

THE
MISSING
SLATE

Homebound

ISSUE 18

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Deciding to write this editorial together was a forgone conclusion. Truly, if not for Nwa (or for Kristia and her eternally infectious excitement), my amazing co-editor (likewise), this issue would not be possible, let alone the continuation of the magazine we had both come to love. The Missing Slate Magazine had announced its final run in November 2023 with one caveat: Maryam, the previous Editor in Chief since the magazine's conception in 2010, was willing to pass the torch and legacy of the magazine (along with priceless advice based on her own experiences).

For me it was the mission of the magazine that brought me to where I am now, raising voices of marginalized creators across all walks of life in all types of art (for me, it was fueling the continued flame of a sacred space that many had come to think of as an extension of their self expression). It was a gift to know that who I would end up running the magazine with would become a trusted colleague, co-conspirator, and friend. An actual friend (I am truly laughing in the way that makes your heart feel like it has expanded a little bit, just thinking about the ways in which we have come to depend on each other as friends)! Extending the magic of this experience, we were able to assemble an awesome team (one we hope to expand) and create the next building block of The Missing Slate: Issue 18, Homebound.

A word on Homebound before you read it: please hold each page with the enormity of trust that was put into it. Trust yourselves through the journeys of these writers and artists as they take you through the many interpretations, experiences, losses, joys, and loves of this Issue. We also ask that you participate in our mission for Homebound: we are supporting and sponsoring Amal Abu al-Rish from Gaza, who is facing current displacement during the ongoing genocide with her husband and three sons. Please read her story as well, and we hope you come to understand the kindness inherent of her personhood as we do.

This issue is the undertaking of many, and for that we say a huge thank you to our team: Khadija, Rameen, Saniya, and Taqdees. This could not have been made without the many hours and care put in (as well as the ideas and many avenues for implementation of these ideas). Thank you, Maryam, for entrusting this needed magazine with us. Most importantly, we thank our contributors (who are moving powerhouses we can never be proud enough of) for placing your trust in us with your work (and our suggestions for edits; you were all patient and kind). It is humbling to read, edit, and work on pieces so integral to the soul. Thank you to everyone who applied, and we hope to see you again in future additions!

This issue is sectioned into five parts, with a separate part for our mission. Each part (Body, Bound, Boundless, Barricade, Bond, and our mission: Brave), encapsulates

the feelings or experiences of Homebound, and in its permutation both Home and Bound. We have created an online version on our website, themissingslate.com, as well as the print version you are exploring now.

We hope you enjoy reading this, taking this in, dipping every part of your body into the ideas and many homes of our contributors, as you live in this issue.

May ease find you where it can,

Free occupied land,



Kristia Vasiloff (and Nwa Rizvi)
Co-Editors in Chief

Brave

What is home without purpose? I think this is the question that is being asked throughout every section in our Issue 18: Homebound.

For us, the purpose was twofold. One, we wanted to create a space for creators to excite, elucidate, and encourage us to think about the many ways to think and create around this theme. Two, we wanted to personally give this issue an explicit mission: with the current genocide occurring in Gaza, Palestine. It would be unconscionable, let alone irresponsible, for us to produce an issue about the idea of “Home” without speaking out.

We were unsure how to go about this: do we promote organizations (of which you can find linked on our online website and listed below)? Do we collectively work with a group aligned with the magazine's ideals? In the end, we were extended with grace unprecedented. A close friend, despite the severe exploitation of Palestinians for their stories and lives, allowed us the opportunity to tell her story. The story of her family. The story of her struggle during the ongoing genocide. The only thing she said to me when asked on what specifics she felt comfortable speaking on was “I trust you.” We do not take that trust lightly.

So, while we will have organizations for folks to check out, donate to, and share, we are grateful to share Amal’s story. A young mother of three boys, the oldest of whom is 5, who is sentinel, kind, immensely giving, and fighting for her family’s right to survive, like so many others. As a literary magazine, we have shown her life as she has been forced to show it - through images and captions, reels and videos. We ask that you watch her story and listen. We ask that if you can, please donate (the QR code link for her GoFundMe can be found below). If you cannot, please share her bravery.

There are many ongoing crises right now that need attention, need speaking to, need advocacy, and deserve to be heard. Every family, every person, deserves to live in peace. We thank Amal for giving us her sacred permission to share her story in hopes that it reaches more people. We ask that if you enjoyed the magazine, that if any of the stories, art, poetry, or pieces touched you in any way, that you pay it forward.

With love and fighting for freedom from occupation,

The Missing Slate

Meet Amal and Her Family



GoFundMe QR - Amal Abu al-Rish

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Untitled by rivvas

Body

Nuances || Snehal Amembal

My mother tongue appears to be changing
Rolling off my tongue differently
As if every year away from the motherland
clenches my vocal chords a little more. Sometimes
I forget certain words, pronounce them awkwardly.
They sound strange, strangely foreign
And I am suddenly unnerved

The boundaries between languages have blurred
Faint recollections of how I used to sound,
speaking my very first language of home.
I miss its sing song lilt, its emphasis on tone,
How it forgives complacent grammar.
A language that has no script to call its own,
A language like me that's struggling to belong.

I open my old suitcase seeking traces

of my mother tongue

preserved within its folds,
Trying to remind me of its nuances
that seem to have eroded over time.

I find an old family recipe handwritten by my mother.
I can't help but read aloud
"Soyee?, lasuna?, piyaavu?"
Are they meant to sound like this?
Where do I pause? Why can't I
enunciate clearly enough?



I quickly put the paper holding
the recipe back into my suitcase,
I close my suitcase and push it under the bed.
I feel like I have let down this beautiful language
that moulded, protected and nurtured me.

“Aaso ma chelda”

I hear a voice reaching out to me from miles away.
My mother’s voice in my mother tongue reassures me in a way that only a mother
can.



I Will Too, Lost || Mahin Zia

*Getting up early and preparing
breakfast,
Eating hardly, the day starts
Then sweeping through the courtyard
And watering and cleansing of the whole yard.
Then washing of clothes and drift of dishes.
Working with my mother. We start cooking.
I should soon get married, she is always thinking.
The day is passing, sun shifting its places.
Men and children coming home at lunch,
We eat and talk. Talking of how good is the meal.
In these long days, times of rest come.
We sleep until the sun lessens its harsh rays. We sleep our best.
Evening starts. Father goes to the little plot.
The plants his children,
Children play in the street. The only thing they wait for.
Girls of the house sit in front of the stove.
The preparation of the night meal.
They all think of creating taste and I try too.
Everyone is talking.
Talking of what neighbors do.
Talking never stops till the sky gets dark.
Darkness brings silence. Houses are locked.
We finish dinner. A little walk.
Coaches shifting to rooftops.
Stories and lullabies, we hear and cherish.
Parents talk of their childhood—golden times.
Lying on our coaches, we siblings imagine our future.
We want the time to pass quickly
And our dreams we should hold in our hands.
Facing the adorned sky, I always think: This will be life.*



*Like women around me, I will live.
Working as a housewife.
Like young girls, I will wait to get married.
Then I will strive to winning everyone's heart.
Then the coming of my first child.
With children, the wait for them to grow up.
With grown children, striving for their best future.
Like my own parents, I will continue to wait, strive
and maybe I will too remember the moments of past.
On my death bed, I will cry with pain.
Like old people, I will be praying for my last leaf to fall.
Like dead people, I will too, lost.*



Vivian peered out the front window of the comfy cottage at the dreary weather; drizzling rain streaked the windows. She shivered and pulled her cardigan around her slight frame. Fine lines etched her porcelain skin. Vivian shook her head to break the reverie and dark hair streaked with gray fell onto her face. Glancing at her left hand, she could see the pale indentation of where the ring had been. Stooping, she lifted the chair's skirt and ran her hands underneath, the dust causing her to cough. Noting that the ring was not there, she found it difficult to stand up straight, her back popping as she tried to right herself.

"Where could it be?" she said aloud. The words were spoken softly, echoing in the silence. The stillness closed in on Vivian. Tears burned her faded, blue eyes, threatening to spill over, but she held them back. Ron had always said she cried too easily.

Vivian made her way to the center of her home. The modest kitchen was clean and organized, but then, she rarely used it anymore, being the only one that lived in the cottage now. Turning, she scanned the counter for the hundredth time to no avail. Vivian grabbed the broom and poked it underneath the cabinets, hoping, but all she found was some dirt and a black spider. She took a shaky breath as she glanced at the clock, tears threatening to spill. *Oh my*, she thought, placing a hand to her cheek; her skin was so thin it was almost translucent. She would have to hurry if she wanted to get to work on time. The search would have to wait. She crossed to the door, sweeping the room with her eyes one last time, her breath catching in her throat.

Outside, she picked her steps cautiously, slowly placing one foot in front of the other on the wet pavement, taking care not to slip. She could smell the roses Ron and she had planted so many years ago as she passed by them. A flood of memories washed over Vivian, and she took a deep breath, the ache in her chest constricting. The roses were just beginning to bud; tight red spheres that made her smile despite her heartache. The day was dismal, chilly for early spring, making her look forward to the warmth of the library. She scooted slowly into the car seat, straightening the pillow she used for driving, and pulled out into the empty road. As usual, there was little traffic, but her mind was preoccupied.



The gold band must have fallen off her finger because she was becoming too thin. Ron would fuss if he saw how frail she had become, but Ron was gone. Vivian's eyes grew hot, and she held back a sob, the steering wheel grasped tightly.

"Did you find your ring?" Nancy asked the moment Vivian walked into the library. Vivian blinked, shaking her head.

"Not yet," Vivian said. Her voice shook, but she was able to keep her composure.

"Oh no, I'm so sorry!" Nancy said, placing a hand on Vivian's arm.

Vivian just nodded. The gentle hum of the heater clicked on, causing the soft lights to dim for a moment. Vivian grabbed a stack of books to be shelved and tried to busy her mind so that she would not think about the missing ring. She would lose herself in her work for now despite the lump in her throat. Usually, the musty smell of the library comforted her, but today she was too worried.

The hours passed, but Vivian could not quite shake the melancholy. Closing up the library, she made her way back home. The rain had stopped but the evening was getting colder, the distant roll of thunder in the background. Vivian shivered. Her keys jingled as she searched for the right key, taking her time in the semidarkness.

Once inside, Vivian clicked on the lamp, a warm glow lighting up the modest room. Vivian breathed in the familiar aroma of home, the smell of lilac in the air. She knew she needed to eat something, but she wanted to look for the ring first. She got down onto her knees and then groaned. *I'm too old for this*, she thought, but she knew that it was necessary because she could not rest until she found the ring. She maneuvered herself around the room to no avail.

Oh, Ron, Vivian thought. She knew he would laugh if he could see her now, pawing around on all fours, and the thought brought a smile to her face despite her despair. Vivian grabbed hold of the wingback chair and tried to pull herself up, grunting. It took several attempts to get to her feet, every joint protesting. She let out a sigh and tried to work some of the stiffness out of her limbs, hoping the act had not bruised the delicate skin on her knees. She would try the kitchen and bedroom again. Vivian had combed the whole house several times, but her wedding band was nowhere to be found.



She sat down on the edge of the bed and kicked off her shoes, rubbing her tired feet together for a moment, relishing the air on her toes. Vivian did not even change her clothes, she just laid down and pulled the cover over her body, quivering slightly. She gulped, willing herself to fall asleep quickly. As she stretched out, Vivian felt something sharp poke her foot, causing her to start. She reached down under the blanket, fishing for the object with her right hand. As she pulled it out, she recognized the familiar shape of her wedding ring, a cry of glee escaping. She clutched the ring and pulled it close to her chest as tears streamed down her pale face, her joy evident.

“Thank heavens!” she said. Vivian’s eyes lit up, and she giggled like a much younger woman as she placed the ring on her left hand where it had rested for many years. The ring slid off her finger onto the bed and Vivian stared at the gold band for a moment, frowning slightly. With trembling hands, Vivian placed the ring in her jewelry box. It would have to stay there. She squeezed her eyes shut and took a deep breath, thinking of Ron’s lopsided grin.

“Ron,” Vivian whispered, her shoulders drooping low, every movement painful. She closed the jewelry box and stumbled back to the empty bed.



Eye Contact || Noor Kumarchadha

He is shelling peanuts in our kitchenette, I am folding the clothes.

Aligning corners like an origami swan. What if my shirt grows white wings and feathers? After all, the river is just a sprint away.

We are outside the theatre, it's cold, it's January. It's late. Did I mention that before? Rehearsals wrapped at 12 because our director didn't like how we were pronouncing our r's. (Roll them).

We stand under the old Banyan tree, a faint glow illuminates from a distant cafe. It's dark. Like the sacred space under a tongue, untouched.

He lights a cigarette and I bum mine off his.

It becomes a ritual.

We stay there till the ash licks our fingertips, every night.

Never saying a word.

Then we walk to our cars and think about each other till we meet the next morning.

I feel it on my neck - his gaze.

It burns a hole into my skin like someone has left a cigarette there

Maybe for a moment too long?

Cautiously, I meet his eyes...

That's the first night he ever came over.

Now we have thirteen potted plants and a bright red sofa.



He is shelling peanuts in our kitchenette, I am folding the clothes.

We look up at the same time

It smells of cigarette smoke



Ma Doesn't Give Me Extra Roti || Sunayna Pal

after I scold
the lady who fought with the world
to keep me alive and alive.

I need to lose weight.
You only want to see me fat.
Why do you bathe this in ghee?

