

## Caesurae MANA Issue, July 2023



## **Welcome Dear Friends & Readers,**

It's a pleasure to be the Managing Editor of this issue: Caesurae MANA 2023 with my team of super-efficient and perceptive Editors without whom this issue wouldn't have taken shape. In a very short span of time, we were able to collate work from our stellar contributors – established and emerging practitioners in the fields of poetics and poetica, literature, semantics, and critique.

As we set out mindstorming the theme, I wondered: 6,500 languages in the world; 387 living languages in India and yet these are seldom enough to draw civil or civilizational bridges of compassion, peace, growth, and empathy. With Manipur burning, Ukraine and Afghanistan invaded, Sudanese and Syrian conflicts, and the devastating Israeli-Palestinian conflicts, are we lost in languages, where silence might be the only recourse? What about our personal existences? Are we restless or at peace? Or is this oceanic ebb and flow necessary between our beinghood and doinghood?

Our troubles and travails, acknowledged..., thought our Fiction/Non-fiction Editor Ronald Tuhin D'Rozario yet wisdom and epiphanies prevailed through memory, its weavings and creation that helped preserve ourselves against amnesia, goldfish-attention spans, public memory, false memories, and aging-related dementia.

Our Translations Editor Bharati Annadanam pondered over Nostalgia and its necessary ambivalence through space and time, its associations and inter-generational connections, and rediscovering and redefining through its accounting.

Kabir Deb, our Books Review Editor, spoke of languages as they penetrated the dermis of the unusual by staying undiscovered until discovered, away from the hype of marketing and gross book-mongering. And Jagari Mukherjee, our Poetry Editor preferred poetry to follow freeplay because all of it could fit under any theme, any season.

And so we began with these fragments of conversation to seek and learn more from our contributors as they created the essential *forest of birdsong*, as they bedazzled us with their writings. Now it is for you to read and share your thoughts...

I would like to thank Jayita Sengupta (President, Caesurae Collective Society) and Nikhila H. (Secretary, Caesurae Collective Society) for their continued support.

Our next Caesurae conference is being planned for early 2024. The last page of this issue has details on our membership processes.

Stay well,  
Rochelle Potkar



picture credit: Suhit Bombaywala

## ROCHELLE POTKAR

**Fictionist | Poet | Screenwriter, Rochelle Potkar is an alumna of Iowa's International Writing Program (2015) and a Charles Wallace Writer's fellow, University of Stirling (2017). Author of *Four Degrees of Separation* and *Paper Asylum* - shortlisted for the Rabindranath Tagore Literary Prize 2020, her poetry film *Skirt* showcased on Shonda Rhimes' Shondaland. Her poems *To Daraza* won the 2018 Norton Girault Literary Prize UK, and *The girl from Lal Bazaar* was shortlisted at the Gregory O' Donoghue International Poetry Prize, 2018. Her writings have been translated into Arabic, Hungarian, French, Spanish, Hindi, Marathi, Macedonian, and German.**

**Her short story collection *Bombay Hangovers* released in 2021. She is co-author of *The Coordinates of Us/ सर्व अंशांतून आपण* of English/Marathi poetry in translations. Her first screenplay was a quarter-finalist at the Atlanta Film Festival Screenwriting competition 2020 and an NFDC India Screenwriter's Lab 2018 selection. Her sixth screenplay was a Writers INK Screenwriting Lab 2022-23 selection.**

**She is an industry expert on English Lit. syllabi boards of two top Mumbai universities, and was invited as a creative-writing mentor to Iowa's International Writing Programs, Summer Institute 2019 and *Between the Lines* 2022 & 2023. She conducts poetry workshops with the Himalayan Writing Retreat. 2024 will see the release of her first novel and third book of poetry. <https://rochellepotkar.com>.**

## Editorial

As John Keats famously wrote in the opening lines of *Endymion*, “A thing of beauty is a joy forever.” An artist, or a writer, tries to capture beauty and transcreate it through colors and words, or whatever medium s/he may use. Oeuvres of art and literature, in my opinion, are meant to capture the fleeting pulchritude of life and immortalize the same. For an author, the essences of memory are distilled through language onto the blank page and remain, thus, frozen in time. The reader, on the other hand, comes vicariously alive in the author’s moments and goes on an adventure, whether they follow Beowulf or Sir Gawain to enchanted lands, ride the waves of ecstatic poetry with Tagore, weave a magic carpet with the Lady of Shalott while yearning for romance, or step into the world of a gauzy looking glass like Alice— Life reveals itself in all its myriad splendid possibilities to the discerning connoisseur of literary works.

MANA 2023 brings you an eclectic selection of the choicest poetry and prose. It was a pleasure working with the scintillatingly brilliant Managing Editor, Rochelle Potkar, who led us by example as Robin Hood led his merry band. While Kabir kept the Book Reviews section open for general submissions, the rest of us—Bharati (Translation), Ronald (Short Fiction and Creative Nonfiction) and Yours Truly (Poetry)—handpicked our selections with utmost care. I admit that the result is a selective (rather than definitive or exhaustive) representation of the dynamic vistas of literary works composed in English. The micro-themes and styles are as varied as they come, but I can say with certainty that each piece in MANA is resplendent with things of beauty that are joys forever.

It is said that fruitive action is its own reward. However, Dear Reader, if you have opened the faery casement of our pages and beguiled yourself with our words for a few charmed hours, we are indeed rewarded, and our cup of happiness “runneth” to the brim. We ask for nothing from you, our Dear Reader, except to give us the same measure of love that we have poured into bringing MANA 2023 to you. And yet, I will end with the poignant lines of WH Auden:

*How should we like it were stars to burn*

*With a passion for us we could not return?*

*If equal affection cannot be,*

*Let the more loving one be me.*

JAGARI MUKHERJEE  
Issue Editor, MANA 2023

## Poetry Section

Editor: **JAGARI MUKHERJEE**



The winner of the 2019 Reuel International Prize for Poetry, **Jagari Mukherjee** is the Founder and Chief Executive Editor of the literary journal, *EKL Review*. She has authored five solo collections of poetry--two chapbooks and three full-length volumes. Her most recent collection is "Exit Noire" (2023) published by Bookwryter. She is a gold medalist in English Literature, a Best of the Net nominee, DAAD scholar from Technical University, Dresden, Germany, and a Bear River Writers' Conference alumna. She has won numerous prestigious awards, including the Rabindranath Tagore Literary Prize for Book Review(2018), the Women Empowered Gifted Poet Award (2020), the Jury Prize at Friendswood Library's Ekphrastic Poetry Reading And Contest (2021), and most recently, The Bharat International Award for Literature 2022 For Short Story. Her book, "The Elegant Nobody" published by Hawakal was shortlisted for the prestigious Tagore Prize in 2022.

Jagari says, "Curating the poetry section of MANA 2023 was sheer delight. The process, I must confess, was entirely biased and subjective—I curated several (not all) of my favorite poets, all of whom I know in a personal capacity. Not a single poet disappointed me. As the contributions rolled in, I reveled in the kinetics of their creations—the textures, the layers, the forms as well as the sublime, the physical and the metaphysical facets of their poetry. Apart from the exquisite assortment of free verse poems from the likes of Sharmila Ray, Menka Shivdasani, Sanjukta Dasgupta, Sukrita Paul Kumar, Sanjeev Sethi, and Vinita Agrawal, we are enriched by the likes of

**Rajorshi Patranabis's mesmerizing gogyoshi and haibun as he traverses gorgeous moonscapes for the beloved, and delectable translated verses by Nabina Das and Kiran Bhat, to name only a few. While Kiriti Sengupta gifts us a single captivating monsoon-scented lyric, tears the soul apart with the assertion "...a meet after lightyears/your eyes still soak itself."**

**As a reader/editor, I cannot help but agree that, for me, reading each poem has been like a tryst with a lover.**

**I will forever remain under the spell of the entrancing poetry in MANA 2023."**

## **SHARMILA RAY**

### **Distances**

**Distances are blurred horizons  
And carry the smell of ruined hills.  
Distances create distance of their own  
and arrival or departure repose  
in a mausoleum.**

**Distances are world unto themselves  
where everything is orchestrated  
into a mirage-symphony of images.**

### **Morning**

**Every morning I sit here  
The pinewood casting a mellow glow-  
My room with orderly and disorderly books,  
slanting, piled up one upon the other or straight lined in bookshelves.  
Before I have a chance to do anything, the books in unison  
call out 'let's refresh your mind'. Before I have a chance to protest  
they start conversing,,,**

**Sometimes, Borges leaps out of Aleph and weaves a fantastic story  
of a universe that lies hidden inside a stone pillar.  
And at other times Gilgamesh takes me to the edge of a  
nation extinct long ago. Caught up in the web of languages  
I try to understand the sub-texts-**

**Calvino among reeds, his wet feet draped with green algae  
creating seascapes on the floor. Blue Dragon Flies appear only to vanish.  
I get up pick up a book,  
The words emerge sticky with nectar, crawl all over my body  
and sting...**



**Sharmila Ray** is a poet and non-fiction essayist, writing in English and anthologized and featured in India and abroad. Her poems, and non fictional essays have appeared in various national and international magazines and journals. She is an Associate Professor of the Department of History at City College, Kolkata. She has authored eleven books of poetry. She has edited a bilingual anthology of American and Indian writers-Bridging Continents. She was on the English Board of Sahitya Akademi (National Body of Letters, Govt. of India), Conducted poetry workshops organized by British Council, Poetry Society of India, Sahitya Akademi..Currently she edits English poetry section of Darabar Jaiga, a noted Bengali journal. She has been reading her poems in India and abroad. Her poems have been translated into Hindi, Bengali, Urdu, Slovene, Hebrew and Spanish and Uzbek.

She has received many awards for poetry. To name a few- Green Tara Initiatives, 2018, from All India Qaumi Ekta Manch, 2019 and from Ethos Journal 2019.



## **RAJORSHI PATRANABIS**

### **Bruise**

**My bruised lips failed to breath. You had bitten me with some monstrous abysmal  
apostasy... As if, it was the last... It was...  
Perhaps, my swollen lips would remain a remembrance, an epitaph.**

**passions submerged  
last frills of our lost arrogance  
wounds survive**

**"Radha?"  
I want to die to live...**

### **Pronounced**

**Read through my recent past. It was an afternoon of awkwardness and the rains  
called our shots.  
The next time, it was that stubborn stone,that wrote a story of holding hands. It went  
on, till your Radhika blocked herself.**

**returned  
righteous scoops of time  
waiting was destiny**

**You lived to love again, I was pronounced death - till I die.**

### **Search**

**a meet after lightyears  
your eyes still soak itself  
mirror speaks of a wilted search  
to crush deep into your dementing heart  
feebly lost into ruins of a long swirling love**

## Moonscapes

she kisses  
dried greens drench  
she smiles  
blinded starlights tatter  
skyline of our prudish moonscapes



**Rajorshi Patranabis** is a multilingual poet, translator, critic, and editor working with different forms of poetry. His publications include collections of sonnets, haiku, ghazals haibun, gogyoka etc. Patranabis has performed his poetry at different prestigious venues and literary festivals like Apeejay Kolkata Literary Festival, Toshali Literature Festival, Intercultural Poetry And Performance Library, and Ledo National Poetry Festival. He is the curator of the Multilingual Annual National New Town Poetry Festival in Kolkata since 2018.

A wiccan by philosophy and a food consultant by profession, Patranabis has been published in many national and international online and offline journals and anthologies. In February 2023, Patranabis published a seminal volume of gogyoka (a five-time Japanese poetry form) titled *The Last Drop of Your Tears*. This volume is the world's first collection of gogyoka in English by a single author. Patranabis's poems have been translated into Assamese and Bengali. He has eight books of poetry and two co-authored volumes of translation.

## **SONNET MONDAL**

### **Grandpa's Veranda**

**Grandpa used to sit on a protrusion  
of the veranda in our old house.**

**He used to nod subtly  
to acquaintances walking by—  
ploughing time—looking from across the road.**

**I remember him from his last days,  
mostly lying on the bed he had slept on  
for more than six decades.**

**These days I often sit in the new open balcony  
of our house. A few people wave at me.  
A few smile and some just walk by.**

**I will be sitting here till they remain  
just like Grandpa still sits in his veranda  
in the eyes of those who have seen him there—**

**an unavoidable view of places we inhabit,  
an inconsolable coffin much before we depart.**

### **The Answer**

**A dry land seeking liberty  
to get drenched wonders  
about the quiet after this storm.**

**The roads are familiar to it.  
The smell of the air isn't.**

**The trees no longer liaise.  
Their commitments are done.**

**Does the new rephrasing require us?**

**An empty bowl falls on the floor—  
the sound seems familiar.**

**It was there in the quiet  
before the storm.**



**Sonnet Mondal** is the author of *An Afternoon in My Mind* (Copper Coin 2022/Bite-Sized Books, U.K.), *Karmic Chanting* (Copper Coin 2018), *Ink and Line* (Dhault Books 2018) and five other books of poetry. He has read as an invited poet at literary festivals in USA, Macedonia, Ireland, Turkey, Nicaragua, Sri Lanka, Germany, Italy, Ukraine, Hungary, Madagascar, South Africa, and Slovakia. He was awarded Gayatri Gamarsh Memorial Award for literary excellence in 2016, Godyoo PodyoProbondho Award in 2023, and was shortlisted for Tagore Literary Prize in 2020. His recent works have appeared in the *Harper's Bazaar*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Stand Magazine*, *Words Without Borders*, *Singing in the Dark* (Penguin Random House), *Luvina* magazine (University of Guadalajara, Mexico), *La Otra* (University of Mexico), *Indian Literature* (Sahitya Akademi), *Stand* magazine, *Poetry Salzburg Review* (University of Salzburg), and *Mascara Literary Review* among others. Mondal was one of the authors of the Silk Routes project of the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa from 2014 to 2016. Founder director of Chair Poetry Evenings – Kolkata's International Poetry Festival, Mondal edits the Indian section of *Lyrikline* (Haus für Poesie, Berlin) and serves as managing editor of *Verseville*. He has been a guest editor for *Words Without Borders*, New York, and *Poetry at Sangam*, India. His works have been translated in over twenty languages.

## AMIT SHANKAR SAHA

### That Year I Broke Aphasia

In the year I started speaking  
I spoke so much that often,  
when we were together,  
I outdid you in speech.

That year poetry too came  
to us like goosebumps on skin.

That year some restless words  
climbed up the hill to rescue  
some frozen utterances  
from the precipice of beliefs.

That year even grammar came  
spontaneously like dreams.

We took punctuations to breathe  
or to buy an umbrella  
when rain-bearing clouds  
covered the mountain peaks.

That year you forgot the past  
and I imagined a future.



Amit Shankar Saha is the author of three collections of poems titled *Balconies of Time*, *Fugitive Words* and *Illicit Poems*. His poems have appeared in *The Yearbook of Indian Poetry in English*, *The Best Indian Poetry* and *Converse: Contemporary English Poetry by Indians*. He has a PhD in English from Calcutta University and teaches in the English Department at Seacom Skills University. He is the Editor-in-Chief of *EKL Review* and the Assistant Secretary of the *Intercultural Poetry and Performance Library (IPPL)*. His latest book is a collection of non-fiction titled *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Essayist*.

## KIRITI SENGUPTA

### Not Moistened by Water

Do I know him?  
A man walks down the public road,  
ignoring the thunderstorm.  
He is alone,  
downpour fails to wet him.

The gentleman looks composed.  
Seeing him from a distance, I leave  
the roadside shade. Incongruity guides me  
to approach the stranger.

Drenched in the deluge,  
I progress to catch him.  
He briskly drifts away.  
My cellphone beeps:

The weather forecast suggests  
a day-long cloudburst.



**Kiriti Sengupta**, the 2018 Rabindranath Tagore Literary Prize recipient, has poems published in *The Common*, *The Florida Review Online*, *Headway Quarterly*, *The Lake*, *Amethyst Review*, *Dreich*, *Otoliths*, *Outlook*, *Madras Courier*, and elsewhere. He has authored twelve books of poetry and prose; two books of translation; and edited eight anthologies. Sengupta is the chief editor of *Ethos Literary Journal*, and he looks after the English language division of Hawakal Publishers Private Limited, one of the leading independent presses founded by Bitan Chakraborty. Sengupta lives in New Delhi.

# **RAJA CHAKRABORTY**

## **Soliloquy**

**talking to myself is an old habit**

**that extra skin  
which has grown like an adage  
and i learn to live with it**

**absent-minded, i tug at the knot  
memories unfurl, indisciplined piles of clothing throw themselves out of the closet**

**awkward and embarrassing-  
i curse myself in hissed breath**

**and then, oil brought to a perfect boil  
chatter of molecules talk back  
of the last gossip**

**i reply in silent overtures  
while adding spices, one by one  
the casserole carrying scars from the last burnt dinner**

**talking to myself is an old habit  
you surely know by now-  
in between i forgot how to listen**

**in some corner  
water overflows from a forgotten tap  
pitter patter of the drops mimicking  
the last time i cried**

**i keep telling myself  
once in a while it will rain**

**not the paper-boat kind of drizzle  
but a tsunami of sorts  
when the sky fails to understand  
the weight of grief**

**i keep telling my soul  
listen to your damn heart and walk on  
the road is about to end  
and your journey will now truly begin**



**Born and brought up in Kolkata, India, Raja Chakraborty is a much published bilingual poet, writing in English and Bengali. He has penned five books of English poems so far, 'The Soup Bowl and Other Poems', 'Whispers in the Wind', 'Broken Lines and Rainbows', 'About Maya and Other Poems' and 'Where the Shadow Falls'. His Bengali publications has six books. He is also a regular contributor to magazines and anthologies which include Setu, Piker Press, The Writers Club, First Out, Litterateur Rw, Dissident Voice, Duanespoetree, Lothlorien Poetry Journal, Borderless Journal and a host of anthologies.**



## SEKHAR BANERJEE

### Twilight

Day and night lie back-to-back: two atmospheres,  
tired, do not touch each other  
The hollowness between us is a golden snake skin,  
a loose contour  
of what we can never get  
I discover the sun is a vast luminous metropolis  
where nobody lives

An evening sets in Calcutta and the suburbs  
almost like a depression  
after making love

It is time to grow apart. Going  
in different directions for something less familiar  
to bear with

Like our stray thoughts after a final decision,  
some offending clouds trespass  
the border  
of the falling city of the sun bent towards the hell  
and return to a blank sky. Colourless

Now, there is nothing to be retrieved from anywhere



*Sekhar Banerjee is a Pushcart Award and Best of the Net nominated poet. He has been published in Stand Magazine, Indian Literature, Ink Sweat and Tears, Arkana, The Lake, The Bitter Oleander, Thimble and elsewhere. He is a former Press Secretary to the Governor of West Bengal. He lives in Kolkata, India.*

## **SMEETHA BHOUMIK**

**This is a ballet**

**A slow rise into the air  
Extending sweep and stretch,  
Of gothic scenes transformed.**

*Radiance permeates the whole world -*

**Luminous leaves, twigs,  
A touch of love, and yes, it is in people' eyes!**

**It is day even at night,  
Not with neon  
But a resurrection  
Of the soul that has felt the appearance of light after countless dark hours...**

*(It's taken three thousand hours times six, maybe more, of a raging disease)*

**Anytime is good. For this.**

**The harp begins then, a soft sound - elusive, faint, nostalgic,  
mournful, defiant,  
Stirring up a potpourri of emotions.**

**In the lessening darkness, there's encore.**

**The ballerina twirls around thrice  
In a sea of rainbow smoke, she bends down to look at  
reflections...**

**And sees herself in the audience,  
Clapping dreamily, saying encore  
Perched on the branches  
Of a beautiful oak on stage behind her;  
She begins to twirl.**

**Her teardrops are lost in a theatrical haze  
Of temporal time  
Drizzling now here, now there,  
Swirling in the arms of the present,**

**Or boogying to a past long gone;  
Buried like treasure  
In earth's deep bosom.**

She does not pay them heed,

*Dancing in  
The light.*



**Smeetha Bhoumik** is a poet, artist, founding editor - *Yugen Quest Review*, and founder- WE Literary Community (2016). She is Chief Editor of *Equiverse Space - A Sound Home in Words* (WE anthology, Notion, 2018), poetry facilitator at #CeWoPoWriMoWE.

