

# THE MISSING SLATE

For the discerning metropolitan.

SUMMER 2012



*Almost by Marria Khan*

A night-time photograph of a road with blurred lights and red light trails. The background is dark with a horizontal line of blurred white lights, possibly from a city or highway. In the foreground, several bright red light trails curve across the road from the bottom left towards the center. The overall mood is dynamic and fast-paced.

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# ABSOLUTELY

*Thank you. Yes please. After you. Don't mind*

*my asking this, but is politeness strange? Don't mention it. What do you think yourself?*

*The politeness of strangers worries me, like surgical gloves. Irrational, I know. Nasties in childhood or the woodshed.*

*How very interesting. Magritte opened the door to a journalist, politely bowed him in, then booted him up the arse right across the room*

–Carol Ann Duffy\*

\*Selling Manhattan, Anvil Poetry Press; 1987

## A WORD FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Dear Readers,

It is hard to believe we've been around for nearly two years and this issue is our sixth. It feels strange that The Missing Slate, an arguably niche publication, has managed to survive in the competitive world we inhabit.

That it has is a testament not just to the resilience and loyalty of its team, but its readership. You have stuck by us in ways for which we as a collective are incredibly thankful.

Partly as an ode to you and partly because we would like to change things up a little, things are going to be different moving forward. For starters, we're splitting up our content on the web, differentiating between web and digital exclusives and drawing a line in the sand between the two. Web edition means our online website; digital is all about the PDF and offering you, our readers, a familiar (to print) experience.

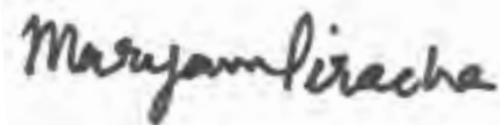
Our segue into print is on hold; to explain why, allow me to take you behind the scenes and into the TMS "offices", which are often nothing more than a laptop and a space of quietude. Print is arguably a dying vessel for the publishing industry, and most people spend their time predominantly on the internet (either on their phones, tablets or laptops). We want to streamline our content for those devices.

We're also undergoing a bit of a "rebranding"; our content remains of the highest quality but we're willing to expand outward a bit, based on the reactions of our readers.

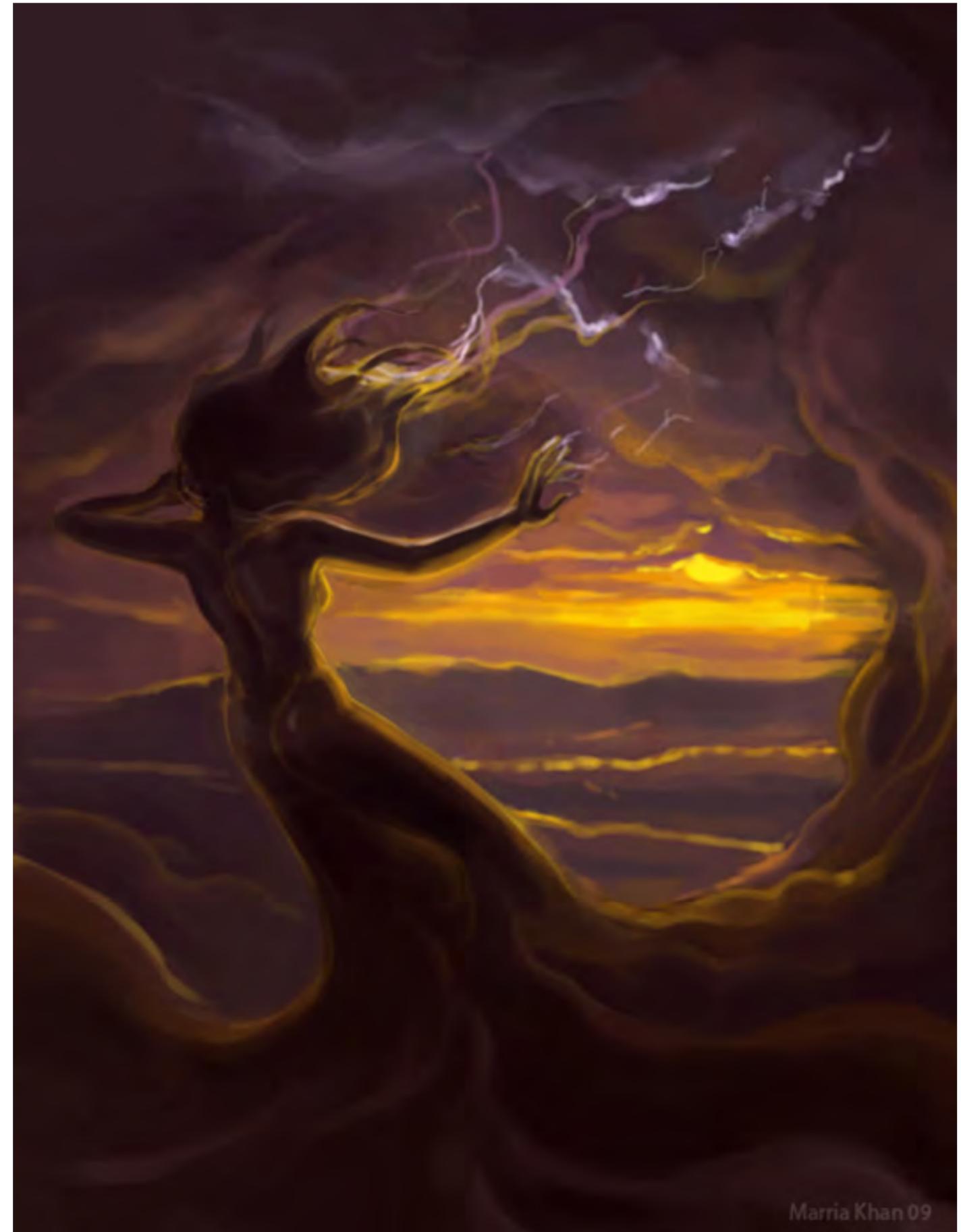
Maintaining our vision as an "intellectual" magazine with lighter fare is not going to be easy, and I imagine we will stumble quite a bit in the months ahead. But we're young and we're learning and right now this seems like the best way to forge onward.

Meanwhile, we unveil our last issue based on this format and hope that you, like us, look forward to next month.

Sincerely,



Maryam Piracha  
Editor-in-Chief  
The Missing Slate



Storm by Marria Khan

# SNAPSHOTS OF OUR CONVERSATIONS

If your mouth fits around my cock  
then it will fit around the barrel of my gun,  
you said, finishing off the vodka.

Replacing vowels with bullets  
in the chamber of your name makes  
A-l-y-s-s-a as thick as a .357 Magnum,  
you said, while rolling a blunt.



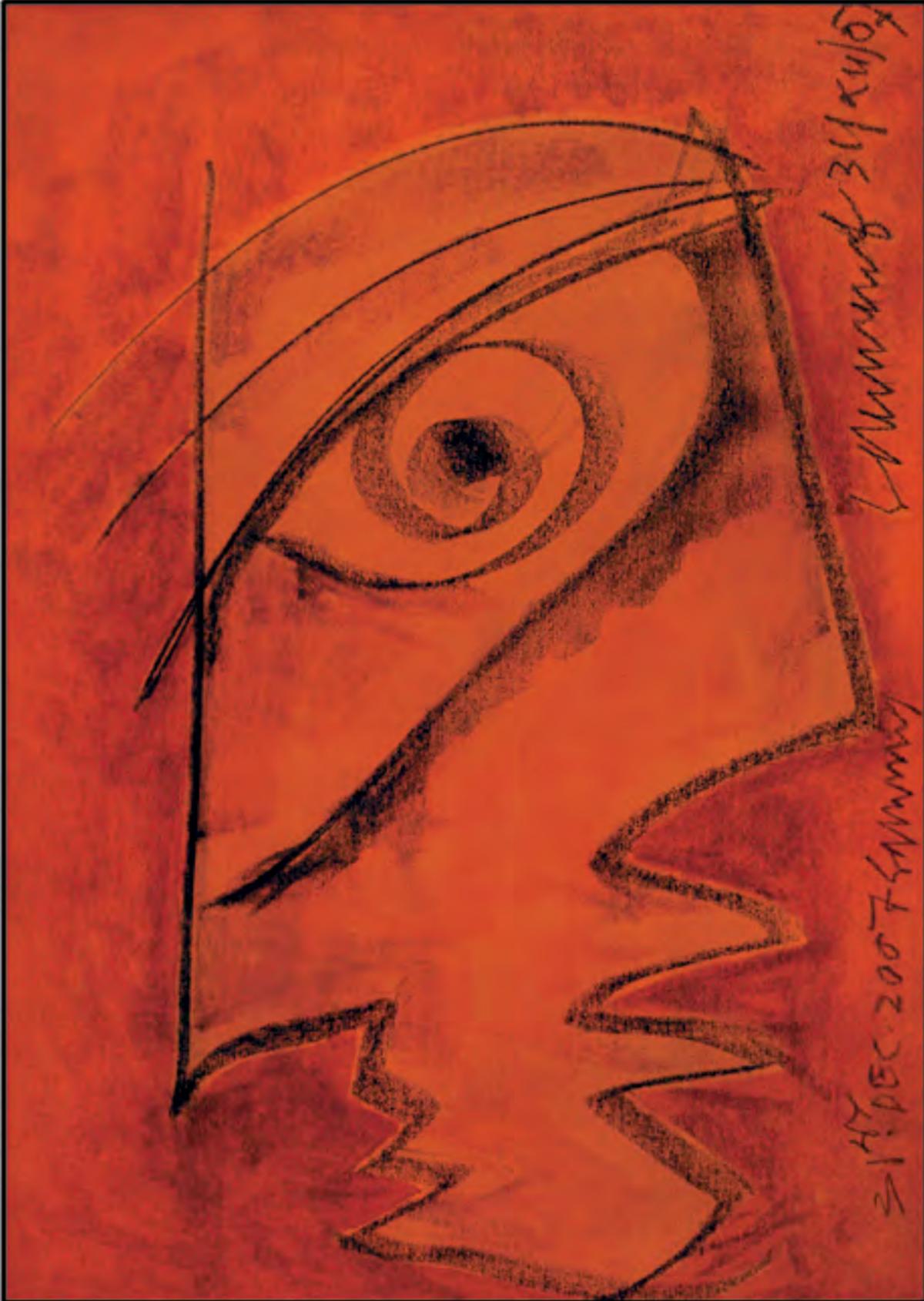
Know how to break your own heart, I said.  
Water all promises planted in your ear  
with cyanide and scotch.

Comfort only comes in sneeze-style flashes, I  
said.  
Waking up before noon is maladjusted;  
poetry is good conversation  
when there is no one left to talk to.

—Alyssa Yankwitt



*Above & Below: Comedy of Errors by Mohsin Shafi*



*Embracing Life and Death by Syed Ali Wasif*

# A SCEPTIC'S SESTINA

Ichneumonidae, hymenoptera: leaded-glass wings, inkblot thorax bruised with words of doubt. A tract that no religious man – when Paley's prose dictates there is a God – would ever read aloud, or dare to whisper. It looks out, alive, through warm amoral eyes. Darwin, beard of moths and fossil eyes, sips chai tea from a crystal glass. Pushing along his pen's soft whisper he sows his page with words. The summer air's abuzz with breath of God. The garden is a world to such a man. And so it is that such a man should see among the shrubs, with pious eyes, the ichneumon wasp – the scythe-tailed God and Reaper to the worms. He drains his glass, and kneels before the plants. He finds no words he comprehends within its sinner's whisper; his heartbeat trills a devil's whisper. He reaches out a hand, like a beaten man. The ichneumon alights; he's lost for words. Its legs are bars around his wedding ring. "I..." He stops, confused. He overturns his glass to trap the wasp, observing like a god. "...I know not what good-hearted God would work to this design," he whispers. A straining larva lies outside the glass and with cruellest curiosity of Man he pushes it beneath, with narrowed eyes. He scribbles something – incoherent words – and the wasp translates these words to wings, swaps death for life – a swindler god – sets upon its life-warm host with hard maternal eye – abdomen throbbing, legs a warning whisper – packs the flesh with eager eggs, paralysing man and worm. Its body's a syringe of black glass. A cynic's eye outside the crystal glass blinks out, fatal, "there is no God but Man" – irrevocable words – a new wasp's foetal whisper.

*Camille Ralphs is currently a second-year student at Lancaster University, reading English Literature with Creative Writing. She has previously been published in The Crocodile and in Durham's Inkapture e-magazine. based in Mumbai, India.*



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# A LETTER FROM DHAKA

*Foreigner in a foreign land*

By Jacob Silkstone

*'Maligna, la verdad, qué noche tan grande,  
qué tierra tan sola!*

*He llegado otra vez a los dormitorios solitarios,*

*a almorzar en los restaurantes comida fría, y  
otra vez*

*tiro al suelo los pantalones y las camisas...'*

*-Pablo Neruda, 'Tango del viudo'*

My first view of Asia was gold on black, Dubai International Airport almost lurid against the 3 o'clock darkness. When the desert sun rose, I retreated to the cool of the Food Courts, sitting on a concrete bench beside a koi pond and reading a few chapters of *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle*, clutching my Lemon & Ginger drink as though it might ward off the rising heat. Clumsy with tiredness after staying awake all the way from Heathrow, there seemed to be something irresistibly glamorous about the whole idea of sculpting a new existence abroad, something almost virtuous in having left family, friends and girlfriend behind to teach in an unknown country for no money at all. Suspended between two lives, who wouldn't feel a flurry of excitement?

A couple of days later, I was stretched out on an unfamiliar bathroom floor, from time to time propping myself up just long enough to vomit into the toilet bowl. I went to bed that night next to a table littered with various pills, and woke up with a headache blinding enough to cover for all the hangovers I'd be missing out on in a country where alcohol is illegal unless you're rich enough to circumvent the law. In full health, new experiences are almost always exhilarating, but in illness you long for the familiar — in my case, bland English food, comfortable temperatures, the faces of the people I love.

I'd left home trying to convince myself that I'd be ready to cope with my fair share of suffering. By most standards, I'd had an extraordinarily privileged childhood and — as arrogant as this sounds — never had to work particularly hard in school or at university. Settling down into a steady job with a steady wage would have felt like an abdication of responsibility; instead, I went to Bangladesh with the

preposterous idea that I'd be leading an existence of quasi-mediaeval austerity, working from sunrise to sundown and living off bread and rice.

As if to highlight exactly how distasteful that vision of self-enforced 'suffering' is, a few lines from Pulp's *Common People* suddenly come back to me:

When you're laid (desperately want to write  
'lying' here, so I will) in bed at night

Watching roaches climb the wall



If you called your dad he could stop it all...

Not quite true: if I called my dad, he'd be concerned but powerless to intervene, and the cockroaches tend to scuttle across the floor rather than climb the walls. Still, Jarvis Cocker has a point. The

idea of wealthy Westerners feeling more virtuous because they've spent a few months in a less-fortunate country is troubling, to say the least.