After I find faults
which I never did the
thirty years she fed me

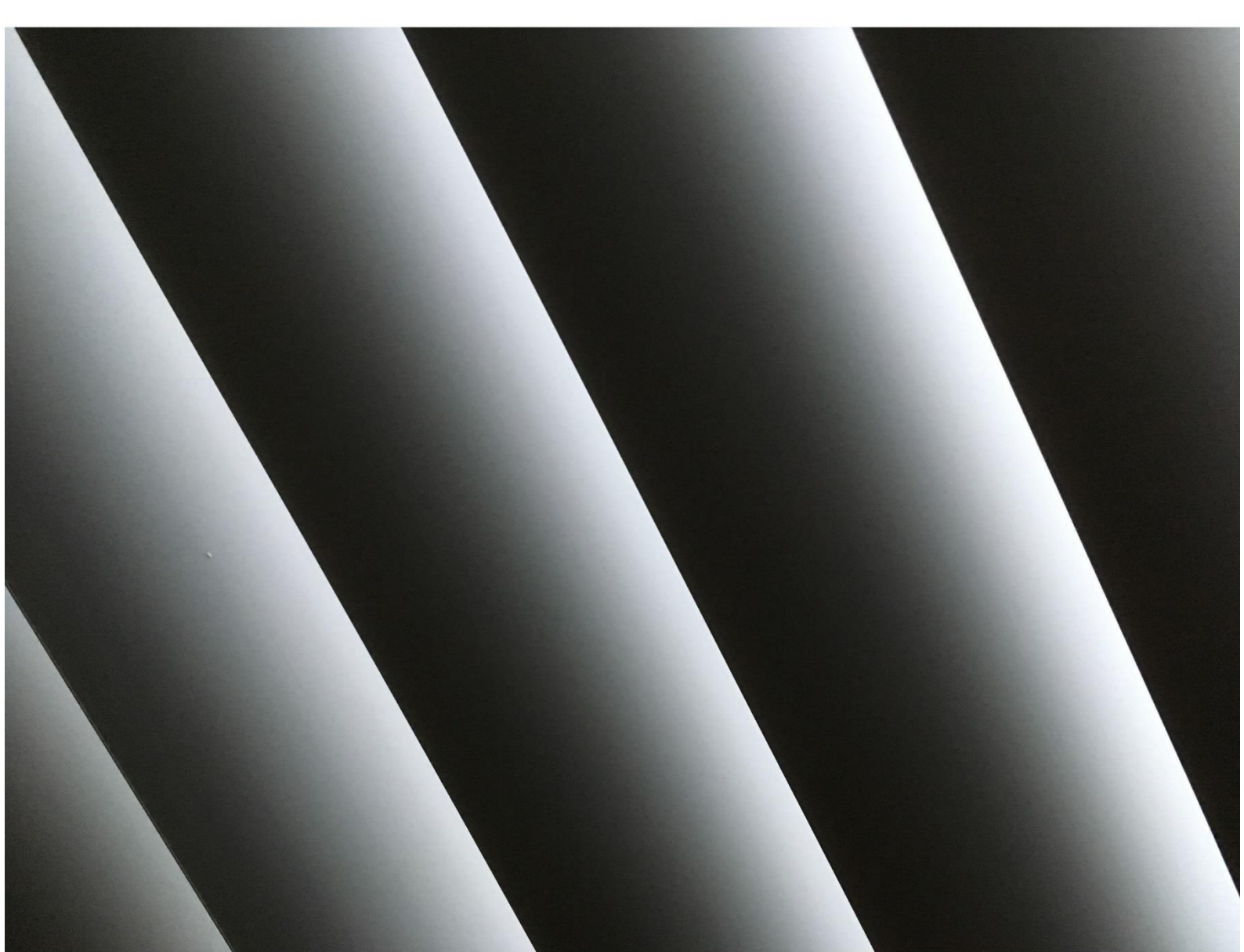
This is burnt.
You should use an iron tawa.
This isn't even a perfect circle.

After I moved
8000 miles away
to start my family

I am really tired
I miss you

Even after I cry.





Study B by Janis Butler Holm

Bound

The Amazing Story of Dr Megrelian's Itinerant Circus and Human Zoo || J. B. Polk

Dedicated to Lola Kiepja, the last pureblood Selk'nam (b.?–1966)

People who met Dr. Megrelian for the first time believed it was his real surname. They also assumed he was a college-educated physician well-versed in the complexity of human malformations and similar afflictions. His birth certificate, however, revealed his true identity. He was Benjamin Cecil Calhoun, also known as Benny, a half-literate resident from Harlan, Iowa, a remote village with only a church, a general store, and a scattering of 10-acre farmhouses in various stages of disrepair.

Born and raised in poverty, Benny received his first pair of shoes from the very man whose name he would eventually assume, and whose five-cent nomadic show pitched tents on a vacant parcel of land behind the Calhoun homestead.

"Three dollars for the lot, and you can also use the crapper and the water pump," Benny's father, Silas, offered.

"How about we strike a deal?" Dr. Megrelian, a shrewd businessman with a good eye for a lucrative deal, engaged in the age-old art of haggling.

"I'll give you two dollars and ten cents for the whole thing, plus one day's work for your kid. He looks like a smart boy who can help us get ready for the show."

Silas hesitated.

"That, plus a new pair of shoes—Macy's patent leather. Phil the Midget got his legs chopped off a few months ago," Megrelian added.

Phil's legs had been sliced off at the Sioux City station by an Akron train when he was unloading trunks and other equipment on the wrong side of the tracks. His friends had worried for weeks that Phil, who'd lost three pints of blood, would check out. But despite the accident and his achondroplasia, he was able to pull through. He had just married the Giant Woman and had not yet consummated the marriage. After the accident, he sat in a wheelchair customized to his more petite body, selling

popcorn, beer, and show tickets. He no longer needed the shoes he had bought for the wedding and only wore once.

"Two dollars and fifty cents," Silas, who could drive as good a bargain as Megrelian, responded.

"And you can have my boy for a dollar a day. With the rye and soybean harvests months away, there ain't no work in Harlan."

"Deal," the good doctor agreed, handing over the money and the shoes.

But after two days, the circus had barely recouped its investment in a town whose farmers could ill afford to pay five cents to watch mediocre freaks, including a legless midget, and their clumsy antics. So the troupe decided to leave—this time with young Calhoun in tow.

"There's no future in Harlan," Benny said as he waved goodbye to his father.

"With the Doc, I reckon I'll travel 'round the world and carve out a name for myself. I might even send y'all some cash," he claimed, which, in retrospect, turned out not to be a lie but rather an empty promise.

During Benny's third year of touring with the circus, Megrelian, who was approaching his seventh decade and suffered from crippling headaches, lost interest in and hunger for all worldly pleasures, including booze, food, and sex. Most of the performers had moved on to greener pastures, and the Giant Woman, unable to deal with Phil's condition, had fled with the Siamese twins who had joined P.T. Barnum. The nomadic act was on the edge of collapse, with only Benny, Megrelian, the Midget, and an elephant named Bertha remaining.

The Doctor's headaches turned out to be aneurysms that one day exploded like quasars, killing him instantly. They buried him under a saguaro cactus in the Sonoran Desert while Benny, blessed with a good nose for business and a dislike for poverty, inherited not only the entire traveling spectacle but Megrelian's name as well.



To raise cash for new attractions, Benny sold Bertha to a park ranger who'd always wanted an exotic beast to keep him company in Arizona's Lost Dutchman State Park.

"How the devil will he feed her in the desert?" he pondered, handing over the animal but not asking outright. He needed the money, and the pachyderm was old and emaciated and would have seen the wrong side of the grass very soon anyway.

With no performers to exhibit, Megrelian-Calhoun was eager to find someone to pique the macabre curiosity of freak show spectators. He happened to run into Sergei Levchenko, an 18-year-old from St. Petersburg, and figured that people would pay big money to view the Russian's tiny third leg, the remains of a parasitic twin dangling from his crotch. Benny gave him Phil's leather shoes for his two good feet and had a shoemaker create a two-inch copy of a third one.

While passing through Wickenburg, the circus stopped at a local diner where Karl Peters, a sous chef and an Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome sufferer with velvety skinfolds all over his body, caught Megrelian's eye. Amazed by the man's flesh trying to escape from the confines of his unbuttoned shirt, he offered him a job.

"We'll showcase you as the Elastic Man. You can stay in Phil's caravan until you get your own," he promised.

Peters, bored with sous-cheffing and the customers' threats to do a wedgie with his butt skin, accepted gratefully, hung up his grease-stained apron, and moved into the Midget's wagon.

Charlene Atkins, AKA the Lobster Girl, joined the show in Tennessee. Her genetic condition caused her fingers and toes to merge into claw-like extremities.

"All you'll need to do is sit in a barrel filled with seaweed and water and make crustacean-like noises with a pair of castanets," Benny instructed, and she was overjoyed to become part of the troupe.

The rest of the artistic ensemble they picked up on the road included Susie, the bearded woman, and Stephen Jefferson, who could twist his joints and play the piano with his back to the instrument. By common consensus, he was a lousy performer,



and the only two tunes he played reasonably well were *Ta-ra-ra Boom De Day* and *Oh, My Darling Clementine*.

As years passed, the traveling spectacle went from state to state and village to village. With the good Doctor long gone and fertilizing the Sonoran Desert flora, Calhoun, now in his thirties, vowed to make the show bigger and better than any other. And, remembering his boyhood hunger pangs, he promised never to return to Harlan or any other region of Iowa, rural or otherwise, until he became rich and famous.

"I'll be damned if I go back," he told his employees as they gathered in the evenings after each event, calculating the proceeds and fantasizing about making it big.

Although his mathematical skills were limited to adding dollars and cents with the help of an abacus, Megrelian worked hard to make the business a success. He fought his way through the cryptic language of newspaper articles and stored information for future use. That's how he learned about two opportunities that were meant to make him rich and turn the freak show into an international attraction.

The first was the Louisiana Purchase Exhibition, also known as the 1904 St. Louis World Fair. The organizers estimated that over twenty million people would visit the technological marvels and amusement rides, each paying a dollar a day. Benny reasoned that even if only a fraction attended the circus's performance, he could retire before the age of forty.

The second piece of news came from an ad in the *Kansas Gazette*, which said that Sam Dixon, a wool and hide merchant recently returning from the continent's southernmost edge, had brought a female aborigine and her offspring. He won her playing poker in the Straits of Magellan and reasoned that exhibiting the two for the enjoyment of country bumpkins would get him extra cash.

"A BUCK TO VIEW, TWO BUCKS TO TOUCH," the sign in his shop window announced.

Everything was fine until the mother bit off the finger of a man who tried to touch the kid after paying his two dollars.



"One clean snap and his pinkie was gone! The dumb expression on his face was worth the money I paid for the doctor's bill. And I also had to return the two bucks!" Dixon chuckled at the memory.

"That woman's teeth are as sharp as a piranha's. We can't find the finger because she must have swallowed it. The only problem is that no one is bold enough to clean her cage now, so she sits in her muck all day, clutching the baby and crooning some crazy stuff no one understands."

Fed up with the situation, he placed the ad.

"Real South American savage. Young and healthy. Price: 30 dollars. Child, cage, and chain for free."

If they got there in time and offloaded the woman and her infant from Dixon, the show could compete with P.T. Barnum or the Ringling Brothers, who were also heading to St. Louis.

"Just imagine!" he said to Phil.

"We'd make a fortune! Two bucks to touch!"

After three days, they finally reached Lawrence, a hamlet on the bank of Clinton Lake where Dixon's house competed in grayness with lichen-covered boulders squatting on the shore like overturned tombstones in a derelict graveyard.

When the convoy arrived, the merchant was cooking something in a large aluminum pot that smelled like rotting haddock, overcooked rice, and green kale.

"I try to get a pot ready for the week. There's no way I'm getting into the cage more often than that," he explained, stirring the foul-smelling liquid with a wooden spoon.

"Just remember – don't stick your hands through the cage bars. The chain is long enough for her to move around. Do as I say, or you'll end up as one of the freaks in your show," he chuckled, pleased with his joke.

The cage, which was about 10 yards from the lake, had a tin roof and a floor lined with an old carpet. The mother, entirely naked, slumped in one corner, her infant on her hip, suckling. Although she was huddling on the ground, Megrelian



could see she was plump, with milk-busting breasts. Her entire body was painted crimson with black and white stripes and dots, and a white stripe encircled her eyes like a scary mask. Her hair was long, black, and rigid, most likely oiled with animal fat. His eyes shone when he realized she was the one he'd been hunting for, a true Amerindian savage never previously exhibited in the human zoo industry.

"Ain't she cold?" he asked Dixon.

"She's used to it. The sun barely rises above the horizon where she comes from. Her people live just a stone's throw from Antarctica – that massive sheet of ice at the end of the world where there is nothing but snow, snow, and more snow."

His tone was scornful as if he could not understand why anyone would want to live in such a place. "She probably swam with seals in the half-frozen ocean," he continued. "Her people can outswim dolphins and often compete with humpback whales for speed and resistance. I tossed her a blanket to cover the baby last week, but she just chucked it back. She has some pride, that one."

Throughout the conversation, the woman never looked up, muttering to herself.

"J-ák t-ēlken, j-ák t-ēlken..."

"What's she saying?" Benny asked.

"How would I know? I'm not even sure it's a language. The shepherds down by Tierra del Fuego call them Selk'nam. They say they are barely human, but apparently, they communicate whistling like parakeets or puffins."

"The European settlers are trying to get rid of them because they've no notion of private property and slaughter their sheep as if they were wild sea lions. They pay two dollars for a pair of testicles or a breast and one dollar for a child's ear. Fewer than a thousand are left, so you'd be getting a collectible at a discount."

"Before they're all gone," he added as an afterthought.

Phil, who sat in the wheelchair behind them, inched towards the cage.

"She's one unattractive lady. And the young'un...phew, I've never seen an uglier child. Despite her size, my ex-wife was really pretty..." he said but stopped under his boss's warning stare.



"Watch out! Not so close, or you'll an arm with those two legs of yours too!" Dixon warned, laughing uproariously.

Phil beat a hasty retreat.

"So, whatcha say? Taking her or not? Thirty bucks for the lot—woman, child, and cage. You can also take the pot of grub for the road," Dixon urged.

"Done!" Megrelian exclaimed.

"We'll load her onto Charlene's wagon and head out. Must make it to St. Louis in three weeks."

"Just hand over the cash and take her off my hands. I reckon I've no interest in messin' with her anymore. In the payout for the lost pinkie, I spent more than I got from her, bless my heart. But you all better watch out when you pull her out. She may not look like a lot, but she's got some serious fire in her. And she's quick. I saw her folks break tree branches like twigs," Dixon said.

The merchant pocketed the six five-dollar bills Benny gave him, then moved away to a safe distance, watching him approach the cage.

"There, there..." Dr. Megrelian chanted softly. "I won't hurt you or your child. Just come out nice and easy, and I promise you'll have a good life with us," he continued, knowing she couldn't understand a word he said. And anyway, everything he said was a lie. She and the kid would be chained to the cage for the rest of their lives.

"Be careful, boss; she might lurch, and then you'll be gone," the little man said, wriggling in his wheelchair.

Megrelian inserted the key into the keyhole and unlocked the door. The woman didn't move.

"How dangerous can a woman with a baby be?" he wondered as he moved farther into the cage to loosen the chain.

He kept saying, "Easy there, easy," as he'd heard horse whisperers do in Iowa. He relaxed because she still didn't stir and seemed unaware of his presence.



Then fate intervened again. She was on top of him in one great leap, the infant still clutching to her breast, and from someplace, perhaps from under the carpeting, she retrieved a bone fragment honed to razor-blade sharpness.

Blood spurted from Megrelian's severed jugular, coating the woman in sticky red. Before dying, he comprehended where the missing pinkie had always been.

Phil tried to back out, but it was too late. The woman flipped the wheelchair over and sank her teeth into his shoulder, tearing into the muscle and cutting through to the bone. Phil screamed, trying to shake her off, but she clung to him as a hungry puma might stick to a seal before the coup de grâce. When she noticed he had fainted, she let go and stepped towards Dixon, who began running for his life.

