm going to kill both of us. It's what I'm going to do."

"I know," said Kavitha, stroking its head.

Later that night, our grandfather took the twins and said that if we ever saw Anand go near their box again, we were supposed to tell him so he could break Anand's arms and legs.

Over the next four years, Anand threatened six more girls with suicide. The 13-year-old girl moved away and a tailor set up shop next door. A tiny tree

“ “I'm going to kill myself,” it wailed, “I'm going to kill both of us. It's what I'm going to do.” ”

with pale green leaves grew so resiliently on one of the twin's backs that it seemed like the twin was finally going to die. But the tree eventually withered, falling away in moist, black lumps that smelled like mud. Anand left home, disappearing one night with anything of value he could find in the house.

When I saw him again, our grandfather was dead. Kavitha had left long ago and nobody knew where she was. The house was empty except for me and some plastic chairs. Anand arrived with a pot belly and an indifferent five-year-old girl on his arm whom he kept plying with cream biscuits and promises that they would be leaving soon. He sat in the room where he had once tried to suffocate one of the twins — his stomach strained against his shirt and a sour, heavy smell of body odour settled over everything.

"I wanted her to see them," said Anand. "Are they with you?"

"Is she your daughter?" I asked.

"This is Ammu," he said, trying to wipe the girl's nose with a bright blue handkerchief. I watched as he awkwardly grabbed her chin, and then muttered something as she pushed him away.

"So they're with you then," he said. "They must be with you."

The twins had been handed down in our family for generations because we couldn't get rid of them. They were small and speckled with scars from the various times people had tried to kill them. We kept them in a broken wooden box that smelled like cough syrup and was covered in newspaper cuttings of Ian Botham. Nobody knew much about them, except that they looked like small grey stones when they were sleeping. Their skin split when they were upset, their limbs were prone to breaking and seeds sometimes took root in their skin. The only time they had ever been outside was when Anand had



De Fuga et Inventione by Andrzej Masianis

taken them to the roof.

"I don't have them," I said.

"I just wanted her to see them," said Anand. "Maybe take a picture. I have a camera on my phone."

"They aren't here," I said. "I don't have them."

"That's fine," he said. "I just wanted to show her, that's all."

He asked how I was doing and said I should visit him sometime because it wasn't that far, one straight bus. Then he asked for a glass of water. I went to the kitchen and waited by the stove. I could hear him yanking open different almirahs, shuffling through old clothes and papers. Then I heard him say 'ah!'

From the window I could see him, almost running, the girl under one arm, the wooden box under the other. He hadn't even bothered to remove the old saris it was wrapped in and they trailed behind him, sometimes snapping at his heels, sometimes curling into the late afternoon sunshine like they were waving goodbye.

The new box was smaller but cleaner and only smelled like cardboard. The sleeping twin was curled around a rubber ball that I had given them to play with. The other was looking up at me — the plant that had taken root behind its ear was already dying, its leaves curling up like small fists.

"I'm going to kill myself," it said softly.

I pinched off some of the dead leaves — they came away easily, falling gently into the palm of my hand.

"I'm going to kill both of us," said the twin. "It's what I'm going to do."

"I know," I said.

I touched its forehead, tracing a scar that ran down to its neck and then disappeared somewhere inside its thin, wrinkled skin.

Kuzhali Manickavel is the author of a short story collection called 'Insects Are Just like You and Me except Some of Them Have Wings' and an e-chapbook called 'Eating Sugar, Telling Lies', both of which are available from Blaft Publications.

THE RISE OF PAKISTAN'S FIRST COMIC BOOK GIANTS

Not just a Facebook page

By Ghausia Rashid Salam



Better Go Fast by Anastasia Inspiderwiht

Imagine a room with a giant wall plastered with comic book covers. You recognise a vast array of beloved characters – *Superman*, *Batman*, *Bat-girl*, *The Mask*, *Spider-girl* among many others. One cover bizarrely screams, “Join the sexual revolution!” To the left are two bright yellow desks, one adorned with a bobblehead, a Lego pirate ship, and a bust of Loki. Behind these, a row of shelves occupied by multiple action figures, varying in size and condition. Aside from a wind-up doll of a crawling baby, it all looks like something out of an adolescent’s fantasies, but for the team of Kachee Goliyan Comics (KGC), this is headquarters.

In two years, the brand has grown so much that the phrase “*kachee goliyan*” can barely be traced back to its origin: an Urdu idiom, which roughly translates to “we know what we’re doing.” Launched in 2011 as Pakistan’s very first comic book company, KGC is run primarily by Ramish Safa and Nofal Khan. Together, they established a nonprofit organisation to support the education of underprivileged children, published several comics, including a series based on a homegrown superhero, and helped establish the medium as a vital marketing tool for

many Pakistani companies. All this before either of them turned 25.

