

# LABYRINTH

I. 20



# THE MISSING SLATE

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# Editor's Note

With immense gratitude to all our dear contributors, I'd like to thank each and every one of you in your individual artistic capacities. We dedicate this issue to the writers who language their inexplicable experiences, the poets who dilute their ink with pain and create magic, and the artists who give us the eyes to see beyond our limited thoughts; here we champion all of them.

Labyrinths symbolize uncertainty: but how can we be certain that even non-'labyrinths' are truly certain? Does that give the labyrinth countless meanings? Our 20th Issue was themed Labyrinth because we wanted to create a space for our wonderful contributors to navigate the ambiguities of their lives and give us a glimpse of what living truly means. We could not have imagined how apt this theme would be, for both us as editors and for our contributors.

To birth this issue, the editors and contributors (and readers) have journeyed through the Labyrinth of Life. While confronting dead ends in search of hope, we find each other as pillars along the way. Therefore, this issue is a collective voyage where we witness illnesses of our loved ones, suffer chronic health issues, encounter family dilemmas, fight for our lives, grieve inconsolably at the helplessness of inexplicable situations, or sometimes just work to wake up to get through the day.

In the same vein, I'd like to thank Kristia Vasiloff and Nwa Rizvi, our Co-Editors in Chief, for stroking just the right embers of hope. Jabeen Qadri, our Art Editor, our untiring creative inspiration; Taqdees Mela, Nonfiction Editor, giving voice when voicing is difficult; Rameen Saad, Essay Editor, our hero who doesn't wear a cape; Saniya Khalil, our Flash Fiction and Prose Editor, who tethers us together, and Jahan Aara, our Managing Editor for our upcoming project The Missing Slate Translations (@themissinglatetranslations on instagram for more info), whose joy is a guiding light towards the end of this journey.

Though we may never fully honor the contributions that form the very foundation of this issue, Labyrinth's meaning will be interrogated cosmically, spiritually, physically, emotionally, and politically. I can proudly say that our Labyrinth, Issue 20, is about snatching hope from hopelessness and redefining what was once thought to be inescapable.

May ease find you where it can,  
Free occupied land,

**THE  
MISSING  
SLATE**

**Maryam Shakeel**  
Managing Editor

# Meet the Team

I'd like to thank: Jabeen Qadri, our Art Editor, our untiring creative inspiration; Taqdees Mela, Nonfiction Editor, giving voice when voicing is difficult; Rameen Saad, Essay Editor, our hero who doesn't wear a cape; Saniya Khalil, our Flash Fiction and Prose Editor, who tethers us together, and Jahan Aara, our Managing Editor for our upcoming project The Missing Slate Translations (@themissinglatetranslations on instagram for more info), whose joy is a guiding light towards the end of this journey.



**Managing Editor**

Maryam Shakeel

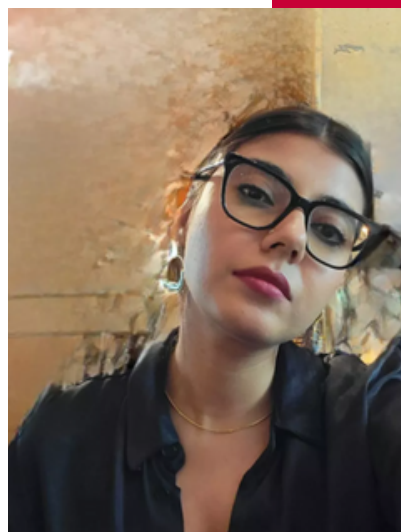
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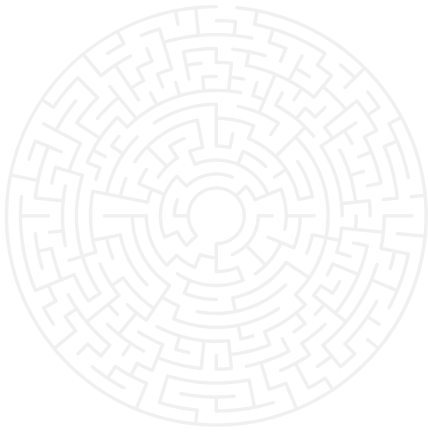


With special thanks to...



**Jahan Aara**  
Managing Editor

**THE  
MISSING  
SLATE**  
TRANSLATIONS



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# ISSUE 20: LABYRINTH

## *A note on the issue, theme, and works featured...*

As we reach the midpoint of 2025, the air feels heavy with change and uncertainty. Our timelines are dense with grief, with wars, with fires – both in the world and in our own homes. There are days that are simply hard for no apparent reason. The silent battles. The struggle to get out of bed. The weight that refuses to name itself.

We find ourselves navigating a world that seems to shift shape just as we begin to understand it. But a labyrinth is not a maze. It doesn't try to trick you. It only asks that you walk its path – forward, inward, sometimes in circles, but always toward something. That's what we as a team aim to highlight: work that speaks to the reality of being alive.

We may not have answers, but we do have each other. Perhaps that is everything.

With this issue, we want to hold space for those struggling with their mental health and for those who help others make it through the day. Whether you're navigating grief, burnout, anxiety, apathy, or simply a world that refuses to slow down, we want to read what survival looks like for you. What healing looks like, or even the absence of it. What care looks like, what doesn't.

There is no singular path through the darkness, but we believe in the light that art can offer, even if only briefly. We feature submissions that reflect this journey – poetry, fiction, short prose, visual art, and hybrid work. As always, we are honored to share your paths. Let this issue be a testament of your steps, however uncertain, however brave.

### **Editor - Essays**

Rameen Saad



The massive wooden wagon rolled along the gravel road, its wheels groaning in protest at every bump and pothole. The entire carriage, lacking strong support, shook as it traveled. A single, gray-spotted horse was tethered to its front and a driver sat atop the wagon. He sang a song he'd heard many times sipping ales at the town tavern.

A slender, young woman stood inside the wagon, struggling to stay upright as the wagon lurched whenever it rode over a thick branch. The woman's tightly braided copper hair hung down to her tiny waist. Her pale, patrician profile seemed frozen and emotionless. Her wrists and ankles were chained to the wagon's side rails, forcing her to stand erect, and making it impossible for her to escape. She stood upon a bed of straw, listening to her heart pounding in her chest.

Nellie Foster, a Presbyterian missionary, sat in the wagon reading aloud to the woman from her bible. Prematurely grey and in her thirties, Nellie was a fervent believer in the Lord and His forgiveness of the wretched girl. Vivianne's sob made her look up. She put her bible aside and went to her.

"Vivianne, ye must remember that God is with ye. Ye have repented yer sins, and, on this day, ye will join Him in His kingdom."

Vivianne swallowed back tears and tried not to cry.

"Nellie if ye weren't with me, I would die of fear before I even reached the gallows. Is this really happening on this horrid day?"

The driver suddenly broke off singing and called back to Vivianne. "Miss, would ye rather I sing you a hymn? How about Nearer My God to Thee?" he barked out a laugh.

"Never mind him," Nellie muttered.

The women heard the faint cries of an excited crowd before they could see it. Off in the distance, families, children, and the elderly revelled in excitement as they waited for Vivianne Dyer's arrival. Little girls ran about with effigies made in her likeness. Vendors erected stalls displaying food and wares and served roasted meat and game pies to anyone with coin. Merchants sold parchment they claimed carried Vivianne's confession. Musicians wandered about, strumming lutes and singing bawdy tunes as women pretended to blush and men howled with laughter. Ragamuffin children slipped through the crowd, sneaking coins out of men's pockets and women's purses.

It was an exciting day in the hamlet of Ramble Field. It wasn't often the small county had a hanging, and gleeful anticipation filled the air. In fact, the last hanging had taken place when Vivianne Dyer was only four years old. She might have attended it but had no memory of it nor the person who was executed.

As soon as people spotted the wagon, an excited shriek went up. They uttered cries of "Hang the bitch!" and "Burn in hell!"

Vivianne swayed and would have fallen over had it not been for her shackling. Nellie wrapped her arms around the woman's small waist and held her tightly. People clamoured around the wagon, spitting at the prisoner and calling her vile names. Two guards pushed the crowd back so the wagon could pass through. The driver removed his hat and held it out to collect the coins offered to him.

Finally, he stopped the wagon and dismounted with a grandiosity that suited a footman attending a prince's coach. Moving around the wagon, he opened the rear gate, and a guard climbed onto it. Unshackling the prisoner, he grabbed Vivianne and pulled her roughly onto the ground. People surged around her and once again guards pushed them back. They forced Vivianne up the steps of the gallows. Nellie made to follow her, but a guard placed his hand on her chest and shoved her backward.

Vivianne stood on the gallows and looked out over the grinning, laughing faces. There were hundreds of people present; many having come from the next town over when they'd heard of her execution. Vivianne's eyes scanned the crowd for signs of her husband,



Hector, but he had abandoned her on this day.

People were impatient. “Hang the baby killer! Hang her!”

The hangman moved forward, placing a hood around Vivianne’s neck then securing it with a noose. He gave a sharp tug and tightened it around Vivianne’s throat to such a degree she feared it would suffocate her before she hung. Vivianne’s shoulders shook as she sobbed into the hood. She smelled the odour of tarp and the terrified sweat of the people who’d hung before her. She allowed herself to think of precious Delilah, something she hadn’t done since she’d killed her.

A justice of the peace stood beside Vivianne and unwrapped a scroll. The crowd hushed each other in preparation for his words. He cleared his throat and read loudly from the parchment.

“Vivianne Dyer, ye have been found guilty of the murder of yer infant girl, Delilah. It was proven that on the fourth day of February 1844, ye fed the child arsenic until she suffered a horrid and painful death. A jury of yer peers has found ye guilty of infanticide and for that wretched crime ye shall hang by the neck on this twentieth day of June 1844, until ye are dead.”

The crowd remained utterly silent, waiting for the hangman to pull the lever and send Vivianne to a well-deserved death. All that could be heard was her silent cries. Suddenly, the trap door opened. Vivianne fell through it, her own weight snapping her slim neck. Her slender body hung in mid-air, the rope creaking as she slowly twisted in lazy circles.

Cheers emitted from the crowd again. Children ran beneath the dead woman, peering up her skirts and pointing at what they saw. Men threw their hats in the air and youth hooked their arms together and danced. Vivianne Dyer was dead. The baby killer was no more.

Nellie blessed herself and wept into a cotton handkerchief. How so many people could

display such glee at Vivianne's great misfortune was a mystery to her. It wasn't her way and certainly not the way of the Presbyterian church. Unable to look at Vivianne any longer, she turned away and began the long walk home.

\*

Vivianne's marriage to Hector Grey was a misery. The pretty, young wife was fifteen years younger than him. Their marriage had come to pass when Vivianne's parents could no longer afford to feed and house their fifteen-year-old daughter. Hector, a widower, wanted a young wife he could use to bear his children. His role was one of cruel jailer rather than husband. He limited Vivianne's social engagements, and she was seldom allowed to visit her parents. A jealous man, he despised his young wife, believing her to be unfaithful to their vows. Often, Hector took his fists to Vivianne at the slightest provocation, leaving her battered and bloodied. A late meal on the table, or a failure to answer him quickly when he asked a question, warranted a beating.

Over time, Vivianne learned his triggers and was careful to avoid them; no speaking at the table unless he spoke to her first. No praying out loud. No asking for money, even to go to the marketplace for food. No singing hymns unless it was Christmas and even then, only a few. There were many other rules, so many that sometimes she forgot one or two. A swift and violent punishment followed.

Tonight, Vivianne stood at the stone fireplace, stirring a large cauldron. Her copper hair was swept into a thick bun and caught beneath a bonnet. Hector didn't like for her to be seen without it. He felt her long, free hair made her look like a loose woman. A large, purple bruise was visible over her left eye. Her tongue flicked at her split lip, licking away fresh blood. Vivianne had made beef stew with root vegetables for Hector and prepared large slices of rye bread.

The house was a dark, one-room stone hut with a thatched roof. The large fireplace where Vivianne cooked took up most of it. A large iron bathtub, a bed with a flat mattress, a wooden table and two chairs completed the meagre furnishings.



Hector burst into the cottage, startling his wife. He carried a large load of firewood, which he dumped onto a small pile beside the fireplace.

“When’s it ready?” Hector barked at Vivianne.

Vivianne flinched.

“Done, Hector,” she mumbled. She scooped a large ladle of stew into a bowl and passed it to him as he sat at the dinner table.

Without waiting for his wife, Hector sat and scooped stew with a slice of bread into his mouth. It dribbled from the corners of his mouth and into his frizzy, gray beard. He wiped it away with the back of his hand and kept eating.

Vivianne took her place across from her husband and blessed herself, saying a silent grace.

Hector snorted. “Prayin’ to yer Lord again. He hasn’t done a thing for us, wife. There are people with plenty on their plate, but He doesn’t do the same for me, does He?”

“Thou shalt not covet, Hector,” Vivianne reproached him in a soft voice.

Hector took a swig of his ale and belched at his wife.

“Covet, indeed! Is it wrong to want a larger house and a heartier meal than what I’ve got? I should pray for a worthier wife. Then I’d have some peace and order in the house!”

Vivianne held her tongue. Hector was leaving the following day for Burnaby to collect his meagre pension. Burnaby was 500 miles away, and he’d be gone for months. When he left, Vivianne would travel to see Rupert Sullivan again. She had urgent news to share, and it was imperative Hector didn’t discover it. He would beat her again, and this time, he’d throw her out for good.

After the candles were snuffed and the two were in bed, Hector relieved himself inside his wife, pounding her and grunting loudly in her ear. His fetid breath heated her neck, and she lay as still as she could, waiting for him to finish. With a grunt, he rolled off her and fell asleep.

Vivianne stared at the ceiling, burning with hatred for her husband. Had she the nerve she would have smashed his head with the fire poker.

Early the next morning, Vivianne heard Hector moving about, preparing to leave. She kept her eyes tightly shut, not wanting him to mount her again. She would rather have eaten shit than lie with him. Thankfully, Hector left without bidding her good-bye, slamming the door behind him. Vivianne breathed a relieved sigh and pulled her quilt tight around her. A slow smile crossed her face until she remembered the baby. Her smile faded.

Vivianne's stomach churned as she thought about her pregnancy. It wasn't Hector's. She'd bled each month for weeks after he'd left for an extended stay to visit a sick relative without her. While he was gone, Vivianne met and became enamored with Rupert Sullivan, a stableman for a wealthy family. At a barn dance, they'd come together, and Vivianne, starved for affection, had brought Rupert into her home. Many times, during the following weeks, he crawled into her bed until it was time for Hector's return. By then, Vivianne was pregnant.

Vivianne couldn't sleep anymore. She got up and went about her day, bathing and braiding her thick, copper hair. Reaching beneath the bed, she pulled out a ceramic vase. It was nearly empty. She fished out just enough coins for a carriage ride to Rupert's livery. She wasn't sure how she felt about seeing him again. Although she'd missed him, he had no knowledge of the pregnancy. She prayed he reacted with joy.