She was breathing heavily, surveying the carnage around her, while the child, still on her hip, sucked contentedly on her blood-splattered breast.

Leluachen ran. She ran as never before, not even when she'd hunted the swift Magellan guanacos for meat and fur.

"Hold on to Ahm's neck, Kreeh. Hold tight, and Ahm will run like the wind that whistles along the Wintek plains. We'll be home soon," she whispered, never missing a step.

"J-ák t-ēlken, j-ák t-ēlken...my child, my child," she repeated over and over.

Baby Kreeh, hardly two years old, held onto Ahm's neck unquestioningly. She would not let go. Mama said they would go home. Mama knew.

Leluachen ran as if she were racing along the K'ami Lake shore far, far away, where the world ended abruptly, where there was no more land, grass, or trees but only a vast, limitless ocean. A cool breeze ruffled her hair, singing a Selk'nam melody her grandfather used to play on his whale jaw harp.

Mahuin, mahuin hikuenkr,

Now the kloketens are far away.

Their ankles are tired.



Beautiful heart,

Head of rock...

She chanted into Kreeh's tiny ear. The ear that white hunters would pay a dollar for but which they would never have.

She looked back. No one was following. She stepped into the lake, holding the child close to her chest.

"Listen to Ahm carefully. Close your eyes really, really tight, and don't open them until Ahm tells you to—until we are back home until we are free. Do you understand?"

The little girl nodded.

One step, two, three...

When Kreeh's feet touched the surface, Leluachen was up to her waist in the water.

Four, five, six...

"Now, Kreeh, now! Close your eyes."

Her lips grazed the girl's head.

"It's a pity my daughter was born after the cruel white man destroyed the Selk'nam. We should have been allowed to keep our way of life with bows, arrows, and fur clothes. Our way of life in the land the foreign men call the Land of Fire, but that truly is the Land of Ice," she reflected.

She knew there was nothing to go back to. The only thing awaiting them was men with sticks that roared like sea lions and spat out flames. Nothing but to be killed, maimed, or exhibited in human zoos like her and baby Kreeh. A buck to view, two bucks to touch...

Seven, eight...



Water sloshed around Leluachen and her daughter, hugging them in its comforting arms. She was swimming again with dolphins back in the cold, cold canal that the foreign invaders called the Beagle.

Nine...

She extended her hand towards Temaukel, the Selk'nam God, and the only witness to their departure, ready to gather them into his embrace.

Ten...

She released Kreeh's arms from her neck, letting the child sink to the bottom of the foreign lake that, from then on, was to be their home.



Untitled (1) || Mykyta Ryzhykh

We fucked loudly all night while nuclear power plants mushroomed
We swallowed sperm so greedily
that it started to rain and the air bombs got wet
We kissed so passionately that flowers began to grow outside the cemetery
We jerked off for so long that during this time the neighbor's children grew up
Basements are dark, so it's easier
to have sex there
It's too early for children to have sex, so they just sit silently in bomb shelters
The gun's erection bursts out of screaming throats
Severed heads continue to give blowjobs

Trigger of cardiac atavism
Something exploded in a bright jet and splashed the walls of the bomb shelter:
Gun or strap-on?
Blood or sperm?



Midnight Tracks || Rija Farhan

The full moon beamed down on the barren land, filtering through the windows of the train. Echoing through the quiet carriages, the rhythmic beating of the engine felt like the only thing keeping us alive.

Wearily, I leaned my head against the glass, shuddering at its cold touch against my dry, cracked cheek. My eyes felt heavy. I forced myself awake and gazed at the expanse of fearful faces around me, each crowded into the rows of seats or piled across the floor of the aisle.

I felt my mother's trembling hand rest atop my own as she forced a smile.

"It's okay, Ali," she murmured before beginning to pray, the faint words shaking under her breath. "God, give us strength to make this journey, to keep my children alive."

Just as the words left her mouth, the train halted to a sudden stop, the force jerking my head forward to collide into the seat in front. A sharp pain shot through my skull. Panicked murmurs began to swell through the compartment. In the distance, shouts of men drew closer. My mother gripped me tightly with one arm, and Jamal and Arya with the other as her eyes flickered shut. She began to pray more fervently, as a tear streaked down her thin face.

The storm of men drew closer. The compartment doors swung open with a screech as silhouetted warriors emerged, the moonlight reflecting off of the curved blades of their swords.

"This land will be free of you lot!" The Sikh's roared, as the train stood paralyzed on the tracks.

The screams of terrified passengers were overpowered by their war cries. I clung to my mother as a Sikh warrior stepped forward. His murderous eyes locked onto mine. My heart leapt into my throat.

"STOP! You wouldn't dare kill us," a man's deep voice boomed through the carriage. He wore a blue and white striped hat that sat lopsided on his head.



The Sikh at the front of the mob lowered his arm, glaring at him with a burning hate in his eyes.

“And why would that be?” he spat, pointing his sword at the driver’s neck.

“There is a train filled with Hindus arriving. The only way your people will get to India is if this train reaches its destination safely first. If we die, so do your people,” uttered the driver, trying to hide the slight tremor in his voice.

But hadn’t all the trains already left Wagah Station? The carriage was struck with a silence that hung like a suffocating fog in the air. *Would the Sikh’s believe him?* The leader furrowed his eyebrows, glancing back at his companions. My stomach turned inside out. Gripping onto the edge of my seat, my tips turned white. Finally, he sheathed his sword, leading the others to do the same.

“This is not the end,” he threatened menacingly, before turning away.

From the window, I watched him and his men scurry into the dark night before turning to my mother. Her eyes sagged with relief as she hugged me to her chest, though I could still hear her heartbeat race.

“Where we’re going, things will be much better,” she promised me weakly.

I nodded, understanding what was at stake, one wrong move and we would not have made it. *If we are to survive, I must be brave.* The train pushed forward on its journey as the moon, a silent witness, cast a silvery glow over the landscape. I leaned my head against the glass and looked at the sky.

The storm had finally cleared, but the chance of another remained.



Fortune || Clarie Parker

One of these mornings I'll wake up alone
I'll go back home and taste the Black Sage
and the Sagebrush

Where the air is dry and the desert's cold
at night. On the ridge, the coyotes call
& I find their scat everywhere, full of Manzanita berries and hair
The Live Oaks grow wide here and not so tall, with the Black Sage and the Sagebrush

The Buckwheat and Toyon and Coyotebrush
Chamise & small rabbits and the ghost miners' rust
Arroyo willow, Black cottonwood, Sycamore stream
Arundo donax, that much smited reed
Water hemlock and Primrose and Trefoil, Plantain footprints following me Woodrose
leaves yellowing like a broken promise
California brittlebush & Parish goldeneye & Devil's goldenbush make up the
flowering bones, showing through the skin of this graybrown place
Spectacular penstemon, my enthusiasm cannot be contained
Manyflower marshpennywort, wet feet & tiny
with their grandiose name
Lemonade sumac, Laurel sumac, fire scars in the tree rings and the Black Sage and
the Sagebrush

White Sage, elder sibling, glowing & rare,
witness to all that has passed
Rabbit tobacco, soft velvet &
white smoke, coarse fur & lucky feet
Sticky monkeyflower, bending towards me,
magnetic tenacity
White snakeroot & Desert starvine bring teeth & twilight
on tender green leaves



And the Chaparral mallow & Desertbroom,
hedge between my nervous heartbeat
and the great mess beyond
Opuntia & Cholla & Yucca, spikes in their names
conjuring the protection that I hold around my chest,
to breathe the Black Sage
and the Sagebrush

North fortune, South fortune, river Mugwort's dream crumbling staircase and
grinding stones between I jumped over a rattlesnake here once
I cried up this mountain once
My mind left me here once
to be tended by the clouds & rocks
and the Black Sage
and the Sagebrush



Where's Home || Namrah Matloob

Home was where I could go into my mother's embrace;
In the tinge of the imli chutney that I make following my ammi's recipe.

My parents laughter, chats and bickering;
Mine is filled with baby giggles, chaos and love, I am someone's home...

Popped like a party popper and confetti...
It spread to all the different places
In comfort and idleness

Carefully packed in my trousseau,
A bit of home in my new home...
In my abbu jaan's warm embrace,
In the aroma of home cooked food.
Carefully packed in my trousseau,

The aroma that transitions me back to my ammi's kitchen;
The freeing aroma that now I use to envelope my loved ones in the same warm
embrace.

I try to replicate bits of my amma's home/which was once mine.

Sometimes I find it sewn in the embroidered cross stitch flowers of the dining sheet,
In the creases of the bed linen,
In the air trapped inside the puffy rotis.

Memories and moments, people
Like pieces found,
and some yet to be found...



Every morning I open the curtains in our new house. The house. The one I dreamed about for ten years. The windows face a lake and the beautiful Hawaiian mountains. The window in the master bedroom frames the Ko'olau. My life from the outside appears dreamy. But I would never know as I haven't left my house since 2023.

On New Year's Eve, I lay in bed, tossing and turning, jumping as intermittent fireworks infiltrate the Hawaiian night sky. I am terrified of 2024 and the fear of what it could bring. Every New Year's Day for the last several years began with a rough start. A robbery, an ER visit, and then 2024.

I wake up to an unsettling fatigue. I brush it off as the lack of sleep I have carried from the year before. I tuck it away because I am banking on 2024. All my hope rests on a solid year of joy after suffering through my mother's and uncle's death, the pandemic, my son's accident.

This is going to be the year I take my sons on a real trip. Maybe to Disneyland. Definitely to California. The way it used to be when they were little, before Covid existed, when life felt normal.

By this point, everyone I knew had taken one of those, "I deserve this trip for staying home with my kids for a year." This is the fourth year of the pandemic. I intentionally kept my world small, homeschooling my kids, enrolling them in online school and then finally sending them to the only school that still mandated masks. I couldn't afford to get Covid. It took me three months to recover from Pfizer. How would my body cope with the virus?

During the third year of the pandemic, I yearned for normalcy — not just for myself, but for my kids. My son was turning 10 so I gave in to doing a fun, but maskless, party. I was gifted with my first bout of Covid. Thankfully, his symptoms were mild and only lasted a few days. I also survived what felt like extreme fatigue after two weeks. But it was the second time I got sick a few months later that led to long Covid. I haven't been the same since New Year's Day. This fatigue is like wading



through quicksand or running in water. The constant dizziness feels like I'm inebriated. The worst is the vertigo and the constant rocking as if I am on a boat. Long covid knocked down that bucket of hope. Survival became my own goal.

My days are groundhog days. I am full of despair as I open my bedroom curtains at 8 am and close them at 5 pm every day with not much happening in between. The home I wished for has now become a prison. I watch the world zoom past my window. I spend my time on Reddit and Google searching for answers, searching for a gold standard disease reversing pill that can return my life to me. The irony is I used to wish I was hospitalized so I could rest. Life with two young boys was draining me to the core. Last year, I told my husband, "I need a lot of boring days in a row."

Many believe long Covid and Chronic Fatigue Syndrome is due to an overactive nervous system. Trauma, chronic stress and fear can leave you in a constant state of fight or flight without the ability to rest and digest, and it can do so without your conscious awareness. In *The Fear Cure*, Lissa Rankin, MD, says, "No matter how much willpower you have and how motivated you are to heal, you can't just will yourself to be free of these kinds of fears, because the fear stems from unconscious processes, and hooks into the most primal part of the nervous system. Even knowing that the fear is irrational doesn't help, because the fear response is bypassing the cognitive mind, going straight from zero to terrified in the primal nervous system, without engaging the thinking, rational forebrain." When the sympathetic nervous system is on overdrive, dealing with an illness or coping with its aftermath can unconsciously trigger fear. In theory, it could be responsible for the mysterious symptoms I struggled with for years.

I took an online course by Dr. Becca Kennedy who was part of the Kaiser long Covid group in Portland and Washington. She similarly believes long Covid patients are being triggered by unconscious, repressed emotions of fear. The class gave me focus; instead of worrying, I spent my days meditating, doing breathing exercises, tai chi and restorative yoga. Instead of mindlessly scrolling on my phone, I gazed out at the mountains or the palm tree outside my window.



I wasn't sure any of these things individually were moving the needle, but together they were changing me. I worked on calming down my nervous system and accepting how I was feeling in the moment. Roger Housden says in *Dropping the Struggle: Seven Ways to Love the Life You Have*, "The only way through is to accept the gift of the moment, however it shows up." Struggling was adding to my inability to rest. Fighting my experience was the opposite of feeling safe. Housden says surrendering to our struggles relinquishes the power it has over us.

Self-acceptance fostered a new way of thinking. I saw how I bought into our busy modern world, keeping distracted so I wouldn't have to deal with difficult emotions that would wake me up in the middle of the night. I became aware of how much time I spent worrying and taking care of others to the detriment of my health. When I got sick, I finally took care of myself.

As I close the curtains, I submit to another day of being homebound. This time of my life is filled with sadness and grief, but also a profound sense of self-compassion. I am more loving, peaceful, and nurturing. I am a better listener to myself and others. This has helped me be more self-trusting and in return, I am less afraid. "Will this go away?" has been replaced with, "I am okay right now."

I don't know what tomorrow will bring, but I know that today I am present for the dizziness, the fatigue, the unpredictability. I give up the fight and welcome all of it.



My Roommate || Junaita Rey

Another morning
but still no baby.
Everything is as expected
from the alarm clock
to the sun,
but her belly, stuck on its axis,
can't tell the time.

The phone rings.
“Has it happened yet?”
If the voice on the other end
means nerve ends unraveling,
then yes, it's happened.

The face in the mirror
is as feminine as hers.
But I feel like a husband.
We're roommates.
According to the doctor,
the baby's healthy.

The kid's overdue.
Same as the bills.
Same as a word from her parents.

We're behind on the rent.
Her folks claim to have no daughter.
But she will.
Only the father is stillborn.





Inbound by Nisha Ghani

Boundless

Bargaining || Sunayna Pal

This may be the silliest thing you ever hear
but it's the one thing I really miss about Mumbai

and craved during pregnancy.

Buying 3 earrings for 50 rupees instead of 20 each.

Look the shopkeeper in the eye and cut the price
in half and start there to see where he goes.

Pretend to walk out and hope he calls you.



To You || Sana S. Khan

You were the sort. Or so you thought. The one who knew things. The one who felt things. The one who could see people. The stiffening of their shoulders. The dip in the cadence of their tone. The tightening of their eyes. The compression of their lips. You saw. Them.

As if all their infinitesimal movements were attached to you via tiny invisible threads. Each move would pull on you.

