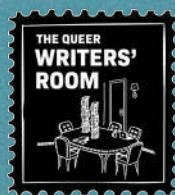


Tributaries

A Zine of Queer Writing & Art from South Asia



Issue 01





Nadi ki
tarah
pyaar
behta
hai

The love you let yourself experience is resistance.

- Kranti

Edited by **Maniza Khalid** and **Wafa Hamid**
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Foreword

Stories have the power to spark imaginations, shift cultural attitudes and norms, build empathy, and move people to action. At The Queer Muslim Project, it has been our constant endeavour to provide underrepresented artists, activists and storytellers with the tools, resources and networks needed to tell their stories and create meaningful change. This zine weaves together prose, poetry, plays, artwork, and photography about queerness at the intersection of faith, caste, ethnicity, social justice, climate change, gender, and ability by a powerful cohort of young, queer writers from across South Asia, who dreamt in shared spaces and gave words to stories that come from lived experiences. The collection emerges from our creative writing program, *The Queer Writers' Room*. Supported by the U.S. Consulate General, Mumbai, the project invests in LGBTQIA+ activists and storytellers as catalysts for change. Through the program, we aim to create a solid body of new writing from South Asia and nurture voices that can bring about positive cultural and narrative shifts about LGBTQIA+ and other minority groups in the region.

Rafiul Alom Rahman
(*Founder & Director, The Queer Muslim Project*)

The protection of fundamental human rights was a foundation stone in the establishment of the United States over 200 years ago. Since then, a central goal of U.S. foreign policy has been to promote respect for human rights, as embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. All human beings must be treated with respect and dignity and should be able to live without fear no matter who they are or whom they love. To achieve this kind of inclusivity in our societies, we have to respect the choices and understand the challenges that LGBTQIA+ people face, celebrate LGBTQIA+ diversity, and recognize the many contributions of LGBTQIA+ people around the world. It is great to see emerging queer writers take control of their narratives to transform social and cultural attitudes through this project.

Rob Anderson
(*Cultural Affairs Officer, U.S. Consulate General, Mumbai*)

Acknowledgements

We are grateful for the support of the U.S. Consulate General, Mumbai for making *The Queer Writers' Room* and this zine possible.

We thank Sadia Khatri, Megha Harish, and Amani Saeed – three brilliant queer writers – for mentoring the participants of the program and guiding the words that came together in this zine.

We are also grateful to Christopher Merrill, Kayla Degala-Paraíso, Vandana Pawa, Ambar Sahil Chatterjee and Lamya H for their time.

The dreamy photographs and illustrations were created by four talented queer artists – Raqeeb Raza, Afreen Akhtar, Imad Farooqui, and Alafiya Hasan.

This work of art would not have been possible without the efforts of the 14 LGBTQIA+ writers whose words touch souls across borders.

And, finally, thanks to our community that continues to support and nurture us to do this work.

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portrait of my body, aged 21

By Ipsa (They/Them)



India

On This Afternoon, Like Every Other

I was always told, stay clear of shakchunnis in the afternoon. When you're well-fed and blissfully unaware, that's when she gets you. You could mistake her nasal laughter for wind rushing through bamboo leaves, mistake her arms for the tender, green vines of a tree, and find yourself tangled in them. The humid air that hangs over unbroken fields in Bengal is charged with her scent—the cloying honey of the kolke phool, a sweet sort of danger. The woman in the mirror in the dim light of sundown; eight yards of black, bewitching hair spilling over her back isn't a woman at all. Look closer and you will find shimmering scales beneath her skin, and knives behind her teeth. But don't look too closely; before you know it, she'll gut you like a fish till your soul is all hers to feast on, till your juicy heart warms the coils of her body into gleeful, moaning laughter.

Are you finding this one funny? The tales they spin about you, I know they're tickling your sicklesharp wit. We lie here and I can't tell where my waist runs into your waist, the soft crook of your arm cradling my stomach. I know the names they call you, and I can't bring myself to care. In return, I get this: the late noon sun dripping into our room, trapping minutes and seconds in a honey gold haze. The patch on your neck I draw into my mouth without looking for it. That thick musk of you that pulls me in, in, and in. They say shakchunnis can stretch their arms into unfathomable lengths and fetch whatever they desire. It's funny how it's all true, isn't it? How your arm really can stretch far, far into the places you've christened, turning me inside out like scooping the innards of a papaya. But now, your arm slides over me as you rise, pick your shirt off the floor, and slip it on—your motions so deeply known to me, I can feel the scratch of cotton on your lush back. Now you'll gather and twist your wild hair into a bun, and then you'll ask me where I've hidden your hair tie again, and I will grin lazily at you like a well-fed cat. It's an unexpected boon, shaping an afternoon into a cozy routine together. As we breathe slowly into the space of these hours, I dare to dream of a dark grove where we drink from the kolke phool, and the trees shimmer like the slope of my thighs.

They say that a shakchunni is the ghost of a married woman, and she's around every corner, waiting to beguile a good, married man with her wicked manners. This is the part you make me recite over and over, as you let go of your hair and climb back in. I tell you again how shakchunnis love to suck on fish bones, just to hear you snort, and then, to watch you smile your scythe-blade smile, and ask me if I'm ready to be sucked dry like a fish bone. And then, there is laughter that sets our room alight. There is so much laughter, always.



Photographs by Afreen Akhtar



Even Shaitan Showers

By Begum Taara Shakar (She/They)

*All my dreams
are made on
the bathroom
floor.*

Here is a rough carpet I've dragged there. There in the solace of my company, I sit and let myself get lost in the last four pages of the book I am reading. I press my head back to the cool pink tiled wall, once I am done. I close my eyes, this time. I decide what city I would like to be in and write the story in my head.

I have always found this to be a safe place. I smuggle items under my kurta, sucking in my stomach and tucking them in the front of my jeans or shalwar. A diary, a book, a whole wad of A4 sheets to draw on, pens. Coolly pressed against my hot skin, their awkward corners stick out from the covering cloth.

Outside, I ponder on my mother's gaze. She who read before me, and brought me into this world to love books, can read the burning honesty in my cheeks.

There is so much more to be said about how much I loved spending time on this tiled floor.

During my fond visits, I would always wonder, if this was me slowly turning evil. This is how the

devil, *Shaitan* made you wear horns. Ama & Nano both had been very clear, this is the devil's dominion. A bathroom is unclean and so the devil and the minions live in its dirty glory. I was also warned not to look at my naked body in the mirror. After all, they knew. They were watching, shaitans of all sizes watching me live my life in their living room.

I don't remember when I decided I was part of their family too.

Don't get me wrong here! I always thought God was in love with *Shaitan*. Did no one notice that a whole world was created to prove *Shaitan* wrong? That God who knows everything that is to happen, still lets it happen?

*here is a journey i already know the answer to
God says
i bestow it on to you my dear jinn who thinks they know better.*

*here is a whole journey to answer your question
you will lose either away
you have lost my love but you will realise why
for you don't realise what I love*

Doesn't anyone notice how God simply wants to be known and trusted by *Shaitan* to trust in the judgement of faith of Hazrat Adam? God wants their creation to be loved and seen as they are. God is also their creation. Humans are the manifestation of God's light.

When Allah holds love in so many ways - I start to feel ridiculous sometimes when I fear it.

I think about *Shaitan* and their struggle for love. They sit beside me - sometimes, I think they are the fear that moves me away from love and my life.

I remember kissing you in the darkness and thought you to be a jinn. It would only make sense then, this overpowering love, this happiness, to be understood and feel divine. Another time to feel powerful, I once wrote myself off as a jinn. There are so many ways we share stories in forms larger than us. God built a whole world for *Shaitan* instead of vanquishing their existence.

The first time your tongue was inside me, I swear I saw god quivering in my skin. I struggle to turn away from light and form when it is all so obviously a love letter.

I am constantly afraid. *I become the meeting of Shaitan and God together.* One of us has left the understanding of the other.

I say goodbye to you, while I still have the strength to hold your hand. *I love you better,* I whisper to myself. Here is Shaitan trying to tell God something. *Prove me wrong,* I know better. I leave. Does everyone learn to wait for the day of judgement to understand love?

Many months ago, I dreamt of your body growing heavier, your hair turning grayer. I carried you on my back and you wore a kurta of my favourite colour - red. It is good to see you smile here in my dreams. I know now how to bury hurt here. I know what needs to be let go of, to know the truth of our time spent together.

I wonder if Shaitan thinks of the eternities of worshipping God before Hazrat Adam came. *I hope I worshipped you enough.*

This is a dream written on the bathroom floor. I practise my shame and desire with my body facing the bathroom door.

One summer, I was bleeding, shrouded in the darkness, growing sick to faint. I remember thinking it was better to die here, than in my room. A bedroom has always attached responsibilities and identities to it. A bathroom is there for you, here for you to relieve and cleanse yourself. A bedroom can be selfish in asking more of you.

It becomes a habit of comfort, to whisper to myself,

We are all jinns.

So what do jinns do when they can't sleep? Do they also dream of love? Do they make dreams on the bathroom floor? Do they wish to be fed? Do they practise desire? Shaitan dreams to be right, to know and be known. To be known is to be loved.

I am not very different from Shaitan in love. Ever since I wanted to know I was right, I have been failing in love since then.

Shaitan will only cry in pain when it is stoned. We stone a lover every day. I think it fits perfectly into my narrative of how one can be perceived. How easy to blame the Shaitan for what the human wants to do?

The grief of the Shaitan is not any less, than of me and you. Love is grief, and the world is a fleeting moment of it. There is nothing singular about it.

When your father is quiet in the casket and arrives in the neighbourhood, the lions have been roaring for hours. Kept away in different houses, they call out to each other in the dark. You open your mouth in grief and I feel the world crumbling into nothing at your roar.

*What is time teaching Shaitan?
Where is the lesson in eternity?
To watch humans suffer, err, cry and give into fears?
What is God trying to teach their beloved?*

The first time your tongue was inside me, I saw God quiver in my skin. I felt scared enough that you would eat me alive. *But you are no lion, only a human. We are still here, souls kept in a zoo.* Living in containers larger than the other, we pay the price of being seen in our identities.

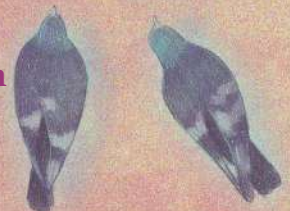
All my dreams are made on the bathroom floor but sometimes they can live outside this door. One night when I was drowsy and hungry you got me pasta and fed me by hand because I couldn't bear you to leave the bedroom again. The soft pad of your fingers, the creamy sauce, my mouth, slippery mushrooms. Only God knows how tender you were, to grant my blood timelessness.

These stories are my last and this is where I share my last lesson. This night we slept at yours, next-door to your mother and sister on the top floor. Two bedrooms, and a joint bathroom shared but even under your ceiling, we were not alone. Every time the bathroom light would turn on, we'd turn away from each other.

Time was wounding us up, as we lay close. Shaitan was watching us beneath the door as we slowly met and measured the inches between our fingers to let them grow. Can you imagine two figures turning away from each other in the light, and back together in the dark?

*I saw the aching. Shaitan waiting, unable to sleep.
Hungrily watching me for I was right there, living their dream.*

Illustration by Alafiya Hasan



Darling

By Ram Vishwanathan (They/Them)



India

Darling

Well played, darling.

My coach clapped my back, laughing heartily, as we walked off the field. The game secured, it was time for him to bring out his favourite nickname for me.

Before you get too concerned, let me make it clear: he was more of a joker than a creep. Darling, his moniker of choice for me, always delivered dripping with sarcasm, reflected what he must have thought was a good-natured dig, aimed at a talent he found promising but too soft to survive India's intensely competitive cricket rat-race.

For my coaches, toughening me up was something of a mission. My cheeks were too plump and chubby, my hips too curvy. My hands were soft and tender — like a girl's, I was told. To survive, people around me said, one could not merely tolerate the blows of the rough, hard leather ball. One had to embrace its rough edges, and become one with them.

With time and practice, my hands grew calloused and leathery. My fingers became rugged and irreversibly crooked, bent out of shape by a decade of spinning the ball. Even today, they're never still. If you look closely enough, you might catch them spinning an imaginary ball, or, increasingly, spelling out a word or two that's stuck in my mind, moving ponderously in sync with my own gradual drift of thoughts.

My coach might have successfully brought me closer to the physical specimen he felt a male athlete had to become, but it was my inner softness that truly stumped him. Hardened hands or muscled limbs offered merely a layer, a facade. They told only partial truths. The word “darling,” the adjective “soft,” or any of the other nicknames he and others around him invoked were intended to provoke me into action. They were meant to release a righteous anger that would drive me to prove to them that I was not too soft, too effeminate, or too fragile to survive the brutal culling that is a necessary part of selecting a fifteen-member cricket team out of millions of aspirants.

To their chagrin, their goading found limited success. Sure, I wanted to prove my ability in the game, and I didn't quite like being called a darling, but it was more who used that word, and how it was used, rather than the word itself, that troubled me. A taunt like darling reflected the one fundamental idea that defined how we were meant to play cricket: in pursuit of success in the game, all other emotions, desires and ways of being had to be stripped aside.

And so I remained incorrigible, maddeningly ambivalent about the qualities my coach felt were necessities for any successful cricketer. But in hindsight, I wasn't becoming less of a cricketer. I was simply becoming a full person.

At a purely competitive level, my coach was probably right. I didn't make the cut. Tens of millions of young children learn this news every year, and must find ways to pick

up the debris of their once all-consuming dreams, and keep going.