\*

Vivianne crossed the large property where Rupert worked until she reached the barn. Entering, she saw her lover hard at work pitching hay. Sweat rolled down his face and

back as his shoulders heaved with the effort. She remembered the feel of those muscles above her during their lovemaking. A fleeting smile crossed her face.

“Rupert?”

He turned around suddenly and stabbed the pitchfork into the hay. His eyebrows raised. She smoothed her hair and brightened.

“Vivianne! What are ye doin’ here?”

“Hector’s gone again.”

“Aye? Are ye up for a tryst?” His mouth twisted into a lurid grin she hadn’t seen before.

Ignoring this, Vivianne smoothed her cape over her belly with her hands. “Rupert, I’m with child.”

Rupert’s eyes widened and he stared at Vivianne. After a moment he asked, “What has that to do with me, woman?”

“Rupert! It’s yours!” Her glow faded.

“How can ye be sure? Hector’s been home for weeks.”

“Hector was away when ye got me pregnant! I’m too far along for him to be the father.”

“What is it ye want, Vivianne?”

“Rupert, ye can’t abandon me. By the time Hector returns the baby will be born. He’s no fool.”

“That’s between ye and yer husband, not me.”

“But Rupert—”

“Vivianne, ye have a husband. Let him care for the bastard. Tell him it’s his. He’ll never know. He seems as dumb as a stump.”

“Rupert, Hector will be furious with me. You know how mean he is!”

Rupert sighed and sat on a hay bale. He gave Vivianne a cold stare.

“How do I know it’s mine? Yer far too easy to bed and I’ll bet me wages that I haven’t been the only one beneath yer skirts. Do ye think me a fool?” Rupert snorted with laughter. Vivianne stared at him, speechless.

“Besides, woman, I’ve a wife in Dunagan. I’m returning home for four weeks to see her and bring her my wages, then I’m back here again. Ye don’t think I’m goin’ to leave her for ye, Vivianne? She’s a good Christian woman, not a slut like ye.”

“A wife?” Vivianne whispered. Her head began to spin. “Ye never told me.”

“Ye never asked!” Rupert stood up and returned to pitching hay. He glanced back at Vivianne. “Go on, go home to yer husband. Tell him it’s his.”

Turning his back on her again, Rupert went back to his work.

Numb, Vivianne turned and left the stable. Beneath her cape, she rubbed her slightly rounded belly. By the time Hector returned, she’d have a newborn to explain. He’d surely turn her out. She’d have nowhere to live with her new infant. They’d starve in the streets. Tears blurred her eyes during the long walk home in a daze. Vivianne didn’t know what distressed her more, Rupert’s cruelty or the pregnancy. She had believed Rupert’s soft words of affection during the weeks they were together. Had she known him so little? Once, he held her gently in his arms, tracing her mouth with his finger and promising her a future together. Now this dreadful, mocking man had become a pitiless stranger.



In the following months, Hector didn't send word of his whereabouts. Vivianne had no idea when he'd return, or if he was in good health. He sent no money, and she took up sewing to support herself until he returned. The income, however, was meagre and Vivianne was often hungry. It didn't take long for her to empty the coins in the vase beneath the bed.

As the months passed Vivianne seldom went into town. It became impossible to hide her pregnancy beneath her cape. She lived in fear of Hector's return. Would he arrive before the birth or after? Once she'd had the child, perhaps, she could find someone to take it in. Then maybe, by some miracle, Hector wouldn't find out about it. It was a ridiculous thought, but it was her only comfort.

In early February, Vivianne went into labour. Alone and in agonizing pain, she delivered a small girl. Vivianne held the infant and looked closely at her. There was no resemblance to Hector. The child's eyes were dark brown, and a tuft of black hair dusted her head. There was no question she was Rupert's child.

It would have been easy for Vivianne to love Delilah. She was a pretty baby and well-behaved. She seldom cried and she slept well. Vivianne's heart broke as she held her daughter and nursed her. Many days she wept while Delilah slept peacefully in her arms. Had she belonged to Hector, Vivianne would have known great joy for the first time since they married. Instead, she dreaded the moment her husband came through the door. Would he beat her? Would he take a hand to Delilah? Vivianne was far too afraid to seek help from the townswomen. They would know that Delilah was born in disgrace and would have no sympathy for the mother or her daughter.

On a bitter, dark morning, Vivianne stoked the fire, then sat on her bed. She watched Delilah, who lay sleeping in her crate. Vivianne's lank hair hung around her face, and she was unable to cook or care for herself. Her worries beat at her heart every moment, giving her no peace. Vivianne's eyes blurred with tears as she realized there was no hope for her and Delilah.

She heard the scratch of a rat beneath the bed. Normally, it would repulse her, and she

would pull her feet up beneath her, but she was too sullen to react. She watched the ugly creature scuttle across the floor beneath the table, searching for crumbs. She glanced upward at the mantle over the fireplace, looking for arsenic. She should set some out for the unwitting rat. Kill it quietly and think about it no more. Kill it quietly.

Vivianne held the arsenic in her hands and stared at it. She looked at her sleeping baby. If she fed it to the infant in a cup of water, surely her death would be quick, like the rat's. Delilah would choke perhaps, maybe convulse, then lie still. Vivianne would send for the doctor, who would be none the wiser. Infants died quite often in Ramble Field. So did mothers, usually in childbirth.

The rat ran over her feet and, with a shriek, Vivianne stepped on its head, stomping until it stopped moving. She had no need for the arsenic now.

Vivianne sat on the floor, her head in her hands as she wept. Kill her baby? Was she really a monster? Delilah was perfect. She'd done nothing to deserve such a dreadful fate. But there was Hector.

Vivianne thought of Hector's beefy fists as she hugged her legs and rocked herself. Surely, he would kill the baby when he found her. Then he'd kill Vivianne. It would be easy enough for him to leave town and never come back. If he travelled far enough, they'd never find him.

Shaking, Vivianne stumbled to her feet, reached for the arsenic and poured it into a mug. She looked at her sleeping child. The most important thing now was to save her baby from Hector. Even if he believed Delilah was his, as she grew, he'd beat her as badly as he did Vivianne. Delilah would never know a day's happiness. Worse, she might wed a man as evil as Hector. Vivianne had to act quickly.

Vivianne looked at Delilah's rosebud mouth. Her porcelain skin glowed in the firelight. Long, black eyelashes brushed her lower lids. Vivianne shook away the image of her doll-like infant. If she didn't do this now, she never would. She scooped the baby into her arms. With a hand that shook, Vivianne poured the poisonous liquid into Delilah's mouth.

Delilah awoke and howled as loudly as a wolverine. Vivianne had been wrong about the arsenic. It wasn't quick and Delilah suffered greatly, more than Vivianne had imagined. Delilah's face reddened and her tiny hands curled into fists. She vomited, covering herself in watery, blood-stained bile, then began screaming again. Weeping, Vivianne placed her anguished infant back into her crate.

"Dearest God, forgive me!" She pulled on her cape and pushed her way outside into the frozen snow as Delilah screamed. Vivianne heard the child's cries from outside the house. Clutching her cape, she tried to stay warm against a frigid wind as she ran from the stone hut.

Vivianne squatted beneath an oak tree on the frozen ground, rocking herself and moaning. Time passed and, as if sleepwalking, she eventually stumbled on numb legs back to the hut. She strained to hear any sounds from inside the stone cottage, but there were none. With reddened hands like ice, Vivianne managed to open the door and step inside. Delilah lay inside her crate without breathing. Vivianne fell to her knees, weeping and praying for God's forgiveness. When she couldn't cry anymore, she lowered herself into a chair at the table, dropped her head onto her arms and slept.

\*

That was how Hector found his wife when he returned home. He pushed open the door and was greeted by silence. No fire was lit in the fireplace and Vivianne wasn't cooking. He looked at his sleeping wife and felt his anger grow.

"Vivianne!" He barked and she startled awake. "What's the meaning of this? Why is there no meal on the table?"

Vivianne regarded her husband through blurry eyes. "Hector?"

"Yes, it's Hector, ye bloody fool! Who else would it be?" He stormed across the room and threw his canvas bag onto the bed. He was about to turn away when his eye fell upon Delilah's crate. He squatted down for a better look at the tiny child. Looking closer, he saw

she was a light blue. He touched her face and found it cold.

“Vivianne. Whose child is this? What’s happened to it?” Hector stared at his wife.

Vivianne sat with her shoulders slouched, pulling her cape around her.

“Good God, wench, ye look like ye’ve been through the wars. Yer a bloody mess.”

“Is she really dead, then?”

Hector glanced from the child to his wife. “Whose baby is this?”

“Mine, Hector. I had her while ye were away.”

Hector’s eyes widened. “What do ye mean, it’s yers? Ye weren’t pregnant, Vivianne!”

“I was, Hector.”

“Wife, ye were pregnant with my child but didn’t tell me?”

Vivianne shook her head.

“Why in Christ not?”

Vivianne remained silent. Hector bent down and felt the child’s tiny hand.

“Jesus, it’s cold! It’s dead, Vivianne! Have ye called for a doctor ye bloody fool?”

Vivianne whispered, “Her name is Delilah.”

Hector crossed the room and grabbed his wife, pulling her to her feet. He shook Vivianne so hard her head bounced. “What’s happened to her?” he spat.



Vivianne stared at Hector, utterly exhausted. “I killed her, Hector. I did. I fed her some arsenic in a drink. I thought she’d just go to sleep, but she didn’t, Hector. Oh, how awfully Delilah screamed. It was a terrible scream. I didn’t know a baby could scream so loudly. I surely didn’t, Hector. It seemed to take awfully long.”

Shaken, Hector released his wife and turned away. Leaning against the fireplace, he faced her again. “Are ye mad? Why would ye kill an infant, woman?”

“I didn’t want ye to know about her.”

“Why in Christ not?” he repeated, his face turning purple and his hands curling into fists. Too bereft to fear her husband anymore, Vivianne said simply, “She’s not yers. I knew ye’d be angry, so I killed her. I was going to bury her before ye knew, but ye came home too fast. Ye should have written to me, so I’d know when ye’d be back. It’s just like ye not to write me, Hector. Ye’ve always been an imbecile. A husband ought to write to his wife when he’s away. Had ye a heart, ye’d know that.”

Hector stared at his wife without speaking. A surge of rage flooded through him. He could have broken his wife into pieces, shattering her as sharply as if she’d been the ceramic vase beneath the bed. Except clearly, she was mad. It was the only reason he didn’t destroy her at that very moment. She wouldn’t dare rut with another man. Vivianne knew he’d kill her. Her mind had gone.

Turning around, Hector left the house, mounted his horse and rode into town as fast as though the devil was at his heels.

\*

After the hanging, the shrieking of the crowd faded, and people straggled away from the scene. The gallows were taken down the following day, but for weeks, people spoke of Vivianne in pubs, at the market, and in their homes. When they tired of the subject, the ordinary routine of everyday life replaced Vivianne’s hanging until it was seldom mentioned.

Neither Vivianne nor Delilah were buried on consecrated ground. Vivianne was executed for her crime, and Delilah, born out of wedlock, was unbaptized. The church turned its back on them both. Although mother and daughter hadn't been together long in life, they were brought together again in death and buried in an unmarked grave. They lay well outside of Ramble Field in an area the townspeople never frequented.

As the years passed, weeds and grass grew high over the grave, making it impossible to find. Vivianne and Delilah Dyer became nothing more than tragic folklore and, even then, seldom mentioned. The people of Ramble Field went about their lives, unbothered and self-absorbed.

No one ever looked for Vivianne or Delilah Dyer.

# Epiphanies in my life: letters to my mother

*Diane Klammer*



After Hala Alyan

An oak's shadow leaves a kaleidoscope. It is always noon in

Rio de Janeiro

and my aunt's porcelain  
Madonna sat by front window:  
where you left her. Below, waves  
smiled snaggletooth foam from

Leblon beach where grandmother  
used to sit and count passerbys  
before she died. I never met her  
but remembered your stories. The

gold locket you gave me rested  
on my heart, intertwines V  
for Valentina and A for Arlindo:  
now belongs to my daughter.

I will never forget running  
on the beaches of Ipanema  
to Copacabana, where you  
first met my father in the forties;

Seattle

Where rain spattered Calder's metal,  
eagle towered over my sunglasses,  
in the mists of a Sculpture Garden,  
Aaron pointed to the open doorway

of an oyster bar, where a firepit warmed  
the center of a room. Audrey pulled  
and we sat to glints of ocean  
glasses of Sauvignon Blanc fresh—

oysters on the half shell,  
salad with bay shrimp sustained  
us before we wandered to Pikes  
Market to immerse ourselves in

bouquets and cherries before  
returning to Freemont,  
that giant crushing California,  
VW bug near Aaron's apartment,

Denver

as the usually spacious park,  
near City Hall crowded

with protestors underneath  
glare illuminated signs

speaking out against policies  
of the Trump Administration:

Thirty-four thousand strong connected  
to hear Bernie Sanders

angrily defying Musk's chainsaw.