KGC was born, in large part, from the passion and artistic ability of Ramish Safa. Doodling and sketching since he was young, Ramish ascribes his love of comics to many influences. His favourite comic growing up was *Tintin*, and he cites it as the biggest reason he started drawing comics in the first place, with dailies like *Calvin & Hobbes* and *Cyanide & Happiness* also contributing to his trajectory. He raves endlessly about Frank Miller’s artwork and art style, as well as Neil Gaiman’s *Sandman* series. Another favourite is H.R Giger, the set designer behind film franchise *Aliens*, who, along with his team, received the Academy Award for Best Visual Effects. “My personal art style is inspired by him quite a bit,” Ramish says, launching into an enthusiastic explanation of the art style and history behind the design of *Aliens*. Unsurprisingly, he is a big fan of Marvel’s *X-Men*, because of the intertwining story arcs and overall storylines, but when it comes to DC, his favorite characters are Batman and Deadpool. His passion for art is so obvious and contagious that the entire interview is peppered with pauses so he can

“ “I was in a state of unrest at the time, and was very defensive of my work because generally, people didn’t accept it,” Ramish Safa, Kachee Goliyan Comics. ”

show one image or another to illustrate his point. Because his talent is so central to the work they do, KGC itself has evolved with Ramish’s self-taught technique. KGC began as a simple black-and-white comic strip that was quicker to draw, and was consequently produced more frequently. Kachee Goliyan 2.0, however, has increasingly been influenced by the *chibi* art style, which Ramish enjoys because “they look like obnoxious, mischievous children,” despite it taking longer to draw.

The boys at KGC enjoy recounting the story of how they all first met as teenagers: “I met Nofal on my first day at university,” Ramish laughs. “He was the fat kid who tried to haze me, but laughed the whole time instead, and eventually my friend scared him away.” They became friends a few days later, when they found themselves sitting together in class and bonded over a mutual sense of humour. Their third partner, Mateen Ansari, is often found behind the scenes, but is just as instrumental in the day-to-day running of the company. Ramish met Mateen at university while showing off some sketches to a friend – dark, twisted depictions of somewhat nude figures. “I was in a state of unrest at the time, and was very defensive of my work because generally, people didn’t accept it,” Ramish explains. “When Mateen saw my sketches, he just said, ‘Good work, man!’” This was the start of a friendship, which would eventually spawn two companies, and “a crazy ride.”

The three teamed up for a business competition by Procter & Gamble in their first year of university. Despite losing the competition, working together made them realise they were a good team, and had the potential to be good business partners. They put their heads together and came up with the not-for-profit organisation Pappu in late 2009, helping underprivileged children get the education

they deserve. Within a year, and on a shoestring budget, they had supported 13 children. “We started out with Rs.500, with which we printed stickers. We sold those for Rs.5,000, and spent that money producing notebooks [which] we sold for Rs.30,000.” And so the process continued, until they raised enough money to start supporting children. Ramish proudly tells me, “To this day, we have never taken a salary from Pappu.” Their venture was so successful that in 2011, the boys were invited to the Global Social Business Summit in Vienna, an initiative of Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus. The organizers even waived the required fee of €35,000 for them. “That’s how inspired they were by us!” Ramish exclaims, more baffled than proud. In addition, not only do they donate free copies of their comics to disadvantaged children, but they also plan to launch a project to help develop children’s critical thinking and cognitive abilities.

Kachee Goliyan Comics was officially born in 2011. Since the three would carpool together to university all the way from their homes in Nazimabad, cracking jokes and talking about inane things on the way, Mateen suggested that they podcast or Vlog Ramish and Nofal’s antics. “Eventually, we decided, ‘forget the video, let’s make a comics page.’ All the ideas we’d had for a YouTube video, we put into comics, and hence, KGC was born.” It all sounds simpler than you’d expect, but that is the beauty of KGC. It is the brainchild of three ordinary guys who had an idea, and turned it into something extraordinary.

“It was never supposed to be just a page,” Ramish says, when I ask about their business model. “There’s no point in doing something randomly; there has to be a bigger picture attached to it.” Like Pappu, KGC had a five-year plan and was treated, and launched, as a business. This is what sets them apart from other Facebook pages like *Sarcasmistan*, *Mango People* or *Jay’s Toons*. “They... are clueless,” Ramish says. While he respects artists who are truly passionate about their work online, he sees them as being Facebook pages only. “It’s akin to just drawing sketches and putting them up in your room. I get inner satisfaction from it, maybe, but to a point,” Ramish shrugs. “For us, it doesn’t end there. Being true business students, even if we poop, we want money for it.” Though KGC has accomplished more than they expected in just two years, Ramish points out that they’re still in the early stages, and promis-

SIBERIA

A group of musicians play in the snow losing its distinction.
I am to photograph them.

A speculating wind blows through my instruments.
I am unused to the climate, the faces turning

like leaves in a blue autumn, my astonishing loneliness.

In this wild white stretch sometimes a coat flies open,
a violin plays unaffected by the cold,

red ribbons float by, blood boats. Should I?
Is the blizzard merely a case of tinnitus? The snow

anomalous? What staging is this, rending and exquisite,
in which the wind blows and blows, taking me

with it, leaving me bare?

~ Aditi Machado

Aditi Machado's poems have appeared in 'The Iowa Review', 'The New England Review', 'LIES/ISLE', 'High Chair', and elsewhere. Her chapbook 'The Robing of the Bride' appears from Dzanc Books (2013). She is the Poetry Editor at 'Asymptote Journal'. She is from Bangalore, India, but currently lives in Denver, USA.

es that there is much more to come. “Give us money and we’ll do more projects!” Mateen chimes in from across the room, making everyone laugh. It is clear that, despite their jokes, KGC’s work relies on purpose over monetary return.