But for me, the task seemed easier. Cricket had helped me find comfort in being in my body as a child — until, as I became a young adult, it suddenly didn't. In its place, I began to find a vocabulary to understand myself that has served me far better than the jokes aimed at me then. By this I mean queerness, but a specific shade of it in particular, best described by a word I referenced above: ambivalence, which most precisely summarizes the way I approach and understand my own gender and sense of self.

Another way I've learnt to describe myself is through the politics of negation — which I've felt offers a lot more radical potential than the sticky and unsatisfying politics of naming. It is much easier for me to define what I am not than to pin myself to a word or identity with any real affirmative, unequivocal emotions. In short, I often just don't care.

This has felt an increasingly difficult motto to live by in a world whose complexity we seem to traverse (and commodify) by making each other visible through identity. For as long as I have realized I am not a man, but not quite a woman either, and that I don't need to be anything at all, the world has seemed unsatisfied with my answers. Without the right adjectives, it seems to tell me, you cannot be visible, you cannot be seen.

Gender, in that sense, has felt like something of a rubber band to me. I can stretch it out in various ways, play with

shape, style and performance, but ultimately the words that construct gender, and create its aesthetics, seem to have no material grounding. They always, when sufficiently stretched and pulled, somehow come to mean nothing and everything at once, and dissolve into the vacuous emptiness of that rubberband's empty center, leaving me bemused and a little exhausted. Often, I have found the most peace in the realization that language is always incomplete, and in being liberated from the urge to find a stable, categorizable sense of selfhood.

I've often been struck by how the way I describe queerness seems unusual. It's marked by a grey, austere tone, with a type of anti-consumptionist, self-annihilative streak that contrasts with the rainbow celebration of our colourful and diverse individualities. Perhaps that tone reflects something fundamentally true about me, an ontological discomfort with the individual self, and how the culture of late-stage capitalism seems to reduce who we are to the sum of our individual desires.

But more than that, this tenor is a product of the fact that, as I left the cricket field for the university, my sense of self became best expressed in conceptual abstractions. But answers to the deepest questions about ourselves are never so tidy. The world around me and the communities that we find meaning in are very messy, material things — held together, for example, by the camaraderie that makes sports teams such special communities for some. I still missed cricket, because I had found a vocabulary, but not a practice.



“Why do they have the same last name?” Appa asked, sitting up and pointing at the WPL (Women’s Premier League) cricket match on the TV screen. I was back at my parents’ home in Bangalore; it’d been a year since I’d graduated from college. On the screen, Natalie Sciver-Brunt and Katherine Sciver-Brunt were embracing, celebrating the fall of an opposing team wicket.

Our cat, seated on Appa’s lap, meowed in response, a plaintive cry protesting the slightest disturbance to his perch. But the cat aside, my father’s question was met with a pause, and an awkward silence.

“They’re married,” I eventually replied, my voice neutral and matter-of-fact, but my heart beating with a tremor of excitement.

In his moment of comfort — nighttime TV with a cat on his lap and a bowl of peanuts by his side — Appa had walked into a bit of a trap. As if on cue, the commentator exclaimed, “The off-field jodi is now on-field too!”

When I returned to Bangalore, my parents didn’t take long to realize that I was not the same person who’d left home at 18. It likely struck them as early as the day I returned, when they offered to help me unpack, only to find in my bag a non-zero amount of makeup, and clothes that were far too flowy for their liking. My hands had regained their softness; my fingers were still slightly bent, but they’d taken on a long, lithe elegance — one I now enjoy highlighting with nail polish.

My Amma is eloquent, expressive, and even effervescent, but somewhat inconsistently so. She once told me she'd been diagnosed as borderline bipolar, a term I didn't quite know how to comprehend or take seriously as a child. She's always had a rebellious side — eating meat, changing careers, marrying out of her caste — but that side of her has been tempered over decades by the torpor of married life. She might have lost a radical edge, but she remains refreshingly frank and direct.

Amma had no hesitation quizzing me that very day about my new clothes, and, when I told her I no longer identified as a man, about gender nonconformity. Our conversations have continued since, even if her responses are inconsistent, and vary more with her mood than anything else.

I'm so glad you are embracing ambiguity, she once texted me. But a day later, she'd flipped a full 180. She tried her best to talk me out of painting my nails, and asked me why I wanted to provoke the people around me. But no matter what her thoughts were — supportive, dismissive, concerned — they needed little deciphering. I'd often hear them moments after she fully formed them in her head.

Appa's response — like most desi fathers — was quite the opposite: to entirely ignore that anything was out of the ordinary, bury his feelings into a seemingly bottomless abyss, and silently move on with life — which, to both his credit and his failure, has always revolved around supporting those around him. Like subterranean carbon, my father's submerged and compressed emotions have formed a layer of fossil fuels, ready to explode with the slightest hint of

flame. And while he has mellowed with time, Appa's combustibility is warily remembered in our household. Since my return to the city, it had shown itself once before, when, during a stressful weekend, he yelled at me for wearing a pair of red pants that he finally admitted triggered him.

Unsurprisingly, Appa digested the fact that a lesbian couple was on screen with unflappable silence. But while he fended away his moment of awkwardness, my sense of excitement didn't pass. I've enjoyed watching cricket ever since I stopped playing the sport competitively, but always wistfully, with complicated — you could say ambivalent — emotions. This was different. I felt a burning ache in my heart, a pining I've never quite felt before. I wanted, in that moment, to be those lesbian cricketers on the screen. I yearned for what they could enjoy that I'd never been able to in the past, which had made complicated the sport I otherwise loved so unambiguously.

Watching women's cricket, and seeing athleticism and queerness so visibly on screen, invoked some of the most powerful emotions of gender yearning I've ever had. A quick headcount would suggest that nearly half of all women's cricketers outside the subcontinent — where public queerness continues to be frowned upon — are queer. Many are married to or partnered with each other. They are allowed to love each other, cry together, and play together, all at the same time.



That moment of longing came with a hint of reinforcing clarity — not about “who I am,TM” but about the scale at which I wanted to ask that question. I didn’t need to find new words to better describe me as an atomized, individual being, when these terms make the most sense to me at a relational level, at the level of a collective. I had rejected being a man, in part because I found the culture of brotherhood toxic and unsatisfying. In recreating my own path, it is not womanhood I necessarily desire, as much as a sisterhood. Perhaps, if I am to use the word, that is one way in which I would like to be trans: to play a sport I love with people who I am allowed to love too, and be both an athlete and a darling — without any scorn involved, or any contradiction between those terms.

Photographs by Raqeeb Raza

Unmasking The Lakhey

By Sushobhan Chimoriya (He/She/They)



Nepal

The stage is set with a few chairs, a shoe cabinet, and a few decorations that showcase traditional Newari¹ architecture. It's Aju's quarter, a small and cozy space. At the center of the stage is a wooden coffee table and a glass surface at the center. The left side of the stage is a blank space, the entrance to the quarter.

LIGHTS UP!

[Aju enters the stage from the left side, looking exhausted and stressed out. He enters the quarter hurriedly. He takes a deep breath and exhales slowly. He looks around and grabs a book on top of his shoe cabinet.]

AJU: 'Finding your true *maicha*² huh, Aunt Silu?

[He opens the book and starts tearing the pages frantically. He then tears each page into long strips and throws them on the coffee table. He steps out of the house and returns back with a big bowl. He then sits down on the chair next to the coffee table.]

AJU: Well, let's put this stupid thing to some use.

[He throws the paper strips into the bowl. He takes them out. They are now wet and slimy. He then starts sticking them to his mask. He continues to do this with great concentration, unaware of his surroundings.]

LIGHTS DIM DOWN ON AJU AND SHIFT TO THE LEFT SIDE OF THE STAGE

[A tall green-eyed man wearing a black kurta reads something on a piece of paper and looks around.]

MAN: Well, this should be it.

[He enters the quarter and walks towards Aju.]

LIGHTS RETURN TO AJU AS THE SPOTLIGHT FADES FROM THE LEFT SIDE OF THE STAGE.

A LIGHT TAPPING SOUND.

1. Newari people, and thus the traditional Newari architecture which is particular to Nepal.

2. Maicha = beautiful girl

MAN (in a silvery voice): Hi. Are you the masked performer?

[Aju quickly sticks the last three strips of paper on his mask. He turns around to find a man looking at him with his hand on his shoulders.]

AJU (with a smile): Yes, I am the Lakhey. What is your purpose?

MAN: Hi, I am Aniel. I am here to get to know you.

AJU: What's that?

[Aniel laughs a little.]

ANIEL: I am writing a research paper on individuals performing lost arts. And I wanted to know more about you and your art. I checked in with the committee and they have allowed me an hour to talk to you now. Would now be a good time to get started?

AJU: Could I please have a minute?

[Aniel nods his head. Aju aggressively presses on his mask. Aniel looks at him curiously.]

AJU: We can get started now.

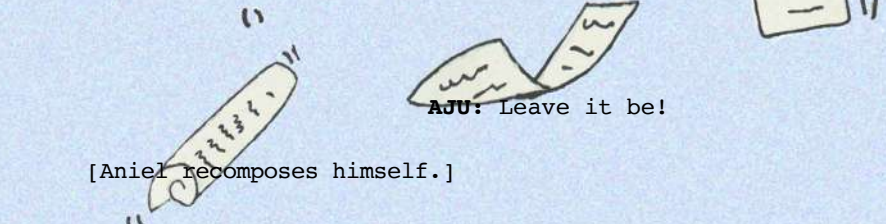
[Aju chin-points at a chair in front of him next to the coffee table. Aniel slightly nods and takes a seat. He sits with crossed legs, with the right leg over the other, and his pen and paper on his lap. Aju bends forward and puts both his hands on his cheeks.]

AJU: I am a storyteller. I don't know how to do an interview.

ANIEL: This is not an interview. I just want to talk to you. Get to know you better!

AJU (nodding his head): Sure.


[Aju moves back and removes his hand from his cheeks. Two strips of paper fall off the mask on the floor. Aniel bends down from his seat to pick up the paper.]



AJU: Leave it be!

[Aniel recomposes himself.]

AJU: So, where do we start?




ANIEL (playing with his pen): Why don't we start with you? Tell me about you.

AJU (a bit startled): Well, my name is Aju Pasakar.
I am a Lakhey personator.

ANIEL: Could you tell me what a Lakhey is?

AJU: A Lakhey is a demon. But not the bad kind,
the good kind. He is a protector demon.



ANIEL: What is a protector demon?

AJU: Lakheys lived in the underworld but came out once every year. One such year a group of Lakheys was visiting the Kantipur forest.

One of the Lakheys got lost. He eventually came upon a maicha, a beautiful girl, who guided him through the forest. Seeing her kindness and generosity, the Lakhey became smitten with her. It didn't take long for the maicha to reciprocate his feelings. The local community was strongly against their union. The Lakhey then started helping the villagers in their fields. He took an oath to protect the villagers and would often wait outside the city gate under heavy rain to protect the villagers. He gradually gained the confidence of the villagers and the couple was united.

Every year, we celebrate this union by celebrating Pranay Jatra every monsoon. The Lakhey personator then dresses up in the best red and gold costume and performs the traditional Pranay dance. The locals prepare huge quantities of delicacies and offer them to the deities and the Lakhey.

How do you think I developed this tummy?

[Aju and Aniel share a laugh. Aniel takes a minute to note everything down. More paper strips continue to fall. Aju and Aniel both choose to ignore it.]

ANIEL: So, are you the only Lakhey personator that there is?

AJU: Far from it. There are around a dozen other Pasakars who perform as Lakhey personators. I am the oldest one though.

ANIEL: You don't look old, though?

AJU: Well, I am. I was chosen as a personator when I was 9. I am 23 now. Practically, I should have retired by now.

[Aniel, quite surprised, puts his pen down and arches his back straight.]

ANIEL: Are you sure? Even gymnasts don't retire that young.

AJU: I am quite sure. My great-grandfather, also a personator, retired at 17 and got married.

ANIEL: Why don't you retire anyway then?

AJU: That's not how it works. We, Pasakars, are direct descendants of the Lakhey and the maicha. And unless we find our one true love, we can't retire.

[Aju puts a finger on his chin.]

AJU: This mask you see. Only we Pasakars have it. Like our Lakhey ancestors. We develop it after our rice-feeding ceremony and it continues to grow until we are 8.

ANIEL: Hope you don't mind me asking but why were you putting the paper strips on your face earlier?

[Aju raises his eyebrows.]

AJU: You saw?

ANIEL: I did.

[Aju turns his head down and breaks down.]

AJU: Because I am a bad personator. When I talk to someone at a

stretch, my mask starts melting. I lose my divine energy. I don't want to disappoint my community. So, until I find my one true love and regain my divine energy, I have to layer more paper-mâché onto my stupid face.

(crying even harder) Maybe I am destined to be this old Lakhey personator with no power and no use.

[Aniel gets up from his seat, stands next to Aju, and consoles him. Aju looks up at Aniel.]

AJU: And you know what the worst part is? I don't even want to find my one true love. I want to go out. I want to eat good food. I want to meet my friends. I want to see the world outside this quarter.

[Aju suddenly stands up and wipes his tears off.]

AJU: You know what? I am going out today.

[Aju seems to be in a thought for a minute.]

AJU: I would love to try out the new choila place. Probably try their niuti chola.

ANIEL: What's a niuti choila?

AJU: Spiced grilled soya chunks.