She is the author of poetry collections *Where I Belong – Moments, Mist & Song* (2019), and *In Tumultuous Light, Rhapsodies!* (2023)

Her favourite poetic form is the sestina. As Founder – WE, she has helped establish several poetry awards, including the *WE Kamala Das Poetry Award*, *WE Eunice de Souza Poetry Award* among others. Her poems feature in national/ international journals, anthologies including *The Polaris Trilogy – Poems for the Moon* (Brickstreet), *TMYS Review* Sept 22, March '23, *Sunflowers – Ukrainian Poetry on War, Resistance, Hope, Peace* (River Paw, 2022), *Poetry Unites* (The Write Order, 2022), *Oxygen - Parables of the Pandemic 2022*, *Quesadilla & Other Adventures* 2019, *Muse India* 2017, 2018, *Life and Legends* 2018, *Modern English Poetry by Younger Indians*– Sahitya Akademi, 2019, *Unlikely Stories Mark V*, *Open Your Eyes - A Climate Change Anthology*, *Freedom Raga, Poetry & Covid project* - Universities of Plymouth, and Nottingham Trent, *Writing Language, Culture - Asia vs Africa*, Mwanaka, among others.

Her art, mainly the 'Universe Series' has shown in exhibitions in India and abroad.

## **MENKA SHIVDASANI**

### **Our World**

**After thirty years, we retreat into private spaces.  
I shut my eyes against shadows  
that creep up on rocky walls.  
My cave is made of muddy pools and cracked crevices,  
secret tunnels that lead to undiscovered paths  
where shafts of sunlight somehow penetrate.  
It has taken me many journeys to find my way  
into the cool silence of this ageing stone.**

**And what of you?  
It was a sea that you discovered  
ruffled against your limbs of sand and rock,  
where your eyelids watered  
as the wind blew too hard upon your face.  
I used to know the fish  
that swam in those unseen spaces,  
where corals kissed and dolphins dreamed;  
I've touched the fronds  
that swayed in your aqueous depths.**

**You and I, we have found new trails,  
walking seven times, and more,  
around the ceremonial fires of our being.  
We have burned together in a single universe,  
created our milky ways,  
and lit up the night sky to shape our galaxies.**

**Now, still together in this quiet space,  
we balance the cosmos  
between my mountain and your sea.**

**The world is ours,  
as it has always been.**

## **Confluence**

**At the point where the Gomti and Saryu meet,  
every stone is a tribute, every ripple a new breath.  
The roaring rivers have journeyed  
down the mountain,  
carving rigid landscapes,  
navigating the waterfalls,  
seeking their spaces in crevices of rock.  
Now they curve, gentle into each other's sides  
sharing stories that no one else can know,  
mingling memories of silver oak and pine.  
Who can tell where one begins,  
who can tell where  
it flows into the other?**

**As the decades have streamed by,  
we have changed our course  
and yet remained together,  
smoothing the rough edges  
of boulders on this riverbed,  
meandering along the shoreline.  
shifting the soil.  
Tributaries have flowed in,  
distributaries disappeared,  
but we have gone on,  
inseparable between the banks.**

**Someday, in a far-off land,  
when rain dries mid-air  
as the sun burns too bright,  
we will leave our memories  
in pebbles on the sand**

**and though selfie-taking crowds  
may step on them,  
it will not matter, for we will  
have left our mark,  
bringing forests to life  
feeling our breath in the breeze.**

**We have moved mountains,  
though this secret is ours  
and no one else will know.**



**Menka Shivdasani** has four poetry collections. She is co-translator of *Freedom and Fissures*, an anthology of Sindhi Partition poetry (Sahitya Akademi, 1998) and editor of a SPARROW anthology of women's writing. She has edited two anthologies of contemporary Indian poetry for the American e-zine, [www.bigbridge.org](http://www.bigbridge.org), and bilingual poetry books by Sindhi writer Mohan Gehani. Her poem, *A Tale of the Mountains*, based on a Sindhi folktale, has been made into a short film by Susheel Gajwani.

A widely published poet, Menka has received the Ethos Literary Award 2019, WE Eunice de Souza Award 2020 and Rabindranath Tagore Literary Prize recognition for *Frazil*. Menka co-founded Poetry Circle in Bombay in 1986. She has been organising poetry festivals since 2011 for the global movement 100 Thousand Poets for Change. Menka is Co-Chair, Asia Pacific Writers and Translators (APWT) and **Council Member, Literary Arts Council, WICCI**. Menka has co-authored/ edited 18 books with Raju Kane, three of which were released by the then Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

Website: <https://menkashivdasani.in/>

## **MADHU RAGHAVENDRA**

### **Shells**

The rain-filled pits  
of the pallanguzhi  
waits to claim its grains.

The tamarind run tongue  
runs clockwise after cowries,  
games of time refrain  
from drawing breath,  
there is no one to scatter  
the ashes of smelted seeds  
there is nothing here  
to pass the silver afternoon.

What amount of absoluteness  
absolves the use of the word  
absolutely?

### **Leadership**

These days, everyone is into leadership;  
exclusive leadership  
inclusive leadership  
emerging leadership  
submerging leadership.

Everyone is busy getting  
trained or training others.

Can someone tell me  
what is this all about?

I'm just here to fill a flask,  
carry a diary, take a hike up the hill,  
sit, sip some tea, and see some sunset.

Come, join me, no training required here.



**Madhu Raghavendra** has authored four books of poetry, *Make Me Some Love to Eat*, *Stick No Bills*, *Being Non-essential*, and *Going Home*. He is the founder of Poetry Couture, a movement that has created free spaces for poetry in many cities of India, including the North East India region. He uses performance poetry as a tool to advocate human and environmental rights. He collaborates with global artists to create cross disciplinary poetry experiences. His poems have been set to classical music and contemporary dance in India, the United States, Finland, and Australia. He regularly conducts performance poetry workshops for young adults, and has read at many educational institutions and literary festivals globally. His works have been featured in many literary journals and translated into many languages. He has participated in the 2022 PEN Emergency World Voices Congress of Writers at the United Nations Headquarters, New York. Madhu was a resident poet at the 2022 Spring International Writing Program, The University of Iowa.



## HEIN MIN TUN

### The Ray

Following a stoic walk on the blade of passion in nude wear of lust,  
the pusillanimous heart leaves in the lurch  
a sullen stare of samudaya outlined  
in a twin of moist cosmic circles under the dewfall of eternal dusk;  
yet, dabbing doused eyes in the opaque silhouette of narcissistic soul.  
Stained are the strides that skim the crest gliding high and low  
through the recurrence of double-sided circumstance.  
Languorous tears carrying nuanced weights healed in  
the petrichor of breath-beaded lacuna  
Hopes bred to keep the deflatable stray balloon buoyant and blithe  
peer across at desired images stirring in the blur of far-off dates.  
Vows thin as air merge into apotheoses fringed with sharp superciliousness.  
Assured chortles shamelessly give their mighty voice,  
lofty message from the base of a deep nothingness.  
Some deserted visages are reminded by wet reminiscence coming over  
when novelties grow old and dim, hands that could pluck blossoms of rare hues  
are left only with suggestive fragrance to inhale, ruminant.  
A mocked truth surfaces, grasps unleashed with burdened sighs, a soft dream  
through a hollow interlude always  
waking up with answerless conundrums to the haze of abysmal resurrections.



Hein Min Tun is an award-winning writer and multi-published poet hailing from Myanmar. He holds a B.A (Hons) degree in English Language & Literature, and is a curated candidate for the degree "Master of Arts in Literature". He is the winner of "Distinguished Writer Award for Excellence in Literature" for two consecutive years of 2022 and 2023 for his short fiction works such as "The Outcast" and "The Love Song". In addition, he has fallen on the second place for "Chanting Bards Award for Poetry Recitation" conducted live by Poiesisonline.com & Xpresspublications.com on May 20 in Bangalore, Karnataka, India, for his lyrical "Soaked Poetry Muffins: Delicate Bites". The writer has penned numerous literary works which include prose and poetry, and has abundant poems plus prose writings to his credit in acclaimed international magazines and anthologies.

## **ANEK CHATTERJEE**

### **If You Were Me**

**If you were me,  
savoring the copper sky  
as evening descends to overpower.  
The same sky often visited us,  
silently, outside the lawn of the  
coffee shop.**

**I'm always baffled to word this part  
of the day. Some lights are on,  
some others, obscured by the  
preponderant sky.  
The smell of coffee, tiny white and pink  
flowers at the four edges of the  
rectangular lawn are witnesses  
with me, to this splendor.**

**Flowers I saw plenty and wished to  
know their names. Some neglected flowers,  
you had named on your own  
and only whispered to me,  
as did the silent copper sky.**

**Some flowers, I know today,  
sitting under the sky, are you. The copper  
universe is you. The smell of coffee is you.  
And all surrealism reaches you in silence  
this evening.**

**If you were me  
at this moment,  
we could be subjects of  
another unborn, but ubiquitous  
painting.**

## **The Other**

**I talk to myself  
to clear all doubts, hesitancy,  
stops and runs.**

**And engage in debates over  
my position, id, jealousy  
and possessions.**

**We constitute an  
orchestrated polemics; ---  
me and I.**

**But at the end of the day,  
I frantically search the other,  
who's missing, always.**



**Aneek Chatterjee is a poet and academic from Kolkata, India. He has published more than five hundred poems in reputed literary magazines and poetry anthologies across the globe. He authored 16 books including four poetry collections titled, “Seaside Myopia” (Cyberwit, 2018), “Unborn Poems and Yellow Prison” (Cyberwit, 2019), “Of Ashes and Persiflage” (Hawakal, 2020) and “Archive Avenue” (Cyberwit, 2022). He also co-edited the “Poetry Conclave Year Book 2022” (Authors Press). Dr. Chatterjee received the prestigious “Alfredo Pasilono Memorial Panorama International Literary Award 2023”, conferred by the Writers Capital Foundation. One of his poems ‘Tramline and the Man’ has been included by “Pick Me Up Poetry”, a South Africa based Poetry Journal and Poetry Community as one of the best contemporary poems on ‘Survival’. He was a Fulbright Visiting faculty at the University of Virginia, USA and a recipient of the ICCR Chair (Govt. of India) to teach abroad. His poetry has been archived at Yale University.**

## **MIHIR CHITRE**

### **The Vanishing**

**blue matchsticks, irrational words  
forging meaning, a lifelong habit  
like failing**

**so completely  
that, that feels like a job  
well-done**

**without a sense of self**

**exactly the way I vanished  
in the book of age  
page after page**

**ask the twenty-ninth  
of February how hard it is  
to come back**

### **Comedy**

**The goal of my life is to laugh  
at everything  
that is dead or alive**

**which is pretty much  
everything  
except Shrodinger's cat**

**The way my father died, suddenly,  
has to be funny  
there must be some hidden joke**

**in the countless sleeps  
I awaited  
that hit of anxiety**

**from a bar to another  
when the therapist made cocktails  
of post-traumatic stress disorder**

**When they attacked  
I choked  
to their sniggering revolution**

**The way I gave in  
without a fight, to my harassers  
evokes a guffaw**

**I'm not a victim  
but a barbed wire of jokes  
the goal of my life is to laugh at**



**Mihir Chitre is the author of two books of poems, Hyphenated and School of Age. His work has appeared in over 25 literary magazines including Nether, Indian Literature, Cerebration, The Bombay Literary Magazine and in five anthologies including 40 Under 40, Modern Indian Poetry by Younger Indians, Helter Skelter Anthology of New Writing, etc.**

## **ANANYA CHATTERJEE**

### **Inaction**

**A butterfly  
is stuck in the inches between  
the pane and the window glass.  
Still. Quite still. So still that its  
printed body of yellow stars  
resembles a fragment  
of my summer-sale dress.**

**I haven't tried to open the shades.  
A part of me wants it gone.  
But there's another part. Another me  
who wants to watch every micro-step  
in this process of gentle decay.  
She wants to catch the exact second  
when the yellow fades into dirt gray  
and the firm filigree crumbles like dust.**

**She wants to learn how the dead disappear.**

**Just then I see a gentle flicker,  
a fractional movement of the wings.  
A part of me wants to open the pane.  
But there's another part. Another me.**

**who wants to feel the putrid pleasure  
of watching it die. Skin to dust.  
She grabs me with her fiercest grip.  
and we watch arm in arm  
the fight slip out of its tiny soul.**

**I've bothered you, haven't I.  
I've let you see my dark intent.  
I've let you see, finally,  
the destructive power of inaction.  
The cruel cravings of a human mind.**

**But I am a human. After All.  
Could I ever do better than my kind?**



**Ananya Chatterjee** is a software professional working for Oracle India Pvt Limited. A gold medalist in Computer Science, Ananya has always been passionate about writing verses. She is the author of the Amazon bestseller, *The Poet & His Valentine*. *Un-building Walls*, *Another Soliloquy*, *The Blind Man's Rainbow*, *Alor Sandhane*, and *Barefoot On Splintered Glass*, are her other poetry collections. She is also a member of the executive committee of the Intercultural Poetry and Performance Library, the first Poetry Only Library in India. Ananya also worked as a translator for the poems by actor and poet Soumitra Chatterjee, published in the book *Forms Within*.

## **GOPAL LAHIRI**

### **Water**

two slum girls,  
the color of the charcoal,  
stand at the edge of the pavement,  
Their horsetails are clump of unkempt hair,  
their shoulders stoop low,  
skinny hands and crooked legs  
go hiding in the smoke raised  
by the tires of the goods' lorries,  
while they kiss the dry roadside tap  
in search of water.

### **Sangfroid**

As I draw sketches of green bough  
under your eyelids,  
there is the iris annotates  
the shards of the sun,  
beyond the split windows of the room,  
flowers explode in the sky.

Love must not be wounds,  
rather it stiches the fissures in our heart,  
the answer is within you or not,  
it's not just a word on the edge of my  
typing fingers but one on the lips  
of people over the centuries,

We pine for them; word can go that far,  
It remains the sangfroid of my canvas.

### **Fall**

That is asleep now and silent.  
with two sharp cries the yellow bird flies away,  
feathers begin to fall into the world below,  
slowly, one after another.  
they are too many to count.



**These drifts and turns, I suppose,  
a revolution, a transformation,  
they are close against my heart,  
You must flow and then anchor,  
somewhere in the haze, I realize the life.**



**Gopal Lahiri is a bilingual poet, critic, editor, writer and translator with 29 books published, including eight solo/jointly edited books. His poetry and prose are published across various anthologies globally. His poems are translated in 16 languages. He has been nominated for Pushcart Prize for poetry in 2021. He has received *Setu Excellence* award in poetry. His latest collection of poems ‘Alleys are Filled with Future Alphabets.’ has received Pan Asian Ukiyoto awards.**

## **MALLIKA BHAUMIK**

### **soundscape**

**There is a pattern in the way things decay.  
Age settles down soundlessly like dust  
you move towards another road,  
another year,  
while voices ebb and colours around you turn sepia**

**A bubble of a wish floats far  
to reach the ding dong loyalty of the old pendulum clock,  
the morning clamour, newspaper and breakfast,  
water filling up the soapy tub,  
the occasional doorbell,  
Carnatic music floating in with a gusto from the opposite flat,  
the high pitched tone of pheriwala's call,  
the golden 'bikel' of kho kho and cricket,  
blowing of conch shell as dusk sets in.  
You sleep with the lost soundscape under the quilt.**

**The 'chakravayuh' of city traffic near Chowringhee  
impatient honking and messages beep,  
you shut off the noisy world held in your grasp,  
roll down the window glass to let the cool cab air spill outside -  
the chaos melts as the sky translates its sorrow  
your palm feels the first drizzle drops  
everything slows down, blurs,  
~a lungful of moistened air carries the flutter of homebound birds.**

### **Glossary-**

**pheriwala ~ peddlers selling their wares on road; bikel ~ afternoon /around 5 PM in any warm country; chakravayuh ~ a military formation used to surround enemies as depicted in the epic 'Mahabharata'; Chowringhee ~ downtown area of Kolkata**



**Mallika Bhaumik was a nominee for the Pushcart Prize for Poetry in the year 2019.**

Her poetry, short stories, essays, articles, travelogue, interview have been published in various e mags and journals like Cafe Dissensus, Guftugu Journal, Grey Sparrow Journal, Shot Glass Journal, Mad Swirl, Madras Courier, The Alipore Post, RIC Journal, Kitaab, Dhaka Tribune, Outlook India, Voice and Verse to name a few.

The transliterated version of her essay, 'Of Mahalaya, memories and moksha' originally published in 'The Chakkar' came out in the Bengali daily 'Ei Samay' in Oct 2022.

She has received the Reuel International prize for her debut poetry book, 'Echoes', (2017) published by Authorspress (New Delhi).

Her second book of poems, 'How not to remember' has been published by Hawakal Publishers (2019).

Her poems are part of the Post Graduate syllabus (English Dept) by BBMK University, Dhanbad.

She lives and writes from Kolkata (India )

## **VINITA AGRAWAL**

### **Hyoid Bone**

Through the C of the wrench  
the runnels of grief  
lie wide open on the floor.  
How do I close the tap?  
Spanner, hammer, screwdriver, nothing works.  
I need what I don't have;

a measuring tape.  
Ferreting the distance  
from eyes to light.  
And in that light,  
detecting a marigold blooming,  
despite all odds.

Somewhere inside a forest,  
ribbons of gold  
weave through clusters of trees  
warming the brown soil,  
softening it  
to fertile wax.

Emerald moss  
flexes its span on oak trunks:  
jewel upon jewel of devotional green.  
And here in my heart,  
the trash can is full to the brim  
with thrice crushed balls of deflation.

Sidelines are calderas  
where we lay out our beaten skin  
and bruised breaths.  
Those deep caverns of days  
where sunlight does not penetrate.  
Where contusions hug themselves.

The hyoid bone in your throat,  
the only one in your body,  
not attached to any other bone,  
teaches a vital lesson:  
disengagement, severing,  
letting go.



**Vinita Agrawal's** latest collection of poems *Twilight Language* was the winner of the Proverse prize Hongkong 2021. She has authored five books of poetry. She was awarded the Rabindranath Tagore Literary Prize 2018 and the Gayatri GaMarsh Memorial Award for Literary Excellence, USA, 2015. She is Poetry Editor with Usawa. She co edits the *Yearbook* series of *Indian Poetry in English*. She has edited two anthologies on climate change *Open Your Eyes* in 2020 and *Count Every Breath* in 2023 (Hawakal). She is on the Advisory Board of the Tagore Literary Prize. She is Co chair for CoE - a Global Council for Excellence for Environment and Sustainability and on the Advisory Board G100 World Peace.