This purpose is more than just making people laugh, or expressing the opinions of three young men in Pakistani society. Their vision spans much further than their simple childhood dreams of creating a South Asian superhero. “The general medium of graphical illustrations that depict what happens around us in the world is something we want to make commonplace,” Ramish says. So if they’re uploading funny jokes or memes on their Facebook page, according to them, it’s because “comedy is the best medium to use if you want your work to go viral.” Within the past two years, KGC has courted clients such as agricultural giant Engro, mobile carrier

Telenor and prominent soap manufacturer Lifebuoy, all of whom are trying to cash in on the steadily growing appreciation for comics in Pakistan. They hope that, in the next five years, comics are much better appreciated as a medium for everyday verbal and nonverbal communication.

From the beginning, the team treated KGC as a platform for marketing. “We’d decide to do something and then three weeks later, we’d learn about guerrilla marketing in class, and look at each other thinking, oh so that’s what we’ve been doing!” Ramish chuckles. He refers to a couple of podcasts that they recorded early on, and why this didn’t pan out into a longer series. “Back then we had 5,000 likes, with a following of likeminded people who appreciated our sense of humour. The podcasts had adult content, but were never offensive. Now, with the sort of mixed crowd we have, there are too many

fans who would find adult humour offensive,” he says, with a sheepish laugh. Even though the team makes a conscious effort not to offend any group, having an audience of over 17,000 means upsetting someone or the other is inevitable. Ramish mentions a Ramzan-themed comic that said: “If she fasts the whole month, she’s too young for you, bro.” The reference to underage girls was missed by many, and the comic garnered many angry comments like “what sort of a Muslim are you?” or “what about your own mothers and sisters?”

KGC has always been directly involved with their fans, whether by engaging with them online or organizing fan meet-ups, and Ramish smirks when I claim they’ve created a cult instead of just a fan following. “We were one of the very first pages in Pakistan that interacted with its fans on a personal level. It was more than just ‘oh, thanks for liking our comic!’ If someone commented once, we’d remember them the second time they commented.” Even now, with 17,000 fans on their page, they make it a point to single out any interesting comments, to respond to them and let people know that KGC is listening. They are well aware that this is the key to keeping their brand from dying out. An important event was their 2012 comic marathon, where KGC planned to hit 12 locations in 12 hours, and upload a comic at each location. However, since more and more people kept showing up and asking the team to wait, they only managed three. Now their meet-ups have become more internalised, consisting more of official launches at best. “We don’t know if someone politely ask[ing] to meet up [might] come armed with a TT,” Ramish chortles, pointing out that they still meet up occasionally with the older fans – now friends.

KGC’s first major venture in 2013 was *Umrū Ayar*, a comic book series published in both English and Urdu, based on the eponymous character from *Alif Laila* who battled demons and witches, armed mostly with his wits. KGC revamped him into a superhero, thus giving Pakistan their own, and relaunching a much loved character through a much more accessible medium. “*Umrū* is an established character, and already has equity in Pakistan,” Ramish explains, adding that taking on *Umrū* was a big experiment. With their previous effort, Kachee Goliyan Comics, featuring the everyday adventures of J.C and Sufi, they relied mostly on situational comedy for appeal. Superheroes still remain mostly

“ A recent comic running during the Islamic month of fasting: “If she fasts the whole month, she’s too young for you, bro.” The reference to underage girls was missed by many, and the comic garnered angry comments like “what sort of a Muslim are you?” or “what about your own mothers and sisters?” ”

confined to a niche appreciation in Pakistan, with a mere smattering of Marvel and DC fans. *Umrū Ayar*, on the other hand, was a way of reaching out to both nostalgic twenty-somethings familiar with the story and characters, and teens new to them. “It was a double-edged sword,” Ramish admits, “but the fantasy element and complex storylines are things that appeal to everyone.”

Having been invited to comic conventions in both Dubai and India in recent years (unfortunately missing the former due to exams and the latter over visa issues), the boys seem skeptical about the prospect of organising one in Pakistan, pointing out that it is too early to expect one to happen in a country with barely any comic book culture. “Usually, comic-cons exist to promote local artists, but without any artists to promote, there’s nothing to do.” At best, he explains, a local comic con would feature a screening of the superhero movie of the season, sell a few graphic novels and t-shirts, and become a completely foreign event. Be that as it may, it still shows that KGC’s appeal has transcended borders. Ramish acknowledges that although their global presence is limited by their localised content, their new website is aimed towards changing that.

Considering how socially conscious these young men are, it’s unsurprising to hear that they hope to open up their own art school one day. “We’re not from an art school, and neither are the people who work with us, but collectively, we’re better

““Their vision is limited. They’re scared and restricted, and lack the element of experimentation,” Ramish on Pakistan’s art school graduates. ””

than the kids who’ve come to us after four-year programs at art schools. They lack the basic knowledge and skills that we’ve all picked up from researching techniques and going through daily comics,” he states unabashedly, and this is why he feels the need to establish a more progressive art institute. He’s critical not of the capability of the students, but the way they’re taught. “Their vision is limited. They’re scared and restricted, and lack the element of experimentation, and in general would be better off not going to art school at all,” he says, with a hint of frustration in his voice. This apparent lack of vision of the country’s art schools is one of the reasons he plans to attend art school in Malaysia in early 2014; to learn how to teach art in order to train and mentor young artists.

We finish up the interview to chat, and I’m struck once again by just how normal these three boys are. They’re just three average guys, who share an endless love for *nihari* and *doodh patti* and *Batman*, but together, they’ve built something special and almost magical. What stands out most of all is their infectious, all-conquering passion. Part of a mostly jaded and cynical generation, they adamantly refuse to relinquish their idealism, and this idealism is what makes their work so effective. Whether through philanthropy or sheer creative ambition, the path these three have carved out for themselves is an excellent example for young creative people in a society that still primarily churns out doctors, MBA grads, and engineers. Considering how far they’ve come in such a short time with so much more in the pipeline, theirs is a journey worth watching.