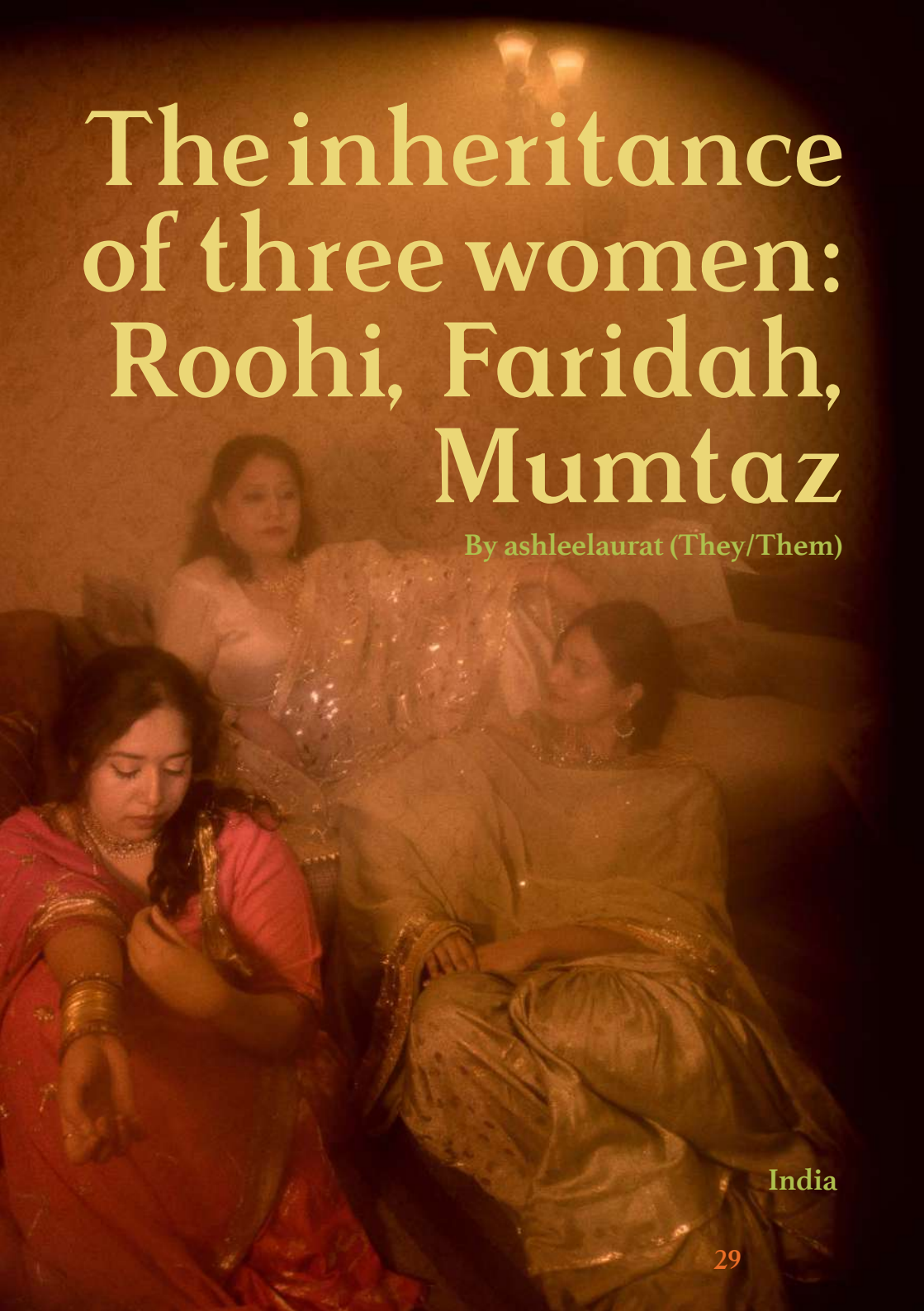
ANIEL: Sounds delicious. Can I join you? My treat!

[Aju looks at him with a raised eyebrow which gradually turns into a slight smile.]

AJU: Okay, let's go!

BOTH OF THEM LEAVE THE STAGE AND THE LIGHT GRADUALLY FADES OFF.

Illustration by Imad Farooqui



The inheritance of three women: Roohi, Faridah, Mumtaz

By ashleelaurat (They/Them)

India

When she finally came to power, she was known as 'Faridah'. Even her favourite son didn't know it wasn't her real name. The house, 'Faridah Manzil', is where everything crumbled; the family still lives under its debris. After her mother passed, she took up the role of 'Baaaji', the eldest sister in her Mamu's house.

Before I continue, let me remind you: this is a biased story. Relationships are intangible creatures, as they grow slowly with the passage of time. They tend to consume you. So when they cause pain, it seeps into your bones. All stories are moulded by relationships, and so is this one.

Being the pampered daughter of the house, Baaaji ended up in the dirty lanes of Kolkata. Living with her husband in a room that ended where it began. Migrants in a city, where she didn't understand the name of its vegetables or their strange way of adding an 'ow' sound to everything. She missed being followed around by Mumtaz, her favourite sister.

Mumtaz was next in line. She married a man I never got to know. I knew her life after. When her husband, Azhar, passed away, Mumtaz didn't have time to grieve. She went straight to work as a woman managing the only petrol pump in her town, Hardoi, in the mid-90s.

She came back home late to see her daughters cackling and bullying their only brother. Mumtaz would pretend to scold them for the pranks they pulled. Sometimes she couldn't control it, and a laugh would itch out. Lethal judgements were often meted out to her children. Hysterical complaints were made about how their jokes spared no one.

Their cousin was still allowed to stay in the childhood they had suddenly left behind. Roohi was a generation younger than them - her abba's daughter and the middle child. She was among equals. It was always who ran the fastest, ate the most, and read the quickest. Her brother made her do chores in exchange for reading crime thrillers in Urdu. So she learned the language out of spite.

On her holidays, she would spend time with Faridah and Mumtaz's kids, who were her age. Before they all knew it, they were all being measured, studied, and reviewed. Her biodata took her all the way to Bombay.

When men leave their homes it's a hardship, a necessity, and an adventure passed on as stories to keep the future generations humble. In our family, women only have homes while their mothers are alive.

After having three daughters, Faridah prayed daily. Her Kashif was born. By the

time their four children were in school, there wasn't a room in their house they hadn't been scolded in. As a diligent woman, she meted out the same treatment to her daughters. All were married after school within the family to old men with old money.

With more time on her hands, she focused on managing an orphanage for Muslim girls. She met plenty of Muslim women looking for guidance and reprised her role as Faridah Baaji. When she recommended a girl in the orphanage for a rishta it was meant to happen. Didn't have the funds to put them in college, so she married them off to men within their biradari (caste).

I still don't understand how, in between generations, amnesia takes over. As if you can't see that you are wielding the same weapon used on you. If you leave the violence of 'log kya kahenge' - what will people say?—behind, you're passing on stories rooted in love and not pain.

Mumtaz's in-laws were trying to claim the house. She confided in her Baaji, who had the answer to everything. Baaji decided that marriage would stop the talking, so she set up rishtas in the family. The eldest two were soon married, but they protested that their siblings should only be married after college. Baaji had selected one of her daughters for her own son; the sisters were now in-laws.

Her daughters never complained. She could finally live peacefully once her son took over the business and settled down too. The house felt empty. She rarely saw all her children in the same room. Eagerly ordering aloo chaat, dahi batashe, and jalebi-rabdi for her grandchildren during the holidays.

Roohi still hasn't seen her grandchildren. She remains silent while her cousin Faridah regularly calls her to complain about the rebellions of the next generation. She raised her son and daughter, teaching them maths every day. Her husband handled the Marathi. Through rounds of chemotherapy, managing parent-teacher meetings as a principal, and raising another daughter, she decided that she had enough. Now she sits at home and recalls stories of her own childhood while I act like I've heard them for the first time.

'Khala' was now permanently attached to Roohi's name as a reminiscence of the friendship she had with her nieces. Roohi Khala warmly hosted a dinner for her niece, Ammi. She came to see her from Kolkata for the first time. Afterwards, my mother analysed the conversation of the night. As mothers do. 'Log apne baccho ko muhabbat seh yaad karte hain' my Ammi said. People speak of their children with love. Roohi Khala never mentioned her son once. She only saw him and his family in the photographs they seldom sent.

Faridah became a great grandmother. Her husband's death strengthened her reign. The women in the family were terrified of her. The men stood up when she entered the room. Any protests by her grandchildren were silenced, especially mine. Her word was the final one. We could always hear her talking to herself when we passed by her door. It was seeing Mumtaz after five years sitting across the room when the family, for once, saw her fall into silence.

Mumtaz slowly started forgetting things. She mistook faces. There was a lady who kept asking her if she wanted chai. It was too late before we stopped pretending. Her kids stopped coming back from school. She waited in the drawing room in the evenings for her husband to return from work. She was there, yet she wasn't. When it was her time to live a quiet life, in the chatter of her family, their memory escaped her. We never got to know our Nanna (Nun-aa).

Time seldom heals. We don't understand the creatures we've birthed between us. We don't know what came before it. And we don't consider what we will do with it. A rabid animal that haunts us. A silent one that lurks in the corner. The ones you can see but never name. In the lives of these women, all of them are fostered and inherited by their daughters.

A photograph of a woman with dark hair, wearing a light-colored, patterned top, sitting on a sofa. She is holding a white cat in her lap. The background is a patterned curtain. The lighting is warm and soft.

Photographs by Afreen Akhtar

Silver



By Kahless Jaden Hameed (He/Him)

Sri Lanka

Hijaz strode through the street like a snake would slither through a field — smoothly, barely noticeable, a ghost — and yet people parted before him like grass, almost unwittingly. Something about him repulsed them. It could have been his demeanour, or his black, hooded coat, which stood out starkly in the hectic business district. Or perhaps it was the mask that hid his face, making his apparent strangeness bolder. Hijaz was used to it. He'd been forced to accommodate people's discomforts. He kept walking.

The night was lit up by colourful signs miles above, up to the edges of the troposphere. You could no longer tell when the night ended and the day began. Hijaz kept his head down as he moved through the crowded street. Regular bulletin screens blared the news for the day in the sky above. They constantly spoke on the same issues, adding tiny details every time.

"There has been a 60% spike in identified unfeasibles over the past quarter," a news anchor read on one screen.

"The unfeasibles represent over 80% of the prison population. This solidifies the theory that emotions turn people into criminals. Ban all supplements. Ban the sale of emotions," an older, bearded man said to another.

"- as the annual human birth rate takes another plunge," said yet another screen.

Hijaz looked around him at the neutral

faces, unburdened by tumultuous thoughts. Nobody stopped to chat, only asking what was necessary, whenever necessary.

Another screen broadcasted an advertisement disguised as a news story. "The Little Angel program is doubling the number of seats this cycle in response to fast-lowering birthrates. For those who want their own Little Angel, applications are currently open."

He'd heard enough. Hijaz slapped his hands over his ears as he quickened his pace for the rest of the way until he reached a large building with no street-facing windows. A massive metal door greeted him at the top of the stairs. Just as he'd been instructed, he walked up to the little digital face against the wall and entered the six-digit code. It took a minute before the door opened into a cavernous hall — the dark grey concrete walls and black granite flooring reflected no light, amplifying the unfamiliar. Hijaz stood there, surrounded by several masked faces and swishing robes, just like his. He awkwardly shuffled past, carefully avoiding them with his eyes to the ground only to harshly bump into somebody seconds later. Hijaz braced for the fall but he didn't hit the floor. The stranger he'd bumped into had a tight hold on his arms.

"You're okay, eh?" the person asked.

Hijaz gasped as he looked up to face the stranger. They were quite a bit taller than Hijaz — by at least 6 inches — and their mask had an unmistakable avatar on it. A glowing blue falcon carrying a

book that was impaled by a sword. Hijaz realised he was facing a legend — Hades. They were the one who created the virtual forum (VRA) Beyond The Meta (BTM) — a secret online community for those society had deemed ‘unfeasible’, those who were forced to become pariahs.

Everyone in the hall had their unique avatars to protect their identities. Hijaz didn’t know their names — only their handles in the BTM. He’d never seen their faces, yet he’d forged a bond with every single one of them. Hades had ensured everyone could find safety and friendship through this network, including himself.

“Thank you,” Hijaz said, partially in awe.

“Don’t mention it! Hey, I’ll be on in a minute. Hope you’re ready?” With that, Hades disappeared backstage.

The strangers he called his closest friends assembled around him. Hijaz anxiously tapped his fingers against his thighs, avoided looking at them, and kept his vision plastered on the stage before him. For some reason, even though he’d probably spoken to everyone there before, it was weird and awkward meeting them in real life. They’d all had similar struggles in the past and nobody on Earth could relate to Hijaz more than them. He never had much of a childhood, let alone childhood friends.

Hijaz recalled his first inspection. Like every child aged 4 to 18, Hijaz had to take on annual ‘inspections’. On his first day,

he was greeted by an assortment of people in both lab coats and suits. None of them had discernible features. They all had short hair heavily slicked back, no facial hair, or any makeup. They spoke in monotonous voices using many words Hijaz couldn’t understand — though, this wasn’t unusual. After what felt like forever, a person in a lab coat approached him and hastily started applying drops of an icy gel around his scalp before attaching several rods to his head.

They then stepped back and said, “Hijaz Ameen? Think about your fondest memory.”