It was okay for a while - wasn't it? The knowing, the caring, the pleasing. Everyone was happy. Even you. For a while. You had it all sorted, tucked and snuggled in your mind. Your purpose, of course.

Meanwhile, the constant pulling of the threads began scuffing your skin. There were tiny abrasions, slightly pink, but tiny. It's ok, you thought. It does not hurt that much, you thought. And you soldiered on. While the threads began to gradually gnaw on your skin because of the constant pulling you let them do. Yes, you. You would let them. The incessant itch, a reminder of something you could not quite understand.

Why am I itching? Why, why, why? You saw the doctors. They gave you medicines and ointments. But nothing made the damn itching go away. It was constantly there, underneath your skin, clawing, begging. Like a petulant child who just does not stop nagging. People would ask, what are those bruises on your neck, arms, face? - allergies you would say.

And one day, you looked at yourself, and you saw pockmarks, red, angry, bleeding like volcanoes that were dormant for centuries.

Why? Why is this happening to me you would wonder. Then you stopped having sugar. You cut down on carbs. Perhaps it was something in the food, you thought. Google made you buy oatmeal creams, scent-free lotions, non toxic soaps, multivitamins, and whatever else promised you a cure. You kept buying, but nothing would help, would it?



The itching was always there. Like a determined fly which would just not leave you alone. You would cut your nails, so you would not claw your skin bloody. You wore full sleeves so your bruises would be hidden.

But that miserable tingling always beckoned you, like a slithery demon living under your skin, showing its head wherever it damn pleased.

You lost sleep. The subtle tingling, tangible, constant, forever. Oh, your caring, and pleasing routine continued, despite your visible discomfort. The breaking of your dreams, the snuffing of your hopes. As long as everyone else was happy, you were happy? Right? For it was your duty, to bury the wisps of your soul and yearnings of your heart. Was it not?

Until finally one day, you looked at you. No, not the bruised skin – you looked at your extinguished heart and defeated soul. You saw them – and you finally acknowledged your wretchedness. Your heartache. Your broken dreams. Your lost self.

The demands of your role leached at your soul. Bled your heart. And you saw anew.

Iota by iota you would look at yourself, you would turn inwards and see your heart encaptured in the web of grief. String by string you would undo the web, gently, tentatively, for the web was a scary thing. As for your skin, of course the bruises and marks were there – the itching present, but not as aggressive. Quietened, as if watching, waiting, wondering if it had finally got your attention.

Sometimes a whisper from your soul would guide you, partner you before it quickly went back and hid again, afraid. But you continued to see – and tend to you. Gentle. Apologetic. Aggrieved. Hurt. Earnest. For you have finally begun your journey to yourself. To home.



And suddenly your kid sister isn't a kid anymore

You are embarrassing and she ignores you in the hallways at school and makes it a point to let you know she doesn't approve of your outfit. You are from a completely different generation even though you are barely two years apart in age. She makes you drive her everywhere and enlists you as her partner in crime. She's 16 and you can't believe it because you were just 16 last week.

You catch yourself pressing your ear against the wall to see if those are peels of despair or howls of laughter. Sometimes you pass by her door, the one right next to yours, and you hear her playing the music you listen to. The very same she gagged at a few weeks ago and not so secretly hummed along with.

You pile in the car for your daily summer ice cream run and you notice she has rings on nearly every finger, just like how you chose to wear yours. You can't help but feel that you had some effect on her, although she will do anything to deny it.

She's taller than you now. Your baby sister, the one and only, is a full half-inch taller than you. You make a point to go on your tip-toes in photos just to seem that much older because you will never be able to accept it.

She's learning how to drive and you feel a fraction of the same panic your parents felt when they were teaching you. You didn't understand it then, but you sure do now. She's athletic where you are academic. She's brave where you are wary. She's sweet where you are temperamental. She is everything that I will never be, and I am grateful for it.



Once Upon a Time || Paroma

City-dwellers were in love with the rustic charms of this sleepy little town situated next to the riverbank. They were always looking forward toward extended weekends to drive down here from cities that had forgotten how to sleep. And every single time, the little town magically expanded her heart and embraced the visitors. She showered them with her clean, life-affirming air and water, her simple homely comforts and abundant warmth, replenishing their hearts and rejuvenating their souls. Repaired and rehabilitated, the city-dwellers went back to their homes and, like possessive lovers, kept their beloved beauty hidden from the prying eyes of the world.

Like all long-held secrets that eventually are forced out of the closet and cause an explosion; this too came into the public eye when a bunch of Instagram handles with names such as 'Hidden Gems' and 'Secret Getaways' and hashtags like 'Would you believe this is not Europe?' and 'Cheap Stays with Mesmerizing Views' stumbled upon this sleeping beauty. It didn't take long for her to become the cynosure of all eyes.

People descended from all over the country to lay their eyes upon this winsome beauty and were riveted by her. Each visitor claimed to be her greatest admirer and couldn't stop gushing over her unique charms. For some, it was her delicate natural beauty that won their hearts, while others could never tire of watching the graceful dance of her waters. Thousands were won over by the simplicity of her people, while many were relieved to have finally escaped the people in their own lives and found solace in her.

The outpour of love and attention had a mystical effect on her. She had never known such love existed in this world, and, therefore, had neither imagined nor desired it for herself. But once she got a taste of it, she realized she relished it and would never be able to live without it again. With every new lover she acquired, she found her appetite growing and wanted more. She discovered that she wasn't sleepy or little anymore. Instead, she had finally woken up and found herself in the midst of a beautiful dream.



Syahi remembered those days well. She was born here and came of age as her hometown transformed itself. Syahi was one of those youngsters who loved this revamped avatar of their home and wanted to preserve it for themselves.

Twenty-five years later, Syahi could not even recognise her hometown anymore.

She had been at this tiny railway station for over three hours now, and kept trying to match the memories of her home with the desolate ravaged town that stood before her.

She hadn't expected it to remain unchanged over the years, waiting for her return. Syahi wasn't naïve or sentimental like that; but she was steadfast in her belief that her town would only evolve and grow.

This town, however, was far removed from even her wildest dreams. It did not look like the big modern city that she had been expecting or the popular holiday destination she remembered it to be. But what truly shattered her was the realization that it was not even the sleepy little town she had known it to be. Her home, the popular beauty that had charmed the hearts of millions, was now a godforsaken place.

Sitting on an uncomfortable wooden bench in the station, Syahi kept looking for her childhood playmate, that mighty River of Yore, but couldn't catch even a glimpse of it. At first, she was convinced that she had de-boarded the train at the wrong station. After realizing that that was not the case, she asked the station master and the handful of passengers around to guide her. Syahi reasoned that as her town expanded, it went farther away from the railway tracks. Or perhaps, new train routes were now operational, and she found herself in this unfamiliar location. After all, any number of changes were possible in the span of twenty-five years, but how could a whole town disappear?

How could her home disappear from the face of the Earth?

Rivers are not known to vanish into thin air.

How can a town cease to exist on a map?



What does home feel like if you haven't set foot in it in twenty-five years?

What does home look like after a quarter century?

Does one even have a home after all these years?

Does Syahi still have a home?

Does Syahi *deserve* to have her home?

Of course, she does! Isn't she a daughter of this infamous town?

Syahi was desperate for any connection from her past. Even though she had been away for two and a half decades now, she hadn't ever felt uprooted or alone before. Until this afternoon, she hadn't known what it truly meant to not belong, and how it felt to be homeless.

Her body refused to listen to her. She found herself stuck to the bench, her feet refusing to budge. How could she move ahead in this world if she didn't have a home to return to? How does one step forward in an abyss? She was sinking, flailing, struggling to come up for breath. She needed a miracle, but she was willing to accept a mirage.

What does one do when time comes to a standstill?

What do you do when your past haunts you, and the future holds no space for you?

You cling to the present with all your strength and determination. Syahi stopped counting the years and the memories. Instead, she started counting the trains that passed by. She had seen thirteen trains rush past her since she had stepped on the platform. Only three had stopped so far, and not for more than two minutes. This was a distant cry from the time Syahi's sleepy little town was the city-dwellers' well-kept secret. In those days, at least seven or eight trains stopped here for a few minutes every day. The trains brought the vacationers from the city, and took the employment-seekers from the town in return.

The fourteenth train pulled into the station and dropped a single passenger before rushing off to greener pastures. Syahi could not see the young girl's face, but she



overheard snippets of her conversation on the phone. She was waiting for her friends to pick her up from the station and proceed towards the forgotten town.

The stranger was on her way to Syahi's home!

Not only was she living proof that Syahi still had a home, she also knew where it stood now. This realization proved to be an elixir, and she found herself rushing towards the stranger who was going to guide her home.

But before she could speak, the younger woman on the phone did. She had seen Syahi rush towards her, and after a detailed glance over her clothes, had blurted: "Aunty, are you from the town by the riverbank? Your expression seems to suggest so, although I am yet to meet anyone from there. Anyway, you definitely look like the people who used to live here."

A faint smile appeared on Syahi's face when she stopped mid-way. What did this girl mean? "People who USED to live here?" she repeated. Where did those people live now? Why had they left their hometown? And if no one lived here anymore, then why was this stranger so interested in visiting a ghost town?

Syahi had come back after so many years in search of answers. But, upon her return, it was instead a barrage of questions that assailed her.

"I grew up here but moved out a few decades back. It is my first visit since then, but I can't recognize my town anymore."

"Oh! I am sorry for your loss. This town went underwater a few years back. No one survived, and nothing from back then lives on here."

Angkasa placed her hand on the woman's shoulder, comforting her, giving her time to accept the news.

She continued, "I am a climatologist and have come with my team to research on the conditions here. Would you like to come along? I know Resul would be excited to meet you. Actually, all of us would be. Even though we have been working on this project for a while now, our attempts to meet people who hailed from this region have all drawn a blank. Sohrab keeps insisting that our work will remain incomplete without the input of those who lived here."



At the time of her departure, Syahi had decided to never come back. She was too angry and hurt to consider otherwise. Twenty-five years later, she was coming to realize that it was, in fact, her motherland that had turned her back on her.

She was an orphan and truly alone in this world.

Sohrab and the crew were getting impatient waiting for Angkasa to arrive. They had a long day of work ahead and the temperature was not making it easier to wait.

“How much time does it take to walk out of the station?”

“This is such a small station. I don’t think it is even possible to lose your way here.”

“Hey, look! She is walking out now. But who is that with her?”

Walking behind Angkasa was a middle-aged lady in a white silk saree with a red border. She wore no jewelry, but a large red hibiscus flower was planted on her hair, right at the back of her ear. Their friend was holding her hand and gently guiding her towards them. The woman looked dazed and upset and, as she came closer, they noticed that beneath those kohl-rimmed eyes, tears were welling up. She was not wearing any make-up, not even a hint of a lipstick. Only a tiny red *bindi* dotted her forehead.

“Hang on, doesn’t she look like a member of the local community that used to live here?”

“Yeah, and those women used to wear fresh flowers in their hair too.”

All their anger and frustration dissipated into thin air as they realized that Angkasa had finally found someone who could play an instrumental role in their research.

“Hey folks! Syahi Aunty used to live here twenty-five years back. She will be joining us on this tour.” Then Angkasa motioned towards her team. “Aunty, these are my team members. That’s Resul, the guy I was telling you about. He is a reputed anthropologist. Luke, here, is an ethnographer. Azadeh is a feminist researcher and has worked extensively on women’s history. The rest of the team is still on their way, but this is the captain of the ship, Sohrab. He is an archaeologist and documentary



film-maker. He is the one who has brought this whole team together. And this is his dream project, and a long-gestating one at that!”

“Hello, please call me Syahi.”

“Hi, Syahi! We are so happy that you will be accompanying us. I am sure you will enrich our understanding of this town and its culture,” said Sohrab.

“I will try to help you, but as Angkasa said I have returned after decades. And it looks like nothing I knew it to be.”

“Seriously, it baffles me that this place used to be on everyone’s list of favorite cities till just a few years back, but now nobody even remembers it or mourns its loss.”

“But how can people forget so quickly? Twenty-five years is not that long a period of time. And when I left town, it was such a popular tourist destination. Even if tragedy struck ten or fifteen years back, it is still a recent phenomenon. How is it possible for the city-dwellers who proclaimed such deep love for this beautiful town of mine to forget it so easily and move on?”

Luke could not hold back any longer. “Ten or fifteen years back! What are you talking about, Syahi? This is not ancient history. The town disappeared only three years back – although one can argue that tragedy struck much before that. But you know how public memory works and how short-lived it is. Perhaps that is our real tragedy.”

Syahi was too stunned to react. The youngsters had no words of comfort to offer her. What could those with a home say to one rendered homeless when they had turned a blind eye to everything that went on earlier?

They stood in silence and shame while Syahi remembered and sobbed.

“This was our picnic spot,” Syahi informed the team. “The river used to flow here and as kids we used to dip our toes in its cold waters and play hide-and-seek behind the giant lush green trees that surrounded us. It is surreal to talk to you about this, Sohrab, when neither the river nor the trees survive. You will not believe me, but even though I know we are standing on barren land right now with not a drop of water or a trace of greenery in sight, I don’t have to dig deep in my memories to



remember it as it was. The past feels more real to me than this.” Syahi had to rely on her hands and indicate the nothingness around her because she could not dredge up the words to explain the strange sight.

“I have always been amazed at this chasm between public memory and individual memory. Public memory seems like a misnomer given that it barely remembers. In fact, it has to be regenerated again and again and my attempt with this documentary is to do the same. On the other hand, individual memory never falters. In fact, it would probably be easier for us to move on and live if we could forget some of our most unpleasant memories, but all our attempts in that direction fail every single time,” replied Sohrab.

Azadeh gave a weak smile at that, and fell into step with Syahi. “Sohrab is right, you know. But in this case, we are benefiting from your memories, Syahi, and we are so grateful for it even though I can guess that recounting those days must be painful for you. We have been coming to this spot daily for so many weeks now, but the barrenness always overwhelms us. Your stories are allowing us to imagine what this place must have looked like in its heydays. And I have to say, it is a pretty sight.”

“The river would turn here and enter the agricultural lands. Between the river and the monsoon, our lands were always well-irrigated. Did you know that our local produce was introduced as star ingredients in gourmet restaurants? In fact, I remember that after our town started getting a record number of visitors, many chefs from the big cities would come down and hold pop-up dinner parties for the tourists. They championed the local produce at these dinners,” Syahi continued with renewed pride. “I think they even called these the ‘farm-to-table’ and ‘seasonal meal’ concepts...you know, after it became popular most commentators said that ours was a tourism economy. We could not have survived without it. But I always thought we would not survive without the playmate of my childhood, the mighty river. In fact, I still believe that it was the love for the river that drew the city-dwellers here, and then my town won them over with her charms. Honestly, everything was going so well. I still don’t understand what led to this disaster.”