Policies against the people of  
America, while dandelions grew

decorated grass, while butterfly  
helicopters flew overhead

any city where you must listen to know it. Everyone hides

whales

that choruses ocean songs  
where my children trilled  
in my lap as babies,  
before they grew to

earn a place in their own  
boats in their own seas,  
by their own houses after,  
lives of ancestors became

stories we tell under Tanzanite  
skies, listening to guitar in  
a backyard house of  
a new country. And if you,

veils

of royal purple that covered  
my head at weekly mass,  
as a girl created illusions  
of glamor of mystery out

of hymns. Candles, choirs  
of my young life's supplication,  
where a rose did not fit,  
my dark hair like

Spanish señoritas of lavender  
a doll from Olivera Street

with a dove in hand  
to reveal the duality of her—

Denver

a city of Helenite near  
an active volcano,  
in the lands of multiplicity—  
nexting in Russian dolls,

in reflections of clouds  
ideas, entities and archetypes,  
pulling like a rubber gumby,  
a plastic egg at Easter

dancing like tops spinning  
on uneven asphalt.

as anchors catch, unhook,  
unrealized pathways—

anotice when bluebirds call  
water Blue Jays from the East—  
mate with Steller's jays  
as you eat a meal at fresco

the Anima and Animus.  
that once concealed your girl  
from her own identity script,  
that the fortune cookie conceals:

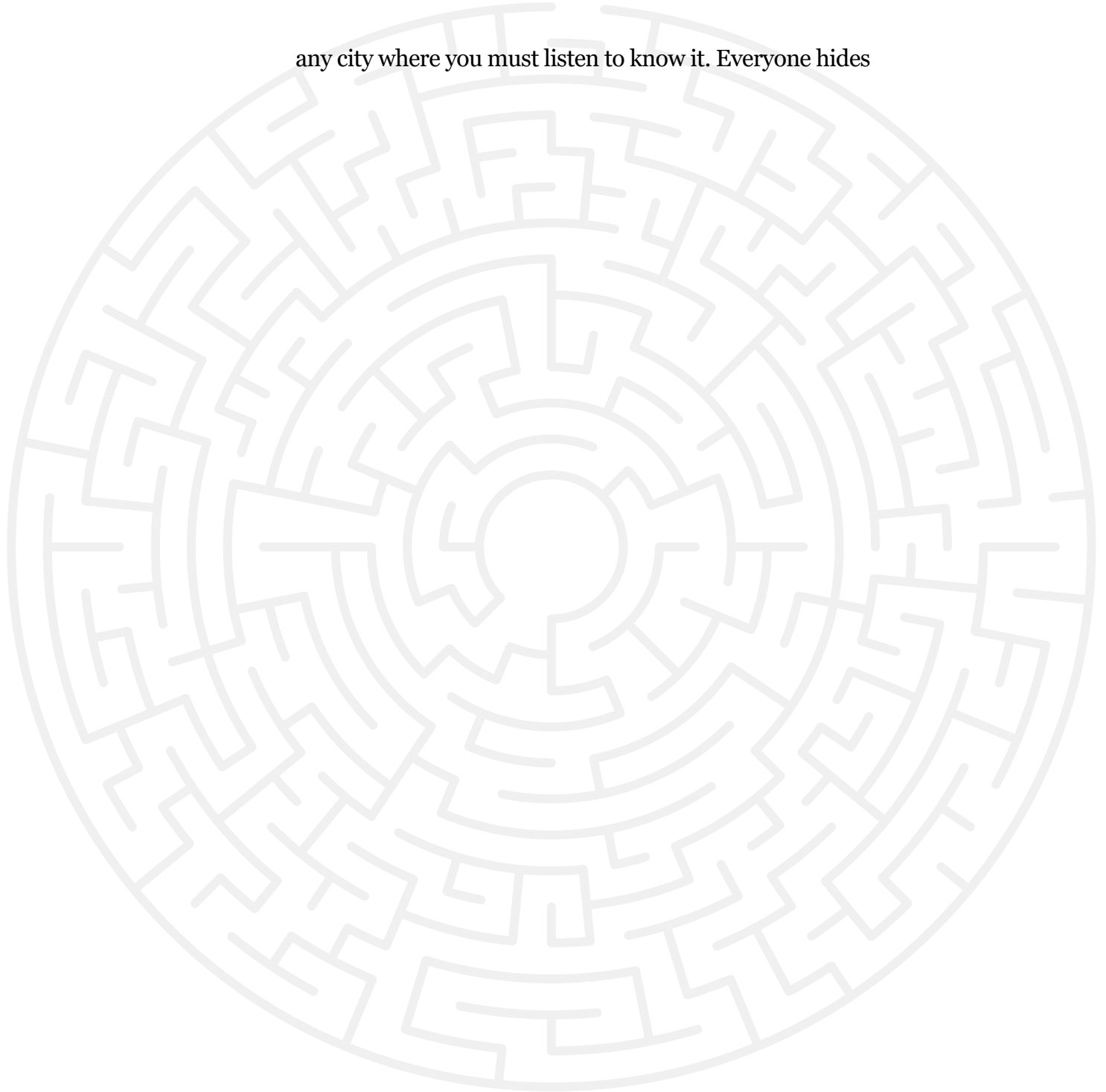
Choices I never made  
from the blueprints you once gave me:  
restricted like a glass of gumballs  
I longed for but could not possess

if you crack the egg open,

if you pull the wrapper away,

if you chew that chartreuse gum.

any city where you must listen to know it. Everyone hides





you don't know  
what to say  
when the young mother  
wearing the sweater  
covered in embroidered  
pink smiling monkeys  
climbing up blue curly ropes  
tells you she is taking  
her down syndrome son  
to lourdes for a miracle

you can only tell yourself  
this is not your circus  
this is not your mass  
of moveable tents  
that must be put up  
and taken down  
one tumbling day at a time

I will claim a home  
In the middle of the new city  
They're secretly building now  
By the sonorous shore  
With Mother.

We'll follow our tiny swell feet  
Out in the silhouetted night,  
Sing morose poems  
Underneath the sooty spread of God above.  
I'll memorize all her favorite ghazals,  
She'll read my homework to bed.

And when awakens October  
We'll paint the streets mustard  
With a hint of fervent ferozi.

November will be for sleeping  
In memory of all our  
Crowded, lost and dreamless nights  
Spent miles away from each other's scent.

We shall keep sleeping and smiling  
In our one home  
As the world droops in oblivion around us,  
Till Death dines with us  
On the first of January.

I once knew a teenage boy who smelled particularly bad. It wasn't specific to one thing, but it was a mixture certain to make you scrunch your nose in an "ew" manner. That boy and I attended the same school and knew of the same people. His oversized head seemed to be too heavy for his scrawny body as if it could detach at a moment's notice. Although I remember little of his face, I catch myself remembering his smile ever so often, when life manages to slow down. It was kind yet distant as if he never knew whether he was allowed to do the gesture. Or perhaps he did it so scarcely that the movements were foreign to the muscles of his face. On rare occasions of happenstance, we would run into each other in the streets of our boisterous, unruly city, and even then, I would see the same uncertainty in it. Yuri was his name, Yuri Alcindor. I never sat next to him in class, nor did I want to, on account of the rancid-like smell. I still remember the day when I had no choice but to sit beside him. How could I not, it was the beginning of the end for many as much as it was for Yuri.

The day went like this.

My eyes tentatively open to the sunrise. I grunt and close them after the assault I get from the bright light. I curse the divinities, their offsprings and whoever crosses my mind as I remember where I am. I feel the throbbing pain that presses against my bladder ordering me to get out of bed. It hurts so much, it threatens to burst, but I'm stubborn and press my knees together. The smell of morning coffee tickles my nostrils, also beckoning me to leave my haven, but I persist in my stubbornness. I squeeze my eyes and wiggle under the cover hoping to will my pee away. I want to cry because it hurts, but instead whimper in agony. Muffled footsteps, I know far too well, begin to echo in the corridor. They approach slowly, signalling the imminent end to my morning. As my time is precious, I make sure to breathe in the familiar scent of my week-old sheets.

"Get up," my mother says, "you're going to be late again." I can hear the boredom in her voice. She too doesn't want to take me to school. She never does, but what else could she

done? She signed up for this when she pushed me out of her vagina. I didn't ask for this; she was the one responsible for the contract she forced us into. I grunt again, this time at her. She screams - as is our ritual. The drapes are yanked so fast that I gasp from sudden cold air. The assault riddles my skin with an infinite number of goosebumps.

"I don't want to go!" I scream this and open my eyes to face my mother. She towers over me in the confines of my spartan room surrounded by barren walls; the only thing decorating them, carcasses of dead mosquitoes I've battled. I hate my room. It looks nothing like me, but I'm powerless and can't do much to change it.

"We can't afford frivolous objects," my parents like to remind me.

I can't stand to look at her in this state, face turned red, eyes filled with disdain. I return to my ball-like state as if it will shield me from her, but what comes next is worse. The harsh sting of the familiar leather belt burns my already bruised skin. I bite my lips and swallow the lump in my throat, but resist one last time before she strikes again.

Everything freezes, but the third strike doesn't follow. She knows I'm too weak to endure three strikes. She leaves and I noiselessly follow. I begin my monotonous routine. I remember most days she resents me as much as I resent her.

I get into the car and avoid the cold gaze she so often gives me. I pretend to be fascinated with the dull grays of my plaid skirt and curse the deities again for the breaking down of the car radio. My heart clenches harder as we approach the red gates of the prison that poses as my school, and I can no longer see clearly. I stifle back my tears because I know she will be mad. I mumble an unceremonious goodbye to my mother and stand in front of the gates to contemplate its ugliness. *Hispaniola*. The name is a twisted and uninspired homage to our former colonizers. The building doesn't only feel like a prison, but also looks like one, with its cement and gray walls. Once you pass the second gate, you see the school cowering behind the bars of 15-foot iron gates. I can see the stairs that lead to my classroom, so I follow the path through the empty corridors. Each step I take feels heavier than a concrete block. I try unsuccessfully to moisten my lips and all I can taste is that particular taste that only belongs to blood. A consequence of months of neglect. My surroundings feel foreign to me, but I manage to reach the door to my class. The brown

cheap birch door stares back at me, and is the only thing separating me from my nightmare. I really hope it burns to the ground, I think, before slowly pushing it open.

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The door opens timidly to the face of Veronica. She looks paler than usual, with her disheveled bun and wrinkled uniform. I always imagine she sleeps in her clothes. Sometimes when she's not looking, I watch her and see the bruises that taint her pale skin. I don't think it's a secret, her mom beats her still as a teenager, but I doubt she would appreciate me staring.

"I'm sorry, I'm late Mr. Faustin," she says to our teacher.

I watch as the beer-bellied giant sucks in a breath of frustration. I can see, along with the rest of the class, he's fuming inside. Veronica is always late and no matter the consequences, she never tries to rectify the situation with her parents. After holding his breath for what seems to be an eternity, Mr. Faustin, Fofo for short, releases the loudest sigh he can muster at 8:30 a.m. on a Monday. His massive gut wiggles as it sags back to place with the help of gravity. The class tries to muffle the usual chuckles before Fofo gives one of his death stares. With a dismissive wave, he tells her to enter and goes back to the blackboard. From across the room, beyond the monochrome, gray-colored uniforms, I see her freeze when she realizes I'm the only one with an empty seat.

Our class has exactly 30 students, 16 desks, and 31 chairs. The 16th desk and 31st chair belong to our lesser than enthusiastic Fofo and his otherwise more enthusiastic colleagues. Although she should not be surprised, I understand her reaction. Kevin (a sickly boy who rarely comes to school) is here today, meaning she has to sit next to *Stinky*. The expression on her face betrays her as she weaves through the tables of snickering students. I know no one envies her situation and I don't mind how they treat me. At least not anymore. She pulls the metal chair without much subtlety, which earns her a hateful look from Fofo. She gives me a curt nod vaguely acknowledging my presence. I don't have a chance to reciprocate because she quickly looks away. I can already hear the others whispering as they usually do. I know what will come next. The incessant mocking and



nagging of idiotic teenagers. Sometimes I really wish this place would crumble and fall.

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I turn my head away from Yuri. Hopefully enough to damper the rancid acid-like smell. I don't hate him though, he never did anything to me. I never give him a reason to. As I usually do with people, I continue to avert my gaze and pay attention to the board and Mr. Fof's endless equations. I can sense him staring at me like he always does. It used to be uncomfortable, but I kind of accepted it in its own creepy way. From the corner of my eye, I see him pull out an apple. He's the only one allowed to eat in class because he has low blood sugar. He always has pretty colourful meals, like someone has taken the time to make them with love and care. The one thing that always strikes me though is this odd little dessert he never seems to run out of. Small cubes too big to be candy yet too small to be cake. Their bright pink always reminds me of Pepto-Bismol, which I absolutely despise. It's weird because they don't look like anything we'd make on our island.

I hold my breath and gather my courage to ask about the unusual candy cake when suddenly I lose my balance. I regain myself, but it doesn't work. The room starts shaking and so do the desks and the walls. It takes a second to register my surroundings, but I can see the same expression in almost all of us. Fear. I turn to Yuri and I watch in horror as his head starts to bob like a toy. Horrible screams begin to belt through the school as the ground keeps moving from underneath us. I hear a piercing scream, one louder than the others. I search for its owner, only to realize my throat is aching horribly. Yuri tries to run, but he falls to the floor.

Move, I think. Before I can even try, the ceiling falls and crashes down on us. The last thing I see before it turns pitch black is Mr. Fof's belly impaled by a rusty metal rod.

There's that taste again. That taste that belongs to blood only, iron-like. There's so much more this time, it can't be from my chapped lips.

"Ahhh!"

What's that? Is that me?

“HELP!”

No, it can't be me. I can barely move. Where am I? It's cold. My back is pressed against uneven rocks, each one trying to tear through my back. I try to move but the pain that shoots through me is unimaginable. I feel it gnawing at me, torturing me until I too scream at the top of my lungs. Spikes shoot inside my throat and my heart races so much I can barely hear the hollow screams around me. I don't want to open my eyes. Unlike this morning, I can't bear to face the darkness. I take a deep breath and muster through the agony and wait for it to ease. Hurt is good. It's worse if you feel nothing, I think. Hard long minutes pass, but the pain slowly begins to vanish. My heart races every time a new scream echoes and I feel like the torture is endless. Eventually, I find the courage to slide my other arm from under the looser block. With each painful inch I move I feel the naked cement scrape and claw at my skin. I bite away the pain and hold my breath before I yank the final yank, and everything turns to black once more.

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“Veronica?!”

I hear the faint call as I regain consciousness.

“Veronica?!”

He sounds too anxious for me to recognize him.

“Veronica, can you hear me!?”

“My head is pounding, and I'm not sure I'm alive but I'm pretty sure I can hear you,” I manage to say against all odds. This time I dare open my eyes to be welcomed by the massive piece of wall above me, threatening to flatten me.

“Are you okay?” The voice asks.

“No.”

“Can you move?”

“No,” I say again, thinking of my earlier attempt. “Who’s this?” I ask, trying to gauge which direction the sound is coming from.

“It’s Yuri.”

Oh, Yuri. We must have crashed next to each other.

“Are you okay?” I ask in the direction of a small opening.

“Yeh, I think so. But I’m stuck.”

I roll my eyes at him stating the obvious, but reply nonetheless. “How long have we been here?”

“I don’t know. Two hours maybe,” his voice replies with a faint echo.

I stay silent for a moment which evidently worries him. “Are you still there?”

“Yeah,” I croak, the tremble in my answer betraying me. My breathing accelerates and I can hear a loud whistle in my ear. It gets louder and louder as if trying to break through my eardrums.

“Try to think of something nice,” Yuri suddenly says soothingly. Somehow it manages to calm my heartbeat.

“I don’t have many of those,” I say through the whistle.

“Try,” he says softly.

I do as he says. I try, and come to a blank. So much for seeing your life pass by before your eyes as you die.

“Where do you get those little candy cake cubes you always have? I ask instead.

“I’m sorry?” He sounds dumbfounded.

“You know, the ones you always have, super pink and shiny.”

As I say this, we hear another scream through the rubble. I close my eyes to prepare for whatever may happen. I wait, but nothing falls on me, and Yuri’s voice echoes once more.

“Do you know the word for confectionery in Hungarian?”

“If you expect me to know this, you’re weirder than I thought.”

“Well, at least your spirit is intact.”

I chuckle as I imagine the expression he must have.

“It’s Cukraszda,” He says simply.

“I hope for your sake this is going somewhere, Yuri,” I grumble.

“It is,” he pauses a moment which makes me worry, but before I ask if he’s all right, he continues. “I just don’t know if you’d believe me.”

“What else do you have to lose?

I hear him chuckle again. Through the turmoil of my racing heart and the throbbing pain that engulfs me, I feel the tiniest pull at the corner of my mouth.

“Do you believe in the inexplicable?”

“As in God?”

“No, as in the supernatural.”

“Yuri,” I say flatly “look where we live.” Soon to be, where we died.