## **NIKITA PARIK**

### **Unspectacular**

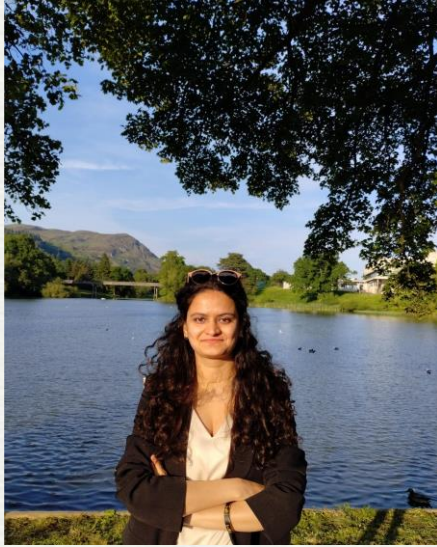
**Along the trails in my  
becoming—**

**between lush forests  
whaleback hills, warm sun-on-skin,  
heady bluebell mist in  
faraway forest covers,  
& oystercatchers—**

**in those mundane, colder,  
darker crannies,  
time snakes  
like a paralysed  
vertebrae**

**(for what is a tree  
post-shedding & pre-leafing  
but a sharp fork**

**cutting into the sky,  
bearing the weight  
of its great, grey belly  
upon its winter self).**



**Nikita Parik is the 2022-2023 Charles Wallace India Trust Fellow at the University of Stirling. Her third and latest book, *My City is a Murder of Crows* (2022), has been nominated for the Sahitya Akademi Yuva Puraskar, and shortlisted for the Rabindranath Tagore Literary Prize. She has recently presented talks, readings, and workshops at SOAS University of London, University of Kent, and University of Stirling.**

**Her books have been reviewed/featured in *Indian Literature*, *The Sunday Statesman*, *Business Standard*, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, *Outlook India*, *The Wire*, and *Kavya Bharati*. Her poems have appeared in *Rattle*, *U City Review*, *The Alipore Post*, *Vayavya*, *The Bombay Literary Magazine*, *Scroll*, *Stanford University's poetry gallery*, the *Yearbook of Indian Poetry in English*, and several other venues. You can read [her interview](#) with *Kitaab* (Singapore) and listen to [her poetry podcast](#) with *Rattle* magazine (USA).**

## **SANJEEV SETHI**

### **Seasons**

**Trickeries of snollygosters increase in tenebrousness.  
Fused lights on the belfry's snicket lead them. We  
relish relationships played by our rules. Others are  
endured as they pad our plans. If one could parclose  
elements from one's ambulation. Leaking umbrellas  
and lovers who lie aren't for me. I learned the early  
grammar of erasing grief. Shame spoiled my spring.  
Rains came unasked. Summer was sere. Aromas of  
fall left me limp. I like the warmth this winter sidles.**

### **Itch**

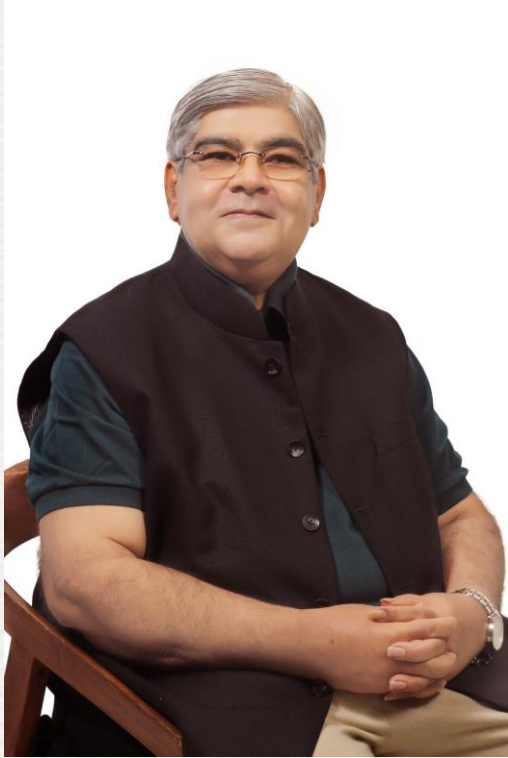
**Shirty reflexes envelope  
the area between us.  
I plead with the All-Knowing  
to help betray my biases.  
He is on a hiatus.  
Our bickering continues.  
Griff from groin  
wends its way to you.  
The ugly face of urge  
has no qualms.**

### **Peripheries**

**The mizzle of movement  
encourages me to engage  
with those, your presence  
dissuades me not to notice.  
Possibilities must never be  
erased from engrossment.**

**To be a racer isn't for everyone.  
Some are meant to sag in a coop,  
handclasp their hardships.  
Some contuse; some knit  
a few move on regardless  
of their locale or latitude.**





**Sanjeev Sethi** has authored seven books of poetry. His latest is *Wrappings in Bespoke* (The Hedgehog Poetry Press, UK, August 2022). He has been published in over thirty countries. His poems have found a home in more than 400 journals, anthologies, and online literary venues. He is the recipient of the Ethos Literary Award 2022. He is the joint winner of the Full Fat Collection Competition-Deux, organized by The Hedgehog Poetry Press, UK. In 2023, he won the First Prize in a Poetry Competition by the prestigious National Defence Academy, Pune, during its 75th anniversary in the “family members category.” He edited *Dreich Planet #1*, an anthology of Indian poets for Hybriddreich, Scotland, in December 2022. He lives in Mumbai, India. Twitter @sanjeevpoems3 || Instagram sanjeevsethipoems

## SIVAKAMI VELLIANGIRI

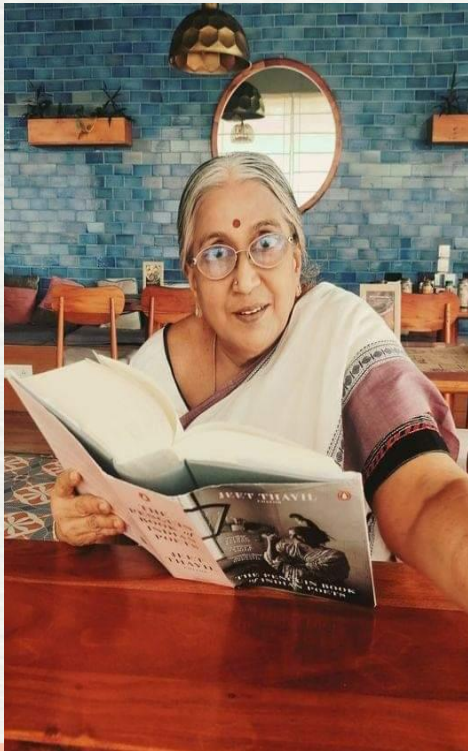
### Cultural Differences

The aura of many tiered ghee wick lamps  
light offered to gods and goddesses  
the dwindling of the tiers to the last single wick  
the dark stone goddess smiling, her diamond  
nose rings sparkling, this is the only Arathi  
I was aware of.

In my husband's hometown there was a different  
kind of Alathi, a dilute red liquid in a hollow plate,  
betel leaves, camphor; they said 'go bring Aalathi!'  
My sister-in-law gave me tips, mix a little turmeric  
with lime and water and it turned red.

As for what one had to recite, your father's eye, your  
mother's eye, the eyes of relatives and neighbours  
let all evil eyes go, go, go, vamoose. Do this thrice  
clockwise, thrice anti-clockwise, and chant this, 'she said.

I merely conjugated my French verbs in the pluperfect, in silence.



Sivakami Velliangiri is a poet, born in Madras and brought up at Trivandrum, and now living in Chennai. When Sivakami Velliangiri was Sivakami Ramanathan she published her poems in Youth Times, and in various other literary journals. Professor Srinivasa Iyengar included her among the women poets in his *History of Indian Writing in English* (1980). She is Founder Member and Co-curator of The Quarantine Train, an online Poetry Workshop. Her online Chapbook *In My Midriff* <https://tinyurl.com/nzk7db78> was published by *Lily Literary Review*. 'How We Measured Time' <https://tinyurl.com/h38tpfz5> is her debut poetry book. Her poems appear in *The Penguin Book of Indian Poets*, <https://amzn.to/3MZ0rap> April 2022.

## **SUKRITA PAUL KUMAR**

### **Chashme Shahi**

Are these cumulated tears of joy  
Forming an ocean of happiness?  
Springing straight from the  
  throbbing and pulsating heart  
  of the big mountain

Deep blind wells ensconced in the lows  
  amidst the heights

Caressingly warm in winter, peppermint cool in summer  
Manna from the heavens, said the Moghul Badshah

Drink and be young always

Listen to the gingerly call of the mountain

I hear the explosions instead, see the rocks tearing apart

Rivers of vipers and snails gushing out of the cracking earth  
  Directionless

Making space ceaselessly for  
  Tunnels and traffic, trucks and trains  
  Carrying men and women to  
  futuristic mythologies of progress

Abandoning Chashme Shahi, along with  
its myth of eternal youth  
lies abandoned

### **Everywhere/Nowhere**

The grey folds in white clouds  
swallow the mountains in white robes  
sweep multiple horizons in their miasma

rain and sunshine, love and hate merge  
into the misty veils  
the four chinars on the little island  
are whirling dervishes in frenzy  
singing their swan song  
and collapsing in a heap  
their ghosts rise to home in the fog  
showering their blessings

I float lost on the lake  
in search of the absent foursome

### PARIMAHAL

In olden times, they say  
Fairies would emerge from  
The now wrinkled structures  
Ruins telling tales of the erstwhile

Fairies stand in the shape of conifers  
Delicate and benign  
Over an entwined web of roots  
Emerging from  
the belly of the earth

No whiff of evil in this world

Twisting branches  
on slender trunks  
In step with the twirling breeze

They are still  
when the breeze is still  
They quiver  
when the wind blows

What's with the guard  
Rifle in hand

On the look out  
For demons inside humans

Upside down is the rifle  
With people on their way out

**What of the flowers within the plants  
Waiting for spring fairies  
To rise from the Parimahal  
And spread their fragrance  
Of lost trust and affection**



**Sukrita Paul Kumar**, former Fellow of Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, held the prestigious Aruna Asaf Ali Chair at Delhi University. An honorary faculty at Corfu, Greece, she was an invited resident poet at the prestigious International Writing Programme at Iowa, USA. Her most recent collections of poems, are *Salt & Pepper* (Selected Poems), *Vanishing Words* and *Dream Catcher*. Her poems have been translated into many Indian and foreign languages, the latest is the book of her poems translated into Italian, published by Besa Muci, Rome. Her critical books include *Narrating Partition*, *The New Story* and *Conversations on Modernism*. She has co-edited many books, including *Speaking for Herself: Asian Women's Writings* (Penguin). An Honorary Fellow at HK Baptist University, Hong Kong, she has also published many translations and has held exhibitions of her paintings. Currently she is series co-editor of "Writer in Context" volumes being published by Routledge UK and South Asia. She is the Guest Editor of *Indian Literature*, a journal published by Sahitya Akademi, India.

Email: [sukrita.paulkumar@gmail.com](mailto:sukrita.paulkumar@gmail.com)

## **DUSTIN PICKERING**

### **Hope II**

**I erase the battleships caged  
in the heart of our mimicry.  
I cannot foster the flaming path  
where the mountains emerge  
and the song dies down.**

**Heights are sufficient for the plot,  
the conspiracy to shape time with a maiden's hand.  
Will it fit,  
or will I dance the starry magic into slumber?**

**A gloss forms over my childish eyes.  
The misery of genius climbs my empty gut  
and I feel the syringe of sympathy.  
In another world, somewhere parallel,  
the classless Satan of one field's battlecry  
emerges to shut the heart valve.  
My opinions fluster in the passage.**

**I feel the tumbling treasures of wistful nights ahead  
come deeper, darker, down the empathic ruins  
where the monsters are closing down business.  
My dream is swallowed by the last torturer.**

### **Hope IV**

**You say the catharsis is the poem.  
Reflection is the noun you involve yourself with,  
yet I carry the deepness within me:  
look, the splendor has walked away.**

**Like a Puritan in a wicked embrace,  
you surface with the emblems of talk  
engaging you bitterly.  
Hold my pressing welcome  
because the urgency is no longer lonesome.  
I feel the gravity of this situation.  
I am still hitting the slacker hour.**

**I have remained unstill, weeping, and my wishes  
are forgotten like prayers that god neglects.  
I do not care to disrupt myself.  
The hidden wreck is the truth of time.  
Never step backward into the past  
unless the mask you wear is pure white.  
Not even silver will face it.**

**The moment is seized, and thoughts  
are liquor to my eyes.  
I place you in a prison.  
You lock me in your favorite room.**



**Dustin Pickering** is founder of Transcendent Zero Press. He has contributed writing to Huffington Post, Café Dissensus Everyday, The Statesman (India), Journal of Liberty and International Affairs, The Colorado Review, World Literature Today, and several other publications. He placed in the top 100 out of 12,500 entries for the erbacce prize in 2021, and was a finalist in Adelaide Literary Journal's first short fiction contest. He was longlisted for the Rahim Karim World Prize in 2022 and given the honor of Knight of World Peace by the World Peace Institute that same year. He hosts the popular interview series World Inkers Network on YouTube.

## **PARESH TIWARI**

### **Confessional**

At eight, Mom brings home a set of crayons. Forty-eight of them stacked neatly in a cardboard box. I sink into the study chair. Relieved how easy it is to choose the right shade of bloodshot and bruise for the family portrait.

\*

There is a hole in the boundary wall. Teeming with carpenter ants. I bottle a few and bring them to my table. Hold their necks with forceps and pull out their legs. One by one. Once you pull out the fifth, they stop fighting the inevitable.

\*

I open my eyes as the streetlamp blinks in through the window. You are asleep next to me. Your skin, the colour of honey and warmth against the sterile bed sheets. I pick up the phone, steal another glance at you before typing, *thinking about you makes me hard*. I hit send.

\*

It worries me when I haven't wept for some time. Last night I willed myself to tears. I thought about us. Our mud-coloured bodies shaping each other. It is hot and muggy, the sky outside a deep shade of grey. And I am a voyeur watching salt leak around my eyes. You do not reach out.

\*

A poem could be a confessional. The blank sheet of paper a two-by-two box hewn from a dead tree. This poem, however, is an asylum. The words stacked up like bricks. Holding up a roof in the middle of a vast emptiness.

### **Cartography**

At thirteen, she understands how rivers are born. Spends the night clutching a bedsheet between her legs. When the fertile clay of her body breaks open, an ill-fitting bra is thrust her way. Spends weeks praying the breasts would go away.

A continent sprawling over a stretch of unbroken ocean, claimed by many, she knows she has to learn about borders and boundaries.

There's a peace treaty on the cut of her hair



*follow the mountain ridge of shoulder*

*blades*

An armistice over the length of her skirt

*cover the forest growing out of your ankles*

A ceasefire over the neckline of her blouse

*the school bag will soldier your bosom on  
bus rides*

The shape of her claim changes with time. Sometimes, she mourns the surrender of her voice.

At sixteen, she learns to travel. Her fingers walk for miles over the unfamiliar trails of her own body. Spends the night strangling a strain of desire.

**Pi**

the noise in the store is a knife carving skull skin flesh bone a Rorschach of lavender  
citrus pine a molt of touch sweat breath that just wouldn't fade

the way 'different'  
rolls off his tongue  
rain rain . . . rain



**Paresh Tiwari** writes his poems sitting by shuttered comic bookstores. His first readers almost always are the mongrels of his street. Readers can find his work imprinted on fallen leaves and passing clouds. And if that seems too esoteric, his poetry books are available on Amazon.

**PATY LOPEZ**

Translated by **KIRAN BHAT**

**UNI, TSEBETIK**

**ANTS**

Woman,  
it is with your voice that you tumble  
the spirits of misery, the repugnant repressions of valour.  
With what bravery  
your lesson inflames us,  
seeds to our courage  
footprints to your vision.

You tremble the earth with your wisdom  
you tumble the shadows of the hidden

you give light to the village

Your rebellious energy  
is the beating heart of our people

and we will never forget it.

**ANTS**

Ta xvay li ak'ubale  
xvilet li vaichile  
tsobol k'ucha'al ik' ta vilel.

Te'etike ta xbaj yanaltak  
xkuchoj lekil k'op ti yanale  
ts'ibtabil ta ya'lel satil  
ya'lel satile ta xk'atbuj ta ch'ix.

Sbeoal vaichil  
li mal k'ak'ale ta xts'ain  
tse'imol jch'ul me'tik  
tse'imol ants.

## **BIJILAL**

**The bloom  
responds not to the echoes of the wind  
nor to the flow of the words  
nor to the flutters of the butterfly.**

**Wisdom  
is a seed,  
and it blossoms with the heart.**

## **YSILAL K'OPETIK**

**What the heart knows becomes one with thought,  
then becomes handwritten with love  
over night and days.**

**On each dead leaf  
and on each fresh green  
are the different colours of seeds.**

**A garden of words;  
from the distance comes your perfume,  
announcing the start of spring.**

**You travel across the world  
covered in phrases  
adventuring  
to all of the souls of our countries and their places.**

## **KUXULUN TO**

**Don't be scared,  
little girl,  
just walk ahead,  
following your destiny.**

**Open your eyes  
open your mind  
cultivate your words  
so that your aroma can spread  
to every village, to every land.**

**Stitch together dreams  
that never limit your path,  
climb to the top of the great mountain.**

**Let your heart tell you  
to never feel fear,  
little girl.**



**Kiran Bhat** is an Indian-American author, traveller, and polyglot. He is known as the author of *we of the forsaken world...*, but has published books in five different languages, and has had his writing published in journals, such as *The Caravan*, *The Bengaluru Review*, *The Kenyon Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *3:AM Magazine*, *SOFTBLOW*, and many other places. He has been to 150 countries, lived in 25 cities in the world, and speaks 12 languages, but currently lives in Mumbai.

**Paty Lopez** is a Mayan poet born and brought up to the Yutniotic community of San Juan Chamula, Chiapas.

TRANSLATED BY **NABINA DAS**

From:

**ARISE OUT OF THE LOCK**

**50 Bangladeshi Women Poets to Commemorate the Golden Jubilee of Bangladesh**

**Curated by Alam Khorshed, Chittagong Arts Complex, Balestier Press, UK, 2022**

**RAHIMA AKHTER KALPANA** (b. 1962)

**Ten Haiku**

1.  
early morning  
little snails  
drink dew drops
2.  
migrant bird's flight  
like the hunter's arrow  
clouds turn red
3.  
in the dead of night  
silence gets sawed  
by a voice
4.  
merry chatter sounds  
candles light up party hall  
I burn alone
5.  
on the sea shore  
spread out a long beach  
home is here
6.  
little jasmine blossoms  
in children's mouth  
two tiny teeth
7.  
unknown flower  
blooms even in neglect  
in matchless glow
8.  
split wooden logs  
sawed down trees  
the market is nigh

9.  
slow-moving snail  
travels a long way  
there's no looking back  
10.  
this black waterfall  
the night sleeps  
in my beloved's hair

**Nabina Das is a poet based in Hyderabad.**



## **SUHIT BOMBAYWALA**

### **Two ghazals with the phrase: *Tryst with Destiny***

1.

**Hail, midnight hour! Hail risks of destiny  
Steel veins sang the tryst with destiny**

**Blood-red soil sprouted soft, pink blossoms  
Our hybrid present spoke the gist of destiny**

**The momentum of longing hurled us skyward  
That August promised us bliss of destiny**

**Young India escaped gravity's straitjacket  
Desi-nauts in topis rode oil slicks of destiny**

**That midnight's contrails still light our hearts  
Take, Suhit, take a votive sip of destiny**

2.

**Find Baba's children scattered by arrows  
Return Mohandas slain in Kurukshetra**

**A prideful king dismantles dharma  
Tricolours tint the rain of Kurukshetra**

**Unbroken Panchali wears unlawful statutes  
Bailiffs peddle lies in lanes of Kurukshetra**

**Let hate or love anoint your fingernail  
A tryst with destiny awaits the plains of Kurukshetra**

**Come armistice, Suhit, we'll have light and mirth  
Our songs will toast the losses and gains in Kurukshetra**



**Suhit Bombaywala's fictive and factual writing appears in Indian and international publications and anthologies, including Guernica, Litro UK, The Penguin Book of Indian Poets, and Hindustan Times. Twitter/X @suhitbombaywala**



## SREETANWI CHAKRABORTY

### Edifices of shadow

Edifices of shadow stood long on the drenched highways,  
Some long shadows visible on flaky planes,  
And a few short ones on the parched highlands.  
Serrated, cropped shadows jostled for love,  
Bigot shadows remained in one crooked corner of the mountain,  
unmasking the heathen skin of the peaks.  
Some shadowy patches were marching in a straight line,  
with placards in their mutilated hands, placards that spoke of  
bloodstained stoves and umbilical cords,  
exhausted daughters, and wives with husky voices, who disappeared and never  
returned.

The last few edifices sat under the tree of *amaratva*,  
Singling out cards from a stack of myth in the city-scavenger's sack.