In fact, some lives in Bangladesh are privileged beyond the dreams of wealthy families in the West. Having a maid and a driver is commonplace, even for middle-class families, and the country's elite seem (although I have no first-hand experience) to live in palatial homes with dozens of guards, dozens of cars and a continual greed for more. The problem, as has been pointed out thousands of times before at much greater length than I can afford to go

my chauffeur-driven car as a beggar squirms on the dusty ground, pale soles upturned towards me. On either side of his spine, two twisted humps of muscle bulge upwards to form what looks like a shark's dorsal fin. His limbs are so withered that walking is impossible. A young woman in a pink sari walks past and fumbles in her purse until she finds a small note (20 Taka, I think, although it's hard to be sure from where I'm sitting) and presses it into the beggar's clawed hand. A minute or so later, a man in a meticulously-ironed suit stops in almost exactly the same place, digs around in his pocket, pulls out a brand new iPhone and hurries on.

For me, the terrifying thing about that little anecdote is the ease with which I was able to turn away. When approached by people who must be going through a level of suffering beyond anything I could ever imagine, I'm able to coldly shrug and turn out my pockets and show them I don't have the money. When they say 'Please, boss' (the standard way to address any white man here), I look impassive behind my sunglasses and am secretly relieved that I'm not carrying loose change. I've seen people actively pushing beggars away, or shouting 'jao' (go!), but somehow passivity is more shameful.

There are many ways in which I don't quite fit in. I'd expected language to be the most significant barrier, but religion turned out to be of far more importance. Although Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, 'the father of the nation' and still the most visible face on Dhaka's many political posters, initially intended Bangladesh to be a secular state, Islam is utterly dominant here, governing almost every aspect of life. In general, people are remarkably tolerant towards non-Muslims, as long as they identify themselves with another religion. In the first few days, I was asked hundreds of increasingly detailed questions about Christianity, and people seemed genuinely fascinated by my answers. What nobody seemed to consider was that I might not be a Christian at all. I imagine any suggestion of atheist sympathies would have been met roughly the same mixture of 'Is he serious?' bafflement and outright disgust, as the suggestion that I spent my Thursday evenings having vigorous sex with an assortment of farm animals.

Despite the obvious cultural differences, I surprised myself by very quickly beginning to feel at home in Dhaka, as though this city of two-hour traffic jams, stifling pollution and buses which would

into here, is the gulf between the elite and the rest.

The rich regard the poor with a mixture of indifference and pure fear. Here's a scene from the suburbs of Dhaka which might illustrate the point: I watch from a distance through the tinted window of



cause a national scandal if they were allowed to run on British roads, could somehow become ‘my’ city. I remember Seamus Heaney’s line about being ‘lost, unhappy and at home’, but that’s not quite it...

There have been moments, listening to Hindi songs in the car on the way back from a restaurant or spending time with the kids at my school or walking to the park in the evenings, when I’ve felt as happy as I’ve ever felt, and times when coming to Bangladesh has seemed like the best decision I’ve ever made. And yet it’s a country of contradictions — my Bradt guidebook says that ‘if Bangladesh were a person, she would be a youthful teenager’, and Dhaka certainly has enough wild mood swings to justify the description.

At the end of my first week, I went for a walk around ‘my’ area of the city, accompanied by one of the household staff (having been told it was too dangerous for me to go out alone). After a few minutes,

we came to a small lake and sat down on a swing (ignoring the English phrase ‘no outsiders allowed’ in English and its Bangla equivalent) to watch the sun sinking behind a stunningly beautiful white mosque. The sun was so round and red it could have been cut from the Bangladeshi flag, and the lake looked postcard-calm save for one family pedalling a hired boat. On closer inspection, though, the water was discoloured and stagnant, and a dead carp floated palely belly-up just a few metres from my feet.

Sometimes Dhaka seems squalid, choked by the blue-grey haze of pollution, and sometimes it seems like a terrestrial paradise. Ultimately, perhaps, it is just another city that outgrows every description.

*Jacob Silkstone is Poetry Editor at The Missing Slate and co-manages Alone in Babel, a blog on books and the publications industry. Formerly based in the UK, he is currently teaching young schoolchildren in Bangladesh.*

## SLUMMING IT IN SILICON VALLEY

By B.A. Krishna

“The trouble with most managers,” declared Rajat as he sipped his drink, “is that they’re like monkeys. They are, in fact, positively simian. For all practical purposes, they are primates in dire need of training. And just when you’ve finished training them, they often get promoted, probably into a realm where they can only do minimal damage. So you end up with another monkey that needs to be trained all over again. The best ones quickly learn to leave you the hell alone — those are the ones that realize good engineers don’t need to be managed. You see, they just need to be babied. Their fragile, creative egos need to be nurtured, just like you do with precocious kids!”

Pausing briefly, Rajat plunged right back into his ill-advised monologue: “Watching someone rise through the ranks of management is like watching evolution running in reverse, a devolution! During the middle-management stage, there is diminished brain-activity, but they’re still capable of producing status reports in the form of finger paintings and cave drawings. But once they move into upper management, they lose interest in remaining erect, develop prehensile feet and are routinely bewildered by modern inventions like fire and the fax-machine. More than one board meeting has been aborted because executives chose to bare fangs and hurl bananas at each other. Oh, and they grunt, there’s a lot of grunting!”

“Once they’re that far gone, the only humans that can get through to them are women that resemble Jane Goodall.” As Rajat finally made eye-contact with his audience of one, it dimly dawned on him that the person he was talking to just might be a manager himself, and that his rigorous analysis might not be going down so well. Oops. To make matters worse, he suddenly realized that he was talking to his party host. Double oops. So Rajat decided to make himself scarce and wandered off in search of new victims.

“The average Manager is so inept,” said Rajat to his now imaginary audience, “that he shouldn’t even be trusted with a keyboard. Most of them barely have the motor skills required to use a mouse, which is about all they need to churn

out Powerpoint(less) presentations. They can, after extensive training and with significant supervision, be taught to operate a foot-pedal, but barely. Every time I see a manager, I’m reminded that somewhere, there’s a cave missing its dweller.”

Rajat noticed a grumpy looking Bengali couple, keeping to themselves. He walked up to them and said, “Hi, I’m Rajat. What work do you do?” The Bengali guy continued to remain grim but out of the corner of his mouth, uttered a single word, “Computer,” and then proceeded to clam up. This irritated Rajat to no end. “Computer? Not even Computers? Why stick to the singular? Does he work on a single bloody computer and hence used the singular? Surely, considering his age, he must have worked on at least two Computers by now, over his illustrious career? What does he work on? The bloody ENIAC?”

“And what’s with self-imposed economy on words,” thought Rajat, to himself, “Is there a shortage that I need to know about? Should I be conserving my usage too?” It reminded him of an old joke. When Prince Phillip visited Kenya, he was introduced to the national volleyball team. The nervous team captain, on being introduced to His Royal Highness, blurted out, “I’m volleyball.” Without missing a beat, Prince Phillip responded, “Oh, in that case, I’m polo.”

Unable to muster the energy required to prolong this conversation, Rajat walked away. “Why are

“You see, most people believe in three square meals. Me, I’d rather settle for one rather large rectangular meal, preferably at no expense to myself. If you ask me why I’m eating so much, I shall simply quote George Mallory: ‘Because it is there.’ ”

people so disgruntled?” he wondered, “And by the way, if one isn’t disgruntled, can one declare one’s self chirpily grunted? How are you? Oh, I’m perfectly grunted, thank you! Somehow gruntle doesn’t sound like a very pleasant state. Note to self: Check if the word exists. Hopefully it doesn’t and I’ll make it a point to use it, just to screw with people. Now that’s a satisfying thought!”

Rajat then spotted another couple that he knew, sort of. It was Niraj, who was good company, but his wife, Nasreen, was nauseatingly cheerful. “Somewhere,” thought Rajat. “There’s a detergent commercial, sorely in need of her!” He remembered that there was an ongoing cold-war/spat going on between Nasreen and his wife. “It probably has to do with Facebook, the root of all evil,” he thought. “Perhaps my wife didn’t thumbs-up or poke promptly, in response to one of Nasreen’s numerous Facebook comments.” Consequently, a state of war had been declared, implicitly of course. With women, it’s always implicit. The rules of engagement were all very hazy. So understandably, Rajat wanting to avoid all latent land-mines, stayed away from the couple.

As he scoped out the crowd, he vaguely recognized Vivek whom he had met at another party years ago. Vivek was doing his best to not recognize Rajat, which was natural since Vivek’s company had gone IPO. In the Silicon Valley caste system, we all know that the IPO-caste reigns supreme. Post-IPO, people feel compelled to mingle only with other IPO-ed denizens. Scientific studies confirm that there’s a high risk of this newly gotten wealth leaching out of their bodies through a process of osmosis. It’s all very understandable. “Thankfully, most of these ‘made’ men lack hobbies and continue to work themselves to death”, thought Rajat to himself. “Some don’t know any better. Others are forced to remain workaholics on account of their spouses – we don’t want your ass parked at home all day.”

The desi grapevine estimated Vivek’s wealth at \$15 million or so. How would they know? Through a careful mix of diligent research, complex financial models and subtle third word questioning along the lines of: “Could we please have your home address so that we can look up the sale price on zillow.com?” It’s hard to talk your way out of answering that one.

“Let’s hope he has invested it all in one place, poorly!” Rajat thought to himself, crankily. Vivek, in an act of cheerful self-appreciation, had recently

constructed (Vivek would rather think of it as his favorite and, hopefully, longest lasting erection) a hideous Greco-Roman mansion for himself recently, replete with fountains and Corinthian columns. “The only way this monstrosity could be made appealing,” Rajat once remarked, “is if he threw in some co-ed Greco-Roman wrestling. Now that’s a thought! Besides, surely there are good reasons why the Greeks themselves have stopped building that way?”

Vivek, at considerable expense, had fully grown palm trees shipped in and installed in his garden. Not quite content, he then detected a shortage of Indian cultural influence in his little Xanadu and proceeded to spend some more money on life-sized, hand-sculpted statues of voluptuous apsaras which are now placed at strategic points around his house and garden.

As luck would have it, a local newspaper, upon hearing of his house (which was described to them as a reincarnation of the notorious Hearst Castle) expressed a morbid interest in interviewing him. When asked how he would describe the architectural style of his house, Vivek thought for a while and then humbly responded; “Oh, it’s unique. I would simply describe it as Vivek-esque.” He then felt compelled to elaborate on the philosophy behind his creation: “You see, most people settle for a home-theater. As for me, I’d rather have an amphi-theater. That’s just how I swing!”

As Rajat curiously eyed Vivek’s wife, he suddenly had a revelation which cheered him up considerably: “Ah, the wife is clearly pre-IPO. I’m glad he’s stuck with her for now! That’s not an easy one to upgrade. And unlike software, you can’t simply do an uninstall either! Ha ha.”

Reassured by his own wit, Rajat then turned his attention to others in the pot-luck, hoping he might come across a border-line hot “Auntie” whom he could ogle at leisure. This option was a lot more attractive than having to run around his impossibly slippery, bratty sons who were magnetically attracted to all objects fragile and expensive. As any respectable Indian taxonomist can tell you, all women, post-adolescence, get classified as members of the ‘Auntie’ phylum which sits decidedly higher in the food chain than the ‘Uncle’ phylum.

This Indian prerogative to stretch the rigorous bounds of English even extends to fabricating

## ROSIE IS NOT MY BEST FRIEND

I am the first to admit that I have been no friend to her, for this I make no excuse. But was Rosie ever really my friend, let alone my best friend? Do friends walk past you on the street and throw their gum in your hair? Do friends open your post and put their rubbish in your bin? I mean, Rosie has never been what you’d call kind to me. In fact, Rosie is hardly more than a neighbour to me, she is my neighbour, she lives next door. The truth is I don’t even know if her name is Rosie, I’ve never even spoken to the woman. But I do know what her husband tastes like and he tastes delicious.

—Christine Brandel

*Christine Brandel is a British-American writer whose work has appeared in literary magazines on both sides of the Atlantic and online. She rants and raves through her character Agatha Whitt-Wellington (Miss) at EveryoneNeedsAnAlgonquin and writes about comedy at PopMatters.*

new words on a need basis. For instance, take the word “prepone.” It was considered a made-up word by Oxford purists but Indians have been merrily using the word since Jurassic era. It suited them. The said purists could only hold out for so long. Recently, they were forced to make it mainstream and the word is now respectably listed in the Oxford English Dictionary. They could easily have preponed this decision and saved themselves some trouble. Ha ha!

Unfortunately for Rajat, most of the aunties around didn’t quite qualify as hot, border-line or otherwise. The party crowd was bunched up in groups, each debating such fascinating topics as “Did I tell you about my school district, which really is the Promised Land?”, or “Isn’t it terribly difficult to find good day-care these days?” What was even worse was to encounter a not-hot alpha auntie gloat over her latest find, an ultra-cheap nanny- a veritable Punjabi Mary Poppins, who effortlessly tended to the kids, cooked amazing parathas infused with love and kept the house in impeccable order. Rajat knew that such reports were greatly exaggerated but also knew that he would have to suffer through a “Why can’t we hire super-efficient help like others

do?” lecture from his wife. If aural scarring was possible, he was sure to have it in spades.

While all of these conversations were of marginally practical value, they were hardly entertaining. So Rajat ploughed through the crowd, hoping to spy some of his more tolerable friends, those that might be receptive to his theorizing. There’s something vaguely satisfying about being listened to but his target audience sample space was rather small. Out of the corner of his eye, he spied his wife busily chatting with her current best friend. He was sure she would download a detailed (and annotated) report of the conversation later that evening, when, hopefully, he would be dazed enough to suffer

through it relatively painlessly. If fortune favors him, there will be no trick questions asked during the download process.

He then ran into Mrs. Gupta’s husband. Rumor has it that no one really knew his actual name, not even Mr. Gupta himself. As a result, Mrs. Gupta’s husband, much like Caesar, refers to himself in the third person. Thrilled to have finally found himself a victim to bore, he then gleefully remarked, “Son, you’ve grown up so much. I still cherish memories of you as a kid in New Delhi, running around in diapers.” “Ah, that’s a tricky one,” Rajat thought to himself. “We both know that in India circa 1970, there were no diapers to be had. We toddlers were forced to exist al-fresco, so to speak.”

After exchanging a few words with Mrs. Gupta’s husband, Rajat excused himself and recognized someone he knew, his college buddy Ashok, who qualified as semi-decent company. Ashok, like Rajat, didn’t have much stomach for upward mobility and was equally irreverent. Both hadn’t much luck when it came to picking start-ups. Rajat equated his plight to “Being lactose intolerant in a land with riv-

ers of milk and honey – what good is that?”

After exchanging the obligatory profanities and refreshing their drinks— thankfully the host was no skin-flint when it came to serious matters such as alcohol— Rajat slapped Ashok on the back and asked him what he had been up to, hoping he could derive some vicarious delight out of Ashok’s latest antics or out of his latest source of misery, either would do. Anything to inject some variety into the vacuous “formula” conversation mandated in most potlucks.