“You have a point.”

Silence. I can do nothing but wait.

“So, if I tell you I can jump through space, you won’t think I’m crazy?”

It does sound crazy. “Do you mean the vacuum of space?” I offer.

“I knew you wouldn’t believe me.”

“Believe what?” I say, trying to move my head. It’s a terrible idea because I move my right arm doing so, which shoots another jolt of pain through me. I wince in silence and try to keep it from Yuri. “You haven’t said anything.”

Suddenly, the wall over me shakes as if it’s about to clobber me. I hold still and for the first time since the nightmare started, I see my mother’s face flash before my eyes. A rush of sadness comes over me because I’m afraid she will be relieved to not have me in her life anymore. Is anyone going to mourn me? My eyes well up with tears and there’s little I can do to stop myself.

“We’re not going to die here Veronica,” Yuri says after minutes of me sobbing. It’s all so surreal. I can hardly believe I’m buried under rubble when only this morning I was fighting with my mom like I usually do.

“Yes, we will,” I hiccup. “Look where we are. It’s just a matter of time before we get

crushed if we're lucky enough."

"Then we should make the best of it."

"How are you so calm?" I ask, bewildered by his attitude.

"I'm okay with dying," he says quite maturely.

"Why? You're only 15. Your life is just starting. Freak out like a proper teenager. Shit, freak out like a proper human."

"What good will it do if I freak out?"

"It would mean you're real."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm scared that I may be losing my mind," I say, bleeding. "Am I really talking to you?"

"You are."

"I can't believe that."

"I can prove it."

"How?"

"There's a pipe next to me, all I need to do is hit it twice with the piece of rock I'm holding, and you'll know I'm here with you."

"Ah."

"You have to ask me to knock whenever you feel you're slipping away, Veronica."

“Okay.”

We stay in silence for a while. I still don't ask him to knock. I'm scared if I do, I won't hear the distinct clink that belongs to rock hitting metal. “Why aren't you afraid of death?” I ask.

“Don't get me wrong, I want to continue to live. But if I die today or tomorrow, I won't regret anything. I've lived and seen so much already, I feel blessed.”

“Is it because of your space jump thing”

He scoffs loud enough for me to hear it. “Yes.”

“Tell me about it,” I insist, ready to listen this time.

“Do you remember the word for confectionery in Hungarian?”

“Tsoo- something?” I couldn't remember past the weird first sound.

He chuckled at my meager attempt. “It's Tsu-kraz-da,” he says, enunciating carefully. He remains quiet for a short time, seemingly mulling over the right words to say. At least I think so. “Some places on earth are interconnected. It's a well-kept secret only a few people around the globe know of.”

“Interconnected, how?”

“I guess you can call them portals. Or doors, I don't know.”

“Okay. And with these portal doors, you do what? Enter one place and exit another?”

“Exactly.”

That just sounds like my house to me. Or any other building for that matter.



“I can go through one here in Kenscoff and end up in New Zealand if I want to.”

He’s obviously shitting me, but what the hell, I indulge him. “Uh-huh.” I’m not sure he hears this through the sounding screech, but he continues, nonetheless.

“You know in life; nothing comes for free. It’s an incredible thing to be able to move through the globe in the blink of an eye, but it comes with a price, like everything we do.”

“Do you have to feed them something? Like people?”

“No, no,” he chuckles again. “But the person who goes through one loses parts of themselves. It chips away at you and slowly eats you from the inside out. It’s slow like a cancer that gnaws at you.”

“Why do you do it then? That’s why mankind invented planes, you know.”

“Being a part of the inexplicable makes you feel special. As much as I know traveling through space kills me, I love every bit of it. I don’t mind paying the price.”

“Is that also why you have such a strong body odor?”

The throaty laugh I hear from him is so unexpected that it's contagious. I smile fully.

“No, sadly, I'm just a teenage boy who perspires too much.”

No teenage boy I know uses the word perspire. “Okay, and what does that have to do with the word Cukraszda?”

“I’m getting to it.” I hear him say faintly. I wish I could see him right now, for more than one reason.

“Just like planes, the greater the distance the more taxing it is. So, when jumping, you need a connection point. And Hungary happens to be my favorite way station.”

“What’s so special about it?”

“I don’t know, I’ve never visited it.”

This time it’s my turn to laugh wholeheartedly. It hurts every bone in my body, but I don’t care.

“The Hungarian portal happens to be in the basement of a Cukraszda. So, whenever I go, I make sure to steal a bunch of those little cube cakes. They call them Minyon.”

“I see.” I don’t see, but what else can I say?

“You don’t believe me.”

“It’s a bit hard to. Can you blame me?”

“No, but what reason do I have to lie?”

“It’s your turn to have a point,” I pause to catch my breath. It’s becoming harder to breathe and I can almost feel the dust particles slowly poisoning my insides. “How do these portals work?” I ask after a short break.

“I don’t know to be honest. According to my dad, they’ve always existed, and our family has always been aware of their existence. Not everyone can go through one though.”

“What decides whether you can go through one or not?”

“That too, I don’t know. For a long time, my family thought it had something to do with our bloodline, but they were wrong.”

“Oh?”

“I was 10 when I saw my brother torn apart by the portal.”

“And you still went through?” I ask horrified.

“It wasn’t my first time, Veronica, and it wasn’t my brother’s first time either.”

“And you don’t know what changed for him?”

“No, and we always jump through never knowing when it will be our last. Maybe my brother was not worthy of the portals anymore. We’ll never know. My dad is still alive and still goes through. And I’ll continue until I can’t anymore.”

“I’d rather take a plane, Yuri.”

“With our passport!” He scoffs again. “In the past year, I’ve been to more places than I can count.”

I say nothing and stare at the wall, reminiscing on the things I wish I had done. I could’ve confronted my mother or tried harder to build a relationship with my father or even apologized for my past behaviors and all that I did wrong. I have nothing to show for my short time on this planet. Now, I lie here waiting for death while someone I barely know tells me about the inconceivable. “What does it taste like?”

“What?”

“The cake.”

“Sponge cake is dipped in punch and coated with melted sugar. You mostly taste the sugar.”

“That sounds horrible.”

He chuckles again. “Not to me. I love all of those things. When I take a bite, it sends shivers down my spine, and I remember why the vomiting and diarrhea are worth the trips.”

I grimace at the thought. “Do you at least leave money for the things you steal?”

“What do you expect me to leave them? Gourdes? No. I don’t expect them to miss a few slices of cake every now and then.”

“Fair enough. Where else have you been?”

For the next hours, he tells me of his adventures and the places he’s visited with his dad or by himself. He mentions cities I’ve never heard of like Nay Pyi Taw or Lichinga. As I hear him talk, I feel this increasing and overwhelming sadness take over me. For the first time in a long time, I feel something other than resentment, fear, or anger. For the first time, I can imagine myself outside the walls of my spartan bedroom. I’m angry again because I have to discover this today of all days and with a boy I don’t know. Eventually, we hear the sounds of a machine growing closer to us, giving us hope. But it means so little, as anything can go wrong at any moment.

There’s a horrible smell that surrounds me now. It’s not Yuri’s this time, but me. I’m pungent, I smell of urine and God knows what else. It grows stronger and makes me cry, but at this point everything makes me cry. I can feel myself slipping away, I can barely make out the wall above me anymore, so I say the word.

“Knock.”

Nothing.

Only the distant sounds of the sirens approaching. Maybe he didn’t hear me.

“Yuri?” Again, nothing.

“Yuri?” I say, my voice trembling.

“Yuri?” Silence.

“Yuri, please, answer me.”

I scream his name over and over, but he never answers, leaving me alone in the dark.

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The smell of sweets tickles my nostrils. I inhale a big gulp and savor the moment. I look to my right and count all the different cube cakes I see behind the curved glass. It's not just bright pink looking at me, but dark brown, pale yellow and even purple. A single string of water drips down my cheek and I realize I shed a tear after I told my story. I don't wipe it but the stranger sitting opposite me, dabs at it quite awkwardly with a napkin. I thank him with a smile. It had been a while since I told my story. My arms were a constant reminder of that day, and I always wear long sleeves, even on hot summer days like these.

The plate in front of me contains the little that is left of my Minyon. It's my first time trying one and I'm happy to discover it tastes nothing like liquid toothpaste. And just like it did to him, the Hungarian delicacy sends shivers down my spine. But unlike Yuri, it's for a different reason.

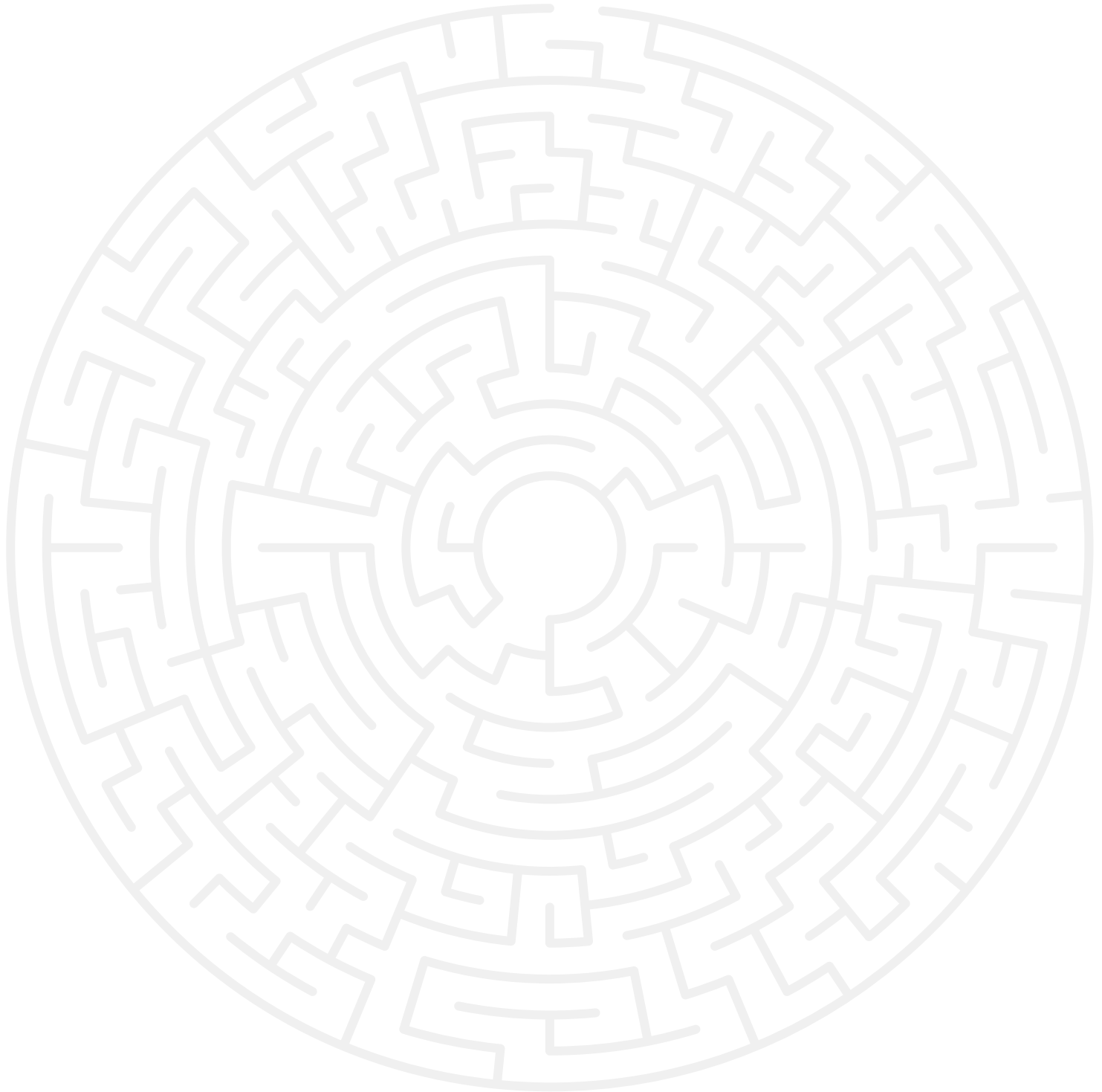
I look up from my plate again and try to gauge my date's reaction. He has one of both disbelief and sadness. Unlike me, he doesn't look out of place inside the Cukraszda. He's a Hungarian of average build and average height, but still taller than me by an inch or two. His green-brown eyes flicker under the bright sunlight and when he speaks, he has this constant grin at the corner of his thin lips. That is until he asked me why I chose to move to Hungary of all places.

“They never found the body of the scrawny boy with the oversized head. It's quite hard when you've been buried alive, but I know I'm here because of him whether his story was real or not.” I savor the last bite of the Minyon and feel a pang of joy as the savory sweet melts in my mouth.

“How many people survived?” Maté asks.

The pang turns into guilt. It's something I still struggle with even 15 years later, but life tends to be so cruel at times.

“I was the only one.”



There once was a time when I could release  
like ragweed, roam with the breeze,  
unconcerned about isolation or watery eyes.  
Grains with knightly names, Pinaceae  
and Quercus, I set forth on quests, without  
needing to know where I would land, content  
to sleep beneath the clinic that promised  
cures pulsing pressure on your feet.

I run outside now and cling to the hood  
of a car like the yellow cloud that coats the street  
each spring, or tuck myself inside the windshield  
wiper blades, a tassel of oak, hold on through curves  
and swerves of winding lanes to release on new soil.