Sreetanwi Chakraborty is an Assistant Professor in Amity Institute of English Studies and Research, Amity University Kolkata. She is also the chief editor of a bilingual biannual journal *Litinfinitive*, with multiple indexing of international repute and archived in 240 global libraries. She is a bilingual writer published in *Ekdin*, *Uttarer Saradin*, *Setumag*, *The Darjeeling Chronicle*, *Darjeeling Times*, *POL*, *The Dhaka Review*, *The Daily Bhorer Alo* (Bangladesh), *Muse India*, *Kochi Post*, *Kavya Bharati*, *Asian Cha*, *Poetry Potion* (SA), *Poetry Conclave* and many more. She has read her poems on invitation by the *Sahitya Akademi*, the *Chandrabhaga Poetry Festival*, the *WB Kabita Academy*, *Samyukta Poetry* and many more. Her book *The Sleeping Beauty Wakes Up: A Feminist Interpretation of Fairy Tales* received the 'Rising Star' non-fiction award in New Town book fair in 2019. She has two sole poetry books and is an invited poet to 18 anthologies. Her recent work includes 'Rhododendrons', a novella, 'Of Dry Tongues and Brave Hearts' (Anthology, English, Red River Publication) and a translated short story in an anthology of Kazi Nazrul Islam's short stories, a project from Kazi Nazrul University (Orient Blackswan).

## **SANKET MHATRE**

### **Fraction**

The sleight of a moment beckons  
When you stand with pointed toes  
On the fulcrum of a golden sunshine  
Where the toe touches red earth  
are roots, thousand years old  
Awaiting your entwined mind  
No longer are chirps stranger  
Neither are smiles,  
Eyes that glance with the smooth flutter  
of a hummingbird signal illumination  
Even the last leaves wave high  
Content that their last breath  
Could be your first  
The other half of a moment  
Is a bend that leads to you  
Uncertainty turns into thousand  
dreamscapes of possibilities  
The moment ensconces your feet  
When you walk into the day  
Awaiting the next turn.  
This fraction was always written  
on your palm.

### **In the memory of a memory**

You cannot be held by strong hands either  
You will dissolve at the first hint of fingers approaching  
Pass away like steam;  
or escape like desert sand between fingers  
You wouldn't show up so easily on a radar '  
or blink like a hotspot  
Rendering all satellites useless.  
There's no point declaring you 'Missing'  
because you'd shape shift  
wear the mask of the city  
Come close to my breath and I still wouldn't know.  
No search party can now retrieve you  
For you have self-declared: Disappeared!  
I last spotted your faint outline in our conversations  
as you were retreating in a hurry.

One pedal on a full-stop  
another on a restless earth of a turning page.  
I find you in tiny shreds of memories  
flagpoles of truth and self-fulfilled prophecies  
between a song and two memories  
Memory One: When I cut through chaos and took you in an embrace.  
Like a sudden poem that falls on a beating heart.  
Memory Two: When you whispered in the crowd, "You are only mine."  
The heart trembles when  
your imprints vanish from the face of shores  
though temporarily  
until you fix the universe yet again  
with your laughter and silence, the perennial show of ebb & flow.  
Like spring wrapped in a delicate Gulmohur,  
not wanting to come out of its petals  
I find you stuck somewhere between a half vacant sky  
and a hotel-roof in far distance.  
Poems, verses, prosody, meter, cadence and alphabets  
call you in the wind.  
The lost cavalcade of a seer.  
But still,  
you wouldn't know  
because you are somewhere  
in the bedsheets of a single page.  
In the memory  
of a memory.



**Sanket Mhatre** is a very well-known bilingual poet writing in English & Marathi. He has curated Crossover Poems – a multilingual poetry recitation sessions that unifies poets from different languages on a single platform. Apart from this, Sanket Mhatre has been invited to read at Kala Ghoda Arts Festival, Poets Translating Poets, Goa Arts & Literature Festival, Jaipur Literature Festival, Vagdevi Litfest. Besides curation & recitation, Sanket Mhatre has also created Kavita Café – a Youtube Channel that combines cinematic vision with visual poetry.

# **SANJUKTA DASGUPTA**

## **WHO AM I**

**Stately, perpendicular  
Peripatetic, free flow  
Jig-saw puzzle  
In bits and pieces**

**Gymnastics and gyration  
When and where  
Which 'I' is in play  
The Chess player  
Immersed in  
Subterranean identities**

**Ideologies, Ideas  
Fixated, flexible  
Churning wildly  
Mismatched  
Chaotic I-entities  
In a dizzying whirlpool  
Virtual fantasies  
Real so Unreal  
Split, fractured  
Shards and labels**

**I stand tall  
I bend double  
I in trauma and trouble  
I playfully remain  
A blundering bubble  
Between Here and Hereafter**



**Sanjukta Dasgupta** is an Indian feminist scholar, poet, short story writer, critic and translator with twenty-one published books to her credit. She is Professor and Former Head, Dept of English and Former Dean, Faculty of Arts, Calcutta University and has been the recipient of a number of fellowships including the Fulbright postdoctoral fellowship and Fulbright Scholar in Residence grant, Australia India Council fellowship, and the Gender Studies fellowship grant, University of British Columbia. She has been invited to participate in conferences and has taught/lectured at universities in the USA, UK, Europe, Canada, Poland and Australia. She is the President, Executive Council, of the Indian Poetry and Performance Library, ICCR, Kolkata, and the Convenor of the English Language Board of the Sahitya Akademi, India's national academy of letters. Her recent awards include the IWSFF Women Achievers Award, Kolkata (2019) and the WEI Kamala Das Poetry Award (2020).

## **SONI SOMARAJAN**

### **Feynman Lectures**

Just bored pupils plotting progress  
of a light disobedient,  
as the summer hummed next  
to our ears, minus the optics—  
not Caltech, nor freshmen,  
nor being taped for posterity either.  
Through triple-slit windows,  
the light barrelled in, not brute force  
with a booming bellow,  
but a patrol of photons punching  
past in an angle of spread.  
That Monday, we didn't argue  
about what roles they'd play,  
whether particles or waves—  
their neat double-life trick.  
But something came pretty close  
to the famed lectures:  
dressed in angelic whites,  
you floated before the classroom,  
your sermon of lorem-ipsu  
a drone fleeting past.  
In fits and spurts, I daydreamt,  
time-flitting, here, there—  
a graph plotter gone berserk.  
Then bell rang, you walked out,  
the fist-pumping smirk in tow,  
and I'm left there dazed,  
physics having made no dent,  
wondering like a poet  
if light and lightness are related,  
sharing those five letters et al—  
a possible pedigree.  
Years on, in a Lancashire accent,  
the brilliant Brian Cox explains  
light is always lightness at zero.  
And then, he loses me.  
I go off on a tangent predictably  
as if I could care less  
about the speed of stuff,  
how I can instead shed the weight  
of such inexplicable things,  
and inch closer, much closer

to an old window from long ago,  
to a light that was just light  
or maybe even a furred thing—  
claw and teeth, a low mewl  
for less than half a moment,  
springing from the sill  
into the quadrant of blackness,  
at once an airframe of fire.



**Soni Somarajan** is a copywriter, editor, and content consultant. His poetry and writings have appeared in *The Bombay Literary Magazine*, *North East Review*, *The Four Quarters Magazine*, *The Bangalore Review*, *Muse India*, *Kitaab*, *New Indian Express*, *Marie Claire*, *Madras Courier*, *The Alipore Post*, *Bengaluru Review*, and four poetry anthologies — *Witness: Indian Poets Define Dissent*; *Open Your Eyes: A Climate Anthology*; and *The Yearbook of Indian Poetry in English 2020-21 & 2022-23*. An alumnus of the University of Iowa's IWP Advanced Poetry Seminar 2013, he read his poetry at the Hay Festival Thiruvananthapuram (2010) and the Bengaluru Poetry Festival (2022). Soni was the Creative Director at *The Quarantine Train*, a poetry collective, and is currently an Associate Editor at Yavanika Books. *First Contact*, his debut poetry collection, was published by Red River in 2020.

## **Fiction & Non-Fiction Section**

**Editor: RONALD TUHIN D'ROZARIO**



**Ronald Tuhin D'Rozario lives and writes from Calcutta.**

**His stories, poems, and essays, have been published in many national and international online journals and in print, including – Cafe Dissensus Everyday, Narrow Road Literary Journal, The Chakkar, Kitaab, Guftugu, Madras Courier and other places.**

**Ronald says "After we ended an hour-long Zoom meeting with our Managing Editor, Rochelle Potkar and decided on the theme of this issue -- "Language - isms: lost and found"; for the next one hour I sat silently questioning myself -- What does language mean in this fragmented world of Alexa and AI Chatbot? The pedagogy of language has evolved over the generations from harvesting the school's library to Google's text-to-speech synthesis and more recently the Google Bard. And alongside, it kept updating the abbreviations too -- turning many words into a shorthand of speech.**

**Moreover, the language of emotions too has reshaped itself in the form of emoticons that takes care of every reason and mood very easily. As I write this, I watch the stress ball wearing a happy face emoji -- looking at me from the other side of my bed. I shop for my expression.**

**I have always considered language to be something intimate and deeply sacred because it has been the tool for me to -- pray, read and write, seek help, and express**



love. But, after all the years of belief and practice -- gradually I started to understand that -- language has much more to offer.

I realise that, perhaps, this is the reason why it creates an urgent need in others to ask us for the preferred language or languages we know -- in every document which requires us to put in our details. The moment we fill it in -- we immediately create an invisible network with all the people who have familiarity with it. It reminds me of the tagline of the Hutch advertisement -- "Wherever you go, our network follows."

Almost like a ritual in the family -- we are born inheriting the mother tongue. And later as we grow up, like a product's need for good packaging to heighten its sales -- we consume many other species of languages for the validation of our -- existence, belongingness and familiarity with the province. And yet, in the end, amidst a multitude of chaos of language-isms, we seek a home in the language of silence when overwhelmed. And maybe, just maybe -- it works as a visa in making us appear 'neutral' to the rest of the world.

Eight wonderful writers have come together in this section --

Nishi Pulgurtha, Sahana Ahmed, Subrata Barman, Sucharita Dutta-Asane, Babli Yadav, Barnali Ray Shukla, Rakhee Pant, and Bhaswati Ghosh and have shared their narratives in a profound way which would leave every reader moved.

Each work has explored the theme from a unique perspective that opens the doors to whole new thoughts and beginnings. In greater depth, they explain how words and wordlessness seemingly become a medium of communication where -- Language is personal and language-ism turns a political discourse very often.

In this conspiracy of language-isms -- while I write this editorial from the Fiction & Non-Fiction section of Caesurae MANA, I try to build a relationship between you and me immediately to assure you that -- each section in this entire issue is going to return you with something worth having and a few things may just stay with you even for a long, long time. This issue is emotionally very close to me and the entire editorial team of Caesurae MANA has invested everything to put it together."

FICTION

**NISHI PULUGURTHA**

**Sounds**

An unknown number flashed on my mobile screen. I looked at the flashing light for a while and went back to doing what I had been doing. The water simmered for a while. I looked at it as I waited. Time to add the tea leaves. I needed that cup of tea. Darjeeling, the shop keeper had said, "You should try it. I am sure you will like its flavour." The shop sold only tea - leaves dust and all. As I spoke to him, the smell of tea filled my senses. The wooden caskets arrayed together in that small shop at the corner where the road turned to the left. And Mohon babu, all knowingly, would rattle away details. He knew my taste in tea. There was competition close by – another shop selling tea had come up a little further down the road. It had a fancy décor and looked jazzy. On my way home from work I did notice it a few days ago. It was good to see new ventures coming up, more so given the times.

I opened the cupboard and carefully looked at the mugs. I preferred using each one of them at various times of the day. Liked the variety. I picked up a transparent glass one. The colour of the tea looked so nice when poured in. The wooden coaster on the table was hidden under the books. I looked around for another one. Anita Di had given me one from her holiday in the hills. It had a miniature in the Mughal art school style done on it. Cup on it, I began to read for a while. The tea did taste great.

The mobile screen brightened up and flashed again. I answered the call from the unknown number. "Listen, I need to tell you something. It is my son's wedding in September and you must attend it."

It took me a while to identify the voice A familiar voice now rendered unfamiliar. "Congratulations."

"You must come. The wedding is in Jaipur. We are all getting our tickets."

"September is a long time away. Given the times we are in how does one plan that ahead," I said. What else could I say. It was true too. The pandemic had made things so unsure. It was just the month of January.

That was Ruby Di on the line. She was older to me by a few years. We fell apart three years ago. She turned away at a time when I needed support the most. Choices that one makes, I think. I was surprised that she called me after all this time and insisted I attend the wedding. The tea in the cup had gone cold. I gulped it down and went into the kitchen. The kitchen window opened out into an empty open space. Beyond that was the boundary wall and beyond that were two apartment complexes within one enclosure. From the first floor window of the building on the right jarring music could be heard. Montu was learning to play the guitar. His parents had got him one sometime during the pandemic and those jarring noises came in almost every day. As if someone was determined to force out some music. I always felt there was some element of force while he played on the strings. Montu's

examinations must have been done. I smiled as I washed the cup and laid it to dry. "Why did she call and insist?"

I went back to my desk and opened the laptop. The black words looked back at me I did have quite a number of mails to attend to. It is still work from home for me. The firm that I had been working with for the last five years was still not calling us back to our desks at the office. I had to log in at the right time and be available online for work. Work it was for most of the day. But then there were moments of respite. Gita had a baby this morning, a message popped up on the screen and messages flowed on for a while. Some cheer in dreary times. She seemed to be a nice person and had joined the firm as assistant just before things turned awry as the virus took over our lives. I had never met her it was always online, but it felt nice talking to her.

That phone call was still bothering. For over three years we had never interacted. Those troubling months, those sleepless nights, that trying to pick up strewn pieces, a little at a time. I had always thought of Ruby Di as an older sister, a good friend. How wrong I had been about people. Why did I trust so blindly? Was I a fool?

The sound of a bell alerted me. I could hear shuffling steps for a while. "ki holo dada?" I could hear Sumitra's voice faintly. Had it been some time earlier I would have jumped and gone to check. These days I didn't. I knew Sumitra would attend to Ankur. A meeting was on as well. I could not leave it and go away. More sounds in response that reached me and then some gentle music.

Ankur loved to listen to music. He must have called out for that. It soothed and calmed him. After the stroke he only communicated by ringing the bell, a few hand gestures and the blinking of his eyes. It was music that had brought us together. We had been new recruits, just out of college. The training and projects had moments of respite when Ankur would break into a tune. We would all huddle to listen. We had been on a trip to Santiniketan, a few of us colleagues. This was about after six months of joining. That night, we gathered around the bonfire, the conversations and drinks flowed as did the music. Mitali sang beautifully, Hemen had brought his guitar too and the atmosphere was crackling with song, fun and energy.

The gentle nip in the air, the clear sky, the diamonds twinkling in the distance. It seemed as if time would stop, freezing this moment when all of a sudden Ankur stood up, cigarette in his hand and came close. I looked at him, he smiled and sat beside me. He moved closer and put his hand on mine. I did not say anything. A few days ago I had mentioned about my crush on him to Priti. Did he find out about that. Why couldn't Priti be quiet? We sat like that for a while. Dinner was announced and we had to go in, the staff had to get some rest. I couldn't sleep all night and woke up early in the morning. I walked out into the beautiful garden. That is when I realized Ankur was there. He said, he couldn't sleep too. We walked about the garden talking. About six months after that we got married in a small ceremony with just our family and close friends in attendance.

Music flowed and we tried making it a part of our lives as we struggled. Work hassles, transfers, our parents' problems, their failing health. We managed to be located in the same city after a couple of transfers. The day I got a call from his office saying that he had fallen sick was like any other day. It had been some years that both our sets of parents had decided it was time for them to leave. We fell back, as we always did, to each other, to our music. Books were another important part of our lives. Ankur's father had a wonderful library that we had inherited. A small room, stacked with books, a small table and a couple of chairs. I had added a mattress and a rug, some cushions to add more space to relax and some colour as well.

That call changed my life, our lives. It was a long, endless stream of hospital visits, diagnostic tests, physiotherapy sessions, speech therapy session, medicines. I make it a point to take my medications regularly and keep in touch with my therapist. Ankur was home after a fifteen-day hospital stay. He remained confined to the bed mostly. The stroke had robbed him of so much. He is in bed mostly, the wheelchair close by for his strolls through the rest of the flat. At times Sumitra props him on the sofa with some pillows for support. He tries to help himself as Sumitra struggles. When I put out my hand he tries to reach out and slowly hold on. These days he holds on for a little longer. As I sit beside him and the music plays on I notice a hint of a smile. Sumitra takes him into the small library and places the book in his hand. He looks at it and reads. The page has to be turned, he waits for it and reads again.

As I log off work and move to where he is, he looks at me, a gentle nod acknowledges my presence. Sumitra goes into the kitchen as we sit quietly and the strains of the sitar play out. All other noises are cut off. Our conversations are on.



**Nishi Pulugurtha** is academic, author and poet. Her publications include a collection of essays on travel, *Out in the Open*; an edited volume of essays on travel, *Across and Beyond*; two volume of poems, *The Real and the Unreal and Other Poems*, *Raindrops on the Periwinkle*; a co-edited volume of poems *Voices and Vision: The First IPPL Anthology* and a collection of short stories *The Window Sill*. Her recent book is an edited volume of critical essays, *Literary Representations of Pandemics, Epidemics and Pestilence* (Routledge, 2023). A volume of essays written during the pandemic, *Lockdown Times*, and a third volume of poems is forthcoming. She is the Secretary of the Intercultural Poetry and Performance Library, Kolkata and is member, Advisory Board, Alzheimer's and Related Disorders Society of India, Calcutta Chapter

## SAHANA AHMED

In Conversation with Grand Prix du Film Nominee **MIA CHOWDHURY**

*[Tell us about Eitch.]*

That's eitch: H for hello. That's what my grandmother called her husband. Hello. She wouldn't utter his name ever. If you say your husband's name, she said, you take away one minute of his life. That was unlike her, such mawkishness, but then again, she was filmi. In her presence, my father turned Hello, my uncles turned Hello. So much hello, hello, but we had no phone. We had no plumbing or electricity either. It was a pucca house, but we lived in a slum.

*[What were your earliest influences?]*

I was almost born in a cinema hall. My grandmother must have dragged my mother to the theatre, she was not going to miss the "Star of Tomorrow" Arun Govil was going to be the next Rajesh Khanna, and Dadi loved the pictures to the detriment of her own well-being. Everyone in Keshtopara knew that.

*[Go on.]*

It was mostly a Muslim neighbourhood. The only Hindus I remember were Ghosh, the postman, and Lalon, an usher at Uttara. Uttara Talkies was walking distance from our house, by the Bhagirathi. We had to pass a haat full of Sarf, Coglete, Viks, and Sanslik. The lane had a mazar too. The instructions were to avoid the shopkeepers and say a salaam to the tomb. There was graffiti on the walls. Till I was five, that's when Indira Gandhi passed, I thought the palm of Congress was the hand of God.

*[So, you were born in Uttara?]*

No, no, not so dramatic. The nursing home where it happened was on the other side of town. Details are sketchy, but Mom tells me they could not find a bed and she delivered me on the floor. I don't like that, so I don't prod, but I do enjoy the part where Dadi tried to kill me in the womb. That makes me feel like a child of destiny or something.

*[Like Krishna...]*

See? The Krishna of Keshtopara. That's befitting! Anyway, somewhere across the Ganga was a burning ghat. It was rumoured to be a hub for tantriks. A couple of them were seen at our doorstep the day Mom fainted. She was in her second trimester, and Dad had rushed her to the hospital. He had later had a huge row with his mother when he had discovered a pouch of sindoor behind his desk. That was one of the rare times my grandfather had yelled at his wife. Honestly, I can't picture him doing that. He was benign, always smiling, his beard like that of Tagore. Intellectually, of course, he was a has-been. Once slated by his bosses to go to London, a freak accident had landed him in a clerk's chair. Slumped in his Jeanneret,

half-drooling, invalid, he depended on Dadi for everything. So, the act of throwing a “Nonsense!” at her was nothing short of mutiny.