Ghausia Rashid Salam is Assistant to the Editor-in-Chief and newly appointed Junior Articles Editor for the magazine. She resides on the internet.



Futility by Luisa Kelle

USS: THE UNCERTAIN STATE OF SUPERHEROISM

On the forever mutating political and social relevance of superheroes

By Mahnoor Yawar

In 1940, as part of a two-page comic commissioned by *Look* magazine, Superman captures Stalin and Hitler and flies them to Geneva to stand trial before the League of Nations. There, they are found guilty of “unprovoked aggression against defenseless nations.” So significant was the comic when it came out that it drew criticism from the official newspaper of the SS, in a rather wordy opinion piece. Three years later, before Superman co-creator Siegel was drafted into the United States army, he managed to squeeze in a month-long arc in which Superman takes it upon himself to rescue none other than Santa Claus from Nazi Germany. In an epic confrontation with Hitler, Mussolini and Japanese general Hideki Tojo, the Man of Steel declares, “For a bunch of so-called Supermen, you’re not making such a good showing.”

Nazi Germany made a decidedly less campy reappearance in the Superman universe, this time on his 60th anniversary in 1998. Clark Kent is sent to infiltrate German society undercover and report on the brutality of the regime as well as all who suffered under it. Off duty, of course he repeatedly saves the day as his caped alter-ego. Only one thing was amiss about this particular story – the entire thing takes place without mentioning the words “Jew” or “Holocaust”. In response to the resulting uproar, the editor explained that this was an executive decision “to avoid providing fodder for further intolerance.” One assumes, of course, that this statement was delivered without a hint of irony.

Art and literature can only truly be defined and represented as part of a context, be it political, social, geographical or historical. Every work of art is a product of the intellectual and stylistic considerations that signify a certain time and place. In today’s politically correct world, even the slightest, most unconscious assumption can be misconstrued as a deep-seated bias. Convention consists of tiptoeing around discussing important issues, making outright declarations, and expressing strong opinions, diving so deep into the safe side that we end up in the cesspit of another group’s ire.

Jean-Paul Sartre believed that it is the reader’s

““Morality may be the pinnacle of human evolution, but its parameters are hardly universally agreed upon.””

subjectivity that offers any substance to the writer’s words. If so, the artists and writers behind comic books take it a step further: they offer both foundation and skeletal framework ready for the reader to add flesh to. In a medium that is both art form and literary style, superheroes occupy the same status once afforded to mythic gods, erstwhile heroes, cowboys and knights. These are characters rich with mythology, evolved over decades of human history, running on the fumes of two of humanity’s most complex concepts: faith and hope.

And yet superheroes, and all offshoots thereof, are consistently doomed to the status of shameful indulgence at best. Even within the medium, there exists a marked distinction between superhero comics and their more “highbrow” literary counterparts: the graphic novels. The latter have encouraged the evolution of a dedicated branch of academia, where the DC & Marvel universes are still mostly considered infantile and devoid of all intellectual value for those in both artistic and literary pursuits. Even with their oft-familiar stories of redemption and courage in a world that often lacks both, superheroes with their capes and tights and logos are but protagonists in modern age penny dreadfuls.

Despite their apparent refusal to acknowledge the existence of women and people of color, superhero comics have one thing in common – they appeal to the outcasts in us all. These are almost always characters that stand on the outskirts of acceptance, whether by choice or compulsion. Every origin story begins with weakness – physical, material or otherwise – that is overcome, almost invariably for the greater good. These stories consist of sacrifice, of courage, of sometimes having to overcome one’s ego to work alongside others for a common goal. All recognisable ingredients for just about every story of

innate, conscious, pure good battling and triumphing over the omnipresent evil that operates in subterfuge, present in everything from Greek mythology to Hindu deism to Shakespeare and beyond.

But despite such a simple commonality, one can argue that their appeal is hardly universal in our world. Morality may be the pinnacle of human evolution, but its parameters are hardly universally agreed upon. This is, after all, the entire basis of a world with multiple belief systems. So while superheroes are designed to represent the very pinnacle of moral justice, the fact is that the definition is up for interpretation across the spectrum of human existence.

Take Superman – for decades, fans of the medium have lauded him as the true representative of idealism. But which ideals exactly? The American ideals of liberty and strength? Or perhaps the Christian ideals of sacrifice and humility? Or maybe even the socialist ideals that subtly define his every motivation in fighting for the oppressed? And how do you reconcile a concept as colonial as the strong white savior for the masses within a modern-day context anyway?

Superhero stories, being entrusted with the upkeep of law and order as they are, cannot avoid an underlying thread of conservatism. After all, leading men in the Marvel Universe, *Iron Man* and *Captain America* are respectively an arms manufacturer and a biochemically enhanced super-soldier. While this fundamental facet does not necessarily translate into a particular leaning, the politics of superheroes are entirely dependent on the politics of their writers. The most iconic stories gingerly straddle the political divide of Left and Right, simultaneously embracing neither and thus appealing to both. Things changed in the 70s, when current events began to blatantly dictate not just the content, but the tone that they were presented in. Spider-Man grapples with civil disobedience on his college campus, to reflect the then political mood at Columbia. Green Lantern is left speechless and ashamed by a black man who demands why his skin color makes him less important. Green Arrow's sidekick Speedy becomes addicted to heroin. They both lament the "hideous moral cancer" that led to the deaths of good men like Martin Luther King Jr. and John F. Kennedy and vow to save their beloved country before the rest of the galaxy. While moral ambiguity is



Can Can Cat by Luisa Kelle

not an option for superheroes, how far can a writer take political and social messages of their time without resorting to the pulpit?