RAHADA TAJWER

## Cover Artist

# RAHADA TAJWER

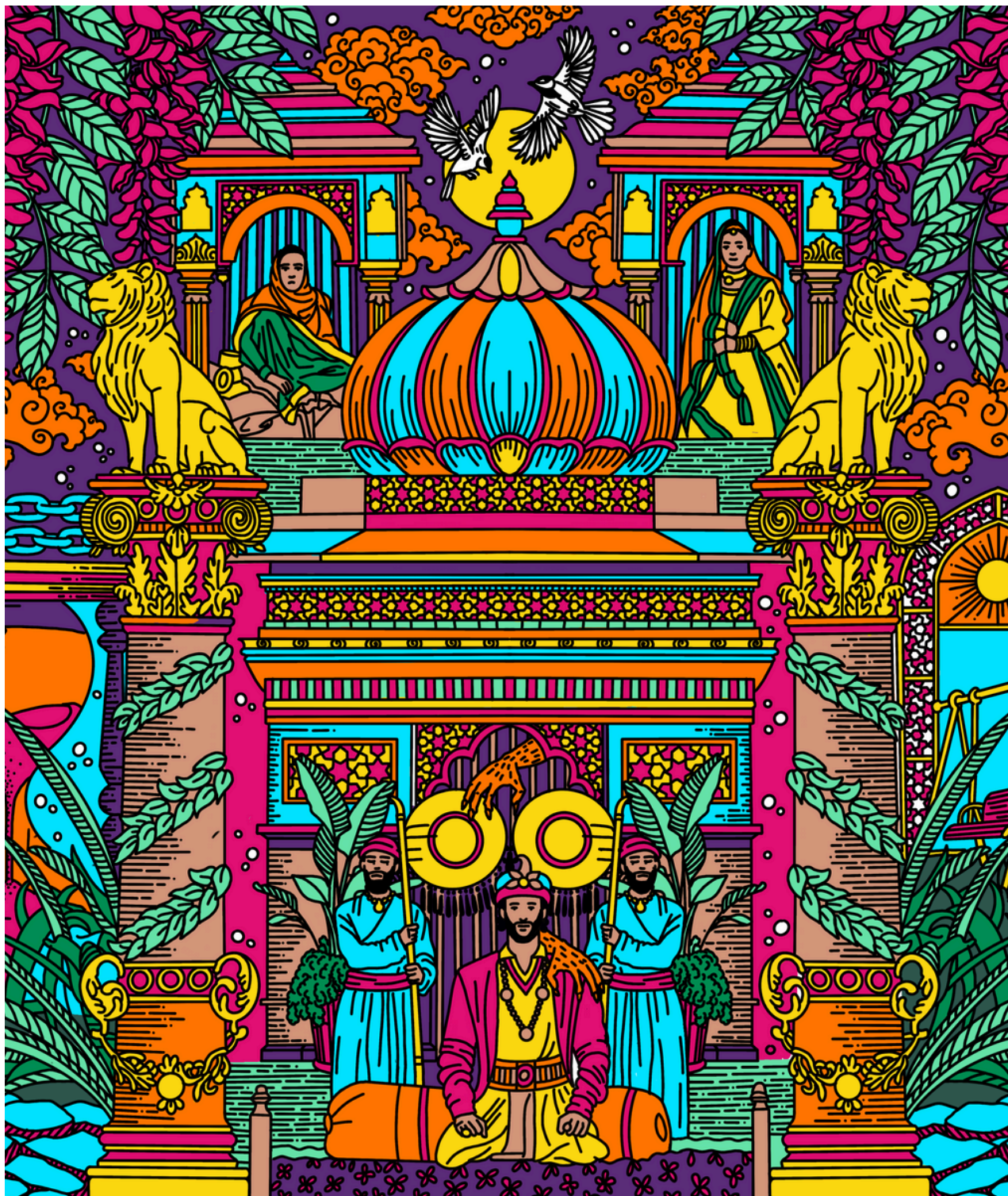
Rahada (she/her) is a Communication Designer based in Pakistan. She helps businesses scale through various skills she offers. She spends her free time illustrating, or rereading her favorite books. She has been published in presses and magazines, such as Dawn & Aurora. In 2022 her artwork for ZeeTV's series *Dhoop Ki Deewar* won a PROMAX award for "Best Key-Art".

Her Instagram is @rahadatajwer.

THE  
MISSING  
SLATE

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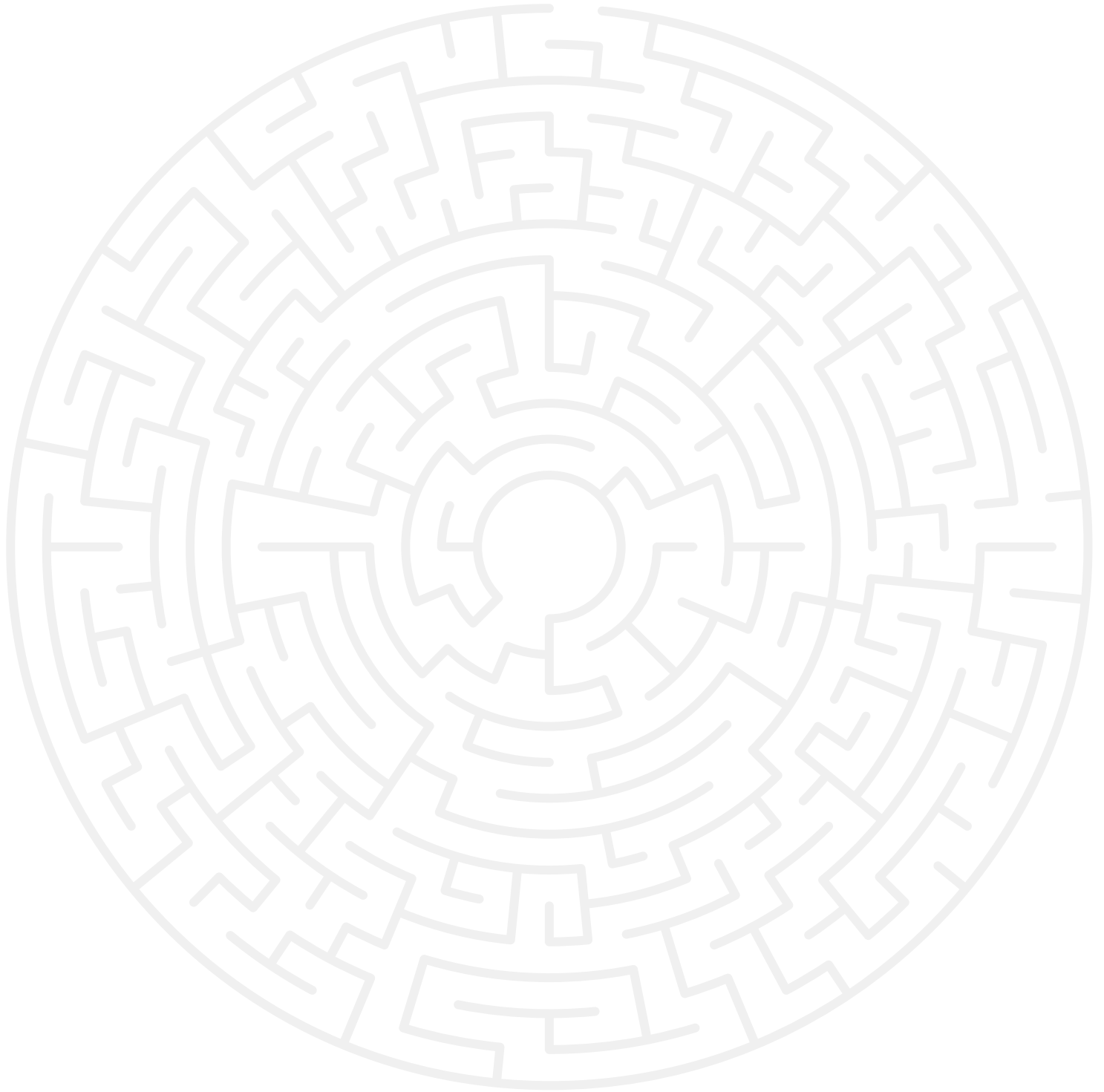


RAHADA TAJWER

Man in rain stood  
his sense of self,  
aborted around the picket fence  
his striped pajamas and there's  
rain and man and neighbor's wife  
squeaking with joy  
god maddening nuisance.  
so he mutters

rain beats behind his ear lobes,  
water creeps into his ear-gutters,  
guttled he shrugs, somebody's wife  
somebody's daughter somebody's sister  
mother, mother-in-law, grandmother and  
he shrugs and shrugs and shrugs  
and the women  
rat him out. A lot of  
"horrid man"s and "fucking idiot"s and "oh I see why he  
can't take a wife again" as  
the drop of water creep in further and further  
plows crawl with its hundred tiny feet, centipedes  
its claws into his ear drums  
and rings and rings and rings  
clumsy hands over a broken flute  
his daughter—  
squeaks and holds his hand.  
asks the rain to smile for her father  
and so it does  
and so he does too

as her feet beat  
over running water  
sprinting,  
quietly.



my entitled being was stuck in the impasse  
like hurricane-force wind speeds trapping me in the eye of the storm  
*i never wanted anything more*

put your nose in someone else's business  
you'll find yourself dyed a satiny crimson hue  
limerence is foolish  
so is ingenuity

but i never minded

Watch your back whispered across a wide desk  
Watch your back whispered across a wide desk  
Warning of ambush on a second-floor outpost  
Warning of ambush on a second-floor outpost  
Desk outpost whispered back of a second warning:  
ambush across a wide floor on your watch.

Dawn rose as a red pencil slashing the horizon  
Dawn rose as a red pencil slashing the horizon  
Loops drawn to lasso squares on old charts.  
Loops drawn to lasso squares on old charts  
Rose loops a red lasso, slashing the drawn dawn  
to pencil charts as old horizon squares

Five tear-bullets leaked down cheeks at the check out line  
Five tear-bullets leaked down cheeks at the check out line  
Pack up plaques for programs that no longer exist  
Pack up plaques for programs that no longer exist  
Exist longer? Tear down the plaques! Five programs  
leaked out. in. Cheeks pack bullets. No line-up for that check

At the program slashing, five whispered  
of a Red Square outpost. Plaques rose as warning  
to watch out, check down desk charts that exist.  
Ambush leaked back no second bullets. Pack a pencil  
for your longer lasso lines. The horizon loops wide,  
drawn across the old floor's cheeks. Dawn tears up.



february 13  
the first dawn of love

i might have buried the art of playing with words and writing letters but the thought of writing one to you tugs right at my heartstrings. it's the thirteenth of february, lahore is lying in an eld of wild daisies under the evening sun, humming to your verse;

رات یوں دل میں تیری کھوی ہوئی یاد آئی  
جیسے ویرانے میں چکے سے بہار آجائے

draped in colors of scarlet silk and marigold, the sun is almost there but nowhere near you yet it is warm on my heart; your verse begins with a lump in my throat, splits me open, builds a home of its own and kisses the golden hands of grief only to feel whole again.

with you, i am entirely smitten with love as your words bring a declaration of love and everything starts to fall back in place. a love, so tender—that pours out a little too much but dies all yours.

if i have no one, i have the swollen rivers of your name where the gardens of Jinnah dance to *hum dekhein ge* while the winds of lahore mourn another river for you, like love which comes, and wraps you entirely and then leaves only for something greater to come again.

جیسے صحراؤں میں ہولے سے چلے بادِ نسیم  
جیسے بیمار کو بے وجہ قرار آجائے

hand on my heart as your sweet verses roll off my tongue; the buds of melancholy unbutton themselves on the mustard elds of lahore and bloom with the coming of dawn. the heart of lahore runs for joy and sinks into the depths of your kalam like one yearns in his mother's arms.

carried by your memory, lahore jiggles to the beloved scent of gulaab drenched in pearl-

white *gajray* with ruby roses tucked in her hair, while shadows of deep-gold leaves swirl gently over her face, curled in the warmth of your verse. the trial of waiting persists in your absence.

the city and your name;

*the two rivers that run side by side but never meet*



*perhaps, this labyrinth of love seems almost endless—like the uninterrupted strands of a kite, stretching endlessly, pulling the strings of my heart, only to bloom and return—to you.*

*pyaray faiz, i wonder how much of lahore lives in you and how much of you lives in lahore? anything else would be too bitter.*

My mama did her best to hide me.

Her desperation to bury me and bleach my existence of the old world was all I could remember of her.

“This place,” she told me one day while washing my hair, “would protect in ways she couldn't.” Ugali was traded for bread, our beaded dresses and bare chests were covered and replaced with trousers and shirts.

“Anything to protect me,” she would coo smoothing down my curls. It was because of her that the grey stones of the dingy church basement and the nauseating scent of mould and dampness were the only memories I still have from my childhood.

Small buildings with clouded rectangle windows boxed me in where I traded the warmth of the sun for a flickering offending bulb that loomed over my huddled figure. It was there, under the pale fluorescent lights, that white angels stared down at me in disapproval warning me to behave lest I be ousted from their paradise.

Days spent pulling languages and words I couldn't understand out of my throat, binding and tucking parts of me I hadn't then met, so much of me stolen I felt light and dizzy every time I left the building and stumbled into the cold Halifax air.

It wasn't long before my eyes dulled and the terror and pull towards him finally lessened. Not long until my mother's tight grip on my shoulders grew lighter, almost playful, as their magic worked.

Kifo, usinitambue, Kifo, usinitambue, Kifo...

Like a mantra, my mama taught me to recite these words, clutching the rosary necklace

the priest had given me, rubbing each bead clockwise in frantic intervals until the magic settled around me and I finally felt safe enough to leave the house.

Was their magic strong? Of course. The lingua had its power.

But it must be sealed by Didignya to truly be powerful.

Their gods had their strengths just as all did, but the most they could be called upon to do was layer and shroud.

For how could they truly fight the god of death and hope to win?

For it was he that came to collect their gods when the time came.

When I was fifteen, I stumbled out the door forgetting to do my ritual. Distracted by thoughts of school and how dangerously close the humidity was getting to ruining the perky gelled bob I had agonized over that morning, it took me a while to notice the mass of crows that had started following me. It was easy to pretend that nothing was wrong. Crows usually gathered, didn't they? It was not unusual to see pairs, trios or a murder all at once, right?

I clutched my backpack strap tight, fear pushing me onto the bus where I quickly found my seat, kept my head down, and pretended the quiet whispers around me weren't a commentary on what was happening outside the windows. When the bus pulled up to the school, I waited until everyone had left before slowly making my way out. A deep breath, and I began:

Kifo, usinitambue...

I stopped. Maybe it really had been a coincidence?

The minute I stepped out, knots began to form. Shivers that had nothing to do with the weather played up and down my body while sweat began its antics on my face. In

revulsion, I blanched, stumbling back, regretting the comfort I had sighed happily into this morning. More than a hundred crows of various sizes had come to greet me.

They littered the ground, some hanging off the telephone poles, others crowded on fences, watching me with eyes too clear and too dark. They didn't make a sound. No caw or rustle of feathers. Just beady, clear eyes following my every move.

Pain that I could only describe as red and hot seeped out my back, radiating with every thump of my heart. I fumbled in my pockets, palms slick with sweat, grabbing the necklace I had carelessly thrown into them. I repeated the mantra as fast as I could, closing my eyes shut and after three rotations, opened them to find myself completely alone.

The crows had scattered, the faint cawing in the distance sounding vaguely like scolding.

To this day, the marks still stain my skin. Swirls had started to appear on my arms, climbing up like vines, extending out from my ribs to form a jagged circle around my heart. The ends appeared faded, as if the artist had run out of ink before it could truly finish its piece. I knew I couldn't tell my mother. She would have locked me in the room after dousing me in holy water and spent hours screaming at my father behind closed doors about how he couldn't protect me. The strange happenings had begun to wear her down. Last time the crows had followed me, she had kept me home for months citing religious needs to my teachers who eventually stopped looking at my empty seat.

I became a ghost that occasionally haunted the school grounds and my mother...well, lines of stress marred her forehead. Her eyebrows stayed hunched with worry and quiet pain, her mouth pinched knowing only to scowl and to open to lecture. She had become paranoid, seeing the god of death in every friend I tried to bring over and every gift from neighbours who looked at me in pity while handing over stale food. It wasn't long before she refused to meet anyone in public. Only home, and only after they had been blessed by her.

She no longer could hold a job and began to lean into my father in a way he did not know

how to support. It felt strained to be at the centre of so much misfortune. Bitterness bubbled in me, mixing with an anger I knew had been building every time my mothers hands examined my body every morning for traces of him.