“Let’s go skiing sometime,” Ashok said. He knew that this was a hypothetical, since they both had infants and hadn’t acquired enough time off for good behavior. “Yes, of course Ashok, any time buddy,” said Rajat. “We both know it isn’t happening, ha ha.”

“Did I tell you how I got a raise?” exclaimed Ashok, dramatically. “Viagra?” thought Rajat to himself but didn’t have the heart to derail Ashok, who eased effortlessly into his customary lecture-mode and said, “We were all scheduled for a performance review, and I thought I’d try a new tactic. You see, most idiots, after their review/raise, walk around dejected, bitching and moaning. So I thought I’d do the reverse.”

“Typical Ashok,” thought Rajat to himself, partly envious but also eager to hear the full extent of Ashok’s stunt. “So,” said Ashok. “I thought to myself, self, how can we exploit this human tendency? I walked up to the VP and said ‘Give me a 15% raise. If you don’t, I’ll walk around with a smile on my face, exclaiming to one and all that I’ve got a 30% raise.’ That’s bound to piss everyone off. So just give me a 15% raise and I’ll walk around looking dejected just like the others. Small price to ensure that I’m disgruntled and yet preserve overall morale. Yes?”

Ashok went on. “That tactic scared the VP. He figured it would be more cost-effective to hush me than to have everyone else clamoring for a bigger raise.” Ashok sported the smug, self-satisfied smile that he had patented when he was a toddler. Rajat loved the idea and made a mental note to try this tactic out, but knew that he would falter in the execution. Even so, it is entertaining to consider an overpaid VP being intimidated by such a ploy. “I now have at least one under-hand, devious tidbit nugget of wisdom that I can try out later,” Rajat thought to himself, “Nothing like a nice, controlled experiment seasoned with a twinge of malice!”

“The desi grapevine estimated Vivek’s wealth at \$15 million or so. How would they know? Through a careful mix of diligent research, complex financial models and subtle third word questioning.”

Rajat recollected another nugget of wisdom Ashok had shared many moons ago. “If you get a terrible raise”, Ashok had said “don’t be dejected. Just focus on effective pay, that is, pay per hour. Just work slower and work less, staggering output just a little. Don’t make it obvious. Run around, look stressed but don’t actually work much. You don’t earn more, but you do get paid more per hour of effective work. The key is to not put in too many effective hours and you break even.” The principle had really appealed to Rajat and was even easily implementable with some practice.

He also recollected memories of when the two of them had worked together in a start-up. The offices consisted of a ware-house in which one of the conference rooms had an exit door. So as a joke, they made it a point to walk through the room, ignoring meetings that were in progress, and proceed to simply walk out of the exit. That raised a few eyebrows from the meeting participants, but many found it funny. So Ashok refined that mode-of-exit a little. “Let’s not just walk through the meeting and walk out of the exit,” said Ashok, “Let’s improve it. I’ll run through the room and exit. You come running in, chasing me, shouting ‘Have you seen him?’ and also exit.” That plan was executed flawlessly. The resultant skit almost got them fired, since it derailed a critical investor meeting, but, boy, was it oh so satisfying!

Ashok, having perfected the art of effortlessly context-switching so as not to lose control of the conversation, launched into his next topic (He usually has a predetermined list), “Oh, did I tell you about Sundar? He did something really cool, considering this downturn.” “What’s that?” asked Ra-

jat. “He figured he’s going to be laid off anyway, and decided to relocate to Massachusetts,” said Ashok. “While most states pay your employment disability for just a year, Massachusetts pays you for two full years of unemployment! Ha ha.” Both Ashok and Rajat enjoyed a good chuckle over Sundar’s foresight. To relocate solely based on post-termination state benefits seemed like an act of sheer genius.

Rajat, eager to share an anecdote of his own, said, “Did I tell you about my sabbatical? I visited Southern Thailand. Coconuts are a big cash crop there. Farmers use trained monkeys to harvest coconuts for them. They even have Monkey training schools. Not all graduate. The few that do, especially those on the Dean’s list, can be relied upon to harvest coconuts on demand. On graduation day, smart farmers flock to hold campus interviews, to ensure they snare the best graduates. It isn’t uncommon to see a farmer riding on his motorcycle, along with his valedictorian monkey. Now there lies a solution to this outsourcing problem!” “So what happens to the monkeys that fail to graduate?” asked Ashok. “Do they join business school and move into upper-management? Ha ha.”

They then began to reminisce about the most-excellent technical work they had done together, while at the start-up. This collaboration had even yielded them a technical paper which they jointly presented at a marginal conference. Having secured such exalted credentials, both, as per Ashok’s suggestion, immediately (and cunningly) listed this solitary paper in their resume under the modest title: “Select Publications.”

Lost in conversation, both Rajat and Ashok headed over to the food. Thankfully they were the early ones. Since they were seasoned potluck professionals, both had learnt not to be tardy in matters of food and drink. As the old adage goes, “You snooze, you lose!”. After much thought and discussion over the years, they had refined their buffet strategy into five thoughtful pillars of wisdom: (1) Attack the food early (2) Avoid low-labor intensive dishes like salads (3) Load up on the high-demand items (4) Pre-fetch an extra plate or two & (5) Find yourself a quiet corner to chow down.

As they helped themselves generously, Rajat turned to Ashok and said, “I recently saw the movie ‘Julie & Julia’ which was about the life of legendary chef Julia Child.” Ashok, who was busy loading

up his third plate of food, vaguely nodded in his direction. “The amazing thing about Julia Child,” resumed Rajat, “is one wonders how good her cooking will be once she’s Julia Adult! Ha ha ha.”

Feeling somewhat compelled to explain his appetite in geometric terms, Ashok said “You see, most people believe in three square meals. Me, I’d rather settle for one rather large rectangular meal, preferably at no expense to myself. And if you dare ask me why I’m eating so much, I shall simply quote the great George Mallory: ‘Because it is there.’ Of course, once I’m done, it will no longer be there, so to speak.”

Ashok’s last comment did them both in. Both their wives, who were within earshot, just couldn’t bear the thought of their husbands enjoying themselves and promptly began to berate them for being the negligent dads they already knew they were. “Great!” grumbled Rajat. “Just when I thought I was into the conversation, they pull me back out!”

As usual his two brats, one-dot-oh and two-dot-oh, were rumored to be acting up. After a frantic search, Rajat finally confronted one-dot-oh, which, having discovered the joys of spinning until dizzy atop a table, was now impersonating a highly motivated whirling dervish. Meanwhile, two-dot-oh, much to the delight of an eager toddler audience, had unearthed a rather large matchbox, made itself comfortable in a pile of inflammables and was gleefully contemplating the next step in its ambitious pyrotechnic project.

An emergency exit was called for, but no, the seat cushions didn’t conveniently double as floatation devices that his family could use for their exit. The post-party baby relocation logistics meant that along with the still spinning one-dot-oh and an incendiary two-dot-oh, a mountain of baby crap needed to be transported to their Honda Odyssey baby-mobile, a Herculean task for which even Sherpas are prone to using the assistance of pack animals. “Ah, but the potluck wasn’t a total waste after all,” Rajat muttered to himself, half cheerfully, “Vivek’s pre-IPO wife made it all worthwhile.”

*B. A. Krishna is an Indian American living in Silicon Valley. He designs computer chips for a living and has authored two technical publications in Formal Methods in Computer Aided Design and Lecture Notes in Computer Science. He has also authored an essay published in the Indian Review.*

# ANONYMOUS NIGHT

“The universe is made of stories  
not of atoms” ~Muriel Rukeyser

\*

My first language is body, he says,  
the dull bulb of moon, a flickering pulse:  
enter the garden of fools.

\*

Postcard from nowhere reminds:  
slippery lips loose lies,  
besides that, then what?

\*

Her mouth, a neon sign flashing:  
OPEN 24 HOURS  
You have no poetry, she says.

\*

Molecules refuse to compose the alphabet,  
don't forget, this is language specific text;  
regret is its own art.

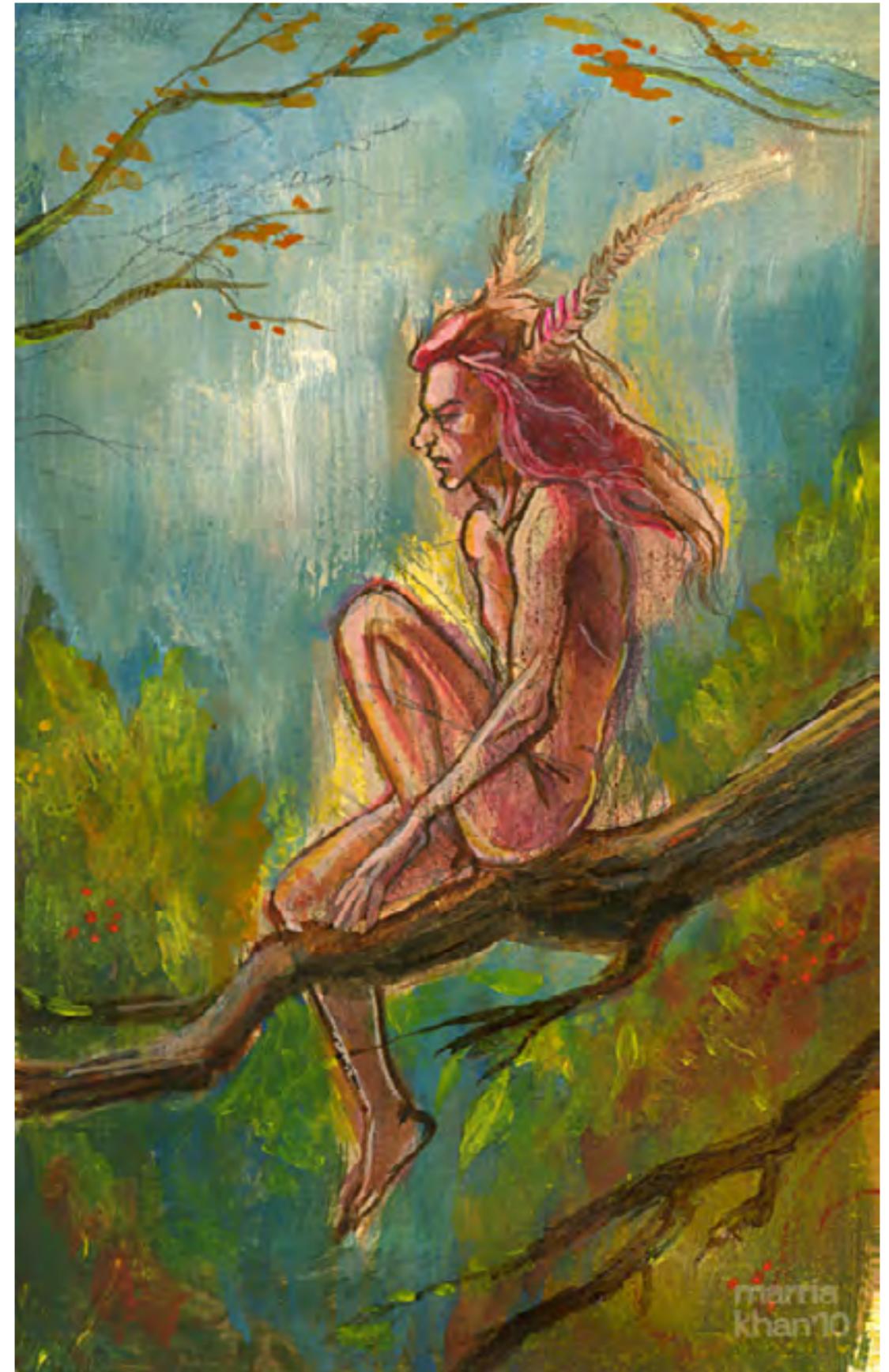
\*

Waiting for an offering, his palms open.  
Like sand, air filters between his fingers,  
Blame it on the bossa nova, he says.

\*

You've ripped my heart out, she says  
like an oyster's pearl; her silhouette  
dancing toward the gimlet-eyed dawn.

—Alyssa Yankwitt



Fey by Marria Khan

# THE REVOLVING DOORS OF PUBLISHING

*Of perceptions and receptions*

By Sana Hussain

It is the function of art to renew our perception. What we are familiar with we cease to see. The writer shakes up the familiar scene, and, as if by magic, we see a new meaning in it.” – Anais Nin

The relationship between art and perception is symbiotic; art changes an individual’s perception, and individual perception often changes how art is viewed. The nuances of this change are important.

A literature such as ours, which is slowly maturing and coming into its own, is often hauled over the coals for being elitist, or unrepresentative of the “true” Pakistan. Allegations are also made that writers cater exclusively to foreign audiences, conforming to their perception of Pakistan. Following the global repercussions of 9/11, a process of identity reconstruction has taken place. Consequentially Pakistan, and by extension Pakistani literature has come to be seen in stereotypical ways that leave little room for a wider and more comprehensive interpretation.

Owing to the socio-political events of the past decade, a lot of attention has been focused on Pakistan, which unlike the attention the country usually attracts, has been quite favourable. One may say that these dynamics are a Faustian bargain where writers, in hopes of garnering international acclaim may compromise on artistic integrity, pandering to the perceptions and expectations of their audiences. In an article published in *The Telegraph India*, Uzma Aslam Khan (author of *Geometry of God*), feels that the assumption Pakistani authors will speak in the same voice as news anchors, is a dangerous one, but feels that “this expectation is being put on us, at times very overtly”.

The idea that publishers and readers look for a particular kind of writing when they pick up a book by a Pakistani author is echoed in Aslam’s personal experience, which she narrates when recalling a UK published author who turned down *The Geometry of God*, saying there was nothing in the book about sacked chief justices. “He said it was a shame that at a time so much violence was erupting in Pakistan, I was writing about a woman who wanted to be a scientist (and succeeded).” So while considerable attention

“ He said it was a shame that at a time so much violence was erupting in Pakistan, I was writing about a woman who wanted to be a scientist (and succeeded),” says Uzma Aslam Khan narrating her experience in taking her novel *Geometry of God* to a UK publisher. ”

has been focused on Pakistan, this attention has a rather insular purview, focusing only on what fits the preconceived ideas regarding the country.

Another significant quality of Pakistani literature in English is the inseparable intertwining of the political and the personal, to the extent where journalists and political activists feature in Karachi Literature Festival, the only one of its kind in Pakistan.

Politics pervades our literature much like it pervades our lives. But is this intermingling overdone? Is the portrayal of unstable governments and chaotic times what helps sell books? And do writers feel like they must include the disorderly affairs of state to conform to the perception of Pakistan, in the foreign reader’s mind? To be fair, these indictments may be unwarranted in light of the scarcity of indigenous publishing houses that leaves Pakistani authors with no choice but to take their work to foreign publishers, who in turn have their own criteria for publishing. Readership is arguably among the most primary concerns of authors, and with an insignificant readership in their own country, it may be natural to appeal to the perceptions of a more substantial audience.

# VACUUM

Now where did I put my

words?

They were here just now, but they  
keep dropping  
off  
and disappearing  
like ash off the tip of a cigarette,  
expiring like smoke rings that die virgins.