One of the most widely bemoaned aspects of the genre is, to put it bluntly, the gratuitous violence. The final fight scene is basically the *raison d'être* of a superhero story – a cathartic climax to the slow buildup of antagonistic forces – the very gratifying instant adrenaline rush that real world conflict resolution so unfortunately lacks. But there is a very fine line between cathartic and voyeuristic, especially



Dandy by Luisa Kelle

in a world that is no stranger to the destruction of wars and natural disasters. So when critics point to prolonged fight sequences resulting in the complete annihilation of Batman's Gotham or Superman's Metropolis or even Spider-Man's New York City, where he shows up too late to save his hometown on 9/11, it raises an important question: where does one draw the line between necessary violence and pure disaster porn?

All these are probably reasons why recent incarnations of superheroes tend to face dilemmas

“When critics point to prolonged fight sequences resulting in the complete annihilation of Gotham or Metropolis, it raises an important question: where does one draw the line between necessary violence and pure disaster porn?”

more psychological than physical. Characters have to be pared down to their essential motivations in order to find a use for them in a world that isn't just championing "the American Way." The current resurgence of interest in superheroes in a global atmosphere of guilt and fear is hardly coincidence. While the half-baked attempts at political relevance in more recent adaptations often take away from the very essence of these characters as they were initially imagined, it is this re-imagination that can save the genre from the failures of the post-WWII era, or the 80s when superheroes were stripped of their superiority to fight the more mundane battles of mortality and all that comes with it.

Superheroes were, after all, designed to represent the very ideals of what humanity could strive towards, but perhaps those ideals have altered and multiplied since. When major social change occurs, our heroes must change with them. The heroes that live in fiction are no different.

Mahnoor Yawar is Articles Editor for The Missing Slate.

KARGIL

*Our street of smoke and fences, gutters gorged
with weed and reeking, scorching iron grooves //
of rusted galvanise, a dialect forged
from burning asphalt, and a sky that moves //
with thunderhead cumuli grumbling with rain,*
— DEREK WALCOTT, *Tiepolo's Hound*, Book One, (II).1

Ten years on, I came searching for
war signs of the past
expecting remnants — magazine debris,
unexploded shells,
shrapnels
that mark bomb wounds.

I came looking for
ghosts —
people past, skeletons charred,
abandoned
brick-wood-cement
that once housed them.

I could only find whispers —
whispers among the clamour
of a small town outpost
in full throttle —
everyday chores
sketching outward signs
of normalcy and life.

In that bustle
I spot war-lines of a decade ago —
though the storylines
are kept buried, wrapped
in old newsprint.

There is order amid uneasiness —
the muezzin's cry,
the monk's chant —
baritones
merging in their separateness.

At the bus station
black coughs of exhaust
smoke-screen everything.
The roads meet
and after the crossroad ritual
diverge,
skating along the undotted lines
of control.

A porous garland
with cracked beads
adorns Tiger Hill.
Beyond the mountains
are dark memories,
and beyond them
no one knows,
and beyond them
no one wants to know.

Even the flight of birds
that wing over their crests
don't know which feathers to down.
Chameleon-like
they fly, tracing perfect parabolas.

I look up
and calculate their exact arc
and find instead, a flawed theorem.

~ Sudeep Sen

Sudeep Sen is widely recognised as a major new generation voice in world literature and "one of the finest younger English-language poets in the international literary scene" (BBC Radio). His poems have been translated into twenty-five languages, and have appeared in numerous major international magazines and anthologies. He is the editorial director of 'AARK ARTS' and the editor of 'Atlas'.