Hijaz looked at them in confusion. How could he choose a single memory? He had many fond memories. Like Eid! Hijaz loved Eid because his brother would come home and they all prayed together and then sat and ate together. The whole family drank a vial of glittering pink liquid and smiled and was happy. Hijaz never got a vial though, and his parents told him that he’d be getting his first one when he turned 19. As he thought about their last Eid, the lights above him lit up pink, distracting Hijaz. The lights suddenly dimmed down to a light yellow.

“Hijaz, I need you to focus now. Can you do that? Respond ‘Yes, I can’ if you are willing to cooperate,” the person in the lab coat had demanded.

“Y-yes, I can,” Hijaz responded, a slight tremor in his voice.

“Focus on your fondest memory, Hijaz.”

Hijaz tried again, teleporting him to another memory — his birthday last year. His mother had woken him up with a hug. “Happy birthday Hijaz, you’re three now. May Allah protect you. I hope you’re always happy like mommy is today. You’re our special rainbow baby,” his mother said as she kissed him on his forehead. That felt like the first time he’d looked her in the eye. There was a pink glow in her eyes that day which he’d never seen before.

In the present, the lights above Hijaz started pulsating... a shade sickeningly similar to the one he had seen in his mother’s eyes.

“Keep going. Focus.”

Hijaz had received gifts throughout his birthday from friends, relatives, and of course, his parents. Every birthday was the same — he felt loved and attended to. Most other days, though, fell short. Those days were the hardest for him. Those were the days when he’d clamber onto one of the tall chairs in the dining room to eat his soup alone. Those were the days when his family didn’t feel like one. They never looked into each other’s eyes or made small talk. Those days were unremarkable and lonely.

The light slowly began to blink. There was a flurry of hands on keyboards and confused chatter went around as people struggled to stop whatever was happening. The person before him approached Hijaz briskly and grabbed him by the shoulders. The lights swirled

to a shade of orange.

“Hijaz, regulate your emotions right now. Regulate them. Stop feeling whatever it is you are feeling.”

Hijaz shut his eyes tight and tried to calm down but his heart was racing.

“Hijaz, regulate your emotions. This is an order.”

His heart was speeding up and a bead of sweat dripped down the side of his face.

“Now.”

There was a series of short beeps and a brief flatline.

“It is futile. He has contaminated the sample,” a suit said.

The room was quiet. “This is highly unusual. It looks like this specimen will have to be removed from the index. It is not feasible. Notify the school that we will not be collecting samples from Hijaz Ameen. Inform the parents they will not be receiving a cheque,” said the lab coat in response.

That was the day when Hijaz’s world came crashing down. He was the talk of the town, the only child to be rejected from his annual inspections in that area in decades. Now, 14 years later, Hijaz knew it was all bullshit. He knew he wasn’t the only one. He’d learnt the truth that there were others like him and that all of the sufferings he had endured were forced on him by a world hellbent on control.

He breathed deeply as he felt a shift in the atmosphere around him, like something was about to happen. From high up, four stage lights lit up the wooden platform before them. Hades stood at the centre of the platform. They looked burdened, with their shoulders slumped, as they walked forward, closer to the crowd. The curious chatter died down as Hades cleared their throat. They turned their head from side to side, their arms in the air, awkwardly positioned as if to welcome the people before them.

“It’s so great to see you all here today. When I started our forum, I’d hoped to find somebody — anybody — to relate to. It grew into a lot more than that. We are a family now. We love each other and we want to protect each other,” Hades said.

They continued, “The most important rule on our forum was that everyone should stay anonymous at all times for our own safety. I acknowledge that this has its issues. While anonymity protected our identities, it also isolated us in real life. We watch avatars go dull, feeling helpless, knowing we’ve lost somebody. We have no job prospects and are branded as potential criminals without ever committing a crime. We can’t assure protection out here if we don’t know who we’re protecting.”

There was a sudden rush of agreement and some hesitant protest across the hall.

“Everyone, listen! Every day, society’s hatred of us becomes more apparent. They fear us even when they claim they don’t feel fear anymore. They claim

our emotions make us ‘vagrants’ and ‘criminals’ while they suck it out of children and bottle it for profit,” Hades said, a trace of anger in their voice.

“There is more. We have evidence that every single one of us was part of the Little Angels programme. Our allies on the inside confirmed last month that inspection facilitators are working for none other than the Little Angels program itself.”

Silence.

Hijaz’s mind was racing. It made so much sense and simultaneously none at all. The complex corpo web grew clearer. The prison system. The education system. Bribing the parents. The greed. The isolation. He realised he’d been the scapegoat all this time. He looked around him. Everyone else here was a scapegoat, too.

His blood prickled in his veins and his breath grew heavy. Something fierce had awoken in him.

“The corpo scum are hailed as saviours of the world, lauded for bringing an end to ‘divergent’ ways of life — for “ending” crime. But they’ve been the criminals all along. We can’t end this cycle unless we band together and put our names out there. Fight back! I won’t force you to join us, but if you are willing, I’m ready to drop the mask.”

Hijaz felt his heart beat faster. His hands trembled. He did not want to drop the mask which had his glowing pink and blue avatar of a dragon. It

had all become very real too quickly. He was angry but he was also scared. Every single person in the hall was in a precarious position — being who they were. Would they sacrifice their safety in the shadows to fight for a better future they might never get to see?

“I’ll do it,” a small voice interrupted Hijaz’s thoughts.

He turned towards it, as did everyone else.

“I’ll do it because I’m tired of being forced to hide who I am. I’m tired of being bullied. I’m tired of feeling unloved and alone,” a short person with a three-headed unicorn avatar yelled. Millie4three, Hijaz recalled.

“Yeah, I mean. What else can we do? I’m down too,” another chimed in.

Soon, the hall erupted in agreement, ready to drop their masks. Hijaz remained unsure. He watched as hands reached for masks — some were hesitant while others were firm. Hijaz’s were frozen in place. He felt his heart reach out to his friends but his arms wouldn’t move.

Hades’ masked face turned in Hijaz’s direction, pausing briefly before turning away. Guilt began to bubble in his chest.

“Thank you for your faith in me. There’s no need for masks anymore. Take them off and let your true selves be free,” Hades said softly as their own hands reached for their mask.

“3, 2, 1 ...” Sounds of fabric scraping against fabric filled the air. Hijaz held his breath and shut his eyes. It felt illegal to look at their faces — he couldn’t figure out why. Perhaps because he’d been a coward and refused to take off his mask? Or could it be that he feared rejection because despite being the only people who could relate to him, they didn’t truly know him? What if they hated him? What if he lost it all?

He felt a familiar touch on his shoulder as a voice said, “It’s okay. You can open your eyes. We trust you.”

He opened his eyes.

Instead of a warm smile on a gentle face, Hijaz’s eyes met silver.

Illustration by Alafiya Hasan

My hometown is untouched by you

By Kranti (She/They)

Tonight: asking for her blessing. Please God, Let me be the first symptom of love. Let softer lands exist in my universe. Gently remind me of my mother's dimple and my father's jawline. Please, I just want to be full of warmth. I just want to be full of warmth.

This is how I prayed for myself.

My dost thinks I am a carrier of hearts. He came back from the mountains and handed me a black and white photograph. A huge, lonely rock sits on the top of Skardu, Northern Pakistan. It is no ordinary rock. It has a hole carved in the shape of a big heart.

This is how he prayed for me.

Somewhere along the line, absence became a desperate wish. People in my life prayed with me. For me. Except you.

When you held my eyes, you looked past my prayer. You listened, but did not join. My dua was not a name for you, not an intention, it was a study. A historical study. Fingers traced down my Adam's apple, you realized what I lost in translation: I sought something so desperately, I grew too shy to name it.

You called us kranti wala pyar.

'Kranti, like a revolution.... *Arey mahilaon ka pyar*'³ I remember how we picked up

³ like a feminine love

Pakistan

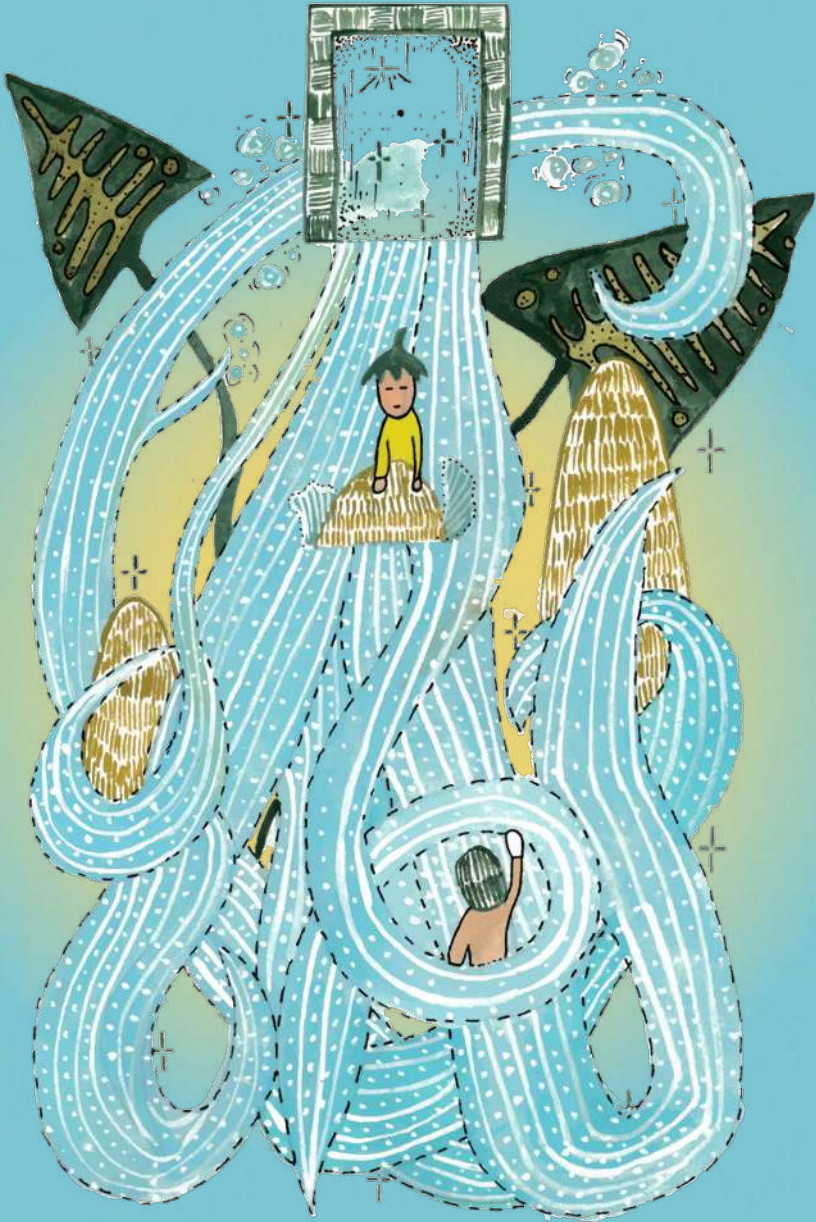


Illustration by Imad Farooqui

erasers and rubbed borders off of our chests. Lands that were not a part of this bed. India and Pakistan were faraway metaphors. Nothing stood in between bodies of care. Someone once said, 'ye lakeeray kuch nahi hoti,⁴ it all originates from the river'. Nadi ki tarha pyar behta hai⁵. The love you let yourself experience is resistance. To love her is to let myself feel cared for, loved for. *Batla house se sir syed university tak ye pyar ki ek nadi hi toh hai. Desh ho ya qoum, kranti ho ya inquilab* ⁶, we ended up loving; despite, despite, despite...

Haan Allah ki takhleeq ho tum, magr apnay dil ki rakhwali sirf tum ho. Jaan, i hope tumhe maloom hai kay har qadam par tum toofan ho. Tumhari ankhein sirf tumhara husan nahi, ye hazaaron logo ki muhafiz hai. Kaash k mei ye sab tumhe bol sakti. Kaash k tum ye anson dekh sakti⁷. I just want you to know you have touched me in ways I had never imagined possible. Meri bachpan se ek dua thi: mujhe Haq ki raah mein rehna hai. Lagta hai ab tum hi mera Haq ho⁸. The rivers I created back home, the mountains you spoke here in.

We did become Kranti.

It is very strange to stand here, wishing tenderness upon you, like imagining old folklore. Even so, what I found in love is the immense need for revolution. And what I remember of such moments is the binary that began from my cradle.

You can hear, I hope, constellations shifting. Care has become my prayer, and it has a shape. It comes in circles. Imagine all of us sitting crossed-leg next to each other. Our heads tilted on to the others' shoulders. Aren't we making a pretty flower? That is where my prayer hides.

You see, I no longer shy away from love. A lonely thing. Where my father's Jawline is from Bihar, and my mothers dimple is a Delhiwala. And my left leg has a birthmark of India's map. That my hometown is untouched by you. And somehow I have faith that you found warmth in Delhi winters, while I found you in all of my body.

That care is what brings us our desire to love.

Tonight: asking for her blessing. Please God, I want to sculpt my world around care. To have kinship scented. To have a taste of endings. Tell me, God, what does it mean to fistfully care in this brief land of exchange?

4. These borders are nothing.

5. Love flows like the river.

6 From Batla house to Sir Syed University, this is a river of love.

7. Yes, you are a creation of God but only you can protect your heart. Beloved, I hope you know that you are a storm at every step. Your eyes are not just your beauty, they are guarding thousands around you. I wish I could say this to you. I wish you could see me cry.