Luke asked in a soft voice, “Why? As always, the culprit is human greed. Like you said, everything was going well, and we wanted more and more and more. So, no one



paid heed to the signs all around us. The agricultural lands were bought at throwaway prices, and huge malls were constructed there. The route of the river was diverted so that towering residential complexes could be built on the riverbed. Initially, everyone was happy about it. It seemed like the town was coming into its own and investments were flowing in. But after some time, people began to realize that the demand and supply did not match. Worse, environmental clearances were given without proper scrutiny and natural disasters became frequent occurrences. Even then, we turned a blind eye thinking these were minor incidents.”

Resul spoke up, “Don’t forget that these were all minor incidents for the well-off residents of the high-rise apartments. Each of these disasters was a calamity in its own right for the underprivileged.”

“Yes, and when the end came, it took away these underprivileged people with it. Those who survived became climate refugees. The rich had already abandoned this town by then. The government and industry had banded together to build real estate, but no one took on the initiative of building public infrastructure.”

“That’s just one part of the story, Syahi. Deep animosity had crept in among the people who lived here by then. Your memories may be different but the ‘us and them’ narrative defined the townsmen at the end. And there wasn’t even a proper classification or category to explain these differences. It seemed like every morning people discovered a new ‘other’ who was living among them but was not one of them. And then they banded together to either kill or drive out these ‘aliens’ from their homeland.”

“Angkasa,” interrupted Syahi, “I think I might know something about that. I too was driven away by my own people.”

“What? Why?”

“That’s a story for another day. Suffice to say that for all their embrace of modernity, the people of my land were not ready for a woman who dared to love women, and I wasn’t ready to give up on my love and desires...you should leave now. I can sense another tragedy well on its way. Go and stop it or at least, raise your voice and try to,” she said.



“Me? I will never leave my town ever again. You will find me whenever you return to this ghost town, guarding its memories and haunting the conscience of all those who let their beloved beauty down.”



Barricade



کنڈی by Noor Ul Ain

Untitled (2) || Mykyta Ryzhykh

as unnecessary tore the soul from the body
out of habit I distributed bread to people with sewn up stomachs
buried a cemetery under the bed
canceled the future for the sake of a neighbor living in the past
shot his most beautiful lover in the temple
of me

also

I broke the waters
I threw out the trash
I cleaned my ears
I wiped the blood from my forehead
I washed the cum off my stomach

I'm learning to be a seedling like before
my grape pupils bloomed for the first time
I died inside your head
the sky in my tears will never become the subject of study by historians

A Hero's Quest

The A/C and I hum, the A/C louder than me, as the children sleep. It gives me time to settle my mind so I can think of another entry to the story.

They've been able to stay on their feet thus far.

Officially, the story is that we're on vacation. Hopping from motel to motel, it's given me the idea of inventing stories about the little neighborhoods we live near. Instructing them to find "trinkets" centered around the stories I have told before we move on. They were pretty good at finding them, mostly garbage I told them to get rid of once they got "power" from them or unlocked their "mysteries". Sometimes I tell them real stories when the memory is stirred, but the fake ones are much more thrilling. Ghost stories and made-up murders. I'm every bit like my grandmother.

Parents shouldn't lie to kids, but doesn't the moral scale tip in your favor when you know the costs of letting in certain realities? Kids who are acutely aware of poverty's harsh reality detach from what's typical in their lives, and go into survival mode.

Like education. Grades plummet where there's empty fridges and pantries. Kids dream of their own stories outside of hunger in place of what they have to read in class. They sink inside themselves because they're afraid of the embarrassment that'll be weaponized against them if anyone finds out they are poor. The fact that there's elitism in poverty scares me.

Reading takes up my time when the worrying sets in, to keep from sinking into despair. It doesn't serve me. Eventually we'll have to leave this motel and move on to the next. I'm not exactly low on funds, not yet, but management's making jokes about whether I plan on paying rent here. I read well between the lines. We have to go. To where, I haven't yet decided.

I click my nails against the table, impatience lending power to my fingers that might break a nail or two. I consciously stop myself, ball my hand into a fist, which I



proceed to slam against the table. I freeze and look at my kids, who turn and groan irritably without opening an eye. Still again. Asleep again.

I sigh and mutter, the A/C's rumble consuming my words. It wouldn't be this hard if I had help. A cooperative mother for one. I paid her bills, her mortgage, sacrificed so much of my life because I didn't want her staring down the possibility of living on the street. She offered me anything, up to half her tiny kingdom then. When I wanted nothing, she told me I'd always have a place if I needed it.

The things we believe at nineteen. In our early twenties. Like all the I love you's and I gotchu's from a man who promises to stop hustling and get a steady job. A job he can do with ease because he's talented, a job I envied because it meant he could do nothing for hours, hours that I'd like to take and devote to learning something useful. Ten years and back and forth, bouncing between jobs and hustling before the good one comes, then the minute he decides to take it, he gets killed.

I love and I hate Mike. I miss him more than either. We wouldn't be here if he was still alive. I could be on my ratty brown couch with the jojoba oil stain on the arm, instead of sitting cross legged on this uncomfortable chair with this flat burgundy cushion. It doesn't look like it's been cleaned well. At least the beds are.

I scroll through the job listings hoping to find one without a lot of bullshit. When did customer service jobs require four-year degrees? It burns like cigarette into my skin, the limitations of my education, the barriers I faced to expanding it. And I feel sorry for the undergraduates because when I pretend to have a degree just to see what's offered to them, I bite my lip to keep from screaming. Bachelor's degree plus ten years of experience. For 40,000.00 a year.

The Red Wall

The next morning is better and worse. It's worse because we have to leave today. Because when I woke up and stretched, I felt a small cramp. I thought I pulled a muscle too far, but as soon as I piss and wipe, I see dark red all over the tissue. I jump up and it's all I can do to keep from shouting *fuck* in frustration. The toilet's filled with blood. I figured since I was obscenely late, I was always irregular and sometimes my period didn't come, I wouldn't have to count this one. I had no money



budgeted for it. Just food and shelter. I stuffed wads of tissue in the seat of my underwear and proceeded with my day, bleak before it began.

When I got to the counter, I was relieved to see a woman there. She looked young enough to still be menstruating. While Kayla and Jamal stood idly by, still rubbing sleep from their eyes though it was nine, I leaned forward and asked the woman if she had an extra pad quietly. Shame seemed to make my flow heavier. I looked down at the desk to hide my stinging eyes.

“Oh, yeah,” the woman replied nonchalantly.

She pulled her black bag on the desk, dug through it with tired familiarity before producing the coveted item in pink wrapping. So that brought me eight hours.

It got better because the Red Roof Inn was still taking reservations for the time. For three more weeks. That left me on borrowed time, but enough to figure something else out. I felt like I needed my mom more than ever.

It got better because while on the bus to Naylor Road Station, I scrolled through my emails and saw the subject line INTERVIEW INVITATION in all caps. It was for an administrative assistant job I applied to weeks ago. It was on a whim since there wasn't a college degree requirement. I opened the email, read the message, then re-read it again just to make sure I had it right despite the words in the subject line.

I got an interview. I could feel my heart swelling as I read through the email before the catch started to deflate it. I needed a laptop. It was a video call. Why, why, why not a damned phone call! My spirit almost sank when I remembered Keisha's boyfriend brought her one recently. At least my cousin would help me. Living with her wasn't an option until she got space though. Two of our other cousins were staying with her for the time being. I would have called Mike's mother for help, but I didn't want it to turn into an invitation to stay with her. Bless her soul for her kindness, but she couldn't kick her drug habit completely. Or I could ask Nicey. But that girl was barely home and left no spare keys. Barely available. She was messing with some rich guy up in New York at the moment. Last month they were in Belize. If I had that luck. I hate a money-focused relationship, but I wouldn't be bleeding into the only solitary pad I had, on a filthy bus, smelling the metallic sweat of the



construction worker next to me, and the salted, pungent body odor of the woman in front of me.

I wouldn't worry for my kids' education. My family would have a home. Parents sacrificed anyway. What was love to their comfort? Our stop finally came after an arduous hour between taking reluctant breaths and holding them in. That woman rode all the way down here, and I wish she had gotten off and walked. That's the type of funk that belonged outside.

When I saw a man struggling down the street with piles of bags, I felt a little bad about what I thought about the woman. She could have been homeless. I mean, hell, I was walking that route my damn self. No one belonged outside, not in this heat, the ever-fucking lasting heat wave that was killing people up and down the country. I just wished I didn't have to smell her all the same. It wasn't the best thing to inhale when nausea settled in.

Once I checked in and got the kids situated, I left for the CVS nearby. Walking was a sort of divine torture. My grandfather used to say that trials were part of life. God's tests, but torment seemed more accurate. Pain isn't the only thing that makes people grow. Nurtured curiosity, stable environments that encourage people to go forward, to do more, challenges that don't end in decimation, those help people grow too, but what do I know? Parents have seen and done it all, so my point is moot. Even though I'm one. Life is what it is, so what's the point in complaining? I'm shut out before I even really start to get my words in. Before anyone really hears me.

The CVS has people moving about. An aisle could be empty one moment and packed the next. I had to be quick if I wanted to pull this off right. I made my way to the aisle with the pads and, God help me, there were four women there already. An old black woman who eyed me with smugness immediately, two black women my age, and a youngish white woman in jogging gear. She glanced at me in between searching for her ideal tampons, weighing the choice she had between Tampax and Kotex. The other women left before the older ones did.

I acted like I was a typical frustrated woman, dissatisfied with the pads and tampons, considering new options like the period underwear, but remained unsure. The old woman tapped my shoulder then.



“Don’t worry, eventually you won’t have to worry about it,” she said with mild kindness.

She left with her Depends. I guess she figured I wasn’t trifling and decided to end her citizen’s watch. I used to hate people like her until I saw it from their perspective. Theft drives people crazy. Personally, it steals your peace of mind. Done in stores, it puts boxes around the things you need, and makes you feel like you’re in yet another box like the one you live in. I still don’t like that shit, the suspicious spying. It makes you feel like garbage, especially if you need something for survival. But everyone’s looking for control at the end of it. It makes me sad and sick. These things keep us in circles of destruction. No one stops to ask why people steal, why people spy, why we do anything. They just make more boxes, ones around necessary items or bars around the convicted.

The white woman lingered, stealing peaks at me in between her search. I felt her gaze on me often, looking up in between my fake search as she tore away her gaze. I could keep up the charade longer than she had the patience to wait for me to slip up.

When I picked up a crushed box of tampons, she finally gave up. I looked around once more, ensuring the view was clear, before slipping them into my bag. I wasn’t a fan of tampons, but that thing about beggars came to mind. Since I was here I could pick up the kid’s food this afternoon. I would have never thought of CVS as a blessing, not until today when I saw the sale on snacks and Lunchables. It would give them a break before we had to switch back to Lidl bread and lunch meat. It was the similar rhythm of home, cycles of fun lunches, and staple lunches. No deeper questions into what was really going on.

With that accomplished, I went home, planning my next move. I called Nicey and hoped to God that she picked up. No answer. Mom was my last resort, but I didn’t have the heart to beg her to think about her grandchildren again. All I could do was call Keisha to borrow her laptop for my interview.

“Oh, girl, sure,” she said when I asked. “I hope you get the job.”

“Me too,” I sighed.



“Barely holding up?” she asked sadly.

“Girl, I’m trying,” I said looking at my kids eat now.

“I am looking at one of my room’s opening up,” she told me then. “Kenneth doesn’t like the idea of being assigned chores, so he claims he’s been looking for another place to stay. He’s trying to see if our aunt will take him, but he left her cause of the mice. I don’t know what he’s gonna do afterwards.”

“And if no one takes him?” I asked warily.

“I don’t know, but he can’t stay if he won’t contribute. Laying around my house, eating up my food. Maybe his mama might take him back. If he goes, I’ll let you know.”

I got her position. She didn’t want to throw out family, especially a nineteen-year-old, but life doesn’t come for free.

“Mommy,” Kayla said, tapping me gently. She grew into this gentleness because as an infant she was a boxer. “Can we watch TV?”

“Sure, baby,” I told her. It was at Jamal’s bidding, I’m sure. All kids know how to hustle their parents. Send in the favorite or the cutest kid for a request, do a chore even (once out of all the times they’re told), and they get what they want.

“Mom?” he called out then.

“I’m on the phone, baby?” I said.

“When are we gonna get the next story?” Jamal asked.

“In a bit,” I replied, forgetting that I hadn’t even done that yet. “Hey, let me call you later.”

“Alright. Love you,” Keisha said.

“Love you too.”

I left my phone on the charger and went to my kids. They turned away from the TV, easily ignoring the cartoon playing. I don’t know what it is. My tolerance for cartoons ended five years ago. People aren’t even trying anymore.



“Let me think, what had happened here again?”

I eventually came up with a story about three dead kids. I know, mom of the year, but since we're under unusual circumstances, I'll give myself a pass. The story with the kids is that there was a child killer going around in an ice cream truck. He'd park it somewhere near old houses no one lived in, and kids strolling around the block would see it, ask for a treat only to be butchered, and have their brains thrown in the freezer. Each victim had a small trinket found with their bodies. A marble, a barrette, and a HotWheels white and red racing car. I hated myself as the words came out of my mouth, for the morbid story I made today, for all the stories. Why couldn't I just be honest with my kids?

It was a habit I picked up from my mother that I swore I'd never partake in. A lot of things she did I swore I'd never do and ended up doing. Lying to my kids was the worst.

Into the Great Unknown

My kids were upset they couldn't find everything on the list. They came back with a dirty, toddler sized basketball, and a red car before I called it quits on their hunt. Work was encroaching. I told them that we'd have time again tomorrow, went over the usual “let no one in speech”, and left for Safeway. I worked at the Waterfront location. The ride was wonderful for the short length. I wish my pay was as nice as it felt.

I thought of the life I used to plan for when I was in school, what I wanted to do with a degree in business, the house I wanted to have. Expenses sidelined all that, so I figured, I do Community College, and then transfer my credits. But I put the rest of my education on hold when mom was about to lose her home. I couldn't let that happen, so I focused on working to help her. The reward for that was ungratefulness.

I left shortly after.

Then I lost the only good job I ever had two months ago. I never knew why we got laid off for certain, but part of me assumed it was because the owner wanted to open up somewhere cheaper. Isn't it what they all do? Move businesses out of the state or the country to pay people less? After that, the jobs I got were one



disappointment after the other. I wasn't fired, but it felt like I was branded with those words because no one worth working for would hire me.

I wanted better for me. I spent so much of my time working for someone else's comfort. It was a horrifying curse. At what point does someone else make me happy? At what point does life pan out better for me?