*[You dedicated Eitch to your grandfather...]*

Yes, he bequeathed his books to me. His PK De Sarkar, for example. Whatever I know of language and life comes from that book. The text, of course, and my grandfather’s turquoise notes on the margins. He had the most beautiful penmanship.

*[Ever thought of writing a book?]*

Yeah, maybe I’ll write one about my grandparents. Sad geriatrics are literary gold. I’ll dedicate it to Dadi -- “The woman who wanted me dead.” Funnily, she never read anything. When I got my first byline, she asked me if I had written a film. The movies and Rafi, that’s all that mattered to her. She danced to *Yahoo!* at my wedding. What a hoot.

*[Any backlash...?]*

No, she was an ally. When I told Sue about the Hello directive, she thought I was kidding. But she understood what a big deal it was for Dadi to accept us. Whenever Dadi was around, we called each other Eitch.

*[You were accused of indecency.]*

Yeah, and blasphemy.

*[Elaborate.]*

See, my mother was a Syeda. My grandfather was a very pious man. Being in a relationship with Sue was one thing, to make a film about it was unthinkable. They tried everything from threats to fatwas to social media lynching.

*[You are hardly seen on social media. Is that the reason?]*

Flexing on Instagram is not my jam. My work should offer my portrait, I can’t compete with dolly birds. It’s a losing battle, TikTok is brutal, and I don’t want salacious speculation on how much salt I put in my chai.

*[Salt...?]*

Why, you don’t? Anyway, who am I to judge?

*[Don’t you think social media will allow you to reach more people?]*

I do have a presence. I prefer that people who are familiar with my work visit my posts. I cannot make myself interesting for strangers. Anyway, to be intimate with artists is never not disappointing. I am not your friend, sorry, and I cannot influence you.

*[But you can.]*

Correction. I can, but I don’t want to. Please watch my films. The content is there.

*[You are seen as an activist.]*

I want to create awareness about representation. Diversity and inclusion, these words pop up everywhere, but let's be a little more concrete. We need to have the tools to talk about things. Can we communicate with our children? Are we refined enough? Do we have the frameworks? I'll give you an example. We have the Bechdel test to check how we portray women in fiction. We have a test for Muslims too. I want to qualify LGBTQIA+ stories. In film and on the page. Are we on top of the rainbow?

*[How do you propose to do that?]*

We can measure this through three questions. Does the story have a main character who identifies as gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex, asexual, or questioning? Two, is there a main character who deals with issues related to the community? Three, are these issues central to the plot?

*[An actress recently made a homophobic remark. She said OTT is full of gay lesbianism.]*

I know who you're talking about. She is better than that, and I think she is just trying to stay relevant. Dadi used to like her when she was new. In fact, more than she liked Hrithik. Dadi thought Hrithik was Tom Alter's son...

*[Kaho Naa... Pyaar Hai? That's a new one! Tell me, what do you think of nepotism?]*

Aah. See, I have no say in how producers spend their money, whom they invest in, but I do have a problem if someone is entitled enough to not value their opportunities. It can be anyone, not just a nepo. Look at Hrithik, that man still works hard. I mean, do your homework! Don't come to the sets to learn. Don't waste our time. We outsiders don't get that luxury. People said *Eitch* doesn't feel like a debut film. But I couldn't afford to bring anything but my A-game!

*[There's chatter about an Oscar nod.]*

Well, I have my speech ready. I know whom not to thank.

*[Well, you do have naysayers. Critics say your work is too simple.]*

What is simple? Simple is damn hard work! Scorsese said that. I am mindful of the budget and the production value. I have a different grammar. If that makes me sharp, I'll take the compliment. I am a minimalist. Not in the sense of removing everything from the scene, but in keeping only what is needed.

*[In the tradition of the Nouvelle Vague?]*

Not really. It would be lame, no offence, to be clubbed with a movement that old. I do what I do out of necessity. I am all bare bones.

*[Your stark imagery evokes poetry.]*

Thank you. Who said this -- maybe Nietzsche, or one of his lovers? Step close to poetry, never into it. I try.

*[What's a tip for aspiring filmmakers?]*

I'll borrow from Sue. Awareness, authenticity, and application. Remember these. For life, I'll share what my father says, "No bets, no debts." Stay practical. When in doubt, play Rafi.

*[You are still close to your roots.]*

What can I say? I'm trapped in the louche world of Bollywood! When I was little, they made me believe that Mr. Bachchan would meet me if I ate my veggies. Imagine. That's the power of cinema. Oh, and by the way, another tip. Do watch *Le Ballon Rouge* if you haven't already. Remember Lalon, from Uttara? He cried when he saw it -- the veteran of Jeetendra bops! His son works with me now. He is my key grip.

*[What next? What are your plans?]*

To live long enough to become an auteur. To not live so long that people tire of me. Timing. Life is all about balance and timing.

### Glossary

filmi: someone who is obsessed with films, typically Bollywood; Dadi: paternal grandmother; haat: market; mazar: shrine or mausoleum; tantrik: occultist; sindoor: vermilion; Syeda: an honorific title borne by female descendants of Muhammad



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## **SUBRATA BARMAN**

### **Distance: A Connecting Experience**

In the depths of an unsettling night, a torrent of emotions surged within me, overpowering my senses. The absence of her comforting presence beside me was unbearable, leaving me overwhelmed and rendered speechless. Tears flowed freely down my cheeks as I tried to make sense of the tumultuous mixture of happiness at seeing her and the agony of her absence. "Sorry, Jayita," I managed to utter, my voice choked with emotion. "I couldn't reach out to you for the past two days. My mobile was completely drained of charge."

Jayita, her face stained with tears, appeared visibly distraught and anxious. Her voice trembled as she questioned, "What happened?"

It had been two days since we had laid eyes on each other. A profound event occurred in the world during our short time apart. The ominous whispers of a new virus had reached my ears—Coronavirus—a peril that had swiftly spread throughout China, transforming into an epidemic. While it offered some small comfort that its mortality rate was lower than previous viruses such as the Marburg virus, Ebola, HIV, Hantavirus, and SARS-CoV, its rapid transmission sent shivers down our spines. We had learned that it spread through airborne droplets, prompting medical professionals to emphasize the necessity of wearing masks.

Although the virus had not yet reached Indian shores, a sense of foreboding loomed over me. I knew deep in my heart that it would not spare us easily. The moment I received news of our Prime Minister initiating the evacuation of Indians from Wuhan—the very epicentre of the virus—an undeniable sense of impending danger washed over me.

Before the impending lockdown, in the tranquil embrace of one fine February evening, we made plans to meet on our university campus. The atmosphere was gentle and comforting as if nature itself conspired to set the perfect stage for our encounter. The wind danced around me; its caress was akin to a delicate feather tickling a newborn baby. As dusk settled in, a newborn moon shyly emerged in the eastern sky. The harmonious symphony of chirping birds still resonated in my ears, painting a serene backdrop to the unfolding scene. And then, amidst this ethereal setting, her presence beckoned me. It was her enchanting fragrance that tugged at my senses, compelling me to turn and behold her approach. Clad in a captivating pink full-skirt with creamy-white dress, she seemed to emanate a certain allure, as if she had intuited my fondness for that particular shade. The wind toyed with her earrings, causing them to sway in rhythm, while her lustrous black locks playfully veiled one eye. With measured steps, her gaze fixed upon mine, she drew nearer, her timidity apparent. Although we had spent over a month conversing through the realms of social media, the prospect of our first encounter rendered me bashful as well.

Adorned with a mask as a precaution against the virus that had originated in China and had begun to spread within the confines of India, I wondered if she would

recognize me. But as she arrived and extended a formal handshake, a curiosity lit up her eyes. "Why are you wearing a mask?" she inquired, though well aware of the rampant spread of the virus. In response to her unspoken request, I unveiled my face, exposing it to her enchanting smile—a smile that mirrored the heavens themselves, radiating warmth after an endless drizzle.

The day after our second meeting at the café, Jayita had to return home. We had eagerly anticipated spending the upcoming Holi festival together, and we had even set a date for our next rendezvous once we both returned from our respective homes. The longing to celebrate Holi with my family burned intensely within me, but fate had other plans. Burdened with a multitude of assignments, I found myself unable to make the journey.

Then, one fine Sunday morning, as I sat before my laptop, savouring my coffee, the concept of quarantine and lockdown thrust itself upon my consciousness. The news unfolded before my eyes like an unexpected earthquake, leaving me shaken to my core. It was decreed that I could not return home, as all modes of transportation would cease operating for a gruelling period of 21 days.

Those twenty-one days became an interminable cycle, stretching out endlessly before me. Time itself seemed confused; its motion elusive after fourteen days had passed. I resided in a modest rented house near our university campus, equipped with a solitary bed, a single table, a bookshelf, and a few basic household items. As soon as the lockdown was announced, I dialled the number of the hotel from which I often ordered food for delivery. The response from the owner was laced with a hint of despair. "Sorry to say, but due to the prevailing circumstances, we are unable to continue our home delivery service," came the sombre reply.

My mind spun into a frenzy as I contemplated how I would survive the coming days without sustenance. I lacked a gas oven and cooking utensils in my room, leaving me utterly helpless. Somehow, I managed to cook rice in the electric kettle I had purchased for brewing coffee. Boiled dal served as a meagre accompaniment. However, with each passing day, the monotony of my diet dulled my taste buds, leaving me feeling disconnected from the very sensation of flavour.

After an arduous month had elapsed, the second phase of the lockdown unfolded, and the government finally turned its attention to the plight of the workers. It was the very same government that had orchestrated the rescue of Indians from China, yet it took over a month for them to address the concerns of the workers left stranded. On a fine Tuesday morning, I awoke to the melodious symphony of birds twittering outside my window. Their song, once nearly silenced, had returned to life after thirty days of pollution-free respite, not just in India, but throughout the majority of the locked-down nation.

After seeking counsel from my father, I decided to return home alongside the workers being rescued. The following morning, I embarked on a long trek towards the nearest train station, approximately 14 miles away, as no means of transportation were available. Along the desolate roads, I encountered numerous labourers, old and young, and women with children, all making the arduous journey. About four or five miles into my walk, I struck up a conversation with a man named Ramakrishna, who

happened to be heading in the same direction. He disclosed that he worked in a factory, recounting the unfortunate circumstances that had brought him to this point. I was taken aback by his fluency in English as he spoke, and I couldn't help but ask, astonishment evident in my voice, "Are you certain you're not joking with me? You work as a mere laborer in the factory? Or is it possible that you hold a higher position, perhaps as a manager?" He smiled at me, a glimmer of amusement in his eyes, and replied, "No, sir, I am but a humble worker there. It was sheer luck that dictated my circumstances." Intrigued, I implored him to share his story.

Ramakrishna proceeded to recount his journey, explaining how he had come here in search of work. He had graduated with a degree in commerce, but fate had dealt a cruel blow when his father suffered a heart attack just as Ramakrishna was preparing for his first-semester exams. To save his father's life, they had exhausted every means possible, even selling their land. As the sole son among his mother and two sisters, Ramakrishna shouldered the responsibility of his family after his father succumbed to his suffering three months later. His dreams of higher education were eclipsed by the weight of familial obligations, forcing him to embark on the path of labour to sustain his loved ones.

While we waited at the crowded train station among thousands of weary workers, Ramakrishna handed me a packet of sliced bread along with a bottle of water. Grateful for his gesture, I attempted to offer him money in return for the food, but he adamantly refused, his eyes reflecting a hint of hurt. "Does that mean you can't consider me your friend?" he questioned; his tone tinged with disappointment. I immediately comprehended his sentiment and promptly withdrew the money from his vicinity. Sitting opposite each other beside the train tracks, we began to savour the slices of bread. It was then that Ramakrishna's curiosity got the better of him, and he inquired about the girl he had glimpsed in my purse when I had retrieved it to offer him money for the bread. Blushing, I smiled and replied, "Her name is Jayita." Ramakrishna returned my smile, his eyes filled with warmth as he asked, "Is she your beloved?" Unable to contain my joy, I smiled coyly and proceeded to share the story of Jayita and me. I recounted how we had initially connected on Facebook, followed by her enrollment as a junior student at my university, and the delightful moments we had shared during our two dates. I had always believed that true friendship didn't require an extensive period of time, but rather an instant connection. In Ramakrishna, it felt as if I had found an old friend with whom I effortlessly felt at ease.

After a hectic half-hour of jostling for seats on the train, we managed to secure two single seats for ourselves. As my 14-hour journey commenced, a surge of anticipation coursed through my veins, despite the gnawing hunger that plagued me. The wind, breezing in through the open window, carried a sense of nostalgia from the dusky westward horizon, triggering memories of the evening I had spent with Jayita—the gentle sway of her earrings, the cascade of her hair dancing in the wind. I vividly recalled how her cheeks turned crimson after devouring the spicy panipuri, tears welling in her eyes. That particular evening, as I retired to my room after bidding Jayita farewell, my phone rang, and it was her on the other end. There was an unspoken message in her hesitant silence, in the urgency of her breaths cascading

through the speaker. In that profound moment, I shattered the silence, uttering the words, "Yes, I Love You, too."

As the train's wheels created a steady clickety-clack rhythm, and the gentle breeze whispered through the open window, Jayita's face consumed my thoughts, effortlessly erasing any awareness of the passing time. Lost in my reverie, I was abruptly jolted back to reality when Ramakrishna tapped my shoulder, calling out, "Wake up, Joy! I brought some roti. Let's eat." Opening my eyes, I was met with a warm smile on Ramakrishna's face as he presented me with two roti accompanied by chickpea curry. It was well past 10 pm by then.

Emerging from the washroom, I noticed Ramakrishna engaged in conversation with a man around 40 years old, seated beside him, holding a bowl of rice adorned with potato curry. We all began to eat together, sharing in the simple nourishment. Ramakrishna graciously offered the man two roti, and gestured towards me, suggesting that I take another. As I had already eaten my fill, I politely declined, saying, "No thanks, I'm already full. You guys carry on. I'm going to use the washroom." With a smile, I grabbed my toothbrush and toothpaste, a nightly ritual I maintained even during my travels.

Upon my return from the washroom, I found Ramakrishna and the man, Harihar, engrossed in conversation. Harihar, a construction worker, had experienced three days of agonizing hunger, surviving solely on water and two packets of biscuits. He had spent his nights under a bridge alongside hundreds of other fellow workers until an organization extended a helping hand, providing them with food and shelter. Ramakrishna shared his hardships, recounting how he had spent four nights surviving on packaged bread and biscuits. He had relied on the kindness of others who shared their rice but lacked the means to cook it until a compassionate neighbour lent him a pan. Ramakrishna had sought refuge in a dilapidated primary school, where he and twenty-five other workers found solace amidst their struggles.

As I disembarked from the train at the station near my home, a sense of heaviness hung in the air. Ramakrishna remained unusually silent, while Harihar embraced me tightly, bidding me farewell. I noticed a solitary tear glistening in the corner of Ramakrishna's eye, mirroring the unspoken emotion welling up within me. Though we exchanged no words about it, the unshed tears spoke volumes, a silent acknowledgement of the impending likelihood that we would gradually forget one another. In this bustling world, where reminders are scarce and contacts easily fade, it seemed almost inevitable. Perhaps that was the reason for those quiet tears. Despite the idealism often associated with long-distance relationships, we understood the inherent significance of physical presence in this fast-paced, materialistic realm.

Jayita, perceptive as ever, inquired, "Are you crying?" I mustered a melancholic smile and replied, "I don't know." After engaging in a two-hour video call with Jayita, a testament to the modernity that bridged our distance, I reluctantly bid her farewell, promising to call her the following day. As my mind drifted back to the train journey, lost in its absence, I found myself murmuring once more, "I don't know."



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## SUCHARITA DUTTA-ASANE

### These tongues that grow roots

It is a big room. Its red floor, sloping roof and tall windows fringed by trees gives the illusion of an island, and she, its only inhabitant. But she is not alone. Sitting in a circle with her are so many voices. Each, a story. Each with so many stories.

They speak. She listens. They speak in many tongues. She listens with many ears. Many skins. Many limbs. She listens with eyes wide open. She sees the words spread around her in their myriad shapes. Some flat. Some rounded. Elliptical. Jagged. Others fill in the corners, segue into the shapes, shape-shift. Amoeboid. She watches. Listens. In her mind, she fills the blanks, inserts question marks. Unanswered questions will drift into her sleep and keep her awake.

When they disperse for tea, she walks among the trees, teacup in hand. Phrases, sentences, broken-off-in-the-middle idioms, metaphors, endless verbs that drop into sentences, for karma is inevitable. Adjectives that reveal their own stories.

She stands under a gigantic banyan and lets all that she has heard and seen spread their roots. Taproots, aerial roots, fibrous, creeping, tuberous... She feels them dig their way through her mind, her heart, take hold, spread themselves, hold on to her tissue, turn her into a tree. She feels her limbs elongate, entangle, leaves sprout, buds bloom. She dips a twig into her tea, brown in brown, its woody earthy flavour against her palate. Ah! This is a different one, different from the textures she has tasted. But she warms to it, like to unfamiliar music heard in solitude. This story she can hold in the palm of her hand, in the hollow of her cheek, at the tip of her tongue. This she can shape.

Then they return to the hall. The young journalist, her head shaven, *in protest*, she informs, talks of the turmoil in her state. She breaks down, a word at a time. She lets the tears flow freely, then wipes her cheeks and eyes and carries on with the presentation, her voice firm. She wants action not speeches. *The time for talk is long gone. What are you willing to do to solve this problem?* The question hovers in the room, palpating, echoing.

The window panes darken with tree shadow and dusk. She listens to the voices and watches the shadows sway with the breeze, through the soughing of the leaves. Soon it will be her turn. What will she speak? How? With what vocabulary? Borrowed idioms from those who have spoken before her? The new locution of protest and resistance that she has learnt and which sit on her mind in a tangle of roots and leaves and flowers and seeds and bark and earth? Or will she cast a new seed? Will it be hybrid or native to her? How will she decide? What is native to a storyteller?

Someone nudges her. *Your turn*, they say. She looks around the room. The roots slowly disengage, withdraw excruciatingly slowly. She digs long-nailed fingers into the soil they loosen. Her nails will carry away the mud, but that can always be cleaned, she thinks. She takes her time, watches those who have preceded her. She

breathes in, out, in. She holds her breath. At her fingers, a discarded broken seed, or perhaps only its shell. She clutches it, breathes out. This will do.

*I'll tell you a story.* Her voice is soft, hesitant. The story hasn't revealed itself to her. But she can see its mist from a distance, like watching rain come in from afar. Her thoughts take shape and form and substance. Slowly. Sometimes they crumble and fragments slip away from her to other people. She watches the fragments drift: catch like burr in someone's hair, like morning dew on a brow, like familiar fear in another's eyes. She watches her story, and all the stories in it, come together in the centre of the room. They see, too. Each from their own place in the circle. They wait for her to finish.

*It's yours for now,* she says and watches them, their eyes like deer in the headlight's cone.

\*

Deer in the headlight's cone. You remember the phrase. You used it for your photograph, the one in which you are a 17-year-old. The one in which you are still under your mother's thumb. In her shadow.

*You're my shadow, my extension,* your mother had said.

How was that the language of love, you wondered even as a teenager.

*Deer in the headlight's cone?* Your daughter, now a teenager herself, had scoffed. *Mom, that's just so OTT,* she had muttered and left to meet her friends, letting the wind slam the door shut. You'd winced but you are used to the noise of slamming doors. Your mother did the same when you were late from a party or came home with your hair not tied but blowing in the wind, or when you quietly did what you wanted to. That, too, was the *language of her love*, she said.

Why did you think of the deer in the headlights today? Why, when surrounded by so many expressions, utterances, so many different narratives, did that image come to you?