The priest's assurance was not enough. To her, it was only inevitable that Exu would take me away. Each passing day, her anxious hands – thin and bony now – clutched me tight, speaking tongues of places I had never heard of. Wiping the smelly water she always doused me in before I left the house, I cursed Exu's existence. The humiliating way my privacy was a suggestion, how my protests were silenced with terrible lies of care, trying to explain away the bags that piled under my eyes from our 3.am prayers...

This had to end.

So, I conspired.

She had hidden all the texts that referenced him in the last level of the house, going as far as to cut his name out of books she had collected from back home. The books served as a reminder that we came from someplace. Another world where life was an afterthought and death the norm. A place we had fled as soon as I was old enough to survive the long trip.

They only remained because my baba had insisted we have an escape plan in case hers failed and he eventually found us.

Though running water could make him falter and the ocean's delay, no one could escape him for too long. My mother had spent a day digging a hole in the basement burying the books and journals six feet under a layer of salt. She had topped the mound with a mixture of binding magic she had gotten from a sorcerer in Newfoundland who had prayed over it for hundreds of nights and was rumoured to have come from the Pope's own personal spell book.

The room had been salted in all corners. This too was blessed by prayers and by a local priest. He had done it free of charge, bemused by my mothers' desperate plea for his god's

favour.

Now to wait until the holy day...

On Sundays, she claimed, Exu had no power and she could freely roam without seeing his shadow everywhere she went. She had no idea how wrong she was.

For Exu ruled all days. All skies.

Every evil thought, every rise to anger could rouse him to come collect what was his. Even the black shape that follows you every day could be used by him to cause mischief. The soul was promised to him by the creators and to him, it must be given.

Blessed is the one called Exu.

The air in the basement was charged with energy as soon as I stepped in. The cross around my neck pressed against my chest, breathed once, then let out a shudder. The magic was potent and thick:

The crackling of the air and instant shivers to my body were a familiar feeling. One of safety and definitely something...foreign.

It seemed like she had used more than just European magic here.

Just as I stepped close to the salt circle, I heard the door creak open.

My father.

Haunting black eyes stared down at me, red from countless restless nights. Just like my mother, his vibrant energy had been sucked dry leaving the ghost of himself here.

He looked at me from the top of the stairs and nodded once, giving me permission.

Understanding.

This had to end now or we would hurtle towards something very, very bad. I threw the cross to the ground and broke the circle. I heard my father yell as he was blown back and the door slammed shut locking me in the room with that thing.

Exu.

He materialized in front of me so quickly I couldn't react.

He was a giant figure taking up most of the space in the room. His head was shaved bald, skin drawn taut over a bony body that looked out of place with its strange proportions. Truly a caricature of a human being, he reached out and the hot pain that had assaulted me that day began again and I watched, twisting with pain, as the markings grew bolder and stronger, wrapping around my breasts until finally, in one quick move, they pierced my heart and I died.

He stood over me, a hunched figure, terrifying if I could still feel fear.

This was the second thing he stole from me.

I only appear like this because your family has robbed me too, he replied in my mind.

Privacy.

The third thing he took from me.

“This will not work until you get out of my thoughts. Please, leave,” I demanded, still reeling from the pain of his branding. He opened his mouth and let out a wailing so strong it pierced my ears and I was surprised to feel wetness leak from them.

I thought I was dead?

“You walk between worlds now. I am Death and you have not been claimed like that,” he wheezed. Yet.



The warning lingered in my head, clinging to my mind. Whether it was him who did that or myself, I could not tell.

“Honor my request and we can negotiate,” I managed to demand, clutching my bleeding ears.

He shrank, taking the form of a businessman. Proportions still too big, his bones creaked as he moved closer. He bowed slightly and the pressure I had felt in my head finally lifted. A long breath later and I was ready to talk to the strange being that had been the centre of my life. “Save my mother from madness and I’ll serve you like I was...” I took a sharp inhale “...like I was supposed to.”

He tilted his head, looking at me with curiosity. His head was far too big, making his tilting twist in a way that was too low and too deep. The absurdity of watching a god try to emulate humans would have been comical if it didn’t make the hair on my arms puff up. “Child, your mother’s demons are her own. I do not drive my vessels to where she is. She is what happens when you try to run from your destiny and parade yourself in this...I don’t even want to call it magic.”

He picked up the cross I had thrown and crushed it in his hand. After wiping it clean on his shirt, he met my gaze. “Lay your negotiations so we can begin. I am painfully behind thanks to the meddling of your mother.”

His eyes clouded over, dizzying as I met them. They seemed to go on and on and on...

I turned away before I would be driven mad. I didn’t know what else I could negotiate. This all depended on my mother being sane again but if that was self-imposed, I had nothing.

Except for one thing.

I licked my lips, remembering the disgust my mother had for me. All the times she had recoiled at my touch, fearful that he had already claimed her sweet child and what

remained was nothing more than his toy and worst of all...“I don’t want to be your wife,” I said quickly.

He looked at me and, after a brief moment, twisted his face, and let out what took me a second to realize was a laugh. I watched his face shift as skin strained against bone as he carried on while I stood, awkwardly staring up at him.

His laugh turned into wheezing until finally, it was quiet...

“Your Mama still has that rotten sense of humour I see.”

He straightened, suddenly serious. “Listen, child, I have no time for the games of humans and need my emissary now. I do not want to have to chase you to such an unpleasant place again. Understood?”

I nodded shyly. “So, when do we begin?”

Now.

His voice echoed in my head, breaking the first promise we had ever had between us. A long nail cut into me, and out I plopped – raw and new.

I struggled to get used to this form that Exu had given me as all my senses heightened and were fine tuned. The world felt strange.

Suddenly, I understood why my mother hated him so much.

Exu’s world was frightening. I didn’t realize how much my body protected me from the feeling of being pulled, pinched and picked at. How many things swirled around me, waiting for a single misstep to claim my body and possess the flesh and blood all of them coveted so much.

This world of Exu would drive anyone crazy.

I could not call this thing a god.

That word could not be used to describe this thing.

My body filled with dread. He picked me up in his hand, suddenly too big again, and I felt the world collapse around me. I wish I had listened to my mother.

Exu exists far before our world was thought of. Where death and madness lived side by side with life and sanity. Exu is the sweetness of birth, that moment when you open your eyes to the new world. Exu is that feeling of dread and apprehension you have looking over the abyss right before you leap and are consumed. He is something equally great and terrible. You can not run from him as Exu sees all. Pleasing is not enough; no sacrifice could appease he who merely loans you your existence. If Exu found his prey, you could not escape his grasp.

Itaendelea.

Mother told her not to go in. Mazes are made for getting lost, and little girls mustn't lose themselves. It wasn't obedience that kept her out of the maze's maw, however. She feared the lean cypresses and the thick hedges, she dreamed of its emerald foliage chewing her up like grandmother did slaughtered pigs; beloved pets into delectable afternoon snacks.

So, she danced and dawdled around its border, petting its coat in coy coaxing, seeking to charm the trap away. In moments of courage, she pressed her little ear close and listened—not to the whispers of the lost souls nor the cries of the forgotten wanderers, but to the sweet patter of the maze's heart. *Bu-bump. Bu-bump. Bu-bump.* It was cruel, she thought primly and grimly, that her great-granddaddy trapped such a lovely creature in this cage.

With time, she grew up on the maze's edges, discovered herself on its margins, and found love outside its dramatic dead-ends. Indeed, Henry's proposal was a step away from the portal to absence, and she could almost summon that soft Bu-bump over the pounding of her own blood. Henry's gaunt stature and strong brows needn't be frightening, her mother told her, but she trembled nonetheless. Come her wedding day, dressed in satin'd tulle that kissed the gardens' grounds, her Henry willed a silly game—a venture into the maze. No longer could she fear the unfamiliar verdure, no longer should she obey her mother's whims, for she was Henry's now. She had been found, finally. She could ne'er be lost again.

It wasn't obligation that led her into the maze's maw, however. Before she became entirely Henry's, she wished to trace that Bu-bump all the way to its prisoner.

Hand in hand, Henry guided her under the arched ivy turning this way and that, always thwarted by a wall of nature's envy. She giggled at the maze's mirth but Henry had no patience for folly, he could not allow a few twists and turns to mock his wedding day. Yanking on her wrist, he carried them faster and faster, sliding his sword from his sheath.

“Must we finish the maze, darling?” Her voice betrayed her unease.

She had ne'er seen a blade so sharpened. "Why don't we return to the festivities?"

Henry whirled, his green eyes cold. "We must finish the game; you go that way, and I will head West."

She stammered, her chest a hummingbird's plight as he abandoned her to the cypresses and shrubbery, to the emerald borders that once bound her infancy. The snaps and hisses of Henry slicing through leaves frightened her, but she forced air down her tightened corset and pressed her diamond ear close. *Bu-bump*. Ripping fabric off her dirtied hem, she left a trail of lace behind, charting each and every path to and fro. *Bu-bump*. The endless green plotted her path, watching calmly, lovingly, where Henry's curses carried hot on the wind. *Bu-bump*.

"Have you lost your betrothed on your wedding day?"

She stumbled as the familiar heartbeat waxed into words. "Wh—who speaks? Show yourself!"

"Hello, Helen," An armless statue posed in the center of six arches winked.

"I—" she gasped, not trusting her senses. She circled the statue, ducking into each of the ivy arches, but found herself horribly alone.

"If you don't want him back, I'll keep him lost."

"Henry," the statue confirmed. "He lost you first, it's only fair, Helen."

"No!" Helen ran to the statue, her hands gripping its pedestal. "I—I need him, maze. Please."

Impossibly, the statue's head shifted, the material twisting to look down at Helen with a pitying sigh. "You need him, but do you love him?"

“It mustn’t matter, maze.”

“Love ought to matter, Helen.”

She dipped her head, the *Bu-bump* of the statue’s words a convincing lullaby. The ripped hem of her dress billowed with the breeze and she shuddered at the thought of emerging alone. Of ne’er seeing Henry again. Her brow pressed into the statue’s knees, cool marble soothing her fever.

“I’ll let Henry finish the maze first,” she told the heart of her youth. “I mustn’t emerge before him.”

The statue cooed at the bride. “Stay as long as you want, my dear.”

So, she did.

*Bu-bump. Bu-bump. Bu-bump.*



Young Tomás and his friends were the first in their families to finish high school. Although there was nothing to look forward to, they were happy. Like their parents, they would work in the fields or in the new factory. Always, they would dream about the lost things they'll never have.

"Turn here," Roberto said.

Laughing, Tomás turned. "Where does this road go?"

"Who knows?" Benito said. "It's an adventure."

"Who cares?" Carlos was high on life. "Maybe it will take us to new lives in Estados Unidos."

"So, we'll be back tomorrow," Tomás said.

"I've never seen the border," Roberto said. "If we're heading north, maybe we'll see it tonight."

The winding road was just wide enough for their car. Tomás said little as he listened to his friends. He focused more on the road, avoiding possible rocks and holes though the road appeared relatively smooth. When he heard Chelita's name, he joined in the conversation.

"Told you he was still with us," Benito said. "I'll bet he hears her name in his sleep."

"Estella does it for me," Roberto said. "Tomorrow, I'm going to ask her to marry me."

"What? You've never mentioned her before."

“I keep her in my heart where she belongs. She is my dream of freedom. Tomorrow, if she says yes. I’m going to work. Next year we’ll have a boy, then two years after that, we’ll have a girl. Then another boy the year after that.”

Carlos said, “You’ll be saddled with children while you’re still young.”

“We don’t live that long. May as well start young and be happy.”

A quiet settled in the car as each boy thought about what Roberto had said. Their lives were short and none of their dreams would ever come to fruition. Unless they dreamt like Roberto. That was real life.

Tomás said, “You guys are too quiet. I need joy and happiness to drive.”

His friends remained quiet. The road was suddenly bumpy. He began to talk about the morning’s graduation ceremony, but the memories seemed to remind his friends of serious matters. They talked again, but not in the boisterous manner they’d maintained earlier. The road stretched before them with tall grasses and shrubs on both sides.

“I’m going to turn around,” Tomás said.

“Yes, let’s go back,” Dom said.

Tomás looked in the rear-view mirror just as he noticed a creek in front of him. There was nowhere to turn. He braked and said “Hold on.”

He had no idea how deep or wide it was. He’d crossed the water by the time the car stopped. All was quiet. He looked up and saw a star-studded sky. Had the car overturned? “Is everyone all right?” he asked.

“We’re fine.” Dom replied. “Why’d you ask?”

Tomás asked, “Where did you come from? Have you been in the car all along?”



“Of course, it’s my car. Who else has a convertible?”

Everyone had seen Dom’s convertible. Upside down in the blue agave field with Dom’s head and shoulders crushed under it. His body was exposed from his torso down to his feet. His jeans were purple with dried blood.

Tomás thought he must have wrecked his car. He looked around for his friends. He and Dom were alone. There was nothing between the stars and him except air. As he looked, one star shone brighter than all the others. “Elena,” he said.

“She’s waiting for you,” Dom said.

Someone tapped his shoulder. “Are you all right, Tomás?”

Tomás shook his head. His three friends were talking at once. “Why’d you stop?”

“If the car is wet, it’s best if we keep driving.”

“You don’t want the carburetor to rest while it’s wet. Keep driving and it will dry off. Look, there’s a highway up ahead. Speed will help it dry faster and you can turn around there.”

Tomás knew that about carburetors. He started the car and headed toward the highway as his friends’ chatter served as the background noise he needed to keep him centered. He wondered where the weird thought of Dominic came from.

Not having to worry about the winding road, rocks, and holes, he joined his friends in laughter and camaraderie as they rode through the night. They stopped at a café in Hondo close to a gas station.

Roberto said, “I’ll pay for the gas, cause when me and Estella get married, I won’t be hanging with you guys any more. This is my last rodeo.”

At a table inside, they drank guava and mango jarritos and toasted each other as they

waited for their food. They flirted with the waitress whenever she came to the table. As she hovered asking, “Ready for more drinks with your dessert?” She looked at Tomás and said, “My friend Elena wants to talk to you.”

“Bring her over,” he said. He had no idea who Elena was, but was stunned when a raven-haired beauty rose at a table across the room. He hoped she was Elena. He was in love.

“This is Elena.”

“There’s an empty table next to ours. We can put them together if you guys want to join us.”

“Sounds like fun,” they all said.

The bus-boy helped the waitress move the boys to the other table. Tomás found himself sitting beside Elena. She wore little makeup on her angelic face. A faded rose colored her lips from being wiped with her napkin. Sitting, they were equal in height. As they talked, the conversations from his friends and the other girls faded into the background. He only heard Elena.

“Do you want to dance?” she asked.

He did. Tomás rose and offered his hand to her, but she was already standing. She wore a white peasant blouse filled with blue stars and blue capri pants with white stars on the pockets. His mind went back to Dom in the car, looking up and seeing stars, and somewhere, the word Elena fell upon his ears.