I put a pin in my depression for after work as my stop came up. I'd have time to add to the question then. The station was packed with people speed walking and cramming themselves on the escalator to exit. I just stood and waited. Since I was close to work, I had time to burn on these assholes. I hoped they would be even later for the people they knocked over as they rushed to the escalator, especially that poor baby, whose mother promptly picked her up, and grabbed the blond extensions of the woman who thought she'd speed by.

I wish I could stay to see the fight. I bent my neck to stare for as long as I could. A crowd morphed into a half circle around the women, each of them distracted from their routes now. A metro worker rushed to break the fight up. From what I could see, the mother was disturbingly amazing, balancing her baby safely against her while whooping that woman's ass with one free hand. That's a once in a life time sort of occurrence. I wouldn't have had my child so close to a fight, but I do hate rude people. It was nice to see the beat-down for as long as I could.

When I got to the top, I made my way to the Safeway only to find another crowd. A smaller one. Outside my store were some of my co-workers, yelling, crying, screaming, threatening to burn down the building. And yelling the words that made knots on top of knots of my intestines. *What about our jobs?*

Oh, no, nonononononononono...

I felt the blood drain from my body. I was convinced there was a pool of it on the pavement beneath my feet. Maybe if there was, I wouldn't have to deal with this fucked up reality. But the reality is screaming, threatening violence, crying, gasping for air, wondering how it'll feed its kids...

And now I am.



I walked on legs that ought to have been limp, but by some miracle I got to the crowd. I could just see our manager, threatening to call the police if no one dispersed.

“Look, it’s from corporate. Too many people got hired here, don’t worry, you’ll get recommended at another store.”

“Nobody’s hiring!” a woman screamed. “I got turned down by Giant, by Subway, by every shit paying job out there!”

“Hey, no one else wants to work, you should be good,” our manager snapped back.

“Bitch, no one’s *hiring*, did you not hear me?” she shouted, pushing a thick vein against the side of her neck.

“I’m calling the police.”

They didn’t care. It was eight against one, and they rushed past her, shoving her aside, a couple even hitting her. I felt like I could have. I probably should have, but I didn’t need a charge. While she stood there, red faced and breathing heavy, I stared until she locked eyes on me.

“Is my job gone too?” I asked.

She sighed, “Yeah.”

“You know these people won’t hire any time soon, no matter what they say,” I told her.

“I’m sorry, what can I say?” she shrugged futilely. “Get welfare, apply anyway, I’ll give you a glowing review. Hell, I’ll even say you were a fucking manager. Just leave please. That’s all I need.”

“Anna,” a security guard said rushing out now, rattled and wide eyed. Three of my co-workers were leaving with full bags now.

“All I need,” she muttered in defeat.



I think my throat hurt from the amount of pride I swallowed calling my mother. I sounded hoarse as I explained the predicament to her. She sounded quite unmoved.

“Look, I’m not even asking for myself anymore. Just for the sake of your grandkids. Will you let us stay with you, instead of motel after motel? I have an interview, I’ll get unemployment, all the other shit, I just need a hand so we don’t end up on the street, ma.”

My mother sighed, irritable, outraged that I had put so much on her.

“Look, Lonnie hardly likes anybody in his house for too long.”

“Oh, he gets to say it’s his house without helping you pay for it?” I challenged.

“Don’t you get—”

“Stop,” I said immediately, rage bleeding into the pulse of my heart. “I don’t even know why I called you. You didn’t care enough when we was homeless the first time, and you won’t when your babies are on the street, and I’m struggling to keep every creep away from them, food in their mouths, and pennies in our cup from some kind stranger who gave out of their own struggling pockets. You got your man, be happy with him.”

I hung up. I sighed on the ground outside of my job, not caring who heard, not noticing the people who tried to give me money, then left it by my foot when I didn’t take it. I did eventually, I’m not that foolish. Just that angry.

But minutes later my mother did call me back, laying ground rules. How I’m never to disrespect her. How we have to respect Lonnie’s space. The basement is ours for the time.

“As soon as you get a job, you out. Stay with somebody else, get a hotel, since you good for that, I don’t care,” my mother huffed. “You lucky he don’t want no kids on the street. I had to say you was because he’d wonder why you couldn’t just get another hotel anyway. Cuz you don’t know real homelessness anyway.”

“Fine,” I said dryly.

I hope to God I get that job. I hope I don’t have to stay with her but for so long.





I'm still there, playing, crying, learning in our home, habitual of the creeks and bumps of our brick and mud floor.

My knees and elbows are unable to love any scar that wasn't given by our home.

I'm still there, running, falling, retrying, learning in our home,

familiar with the chipped paint and heavy wooden doors secured by the precious کنڈی.

My heart saddens when deprived of that earthy scent of our chipped walls. I feel my soul would go astray from the illusions of this world.

So, when I see them following a single path without a thought in their head,

I stop and secure my soul by casting that كُنْطَى of your values onto the room of my desires, desire to be a part of this herd,

and I put a lock of your guidance in that كُنْطَى, I turn the lock with the key of my heart, and I throw it away.

Every time that I want to be a part of the herd, I throw that key away.

door chain - كُنْطَى*



Neighboring a War || Lucia Duero

It's the afternoon of February 22nd here on the Pacific coast of Mexico, in the state of Oaxaca. The town is as still and silent as a dead fish. Fruit and vegetable sellers quietly withstand the heat, an ancient lady kneads the dough for a tortilla under the roof of a ceaseless sky, oysters wait to be swallowed by destiny. Nothing unusual captures my eye, nothing unusual seems to be happening here. Yet under the sunny surface rests an unimaginable, unperceivable universe, and the air carries the news that would change the course of history.

The day I arrived in this town, I spread my weariness all over the place and began to sparkle like a morning ocean, waiting to be consumed by the dead of night. That very night the Russian army advanced towards Ukraine, the geographical neighbour of my homeland, and, strangely enough, the country where I was conceived. Military invasion would begin the following day. A sleepless night merged into a horrid version of timelessness that would mark the next days to come. Since then, a cloud of incomprehensible darkness has swallowed me, as if the world I knew ceased to make sense. I found myself lost in a labyrinth I thought I knew quite well how to circumvent.

I started this sentence with the expression *in the meantime*, a locution I often used and considered impartial, inoffensive, until I realized its implications in the current situation: *in the meantime* means not knowing, it means death, it means war. This previously neutral expression acquires a new meaning to me in circumstances when one cannot be neutral, suggesting a state of affairs with an intricate 'before' that has not even come to be yet.

It is like a waiting room except you do not know what you are waiting for, and how you ended up there.

In the meantime is also a collection of instances when everything loses sense and we struggle to fabricate a new one. In my own *meantime*, I drink lemonade with Don S., my taxi driver, while waiting for the fish I came to pick up at Brisas del mar. Don S. points out towards the strait where the drugs from Colombia arrive (not that I asked).



“But nothing happens here, don’t you worry. They already bought them all.” If someone is killed, it’s only because they were selling a wrong product or were stupidly defrauded. They don’t touch the tourists.” For I am a tourist to Don S., a tourist that observes all but sees nothing and is untouched by this quiet exchange of goods and capital.

“Pure cocaine that needs to be cut,” he adds, as if I needed to know, and continues by saying that some parts end up in local beaches, available for sale even in the chicken shops, but most end up in the US market. He almost sounds like a tourist guide, as if the drug business, the culture it engendered and the violence it produces, was part of the tourist economy, something exciting to learn about for foreigners like me. The way it blossoms is through sandy beaches that host all the innocent, blameless dancers looking for freedom, a prerogative that can hardly be neglected by anyone.

Nonetheless, when things abruptly stop making sense, another type of sensibility emerges. It is like looking at another you that’s been walking behind you, as if suddenly the reflection in the mirror looked at you instead of you looking at it. No one knew what was to happen during the very first days of the war, or whether the conflict would extend to the neighboring countries. Some people in my homeland did, in fact, leave in fright, only to come back once they had reassessed their next steps. The rumors have it that when the Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant was struck, iodine pills sold out in the entire country within a day. My family was paralyzed in shock, trying to maintain calm and act as if everything was under control, while secretly thinking of escaping to Mexico should things *further develop*. From the very first days of the war my country’s government and its volunteers started to organize and provide assistance to incoming Ukrainians at the border. My friends who knew of or had access to vacant flats offered them to the Ukrainian families, furnished them and made public recollections of furniture or anything that could be used to embellish them. Others shared job profiles of the newcomers seeking work. My little half-sisters have Ukrainian classmates in school now; one of the national newspapers decided to switch the Slovak translation of the Ukrainian capital, Kyjev, to Kyjiv, a phonetic transcription according to the pronunciation by the incoming refugees.



I am here at the coast, far away from where I would like to be despite all the odds, all the logic, anxiously scrolling news until exhaustion, as if my breath depended on every update.

Freedom is a magical word that can be used to justify anything or delude anyone. To fight for an idea, or to cross half of the planet. Is it even possible to grasp such a concept in all its sparkle? Precisely in these unusual, chaotic moments of history, I suddenly realised I was running away from something that was to define me forever, somewhere in the unknown land of the past, take away my freedom, as I would call it then, I ran far away as if running could ever solve the way one inhabits her own soul. Yet unjustifiable nostalgia that cannot, in no way, belong entirely to me due to its magnitude invades me as if my own, interior territory had no borders; as if being here or there did not matter at all, as if the depths of our longing were capable of getting hold of us in another continent. I yearn for the same unattainable freedom I was once fantasising about while I shelter a pessimist, hopeless soul that always dies over and over, only to find itself on strange coasts, drinking lemonade with taxi drivers.

In the meantime, while I wait and cannot stand waiting, the town decides its fate, if we are to believe such a thing is possible, in the local elections. Dry law is imposed, fruitlessly, because there is no law here. The result is not favourable for some, so ballot boxes are robbed. Problem solved. Business as usual. I can keep drinking now. But some did not even mention that elections were taking place, that dry law was imposed, that something was actually going on...or is it? To what point is it possible to dissimulate that nothing ever happens?

In the following days, as the war advances, I could only perceive my empty stomach unwilling to fill itself, nausea, nervousness, anxiety. When asked about the situation, even today, I want to cry and the cry wants me. I hold my tears and try to intellectualize the “topic”. The inability to contribute to what is becoming of history anyhow, and incoherent commentaries on the supposed ambiguity of the conflict, are slowly poisoning me, consuming the last drops of strength I was secretly saving in hope for a future that would count with me.



Three months later, at the end of May, I reach my homeland. On the way from the airport, the radio presenter announces that 100 days have passed since the invasion of our neighbor. All seems still, unchanged at a first glance. Only when a waiter in a local coffee bar does not seem to understand me do I realize she is Ukrainian. Suddenly, I start noticing Ukrainians everywhere: in the restaurants, on the streets, even in the Tatra mountains, spending their free time, waiting for some sort of a resolution, dwelling *in the meantime*.

I switched positions again: I am here, in the proximity of the war, reading about the violence erupting in Mexico: about the usual killings or narco-government confrontations and feminicides. If there ever was any illusion of safety, it evaporated during these last months. But strangely enough, I feel less anxious being here right now, almost ignoring the ongoing war. Am I slowly getting accustomed to it? Or is it an instrument the mind designs in order to live, to exist, a certain disregard of some sort of *neighboring danger*?

*

It's been a few months since I returned to Mexico. I tried to finish this essay several times, I tried to find a moment, an expression that would provide for an epilogue, but there is none. The news no longer justifies the status quo, I keep avoiding the *topic* whenever possible, as one avoids a locus where we have been hurt, pretending it does not exist, that it never happened. Throughout the weeks, several strangers have asked me: Are you Ukrainian? For we do look alike, especially so far from our homelands. I have met Ukrainians here in Mexico, mostly young girls, and I looked down, just to control what would immediately grow in me: that absurd, incessant feeling one always pushes away, that *thing* I try to avoid at all cost.

The local media has mostly forgotten about the war in Ukraine, which, in the course of months, *in the meantime*, has become one of the many wars currently taking place; one of the many places being swallowed as one swallows a tear.



Foreign Tongue || Snehal Amembal

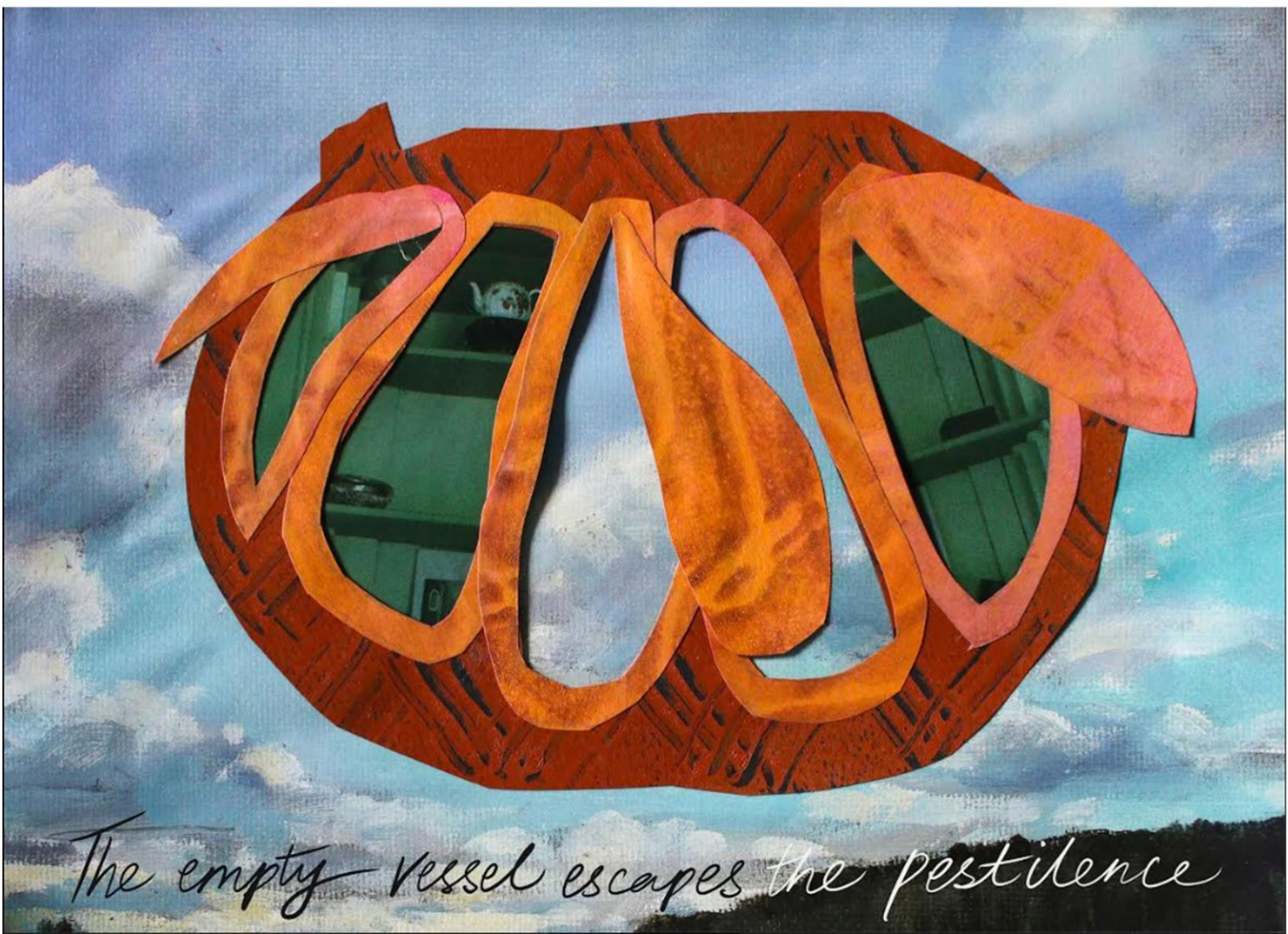
Our children speak your tongue,
Ashamed of how we speak.
Reeking of vernacular,
A rough stone against smooth paper.