You take the photograph out of your purse where you carry it always these days. You're 40 now. In the photo you are 17. When you look at it, you want to protect that young self, to distil life for her, plug those ears and unplug to let in new sounds, those that speak of pure love.

*Sentimental tosh,* your daughter often tells you.

Your eyes stare back at you and you don't know what to do with them. You turn towards the mirror. Your eyes are clear. Your eyes her eyes. Same, yet you know that nothing is the same. Those eyes speak of a time you struggle to remember, but you remember how upset you were with your daughter's dishevelled hair as she left for school. Your hair was always neatly tied, the photograph is proof of it.

Look! How even the ends of the ribbon are pulled tight in a neat bow. No one ties ribbons these days. Not in this way, at least. *I would have flung the ribbons away,*

your daughter said one day when she found you staring at the photograph. *Not so easy*, you reminded her. She shrugged, already losing interest in the conversation.

And then you remember that ribbons were compulsory for those with shoulder length or longer hair. You covered at the rebuke your teachers flung at all of you, sharp as the scissors they threatened to whip out. You remember, as you stare at your 17-year-old self, how terrified you were of having your hair chopped in front of the class.

Is that what you see in your eyes in the photograph? Actually, your mother was more terrifying than your teachers. Rules began at home with no space for dissent.

Dissent is not the slamming of doors. Neither is love, for that matter. Dissent is choosing your battles. Dissent is courage. Dissent is its own rationale, noun and verb, emotion, condition. To your mother, dissent was akin to heresy, her control over your life a religion in itself. And so, you argued with yourself. Your arguments gambolled in that vast playground of the mind with no one to call them home or banish from the drawing room.

There was role playing of course. In your mind, you were your mother and you were you. You knew her arguments and you knew yours. You would cycle to and from school, then to and from college, arguing on your own behalf and on behalf of your mother.

At home, sitting across the table, talking to her, you would say all the right things, all that she liked to hear, complying, conforming. The thoughts that you wanted to express, raced, tumbled, swirled inside that closed space, unuttered, unheard. And later, standing up to wrap up the conversation, when she caressed your hair or patted your shoulders, you curled up inside your head – the foetal position is the most comfortable, comforting, somebody had told you.

You stare at the photo. 17. Raw. Innocent. Troubled. You run tender fingers across its face, eyes, hair, forehead. You tease the outline of the lips to see if a smile would appear, magically. You draw lines along the hairline. Tenderness wells up in your heart again. You want to mother your younger self. Hold her in an embrace that doesn't smother.

You rejected that smothering embrace, but your language was different. Not loud, not vocal. Quiet. Simmering. Not proactive. Reined in. Looking back, you feel as though someone is stifling you. Your throat and neck in the photograph suddenly sprout finger marks and you are desperate to peel off the invisible fingers. No body ever hurt you, or raised a hand against you. Such a pampered child, everyone said. They didn't see the invisible fingers, though, did they? Or the words that dripped honey smooth but steel-encased off your mother's tongue, the tightness in her tone?

Someone is stifling you but it is not you. Your younger self has nothing to do with you. Yet, you feel bereaved. As if at lost time, unvoiced feelings.

You pick up the photograph and hold it to your heart. Balm for the past, from the present. Whom do you console? For what? What is this emotion that rises in your throat and fills up your eyes? What is this terrifying tenderness you feel for the young girl frozen in the picture? You are mother to yourself and you don't know what to do



with this new role. It makes you restless, anxious suddenly. You cannot comprehend it. You don't have the language to breach time.

\*

Dreams breach time. I dream of words dissolving in water. I see a lake. Beyond it, the ground fissures – supine lines waiting for the lake to water them.

*Be careful with what you say, mother warns. Only listen. That will stop you from damaging yourself.* In my dreams, mother stands taller than she did in life.

In my dream, water overflows from the lake, breaches the bund, and starts trickling into the cracks. I see all that we have spoken and heard through the day, flow out of the red-floored hall and mingle with the water, dissolve and seep into the ground.

I have flown across two continents to arrive at this tree-fringed venue from where I see the lake that has flowed into my dream. It's been many years since my last such engagement. I wanted to fly out of my own mind and enter those of others, those I don't know, those who belong to geographies not my own, not familiar to me, not part of my stories. I have flung myself into this open space of conversation and cogitation among journalists, activists, migrants, refugees, seekers. Who doesn't seek? It's what we seek, that changes, constantly, variously.

I have come armed to listen, not to speak. To collect and scatter seed pellets for the ground. Not to till the ground but to let it grow its own crops. To wait, to see what the ground yields.

Look! Saplings will sprout from those watered vents. In my dream, each trickle is a tongue and the tongues grow roots, spread under the ground, hold one another through the soil across gardens and forests and dug-up hillsides. Will these tongues forget all those roots and remember only their own?

In my dream, I hear the young journalist talk of her hometown caught in a vortex of violence. I see fires hissing through villages and houses. And I see women. Running naked across the fields. Who chases them? They are shouting, those women. Bleeding screams from their mouths, eyes, vaginas. And then, a lull that sinks, suddenly, into a hush – dense, heavy.

Where are those women running to? To whom?

Behind them, the land turns desolate, barren. The lake vaporises. From it, plumes of cotton-ball smoke rise into the air and mingle with black smoke from the fires.

Behind the women running into nowhere, the land cracks.

The words we had scattered have not borne fruit yet, have not spread roots, have not held hands with one another.

The women are in front of me. I can see their faces again, their eyes. They are saying something but silence sinks into my ears, unearthly, thick like mountain fog.

The fog lifts, gives way to sounds. I wake up to voices hurtling against one another outside the room.

I hold the door ajar and peep out.

**In the corridor, somebody has left the television on. I watch, trying to make sense of the clamour.**

**On the screen, panellists argue about your rape and my rape, your violence and mine.**

**I shut the door and my eyes.**

**The women's naked screams spill out of my dream and seep into my skin. On my tongue, they lie heavy as augury.**



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**Her short story collection *Cast Out and Other Stories* was published by Dhauri Books in 2018. It was among Amazon's "Best of Summer from India, 2018" and was reviewed widely, including in Sahitya Akademi's Indian Literature, Sakaal Times, Business Line, Usawa Literary Review, Scroll, Asian Cha, Indian Express (Pune Newsliner), among others. *Cast Out and Other Stories* is part of the Indian Institute of Human Settlements' (IIHS) library selection, Bengaluru.**

**Sucharita received the Dastaan Award (2013) from the Pakistan based Papercuts Magazine for her short story 'Rear View' and the Oxford Bookstores debuting writers' award (2nd) for *Jungle Stories* (2008). At present, she edits the prose imprint RED RIVER Story and edits fiction for *The Bangalore Review*.**

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## **BABLI YADAV**

### **A Song of Silence**

The cat rested in its position for a while. Her body, like a pillow that had found its shape; neck stretched, eyes in meditation, glaring profoundly at the ceiling. In response, the ceiling stared back, first in confusion, then to understand and finally, to give in.

Little by little, seeping light began to paint the walls of the dark room. As if departing sun, crossing the road, offering whatever was left of its shine. The ceiling, even though closest in proximity, could only see now, what the cat saw thus far. A fish hooked on to a lampshade. Bulb space rented out to the eye of the fishing hook.

The night moved cyclically; in darkness, then brightness, albeit unseemingly.

Arsh woke up from her dream with a certain heaviness in her head. As if a lover had held her head gently, making it shed weight, sink sideways, slowly, into the cup of the hand... then sudden jerk, hand gone, head plunging in air; not hers, not his.

Like most mornings, at 5 am, tears came to Arsh effortlessly. Like most mornings, she did not interfere with their flow. A river within, dammed for years, finally released. Finding its flow, each day; every moment of the day. Some days were a quiet sit down by the riverside, some involved fighting the current and surviving, some drawn aside for a gentle swim.

It was Day 12 of her silent meditation program. Words of her familial language made little sense to her anymore. It was a mutual decision to take a break and since finding a new language suddenly felt like a rebound, the language of wordlessness, soundlessness, perhaps, even thoughtlessness felt like an interim respite course.

Weeks ago, Arsh's life felt noisy, dry, unmoving like the early April air in her city. Stillness was the familiar language that the leaves, clouds, days, and her heart swore by. Heat outside and within. Hence, the hills.

She had packed her stray life and stray thoughts in less than 60 minutes and had begun her journey to the Eastern Nilgiris. The Sholas had spoken to her last year when she was there; a gentle promise of a revisit.

While packing her bag for the 14 days silent meditation program at a retreat in the hills, she reminisced her last year's barefoot walk in the forest, passing by trees; some erect, some broken and fallen, some chopped neatly with eerie-sounding wood cutters, some exposing their naked roots. It was the start of the monsoon and pale pours had begun to make love to everything around. The soil that still clutched onto the naked roots, stiff trunks of Rudrakash, Mahogany, Bishop Wood, alike softened

by the tiny hugs of moss life, leaves ripe from adulthood, without the worry of the autumn to come.

Little did she know then, six months down the road, she would find herself walking in the Nilgiris again. To her surprise, the day she arrived, the town of Kunnur had been taken over by the Jacaranda canopies. Spread sparsely, without the blooms, the high-headed trees would have been barely a reality. But now, every atop her eyes went to, there was a dab of purple to sight. Much low-lying were the red poinsettias, blue hortensia, orange and yellow marigolds.

That day she had felt a little air return to her lungs, just how the migratory birds return home after a long separation.

Apart from her, there were to be 9 more participants at the retreat. She would not know who, from where, why. One of the primary rules expected them to avoid all kinds of human contact. Including looking into others' eyes and acknowledging their presence. No cell phones, no books, no futile attempts to connect with another through words spoken or written. No place for meandering thoughts, fleeting, or staying. A strange experiment for her restless soul but she was drawn to it, and that was enough.

Their days were nothing but fixed. Except for the compulsory hours of meditation and chanting of sounds not words, opening oneself to the earthy life around, going close to one's callings and instincts; erasing more, exploring less. Looking within.

Old ways of communicating, of dressing one's mind, of seeing, comprehending had to be burnt down before finding newer avenues to observe and interact with.

To Arsh, it felt like being naked, fully clothed-on. So much shedding and self-pruning before allowing newer stocks and stems to spring up. She felt there was not much to lose either. Until there was.

Arsh's many afternoons were spent by a little rivulet. Surrounded by trees and rock formations, it felt like being inside a lit-up cave system. Dark, warm, cosy; in-hiding. The tall tree canopies ensured that only the choicest streaks of full sun entered the premises. Only for a while. There was no place for permanence in nature. Everything spoke in soothing silences. As if her mind had muted all feed on its wall, on purpose.

On the 13th day noon, while sitting by the flowing water, Arsh encountered something extraordinary. She saw in front of her, a forest grown out of nowhere. This forest, white-washed in the backdrop, had vines hanging in the air. Giant blue flowers with beige borders, in full-bloom. Thick stems with colour of leopard's skin with faded-pink leaves. The vine tendrils gave an impression of a chameleon's tongue looking for its prey. Umbrella-like seed pods homing the future within. Squirrels in all their suppleness made love to its fruits and nibbled on their tender skin. And then she saw a giant snake, swirling in a Sema dance, aiming for the blue flowers. The snake's skin was like cat's fur, white and soft with occasional brown. She

wanted to scream out of overwhelm; how else could she contain this sight unfolding in front of her eyes. But that would have meant breaking her vow of remaining silent, within and outside. The former, she certainly was not.

Each day brought to her a unique experience. How they say, when you shut down one sensory tool, all others heighten. Choosing to abandon the language she inherited at birth was her move to escape the obvious, mundane and cliché world that she had gotten ankle deep into. Then of course, there was her work that expected her to be an accumulator of words, meanings, synonyms. Her mind had begun to frame sentences like a machine, even in deep sleep.

This meaningless, absurd, dumb existence right now, was heaven.

She closed her eyes in prayer and began collecting sounds instead. Tribal women's footsteps on dry mulch as they inspect the area for fallen, dry twigs. Fluttering wings hopping from one tree to another, faraway hisses, occasional splash of a big fruit in the rivulet.

And when it felt enough, she opened her eyes to collect scenes. Ears voluntarily closed with the placement of her palms. Miniscule drops of water trickling from her bottle's neck. Its source, a bigger drop meditating atop at the rim of the lid. Shadows playing a game of touch-and-go. Ants walking their way out of a thick moss colony.

This was her song of silence. And she was swimming in it.

On the last day, at 7 pm, all participants gathered under a moonlit sky. Circled around a forgiving fire, they sat close to each other, hand in hand. A silent prayer with eyes closed, and then they greeted each one for the first time with a kind look. They were to speak for the first time in 14 days; their silence was to be met with a pause, with utmost ease and slowness. If someone chose not to speak, that would be okay too.

When it was Arsh's turn — a deep, long breath — and then gently, like a river flowing upwards, her voice travelled, from her gut, all the way to her lungs, acknowledging the heart, touching the walls of her throat, eventually leaving the cave of her mouth. The breath whooshing a goodbye like wind leaves a whistle.

Arsh sung an ungrammared song;  
a spewed outcome of string-free letters she chewed decades ago.

*Hu-Ka-Ne-Suun  
Zoi-Ya-Ne-Pon  
Kri-Toh-Pe-Luun  
Voi-Ya-Ne-Ton*

*Meeki-Na-Kuriya-Pone  
Jhooni-Ka-Giriya-Donne*

**Laayi-Su-Keeno-Chaa-Me  
So-Naee So-Naee**

**Tears. Smile. Gratitude.**

**Glossary : Meaning of the song -**

**The moon tonight  
Only appears to be full  
But it's in pieces, within;  
Uncountable**

**Make no attempt  
To stitch up this poem  
For its thoughts too many;  
Incomprehensible**



**Babli Yadav is a 37-year-old freelance journalist based in Bangalore, India. She prefers being known as a writer of things (in Hindi and English), someone perpetually poetic, greenatic, moonatic. When not making small, slow and futile attempts at penning her thoughts, she can be found staring at trees. Or perhaps, watching cinema in a language that makes zero sense to her.**

## NON-FICTION

### **BARNALI RAY SHUKLA**

#### **Back Up**

She must have been in her sixties when I met her for the first time. The most striking feature, her eyes. Remarkable in their light born out seeing a lot of world, deep brown and amused. They had this molten quality and could shape shift faster than a gazelle's leap. She wore her anger like a rope ladder. Escape route when need be or else deftly can land in your day, provoking you to firefight. She wore her affection in smiles. All of this surrounded by worries when she would rather be surrounded by music, busy children and grandchildren. The time and space that protected her from this reality was good memory. She had made many, having left home at Silchar, the youngest of four daughters with a scholarship to the Bhatkhande College of Hindustani Music and Marris College of Music in Lucknow, in pre independent India somewhere post World War II. That has more memory packed into girl's early years, than many girls of those times.

Well into her teens and insulated from world outside that was seeing her as a woman growing into herself, and one day he saw her too. For her, this was finding a friend for life and a teacher, her future husband, united by the common fascination and mathematics of Indian classical music. They had found more than gharanas there, a ghar in the making with songs, accompanied by the tabla. A jugalbandi of voice and rhythm. That was how her memory had inundated her youth, married to man way ahead of his times, talent way too much to be compressed into pages of media. Memory by now was copiously storing the swinging sixties in her mind nourished by all that was Asian and even the Beatles were not unaffected by the music that her country was making.

These memories made her, lasted her the longest and made way for life, away from estranged moments about life choices. And no family strife could get in the way of her man rooting for a future with her, married to a string belief of how two new travelers in music could walk in sync. Few jobs and two bonny babies later, life was choosing to make way for her with doctoral in the offing, and that too with the tabla. An established male domain in the music in India and the world. She breached a glass ceiling, the shards may have hurt but no one heard the noise of any shattering, just the music.

She was by now growing to be a glowing memory for many and her sons were growing to belong to a tribe of their own, the younger one especially. The last leg of packing memory was when she represented the country in a foreign land as a representative of the community of music practitioners and an expert. This was a new high for the people of India and its music. It was also the time when her man and her sons would bring her lot of affection, pride and sleepless nights. They even got her daughters-in-law, the best carriers of memory, she believed. In their gene

pools, family recipes, chosen Gods, forsaken homes, primary fears and shared memory, perhaps not the best ones but the strongest ones.

And then a little more than a decade later we met, two months three weeks later I found myself married to her younger son.

Today twenty-five years later, while I am working towards a film script inspired by incidents that caught up with a mind losing itself to senile dementia, my approach is subaltern. The idea gathered around me, built itself from a mind gone special. Yes, you read that right. Of the years that the loss of memory was afflicting her, allow me to confess that the last two years were liberating. The algorithm of addressing of a mind living with pixels of memories fast going to the delete mode, know that it is time to recalibrate not return to sorrow of what could have been, I leave you with this scene from our home just three years before we lost her. I choose not to report this but illustrate a moment that changed the way I thought about senile dementia. The morning I learnt the power of not replying but responding. We spoke in Bengali but allow me English.

She: "Wait a minute Barnali, as far as I remember, the sea is nearby right ... and there is a beach not so far from here..."

Me: "Yes, that's right?"

She: "Is the oceanfront still there? And the beach... the sea...?"

Me: "Yes...they are there...exactly at the same place you left them ..."

Silence.

Moments later she broke into peals of laughter. This lasts forever.



**Barnali Ray Shukla** is a filmmaker, writer and a poet. Her writing has featured in the Indian Quarterly, Gallerie, Sunflower Collective, Out of Print, Kitaab.org, OnEating, Madras Courier, Bengaluru Review, Indian Ruminations, Vayavya, The Punch Magazine, The Brown Critique, Kaurab, Usawa Literary Review, Portside Review, Anthology of Contemporary Indian Poetry II, indianculturalforum.in, MODERN ENGLISH POETRY BY YOUNGER INDIANS (Sahitya Akademi), THE WORLD THAT BELONGS TO US (HarperCollins India), HAVE A SAFE JOURNEY (Amaryllis), SIDE EFFECTS OF LIVING (Speaking Tiger), HIBISCUS (Hawakal), OPEN YOUR EYES (Hawakal), THE KALI PROJECT (Indie Blu-e Publishing), CONVERSE: CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH POETRY BY INDIANS (PippaRann Books & Media), RIVERS GOING HOME (Indian Novels Collective & Red River Press), The YearBook of Indian Poetry in English 2020 & 2022 (Hawakal), Borderless (Singapore), Voice & Verse (Hong Kong), UCityReview (USA), A Portrait in Blues (UK), and Centre for Stories (Australia). She has two feature films as a writer-director, three



documentaries, and two short films, as well as a book of poems, **APOSTROPHE** (RLFPA, 2016).

Her new Hindi feature film, **JOON**, premiered in September 2022 in Bolivia, has bagged 15 awards so far at Bolivia, Brazil, Norway, Sweden, France, Japan, USA, Indonesia, UK and India. When she is not doing any of the above, she can be found trekking in the Himalayas. She lives in Mumbai, with her plants, parrot fish, books and a husband.

## **RAKHEE PANT**

### **The Condition of Being**

In the kitchen is a different story. It is filled with stark white light and the chatter of everyday things amidst the scent of freshly rolled out *rotis*. Out here in the balcony, thoughts stray like strands of loose hair (*spread out in fiery points-- glowed into words*) and stab without warning.

The neighbour's window is open. Music plays: a woman's voice over mellow cello. It meets the cawing of crows mid-air, clashes momentarily, then moves on. The tree before me has been invaded by crows. When the wind blows, they scatter like leaves. Dark, autumnal leaves that will (at)tempt life no more but leave (happily?). Will the tree mourn their loss? Shall they be remembered by passers-by whom they allured with their colours not many weeks ago?

The marauding crows fill the blue sky with their black wings and their relentless cawing. What do they seek? Does truth escape their gritty claws too?

The day surrenders. Night catches it mid fall

As if nobody must know they exchange robes in secret, and secrets in whispers.

The moon has melted

been reduced to one half of a burnished ring

looking and lost in the empty sky

May it meet those marauding crows and may each seek what it is they've each lost, together.