Thoughts  
are white shrouded pilgrims  
swarming in,  
circling the Ka’aba in Mecca,  
chanting,  
humming,  
buzzing—always that buzzing.

My world  
is a feverish pendulum,  
oscillating—palpitating,

my heart confined in the dusty heat of my head.

—Madiha Arsalan

# CHATTING WITH MUNEEZA SHAMSIE

Interviewed by Sana Hussain



*In an attempt to gain insight into Pakistani literature and the role of perception in the production of it, TMS interviewed Muneeza Shamsie – experienced reader, well informed observer and articulate critic of the current state of the Pakistani publishing scene in English.*

**Q** As a veteran and a seasoned name in Pakistan’s gradually maturing literary circle, how do you perceive English writing that has come out of Pakistan recently?

**A** I think it is rather good and shows real energy and talent. I only wish Pakistani English poetry had received the cognizance it is due. Sadly, Pakistani English drama appears to be confined to the diaspora with notable exceptions.

**Q** Do you think Pakistani English writers are weighed down by certain preconceived ideas of publishers and readers, to which they feel the need to conform? Or in other words, are there any expectations that belonging to the Pakistani Diaspora, writers have to write about certain stock topics like fundamentalism, religious intolerance and female oppression, which may fit the foreign perception of Pakistan, but in essence only represent a fraction of the country?

**A** No I don’t think there are weighed by such expectations. However, fundamentalism, religious intolerance and the status of women in Pakistan are important issues with long term reverberations, even if they are not Pakistan’s only reality since our society has many other rich, cultural and historical dimensions.

**“A writer does not carry the responsibility of “representing Pakistan”: that is the duty of public functionaries, ministers, diplomats, civil servants etc – literary work should be judged on literary merit alone.”**

The challenge that Pakistani English writers face, is much the same as Anglophone writers from other minority communities in the diaspora, or indeed other countries which acquired English as the result of the colonial encounter: to dispute and question dominant Western stereotypes.

To take some examples, Mohsin Hamid’s novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* plays on the very word “fundamentalist”: and it has nothing to do with religion. Instead he embarks on a discourse on globalization, market capitalism, economic fundamentalism and the inequality of nations. It is an immensely intricate and clever text embedded with metaphors and demands careful reading. *Home Boy* by HM Naqvi also makes an incisive and witty comment on post 9/11 New York.

There are novels such as *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* by Mohammed Hanif, which is a wonderful political satire focusing on the last days of Zia; while Uzma Aslam Khan’s thought provoking *Geometry of God* engages in a discourse between the intellectual traditions of Islam and the narrow interpretation of religion fostered by Zia. *Geometry* focuses largely on a strong willed woman protagonist who becomes a palanteologist, despite [Pakistan’s] gender bias.

Good Pakistani English writers are not much different from other good writers. They are driven by a creative passion and the desire to produce work that is true to itself. Otherwise it would not be possible for Mohsin Hamid to spend six or seven years writing *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* or Nadeem Aslam to work for eleven years writing *Maps for Lost Lovers*.

Diaspora writers such as Aslam do have a different view of Pakistan from resident Pakistanis, simply because they look at the country from a distance, while those living here are caught up in daily struggles. Both perspectives constitute two aspects of the whole, particularly today when migration, travel and access to the electronic media are the norm.

Also, English in Pakistan is largely restricted to those educated in elite English medium schools. Whereas in English speaking countries, the diaspora writer regardless of class or privilege, must attend an English school but continues to belong to a marginalized minority which is struggling to be heard. The work of British-born Hanif Kureishi provides a

critique of Britain and the pressures that Pakistani immigrants face; Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers*, set in an all-Asian working class neighbourhood, similar to the one in which he grew up, highlights conflicts between first and second generation Pakistani Britons.

I think what all Pakistani women writing in English share with other women writing in various Pakistani languages such as Fahmida Riaz, Kishwar Naheed and Attiya Dawood, is an immense awareness of issues related to women's rights. What is interesting though is that whether you look at the

**“Censorship is the only real impediment to artistic freedom.”**

work of an earlier generation such as Bapsi Sidhwa, Sara Suleri and Talat Abbasi, or younger ones such as Kamila Shamsie and Uzma Aslam Khan – and some male writers such as Aamer Hussein – you will find that they portray Pakistani women not as victims, but as strong and resourceful and empowered, despite impediments of gender.

Having said that, one of the problems in contemporary English writing, is that this literature is now coming from regions as diverse as Africa, Australia and South Asia. These books reach a global Anglophone audience which includes many unaware of the cultural and historical nuances of lands vastly different from their own. As a result they are likely to hone in on issues familiar to them.

That is why we need to develop our own literary prizes, a strong tradition of literary criticism and a publishing industry structured to support creative work. Above all, there should be greater emphasis on Pakistani English literature in the classroom, rather than the traditional Anglo-American canon which continues to be the norm in most English Literature classes in Pakistan.

**Q To what extent do you feel that this blinkered approach draws the acclaim and attention towards a certain category of literature, which address the above mentioned stock issues,**

**often sidelining some genuinely great work in the process?**

**A** I have yet to come across a great work of Pakistani English fiction which has been sidelined on the basis of extra-literary criteria.

There has been considerable critical acclaim, however, for fiction dealing with subjects other than geo-politics. This includes Bapsi's Sidhwa's lively novels about the Parsee community and her haunting Partition third novel *Ice-Candy-Man*. Several younger writers, ranging from Sorayya Y. Khan and Kamila Shamsie to Shahbano Bilgrami and Shahr-yar Fazli, have written important novels about the 1971 war. Daniyal Mueenuddin's hugely successful and accomplished *In Other Rooms Other Wonders* tells mostly of life in rural Punjab; Jamil Ahmed's *The Wandering Falcon* describes the timeless pre-1980, tribal life of Balochistan; Musharraf Farooqi's *Story of a Widow* makes a witty comment on marriage and widowhood; Tariq Ali's *Islam* quintet consisting of 5 historical novels explores the encounter between Islam and Christianity across the centuries.

However, we have produced some very fine resident, Pakistani English poets and they have certainly been sidelined in the present celebration of fiction.

**Q With expectations and presumptions tugging at the writer from both foreign and home fronts, does the concept of artistic integrity factor into local writings? Do writers have the freedom to write what they want or does the added baggage of success and popularity impede the process of artistic freedom?**

**A** Censorship is the only real impediment to artistic freedom.

**Q One of the most oft repeated indictments against Pakistani writers writing in English is that they write for and represent a minority, failing to represent the “true” Pakistan. In this panoply of religions, cultures, languages and ethnicities, is it possible to have one all in-**

**clusive perception of identity? Or is there, to quote Flaubert, “no truth, only perception”?**

**A** The broader question here is: if a writer represents a minority, whether linguistic, ethnic, religious or otherwise, does he or she not have the right to a voice?

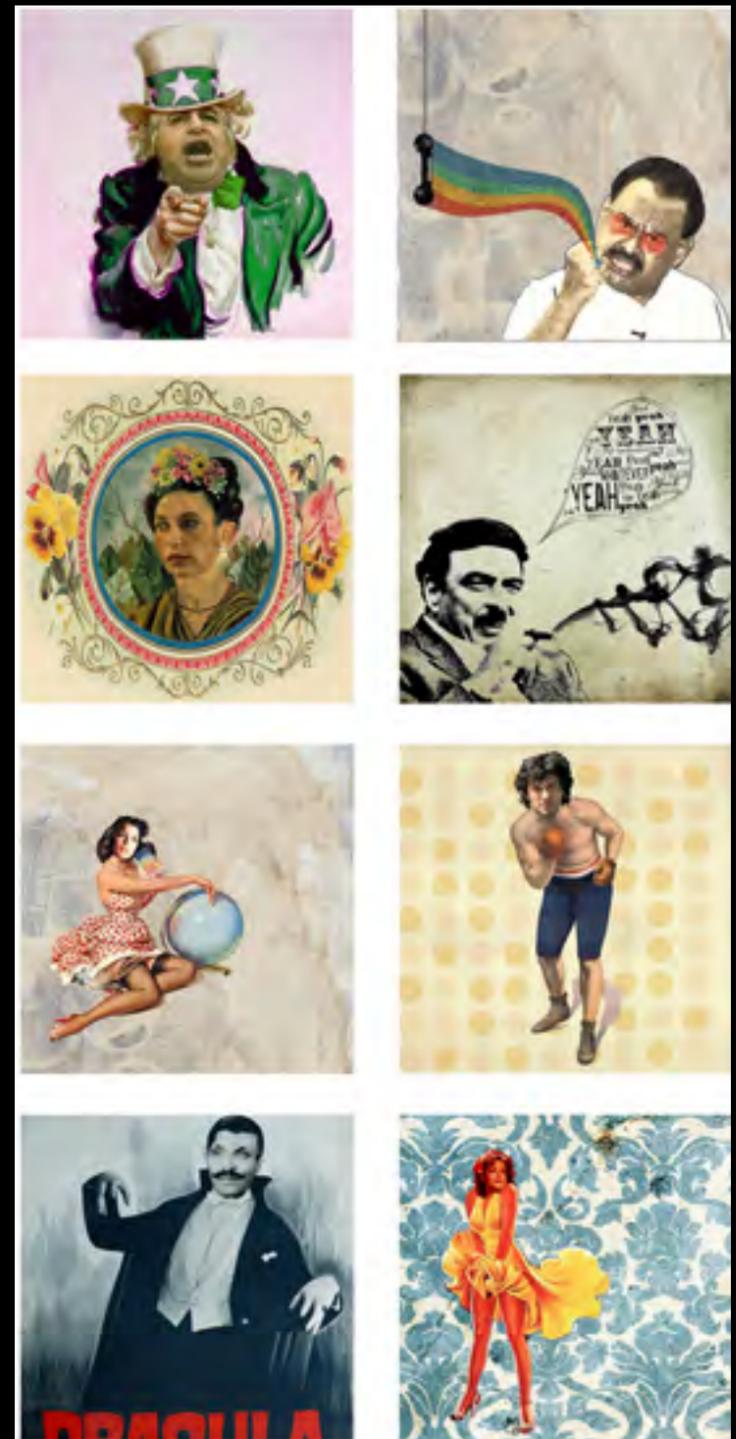
Much has changed over the years and Pakistani English writers no longer belong exclusively to English-speaking homes. Nadeem Aslam, Mohammed Hanif, Musharraf Ali Farooqi all grew up with Urdu and/or Punjabi as their first language.

**“Diaspora writers such as Nadeem Aslam do have a different view of Pakistan from resident Pakistanis, simply because they look at the country from a distance, while those living here are caught up in daily struggles.”**

The so called “boom” in Pakistani Literature in English, has been to some extent a result of the socio-political drama that has been unfolding in the past decade. It appears that these events have come to shape our identity whether we want them to or not. Do you think that our writers can overcome this insular perception of our identity and form a canon that goes beyond the geo-political status of Pakistan?

Recent geo-politics may have contributed to international interest in Pakistani English literature, but prior to 9/11 contemporary Pakistani English fiction had started to come into its own: Zulfikar Ghose, Bapsi Sidhwa, Hanif Kureishi, Adam Zameenzad, Sara Suleri, Nadeem Aslam, Kamila Shamsie, Mohsin Hamid, had already received critical attention by 2000: and it was quite clear then, that this literature was on the brink of a very bright future.

And finally, is it fair for the writer to be car-



*Comedy of Errors by Mohsin Shafi*

rying this responsibility of representing Pakistan? For a literature so green, should the work be judged on anything except quality irrespective of whom or what it represents?

No, a writer does not carry the responsibility of “representing Pakistan”: that is the duty of public functionaries, ministers, diplomats, civil servants etc – literary work should be judged on literary merit alone.

# THEATRE OF THE ABSURD

Lights. Camera. Drama.

By Priyanka Uchil

*Tut, tut, child! Everything's got a moral, if only you can find it.*

—Lewis Carrol (Alice in Wonderland)

The Japanese call it *miai*. A pretty word for a marriage arranged by household elders.

A quick glimpse at the East provides one with a colourful graffiti of varied cultures enmeshed in deep-rooted traditions that leave behind a strong after-taste of heritage. The proclivity toward everything that was and the incorrigible affinity to keeping things the way they were is what defines most of these cultures. It is in diversity that one finds unity, and as far as the average Asian is considered, genealogy is the fuel of the pride wagon. A quick glimpse at the East and one sees a constant peep into the past, and some constant looking over the shoulder, lest the cradle fall.

It is with this emphasis on culture that marriages, especially those in the subcontinent, are arranged in the East. The quest for the perfect bride or the perfect groom is the holy grail of the South Asian family. It is one's purpose in life to get one's progeny married. The procedure of selecting the bride or the groom is extensive and exhaustive, and while opinions of the potential bride and groom are taken into consideration, the final decision invariably lies with the more grey-haired family members. The idea being: with experience and age come wisdom, so the older a person the more capable they are of making a sound decision.

This supposition may seem perfect on paper, but when seen through the contextual filter of marriage, it emerges as deeply flawed. Societal, financial and cultural benchmarks are all met in an arranged marriage, but the emotional compatibility of two people—arguably the bedrock of a successful marriage—is blatantly ignored. Can emotional compatibility be veritably judged based on a few chaperoned faux-meetings between the persons of interest? Flawed or not, such marriages are common in most parts of South Asia and have been around for longer than we care to remember.

“ Tying a chastity belt around a land that preached, practiced and propagated the Kamasutra seems a little far-fetched. ”

To give credit where it is due, arranged marriages have survived principally through ancestry, breed and pedigree. In the lower strata, they worked primarily because girls were taught from a young age to accommodate the wishes of the husband's household and try their best to fit in. Going home was not an option. To be fair however, the size of families was larger, and with so many mouths to feed, a father was considered to have completed his filial duty towards his daughter once she was married. After marriage, she became the responsibility of her husband. With the scene set this way, women had no alternatives but to adjust to their marital households.

## Enter Darwinism

Darwin proposed that natural selection is the sustenance of any utilitarian advantage that enables a species to compete better in a given circumstance. It was inadvertently practiced by the more affluent classes of society, to strengthen their pedigree, enhance their lineage and improve the quality of an offspring. Wealth and beauty were undoubtedly the principal yardsticks, and as things stand today, still are, but if one were so unfortunate as to not have one of the two, alliances were made solely on the family name which was, in earlier times, indicative of status and power.

While royal marriages were almost always arranged in the subcontinent, they were not an uncommon occurrence in other parts of the world either. Among the more celebrated royal arrangements is the marriage of Marie Antoinette, princess of Austria-Hungary whose hand was promised to the crown prince of France, who went on to become King Louis XVI. Though Queen Elizabeth II's marriage to Prince Phillip was not arranged per se, gossip suggests it may have been engineered by the am-



Spring in the desert by Syed Wasif Ali Khan

## SOME SECRETS ARE MEANT TO STAY QUIET

He had a surprisingly big build for an artist, he'd always been older than me. I imagine he still is though I live abroad now and there are time differences.

A wife may have been involved and I know a blood blue liquid was swallowed. Regardless.