8. I used to repeat a prayer in my childhood: I want to do right by the universe. It feels like you are the right I was praying

AUTA BETGHAT – A meeting

By Avinam Manger (He/Him)

SET

A busy teashop, the adjacent shop is a fruit outlet. Various colorful fruits are deliberately placed and look very tempting. The shop also has packets of dry fruits hung up. The strong smell of deeply fried hot samosas, steaming hot momos and elaichi filled tea can make anyone drool over the two stranded shops on the highway. The tea shop has a rush of people asking for tea. The rain is pouring as if someone let the tap open...Dharra..ra...ra..ra...ra...⁹

In the extreme left corner Basanti is seated listening to some of the blockbuster Bollywood songs of the 90's, dressed in a red shabby lungi, and an old torn bubbled gray sweater. Long beard, gray hair. Singing slowly moving her body and hands with long unpolished nails, Basanti keeps changing songs on Youtube in her mobile phone.

[Enter a young boy.]

YUWA: [cleans and dusts his jacket, raises his hands to feel the rainfall and then sings]

तिमी र म, म र तिमी. त्यो संसार कस्तो होला छरिएको छ मात्र खुशी. हेर न बतासभरि तिमी र म, म र तिमी¹⁰.....(you and I, I and you. How might that world be where happiness is scattered all through the wind. You and I, I and you)

[The same song plays in his earphones. As he walks, he notices Basanti.]

9. Dhara..ra..ra - Sound of the rain as usually described in the hills

10. Bartika Eam Rai - Nidarika

[walks slowly through the stage and notices Basanti, stares at her from distance looks confused, looks at the audience, everything pauses in the background]

I always had a fondness for Basanti. So many stories around Basanti but I never had the courage to ask them about it. Are those stories about them true? The sari tale...the Marriage tale...the money tale...the dance tale...are all of these even true? How would I even ask Basanti?

[He scuttles close to Basanti and speaks very loud, and as he speaks he moves back to the center of the stage]

I don't know why but I think that those stories are a part of me.

[As he nears Basanti her song is louder than the Yuwa's song. Ajeeb Dastan hai yeh¹¹, the classic 60's song is on and Basanti is singing and moving her hands in tandem with the music.]

Yuwa: Namaste! (an awkward one)

Basanti: (stares at him with a confused-unable-to-recognize-him look)

Yuwa: (hurried awkwardness) Don't you recognize me ?

Basanti: ke thiyo?¹²

Yuwa: I am Kamala Sister's relative. You used to come to our place. You have stopped coming. Is everything ok?

Basanti: Ae ho.....¹³

Yuwa: Are you keeping well?

Basanti: (Doesn't reply but sings the song playing on her phone)

*ye roshni ke saath kyun dhuaan utaa chiraag se
ye khwaab dekhati hoon main ke jag padi hoon khwaab se
ajeeb daastan hai ye kahaan shuru kahaan khatam*¹⁴

11. Lata Mangeshkar- Ajeeb Dastan Hai Yeh song from the Dil Apna Aur Preet Parai movie

12. ke thiyo = anything.

13. Ae ho = is it.

14. Why is there a presence of smoke with the light from the lamp/I dream that I see has kept me awake from dreams/This is a strange story, where does it begin and where does it end?

Yuwa: [looks at the Youtube video on Basanti's phone]...Ama¹⁵! You sing really well.

Basanti: I am also a very good dancer (with confident eyes)

Yuwa: You should dance.

Basanti: I will dance at your wedding!

Yuwa: Maybe I won't marry!

...

I won't marry!

Basanti: Why not? You are handsome and young. If you will not marry then what will you do?

Yuwa: I don't like marriage!

(How I wish I could tell her that marriages bind people or in all honesty I am also someone like her whose marriage might raise so many disturbances, whose marriage will be questioned, and always kept hidden between four walls of a room, between two people.)

[Silence]

Basanti: [breaking the silence] How many of you are at your home?

Yuwa: It's just me and my mother.

Basanti: So, how will it work? You have to think about your mother, perhaps if you will not marry you will be alone. You have to look after your mother. Go home! Go to your mother, she might be alone.

Yuwa: Then why have you not married someone yet?

[Everything pauses in the background. From between the two shops, a young Basanti, clad in a red sari, a hijra walks between Basanti and Yuwa who are now in the center of the stage. While she walks in, Basanti does not move, but Yuwa looks at young Basanti.]

Young Basanti: *how I wish to tell him I too had a lover, I too desire a wedding. Clad in a red sari, red bangles on my wrists, a red veil and marrying my love. But in our times who would allow a Hijra to marry. And in Sikkim where people barely talk about it. I too wished to be someone's bride. Put tika on my forehead, and in the burning sang¹⁶ with its holy smoke, I too wished that someone would say 'Basanti, from today you are the daughter-in-law of this*

15. Ama = Mother

16. Sang = dried leaves of Black Juniper is burnt in a special holder locally known as the Dhupauro with the help of coals. It is burned usually for cleansing and purifying the air and the soul and is considered to be of medicinal value and often looked as an offering to the dead members of the community.

Kul¹⁷, and the Pitri¹⁸ will bless and accept her." I would have been more than happy to walk along the seven lights¹⁹ and walk through the house. But will this all happen...Who would accept me? Not even my lover...

[Slowly Young Basanti takes out a coin from her bag, takes it to her forehead, rubs it in the sindoor she is wearing and hands it to Yuwa. Both look at each other and hold each other's hand. Basanti walks around Yuwa with a burden free look and stops.]

Yuwa:[Does not reply for some time, looks at Basanti's eyes.]
Huncha!²⁰(firmly) Perhaps I could marry one day.

[Basanti hurriedly pushes Yuwa, resulting in the separation of hands. Young Basanti walks Backwards from where she came in the meanwhile the dialogue continues.]

Basanti: Ae Ho... Then
give me ten rupees. I will drink tea. You might earn money, I don't.

Yuwa: No, I don't earn, I am a student.

Basanti: It's just 10 rupees. Give me, I want to drink tea.

Yuwa: ek chin²¹

[Puts his hands in his pockets and hands her a 10 rs coin. While she receives money...]

Basanti: Run towards your home. Earn money, get a job and then marry otherwise you will be... alone like me. Go fast, go home.

yuwa:[Does not say anything but looks at Basanti, put back his earphones while Basanti continues singing the song which played throughout their dialogue]

17. Kul = within tribal practices, each indigenous community has their guardian deity who is referred as Kul, it often changes from tribe to tribe and community to community.

18. Pitri = the worship of the forefathers It is a common belief that the indigenous people after death do not go to heaven or hell, they go to pitri land where they find all of their forefathers and mothers

19. Seven lights = whenever a new bride enters the family, seven lights or diyas are lit. the new bride is directed to stamp or cross these lights and enter the home. A particular ritual followed by the Mangar community of Sikkim.

20. Huncha = Okay

21. Ek chin = please wait (literally meaning one second).

Yuwa: [Plays his music, Bartika's Nidarika continues]

सपनीभरी गीत खोजी हिँड्छु तिमी हॉसीरहनु
(I walk in search of dreamy songs, you keep smiling.)
हिजोभन्दा अलि बेसि आज चिनेँ तिमीलाई
(I know you a little better today than yesterday)
यी चिन्ने प्रयासहरु कति मिठा?
(How sweet are these efforts to recognize?)
यी सुन्ने प्रयासहरु कति मिठा?
(How sweet are these listening efforts?)
बुझेने प्रयासहरु कति मिठा?
(Efforts to understand how sweet?)
तिम्रा खुल्ने प्रयासहरु मसँगै, मसँगै
(Your efforts to open up with me, with me)
त्यो संसार, त्यो संसार
That world, that world)
त्यो संसार, त्यो संसार
(What would that world be like?)

Yuwa: I hope I have recognised you a little better today than yesterday. These efforts may or may not be sweet but I see in you something of my own today. Loneliness... Something I carried with me as well. I will reimagine that world—that space where people like you and me... will have a world of happiness...

The music fades in the background as the boy exits the stage.

E N D

হাহাকার- HAHAKAR²²

By Nil (She/They)

Opened that video today. Came across the other one. The assault of memories is too keen a blow. I feel a funny twist inside. I call it a heart, but I don't quite know if it is a heart.

I know that when I think of you, I feel distant from the thing I would like to call a heart. When I think of him, I feel distant from it too. I try closing the distance. I try with effort. I try for stretches. I try for days that turn into weeks that turn into months that turn into years that turn into personal eternities. Points of connection at times. Nothing at others.

My therapist asks me at the end of our session each time, “How are you feeling at the end of this?”

I don't know.

He said yesterday that I am transparent. Easy to see through. I listen to songs that remind me of her. Can you see the devastation I wreaked on myself when I let myself love without permission? Can you see that I have come to a standstill inside? Can you see that I am frozen still? Can you see that I am letting time pass through me? Sometimes, it's slow. Sometimes, it fast-forwards. Stuck on that day— a sunny afternoon, a rickshaw ride through trees, a ping on my phone, her text. I didn't notice the shalik²³ that day. I tell her “I understand”

In actuality, what I do is stop time. I glue myself to that moment.

22. “Hahakar” a Bengali word that describes a wail in response to utter destruction.

23. Shalik are small birds that are commonly found in Bangladesh. They carry a prophetic connotation with one shalik implying bad luck, two implying companionship with romantic implications, three implying guests.

Bangladesh



Illustration by Imad Farooqui

When you kiss me, I feel alright. When I miss you, I don't quite know how to describe it all.

Unmaking myself. Unmasking myself. Labelling myself? No.

Redone, reshaped, remoulded.

Fluid, bendable, a changeling.

You give me words for how I am, you explain to me. A lot of it makes sense. Some of it feels invasive, like you have dug too deep.

She let me stay as I was.

The question that haunts me, refrains from leaving me— do I stay in her explanations or do I work through yours?

Why did I think there might be a possibility of love with you?

You remind me of her, but also of me.

It feels violating to be revealed.

Should I let it keep happening?

No one tore the veneer.

You do.

No one questioned my statements.

You do.

Dark, blackish, spikes of fear and anxiety, “no” but also “yes”.

Talk things over with my friend and with my sister.

How does he make you feel?

Motivated. Emotive, at times. In love, at instances. Alive? Unclear, definitely.

When I talk to them, I tell them about how he digs deep into what it is to be me. I think of how I am finally finding the language to express myself sincerely. She helped me do that too for a short time, I want to tell him. But, then it stopped.

What has this resulted in now?

Spontaneity, giving in to impulses, not repressing myself, letting go of control.

The ways I would repress myself with her, framed as logical arguments—

I don't really love eating as much. Buying food is expensive and I can gratify myself in other ways. Food is momentary pleasure and I can do without. She is my sole gratification.

I don't need jewellery. I don't wear jewellery. I don't know how to wear jewellery. I looked ugly wearing it. Jewellery is just pieces of material that are meaningless and inconsequential. I put it on but I find it unnecessary. I stop wearing it,

I wear ear cuffs. Justification? A queer signal. Ear cuffs look nice on me. Any other jewellery? No, this is enough.

I try wearing men's clothing. Feel confident wearing them. Look in the mirror. Ugly for a flash, confident in the next.

Resuming the conversation with my friend. She tells me that I can be the motivation but I have to be the reason.

Are you a means or an end, joy?

Are you the reason? I don't know

Have I ever had the strength to make myself the reason? No.

I have always waited.

And, what about the emptiness I feel inside?

And, what about the ways I constitute myself? Pick elements for myself?

I still feel discarded. How do I get back to before?

Was before an illusion you concocted?
Was before a delusion I believed in?

Before consisted of a handful of days of stolen kisses, hands on faces, hands on waists, bruises on my neck, ear.

Hands running through your hair.

Are we lost?

I think we might be.

Did you take too much on your plate?
You might have.

Do I let expectations be the death of me?
Do I let expectations shape my decisions?
Do you think my expectations breach your consent?

Sit and wait for the book to download. Sit and wait for you to text. Sit and wait for you to call. Sit and wait for you. Walk and wait for you. Talk and wait for you.

You used the word obsession. I would like to deny it.






Yet in this tired, half-awake state when my mind gravitates towards you, maybe I am obsessed.

Is that a bad thing? Still to be determined.

As I feel the emptiness inside me amplify and grow, I wonder if you will catch on.

I think of how you discard because you lose interest. You have a long list of reasons for staying which you don't feel like repeating anymore because you've repeated them enough times.

List of reasons as affirmations:

-  I feel drawn to you, Miftah
-  I miss you terribly, Nilanjana
-  You make me feel connected
-  You feel like a part of myself
-  I am ready to wait for you to grow

I ruin a good thing by myself.

Your Birthmark in My Memories

By Anna S (They/She)

I bump into someone. It didn't hurt me but it did make me accidentally drop all of my stuff. I look back and see the girl I bumped into immediately turn around to help me pick up my stuff. I'm able to take a good look at her this way. She had long curly hair, brown skin, and dark brown eyes. But the most identifiable feature about her was the birthmark below her left eye. I remember her.

"Sorry," she says with a small apologetic smile as she hands me my stuff. She gets up and then walks towards her friends who are waiting, as I watch her leave.

My own friend is behind me; they ask me if I'm okay. "Who's she?" I ask instead of answering his question. "That's Neha," he says, "She's from the science department." Neha? Neha! Neha, Neha, Neha. I repeat that name to myself repeatedly, trying to ingrain it into my mind so I can never forget it, at least not in this lifetime. The truth is I've met her: in different universes, in other lifetimes. I always meet her; I was destined to.

There are a couple of changes on her face and her hair. I am trying to remember, maybe she was taller too. She had shorter hair, and different-colored eyes, but I will always recognize that birthmark no matter what. It was square-ish and pigmented, the shape was so recognizable I always associated it with a country's map. It was always the same shape and size, and in the same place: right below her left eye. Always placed there for me to find.