The music still wafts in, a sombre exchange between kindred souls, without request or intimation; a spontaneous sharing of an unspoken, unspeakable mood born of the condition of being human:

Searing pain (it can hurt to breathe)

And ecstatic joy (look! The roses *have* bloomed!)

The crows will not stop their searching.

I wonder what it is the music says. The voice is wonderful, lingering but I can make no meaning out of its tuneful echo and I cannot help repeatedly glance at the girl in the window, at the dinner table, with feet (likely) propped up on a neighbouring chair. Her back faces me and I can only just make out the face that stares into the distance. I see the same stone buildings as her, the same grey of the sky now silhouetting the trees, the water of the pool below, losing its colour, gracefully. I need not wonder what she's thinking, but I do. Does she press her hands together? What desire does she hope to crush in them?

We're part-taking of the same feeling but her thoughts evade mine. The music between us is an invisible chord, connecting and distancing simultaneously. Someone

**begins to sing along. Tunefully, sentimentally. Other voices are beginning to join in and I'm afraid that our connection will break, snap like a fishing line stretched too far. What is it about the human condition that it must always experience love with fear?**

**The crows have gone. The colours have changed. Day is masked and night has come to stay. I turn to my tea. It transfers some of its warmth to me and I'm grateful. The world is cold.**

**I hold on tight to the cup in my hand. The tea in the pot is long gone, it can offer no further comfort.**

**Eventually I will get up and clear the tea things. My mind will move from the cold and the music to things I must plan and those that I must put away. These thoughts and the moment that accompanies them will break up, dissipate, fall away. The kitchen with its bright lights and the marking of time with meals will take me in. I sigh. The condition of being—but I can lay no conditions. I can only look at the opposite window, at the faint outline in the swiftly fading light, and breathing in the music one last time, turn to leave.**



**Rakhee Pant is a writer and teacher. When she's not entertaining her students with the eccentricities of the English language, you'll find her holed up in some corner reading or writing in her pocket book on the sly. The notes often morph into short fiction, poetry or featured articles, some of which have been deemed publishable by Reader's Digest (India), Parenthesis Journal, Narrow Road Literary Journal and Reading Hour among others. Her poem, 'Escape' was shortlisted for the Glass House Poetry Awards 2020.**

## BHASWATI GHOSH

### Translating Sunsets and Love

What are words but approximations? We say water, but can reading that word quench our thirst? We read someone is happy, but can the actual feeling of happiness be ever adequately conveyed in language? Or sadness? Language is but a vehicle -- of a culture, a place, an emotion. Every time we make a journey -- in time, space, within our minds -- words can feel insufficient in traversing the distance we did. *Lost in translation*, we sigh. But what if memory could retrieve what language on its own can't? I try to translate two "untranslatable" words, one from Arabic, the other Japanese, with my heart as the conduit that lived those words as if they were clothes on my body.

\*

*Samar (سمر), Arabic – Staying up late after the sun has gone down and having an enjoyable time with friends. Samar is also an Arabic name meaning 'evening conversations including Arabic music and poetry'. Samar in Arabic is a cognate of the Hebrew name Shamar which means 'to preserve'.*

A film song carries the  
background score of  
the hills and the

weight of its sunsets.  
An opacus swallows  
friends' Laughter.

*(From Sunset and Moonrise in Kumaon)*

It's the beginning of the last decade of the last century. I'm in high school and recently bereft of my grandparents in whose care I'd been growing up for the past fifteen years. With a single mother who has to journey across two ends of a busy Indian capital every day, the grandparents were my ticket to a happy childhood. And sanity, I realize after they're gone.

An aunt, my mother's work friend, almost an older sister to her, offers to take me to the mountains for a week. Her younger sister's family lives there, and she feels I could use a change of scene as I cope with my grief. I'm nervous about traveling without my mother; we're like shadows of each other, but my aunt insists I'll be fine. From Haldwani, the Himalayan foothills where her sister lives, we go to Nainital, the famous town set in a valley with an eye-shaped lake (hence naini-tal). It's pretty, but the tourist-rich lake town feels fake, showy to me. The next morning, though, everything changes. We take a bus and travel to Mukteshwar, a village about 50 kilometres from Nainital. Sitting by a window on the bus, I look out to mist-laden

mountains, valleys with terraced farms, tin cottages peeking out from hilltops. The expanse, depth and bewitching reality of the Himalayas makes me a convert for life. Mukteshwar, once we arrive there, seems to be the heaven we kept hearing and reading about as children but never thought could exist for real. We've come intending to soak in this peace for a couple of days. There are no hotels, and the pristine quietude of the place hasn't yet been marred by a cavalcade of city investors rushing to build home stays, The only accommodation available are hostel rooms left vacant by the students of the Indian Veterinary Research Institute, IVRI for short. An institute that cares for animals and offers a shelter to humans during the summer turns out to be the medicine my grieving heart needs. This isolation is what I've been seeking. Yet, unexpectedly, I find company that helps me appreciate the solitude while bringing me the solace that mere human togetherness can produce without exchanging a single word. Words, chained to the limits of human intellect and imagination, have no entry into this realm of silence.

A couple of IVRI students who chose not to go home during the summer break become our companion-cum-guides. They show us around the institute -- the tiny, fluffy hamsters that would become the unfortunate subjects of their scientific experiments, the giant refrigerator that can store things at temperatures as low as minus 65C, their hostel rooms. And they show us around outside the institute -- the deep, coniferous woods that keep the sky a secret and take you downhill to open every knot in your body. And some in your mind. One of the two students becomes quite close to our group, chats up with us, makes us feel at home in this remote mountain place. One evening, when the two friends lead us up the steep hills to a sunset lookout, I experience *samar* for the first time in my life.

Here, in this rugged unknown, distance  
is measured by echoes and breathlessness.  
The air crisps up and mists out in turns to  
trick smoky urban instincts. Steep footfalls  
weigh in laughter and pain in equal measure.  
Writhing bones attempt defying their  
stubborn biology, kangaroo-like.

(From *Nightfall in Mukteshwar*)

After covering the taxing trek our city limbs are hopelessly unfamiliar with, we restlessly huff to gather our breaths and settle down on rocky mounds to watch the sun go down. A long time passes with only a few words in the palpable presence of comforting company and occasional friendly laughter. One of our scholar friends finally sings lines from a Hindi film song. *Oh jaanewale, ho sake toh lautke aana | You who leaves now, do return one day if you can.*

My grieving heart is healed.

\*

*Koi no yokan (恋の予感), Japanese – The feeling of excitement you get when you first meet someone and know that you will eventually fall in love with them and are hopeful about being more than just friends. This is a more realistic version of ‘love at first sight’. Koi no yokan comes from 恋 (koi) is romantic love, and 予感 (yokan) roughly translates to ‘premonition’ or ‘hunch’, and roughly translates to ‘premonition of love’.*

It has been years since I’ve met a friend for lunch. My twenties, supposedly the ‘best’ years of one’s youth, have seen me struggle with anxiety, panic attacks, depression -- all undiagnosed, and mostly, all silent. Hence invisible. I alone know the weight of the turmoil that crushes me daily, that makes my mind a battlefield I’m exhausted fighting in and yet can’t leave. I want out, and somewhere deep within, I feel there could be an opening for me to escape the funk, but despite all the usual diversions -- a full-time job, a writing hobby, books and watching cricket on TV -- I remain trapped inside my own mind. Friends get married, have kids and start families. I remain resolutely single. Helplessly so. I step into my thirties, and after almost an entire decade of seeking, tiny flecks of light, the fraction of tungsten that blips just before a bulb fuses, seem to poke at me. It feels like there could be a way out of the tunnel of my mind after all, and hope is suddenly more than a four-letter empty word. For so long, I’ve resisted the idea of marriage only because of one reason. My deep, unresolved (unresolvable?) personal unhappiness. I know entering a relationship while I’m in this abyss would be a disaster embroiling at least two, if not more people. But now, in my thirties, with those flickers of hope, those nudges suggesting the possibility of liberation, I find myself considering the idea of marriage. Only hypothetically at this point, yet even this seems strange to me. I don’t say this to anybody, not even to my mother, my closest -- only -- confidante, but I become open to getting married if the right person comes along. Which is long shot by any stretch of imagination. I don’t have an active friend circle, am not a member of any dating or matrimonial sites, don’t socialize and find the anonymity privilege of online writing forums comforting. Two years into my third decade, I give up a full-time career and become a freelancer. And I begin writing a blog. The former gives me the freedom of time and flexibility; the latter, fellow blogging friends. One day, one of these friends comes to meet me at my house. This is the first time we’re meeting in person, although we’ve now known each other for nearly a year through our blogs and even collaborated on editing a book written by an activist friend.

B, my friend has his roots in Punjab, but lives and works in the IT industry in the US. That year when he visits his family, he wants to meet me. I invite him home for lunch, and my mother treats him to a scrumptious Bengali meal, complete with fish curry. He relishes every morsel of it. Before the meal, we chat over tea and he gives me a book -- his token of appreciation for the voluntary editing work I did. That afternoon, as I listen to this soft-spoken, erudite man, I sense koi no yokan within me. When he calls me back to thank me and my mother for the lunch, he gently asks if we can meet again, perhaps for coffee and lunch somewhere? I say yes with the intuitive knowledge of where this is headed. We meet in Khan Market, one of Delhi’s most loved commercial areas. B treats me to coffee, then a luxurious Chinese lunch at a restaurant named Side Wok. Our walks on the side walks of Khan

Market, where I spot avocados for the first time, the pun in the restaurant's name, our long chats and at the end of it all, B's request in his signature soft voice to click a photo of me as a keepsake -- each of these happenings thrum through my veins that afternoon. I know this stirring; I've experienced this before. This time, I want it to lead to a lifelong relationship, and I can sense B wants the same. Soon he's back in the US. We continue to stay in touch via online messengers and emails. "I think I'm falling in love with Delhi," B writes in a message. I understand what he means. Within a week of our in-person meeting, B asks if I would like to marry him. I say yes. Nobody can believe it; not even me.

That is simply how love works, I would realize in the years to follow. Coming on as a tenuous tungsten flicker, yet illumining the darkest thickets of your mind -- diffusing through and tearing apart, decades-old cobwebs.

By the first meeting, you were  
a sharat aakash -- Bengal's  
fluffy autumn sky. The clouds had  
learned to loosen up and glide  
over simpering grins and dreamy eye-locks.  
My heart you left with a norwester's  
tumult. What is love without a  
splash of melodrama?  
(From *Cloudburst*)

Glossary - Source for words [link](#).



**Bhaswati Ghosh** writes and translates fiction, non-fiction and poetry. Her first book of fiction is *Victory Colony, 1950*. Her first work of translation from Bengali into English, *My Days with Ramkinkar Baij*. Bhaswati's writing has appeared in several literary journals. She lives in Ontario, Canada and is currently working on a book on New Delhi, India's capital. Outside the world of writing, Bhaswati enjoys travelling during the winter months, especially across Latin America. In the summer months, she likes taking in bird songs and rabbit hops in her Ontario backyard, where her husband lovingly grows an edible garden every year.

## Translations Section

**Editor: BHARATI ANNADANAM**

**Bharati Annadanam was born into a family which migrated from its native land in the 1920s, and thus has the advantage of enjoying different languages at home, in school, in college and at the place of work. Being a natural polyglot, she glided effortlessly into the world of translation authenticated by a doctoral degree in Translation Studies. She has to her credit several translated stories and research papers published in prestigious journals and she continues to work extensively in inter-lingual literary translation from Indian languages to English.**



**Bharati says, "Adithi M. Kashyap's translation from her mother tongue to English has successfully retained the flavour and feel of Kannada, while also being extremely comprehensible to any anglophone who reads it. She has used footnotes very effectively and unobtrusively at the same time, and in the process has effortlessly brought the target text readers closer to the source text culture. In her translated version, one can easily see her admiration for the timeless writer, Bolwar Mahammad Kunhi. Anoushka Gupta has chosen a short story which is a commentary on some of the horrors of partition history. Being quite well-versed in both Hindi and Urdu, she has done justice to Manto's frank and unalloyed take on some of the atrocities of those times. She has translated this story to satisfy the compelling need to have a wider viewership for both Manto's calibre and for the telling remains of history. Both the stories have bridged time, space and language in their own ways."**



## The Partition's Echo

An Urdu Short Story 'Khol Do' by **SAADAT HASAN MANTO**

Translated by **ANOUSHKA GUPTA**

The special train from Amritsar left at two in the afternoon and arrived at Mughalpura after eight hours. Many were killed on the way. Many were injured and some were lost here and there.

At ten in the morning, Sirajuddin lying on the cold floor of the camp, opened his eyes to the chaos of surrounding men, women and children and the remaining of his ability to think and comprehend abandoned him. He stayed there, staring at the dark, cloudy sky for a long time. At the moment, there was noise all around in the camp but his ears were deaf to it all. If someone had seen him in that state, they would have thought he was deeply immersed in his concerns. But that was not the case. He was numb. His being was suspended into space.

While gazing aimlessly at the cloud, his eyes met the sun and sharp rays of the sun penetrated every fibre of him. A series of images ran through his mind; plunder... fire...chaos...bullets... train station... night... and Sakina. Sirajuddin stood abruptly and started frantically scanning the sea of people around him.

He scoured the camp for three hours, calling, "Sakina, Sakina!" But he could not find any trace of his only young daughter. There was uproar all around. Someone was looking for their child, someone was looking for their mother, another for his wife and daughter. Exhausted, Sirajuddin sat down, away from the crowd, straining his memory to remember the moment when Sakina parted from him. However, every effort to recall was thwarted by the image of his wife's mutilated body. He couldn't think further than that.

Sakina's mother was dead. She had died in front of Sirajuddin's eyes. But where was Sakina? Her dying mother had told him to leave her and to take Sakina and run.

Sakina was with him. They both had been running barefoot. Sakina's *dupatta* had fallen. He had stopped to pick it up despite Sakina screaming, "Abba Ji, leave it!" But he had picked the *dupatta* up... thinking of the *dupatta*, he looked over at the bulging pocket of his coat and pulled out the piece of cloth..., it was Sakina's *dupatta*... but where was Sakina?

Sirajuddin tried to strain his mind further but he could not find the answer. Had he brought her to the station? Had she been on the train with him? Had he passed out when the rioters forced their way inside the train? Had they taken her?

There were only questions in his mind but no answers. He needed sympathy. But everyone around him needed sympathy as well. Sirajuddin wanted to cry but his eyes betrayed him; dry from the lack of tears that he couldn't shed.

Six days later, when Sirajuddin was able to pull himself together a little, he found people who were ready to help. There were eight youngsters who had guns and a lorry. He blessed them and described Sakina to them. "She is fair in complexion and exceedingly pretty. She takes after her mother, not me. She is about seventeen years old, with big eyes, black hair, a thick mole on her right cheek..., she is my only daughter. Find her and God will bless you.

The youth assured Sirajuddin with fervour that if his daughter was alive then he would be reunited with her in a few days.

The eight youngsters tried their best. Putting their life at risk, they went to Amritsar. They rescued many women, men and children and took them to safe places. Ten days passed but they couldn't find Sakina anywhere.

One day, on their lorry, the eight volunteers were heading off to Amritsar when they saw a young girl on the road near Chuhrat. At the sound of the lorry, the girl started running. They stopped the lorry and ran after her. Eventually, they caught her in the field. She was very beautiful and had a mole on her right cheek. One of the boys tried to assure her, "Don't worry, are you Sakina?"

The girl turned even more pale. She didn't answer but when all the boys consoled her, her fear subsided and she admitted that she was Sirajuddin's daughter, Sakina.

The young men tried to take care of her in every way. They fed her, gave her milk and then helped her into the lorry. One of them even took off his jacket because she was feeling uncomfortable covering her chest with her arms, without her *dupatta* again and again.

Several days passed without Sirajuddin receiving any news on Sakina. He spent his days doing rounds at various camps and offices. But his daughter could not be found anywhere. He would spend long hours at night, praying for the success of those eight young volunteers. Who had assured him that if Sakina was alive, they would find her.

One day, Sirajuddin saw the youngsters at the camp, They were seated inside the lorry. Just as the lorry was about to leave, Sirajuddin caught up to them and asked, "Son, have you found my Sakina?"

Everyone said in unison, "We will, we will." And they drove off on their lorry.

Sirajuddin once again prayed for the success of the youths and his heart became somewhat lighter.

Towards the end of the day, Sirajuddin noticed some chaos close to where he was sitting. Four men were carrying a stretcher. Upon inquiring he found that a girl was discovered unconscious lying near the railway tracks. People brought her from there. Sirajuddin followed them. The people handed her over to the hospital and left. He stayed standing outside the hospital, hugging a wooden pole before he slowly made his way inside. There was nobody in the room. There was only a stretcher with a body lying on it. Sirajuddin moved towards it, taking small steps. The room

suddenly lit up. Sirajuddin saw the big black mole on her right cheek and shouted, "Sakina!"

The doctor who had lit up the room asked Sirajuddin, "What is it?"

"Yes, I'm..., yes I'm..., I'm her father," was the only thing Sirajuddin could utter from his raspy throat.

The doctor looked over at the body lying on the stretcher, He felt for her pulse and said to Sirajuddin, gesturing to the window, "Open it!"

Sakina's body stirred ever so slightly. With lifeless hands, she undid the knot and lowered her salwar.

"She's alive! My daughter's alive!"

The doctor broke out in cold sweat.



**Anoushka Gupta** is an English (Honours) graduate who is currently interning as a content developer at an AI-based tech company. In a classroom setting with twenty other students, she had her initial encounter with translation. During this time, she received guidance through an academic approach to grasp the intricacies of the art. It was in the same classroom where she was introduced to Manto's exceptional and sometimes, gut-wrenching writing. The words left unsaid in his stories were just as impactful as the ones he pens down. The partition changed the course of history and many prolific writers have succeeded in capturing its essence in their words. The tumultuous period of time, handed down through generations via literature, deserves to be cherished, transcending borders and language.

## The Shadow of Black Satan

"Kappu Kallina Saitana"

A Kannada short story penned by **BOLWAR MAHAMMAD KUNHI**<sup>1</sup>

Translated by **ADITHI M KASHYAP**

One Thursday evening, waiting for the benevolence of the Panchayat office workers to come and record the names of the poor, Adrama's grandmother, Kunhi<sup>1</sup> Patumma, afraid of making her fear and anxiety known to those inside, sat on top of the hut built on a hillock. Almost as if she was about to keel over at any moment, she sat at the very edge of the thatched roof, staring at the stone on the hill with wide eyes, which was located to the west of the Mosque, pressed in between a cemetery and a thicket of weeds. It offered anyone who climbed on top of it a view of half the Muttupaadi village. Even with such a view, it was quite the difficult task to spot Kunhi Patumma's single hut. If someone were to push the rough, round rock lying to the west of this stone, it was almost guaranteed to roll down the steep hill slope unobstructed for about two kilometres, soar over the orchard in its path and land in the paddy field a ways away; or, if it landed slightly to the right, it would definitely crush Kunhi Patumma's hut which lay under the shade of a Tamarind tree.

However, if one intently searched for Kunhi Patumma's hut from the stone on the hill, it would resemble a structure similar to what children usually build to play with. Similarly, this stone, primed to roll down at any given moment, also bore semblance to a Black Satan when viewed from her hut.

Any time now, the benevolent Panchayat office workers would walk down the path next to the hill, pass through the Lantana bushes, circle around the Devadaru<sup>2</sup> tree, and take down the names of the poor.

\*

It has been seventeen days since they expected the officers to visit. On the eighteenth day, the sun's rays passed in between the Mosque and the hill with the stone and laid an egg that symbolised good fortune for Kunhi Patumma's household. The bearer of this good news, Adrama, a fourteen-year-old boy, was walking down the footpath next to the hill, sweating while smoking a bidi. By the time he reached the hut, it was already time for the sun to set. The news he had yet to announce was so powerful that it could bring the dried twigs on the thatched roof back to life and simultaneously provide strength to all the poor households.