Horror by Andrzej Masianis

ANOTHER COUNTRY

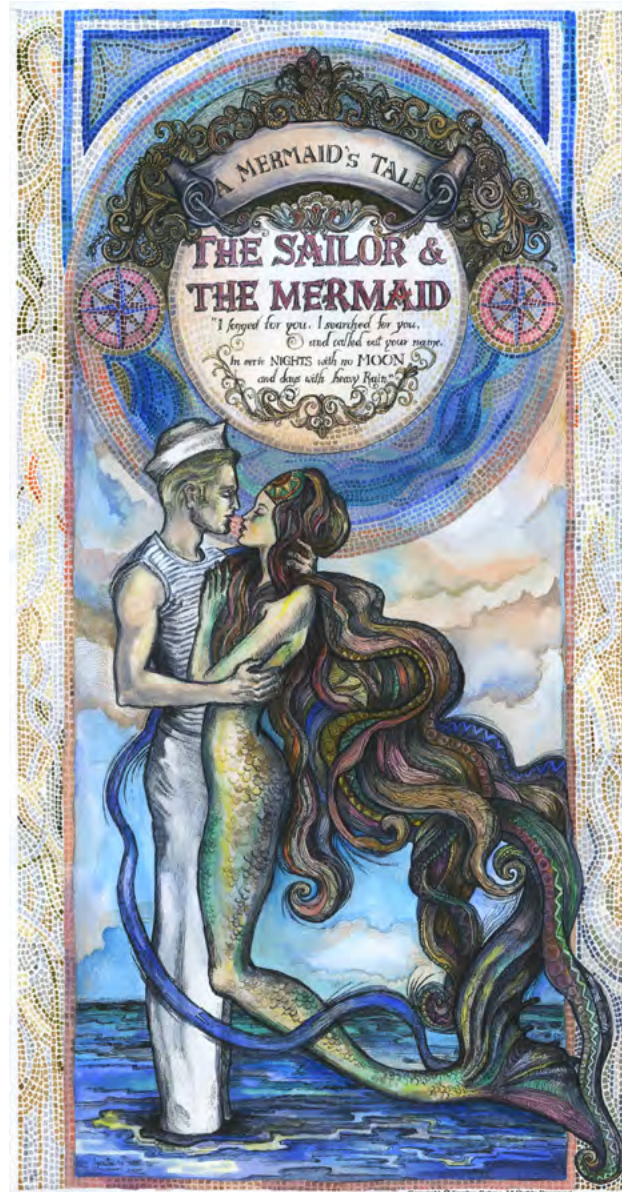
By Anjali Joseph

'Another Country', Anjali Joseph's second novel, shifts between Paris, London, and Bombay. This excerpt is taken from the opening section, in which Leela Ghosh is working as a language teacher in Paris. Here, we follow Leela through "the morning after" – waking up from a night spent with Simon, a "reasonably handsome" and effortlessly charming friend of a friend...

When she woke it was early. Cold morning came through the skylights. Simon slept on his back, his breathing audible, like a standing fan. One arm came out of the covers. His hair was ruffled. She felt no desire to touch him, and recollected their long and exhausting feints in bed – the various things he'd done, with which she'd cooperated, increasingly wishing she'd gone home: his putting his fingers roughly into her to feel her wetness, then licking her, something she found intensely embarrassing, and this time, not particularly arousing, and finally sex. She had thought she might come, but hadn't; had wondered whether to pretend, however that was done, but hadn't; he had persisted for a long time before finishing. After that he'd tried to touch her, instructing her to move against his hand, but she'd said instead that she was tired, and he had rolled over. How was it possible, when you'd had an apparently urbane, socially competent time earlier, to find yourselves behaving so ineptly when unclothed? She had failed, she supposed; yet, obstinately, she still wanted to be loved.

Confused, parched, and with an incipient

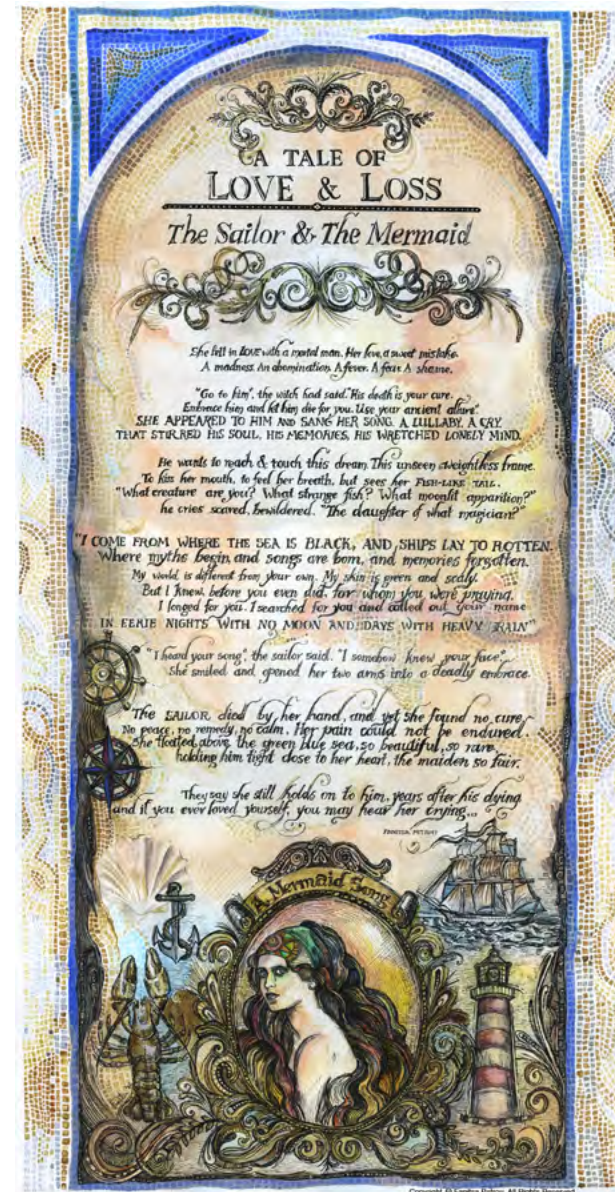
“Late episodes of *The Bold and the Beautiful*, dubbed into French, were airing, and she watched one, depressed by the huge jaws of the men, their suits, the women's heels and tans and bouffant hair.”



The Sailor and the Mermaid II by Fanitsa Petrou

headache, she got up from the edge of the bed where she'd lain all night for fear of being caressed in sleep, or the desire that if this happened it should be done deliberately. There were her clothes, strewn about the floor. She picked them up, looked back at Simon, who snuffled and moved the arm that hung off the bed. There was a book on the floor. She moved it to the armchair, then tiptoed down the stairs with her clothes clutched to her. In the beautiful living room, hunched near the bookshelves where she was least visible from the street, she put on her clothes, first her bra, then her pants, wincing at the slight soreness. She looked round the room when dressed, as though to gauge its expression – would she and this place meet again? In the bleached light, the furniture was impassive.