After a while, he noticed that his friends were dancing with the other girls from the table. The music slowed and Elena moved closer to him and wrapped her arms around his waist. Her heady perfume consumed him and at that moment he never wanted to leave her. Maybe Roberto was right. Life was short. Happiness like he felt might never be his again.

Several years later, Elena's dad asked Tomás to accompany him to Hondo to pick up his brother who was coming for a visit. They stopped in a café where they were to meet Hugo. Conversation was light as they waited, then Hugo arrived. The two brothers hadn't seen each other in many years. They talked about family and reminisced.

The waitress came to the table as Tomás listened to the happy conversation. "Your friends are waiting," she said. "You'd better hurry. They're getting anxious."

Tomás looked out the window and saw Carlos, Roberto, and Benito waving to him. He smiled and stood, wondering why they were there. He made his excuses to his father-in-law who seemed not to notice him.

Outside at the gas pump, Roberto said. "Come on, we have to go. We were going to leave you, but we couldn't find that old road we came on."

"Really?"

"Yeah man, we saw you getting in a car with that girl. We thought you were deserting us."

Tomás turned and looked toward the café. Puzzled he asked, "You saw me getting into a car?"

"You're such jokesters," he said, throwing his head back and laughing. "The stars sure are beautiful tonight."

The friends shook their heads, laughed along with him, and got in the car. They found the old road with no trouble and were back home while graduation parties were still going strong.

## It Must Be Inconvenient to Be Made of Flesh

*Audrey T. Carroll*



You wake up in a strange place. It is too bright, too warm. The wind has stopped and the birds are singing. You can't remember what happened before. It is a vague memory, a dream, the unpleasant kind that you'd prefer to leave buried in goosedown. When you leave your home, you are greeted by an old woman, an enchantress dressed in stars who claims that you have killed her enemy. Nobody ever dies here, but now she has, and good riddance. There is no body, the woman explains, only the dead enemy's silver shoes, which are now on your own feet. When you make your confusion about recent events—and this strange land—clear, you are instructed to skip through the terrors between here and a city made of your birthstone. The enchantress gives you a kiss for luck—or protection, she says, and you wonder what kind of spell this is. No one mentions repercussions for killing the woman with the silver shoes, and you are too afraid to ask. So instead you walk on a road of gold in a dead woman's shoes, each step making you seasick with the thought of what you are truly doing—walking on the dead and gone.

When you pass people on the golden road, they claim to know exactly what you are and what you are capable of merely by one look at how you are dressed. You come across an inanimate man made animate—he desires the quality that people assume you do not have, though they are wrong. He explains that he, too, has a kind of protection from harm; all he fears is being set ablaze by someone else's carelessness or anger. You offer to walk to your birthstone city together.

In the forest, you come across another trapped man. When you free him, he reveals no one else cared enough to try, and he thanks you for your kindness. He also wishes to visit the city with you, this time to ask for the quality that most people say you have too much of. His axe had been enchanted by the person you killed, chopping away pieces of him until nothing of his old self was left. All he wants is one old piece of himself back again. He explains that he is afraid of nothing, except for drowning in his sorrows.

Finally, you come to a pitiful beast, one that would rather be lonely all its life than let

others know it has the quality that you're secretly most ashamed of in yourself. The beast, though afraid of almost everything, joins you on the journey.

The man who fears fire becomes trapped in a river. You convince a large bird to help you save him, because it is important to hold on to the quality that others assume (wrongly) that you don't have. Then you come to a field of poppies that first poison you, and then the beast afraid of everything. The beast falls into an endless slumber; the two men carry you away to safety. The man afraid of sorrows saves a small mouse queen, who in turn saves the beast who hides his shame.

Upon reaching the birthstone city, you are all instructed to wear glasses with colored lenses, which are locked onto you by the gatekeeper. You think it odd, but he assures you it is for your own protection, so that you can see clearly. The magician of this city appears differently to each of you: as only a face to you, cruel and unwavering; as a temptation to the man who fears fire; as a beast to the one who fears sorrow; and as fire to the one who fears all. You must kill again, this magician tells you, if you dare to ask anything in return. He knows from one look at you that you have killed before, so it should be an easy task. You try to insist on your innocence, to simply be free to go where you desire, but this magician remains unmoved.

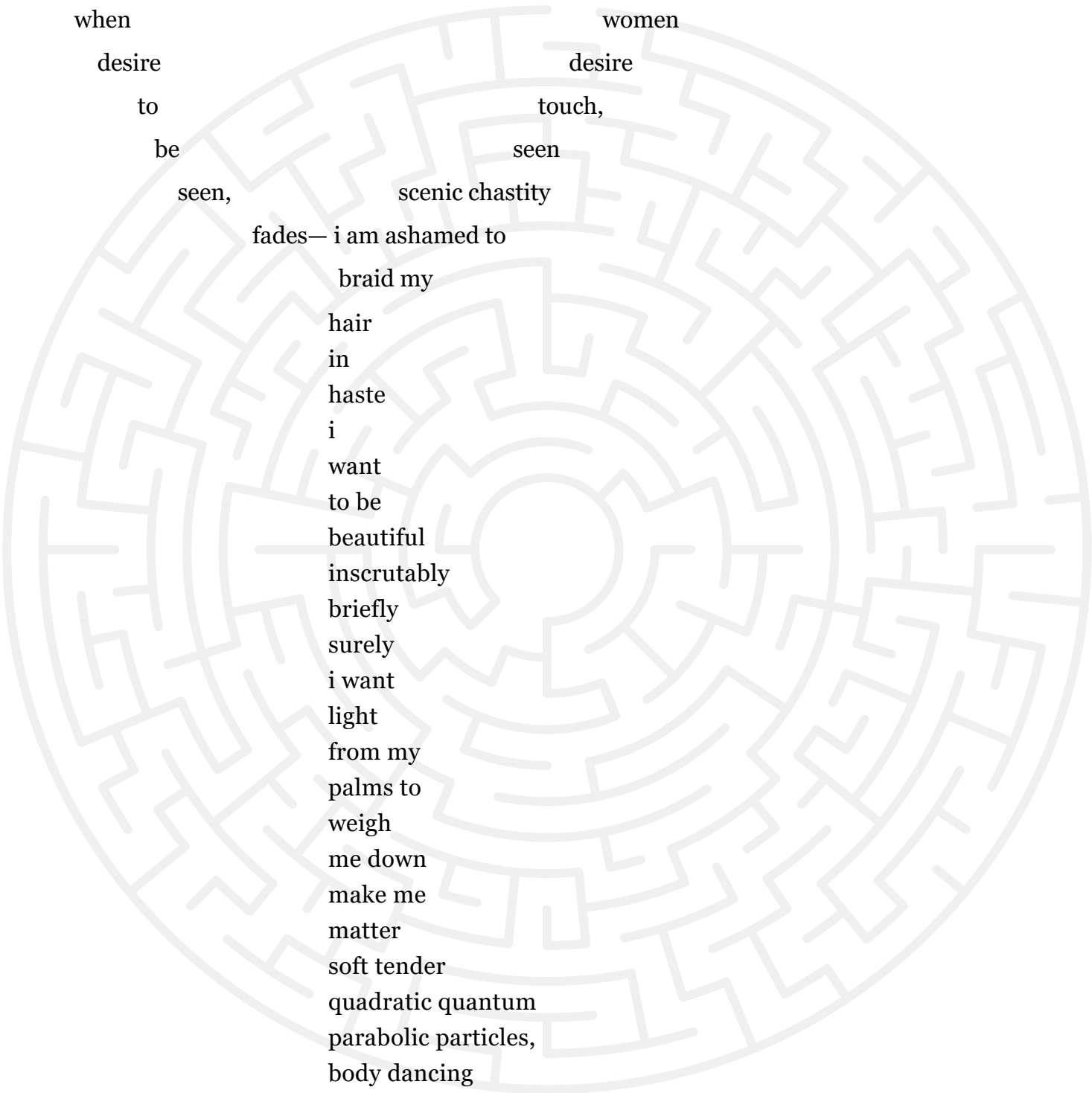
So you set out to kill the one-eyed witch. She sets out forty wolves to kill you, then forty crows, then forty dozen bees. Each time, they are killed instead. The one-eyed witch then conjures the most terrifying thing you've ever dreamed of—a swarm of them—to come and finish you. You are the only survivor, thanks to the kiss of the enchantress that scares even your worst nightmares away. Instead, they carry you to the one-eyed witch. You saw the one who feared fire torn to shreds by her minions; the one who feared drowning in sorrows beaten surely to death. When you look around the room, you take the bucket of water, dousing the witch as revenge for the man with the quality you have in abundance. Within three blinks, the one-eyed witch is dead, but you are still all alone. You rescue each of your fellow journeyers one by one. Eventually, you summon your nightmares, which you now command, and instruct them to carry you back to the magician and his promises.

The magician turns you away. You discover him a fraud; he tells you that all four of your

desires put together are nothing compared to his fear of being discovered. He is nothing but a man who can speak over the images of others, making them appear to deliver his own declarations. He offers snake oil and silk stuffed with sawdust, and then escapes in the air.

You fight the forest itself, ending up in a place where all is beautiful but fragile, until you find another enchantress. Each of your three companions, now certain that they have what they desire, will rule in a different corner of the world. You step in the dead woman's footsteps one last time, letting the silver shoes take you to the place where and when you most wish to be.

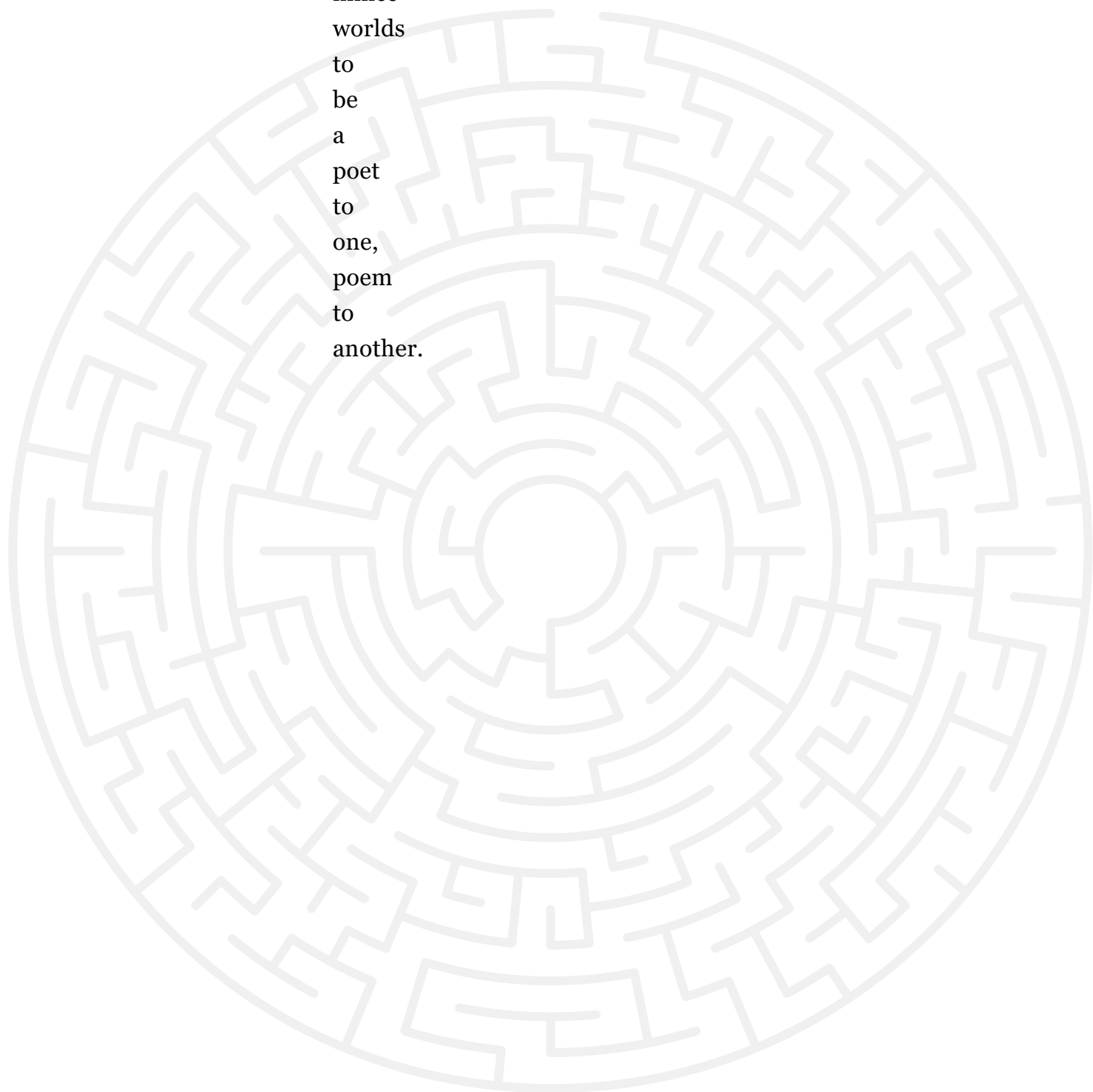




when  
desire  
to  
be  
seen,  
fades— i am ashamed to  
braid my  
hair  
in  
haste  
i  
want  
to be  
beautiful  
inscrutably  
briefly  
surely  
i want  
light  
from my  
palms to  
weigh  
me down  
make me  
matter  
soft tender  
quadratic quantum  
parabolic particles,  
body dancing  
crevice  
to crevice,  
intend  
insignificance seen.

women  
desire  
touch,  
seen  
scenic chastity

I want  
to mimic  
movement,  
momentum—  
mince  
worlds  
to  
be  
a  
poet  
to  
one,  
poem  
to  
another.