She has changed but so have I. My name in this universe is **Alex**, no it's **Alisha**, no wait it's **Shikha**, no, no, it's **Aria**. It's the name on my ID card and my notebooks. It's getting harder to remember what I looked like. All I remember is her. I've met too many people but there is always one constant, **Neha**. She'll never know the different lives she lived and the effect she left on me. Almost every time, everywhere, we

Nepal



crossed paths but she was never there to stay. It was cruel.

After all my classes end, I rush to the college library. I tell my friends that I have some assignments to complete. Instead, I open my notebook and trace back every memory I have. I try to connect them all, trying to get Neha to remember me. I have to get her to remember me. My memories fade every time I wake up in another universe. I'm afraid I'm going to wake up one day and not remember her. This has to be the only way for us to stay together.

I flip through the notes I've written.

Lifetime 1: She was a princess (assassinated)

Lifetime 2: Movie star (moved away)

Lifetime 3: Girl next door (married someone else)

Lifetime 4: A painter (broken up with me)

Lifetime 5: Butterfly (flew away)

So much information about these lifetimes scribble on these pages that I feel like there's so much more but for the life of me cannot remember it. If anyone were to see this, they may think I'm crazy. I do feel a little crazy.

Shaking my head, I try to focus hard. Lifetime 6: Current reality. I write down trying to find the connection between these lifetimes. However, amid my research, I find myself drifting into sleep.

I keep dreaming of those lifetimes, those universes. I keep dreaming of her.

Sometimes it was the dream in which she was the painter and I was the poet, sometimes it was the one in which she was the girl next door that married someone else. I rarely dream of the lifetime in which she was a princess. That lifetime is slowly becoming a faded memory. However, for the first time in a while, I dream of that lifetime. A weirdly distinguishable memory; we were outside in her courtyard after the night of her coronation. I remember that night. She sat near a fountain while the moon's reflection bobbed in the water.

I approached her, we talked very briefly, and then when I left, she was killed.


Despite knowing all this I still approach her. As I get closer to her, I hear her say, "You've been really distant lately," she doesn't look back at me, "Why?"

I sit next to her, and we're still not looking at each other, "I don't know what you're talking about,"

"Are you mad that I agreed to all this?"

"It's not that,"

This memory is so distant, I no longer know what I was even upset about. But that doesn't matter anymore.



She is going to keep on pressing me to tell her what's wrong, and I'm going to deny everything, and then I'll leave her alone and go back in. And that will be the last time I speak to her until another life.

That's exactly how I expect this memory to go. However, instead of asking me what's wrong, she says, "Is it because I never end up staying or that I end up not remembering?" The question catches me off guard, she wasn't supposed to say that. "What?" I ask and finally, turn to look at her.

Suddenly we're not in her courtyard, she's not in her royal attire and I'm not in my armour either. No, we're in her bedroom after another movie shoot, and she's still in her glamorous dress, and even through her makeup, I can distinguish the birthmark. We're on her bed looking at each other face-to-face until she groans and gets up. Another lifetime.

"It's not like I don't want to stay with you," she sits down on her dressing table. I'm collecting my thoughts and trying to make sense of what's happening right now. Which memory was this? Ah, yes, this was our last shooting together; we went our separate ways.

"Then what do you want?"

Neha doesn't say anything for a while.

"I don't know...but I made my choice."

"Well, you're gonna move on and forget me."

"I'm not going to forget you," she sounds desperate.

I believe her, I really do but we're both talking about two different things right now.

"It's not fair for me too you know," she says suddenly.

I'm hit with another wave of confusion. I look at her, she has turned around to face me but this time we're in a completely different setting. She's still sitting in front of a dressing table but this time she's wearing a red saree and is adorned with gold jewellery that she inherited from her family. It's her wedding day. I want to say something but before I can even utter another word she says,

"I want to be with you but you made your choice too."

"My choice?" I'm irked, "How is anything of this my choice?" I don't know if I'm referring to the wedding or the reincarnation.

Neha sighs, "I want to be with you but I can't because you always seem like you're looking for something else."

Something else.

I process everything she is saying. I've carried these memories throughout my whole life, I've never heard her say any of these things to me. She continues, "I try to be close to you, I don't know what else I can do to show you that you're all I wanted. But somehow, you're still so distant, I genuinely don't understand what I'm doing wrong." It's all hitting me all at once. "I didn't know that's how you felt,"

Has she always felt like this? Did I cause this?

"Well, it doesn't matter now does it?" Neha says she gets up to walk towards the door.

"Wait, Neha—" I say before I realize.

"Neha?" She says turning around. She's no longer in her wedding attire. She's in her casuals. I notice a suitcase near the door, we're in our shared apartment or at least it was our shared apartment. "Who's Neha?" she asks. I shake my head, "No one, sorry."

We are both silent for a while and then she finally speaks, "Well do you at least want to say something before I leave?"

In this specific memory, I couldn't speak. There was nothing I wanted to say. So, she left and then we never spoke again.

But this time I finally say, "I just wanted you to remember me. In every universe, you were the only consistent, and every time you're gone... I just feel lonely."

"What would you do if I remembered? What would it change?"

"I just need something, I feel defeated and I just want to hold on to something familiar. I keep losing those memories too. I don't think I have a lot of lives left either."

She's in front of me now, she gently takes my hands and looks straight into my eyes,

"Then just spent time with me with what's left. Let me be part of your life regardless of whether I remember you or not." Her hands move to hold my face, "I really do mean it when I say I do want to stay."

We just look at each other for a bit, and I'm having a hard time forming any words.

And she lets go, and moves towards the doorway to take her suitcase, "Maybe in the next life we can live more freely," she says and then she was out of the door and I was left there staring at it. Suddenly, I feel exhausted. I lay back on the bed behind me

and let sleep take over and take me away from here.

There's a little butterfly right above me that is slowly flying away. Even when I try to reach her I'm a simple plant rooted to the ground. She will belong to the fly while I wither away.

I feel someone shaking me. As I slowly open my eyes, I see that I'm back in my college library. The librarian shakes me and says, "You shouldn't be sleeping here, I'm gonna close up in 10 minutes." I nod at her and rub my eyes to shake off my fatigue. On the table, I see my notebook which isn't strange. No, what's strange is the little package with a bakery's logo on it.

“This isn’t mine,” I tell the librarian pointing at the pastry box. The librarian is ready to move on with her work. But before she leaves, she shoots a glance at me, “Ah, that girl over there bought it for you.” I look at the direction where she is pointing and then I see her, Neha. She has her hair tied up this time. She is wearing her earphones, and working on her laptop. Hot flashes of memories come rushing in but I push it away as much as I can. I need to approach her; I don’t need to think about anything else. As she is working, I finally reach her table. She notices my presence and takes her earphones off. “Hey,” she says with a polite smile. I flash a tiny smile, “Hi,” I point at the pastry box, “Thanks for this by the way. You didn’t really have to.”

“Just thought it would be nice.”

“Thank you,” I say once more, “We, uh, we met before like just a few moments ago.”

“I know,” she says, her smile growing wider.

“I remember you.”

That statement warms my heart, “I’m glad you do.” I say, “They’re gonna close the library soon so you should probably go back.”

“Oh, right,” she says as she starts packing her things back into her bag. “Do you mind walking with me for a bit?” she asks, her eyes seeming a little hopeful.

“Yeah,” I say back, I put my notebook back into my bag, “I’d love to.”

After she’s done packing her stuff she says, “Alright let’s go,” she goes ahead. I follow behind.

In one of these lifetimes, I will wake up and not remember Neha. But for now, she is here with me, and I will make each and every moment with her in this life count.



Art by Alafiya Hasan



//silver
lining in the
bittersweet//

By rajeev anand kushwah (They/Them)

India

at a bittersweet horizon

manifesting tragedies of minor inconveniences as i go to sleep and

in my dream, you passed away, leaving a bittersweet taste.
you felt loved, i was envious – i wasn't there, leaving with you.
always thought you owed me an apology – i needed a reason
to keep you alive. will i forgive myself? amidst chaos, i felt rest
– sharing pictures, video calls from lost days & 1:00 am desires

one day, you disappeared

the day when i met you, nainika said “all the best” and decided
my shirt, you, the horizon, and i, the ocean – we're together, right?
you stole a kiss i can never return, same bittersweet feeling that
day when we met again. tickets for sunder nursery were with me,
they were framed in my mind, in my wallet for weeks, til you left.

if only i moved to bangalore, not hyderabad. although return didn't matter

would you have stayed? if i were on that video call a little longer,
would you have stayed? if i got that queer souvenir from iowa city,
would you have stayed? your smile is funny, you know, like love is,
would you have stayed? if you knew i was crazy brave, only for you,
would you have stayed? if you knew my thesis was devoted to you,

i misheard – 'bomb' for 'bong,' it was in truest sense, the cruel summer

could never mishear “you're one of the rare happy things that make me
happy in life.” if the communication persisted/if i didn't move to all these
cities – would you have stayed? will you even stay if i keep asking – would
you have stayed? did i misread the desire or are you just a bad lover. you did
stay but only moved sideways – i felt safe with you, you felt safer far away.

do you remember that time in the metro when you wanted to kick that guy?

it was delhi, where we first met – i was scared of dim street lights
turning off. your swift hand on my shoulder guided me – your
lips stole a kiss, that was funny, you know? before heading to
lucknow, you wanted me – i know/ i can feel that hug/i remember
your eyes/turmoil, wondering whether to take you to nainika's.

that's what jyn and andor²⁴ must have felt when their horizons became one.

but tell me – i'm the ocean, you're the horizon, aren't we already the same entity? yet you bend. like a sunflower bends to the light. you bend towards horizon – what a marvel of life, love, and fate – all of which i felt briefly, all of which fades. you're a wish now which i cannot make, even with three thousand years of longing

i pretend you knew what it was yet you never said it, is the ocean that scary?

it will never be enough. you, are beyond the ocean. i, a liar, drown in the ocean. if i could, i'd waterbend us in an eternal embrace. you being kshitij, you leave. at every skyline, that bittersweet taste of your kiss lingers, so does your funny smile. when i leave lover(s), i stay back for you. i wish. i wish i could bend time like you bend within.

a white winter hymnal for the year

at my most profound, i write a hymn under rain clouds while

this time when i come back to a clean house
i will pen a white winter hymnal for the year
as i walk past a father screaming at a stranger
and his daughter looks at him, scared. there's
care and fear. perhaps. that's how the year has
been. excel sheet, transcriptions, and suicidal
ideation, i watched everything, afraid. again
there's care, there's fear. stayed home the least
no extensions of gulmohar sepals in hyderabad.
counting seasons, not numbers – few cities later,
i gave up. switched to small case. ~~but when you texted~~
~~LOVE, YOU in capitals, it means what it means,~~
~~right? care will take precedent, fear can rest.~~
~~i was right when back in march i zoomed in~~
~~your whatsapp display. i thought to myself – oh~~
~~fuck. dystopia. i didn't breathe when i was born~~
~~literally love you til death. frozen fear, care thaws.~~
~~darkness crawls but i can feel the sun on you.~~

24. jyn and andor are the star crossed lovers in the 2016 space opera drama rogue one: a star wars story



Photographs by Raqeeb Raza

the solvable problem of true kinda love

i cut my skin, parts you didn't touch and words for other lover(s) who're not you

the last one at a restaurant – awake, alone. pull the chairs, draw the curtains, set the tables, switch off the lights and wait for tomorrow. music is sad. on my way to the kitchen, i step on a lizard while eating vegan ice cream. on reddit, i read the worst ways to die – i think it is to become joachim trier's the worst person in the world.

going through stories to mark day's end – it's sunny in iowa and ellora is reading one sentence a day from fifty shades of grey. i look at him in paris, i think i am falling in love – i screenshot his picture and mail it to myself. the subject – precious person of my dreams. the first “oh, fuck!” moment of the day. i worry desire, there's only true kinda love.