Near the hall table, next to Simon's desert



The Sailor and the Mermaid I by Fanitsa Petrou

boots, she found her shoes and pulled them on. She managed to slide back the door bolt, and shut the door behind her. The landing and stairwell were now those of many Parisian buildings. As she walked through the cold interior courtyard, the stone was slimy with dew; black plastic bags gave off overripe odours.

She briefly feared the outer door wouldn't let her leave, but she found the button to press and slipped into the street. It was raining, and cold. She walked slowly home, reassured by the quotidian misery of the Monoprix, with its fluorescent lights on against the dim day. It was eight o'clock. She bought bread, milk, and coffee. As she crossed the road towards her building, she saw in the alcove of the Crédit Lyonnais the mad old woman, wrapped in her layers of clothing, sitting on the stone ledge. She

held a Styrofoam cup of coffee in claw-like fingers. Leela walked towards her, trying not to look, and angry eyes burned into hers. The old woman spat.

In the studio, Leela took a shower, then made coffee. She turned on the television, the lights, the electric heater, and sat on the floor cushion. Late episodes of *The Bold and the Beautiful*, dubbed into French, were airing, and she watched one, depressed by the huge jaws of the men, their suits, the women's heels and tans and bouffant hair. The rain became louder, smashing on the thick pane of the single window. Leela imagined floods, people's cold, wet stockinged feet on the tarmac outside, bus horns, Paris cursing. She didn't have to go to work. She thought of Simon, when they'd been chatting in the kitchen, saying he kept his car in a garage nearby, that they should take it out and go for a drive in the country one weekend, and she wondered abstractly and yet inquisitively, as a child to whom something has been promised, whether this would happen. Maybe Simon would be her boyfriend? She imagined them doing the things couples did – being seen here and there – and she pictured Patrick's face when he saw them. But she could see it as nothing other than pleased, if surprised, and she stopped thinking of it and hunched tighter on the floor cushion.

When the programme ended, she went to wash the cup and cafetière, and saw the Chinese student in the window opposite. The air outside was dark and stormy; the light in the toilet was on, and while she washed up she glanced across and thought how cold the little cubicle must be. When the man in the facing window made a gesture of privacy – buttoning up his trousers – he lifted his head and turned, as though drawn to the facing light in her window, and she thought their eyes met for a moment before, embarrassed, even slightly sad, both quickly turned away.

*This piece has been excerpted from *'Another Country'* (Fourth Estate, 2012), reprinted here with permission of the author.

Anjali Joseph was born in Bombay. 'Saraswati Park', her first novel (2010) won the Betty Trask Prize and the Desmond Elliott Prize, and was joint winner of the Vodafone Crossword Book Award for Fiction. 'Another Country', her second novel, was published in 2012 and was longlisted for the Man Asian Literary Prize.



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ART'S PLACE IN THE DIGITAL AGE

From unique luxuries to a product of the masses, art today has many faces.

By Aaron Grierson

As much as it is meant to be absorbed and enjoyed, art can be broken down on many levels. Not only from the philosophical or technical perspectives, but to the very way art is created and maintained. Increasingly, we can view this breakdown through the technological advancements over the centuries which affect all aspects of the artwork, from its lifespan to its very composition. We have taken 'high art' and stuck it on postcards; a very kitschy way of commodifying what was once probably a cultural icon. While the most embedded concept of art may primarily evoke painting or sculpture, it would be wrong to omit all other art forms. This is evident through the work of composers like Beethoven, who have since been turned into cell phone ringtones as well as concertos, or dramatists such as Euripides, and even philosophers as old as Zhuangzi or Confucius, the latter of whom is misquoted by pseudo-sages, be they paper or flesh. But to understand how we advanced to where we are now when it comes to presenting artwork, we have to start with early institutions.

Once, museums served as institutions that helped demarcate what class you hailed from. Much of the art found in museums (and now reproduced in households across the globe), was once considered "high class". Even philosophy was typically for people that could pay for the lessons. Now, you can buy entire anthologies for a small sum. In a way, money and leisure turned these art forms into cultural icons.

Museums were established by wealthy individuals who were able to gather together some quantity of artwork and host them somewhere. This would often be at one's estate, adorning the walls with a gorgeous, yet smug sense of self-satisfaction and material reminder of their financial, rather than moral worth. This is something I have very little of, though by contrast I may be just as capable of appreciating the same artwork. A commonality is that I would have to buy a ticket to see these galleries although technology has progressed to the point where I could order admission tickets over the phone and print them out in a matter of minutes,



De Specialibus Legibus Fragment by Andrzej Masianis

compared to the waiting times of yesteryear that could stretch out for weeks.

While attending museums and other such galleries still might be considered a classy outing, in being more accommodating, even to the point of having summer day-camps for children, they are available for, and generally appeal to, a much wider audience. That doesn't mean there aren't wealthy collectors anymore. Instead of housing works of art in their estate, they may donate an entire exhibit's worth to a museum, and in return get their names on said exhibit, along with the self-satisfaction that often comes with such philanthropic acts. This goes hand-in-hand with the technology that allows for such collections to be put in a public place and kept in the same, if not better, condition than wherever they were housed before.