It was a dirty rotten trick for him to slide Anthony Perkins from under a sheet (he knew I had a weakness for weak men) and use him to blur the boundaries of friend and lover, sister and brother, oil and water, colour and colourlessness. Pain and pleasure were present too, but that's often the case when art and bodies, thin or otherwise, bang themselves onto walls.

—Christine Brandel

bitious Lord Mountbatten.

Royal weddings that were not arranged were more often than not unequal marriages. Morgantic marriages have been frowned upon across cultures, because they do not subscribe to the societal standards of what a marriage should be and also result in diluting blue blood. In Japan, brides from such marriages were driven into depression on at least two occasions; it is said that Empress Michiko (the first commoner to marry into the imperial family) was bullied into a nervous breakdown by her mother-in-law. Princess Masako, a Harvard and Oxford graduate, gave up her promising career as a diplomat to wed Prince Naruhito, only to fall into depression a few years later. Prince William was a happy man when he married Kate Middleton last July; had he been born a century early, the very decision of marrying a commoner might have cost him his title at the very least.

It wasn't always this way. Before arranged marriages became an accepted part of the ring cycle, history shows alternative and predominantly liberal forms of marriage in the subcontinent. For instance, the Gandharva method, based solely on the attraction partners felt towards each other, was practiced

far before 500BC in India. While being perfectly legal, this system of marriage had no rituals, nor did it seek approval from society. Swayamvar encouraged prospective grooms to come seek the hand of a lady (much along the lines of US network ABC's reality show "The Bachelorette"). Grooms participated in several competitions to prove their intelligence, might and valour. The man who most impressed the incumbent bride would then gain her approval and subsequent acquiescence to marry.

Orthodox traditions are formed when a generation imitates its predecessors without applying much thought to the process. In most cases, since such traditions are passed down through generations the original concept behind them is lost. To chastise society, avoid promiscuity and bring some level of conformity, the systems of free marriages were reigned in and stricter methodologies were introduced. But tying a chastity belt around a land that preached, practiced and propagated the Kamasutra seems a little far-fetched.

### Leapfrogging into the present

Something changed by the time we grew up; our parents suddenly came of age. I would like to think we were difficult children and wore them out

to the extent that they began to find the process of arranging a marriage too taxing. But I know better. One explanation may be that with at least two generations of education now running through most families, some semblance of logic set in. With the formation of urban clusters, social stigmas associated with marrying by choice and marrying social mismatches once highly resonant in communities, has to a certain extent, faded. That most parents have begun to rationalize the decisions made by their offspring as more or less a measure of their upbringing, helps.

What makes it tough for parents to adopt a liberal view on marriages and endorse a marriage of their child's choice, is the way society is knit in the sub-continent. There are several self-appointed messiahs for blissful marriages, who make it their life's purpose to get anyone within their line of sight married to anyone on their long list of acquaintances. Marriages in the subcontinent are a large affair. In many parts of India and Pakistan they last for several days, at least. The average upper middle class family spends anywhere between Rs0.5 to Rs50 million on a single wedding. A colleague of mine, who is due to be wed this May, has about 3,000 people on her guest list. With the numbers set this way, it takes a lot of courage for parents who themselves were traditionally married to invest so much money in something they are not completely certain will be approved of or will succeed. So yes, marriages of choice have a long way to go before they can be accepted as the norm, and arranged marriages may very well be around for at least another generation.

But one way or the other, the subcontinent's wedding scene is on the verge of a revolution. What might have been perceived obnoxious and improbable a few decades ago, is slowly but quite steadily becoming the norm. To borrow from the structured Japanese, the term for this relatively new system is ren'ai. Today, every grandmother worth her salt claims she fell in love with her husband on the day of the wedding and claims, by that measure, hers was a "love marriage" after all. Yes, in the subcontinent, we've always called a marriage by choice – love marriage. Only, no longer in hushed tones and definitely minus the coy brides and the grumpy mothers-in-law.

*Priyanka Uchil is Features Editor for The Missing Slate and is based in Mumbai, India.*



*The Bone Carver by Marria Khan*

# SPOTLIGHT ARTIST: MARRIA KHAN



*TMS staff member Asmara Malik sat down with multidisciplinary artist Marria Khan to speak about her graphic novels inspired artwork and her recent foray into animation with Daniyal Noorani.*

**Q**

**Did you always know that you wanted to pursue a career as an artist?**

**A**

Not until I was Thirteen. I've always loved art and drawing but I considered it more of a hobby, something I'd continue doing alongside being an archaeologist, astronaut or whatever crazy career my prepubescent mind daydreamed up.

**Q**

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

**A**

They've been supportive; especially my mother whose taught art and is a graphic design major. She's been buying me books on art and comics and helping with art projects since as far back as I can remember. She's a major reason I can call myself an artist today.

**Q**

**Why did you decide on National College of Arts (NCA) versus other art colleges in the country?**

**A**

It is the oldest and most recognized art school in the country and I have fond memories of the area it's located in. We used to live near the Lower Mall as kids and frequent places like Anarkali, the Lahore museum, Government College etc quite a lot. I wanted to be able to do that again. And NCA's campus is beautiful! Contemporary and classic red brick buildings, courtyards and the library, it has the largest collection of art related books in Pakistan.

**Q**

**What words would you use to describe your work to an unknowing audience?**

**A**

Each piece is like a chapter in an ongoing quest where you meet different characters and challenges along the way.

**Q**

**Where do you draw inspiration from?**

**A**

Graphic novels, speculative fiction, animation, heavy metal music, mythology personal experiences and the world around me.

**Q**

**What is your main oeuvre? What forms have helped you in finding your muse?**

**A**

As a multidisciplinary artist, it's rather varied; there are mixed media semi abstract paintings, stop motion paintings, digital paintings and Illustrations, music videos. There was a time when I tried sticking to one thing but it was very difficult.

**Q**

**What is your preferred medium; that one instrument that sets your creativity ablaze?**

**A**

If I have to pick a favourite it would have to be the good old pencil. The use of pencils may not be very visible in my completed works, but if you could rewind my work process you'd see it all usually starts with a pencil sketch which eventually gets layered over and subdued by other media. In other words, a pencil sketch/drawing/doodle is the foundation upon which the rest of the work falls together. In short, I feel insecure when I can't find my pencils.

**Q**

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

**A**

Since most of my works are figurative in nature we could say they mainly encompass the experience of being human.



*Almost by Marria Khan*

**Q** How did the two collaborations with Daniyal Noorani come about?

**A** Daniyal (who also happens to be my cousin) needed a music video for his song. He was looking for a 2d animator. Daniyal's sister, Maliha told him about the animated paintings I did for my thesis so he got in touch with me. I had previously worked on an animated music video for the band 'Boy with a Loud Guitar' and was looking forward to working on another such project. Daniyal's song for the first video 'Find Heaven' provided that opportunity and had a strong message so it had to happen. The second music video was a follow up we were motivated to do seeing how well the first one was received.

**Q** What is the creative process behind the making of these two videos?

**A** Even though both the videos were made using digital media the work process is very similar to that of traditional media. I

usually start out with pencil like sketches and keep adding detail and movement till I get the desired result. Sometimes even a raw sketch or doodle can be the desired result.

**Q** Any future collaborations in the pipeline?

**A** I am currently collaborating with a based San Francisco based artist called Micropixie. We're working on an animated music video for her song 'My Beige foot' .

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

**A** I believe the characters in my works represent different Jungian Archetypes - inherited patterns of thought or symbolic imagery derived from the past collective experience and present in the individual unconscious.



*King by Marria Khan*

**Q** Other people in your field who inspire you?

**A** This is similar to that “Whose your favourite artist?” question. To be honest, there are so many people and works that have inspired me over the years it’s difficult to pick a handful of names.

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

**A** It’s elitist, pretentious, commercial and has more to do with creating brand names and making money than appreciating and promoting art. I usually prefer to opt out of this ‘ratrace’ fearing I too might become obsessed with the price of my work, how renown I am and let the market dictate what I’m meant to create.

**Q** Ever considered doing something else for a living?

**A** You know how the artist Michelangelo dissected human bodies to get a deeper understanding of how they worked. I sometimes wished I was a doctor so that so that I could do the same. Then there are times I have seriously considered painting idyllic landscapes on rickshaws in violently bright colors as a career as well.

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

**A** I have a better understanding body language, the use of color and the affect of light

**Q** Do you think that animation has a future in Pakistan?

**A** Pakistan’s media revolution has created a great demand for 3d artists, animators and motion graphic artists. There’s also a big market for outsourced work here, animation for mobile and console games, animated storybooks for gadgets like the ipad etc. However it might be quite a while before we see an animated feature



*The Cold Absolut by Marria Khan*

length movie come out of Pakistan. Maybe if colleges started offering graduate and undergraduate degrees in animation the likelihood will increase.



*Familiar by Marria Khan*

# SANDS OF A GLOBAL NET

*Shifting perceptions*

By Aaron Grierson

In a world that has been dubbed a 'global community', sometimes it can be hard to truly appreciate not only the size of the community, but the degree to which many of us are connected. Once, a community could be scattered along the side of a hill, kept safe from raiders and rising tides.

Now, we can explore these same settings through the internet. Though far from the same degree of immersing yourself in the sunshine upon the side of a mountain, we can still see and at least be brought into awareness about the locations from

which many of our luxuries originate. This sort of technological capability is both a by-product and a major contributor to globalization. The relationship is reciprocal because the internet expands the web of connections while reaffirming the old adage about a worldwide community.

## **Piracy in the digital age**

Despite this safety we still have our own ebbs and flows to deal with. Piracy, especially of the digital sort has proliferated across the globe, almost a symptom of globalization. With such changes in society come shifts in the responsibility of people. There are clashes over the legality of many things

“ We can act but choose instead to talk about the freedom we so often feel we have but fail to regularly exercise.”

on the internet, from films to status updates. Such problems are ones of perception, however: who owns what and how it is to be globally distributed is only one example. The tangible world of the Silk Road is outdated in its efficiency having been overgrown by the spread of civilization.

My aim is not to upset anyone; I am aware of

the troubling history that accompanied this expansion, one that includes colonization most often to a population unwilling to be colonized. To say that unpleasant things occurred, is putting it lightly. The bag of history has always been a mixed one, irrespective of time or place. It is doubtful that a majority thought the circumstances of the time were a good thing. Many were of opinions similar to ours today. However it is important to note that we are left with little physical evidence over any such connotations of opinion that have not already found themselves strung up on the web.

For whatever problems the past has left us we have also been left many benefits. Not to say they all stem from the internet, but our digital networking has certainly resulted in the expansion of numer-



*Lullaby by Mohsin Shafi*

“ The reason for both higher educational institutions and the Wiki itself reminding readers about the quality of the text is because people are prone to making mistakes. ”

ous cultures, from music or fashion to pirating. It is important to note that most pirating is now done digitally, often for media such as television shows, music or books.

For the people who have access to the internet, rather like the real pirates that still loot and pillage in the modern era, there is an increased sense of power, a freedom from the repressive system that forces inflated prices upon the heads of many that have to work simply to live. At the same time it is fair to say that people who partake in such digital activities are stuck in a greater paradox than some may care to realize. If they illegally download things to avoid paying for them but still pay a large corporation a regular(ly increasing) fee to have access to the internet, what exactly are they escaping?

### Living in an “open” world

The answer, I think, is certain other corporations who provide less of a service for more of a fee. This is especially obvious when one considers the encompassing ‘services’ the internet provides. The magazine this article is published in is a product of the internet. Without it, such an exchange (between writer and editor, for instance) might not occur with as much autonomy. Further, a much more popular example would be social media, and open forums. Such methods of communication allow for explication and exchanges of opinions, and not always in a friendly manner (not that all of the opinions are friendly to begin with). If uncontrolled such mediums can lead to frivolous but harmful exchanges that have little to do with whatever the topic of discussion originally was. The problem of such power exists elsewhere too, even if it is more subtle, and even accidental.

Websites like Wikipedia are considered by

much of the general internet surfing populous to be the biggest wealth of information since Google. And rightfully so, as it has articles on many different people, places and things from the past and present, stretching from old tools to modern speculative novels and their authors. Of course, even the Wiki is prone to reminding its readers that the information is incomplete. But this doesn’t stop people from assuming that it holds incontestable facts. University professors (at least in my experience) frequently remind students that the Wiki article itself isn’t proper academic work, but the footnotes can be very useful.

The reason for both higher educational institutions and the Wiki itself reminding readers about the quality of the text is because people are prone to making mistakes. They may be honest, unintentional ones, but even misremembering a date could jar the record of a historical continuum. It is symptomatic, perhaps, of people’s excitement of knowing things that they generally dislike being told or proven that they are wrong. Their self perception can be, for them, more important than the facts. So gentle reminders to check the facts seem like a good thing. In a way updating Wikipedia and posting your ideas on a forum or blog has a similar end result: the information might still be there but the contribution of the individual is so temporal that it becomes indiscernible. The end result is the exact opposite of what most people might experience at the time they bring such work into the public eye.

### It’s all for posterity

For all of the meta tags, hash tags, signatures and other personalizing identification an author might attribute to their work, be it a brilliant blog post, a mediocre meme or a frivolous forum post, the information can be lost, rewritten or just outright stolen. This highlights one of the dangers and one of the major differences between the internet and the real world. While we can bring ourselves to be presented (through written work, documents of projects or embarrassing photos) to the global community, that piece of ourselves can be easily lost because of the sheer number of people that feel compelled to do the same thing. The result is often a silent dissonance that many people might not realize. Or they may realize it and continue to place themselves out there, regardless of the reaction, just to maintain their presence.

The end result, as it may be perceived, is a

## DECAF IMMIGRANT

My name is not Beneatha,  
or at least I don’t think it was until  
today,  
when my coffee cup informed with the imperial authority  
of permanent black ink over smooth white cardboard  
that my name was,  
in fact,  
Beneatha.

Come to think of it,  
I’ve never had the pleasure of seeing my own name on a coffee cup,  
mocking me with its ironic green and white,  
the familiar colors of a Pakistani flag.  
There’s been Anita, Rita, Mida, Deepa,  
and my personal favorite,  
Juanita,  
but never  
Madiha.

I am the decaffeinated coffee in my careless cup:  
boiling, brown and bitter without the kick,  
or an invisible celery stick  
sitting next to a mountain  
of tantalizing buffalo wings.

—Madiha Arsalan

*Madiha Arsalan is a first generation Pakistani immigrant-turned-American mother who decided to reject her South Asian obligations of choosing a “socially acceptable” career path and started attending University of South Florida as a Creative Writing major one year ago.*

back and forth between being seen and fading away. This constant tug of war is essential to the internet and all it can present to its viewer. Many issues, especially those of ethical grounding appear to us in such a fashion. There is a surge and gradual disappearance of most anything from the eyes of the general public; perhaps, like those landscapes of far off exotic places, the full picture is far from understood.

So it may be safe to say that the problem of perception is a continual one with the evolutions of humanity. Our insights grow as we advance as a species, and with them, the potential to get lost in the flow of information and circumstance grows too. As with these dangers, the mixed bag of benefits and detriments of globalization and, on a more intimately known level for many of us, the internet presents the same sort of problem.