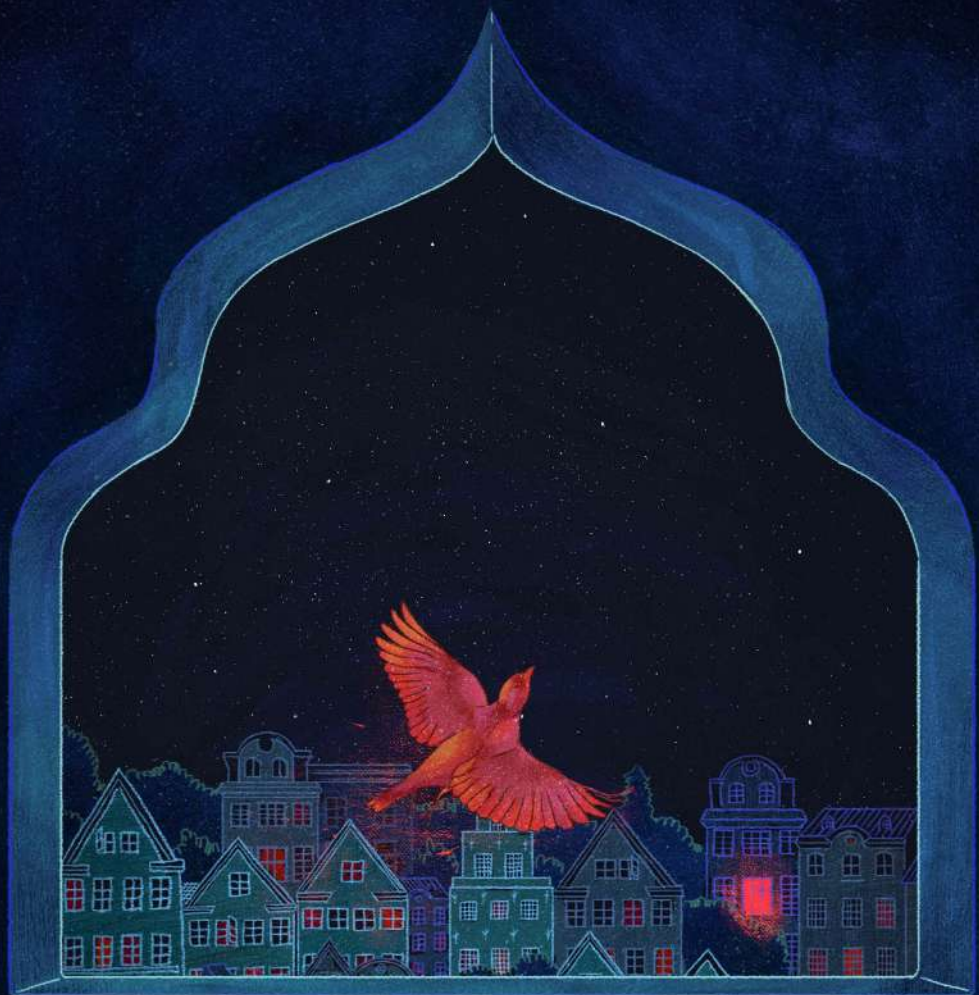
it happened in march last year when i zoomed in on your whatsapp display picture and felt, “oh, fuck!”. i resisted, didn't text, it didn't pass. i feel it when you text. and story time origin of “oh, fuck!” was on 6th march, 2020 – you hugged me last. the world was entering an uncertain lockdown, i was head over heels, abandoned at the railway station. while you carried the broken umbrella, i remember the hug that broke me.

in october, i really wanted to kiss you when you left. i just said, “bye,” didn't even hug, screamed “oh, fuck!”. the feeling stayed. your text remains a reminder. i bitch about you – an excuse to keep you alive, saving only the worst of you. kept the tickets to sunder nursery, hoping to frame them and gift them to you but you left. still looking for a reason. i believe you owe me an apology.

you owe me a poisoned hug. the worst way to die is to love, to be the worst person in the world. *steven universe*²⁵ taught me– people *drift away*²⁶, everything stays but it still changes, and true kinda love is a solvable problem. at night, the last one at a restaurant is in love. they tire themselves to sleep, slipping into tomorrow – worn out. exhausted. fatigued. they wake up and scream, “oh, fuck!”

25, *steven universe* is an animated show that deals with the themes of love, queerness, and grief.

26, *drift away* is a song from *steven universe*: the movie that delves into forgiving a loved one for abandonment and moving forward in life.



Epitaphs for my Past Selves

By Meera (She/Her)

Epitaph written on the night I thought I'd lived

I think there's a physical gap in my chest, one that stands out, stands apart from the emotional ones. A gap that's thin and slight and only aches a low rhythm. Low and unrelenting. I think I love mornings too much to stay awake for them. How unbelievable their beauty!

I also think of my own self so often, so sincerely it must be an act of self-centered bravado! So, I busy my mind with other, more loveable things. My cat. My sister. Warmth. Sunrays. The gloom clearing at dawn's end. Dawn, dish, soap. Kitchen sink. Milk. Milk tea. Tea-soaked biscuits. Biscuits breaking. Broken hearts. Heart. Heart. A gap in my heart. See, what I mean?

This morning I'm awake. I've just watched the sky clear up. The periwinkle turns pink. It was a terrifying thing, such transformation. Do people also change so fast?

Bangladesh

Do we ever truly know anyone? Do we ever truly look at each other? Did we ever sit down for love?

In this wretched world with its devastating, dangerously hopeful promises, I have been given words and wonder and woe. And a thin, stream-like crack in my chest. It keeps aching.

The heart ache only grows.

*Epitaph
written
over Suhoor
during
Ramadan
2023, when I
thought my
life and my
love could
not co-exist*

The city drapes itself in rich midnight radiance, only to shakily sink into prayer. Its people halt the sunrise with the eerie intensity of their collective hunger - one more sip of water, the last bite of food, before it's daybreak. And it works. The world shushes the trees and listens earnestly to make things happen for the children with cracked lips, and scraped knees.

Perhaps we are granted the faintest of miracles, drenched with just enough reality to pass off as coincidence. I feel hope. In the dim glow of windows three buildings down from mine, someone dances alone. I feel hope. In the chill of the unfortunate April air, a bird takes flight. I feel hope. In the slowly fading darkness of my room, I write for myself. I feel hope. Perhaps I do belong.

Faint miracles, delicate wonders, fragile magic. Sometimes I wonder what sort of magic a spoonful of kindness would've conjured up, if offered at the right time. But then I also think about lovers in Rome, living in a tiny one-bedroom flat, barely eating two meals and nothing but the city's charms holding them together. I put myself in their shoes as I speculate their pain and spin stories from it. Perhaps, I too, lack the delicate art of offering timely grace. Perhaps, I too, turn cruel.

In making peace between my hope and my lack thereof, I lose sight of my shaking hands. I forget my own features. The next morning I do not recognize

myself in the mirror. I wish to grieve my loss but I feel too far removed, like a distant aunt's second husband's niece. So, I smile at the reflection, brush my teeth instead. Comb my hair. And make my way to work.

It is as if a part of me dies during suhoor for the rest of me to face the world in the Ramadan mornings. Waiting for the bus each morning is my most regular ritual of prayer to the gods. I'm a woman on a local bus every day, no hell holds a stronger test, no magic more feral.



*Epitaph
written in
humble
gratitude to
all those that
loved me,
including
myself.*

I am nothing but the best parts of the people I have loved, stacked on top of each other, cloaked in a blue handloom sharee. I am nothing but the vilest insults I have consumed, hidden behind each other, embellished with a dangly septum ring.

I can almost look in the mirror and trace which part of me came from whom, some I no longer know, some I'd recognize in a crowd anywhere, some I never had the privilege of knowing more. Yet, the whole picture of me looks foreign. Like a distant relative, like a friend I last saw in pre-K.

I grieve for the people I didn't have more time with. I grieve for the people I spent too much time with. But I'm in the middle somewhere, I forget to grieve for myself.

The blues do not leave. Rather they are settling in. Into the cracks of the skin on my dry patchy knee that I do not find the time to love enough. Into the smile lines that have deepened over the last decade, from the burden of negotiating my queer, ill-fitting girlhood. Into the smudged kohl below my lashes, one that I do not care to wipe away for tears will streak it again. All the same.

I turn blue, I turn indigo even, on nights like these. I am soaked through with love. I am wrung out with grief.

Dear hopeful misery, loveable grief, blind joy, carefree affection, come have a seat. You are all welcome here. Stay as long as you need. In my lonesome balcony I dry tea-stained letters for you all.

I look my blues in the eye, I hold the small fragile hands of my grief. I show them their separate chairs at my table and start a new round of cards. Today, we exist together. I oil my own hair, make tiny braids, I drink my day's portion of water, and remember to not deny myself the space to fall apart.

I let myself belong with me in these lovely graves.




Illustration by Alafiya Hasan

AVADE THODARATHU

By Anush K M S (He/Him)



India

(DON'T TOUCH ME THERE)

*From the midst of a solitude
more dense and mysterious than a forest
we will read our poems
full of dreams and desires*
- Malathi Maithri (Empress of words)

Kai valaru valaru (Hand, you grow you grow)

Kal valaru valaru (Leg, you grow you grow)

Mooku valaru valaru (Nose, you grow you grow)

...

Every Sunday morning, I stood in front of her in my underwear as she poured oil in her hands and rubbed my neck. Amma sang this made up silly song as she massaged each part. From the top, the hot liquid slowly slid down to my leg. When the time came to oil the parts inside my underwear, she would pour some on my hands and would ask me to do it. Hastily I would rub it there and jump inside the water bucket pretending it was a bathtub. I never learned the name of this part. The only information I have of the part is that I shouldn't let anyone touch me there. She said it every time she bathed me. She told me that having anyone touch me there was bad. I named the part: bad touch.

One day in fourth grade, I lay on my tummy and flipped through a Tinkle comic. I was so restless, I started shaking the bed by thrusting my stomach in a to-and-fro motion. I did it vigorously for a while and it got the bad touch excited. I felt the blood rush to my face and switch all the lights on inside my brain. Doing that made me very energetic and I ran around not knowing what or why. While I enjoyed the sensation, I was worried I would disappoint Amma by connecting with the forbidden touch. I convinced myself that it is not really touch if my hands don't come into contact with it. I shook the bed with my tummy nearly every time I was alone at home. I visualized the feeling as hot coal on ice. Somehow I knew I



shouldn't tell anyone or do it in front of people. There was something secretive about the electrifying sensation.



After the fifth grade, I didn't want Amma massaging my body anymore. On Sundays, she would pour gingelly oil in a cup and ask me to lock the bedroom door and come out after taking a hot bath. This was the only time I was allowed to lock the door. When I was rubbing oil inside my underwear. I felt the same excitement I felt while shaking the bed. I had mixed emotions — part of me thought I was acting immorally but another was overwhelmed by the feeling. For a while, I ignored the moral thought and cherished the sensation.

I learned of the word masturbation from my friends. They told me that it was to insert fingers or an ovoid-shaped object inside the bad touch hole. The idea of insertion was mortifying. It reminded me of how I screamed when our family doctor had his synthetic gloved finger inside my butt or when Acha made me puke the random leaves I ate by sticking his fingers down my throat. Inserting something where it doesn't fit felt unnatural like wearing an earring bigger than the piercing. I wondered if what I did on the bed was also masturbation. But that word sounded too foreign for something so close to my heart.

Summer holidays were spent at my cousin's playing video games. My cousin P, who was four years older than me, paused the video game and told me to look into his computer. It was a Ben 10 comic. But only, Ben was naked and hurting Gwen. He tore her T-shirt and didn't stop even when Gwen was crying. It was disturbing to watch Gwen suffer. I loved Gwen. When everyone always admired Ben, she was the only one who kept his ego in check. In the comics, she listened to all his insults without uttering a word. Why did she let him hit her? I knew the real Gwen would have never agreed to it. When I told P I hated this, he slid his hand inside my underwear and thrust his finger inside. I screamed and pushed him away. He told me he was only making sure I was being honest. He claimed I lied because I was wet and that I wouldn't be wet if I had truly hated the comic. I'd never imagined Ben without his green pants. His peepee in the comic was ugly. I didn't understand what being wet meant but I was sure I hated it. P said that he knows better because he's older than me and I should listen to him. I nodded. His hand went back in. I held my breath, clenched my fist and jaw till he withdrew his hand and reminded me this would happen every time we met in private. I was too frightened to immediately report on what happened so I took the joystick and continued playing Mario. The same thing happened week after week in different houses for many years.

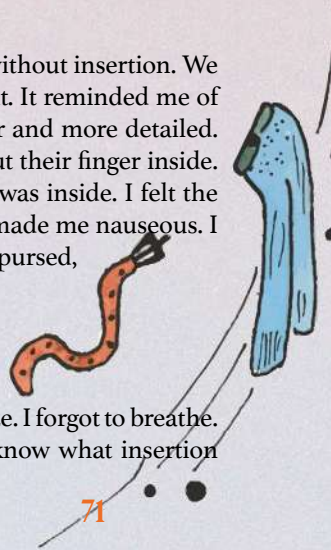
I learned P was abusive after I moved to a different city for college. It was a story I

told all my lovers at different stages of life. Everyone unanimously felt the urge to fix me with their love and sex. They were sure that I would love insertion if they did it. J asked me to be welcoming of his “huge thing”. I didn’t know the average size to measure if it was huge or not. He told me it was huge and that it was something a lot of women had complimented him for. His face glowed with pride. It was cute — like a schoolboy showing his parents his first crayon art. I complimented him like the other women. When his “thing” reached my hole, it was nothing like what the comics showed. It didn’t magically slip in. There was a lot of time spent to angle his penis, an even more uncomfortable time to find the right hole and when both seemed to be in position, the merger didn’t automatically happen. When it came close to entering my vagina, my body stopped breathing, my underbelly stiffened and my arms pushed J away. He apologized and said that his “huge thing” was too much for my untrained hole.

When I had newly come out as a trans man, I believed that every queer person shared the same story. Now, the only prerequisite to date was that they had to be queer. H was a woke queer person who took pride in being an amazing listener and had pronouns in his bumble bio. He heard about P and J and felt sorry, then cursed the two cis-het men for ill treating me. As a queer feminist, he promised to rewrite my story of abuse by showing me how to actually have sex. One night, when we were drunk at his place he asked if we could do it. I said yes as a default response despite not wanting it. I don’t remember if he was successful with his insertion, perhaps for a few seconds. All I remember is waiting for the thing to be off of me as soon as possible. H felt victorious that he finally freed me from my sexual trauma. The next time he and I were in a room together, I pretended to be busy with work every time he asked me to lie down next to him. He grumbled and said, “I should have gotten you drunk. You would have agreed to it.”