Every hesitation,
they unknowingly mock.
Over and over we listen,
Like a voice over static.

So what did we expect
laden with the weight of our decisions.
In our quest for a better life;
Are our children slowly becoming yours?

Bond

Vessel XI by Dua Abbas Rizvi



The empty vessel escapes the pestilence

Nameless Fate || Winifred Òdúnóku

The first time I heard about you, I was in Runtown, at the Don Villa, waiting to see the President. The people I was sitting with at the lobby had described you in a despicable manner with words that have refused to leave my head ever since. They said you were a strong woman, never one to falter at the face of death. They said you oversaw the coup that out-threw the last President and seated this one. They said you are a distant second cousin to the current President, but your loyalty closed up that relational distance. They said he uses you as an instrument to carry out his evil deeds, so like a spell that must not be discovered by humankind, you remain hidden behind a veil despite being a valiant soldier. They said you once hacked a civilian to death because of some unclear offence perpetrated by the latter. Heck! They even said if you found anyone lurking around the Presidential villa without any definite mission, you would shoot them at first sight. That, Colonel, is an infringement on a countryman's human rights, but who am I to talk?

The first time I saw you, I had just gained global recognition for writing an article that condemned the Government of President Yasir, expounding on the ill-treatment of the citizens of the Federal Republic of Kendra orchestrated through his government. I had written that article outside the shores of Kendra, amassed public opinion that differed in wavelength, and aroused the anger of more than half of the country's population, you, being number one. And the moment my feet touched Kendran grounds, I was whisked to the Presidential villa by armed men.

“We've been ordered to arrest you with immediate effect, Mr Omo. Co-operate with us and we shall get you to the Presidential villa alive.”

I had been too stunned to say a word. The first thing that came to my mind were my wife and children. If I wasn't allowed to leave the airport before a group of armed men swarmed me, how much more would my wife, who is a teacher in a public school, have to face? That was the first time, ever, that I feared for my life in my journalism career spanning thirteen years.

From the airport to the Don Villa, it took an hour and thirty minutes, but my mind travelled for much longer. It went to the first day I received my appointment letter at



CDC Africa. That was where my journalism career took off and progressed with the speed of light. I had covered many stories and brought many dark ones to light. But now, more than a decade later, the same journalism was taking me into the mouth of the shark.

Even time distends at the face of homecoming, but this was no home.

I wasn't going to my family in the heart of town. I wasn't going to my wife's school to surprise her with my arrival; or my children's. I wasn't going to my mother to greet her, bearing gifts from 'the abroad.' I was being bundled in daylight to the Presidential villa because I had written an article that tainted the image of the President. The armed men told me to not say anything, so I remained silenced, and squeezed in between their heavily-built bodies inside the mini-van. Their coarse khaki uniforms pierced my skin, and the muzzles of their guns smiled at me horrendously. I could sense their eagerness to be fired.

The first time I met you, I was inside the President's large office, shaking like an elf that had lost its way. The power I wielded through my pen had wilted at the sight of you. You wore a burqa under which only your two eyes were visible. Other parts of your body were hidden but, I could see that you were holding something under that overflowing burqa. A gun, it turned out, because when the President asked me why I wrote the article and I replied innocently that I was only doing my job, you had raised your gun and aimed it at me. Only then did I realized that you were in a full camo uniform, your legs branded in soldier boots, and your waist embraced by the thick belt wrung around it. I screamed and begged for mercy, my legs shaking and unable to support me. I fell to the ground and before I knew what was happening, your foot was on my hip, kicking me to stand up now or "I shoot you, motherfucker."

I stood up.

I saw you at close range for the first time.

Looked into your eyes and saw myself.

But as soon as our eyes made four, you averted my gaze.



“You better cooperate with me, Mr man.” Your voice bore compassion and anger at the same time.

I watched you walk back to your initial position, astride the President’s settee, and standing at attention. You signaled to your junior officers to bundle me out of your sight again.

They kicked and slapped me. Spit at me for committing treason. Insulted me for being a weakling who only knew how to fight with a pen. Bundled and delivered me into the hands of another officer they called the Chief Prison Services Officer (CPSO). From his hands, I was transferred to another set of uniformed men who blindfolded me with a sack bag. My whole world turned black, so black that I could not see my future anymore.

After some tossing here and there and transfers between more hands, through a journey that I can't even remember how long it lasted, we finally walked into a dark pit somewhere that felt like it was fifteen feet below ground level. It smelt like piss. Instantly, I knew it was a place where other government offenders like myself were sent to. I could hear voices superimposing one another, and whispers too faint for one to make out the words being said. The officers dragged me along and threatened the prisoners to keep shut. We came to a stop suddenly, a key clanked against a metal gate, I was uncuffed, then pushed into a cell forcefully. Only when I crash-landed on the hard floor did the sackcloth over my head give way. Then, one of the inmates helped to remove it completely.

“This one be like person wey go school oh.” He announced to the others and laughter erupted in the cell. It was a small cell, and I made the fourth person.

“Please, where am I?” The question had been on my lips for a long time, and I thought the cell was a much safer place to ask it.

“Prison, Oga. U dey Katako Prison.” He offered a handshake, and when I didn’t take it, kicked me and walked away to a corner.

The others laughed. Some out of pity. Others, in amusement. I could hear laughter from the adjacent cells too. This was no place to be.

For the first time since my arrest, I buried my head in my hands and wailed.



The journey of a thousand miles starts with a step, the popular saying goes. But my journey as an inmate started with heavy blows.

Remember the guy that removed my blindfold and told me where I was? He would come back to question me.

Who you be?

Wetin carry you come here?

Who carry your matter go government side?

How u go take dey useful to us for here? Pick a side.

For every time that I delayed getting an answer out of my tired mouth, I received a blow to my chin. Some landed on my jaw. A few on the bridge of my nose, breaking it. There were slaps too. Everything happened in a rush.

I don't know how you came to know about this but the next time I saw you, you escorted the junior officers into the cell, and had them deal with the huge guy. Lefty, they called him. He was the most notorious of them all. The crime for which he was taken was the gravest of them all. Everyone knew not to fall into the bad graces of Lefty for he will use his left hand to disfigure one's face. If I had been warned earlier, maybe I wouldn't have suffered in the hands of one that would bow at my feet were we to meet outside the giant walls of the prison; for with my men, I could make or mar him. And if you hadn't shown up in time, maybe Lefty's left hand would have launched me to the left side of life, seamlessly so.

After Lefty was beaten up by the officers, I was dragged out of the cell and taken to the hospital. Your shadow was following my weak body everywhere it went. When my eyelids closed in surrender to the medications administered at the hospital, you were the last person I set my eyes on. Your eyes glistened under the burka that hid your face, and they held my gaze for much longer. Maybe you thought I wasn't looking at you, because I looked more like a dead man than one on the brink of death. When I woke up, five hours later they said, it was the same glistening eyes that welcomed me back. Yours. The moment you saw my now-wide-open eyes, you left the ward and I



heard you riling orders to some men just by the corridor. Then a bunch of officers came inside, helped me up, and dragged me out of bed. Again, came the sack. My face was covered and I was led into a car where I knew you'd be inside already, waiting.

The journey took an hour, or maybe more. My sense of reasoning wasn't fully back.

When the sack was lifted off my face, I saw myself in a lit room with no openings whatsoever. What exactly was happening? I looked to my left and right, only the stonecold faces of the uniformed men welcomed me. None of the faces were recognizable. I knew you, or rather, the President would not be stupid enough to let my brain register even a single face of your men. So different batches of your men dealt with me at different stages. Now I understood how greatly the President feared the power of my pen.

You too, I know.

Why are you so afraid of showing your face? You won't keep hiding forever, would you? Show me what you look like and that's all it'll take for the whole world to know the errant dog that is doing the Presidents' dirty jobs. All of them.

As I tried to maintain my balance on the transparent floor, and let my eyes become reacquainted to bright light after hours of darkness, footsteps approached me from behind, and with them came voices. Many voices. I tried to look back and the muzzle of a gun instructed me to face forward. Where were you in all these?

The footsteps stopped right behind me. The officers still had their guns pointed at me, so I could barely turn.

"Sit down," one of the new voices said right behind me.

That wasn't you. The voice didn't sound like you.

"But there's no seat..." I tried to argue but a hand held my shoulder firmly and pushed me down. Only when my butt hit hardwood did I realise that a chair had materialised right behind me. I writhed in discomfort from the pain that jolted through my nerves. What was happening? I tried to look around, but the fierce faces of the uniformed men slapped me with caution.



I answered my own question when a table was brought before me, with a laptop on top, and a bottle of water beside it.

I was going to write.

“What do you want me to write?” I stammered, dreading the fate that was staring me right in the face. One too many times, I’d heard how they forced captured journalists to re-write their controversial articles verbatim. And for every word missed or misused, when compared to the original article, the journalists would receive a bullet in their body. By the time the torturers would be finished with them, almost all the blood vessels in their bodies would have been ripped open. And when all the blood leaves your body, what remains?

“Please,” I started to cry now like the real coward that I was, “I have a fami...”

“You didn’t think about your family when you were writing the article?” A voice roared from behind.

That was you.

I could never mistake your voice for anything. You came. You came forward. To my front, commanding the other officers to leave us alone. When the room was empty, you roared again.

“Answer me, you...” there was a hesitation, as though you were considering your next statement, before you added, “idiot.”

Now your gun was raised, again revealing the camo you had underneath your burka. I wondered how a woman could be this vicious yet pious? Isn’t it pious women that wore hijabs to cover their bodies? And then those on a higher level of piety don burkas to cover their faces? If you were in this category, why were you also wicked? How did you mix oil with water so perfectly? My face bore questions but my body craved freedom.

“Please,” I clasped my hands together and rubbed them, “I will use this as a warning. Please.” My nose was full of snot in a matter of minutes. “It’ll never happen again.” I begged like a child who was at the mercy of an angry step mother; you.



“It would be better if you put those hands to great use,” you said. Your voice had suddenly become softer, and you’d put down the gun. You rested your hands on the table, and peered into my eyes. You were really so close that I could see my whole frame inside your eyes. Brown eyes. Sparkling irises. Full lashes. A lush stare. Your eyes bore a deep recognition but I was not about to anger you by staring too much. When I was just at the nick of the moment of unravelling your identity, you turned your face away with irritation.

“Now,” you straightened up and lifted your gun again, “start writing the goddamn article.”

Goddamn.

There was one person I knew that was fond of that word.

And it had become a thrown-around word in my house because my eight-year-old won't stop inserting the word in his vocabulary in mimicry of one of his aunts. But now was not the time to make an analysis.

“Please.” The word refused to come out of my mouth. And even if it had, I was sure you wouldn't have paid any more attention.

You approached me stealthily, pointed your gun at my skull, and commanded me to start writing or you'd blow my head off.

Snot escaped my nose and landed on my bedraggled shirt. Was this how I was going to die? Like a church rat?

I flipped the laptop open, placed my forefinger on the power button with shaky hands and sweaty palms, then tried to remember the first sentence in the *goddamn* article. I was surely going to breathe my last today, I thought, as I closed my eyes shut, trying to say my last prayer while envisioning all the beautiful moments I would have had with my family in the future.

I pressed down the power button and sighed, ready to plunge into the bottomless tunnel that would lead me to the great beyond.

And when I opened my eyes, the picture on the laptop's screensaver welcomed me back to life, or rather, brought me closer to life than any attempt at re-writing the



article would have. It was a picture of my wife, Liya, squatting on a mat under a tree, with our two sons, four and one at the time, curled up in her lap, and tossing a thumbs-up at the camera man — my sister, Sewedo. The person behind the camera.

She had taken that picture when she came to visit my family after her six months training at the army camp eleven years ago, right before disappearing into thin air like she never existed. That was the last time we set eyes on each other, and the last we'd heard from each other. I still had the photo on my phone. But what was it doing on this laptop?

In my confusion, I looked up, and met your expectant eyes. A pool of water had formed at the corners of your eyes. This time, you maintained your gaze and made me see into your soul. You desperately wanted for me to see you. To get the message. To know that you never wanted to be on this mission. Your breathing increased and you sounded like a sleeping gorilla. The edges of the burka around your face became wet instantly, and a needle of affection punctured your hoarse voice so it became deflated.

“Broda,” your voice was soft now, much like the voice I knew to be my sister’s long before this new person took over her body, “please start writing the article now.” Your voice was faint and persuasive. “Don’t let me do this.” You added almost immediately, while touching the butt of your gun and then looking away sharply.

A soldier had to behave like one, no matter what.

I looked into the figure in front of me and saw fate. The tears. I let them flow. My eyes. They became foggy. My mind. It stayed sharp.

I must remember the words in my article. I must remember everything verbatim. I must remember, so I don't die at the hands of my own sister.

And when I started typing, slowly at first, then frantically as though the Grim Reaper was pursuing me with his scythe, I heard you heave a sigh. Was it a sigh of relief, regret, or disdain that your brother had to crawl into this situation with his own two legs, or anger at the fact that you became the President's errand dog instead of the Chief Commander of the Army that you dreamed of becoming as a little girl? I couldn't tell.



The only thing I could confirm was that the two differing paths we chose in life had come back to intertwine together.

I continued tapping away at the keyboard while you roamed the room, with your hands dug into your eyes. and fixated on the ceiling.

I knew what you were thinking.