We have access to a whole other world, and

through it, many different parts of our own planet Earth. Yet it becomes increasingly difficult as time goes on and global awareness increases to really keep afloat in either of these worlds. We may be akin to gods on the internet as individuals, even in reality as a species, but few individuals in reality can say they are capable of operating the same way many children do on the internet.

Perhaps our perception, however broad we may feel it needs to learn to better focus on certain other parts of the world, such as our own lives or local communities that we have access to and can act more purposefully towards. We can act but so often choose instead to talk about the freedom we so often feel we have but fail to regularly exercise.

*Aaron Grierson is Articles Editor for The Missing Slate and is currently a student at McMaster University, Ontario, Canada.*

## PENCIL GREY AND CHIRPING BROWN

An HB-shaded sky  
dulls-down the day  
and a surgical-steel wind  
dissects us.

Expenditure cuts,  
job losses,  
frowns and hunched shoulders - these  
are the common currency  
of this dismal car park.

All Hallow's Moon  
has still to run its course,  
yet Autumn's glow is fading and  
stone-cold gutters are already gathering  
the rustling modesty of naked trees.

Evidence of life, it seems,  
is reduced to a game  
of vehicular Russian Roulette,  
played out by two small,  
speckled birds,  
twittering on the asphalt.

~~~

—Chris Wardle

*Chris Wardle is finding his voice late in life. Currently resident in Oxford, but with his heart firmly attached to Pakistan, this development worker and student of Permaculture is constantly surprised and delighted by the people, places and things which inspire his poetic outpourings.*



*Artwork by Mohsin Shafi*

## SPOTLIGHT ARTIST: MOHSIN SHAFI



*TMS Creative Director Moeed Tariq sat down with artist Mohsin Shafi to talk about the dimensions of his work and what the artistic landscape of Pakistan is shaping up to be.*

**Q** Have you always known you wanted to be an artist?

**A** Yes. As far back as I can remember, I was in the habit of locking myself up in a room and draw all day long to the soundtrack of my father repeatedly claiming that I would never amount to anything in life. I suppose I'm still very much in the habit of doing except that daddy dearest has now somewhat made his peace with what I do.

**Q** Would you ever think about doing something else for a living?

**A** Perhaps a poet; poetry was the donor twin to my visual arts growing up. It sort of dwindled away into malnourishment along the way but if I could, that's the one thing I would like to go back to and perhaps make the centre of my life.

**Q** What's a normal day in the life of Mohsin Shafi, the artist?

**A** Bitch. Bitch. Bitch some more because I'm bitter.

**Q** Your work plays with the idea of identity and perception, how's that working out for you?

**A** I know it sounds very run-of-the-mill but I am realizing that my work and where it's coming from is helping me realize and figure things out like my own identity, my sexuality and where I stand in the grander scheme of things. Relentless, occasionally fruitful questioning is what it is (smiles).

**Q** Where do you draw your inspiration from?

**A** I have been an almost unnaturally observant person, always. And now it's come to a point that my work has everything to do with what's around me. Whatever I see that I cannot digest, I regurgitate through my work. I guess you could say it's in an attempt to provoke others around me into a revolution of sorts to herald change and take a stand against all that is so awfully wrong around us today.

My inspirations are deeply rooted in myself. I'm trying to search for inspiration every day: To reach for the deep feelings hidden below the surface of appearances, to pull them out from behind the shadows of everyday life. It is a permanent record of fleeting sensations. Through a play with image, text, material, medium and milieu, I attempt to communicate multiple layers of meaning. I'd rather pose more questions than provide answers and hopefully, in turn create a deeper dialogue to expose the grey areas that become overshadowed by black and white moral codes.

I use items from everyday life; the worn and used, items that convey news. A drawerful of odds and ends, treasure chests of humanity that allows us to read a book in focus; newspaper clippings. They are all unique, even [the seemingly] ordinary.

**Q** How much of yourself do you put into your work?

“A drawerful of odds and ends, treasure chests of humanity that allows us to read a book in focus; newspaper clippings. They are all unique, even [the seemingly] ordinary.”



*Artwork by Mohsin Shafi*



Artwork by Mohsin Shafi

**A** A lot. I've never actually sat down and gauged it precisely though. It's always about me stepping into another person's shoes to try and grasp how they feel and react to their surroundings. As for putting my own self and me alone into my work, it's been a struggle. But I'm getting around that through the use of personal metaphors in my work.

**Q** Are there any artists that you admire?

**A** This could be a very long list but off the top of my head Afshar Malik, Anwar Saeed, Asim Butt and Naiza Khan (her drawings).

**Q** It is often said that an artist has no living, how true have you found that to be living and working in Pakistan?

**A** To be honest I actually think it's easier getting away with being one here than anywhere else in the world. Besides the fact that you have to be in the art circles to be given exhibition opportunities and be well known but other than that, it's not really that bad here. The supplies are cheaper, there's the home support base to let you work (for those who chose to avail it) and generally just more time to simply be an artist working away. The only difficulty mostly faced here is breaking into the 'right' lobbies here. Your entire future in art depends on who you know and where they let you go. If it weren't for that major crippling factor, there's not much to hold an artist back in this part of the world.

**Q** How would you collectively describe your work in your own words?

**A** The affair that inspires my work transforms the common and the everyday into the disputed and the unreal and creates in the process a loaded, often perplexing world that is at once familiar and bizarre.

## MARK OF CAIN

Like brothers everywhere  
he kept the stain close by  
perhaps to remind him  
revenge is a dish  
best not served.  
He could not remember  
how or when he got it.  
Maybe it was that first winter  
of the bones -  
the cold was so mean  
it broke the horses hooves  
out on the river  
and he'd held his brother  
under the thin ice  
just to feel his weight  
turn the water blue.

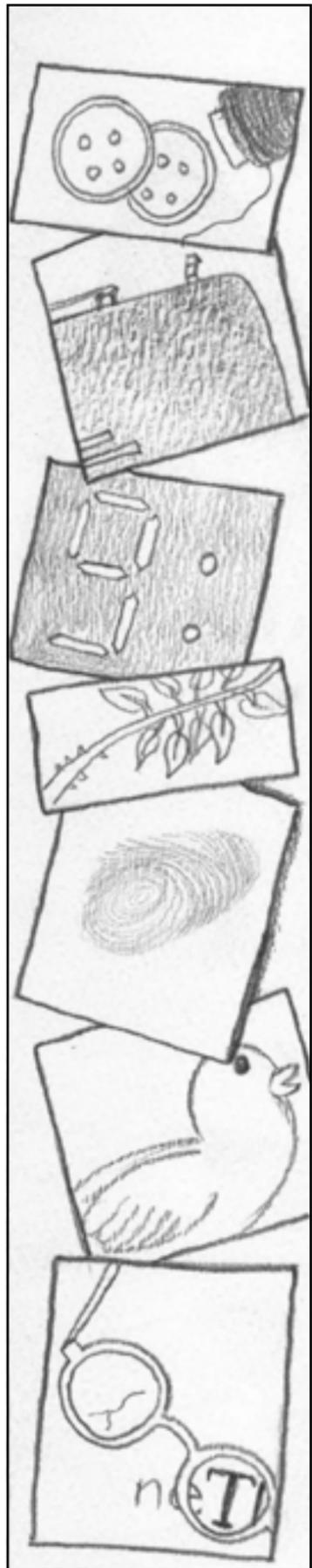
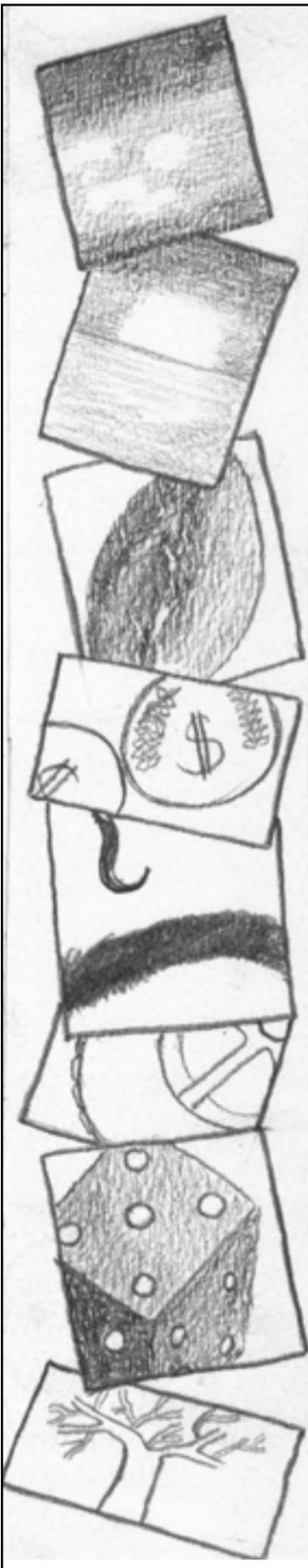
Perhaps it was the spring  
they both fell in love  
with Rachel.  
She wore too few clothes  
and her smile,  
slung low in the pocket  
below her hips,  
always dared them  
to try and pull her blouse up  
or steal cigarettes  
for her to dangle  
between her lips.

His mother swore  
it was during the summer  
all the trees died.  
The locusts grew round -  
plump pods that burst  
when they got caught  
in the streets' hot tar.  
He'd thrown his brother  
off the roof,  
wondering if boys who limped  
could fly  
and why his tears  
got stuck  
on the way down.

But he remembered  
a day in November  
the sky so black  
it made the blood  
in his veins  
stand still.  
The droning of leaves  
was all he heard  
as rock cleft  
flesh from bone  
and the stars  
went battered and unbalanced.  
And then there was nothing left  
but his brother's grin  
and the cold caress  
of his mother's tears.

—Brendan Sullivan

*The poet lives in Virginia, where he enjoys the ocean as much as he can. His poems focus on ordinary magic in everyday life and can be read as verbal snapshots. He is a water sports enthusiast and enjoys surfing, kayaking, sailing and diving.*





*The Missing Slate sat with artist Syed Ali Wasif to discuss the inspiration behind his rural-focused art and the colorful contrasts he brings to the seemingly mundane.*

**Q** Did you always want to be an artist or did it reveal itself to you gradually?

**A** I grew up at my maternal grandfather's house with my mother after the death of my father surrounded by a bevy of cousins. As I look back I recall either painting or drawing something or the other. So it's safe to say I always knew I wanted to be an artist.

A longer explanation would be surrounded by art, from one of my uncles who was a perfectionist architect, to my mother who was a sketch artist and embroider. My Grandfather was a poet and calligrapher, a talent he learned from one of his Arab teachers in pre-partition India.

With this background art seemed the most natural decision, and with the cautious instruction of my school art teachers who influenced and provided guidance at different stages, fell deeply in love with the medium. I still recall how, days before my exams, I would paint rather than revise my syllabus.

**Q** Where do you draw your inspiration from?

**A** From a variety of sources, some seemingly benign; for instance, stress opens your mind in ways you can't anticipate. Other times, there are untold stories gleaned from the conversations, expressions and emotions of those around me. There isn't just one source of inspiration.

**Q** You are a practicing psychiatrist and self-taught artist, do you think that either one of these affects the other in any way? How are you able to balance between the two?

**A** As a student, human anatomy was taught to us in our first year which greatly influenced my work. It helped me in drawing what most artists tend to shy away from, primarily because they tend not to draw hands and

feet properly. I try to find art in every emotional expression which isn't always easy; I may go one step further and say that I have extended expressionist art with richer expressions and anatomical accuracies.

The truth of psychiatry is that we buy pain from our patients to the point where a psychiatrist's clinical performance starts to wither away until he/she becomes nothing more than a pill pusher with a God complex. Painting is my catharsis – when I pain and draw, I push away my inner conflicts and create a masterpiece from sheer mental exhaustion.

How do I maintain a balance, you asked? In 2006, I resigned from the NGO where I worked and became a full-time artist.

**Q** Are there any artists in particular whose work you admire?

**A** Oddly enough, it was med school that brought the art world closer. During my final year, I came to know that Sadequain was admitted under the care of psychiatrist Dr Haroon in a special ward. So of course I had to go and see the legend, but I was too shy to enter his room (partly because of the sign on his door declaring 'No Visitors!'). However, Sadequain's assistant encouraged me to enter.

It was during that fateful meeting where I met two men, giants in their respective fields, who would go on to become my mentors. Sadequain took me under his wing and so, it is natural that echoes of the great man found their way into my work. To mention the other artists I admire and am inspired by: M.F. Hussain, Picasso, Souza, Dali, Goya, Van Gogh, Munch, El Greco, da Vinci and Michelangelo.

“Today, many of the places renowned for fomenting new ideas and creativity are decaying thanks to the red tape of bureaucracy.”



*Brahman - Bull by Syed Ali Wasif*

**Q** If you had the opportunity, which pre-existing body of work (including literature) would you want to illustrate?

**A** I would like to illustrate the stories mentioned in the Qur'an and the short stories of Sadat Hassan Manto; the vivid imagery and emotional impact of his work is beautiful to watch unfold. Previously, I illustrated one from seven stories of the women mentioned in the poetry of Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai; Sur Marvi which centers around the folk tale of Umer Marvi from Thar.

**Q** You collectively title your work 'The Politics of Stress'. What is that meant to convey?

**A** As you are aware I'm sure, there have been social, economic, religious and political conflicts and a long spell of military regiments over the years. The prevailing phenomenon of hatred and intolerance along with various other factors have generated countless pressures on both the country and on me personally. The thought process behind my exhibit is the anguish I feel about the generalization of Pakistanis as terrorists.

To me art for the sake of art is a sin; we as artists are part of society [and therefore] have a collective responsibility to rectify existing issues through our work.

**“To me art for the sake of art is a sin; we as artists are part of society [and therefore] have a collective responsibility to rectify existing issues through our work.”**

**Q** Over the years you've had many solo exhibitions and the accolades just keep stacking up, how do you find the time to work so extensively on your creations?

**A** Since resigning from my NGO and free Mental Health Clinic, I'm a part time psychiatrist practicing twice a week and involved in my creative activity reading poetry listening to music and painting rest of the week. At times I paint even before leaving for my clinic it is not 24/7 job but a leisure activity for me and keeps me focused on multiple issues of my interest.

**Q** A lot of the young artists today talk about 'Art Lobbies' within the country – if you're in, you're good; if not, you don't matter. Being a self-taught artist who has witnessed the evolution of the local art scene, what are your thoughts on this?

**A** Unfortunately as the moral values of our society fall into decay combined with a callous attitude towards everything, yes there are lobbies that put you on a pedestal or treat your art badly. I personally do not subscribe to any lobby – I paint solely for myself – if my art sells and if it doesn't is immaterial. Art does not need any lobbying; if it is good and up to the mark it will sell at the right moment to the right collector.

The local art scene has evolved right before my eyes, especially in Karachi where there wasn't any proper institution for learning art. Karachi School of Art, which was established in 1964 by Rabia Zuberi in Nazimabad (a mostly middle class locality) was later shifted near National Stadium in the Gulshan area. Arts Council of Pakistan was the primary hub for artists which soon morphed into a social forum for artists and student politics and yet was unsuccessful in enacting change.

Today, many of the places renowned for fomenting new ideas and creativity are decaying thanks to the red tape of bureaucracy. It is a blessing that the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture



*Girl and the Cactus by Syed Ali Wasif*

“Art does not need any lobbying; if it is good and up to the mark it will sell at the right moment to the right collector.”

erupted in 1989, by the efforts of certain architects and artists who believed that the city was in dire need for a school that excelled in the disciplines of Fine Arts, Design and Architecture.