As much as we might hate to see commercials advertising some random product, galleries of any sort have jumped onto the social media bandwagon. And why not? I enjoy seeing ads for the new collections on loan to the Royal Ontario Museum (the largest museum in my area). Even if they do not pique my interest, it is still enjoyable to see the variety that is available. Besides, it's unlikely that I would hear about such events without their little quarterly booklet or online advertisements. The same of course, can be said for the performing arts, and, especially in my case, the Stradford Shakespeare Festival, as I am not physically located within the hosting city's community.

There are other innovative ways in which the arts are breaking the mould. Some artists, like Stelarc, a physical performance artist, have used technology to become mobile art while pushing the boundary in a much more serious and thought-provoking way than the most tattooed or pierced person could. In spite of the potential, not all art-

“ Now, you can buy entire anthologies for a fraction of the cost. In a way, money and free time turned these art forms into cultural icons. ”

ists turn to technological augmentation to turn their bodies into art exhibits. Instead others, like Marina Abramovic, use their bodies in other creative ways, creating a display that ranges from insightful to grotesque. Such people may be viewed as a cross between a circus act and an art gallery. Perhaps they are simultaneously both. Participatory art of this sort is a lesser known field, but it is growing.

Musicians embody a participatory art form of their own breed, and endless genres which vainly attempt to categorize their talent. In addition to using voice-enhancing technology, be it becoming tolerable through voice tuning, or more enthralling through layering and mixing. But the bonds between music and technology do not stop there. While it might be unheard of for those who create the 'fine arts' to utilize technology to fund themselves, they certainly use it to promote themselves. In the music business, a new trend has emerged over the last couple of years. Artists, or at least those without million dollar budgets, are turning towards their fans, changing not only the way art is produced, but the way they are remembered as well. Project facilitation initiatives like Kickstarter have begun to rise to more prominence, with various professionals utilizing fans and friends to help fund new projects. The novelty lies in the fact that the payee is paying up front for a new, unknown artistic endeavour. Remember, this is instead of buying the actual film or album, after the unavoidable experience of sampling first in the form of trailers, radio singles, critic reviews, or through friends.

We are getting better at preserving artifacts, while at the same time, often uncovering new ones. On the flip side, there is more artwork being made by a larger number of people who often are talented in their own right, even when compared to a five hundred year-old maestro. The same can also be said of the scripts that are turned into plays or operas or even dances. There is a greater quantity of them than ever before, and within that quantity there are necessarily a number of quality pieces that rise to some recognition. But in addition to preservation, whether a work of art is two weeks or two millennia old, a lot of it winds up on hosting and sharing sites for people to enjoy. Arguably the best part about places like this is that they are free of charge, if you can survive the irksome commercials and other advertisements that automatically pop before the selected article appears. While typically stored in

“ The question of who gets the fame and for what artwork, might just come down to luck, or timing, or perhaps simply to what is the most recent cultural trend. A growing concern with artwork in general (regardless of form) is that there are some who may just pander to whatever is popular, often sacrificing quality in the quest of making ends meet. ”

databases rather than our personal computers, the data becomes intangible and thus, in a way, longer lasting. No one can really hold it, but it can probably surpass human existence. This fact, when taken into consideration, can in and of itself inspire a sense of awe that artwork has, in many ways, transcended its creators. While this may border on magical, there are problems of attribution, accreditation, misquoting, misunderstanding, and just plain butchery of a lot of artwork.

One might say that increasingly, individual artists are aiding in the propagation of a more 'experimental' art scene. But that is essentially the nature of the production of aesthetical experiences. They move. Not necessarily forward, but certainly somewhere. Imagine if a troupe of opera performers went door to door asking for funds, or held bake sales so that they had the money required to practice for their performances. It echoes of the archaic Greek theatre, where often Greek actors (there were no actresses in the western world as a general rule until about the 17th century) had to cater for money, not having taxes, or even patrons before promising a performance. And while we still have the results of such feats on paper, the memory is a living one. The preservation of such things has extended well beyond the individual or even collective memory, transposed elsewhere.

The question of who gets the fame and for what artwork, might just come down to luck, or timing, or perhaps simply to what is the most recent cultural trend. A growing concern with artwork in general (regardless of form) is that there are some who may

just pander to whatever is popular, often sacrificing quality in the quest of making ends meet. Conversely, there are those who refuse to do just that, even if it means they become the caricature of the starving artist. Attempting to find this balance can be considered as something of a political negotiation for the artist. When and where will what be popular for whom?

Coming clean from such conflicts leaves us with a final point upon which to impale ourselves, i.e. the negotiation for the reader. Not only to make sense out of what's been written thus far, but to engage with a third facet of the politics of art discussion. What do we like and why? How do we experience or engage with certain pieces or performances? Do titles such as 'high' or 'popular' style mean anything? Do actual genres or time periods mean anything? Do we have a preference for a historical period or location when it comes to museums? (Other than dinosaurs of course. Who doesn't love dinosaurs?) For some, these questions may only come into play when we are at a play or a museum or a concert of some sort. For others, these questions are constantly reconsidered and engaged with on a deeply personal level. We may even have to consider which of these categories we fall into as individuals while on our quest in navigating the political world of the aesthetic experience, searching for the sublime, no matter how young or old it may be.

Aaron Grierson is Senior Articles Editor for the magazine, and is based in Canada.

“ *For me, Art is the restoration of order. It may discuss all sorts of terrible things, but there must be satisfaction at the end. A little bit of hunger, but also satisfaction.*

~ Toni Morrison, in a 1987 interview



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