Dreamer in Debris || Mahnoor Rehan

I may appear walking in the world
But in another universe
I am dangling on stars
By a silver thread
wrapped around my neck
I take the bus every morning
To come see you
The 10:45 feels like an espresso shot
Warm and bitter down my throat
Buzzing the centers of my eyes
Knowing that past it all
Is your sun soaked
Rose-musk face that awaits me
I see health workers
Desperate dreamers
Silent weepers
High achievers
Take the same bus as me
I identify with each one of them
A dreamer, alone—
At last
In debris



A Breath of Fresh Air || Anne Marie OBrien

Fresh air wraps its arms around my body as I meditate this morning
I feel it breezing through me
As it squeezes in the slightly ajar window



Chai and Chrysanthemum || Mahnoor Rehan

My heart leans
towards abomination
You— Earliest ray of sunshine
Walking sack of calculated calories
Abyss, philanthropy
I follow the squirrels as they hop from one willow to another
when I leave my world behind just to play a minuscule part in yours
White Chrysanthemum disguised
As a human
Bang bang
Swish swish
They rip my petals off in bits
Even god loves your company
You both laugh at my life choices on a Saturday morning over a
cup of chai
Oh, what a delightful sight am I?
A hopeless, humorless watch
The burden of love etched in my palms—
Yet the thought of you still keeps me warm
As I sit here in my rocking chair
In the winter of my life
My center centers around your center
And I quietly oblige



Cover Artist Feature

Nisha Ghani

Where are you from, and how does that affect your work?

I was born and raised in Lahore, Pakistan, and this is where I am currently based. Being in Lahore my whole life, and watching the city evolve into a sprawling urban jungle, has always been a surreal phenomenon to witness. But watching my own home be torn down is what prompted me to try and understand memory and the emotional association we, as individuals, have with spaces.

Seeing the city I love change so rapidly made me realize the power these spaces bear: how a man-made structure or object could evoke such strong feelings within me.

Who are your biggest artistic influences?

So many to choose from!

My biggest inspirations have been Kathy Kollowitz for her drawing style and the emotive figures she creates. I've also been inspired by Ruby Chishti and Zarina Hashmi, who address themes of home and identity within the South Asian context. My work has also been influenced by the research of Antonio Demasio on memory and emotion – in between recollection and remembrance, there exists a state of shared consciousness – signs and symbols – objects collected and passed down between generations – Antonio Demasio describes this as the root of memory and the desire to place oneself within it, whether it is observed in real-time or through a tangible memento.

Where do you find inspiration? When is your favorite time of the day to create?

My inspiration has been the women in my family, and the stories they tell. Growing up and listening to their stories, often more than once, has been a way for both them and me to hold on to the people we've lost, a way to preserve something bigger than us. One of my fondest memories as a child are of when I would play, draw, and do my homework in the afternoon with my daadi, seated in the veranda of our house.

Afterwards, we'd have tea together at sundown, and she would tell me stories about her family. Perhaps this is why my favourite time to create is the afternoon and evening.



How does this artwork fit into your broader body of work or artistic style? Does it represent a departure or evolution from your previous pieces?

My artistic style and medium have primarily been drawing and printmaking, with a focus on mark-making. How we observe, interpret, and develop emotional and cultural connections – its nuances and visual vocabulary are themes my work explores.

My previous works were on a smaller scale, and focused only on impressions of photographs. I feel that this piece has been an evolution from my prior work, in terms of scale and technique. With this piece, I broke out of the confines of a smaller scale and detailed marks, leaning towards abstraction. The work is almost 20x30 inches, which is almost thrice the size I'm used to working on. The marks are also freer and fluid, while the color palette also features hints of vivid colors and tones. In the broader body of my work and artistic style, I feel that this piece is more experimental, and I'm excited to explore some of the new techniques I discovered during the process of its creation in my upcoming works.

Is there a story or narrative behind this artwork that you'd like to share with your audience?

Not in particular, but the process of this artwork did make me think a lot about how we carry the women in our lives within us. Through their stories and anecdotes, in the way they speak or gesture, an old family recipe we make once a month. While we are unique in our individuality, I feel that we are shaped by the ghosts of the women we carry, our mothers and their mothers. As afraid as we are sometimes of turning into them, their legacy and lineage is an intrinsic part of us. This shared history and community is what keeps us connected to our history and identity.

How did/does the theme of this issue (Homebound) resonate with you?

A friend of mine, once exasperated by life, was ranting and said, "I want to go home, but home is a sentiment". And that really stuck with me. When I came across the theme for this issue, I went back to that conversation, and felt inspired to share my contribution. I feel like in some way, we're always homebound – finding our way to that space or feeling of comfort and familiarity.

What emotions or messages do you hope viewers will experience or take away from engaging with this piece?

My hope with all my works is for people to experience the state of flux between the past and the present, and for it to evoke a sense of nostalgia and remembrance in them. Every time I have looked at family photographs with someone, whether that is my family or friends, there has always been a sense of shared sentiment and familiarity. Each object holds a story and a deep-rooted history. That intangible connection and unexplainable emotion you feel when hearing stories about your family members, or looking at old photographs and letters is what I want to share with the people who engage with my work, and in doing so, I hope to find a shared vocabulary for its expression.



What role does art play in your process of self-exploration and expression?

My art has been a means for me to explore my relationship with my identity, family, and culture, as well as the complex, multi-dimensional emotions which come alongside these. The discomfort and pain, old aches which arise from the perpetual identity crisis and dread of losing oneself in the rapid passage and progress of time. The decay and loss, the grief, the degeneration; it is all inevitable. But as uncomfortable a process it is, it is one that's necessary. Creating helps me confront and delve deeper into my emotions. I'm also a very shy and introverted person, so making art helps me express in a way that words cannot.



Contributors



Amal Muhammad Abu Al-Rish is a teacher, mom, and amazing individual who is currently living through the genocide in Gaza, Palestine. She has graciously allowed us to share her story in hopes that it may reach an audience who can help her, and her family survive. Her GoFundMe is linked on themissingslate.com.

Snehal Amembal (*she/her*) is a freelance writer, editor and poet based in Surrey, UK. Her writing primarily reflects her motherhood journey, memories of her own childhood and the essence of everyday moments which she records in her blog 'Notes On The Go'. She has authored 3 poetry chapbooks – *Pause, I Am* and *In between Love*. Her work has appeared in anthologies and literary zines. Finally, she is a Young Onset Parkinson's Disease (YOPD) warrior and creates awareness about the condition through her writing.

Janis Butler Holm (*she/her/hers*) served as Associate Editor for *Wide Angle*, the film journal, and currently works as a writer and editor in sunny Los Angeles, USA. Her prose, poems, art, and performance pieces have appeared in small-press,



national, and international magazines. Her plays have been produced in the U.S., Canada, Russia, and the U.K.

Lucia Duero (*she/her*) from Slovakia is a writer, poet and literary translator based in Mexico City.

Rija Farhan (*she/her*) is a student in Australia. Interested in historical fiction and non-fiction, she loves stories that connect with her cultural roots and explore new perspectives of historical events.

Nisha Ghani (*she/her/they*) is a multidisciplinary artist from Lahore, Pakistan, with a love for banana bread. Her work revolves around memory and object association, particularly in South Asian culture and history. She has exhibited locally and internationally, in Lahore, Islamabad, London, and Turkey. Her work has also been published in *Acierage V1* and *Dillinama Journal*. Nisha's work also spans across writing, research, teaching, and curriculum design. Her Instagram is @nishaghani.

Jasmine Harrell (*she/her*) graduated from Bowie State University with a degree in English. She resides in the USA and is a Technical Writer with dreams of being a full-time author. Her work has been published by IHRAF Publishes, the Bacopa Literary Review, SFPA's Star Line Magazine, and the *Alchemy and Miracles Anthology* by Gilbert and Hall Press. She loves drawing, writing, and reading in her spare time, is a devout horror and science fiction fan, and enthusiast of all things sweet.

Sana Khan (*she/her*), currently in Pakistan, is an amalgam of confusion, ponderings and disillusionments. She is also ever persistent about the journey of the soul. In a world that is too loud, too distracting, and heartbreakingly selfish, Sana tries to find solace in the written word. Her pieces normally revolve around the self and the journey within. She has a penchant for dutifully avoiding chores, and either finds herself with a book accompanied by tea and cake, or on the PlayStation, also, with tea and cake.



Noor Kumarchadha (*she/her*) is a 12th grade student based in Bombay. From before she could walk, she has been interested in the world of books and art, which later translated into a keen curiosity in literature and academia. She hopes to hold onto that and make it a part of all her future projects.

Namrah Matloob (*she/her*) completed her honors in English language and literature from Iiui. Then she briefly worked as a content writer. Matloob's blogs have been published by The Nation, The Woman Inc, and Parhlo previously. Her work is majorly based on social critique. Besides writing, she has worked at Preparatory School Islamabad and is currently working with an ed-tech organization, Dot and Line, as an English Language and Literature instructor. Born and raised in Islamabad, Pakistan, Matloob currently spends time between Islamabad and a small town called Chashma.

Natalie Shea (*she/her*) is a writer and artist in Georgia, USA. She is a graduate of SNHU with a master's degree in creative writing and a member of the International English Honors program Sigma Tau Delta. Natalie has been published by Today's Christian Living. Her Instagram is @natalie_shea13.

Noor Ul Ain (*she/her*) is an aspiring writer/poet currently studying English Literature in Pakistan. Her name, meaning "the light of eyes," symbolizes her commitment to forging her unique path and identity, diverging from conventional paths.

Anne-Marie O'Brien (*she/her*) started her writing journey in San Francisco, USA, shortly after graduating from university. She has since written many poems in America, Australia, Ireland and London inspired by her travels and worldly experiences. Her poetry contains themes of love, relationships, choice, discovery, mental health, nature, and observing life as it happens all around us.

Winifred Òdúnóku (*she/her*) is a writer from Nigeria who loves to explore different narrative styles in her writing. She works as an Assistant Editor for Isele Magazine and is a Nonfiction Reader at Fiery Scribe Review. Her works have been



published or forthcoming in Inked Gray Press, Ilford Review, IBADANarts, African Writer Magazine, Isele Magazine, The Moveee, Revista Periferias, Kalahari Review, Nnoko Stories, Ngiga Review, and Punocracy, among others.

Sunayna Pal (*she/her*) was born and raised in Mumbai, India, now calls Maryland, USA home. She has made her literary mark with her debut poetry book, *Refugees in Their Own Country* (B&W Fountain), which explores the Partition of India. Her evocative poetry graces the pages of numerous international journals and anthologies, museums, poetry festivals, and libraries, resonating with readers across the globe. Beyond her writing, Sunayna serves as the Director of The Poetry Academy and is dedicated to the practice of Heartfulness meditation. For a deeper insight into her work and journey, please visit sunaynapal.com.

Claire Parker (*they/she*) is a feral queer, farmer, forager, woods witch, herbalist, and adventurer. They grew up on unceded Kumeyaay land, near the Pacific Ocean. They mostly write about place-based longing, eco-sensual heartthrob, reverential heartbreak, and human connection to plant and water spirits. When not actively tending the nomadic hearth, they live on unceded Wabanaki land, near the Atlantic Ocean. Their poetry has appeared in the Eunoia Review and in the Portland Press Herald Deep Water poetry column. Claire has been writing poems since they were 4 years old.

Paroma (*she/her*) is a writer, avid reader, and poet from India. Her work has appeared in The Alipore Post, The Punch Magazine's Poetry Issue, and Juggernaut Books platform. She can be contacted on her email address – paromawrites@gmail.com

J.B. Polk (*she/her*) Polish by birth, a citizen of the world by choice. Her first story was short-listed for the Irish Independent/Hennessy Awards, Ireland, 1996. Since she went back to writing in 2020, more than 100 of her stories, flash fiction and non-fiction, have been accepted for publication. She has recently won 1st prize in the International Human Rights Arts Movement literary contest.



Mahnoor Rehan (*she/her*) is a poet, a book lover and an avid introvert, she is known for writing letters to friends on brown paper bags, leaving poems as footnotes on her current reads, and for her gol chashme. She enjoys sitting in the loud cafes of Islamabad, Pakistan, quietly sipping hot cocoa, and reading Keats poetry and Woolf's prose. Her poems have been published in *The Missing Slate*, *Pandemonium Journal*, and forthcoming *Aleph Review*.

Juanita Rey (*she/her*) is a Dominican poet who resides in the USA. Her work has appeared in *Lion and Lilac*, *One Art*, *Moria* and the *Lincoln Review*.

rivvas (*they/them*) lives in North Carolina, USA with their cats. They have moral and ethical rejections to bios and being perceived. rivvas dabbles in different mediums depending on their mood, environment, and the people around them.

Dua Abbas Rizvi (*she/her*) is a visual artist and writer from Lahore, Pakistan. She has written on art and culture for *The Herald*, *Dawn*, *The Friday Times*, *ArtNow*, and *The Aleph Review*, and contributed essays on South Asian and Islamic art to *Encounters: The Art of Interfaith Dialogue* (Brepols), the *Encyclopedia of the Bible and its Reception* (De Gruyter), *Image Journal* (for which she also serves as an editorial advisor), and *Selvedge Magazine*. In 2022, she was awarded a South Asia Speaks Fellowship to develop her first book of visual nonfiction. She is currently studying towards a master's degree at the Academy of Fine Arts in Helsinki.

Mykyta Ryzhykh (*he/him*) is an author from Ukraine, now living in Tromsø, Norway. He was nominated for Pushcart Prize 2023, 2024. He has published many times in literary magazines in Ukrainian and English: *Tipton Poetry Journal*, *Stone Poetry Journal*, *Neologism Poetry Journal*, *Shot Glass Journal*, *QLRS*, *The Crank*, *Chronogram*, *The Antonym*, *Monterey Poetry Review*, *Five Fleas Itchy Poetry*, amongst others.

Patricia Sophia Villalobos (*she/her*) is a college student from Las Vegas, USA. This is her first published work, and she hopes for many more to follow. Patricia spends all her free time reading, writing, and reading some more. She hopes to meet



her goal of reading 1000 books in her lifetime to see if Virginia Woolf was right. She posts her favorite snippets of whatever book she is reading at @greensnotyourcolor on Instagram.

Brandi-Ann Uyemura (*she/her*) is a fifth-generation Japanese American writer born and raised on the island of Oahu. Her essays have been featured in *The Writer*, *Literary Mama*, *Spirituality & Health*, *Raising Mothers*, and more. When she's not at the beach with her sons, she's writing books for kids. Her first picture book *I am a Bon Dancer* comes out in summer 2025. You can see what she's up to on Instagram @TheInspiringBee and her website brandi-annuyemura.com/blog.

Mahin Zia (*she/her*), hailing from a quaint town in Punjab, Pakistan, is an amateur writer and poet. Due to social anxiety disorder, she has found writing as an escape; her burden comes out with the words and flows on the pages, **Shade of Love** is her first published book, and she has participated in several anthologies.