I'm not sure if that answers your question, or if I've gone a bit off track, but I believe there is still much that needs [to be changed].

Q

**What's a day in the life of Syed Ali Wasif like?**

A

My day starts early, irrespective of whether I've had a full night of sleep. Indeed, on certain days I'm a fully functioning insomniac. After catching up on various emails and other tidbits, I sit down to paint or experiment with a concept before committing it to a canvas later.

I usually work through daylight and have a late lunch so the evenings are all mine, that is to say unless I am engrossed in a complicated piece, which arguably does not happen often. At times, I really don't want to do anything so I travel the wilderness camera in hand mostly alone although sometimes with a close friend, mostly to the Thar desert and Ziarat (in Quetta).

I don't tend to socialize much but do keep in touch with a very close circle of friends who are on the same wavelength as myself. In fact, when I am to attend an exhibition I prefer going on the second or a later day so as to avoid the crowd.

# BANANA TREE

By Abbi Nguyen

Lan resented that her children were smart. There were four of them. Each only a year apart from each other. Nathalie and Nathan have had honor roll since the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Her first two have already gone. She saw Amy four times a year on every holiday break. Singapore was only a five hours flight away.

As for Cory, if she was lucky, he'd come home during summer. He was studying biochemical engineering in Lyon, France. She couldn't pronounce such a name, nor could she correctly spell the English names they had given themselves. 'These days everyone has English names, Ma' they said.

Nathalie's real name was Nhan, a white flower of an intense fragrance. It bloomed in Winter, usually along a river or near the ocean. Lan was also named after a flower—the orchid.

All of their names had meaning. In changing it to English, they only kept the first letter of their original names.

And so it would never be quite that normal to her, because as she twisted her tongue over the phone asking for Cory, she mistook the *r* for *l* and therefore said something similar to 'Corly.' She knew his roommates were Vietnamese too, but they'd refuse to respond to her in their mother tongue. Instead, they nonchalantly told her that there was no one by that name there. 'Those friends of yours need to learn to respect the elder. A bunch of rootless, uncultured brats,' she complained. 'They were born here, Ma. So technically they're *French*.' 'Do they look French to you?' she laughed mockingly.

These conversations pained her. Lan tried to tell herself, there was nothing to be done about Cory. Two summers ago, when he walked through the wheat field and tripped over the pecking chickens, she had not recognized him. He was tall, wide, and handsome. No son of hers should be so good looking. She was a rough, common woman. Her best feature was her heap of silky hair, the color of burning coal—black with strands of bright red from working under the sun. When he stepped onto the wooden porch, even his shadow seemed to tower over her.

'Mama.' He smiled, his teeth straight and shiny.

He bent down to kiss her hair. She only reached his chin.

'My god, what do they feed you over there?' She chuckled, her throat dry.

'How do I look? Do you like it?—Engineered milk, Ma. At least that's what they say.' He spoke in a low whisper.

She looked at him painfully. 'Be quiet now. Come inside. I killed a fat pig for you.'

The rest of the summer was quiet. Cory lay in the hammock for the most part, reading Nietzsche or Dickens. He used to read to her all the time, Vietnamese fables and historical tales, a bit of romance here and there. She asked him to translate his English books to her. He said it was too difficult, some English expressions didn't exist in Vietnamese. But he did relate *Great Expectations* to her and she enjoyed it. 'It seems their poverty is so similar to ours. Why don't you write about the suffering of our people? It would make you famous too if that's the stuff they like.'

He frowned at her, then slowly his brows relaxed into a smile. 'No Ma, we don't need more of that. The only stories ever written about our country are about suffering.'

Lan knew he was right and could not argue with him. These days, she had not been able to respond to her son at all. He was genuine, kind and magnanimous in the way he dealt with his less educated mother. She couldn't take offense because he was being sensitive. But in her throat, she felt as if she had swallowed a bitter fruit.

The other siblings looked up to their older brother. Nathan had already decided he wanted to be a doctor and got Cory's approval. Nathalie, however, was a different case. She was worried about Nathalie. She revered her brother.

In her mind, Lan secretly hoped Nathalie would be the one to stay home. Cory filled her head with wild ideas like *you are in charge of your destiny, anything you can imagine is real*, and the famous *American Dream*. What about the dreams of Vietnamese people? Of simple folks like her and Nathalie? She had dreamed of her children even before they were born.

She had been able to predict all of their genders. It was quite simple, actually, all she had to do was sing. Both Amy and Nathalie kicked at songs about the seasons, harvests, or love. Cory and Nathan liked the national anthem.

She would protect Nathalie.

Nathalie was at the peak of her beauty. At sixteen years old, she was a rosy bud that suggested deeper passion than her mild manner gave away. As a mother, Lan refused to see her daughter's blooming beauty, just as she had covered her mouth and looked away when she discovered a stain of blood on Nathalie's underwear. She was only twelve then, too much too early for such a feminine secret.

Yet it was hard for her to ignore Nathalie's late incoming at night, and the growing whispers behind their banana tree in the garden. Nathalie had started to go on long walks and returned only after the crickets had sung well into the night.

'Where were you?' She asked when she heard Nathalie pushing at their creaky bamboo door.

'I caught a firefly, Ma. Look.' She held up a glass jar, inside was a glowing winged insect. Her arms were swollen red from mosquito bites. Large beads of sweat rolled from her forehead as if she had really been chasing fire flies.

'Come here,' she gestured and Nathalie lifted the mosquito net to climb onto the bed.

“ At first, she was cautious about Nam's presence, hushing the baby's nascent questions and growing attachment to the only man in their life. As she watched the boy hunched over his homework at the kitchen table like her children had once done, she felt her heart contract painfully.”

The oil lamp cast a warm light in only one corner of the room. Lan lay on her side, shielded by the darkness, propped up on her elbow and watched the hazy, faraway look in her daughter's eyes. She considered striking Nathalie across the cheek. But instead, pulled the girl's bony frame into her chest and held her there so tightly that Nathalie fell asleep from lack of oxygen and the heat passing between their bodies.

She had seen the boy. He walked behind Nathalie along the dirt road. Around here all the roads were merely footpath of a thick, orange mud. She had peered up from her hat, just barely so as to not be obvious. The boy was clumsy, swaying left and right, his jeans crunched up at the knees, his hands carrying two pairs of shoes.

Under the banana tree was a straw mat. The farmers usually gathered there at mid noon, taking a nap, sharing lunch or a piece of gossip. They would break the leaves off the branches to fan themselves. At night, it was a spot faraway enough from the marsh and safe from water snakes. She had heard their footsteps crunching on the dry leaves and turned out the oil lamp. Back pressed against the cold cement wall, she pulled her knees to her chest and listened to a succession of suppressed giggles and irregular breathing. For a moment, she felt ashamed as if she were a child herself, caught in the middle of peeking in on her parents' bedroom. She wanted to run out, against the darkness, against her own thumping heart beats to confront them. She imagined pulling on Nathalie's hair, dragging her away, in front of the boy, his eyes oscillating half fearful, half mocking. She wouldn't look at Nathalie. Because she knew, she knew that her daughter's eyes would be filled with hatred, shame, hatred. So she sat, rocking herself, and waited. Perhaps this was the only way. Nathalie would stay here. She had decided her own fate under the banana tree.

After that night, Lan awoke each morning with a new vitality. The house was filled with sweet smelling fruit, oranges, apples, bananas, mangosteens. Every night, there was meat on the table. She went out to the field as soon as the rooster cawed its song and stretched its long neck toward the rising sun.

Nathalie still took her nightly walk.

But Lan no longer stayed up and waited. She merely fell asleep each night, feeling peace and excitement wash over her as she pictured the days

ahead.

Soon the day came when Nathan received his scholarship, four years in the UK. The three of them huddled together that night. She had cried greatly but did not feel too much of a loss.

‘I’ll call every week, Ma.’

‘You all say that. Cory and Amy did too. How often do you hear from them?’

‘I won’t be like them. I promise.’ He appealed with red eyes.

‘I know.’ She stroked his back till he fell asleep.

‘Mama?’ Nathalie muttered. Over the course of two months, her face had grown noticeably round and ruddy.

‘Hm?’ Lan asked, her left hand still patting Nathan’s back.

‘Do you think I’ll ever get to go? Overseas I mean? I miss Amy. I’m applying for a scholarship in Singapore, Ma. I’m not as smart as them though.’

‘Be quiet. You are the smartest of all. But going isn’t always as great as you think. You will have to do everything by yourself, it will be very hard. You are not used to it—you won’t like it much.’

‘I can get used to it Ma. I want you to be proud of me, as proud as you are of Cory.’

‘I am proud of you.’ She sighed heavily. ‘Darling, how many times will your brothers and sisters actually see me in their life? Have you thought of that? I’m old. I might live for perhaps twenty more years. If they come see me once a year at their best effort, that’s twenty times. Twenty in a lifetime that I will see my children again.’

Many more weeks went by. Lan pretended not to notice her daughter’s mood swings and continued to pass the best piece of meat to Nathalie at the dinner table, which the girl winced at but swallowed obediently. Nathan had already gone. It was just the two of them now.

It poured. The rain flooded the meadow, the yard, the house. Lan sniffed the air—sweet and muddy. Nathalie was nowhere to be found. She was not at any of the usual spots, at home in her favorite chair reading her brothers’ letters, or under the banana tree. She called her daughter’s name, but her voice low and breathless was drowned by the roaring thunder. She went out, knees deep in water, with the rain prickling her eye lids, her mouth. Keeping her eyes shut and only glimpsing every now and then in

the distance, she saw, on top of the mound of sand and construction debris in front of the village’s elementary school, a large block of wood rolling. Then at the bottom of the slope, the block of wood stood up, climbed back up, and rolled down again. For a moment, she stood still, puzzled and watching the gray figure. Then she gasped, her breath short but sharp. Against the foamy torrent, she ran towards the school.

‘You dumb child! What are you doing!’ She shouted, shocked and angry, yet unable to move a limb. She looked at Nathalie fearfully. ‘What are you doing? What are you doing?’ she chattered on.

Nathalie slumped to the ground like a rock. Her soaked shirt clung to her ribs and the round, swelling bump on her stomach. ‘Ma! I’m so sorry. Please don’t hate me. I’ve ruined everything.’ Her hands clutched at a crumpled piece of paper, she unfolded it shakily, ‘Look, Ma. I got accepted. The fall of 2012, it says, I’m going to the International School of Business and Management. I’m going...’ She trailed off, her eyes, pleading and hysterical.

She bent down next to Nathalie, covered the girl’s body with her frail arms. Flashes of lightning lit up the sky. Though they could not hear each other, they were both crying.

Lan spread cotton sheets on the floor and filled a large tub with warm water in preparation for her daughter’s delivery. Up until this point, they still have not discussed what to do. When Lan spoke with Cory on the phone, she looked over at Nathalie and the girl had put a finger over her lips, silencing the impending news. Amy was visiting in August, she would find out for herself. As for Cory and Nathan, they probably wouldn’t know what to make of it. It was best to save them the awkward reaction.

The house was bathed in fresh sun light, which shone through the baby’s paper-thin skin. He arrived so quietly and with so little fuss that she had to pinch his cheek so he could cry. After gently wiping him clean, she turned to Nathalie.

‘Do you want him?’

Lan rocked the baby in her arms. ‘Whatever your choice is, I can take care of it.’

Nathalie looked at her and smiled gratefully. ‘No, Ma. No—no, of course not. Thanks for helping me—’

She put the wrapped up baby into Nathalie’s

arms. The baby found its food, and fed hungrily.

For months, the baby didn’t have a name. He wailed, his soft skin on the forehead wrinkled, his mouth grimaced and he refused to drink from his mother.

‘It’s like he’s your baby, and not mine.’ Nathalie said with a tinge of sadness.

It was true, as soon as Nathalie handed him to Lan, the baby wriggled quietly and grinned a toothless smile. Sometimes he’d burst into a succession of giggles. When he couldn’t stop, he’d hiccup, eyes still smiling.

‘An, that’s his name,’ she suggested and Nathalie agreed. ‘It means peace right, Ma?’

‘Yes, I feel peace.’ She answered, not listening.

Nathalie started going to school again. She was a bright girl and it didn’t take her long to catch up on all her classes. Grades were not a problem. It was her classmates and the professors. Her friends were glad of the ‘tragedy,’ (at their age, it couldn’t be anything else no matter how much someone may sugarcoat it). Nathalie was smart, pretty, but now she wasn’t so perfect anymore. Though they didn’t say it, Nathalie could feel their secret celebration. And her teachers, they looked at her with such pity, you could have had such a bright future, their faces seemed to scold, with both affection and disappointment.

Nathalie still studied at the oil lamp every night, but no longer with any enthusiasm. She couldn’t see a purpose in it. What would she do? She had to do something to take care of An. She yawned and scribbled heartlessly on the blank page.

‘Ma?’

‘Mm? He’s asleep now.’ Lan put the baby down next to her and resumed knitting a sweater.