A few years later, D introduced me to the idea of having sex without insertion. We played around with role-play and imagery. I was too fond of it. It reminded me of the excitement I felt on my bed as a kid. It was much slower and more detailed. In the prime of an intimate moment, D asked if they could put their finger inside. I said yes and this time I truly meant it. The tip of their nail was inside. I felt the burning in the flesh. They moved their finger like a screw; it made me nauseous. I clenched my jaw. D asked again, “Are you sure?” With my lips pursed, I nodded up and down.
“If you are sure, say, yes.”
“Yes.”

They moved their finger a few centimeters inside; my body froze. I forgot to breathe. They slowly withdrew their finger. I might have wanted to know what insertion



felt like but my body didn't. In a quiet hesitant voice, they said, "I think you have vaginismus."

Vaginismus - a word I never heard before until that moment. They explained it as the body's automatic response to sexual trauma. I didn't like the word for many reasons, Firstly, it sounded ugly. Like it was designed to be hushed, a word that was meant to be whispered. As though it's not supposed to be said out loud - vah-juh-niz-shush. Secondly, I didn't like the idea of bringing all my past experience down to just my vagina not opening up. I refused to admit that the hurt inflicted upon me by others had such power that it caused a condition in my body that distances it from my brain. I couldn't bring myself to say the word vaginismus. Not to myself, not to others. A vagina is not manly. Neither is talking about disliking dicks. So, I pretended I never learned the word and continued to nod yes for sex.

"Can I kiss you?"

"Yes."

"I'll keep my hand there?"

"Yes."

"Do you love it? Tell me you love it."

"Yes. I love it."

Despite all these lies, my body continued to be honest and protested against foreign entries. Most partners weren't patient enough to listen to my body. They had to barge in because they had maintained their contract of consent and had asked me the question. Their moral conscience was cleared. Is it really consent when they hear the mouth say yes but don't listen to the body shutting down? I felt rage while writing about P, H and others. I am angry because they were absolutely blind to the pain they caused. J believed he was a good man. H believed it too. Every man believes they are not like other men but inevitably are.

Both the words vaginismus and masturbation are trying to universalize a feeling that can only be personal. The pleasure I discovered in bed or the hurt I felt when my body was violated — neither of them have a generic meaning. My vagina was introduced to me as a bad touch. This label was a pretext for an emotion I didn't know how to feel. It was hazy. I accepted all invitations to have sex to get some clarity. I wanted to know why other people considered sex to be amazing while I found the mere thought of it unsettling. I was curious to understand what it is like for bodies to touch in places the eyes can't see. As more people pushed open my vagina to enter, the language to describe my discomfort kept leaving me. With every unwanted sexual interaction, I grew distant from my body.

It took me some time to understand that my body wasn't actively working against my interests; instead, it was merely trying to keep me safe. All bodies speak different languages to express their desires and grievances. The body that enjoyed the touch as a child is the same as the body that is terrorized by it. I thought about what had to be done to rekindle my childlike curiosity about discovering pleasure and reestablishing my relationship with my body. I could either choose to reconcile with my body or accept things as they are and only experience pleasure in small doses.

I chose the first.

Once I figured that, there was only one thing I had to do – to carefully listen to my body's needs and fulfill them; one tender touch at a time.

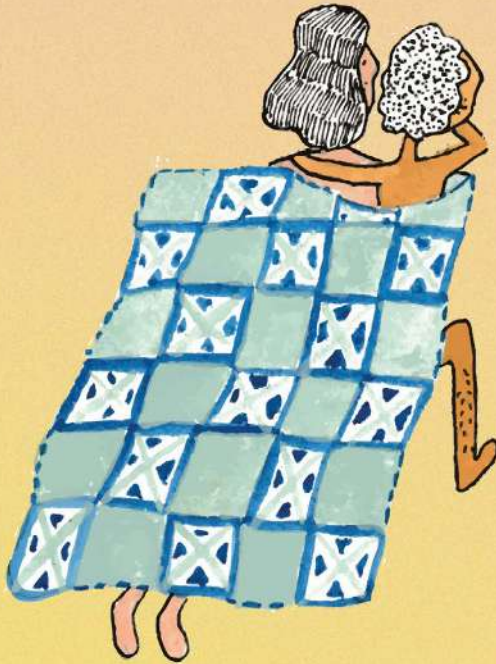


Illustration by Imad Farooqui

The Beauty and Complexity of Being Queer and Muslim

By Adnan Shaikh (He/They)

Growing up in a small town, I felt an overwhelming sense of wrongness lingering within me, like shadows cast by an unseen presence, even in the absence of explicit terms like “gay” or “queer.” These haunting thoughts clung to my mind like ghostly apparitions, weaving their way into every aspect of my being. I was an outsider in a society that didn’t have the vocabulary to explain or accept my identity.

For queer Muslims like myself, this inner conflict can become all-consuming. I was made to feel that my identity was incompatible with my faith and that I had to choose one or the other.

In the halls of the town’s grandest convent school, I stood like a misfit amidst the polished facade, surrounded by an education system that failed to understand me. Their brushstrokes painted a world confined to a binary palette where assumptions of heterosexuality were woven into the very fabric of the institution. I was an out-of-place puzzle piece, struggling to fit into their rigid mould, feeling as if my individuality was shackled. Even the restrooms, labelled with stark signs of “men” and “women,” seemed to cast a disapproving gaze, amplifying my discomfort and alienation. Throughout my twelve-year journey, I wandered like a solitary wanderer, engulfed in a sea of alienation,

India



unable to find the words to untangle the tightening grip around my heart and soul.

In a country where queerness exists in shadows, veiled and unspoken, I faced the haunting spectre of rejection from my family and community. My parents, shielded from encounters with openly queer individuals, held tightly to a distorted understanding ingrained with narratives that labelled homosexuality as sinful, a malady forbidden to be uttered aloud. It was a realm where queerness remained hidden, its existence denied, leaving me trapped in a labyrinth of fear.

In my childhood, the absence of characters like me in books and on screen was a glaring void. I never dared to dream that the protagonist of a show could mirror my own identity, as the absence of such role models took a toll on my sense of self. This dearth of representation held a harmful power, silently whispering that my existence was somehow inconsequential, perpetuating the notion that my story didn't deserve to be told.

Whenever I approached the mosque for daily prayers, I carried an invisible burden of hesitation. Their penetrating gazes felt like daggers, capable of unravelling my guarded truth. A primal fear gripped my heart, envisioning the imam's condemning voice and the community's accusatory stares. The thought of my queerness exposed in that sacred space sent shivers down my spine. It was as if my very essence stood bare, twisted and tormented. Paranoia clung to me, a constant reminder of the precariousness of my place, terrified of being cast out, branded as an outsider in a sanctuary that should have embraced me. Why do queer Muslims always have to justify their relationship and connection to God? Isn't separating people from their creator also a big sin?

Within the sacred month of Ramadan, my faith became a battleground of inner turmoil. The Muslim community surrounding me staunchly reinforced their beliefs, unequivocally deeming queerness as a sin. Each time I dared to broach the subject, my cousin deflected, diverting the conversation or resorting to tasteless humour that only served to deepen the divide. A profound longing consumed me—an insatiable desire to comprehend the roots of such vehement hatred and the scarcity of compassion towards queer individuals. It was a stark reality, witnessing the daily mistreatment of trans people on the streets, their spirits battered by verbal abuse and slurs hurled like sharp stones. The dissonance between the teachings of empathy and the actions of those who perpetuated harm painted a grim tapestry of human hypocrisy.

Many queer Muslims do not hate their religion or God but are coerced into feeling this way by so-called “religious people” who engage in hypocritical haram policing. At times, I found myself questioning whether it even mattered what I did, as I felt like I was destined for hell anyway. It was then that I realized I needed to find my own way

to reconcile my faith and my identity as a queer Muslim by dealing with the shame and guilt that I felt.

My path to Allah hasn't always been linear. It is filled with twists and turns, highs and lows. One of the most significant challenges I faced was the pressure to unquestioningly accept everything without critical thinking. This came from rigid interpretations of the Quran by scholars, which left no space to explore my own interpretations and understandings of the text. I soon realized that I could read the Quran on my own and form my own interpretations, as no one has sole authority over the Quran. Questioning things is not haram in Islam, and I had the power to form my own beliefs and interpretations.

I found comfort in online communities that exist specifically for people like me, spaces that allow people to discuss the complexities of reconciling faith and sexuality or share funny memes and jokes. I found hope and inspiration through the Queer Muslim Project Instagram page, where I came across the stories of remarkable individuals like Gulfraz, a resilient Kashmiri queer Muslim, who breathed life into my weary heart, infusing it with the light of possibility and newfound optimism. And then, there was Haseena, a beacon of courage and resilience, a trans activist hailing from Lahore, whose unwavering authenticity emboldened me to embrace my true self without fear or apology, and many people who affirmed that my relationship with God is personal.

I learned about the Persian and Urdu poets who had written about love and desire that transcends gender boundaries for centuries, using beautiful metaphors and imagery to express their feelings. I especially found solace in the works of Rumi and Shams, two of the most celebrated Persian poets, reading through verses about love, desire, and the search for a deeper spiritual connection that transcends the material, even conventional gender roles and societal norms.

'The Sun Never Says'

*Even after all this time,
the sun never says to the Earth,
"You owe me."*

Look what happens with a love like that.

It lights up the whole sky.



In “The Sun Never Says,” Rumi uses the metaphor of the sun to illustrate unconditional love. By naming his beloved “Shams,” meaning “sun” in Arabic, Rumi speaks of him as love and light themselves. True love does not demand anything in return but shines on the beloved, illuminating their life. Together, Rumi and Shams celebrated the fluidity of identity. Their words inspired me to look beyond the narrow confines of my own community and to embrace a more expansive and inclusive vision of what it means to be a Muslim.

I realized that I was not alone in my search for a deeper understanding of my faith and my identity and that there was a vibrant history of queer Muslims who had come before me. And I began to see that my struggle for self-acceptance was part of a broader movement for queer liberation within Islam. To all with faith, your connection to the divine is for you to strengthen, and it is a solitary path that only you can walk.

Love has been a powerful force in my journey—the unwavering love of my closest friends, the bond with my sister that keeps me grounded and welcomed me with open arms when I came out to her, and the romances that fuel my passion for life. Love has also taught me patience and kindness.

My best friend Kesar stood by my side like a lighthouse guiding me through the stormy seas of introspection and instilled within me a deep sense of self-love. Harsh unveiled the kaleidoscopic world of the queer community, painting my life with shades of acceptance and celebration, and I will always be grateful for the enduring friendship that has resulted. Kajal emerged as an anchor of tranquillity, her soothing presence a refuge for my panicked soul. Karishma, who ignited the flames of Pride within me, urging me to unleash the brilliance of my authentic self. I found support and validation in the form of Muslim allies, such as Aahana, whose supportive presence, genuine curiosity, and willingness to understand and accept my queer identity. These remarkable souls, each a radiant thread woven into the fabric of my life, have taught me the transformative power of allyship—how it can nurture relationships and ignite change within communities.

I’m grateful for these and countless other friends who love me for who I am and have helped me find the courage to live my life authentically. While not related to me by blood, they are indeed my chosen family. Their presence is like a warm embrace that enveloped me in a sense of belonging.

I leave you with a verse in Surah Yusuf: “And do not lose hope in the mercy of Allah; indeed, none lose hope in the mercy of Allah except the most ungrateful people.” (Quran 12:87) The lines make me feel closer to Allah, as though I’m being spoken to directly, urging me to persevere and reminding me of their infinite mercy and forgiveness. As I continue on my journey, I am reminded that my strength and courage

come from my unwavering belief in the knowledge that Allah loves me just as I am.



Illustration by Imad Farooqui

I'd never seen water so damn gay²⁷

By Megha Harish (She/He/They)

Mantis shrimp bond for life, but they are the exception, not the rule.

Friends was wrong about lobsters being in this club.

Their forever only lasts a few weeks, they're actually serial monogamists,
rather than being fixated on The One.

She made fish 300 million years before She made the first of us.

She made the sea dragon zaddies,

dragons and horses here related, dragon+donkey needn't be the only pair

the penguins,

in 1911, a colonial Antarctic explorer observed homosexual behaviour in penguins and
called it "depraved" but they still raise hell (& children) together

the nudibranchs,

who come in colours brighter than SUVA Beauty palettes and fuck with gender

and the zebra sharks,

who have two species' names but don't always need two to make a third

27. Title after Amani Saeed's poem 'Riis Beach'

India

before She made us.

We invented our own modes of clowning though.
Actual clownfish don't clown half as hard.

In every anemone, there's a dom femme running the show.
When she dies, the next-in-line dude transitions in 30 days.
Still orange and white, but with new pronouns and a new job –
she will lay all the eggs now.

Wrasse do it,
Sea bass do it,
Even ribbon eels do it...

The issue is not that we are not natural,
it is that our imaginations have been bottled –
no room for fluidity in confinement.

We begin to read 01100110 01100101 01100101 01100101
as 01101100 01101111 01100111 01101000²⁸

Good thing fish don't go to school –
They don't learn what they're not allowed to be.

MAY

I

28. In binary, 01100110 01100101 01100101 01100101 is 'FREE' and 01101100 01101111 01100111 01101000 is 'LOST'

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About us

Awarded the Cosmopolitan India Blogger Award for 'LGBTQIA+ Voice of the Year 2022', The Queer Muslim Project (TQMP) is South Asia's leading digital and cultural platform for queer, Muslim and allied voices, with a growing global community of over 40,000 people. TQMP uses art, culture, media, and storytelling to challenge harmful stereotypes and norms, build power and visibility of underrepresented LGBTQIA+ artists, storytellers, and communities, and enable them to shape their own narratives.



THE QUEER MUSLIM PROJECT