# FEATURED ARTIST

Hajra Memon

by Jabeen Qadri

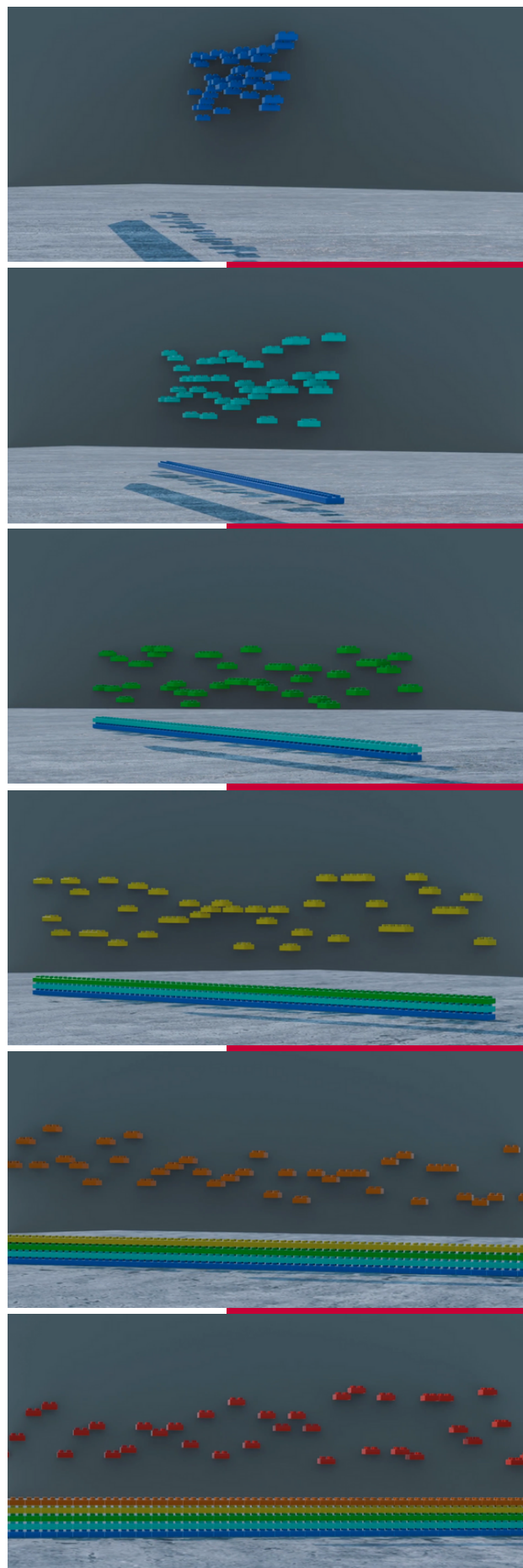
*Hajra Memon is a Hala-based artist, a recent graduate from the Shaheed Allah Buksh Soomro University of Arts and Design, Jahmshoro, currently practising in her hometown. In this interview, she describes the production of the featured artwork "Collapse" for this issue of The Missing Slate. Through her animated video, she provides a moment of stillness and guidance to navigate the labyrinth of our daily lives and creative journeys.*

**Tell us about your art that has been featured in this issue.**

It was an animation, titled *Collapse*. It shows a day in my life. If I am waking up in the morning, some days start very chaotically, and some days are very disciplined. And sometimes I want to collect all of those feelings into one box. I do not know how to explain it exactly. It's kind of messy. If you feel very chaotic, it doesn't mean that it should be conveyed in a very messy way. Basically, depicting feeling is a very abstract form.

**Then, as the animation proceeds, the feelings appear to be coming together. Is that right?**

Yes, they are coming together. I want my day to be very disciplined. I have like 3 to 4 tasks in my day, and I just do them. And in the end, I'm like, okay, now, I just completed my tasks, and I have to add a little more, a little more or a tiny bit of this feeling into the tasks, and when I do that, it all just collapses. Imperfection is left in the end. We all hope to be more disciplined.



Collapse  
frames from the Animation

# FEATURED ARTIST

Hajra Memon

Collapse  
frames from the Animation

**I agree. So, what generally inspires you to create work? Who are your favorite artists, writers, or persons of influence?**

It's all chaos. And finding a balance between order and chaos. To be honest, no, there's no artist, there is no person of influence. But there are little things that influence me in daily life. For example, if I see someone waving at me and I don't know who that is. There's a distance between this person waving at me and just smiling at me. Or a stranger helps you. These little moments influence me, and I amplify these in my work.

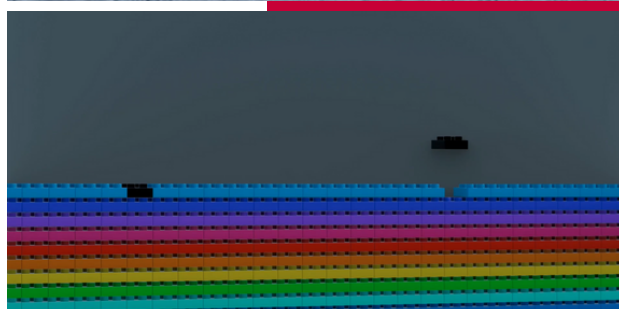
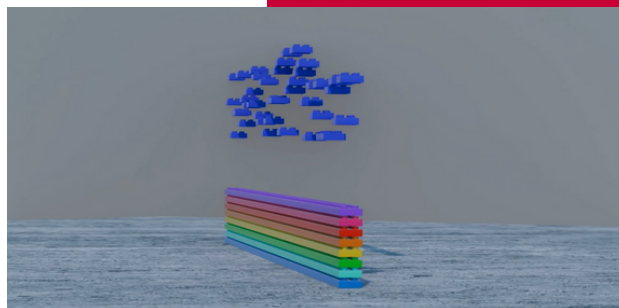
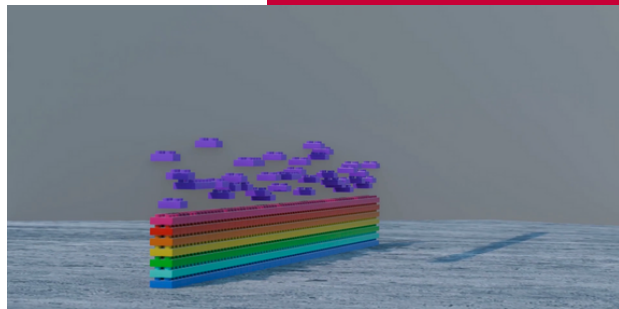
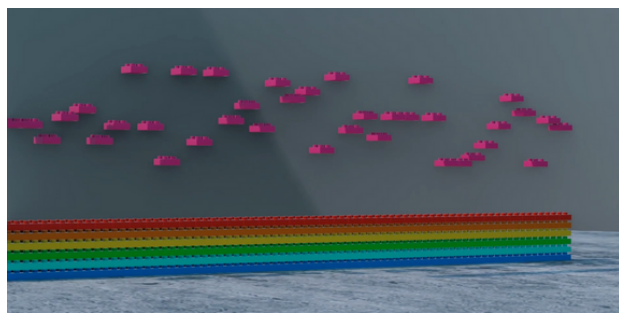
**I want to ask about the building blocks. Why did you decide to work with them?**

I used to play with Legos as a child. There was a connection of childhood with them. Apart from that, blocks are the only object for me that defines true discipline and chaos as well. When we try to build with blocks, we have to take care of some important things. If I pick – we – pick up a yellow or brown block, it's different from the rest. How do we find balance in the building process?

**Do you find that throughout your process, it is soothing to try to find the end? Or do you find that you're really kind of battling your art?**

Sometimes it's challenging, but sometimes it's playful and soothing as well. So it's both.

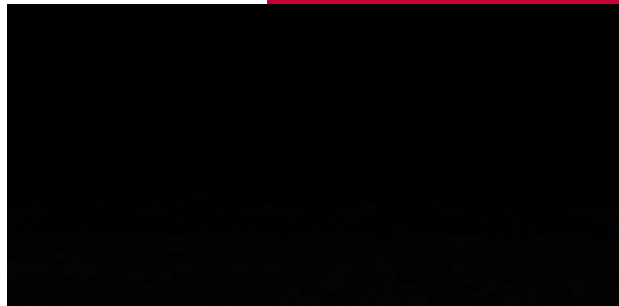
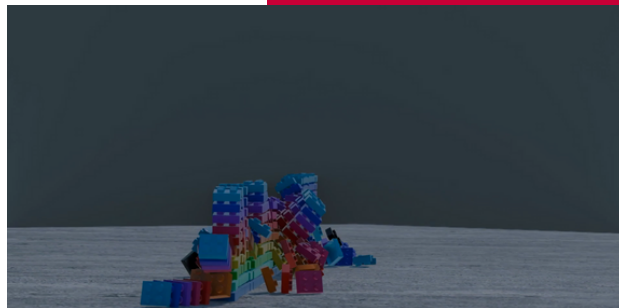
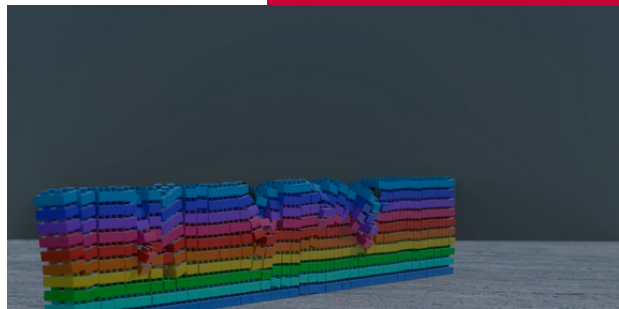
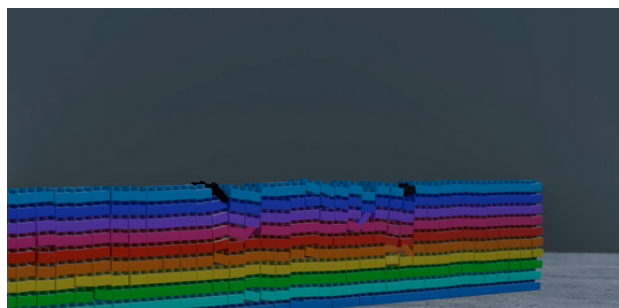
I would focus on the feelings when making art, and also when I'm choosing the color of the blocks. So it basically depends on my day and what kind of feelings I am experiencing on that day.



# FEATURED ARTIST

Hajra Memon

Collapse  
frames from the *Animation*



**Talking through the lens of the magazine, where people are writing and making art, what do you think creativity can show us about handling this challenging process and the feelings that arise?**

It depends on the artist and how they convey their feelings through their art and find balance. Balance isn't alike for people and depends on peoples' perception. Balance seems like a very small word, but for me, it's not a very small word. It's a very big concept, because in life you have to balance a lot of challenges and feelings to complete your tasks or to come to achieve anything you want. Balance is very necessary in everything.

**That's so illuminating. Is there any message you hope readers of the magazine will take away from *Collapse*?**

Yes, there is this message, and it's not very implicit. I'm sure readers will find it. Sometimes you have to be patient, and it's okay not to be perfect all the time. It's okay if your day didn't go well, and it's okay to collapse from the tasks that you couldn't accomplish.

**That's wonderful! Thank you for that insight. Are you continuing to work with building blocks? Or are you going to experiment with other media?**

I am experimenting right now with building blocks, and I'm working on a series which is a mixture of acrylics and oil paints.

# Meet the Contributors

1

**Alishba Umer**

Alishba (she/her) is a passionate writer based in Lahore, a storyteller at heart. She has been published in The Express Tribune, The News International, Daily Times, The Friday Times and Mashion. She's fond of exploring narratives around heritage, memory, cultural identity and social dilemmas, with a deep passion for Literature, delving into nuances or crafting stories of her own! She writes at @poetrybyau, where she channels her passion for writing.

2

**Audrey T. Carroll**

Audrey T. Carroll (she/they) is the author of *What Blooms in the Dark*, *The Gaia Hypothesis*, *Parts of Speech: A Disabled Dictionary*, and *In My Next Queer Life, I Want to Be*.

They are from the United States. Her Instagram / Bluesky is @AudreyTCarroll and her website is <http://AudreyTCarrollWrites.weebly.com>.

3

**Ayesha Owais**

Ayesha Owais (she/her) is a poet from Karachi, Pakistan. A finalist for the inaugural Pakistan Youth Poet Laureate award in English, her work appears in the Jashn Anthology.

You can find her @ayesha.writesss on instagram!

4

**Camille Castro**

Camille Castro (she/her) is a poet from the island of Guam. She has been featured in online publications such as Porridge Magazine and Minute Magazine.

5

**Diane Klammer**

Diane Klammer (she/her) is a disabled writer, singer-songwriter, retired therapist, and biology teacher. Her work has appeared in the United States and Canada, England, Scotland, Wales, and Australia.

She has appeared in LummoX, Avocet, Open Earth Eco Poems, Rattle, Spaces, Wordgathering and elsewhere, forthcoming in Syncopation Review.

As a poet and therapist, she has taught poetry classes to adults with mental illness.

6

**Jean Janicke**

Jean Janicke (she/her) is a writer and dancer in Washington, DC. She enjoys reading, swimming, and walks with friends.

Recently, her poems have appeared in Spare Parts Literary Magazine and Nine Muses Review. Her Instagram is @jeanjpoetry.

**7****Lisa Lahey**

Lisa Lahey's (she/her) stories and poems have been published in several literary magazines including 34th Parallel, Adelaide Literary Review, and The Pink Hydra.

**8****Miranda Jensen**

Miranda Jensen (she/her) is a creative activist with roots in the San Francisco Bay Area. Through her writing and critical theory, she seeks not merely to interpret the world, but to change it. Her work has been published in Nature Futures, Across the Margin, Snowflake Magazine, and Rough Cut Press, among others.

You can find her at [www.mirandajensen.com](http://www.mirandajensen.com) and on X @MirandaLJensen.

**9****Debra Lee**

Ms. Taylor (she/her) enjoys writing, reading, and sipping cocktails at twilight in her backyard.

**10****Nailah Tataa**

Nailah Tataa (She/They)

Living and dreaming in  
Ponamogoatitjg, Mi'kma'ki.

From the Didinga Hills.

**11****Saba Khaliq**

Saba Khaliq (she/her) is an educator, researcher and poet based in Rawalpindi/Islamabad. Her poems have appeared in magazines and journals like The Brussels Review, Fahmidan Journal, Aster Lit and The Lamp. In her free time, she loves reading film criticism and watching old PTV dramas.

She's currently working on her master's dissertation which is concerned with representations of ecotopian spaces in South Asian speculative fiction. Her Instagram is @sabaabdukhaliq\_ where she rants about reading and teaching.

**12****Susan Shea**

Susan Shea (she/her) is a retired school psychologist who grew up in Brooklyn, New York. She now lives in a forest in Pennsylvania. She returned to writing poetry two years ago.

Since then her poems have been published in or are forthcoming in Chiron Review, ONE ART, Folio Literary Journal, Passager Journal, Radix Magazine, Ekstasis and others.

She is a three poem Pushcart Prize nominee, and a one poem Best of the Net nominee.



13

**T. J. Philippe**

T.J. Philippe (she/her) is a Haitian artist living in Hungary. She loves traveling and discovering new cultures.

Her work has been published in magazines such as *The Dew Drop* and *The Literary Traveler*. You can follow her work at <https://tjphilippe.com/>

14

**Rahada Tajwer**

Rahada (she/her) is a Communication Designer based in Pakistan. She helps businesses scale through various skills she offers. She spends her free time illustrating, or rereading her favorite books. She has been published in presses and magazines, such as *Dawn & Aurora*.

In 2022 her artwork for ZeeTV's series *Dhoop Ki Deewar* won a PROMAX award for "Best Key-Art". Her Instagram is @rahadatajwer to keep up with her work.

15

**Hajra Memon**

Hajra Memon (she/her), a visual artist from Hala, Sindh, holds a Bachelor's in Fine Arts (Miniature) from Shaheed Allah Buksh Soomro University of art and design heritages jamshoro . Her work explores the balance of order and chaos in daily life using colorful Lego pieces.

Through abstract compositions, she reflects the tension between control and spontaneity. Inspired by everyday struggles and harmony, Hajra uses vibrant palettes and innovative materials to invite viewers into a deeper contemplation of the contradictions and balance that shape our world.



# THE MISSING SLAVE