“ She was lifted and scattered into the air like the million seeds of a dandelion. When she looked back, the banana tree had diminished into a single dot. ”

‘Perhaps I should quit school. Get a job.’

‘Don’t be silly.’

‘But I can’t do anything now, Ma. Graduating from a village’s school. It means nothing. You know that. I could help you out on the field.’

‘I have no job on the field for you. I have already accepted the scholarship for you. I took the mail yesterday. You’re going in the Fall.’

‘What? Ma! You can’t be serious? What about An?’

‘I can take care of him. Can’t I An?’ She smiled wistfully at his sleeping face.

‘Ma—.’

‘Yes dear.’

‘Thank you for the sweater.’

‘No children of mine can leave without one.’

‘Singapore doesn’t really get cold though. The weather there is like ours.’

‘It’s all cold to me. It’s all far and cold.’ She cut the last thread and tied it.

The truth was she had pictured the three of them, sitting on the front porch, content to be exactly where they were. But only she and the baby were happy. Every time she looked, Nathalie would have her chin resting on her hand, her gaze never touching her surroundings, but always immeasurable, always at a distance Lan felt she could not reach. ‘Where are you? You’re already gone.’ Even with the baby, nothing had changed. And so she filled in the information noiselessly and sent it away. Just a piece of paper with some official sounding words on it. Yet she couldn’t help but feel as if she was sending her last child to war. Sure, Nathalie would be safe, she wouldn’t get shot or blown up. The uncertainty wasn’t of her death, the uncertainty was whether she would return.

A month after Nathalie had left, Lan heard rasping at the door. Baby An was crawling on the kitchen floor, putting anything he could find in his mouth. The boy was at the door clutching a plastic bag filled with oranges. His white shirt was not of a bright, clean white, but brown and well worn. The collar was crisp as if it had been ironed only a few minutes earlier. He wore the same student-distributed blue khaki pants as all her children have. At the sign of a stranger, baby An sat up and widened his eyes curiously. He then clapped his hands together and giggled rowdily. The boy stared at the baby and

his whole face flushed.

‘Hi, I’m Nam. I’m a friend of Nhan. I just wanted to give you this—’ He raised up the bag of oranges.

‘Come in Nam.’ She addressed him sternly and tried to smile at the same time. He was already nervous.

She told him to sit and he obeyed at once, stiffly. She wished he would relax. ‘Relax Nam,’ she said and he stared at her silently. Baby An had crawled under the table over to his legs. She bent down, about to pick up the baby, but stopped herself and waited. She would determine right then and there everything about Nam. He was waiting for her to speak, to ask questions. She said nothing.

“ Just the week before, she too had sent him a red envelope. She didn’t know what five hundred thousand dong would amount to in euros but it was all she could scrape together. She accompanied it with a letter saying she hoped he could buy something nice. ”

When her stomach first started to swell up again, Lan didn’t tell her husband. After the first three and getting twenty stitches when Amy was born, she thought perhaps the universe should spare her. She had gone to see Miss Peach without a specific intention, treading the boundaries of her choices. The house was murky and damp. Miss Peach was stirring a combination of herbs at the stove. The smoke rose from the clay pot and hung like a cloud above them. A bitter, fruity smell filled Lan’s nostrils. She felt sleepy. Miss Peach had asked Lan what she wanted, but she only shook her head. ‘Well they all only want one thing when they show up here,’ Miss Peach curled her mouth in contempt. The reddish mole above her upper lip was laughing. She laid Lan face down on the bed. Her surprising gentleness touched Lan. ‘Don’t be scared,’ Miss

Peach breathed. Lan found the motion comforting. Miss Peach would run the sharp end over the candle flame, then push it, one after another, into the layers of skin on Lan’s back. After all the needles were inserted and then removed, Miss Peach gave Lan a lump of fine black powder, twisted inside a piece of plastic. At home, on her own bed, Lan bit through the plastic and the powder streamed rapidly down her throat.

Lan woke up with her stomach contracting painfully. Her husband was shaking her shoulders ‘Lan, wake up, wake up. Tell me what’s wrong.’ She bent over the side of the bed and vomited cloudy fluid that was neither food nor water. ‘I’m sorry. I didn’t want to be pregnant again,’ she looked up at her husband’s face. His eyes, sallow and humiliated, ashamed of her, for her. ‘I forgive you,’ he blinked. When her stomach continued to expand, Lan went back to Miss Peach. She studied Lan up and down, her face puckered and amused, ‘Well that’s God’s plan, not mine.’

‘Can I hold him?’ Nam asked tentatively.

She nodded.

‘I never got to say goodbye to Nhan.’ He picked up the baby by the arm pits. With confidence, he put An on his lap and dandled him up and down. Baby An’s mouth opened into a little “o” and he giggled. ‘I think she didn’t want to see me.’

‘She had a lot on her mind.’

‘I always knew she was meant to do many things.’

‘You think so?’ She asked, genuinely. Nathalie wanted to be as good as her siblings. But did she particularly want anything else? For herself?

‘She told me once—when her brother sent you five hundred francs, you had left the envelope on the kitchen table for a month. She said the foreign currency was precious to you because her brother had sent it. It showed how great he was. It showed he could give back to his family.’

She remembered that day. She was waiting for Cory’s letter. But instead the mailman gave her a red package. She ripped it open, and inside was another red envelope with the golden letters *Happy New Year* in three languages, French, Chinese and Vietnamese. Just the week before, she too had sent him a red envelope. She didn’t know what five hundred thousand dong would amount to in euros but

it was all she could scrape together. She accompanied it with a letter saying she hoped he could buy something nice. She sent the same amount to Amy. Nathalie and Nathan got fifty thousand dong. She counted the colorful bills. Nathalie said that was enough to buy a new calf, or grocery for many years. She couldn’t believe it. She wrung her hands together and wept. Her eyes would stay red for the whole day. Nathalie thought she was overcome with happiness. The girl kept looking at her and smiling. But she was more confused. Lan had never possessed such a large sum of money in her life. She used to sit and dream about how Cory spent his days, what he picked out from the market, how he may ate with a book open in front of him. But she couldn’t imagine anymore. She realized that she did not know or understand what life was like for him. They were in separate worlds.

‘Is there anything I can do for you, Nam?’ She finally asked the boy.

‘No—I wanted to see how you were doing. The baby—’

‘Is yours.’

His eyes lit up as if he had not expected the confirmation this early on. He swallowed. ‘Can I come see you both, sometimes? I want to marry Nhan one day—I will be able to lift such a burden from you. I don’t mean that you don’t love the baby, just that it wasn’t your responsibility. It was mine. I’m so grateful. I will figure something out, I promise. I won’t dare to ask for Nhan until then. I won’t bring the subject up again, only, I only wanted for you to know up front. My intentions—’ He stumbled.

She studied his youthful face. His cheeks still round and full, his lashes long and batting frequently—a dreamer, she thought. His voice was cracking, the rhythm went up and down, sometimes low and raspy, others high and singsong, out of control. He was only a child, barely transitioning into manhood.

‘You’re an insolent child, coming here after this much time has passed. But I forgive you because this isn’t easy. And here you are.’

Nam bowed his head. His tense shoulders loosened. ‘What is the baby’s name?’

‘An.’ She beamed.

‘I like it. Simple and universal. Anyone could pronounce it.’

‘Yes, he certainly won’t need to change it to an

English or French name. It would suffice.’

The wedding bells would echo over the phone two years later. Now, Nam never neglected a single weekend without visiting Lan and baby An. At first, she was cautious about Nam’s presence, hushing the baby’s nascent questions and growing attachment to the only man in their life. As she watched the boy hunched over his homework at the kitchen table like her children had once done, she felt her heart contract painfully.

‘Why don’t you go out with your friends? Live your life. Youth does not last forever,’ she told him.

‘I like being here. It feels natural to me.’ He smiled the smile of a child who had lost his innocence and was pleased with it.

‘Sure, I just don’t want you to feel obligated,’ she offered.

‘I give myself the obligations Miss. I know I don’t have to. But that’s why it feels even better to do what is right, knowing in my heart it is and without being told.’

‘You have become a bright young man. Nhan would be pleased.’

Being in a foreign land, Nathalie missed her mother more than her own son. She remembered baby An as she would a younger brother. But she never told anybody about her life back home. There would be too much to explain from her part, and too much they would assume. It was also the first time she heard her English name uttered by strangers as if it encompassed the whole of her identity. She liked being free that way, like a newborn, with nothing attached to the name Nathalie just yet.

That was until she met Quang. Part Chinese, he was tall, wide-framed, and had slanted eyes that looked cold and intelligent. His parents had purposefully chosen a name that sounded both Chinese and Vietnamese. He introduced himself as Quang to Nathalie. With a slight accent, he insisted on calling Nathalie by her Vietnamese name. And just like that her whole life spilled out in front of her. She spoke without restraint and collapsed onto Quang as if he was now the carrier of her secret, that he was responsible for them as much as she.

‘All the beautiful people have a past.’ He pulled her head closer to his broad, heaving chest.

Lan received the news with quiet, resigned anger, like hot coal still burning but not enough for



*Innocence in the Moonlight Night by Syed Ali Wasif*

“ Nathalie slumped to the ground like a rock. Her soaked shirt clung to her ribs and the round, swelling bump on her stomach. ‘Ma! I’m so sorry. Please don’t hate me. ’”

flames. Nathalie explained that it was the best for everyone if Lan and the baby would move to Singapore. ‘He’s kind enough to offer to adopt An,’ she had said. But Lan did not feel as if it was kindness, but rather a clever coercion for Quang to uproot the uncertainty of Nathalie’s past, the only thing that wasn’t under his thumb. Of course a baby implied that there was a father too, that Nathalie wasn’t alone. ‘He would own you. It is a charity. Nothing would be ours. Do you want to be a charity?’ Nathalie wept, and between hiccups, wept again louder like she was shouting. Lan tried to understand her daughter’s slurred words but the line had gone blank. Nathalie had hung up.

The worst thing was none of the other children thought this was a particularly bad idea. She had immediately telephoned Cory, Amy, Nathan on the same day and got voicemail for all three. She spoke into the vacant recorder, persuading them that if she left, they would no longer have a home to return to. When they called her back, it was to express how wonderful it would be for her to be looked after, to finally enjoy her life and not have to bend her back under the scorching sun. Nathan was the only one to show any sign of regret. The more she tried to convince them she loved her work, that she didn’t know any other life, the more she felt her back ached and her hand trembled to hold the receiver in place. She hung up and wept silently, letting her tears traverse over the many wrinkles on her face, not bothering to wipe them away. She understood that she was the only one to fight and protect this home, this pocket filled with memories of her children opening and closing the door each day. That after the bamboo door creaked for the thousandth time, their father

would take a mid-breath and never exhale again.

How tired she was. She would not fix the fractures in the cement wall that started out as a single fissure, but now branched out in a spidery pattern over the entire house. She would not ask her neighbor to weave her a new roof out of banana leaves, because fresh ones would attract more bugs and was worse than the old dry, crumbling roof.

She was lifted and scattered into the air like the million seeds of a dandelion. When she looked back, the banana tree had diminished into a single dot, but she could still see Nam underneath a leaf’s shadow—his boyish face contorted as if to say ‘You have robbed me of my dreams!’ He waved his arms violently, mouthing something she could only guess to be ‘Don’t let my son forget me’. Even with his youthful strength, he couldn’t change the course of the wind.

The inhabitants of Singapore had a culturally defined concept of time. Nathalie and Quang picked her up from the airport and apologized it took so long—a full fifteen minutes to get there. Quang said, ‘Burlington square. Bencolin Street,’ to the taxi driver. He nodded and declared ‘Okay la!’ with enthusiasm then drove without a word for the rest of the trip. The building was a high-rise, with green tinted glass windows all the way to the top.

Lan nervously stepped inside the elevator, which took them to the fifteenth floor. She was glad to see the house wasn’t too large, but small like back home, except divided into three separate bedrooms with a shared area of the living room and kitchen. Out the window, houses and buildings toppled over each other in want of space. ‘Like weeds in a field,’ Lan murmured. Quang showed her to the bedroom and excitedly informed her he had removed the mattress and replaced it with a straw mat. Nathalie had told him that the mattress would hurt her mother’s back. Lan thanked him and put baby An on the bed.

He fell asleep instantly.

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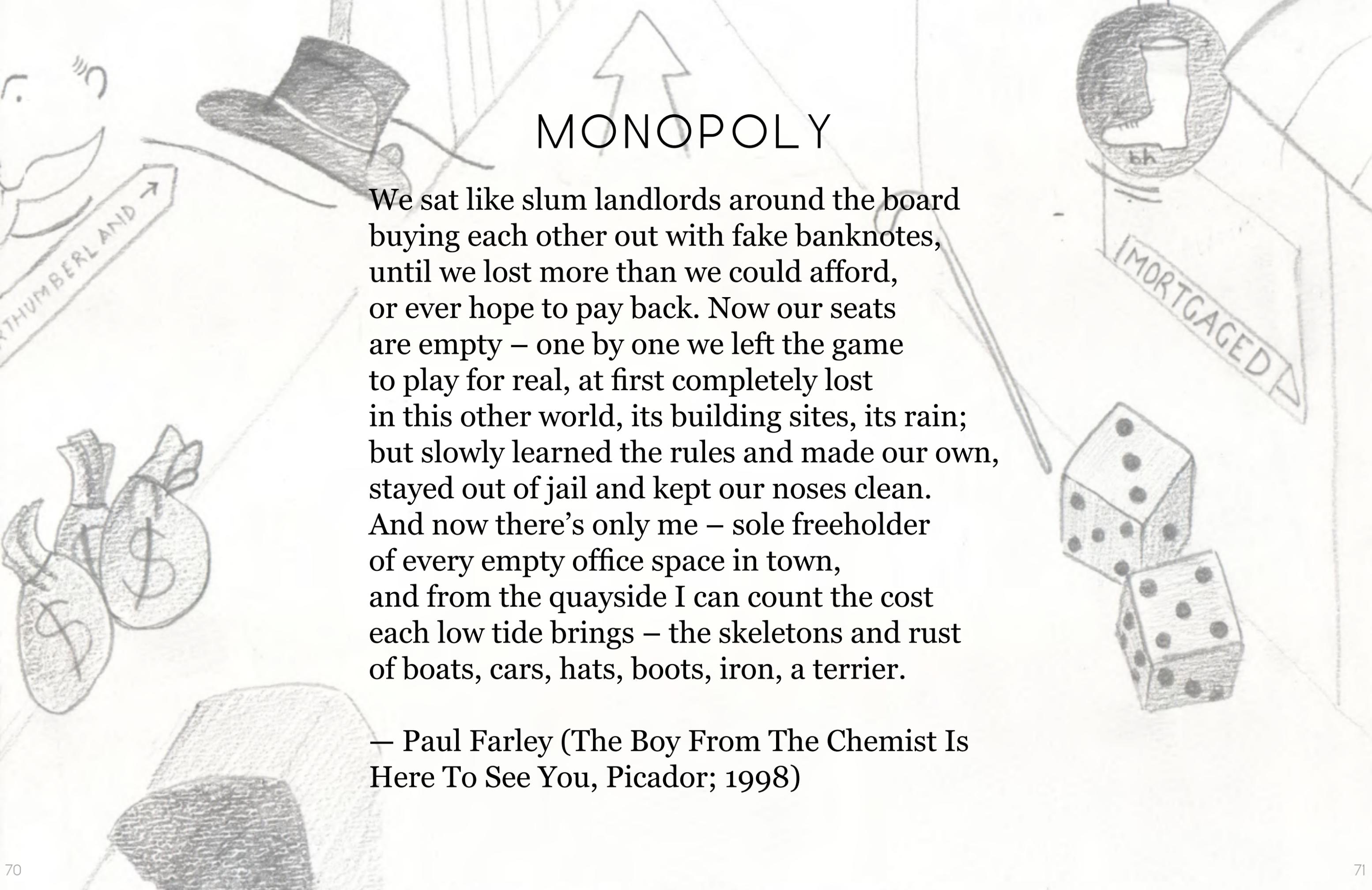
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# MONOPOLY

We sat like slum landlords around the board buying each other out with fake banknotes, until we lost more than we could afford, or ever hope to pay back. Now our seats are empty – one by one we left the game to play for real, at first completely lost in this other world, its building sites, its rain; but slowly learned the rules and made our own, stayed out of jail and kept our noses clean. And now there's only me – sole freeholder of every empty office space in town, and from the quayside I can count the cost each low tide brings – the skeletons and rust of boats, cars, hats, boots, iron, a terrier.

— Paul Farley (The Boy From The Chemist Is Here To See You, Picador; 1998)

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