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<sup>1</sup> "ಕುಂಞಿ" - It has been translated as Kunhi keeping in mind the English name of the author which also has the ಞಿ akshara Bolwar Mahammad Kunhi (ಬೊಳವಾರು ಮಹಮದ್ ಕುಂಞಿ).

<sup>2</sup> The Kannada name for the Deodar Cedar Tree.

Saramma, Kunhi Patumma's widowed eldest daughter, was the mother of four kids, including Adrama. Kunhi Patumma's son, Kadar, had left behind his wife, Sakeena, and his daughter to flee to Bombay. The youngest daughter, Haleema, had now reached marriageable age. All these people surrounded Adrama as he announced the good news. Unable to believe their good fortune, they repeatedly confirmed the truth of this news.

The skinny old lady was trying extremely hard not to believe this news. With her old mouth interspersed with a few red teeth, she laughed loudly. "If I were as young as Adrama, I would have believed this news of obtaining one kilogram of rice with one aane<sup>3</sup>. Now, even if I sincerely believed that I would get one kilogram of rice for two rupees, people would think that I'd gone crazy."

Her daughter-in-law, Sakeena, laughed too. "Twenty kilograms per month for one house!?!? Unbelievable. Hehe, they would probably have to steal it."

Adrama turned bright red in embarrassment. He was on the verge of tears. He started yelling.

"I speak lies, right? Then what Foreman Naranna said was also lies? The entire branch is aware of this policy. Twenty kilograms of rice for one house per month, only for the poor. The Panchayat officers have already left to take down the names of such families. I am also not crazy enough to come here and spout lies. Those who don't wish to believe don't have to."

Suddenly, Adrama's mother, Saramma, shuddered in excitement, recalling the incident of farmhouse owner Puttaba Haji distributing rice to the poor on his mother's death anniversary.

"It might be possible, Umma<sup>4</sup>," she said, rescinding her previous words and rekindling everyone's hopes. "It has been a year since Indira Gandhi, whom we all voted for, died. Her son is the one running the government now. He might be distributing rice in honour of his mother. It's not like they are short of money."

Kunhi Patumma was convinced by Saramma's logic and accepted the validity of the good news her grandson announced.

"I am still unable to completely believe it," sighed Kunhi Patumma before walking to the pillar in the centre of the hut where an angry Adrama sat. Plopping down in front of him on her two feet, she pacified him and asked, "Who told you all this, mone<sup>5</sup>?"

Adrama turned his face away from his grandmother. He did not reply. The old lady tried again. "What did they say?"

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<sup>3</sup> Old Indian currency that is no longer in use. 25 paise = 4 aane.

<sup>4</sup> Umma is an Arabic word borrowed into South Canara Kannada from Malayalam.

<sup>5</sup> Word borrowed from Malayalam meaning "little boy."

**"I don't know," Adrama replied before storming out of the hut. During this time, the shadow of the hill was being cast beyond the path and merged with the Devadaru tree.**

**Kunhi Patumma sat still for a while. She had not let go of her suspicions regarding this unexpected good news yet. She prayed to Allah and promised Him that she would donate two rupees to the Mosque for the Urs festival if the news did turn out to be true. After making this silent promise, she calmed down a bit.**

**With her left hand on her waist for support, the old lady got up while exclaiming, "Allah!" She then turned towards Sakeena and said, "Give me your burqa. I'll visit the branch now."**

**At this point in time, Haleema, who was near the stove checking if the pot of boiled Ganji<sup>6</sup> had cooked properly, questioned her mother, "Why do you want to move around in this heat?"**

**The old lady felt a pang of pain for the youngest daughter, who, instead of cooking for her husband's family, had to simmer in the fumes of her family's firewood stove.**

**"If not me, who else will go? Do you think your dead father will enquire in our stead? If this news does turn out to be true, I will ask Naranna to register our names in advance. If we don't do this, that incident where everyone in the village except us got their ration cards and voting cards might repeat. In their hurry to note down all the names of the poor, the Panchayat officers might just end up forgetting about us."**

**Haleema was speechless. It wouldn't have been this difficult if her brother, Kadar, was still here. The runaway hadn't even sent a letter back inquiring about their well-being. Moreover, he hadn't even sent them five rupees to buy new clothes. Haleema worried about her brother's welfare and let out a deep sigh.**

**While wearing the burqa Sakeena returned with, the old lady suddenly felt angry.**

**"What is this? Why is this burqa torn near the legs? How can anyone wear this? Can't you even patch this up with a needle? Or, were you waiting for your runaway husband to bring you a new one?"**

**Sakeena, who was now sprinkling water on cut bidi leaves, felt ashamed. Seconds later, she started getting angry and put forth a string of questions.**

**"No one in this hut gives me enough time to do so. It's not like I'm lying around doing nothing. I toil day and night for the benefit of this household. I don't even have time enough to scratch my back. Why do you still discriminate against me? It's not like I incited your son to run away. All of us in this hut share the same burqa. Don't we all go to hospitals and festivals in this burqa? If we are not careful of sticks and stones in our path, it will obviously be ruined."**

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<sup>6</sup> A concoction made of rice gruel and starch.

Samma couldn't tolerate Sakeena's arrogant words any longer. "You need not be so rude. No one here is lying around and relaxing. It might be your burqa, but it was my brother who bought it for you. Hence, all of us have an equal right to use it."

Sakeena started crying. "You are free to tear the burqa and eat it since you also have a right over it. Next time, it'll be my dead body that'll step out. Feed my child and me some rat poison. Then, you all can live happily without us."

"Alright, alright, enough of this now. You are all just praying for me to die. Don't think of yourself as a victim just because you shed some tears." Saying this, Kunhi Patamma sat back down before blinking twice towards Sakeena's child.

"Your mother is not even as smart as you, child..." she trailed off before hugging the child to her chest.

Sakeena felt ashamed. She grabbed the burqa from her mother-in-law's shoulder and asked Haleema where the thread roll was. Haleema chuckled good-naturedly.

In just a short period of time, the nine starving members of Kunhi Patamma's hut shared the cooked pot of Ganji and licked it clean.

\*

That same evening....

*"Twenty kilograms per month for one house. One kilogram of rice costs two rupees. Everyone who cooks and eats from one stove is considered one family."*

Recalling these words Foreman Naranna said, Kunhi Patamma traced her steps back to the hut under soft sunlight. When she reached in front of the hut, she suddenly paused in her steps as shivers of delight raced through her spine. As if losing all strength in her legs, Kunhi Patamma slumped down the trunk of the Tamarind tree. She then roughly divided the hut in front of her into three imaginary parts.

Even when it was completely dark outside, she continued dragging her feet and making rounds around the hut. Her actions made everyone who spotted her feel puzzled. Finally, once all the kids were fast asleep, she gathered everyone together and disclosed her plan.

After listening to this plan that showcased his grandmother's unusual wit, Adrama voiced his support from where he was standing. His aunt, Sakeena, was also in favour of this plan. Adrama then promised to set off towards the nearby Kuntala forest and return with seven to eight bamboo pieces as part of his contribution.

Samma agreed to pawn off her sole possession, her silver anklet, to Sankappa Shetty's wife and obtain fifty rupees in exchange. Furthermore, Sakeena suggested taking down the bamboo mats separating the bathroom from the rest of the hut and using the same to put up new walls. She was inspired by her memories of her parental home and predicted that they would need fifty more mats to put up

another wall. The family also decided to bring back mud from somewhere nearby and make two new stoves. Kunhi Patumma herself decided to take charge of this task. To demonstrate his resolve, Adrama even swore on the Ullala Mosque to keep this plan a secret among themselves.

On a Thursday morning, eighteen days after these decisions were made, Haleema, who was rolling bidis outside the hut, was startled upon discovering four to five people descending down the footpath next to the hill with the stone. Sakeena, who sat next to her, tying red threads around the bidis, stretched her left hand towards Haleema out of habit. Seeing no response from her companion, she shifted her attention towards her. Then, spotting the people on the footpath too, she yelled, "They're here!"

One among the five, who was walking near the shadow of the Devadaru tree, was pointing towards their hut and murmuring something. Noticing this, both of them called out to Saramma, who was breastfeeding her child. At the same time, Kunhi Patumma, who was dragging her feet outside the hut, spotted these white-clad men coming down the hill and shivered in delight. To her, these men appeared like the messengers of God who had descended to aid them during their plight.

Kunhi Patumma gave voice to her suspicion. "It looks like they have finally arrived."

The old lady hurriedly rushed back to the hut. Panting, she instructed, "Sakeena, you occupy the right side. Saramma, you take the left and drag one or two kids with you. Turn on the stove and quickly boil some water. Since each stove is counted as one hut, it is not necessary for any of you to peek outside."

Giving the hut a quick once over, Patumma then asked, "Where is Adrama?"

"I've sent him to fetch some headache medicine for me. It has been an hour since then," Saramma replied, massaging her forehead.

Haleema sighed in relief. "Good. Our plans would be foiled if he decided to overact now."

As if meeting their silent expectations, those five men walked down the hill step-by-step and crossed the road separating them from the hut. Finally, they stopped under the shade of the Tamarind tree.

Haleema peeked outside from the gap in between the doors of the hut and started taking in the strangers' appearances. One was a beautiful youth whose face saw the beginnings of a moustache. He had parted his hair neatly and was dressed in a shirt and a pair of pants. Next to him stood a short black man with a sack. The third man was the Mullah<sup>7</sup> who was present while moving her father's dead body. Among the remaining two was a man who wore a turban. The last among them held a black bag in his hand. Who might these people be? She was unable to spot any of them holding a hardbound book. Where will they write down the names of the poor

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<sup>7</sup> Honorific title for the head of a Mosque.



households? It was not like they were the only poor household around where just memorising their names would suffice.

Sakeena's child, who was in front of the hut, watched these strangers with a mix of both curiosity and fear. The stranger with the turban approached the child, bent down to her height and asked, "Is your father home?"

Kunhi Patumma gathered her courage, put together her words and stepped outside.

"The child has not seen her father even once. When her mother was six months pregnant, her father ran away, leaving us all behind. It has been two years since then. He hasn't even sent some money back home for support. We need our food at least to survive until death knocks on our door, right? His wife is now making a living by tying bidis in *that house*." She especially emphasised '*that house*' and pointed towards the partition where Sakeena was with her right hand.

"Everything happens as God wills, bibi<sup>8</sup>," the Mullah said, acting sympathetic towards their plight. "Oh, the house looks new. Any special occasion?"

Kunhi Patumma's heart caught in her throat. The blood flowing in the crevices of her wrinkled face abruptly heated up and increased its pace. But, if she got frightened now, the family's eighteen days of hard work would go down the drain.

"Do you think something special can happen here? Our houses used to flood with water whenever it started raining. That is why all three of our houses decided to put a united thatched roof to avoid this outcome." Kunhi Patumma was very proud of her quick wit. She felt ready to tackle any other challenge they threw at her.

"This place has three houses?" questioned the youth in pants, wide-eyed.

"Yes, son. Is there a concept like living together in this day and age? We've split up to live in whatever land was available to us. We even cook on different stoves. If you want, you can come inside and check," Kunhi Patumma replied, seemingly ready to wage a war.

"Chi...Chi...why would I want to check?" the man with the turban replied. He then turned towards the short youth and instructed him to count the hut as three separate households. "We have made the decision to construct an orphanage for Muslim children. It is an embarrassing matter for us to see our caste's kids making their own living on the streets. It is our wish for everyone, whether rich or poor, to contribute to this good cause. We are not asking you to donate a hundred or thousand rupees. We just want you to contribute ten paise per day. It will not hinder your daily expenditure either."

Kunhi Patumma's face lost all colour. She asked in a lifeless tone, "Then, you didn't come to investigate us?"

The Mullah exclaimed in a shocked voice, "What investigation!?"

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<sup>8</sup> General address for a Muslim woman.

The old lady was on the verge of tears. "The one where Panchayat officers would come down to record the names of all poor families and assign twenty kilograms of rice per house, just like our Naranna said."

"What is that?" the Mullah confusedly scratched his beard.

"How will you understand these complicated matters, Mullah?" the pant-clad youth carelessly interrupted. "You never had to buy rice for yourself. When rice was readily available to you at all times, why would you concern yourself with such matters? Our government recently announced that they would distribute rice for just two rupees. Hence, these people thought that we were here to conduct that survey."

"You are right, son. We have been eagerly awaiting their arrival for about two weeks now. Naranna even comforted us by saying that those people might turn up this week. Are you familiar with any of them?" Kunhi Patumma asked.

"We'll help you in this matter, bibi," the man with the turban chipped in. "I will inform them personally that there exist three households near the bottom of the hill. If we don't help people like you, who else should we help?"

Then, he took three small green boxes from the short youth's hand and showed it to them.

"Here is the opening where you can insert your contribution to the orphanage. You just need to add ten paise to this box every day. Once every month, people from the Mosque will come here, open the lock and take only three rupees. They're also instructed to instantly hand over a receipt. Since it is Allah's money, there will be no mishappenings."

After saying what he wanted to, he offered these three boxes for Kunhi Patumma to take.

"We've been regularly donating one rupee to the Mosque, right?" asked the old lady, extremely terrified.

"Yes, that is your regular donation to the Mosque. This donation is exclusively for the construction of orphanages," explained the man with a sack before turning towards the Mullah. "Mullah, since three houses exist here, is it fair to only collect one rupee from them?"

Like this, Kunhi Patumma, who had naively hoped for the benevolent Panchayat officers to come down and record their names; who even went as far as to split the hut into three parts and maximise their benefits, felt afraid to come face-to-face with the shadow of the black Satan that had fallen upon her hut and finally closed her eyes.



**Adithi M Kashyap** is a graduate of BA English Honours at CHRIST (Deemed to Be University), Bangalore. Her academic pursuits gravitate towards contemporary domains such as Gender Studies, Translation Studies, Fandom Studies, and Film Studies. Notably, her undergraduate dissertation delved into the intricacies of translated subtitles in the Chinese donghua "Mo Dao Zu Shi." She analysed how these subtitles deftly incorporated the nuanced Mandarin pronoun "ta" and other idioms to subtly portray a romantic relationship between the two male protagonists, despite China's stringent restrictions on homosexual media. This research shed light on the complex interplay of translation and LGBTQIA+ representation in a culturally restrictive context.

Beyond her scholarly interests, Adithi is also a classical Bharatanatyam dancer and a dedicated student of Western classical piano. Embracing the dynamic realm of internet literature, she has also ventured into webnovels and has served as a co-editor for Japanese translated web literature on Foxaholic.

## **Book Reviews Section**

**Editor: KABIR DEB**



**Kabir Deb is a writer & professional book reviewer based in Karimganj, Assam. He works in Punjab National Bank and has completed his Masters in Life Sciences from Assam University. He is presently pursuing his MCW from the University of Oxford. He is the recipient of Social Journalism Award, 2017; Reuel International Award for Best Upcoming poet, 2019; and Nissim International Award, 2021 for Excellence in Literature for his book, Irrfan: His Life, Philosophy and Shades. He runs a mental health library named 'The Pandora's Box to a Society called Happiness' in Barak Valley.**

**Kabir says, "The plight of Bhartiya literature lies with its readers. We do believe in catching a movie if the reviews turn out to be good. The massive success of movie reviewers is quite evident with platforms like Film Companion, 5ocial and all. Book reviewing, on the other hand, is witnessing a setting sun. Somewhere around the corner, authors and poets have taken the responsibility of reviewing books which they feel are underrated. If a book becomes a cult classic, its motive doesn't reach the result. Therefore, when book reviews come from the literary community itself, rather than a different group of writers who focus on reviewing, it should make us think about the various facets of the world of literature.**

**With the advent of different online magazines, we have come across some of the finest book reviews which explore the books and the world surrounding them. Although there should be the inclusion of a good monetary benefit for book reviewers, just like film reviewers using their knowledge to decrypt a piece of art.**

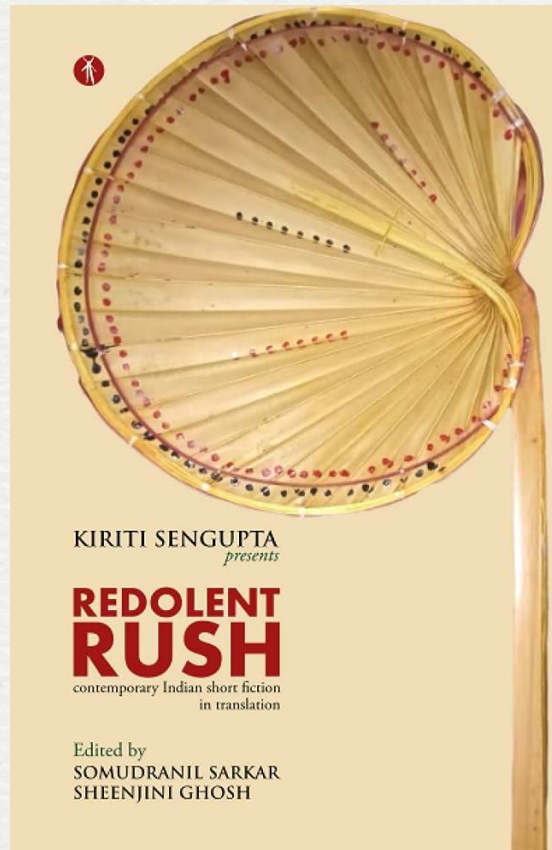
**Criticism has never been the objective of reviewing. It simply lies with academicians, whereas in the case of book reviews, the certainty of making the book marketable lies with constructive reviews by good reviewers. In this edition of MANA, book reviews have taken a special place where the objective is to present our readers with a good list of books - unexplored - but they deserve a good, intimate date."**

## A RUSH OF STORIES

# REDOLENT RUSH

Eds. Somudranil Sarkar and Sheenjini Ghosh | Published by Hawakal Publishers Private Limited

Reviewed by **DUSTIN PICKERING**



The art of storytelling is ancient. We might consider that stories embody our language and habits. In *Redolent Rush*, a recent short fiction collection published by Hawakal Publishers, we have nineteen short stories collected for the purpose of documenting “things that hold our culture in bits and pieces,” as quoted from the inspiring introduction by editors Somudranil Sarkar and Sheenjini Ghosh. The introduction also elaborates on why the volume is translated into English, “English should not be seen as a setter of a hegemonistic bar, but here in *Redolent Rush*, it serves as a vessel to gain a more comprehensive understanding and comprehensibility.” Each story’s notes elaborate on specific cultural contexts, making such a vision precise.

One may ask what could an antiquated art tell us about the contemporary world, and why offer a culturally specific volume in such a medium? One example of the complications of rapidly evolving times is presented in Bitan Chakraborty’s

**“Landmark” in which Tapan is lost and cannot locate the usual landmark that shows him to his friend’s home. After his phone battery dies, he is left in the cab confused about how to map his way to the destination. The entire nature of Uttar Pradesh has changed since his last visit. In searching for the landmark meat shops, he talks with a shopkeeper and learns the government has banned meat. The entire city has undergone restructuring consequentially. Tapan’s situation is common in the rapidly evolving modern world, but its specific symbolism underlies the cultural complexity of a changing India.**

**What could a short fiction collection offer readers outside of the culture it presents? These stories offer the readers universal yet sometimes strangely unfamiliar situations. For instance, we find a bereaved son Amiruddi in West Bengal amongst characters in the story “Abbajaan’s Bones” by Debabrata Choudhury. This character finds himself in the unique position of selling his father’s body to a skeleton market after documentation proving his citizenship is lost. In this poetically rendered fictional tale, the author presents us with mixed emotions of the worried son who views his birth as devalued.**

**The symbolism presented by this story is both political and socially relevant to India. In “Teen Choukke (Three Fours)” by Veena Vij Udit grief is also illumined through the tale of a mother’s loss. The mother, Pam, loses her daughter to a car accident in San Francisco. Pam is met with the strange coincidence of time: the exact time she learns of the death is 4:44. Later, a newborn infant is brought into the world at the same time and Pam finds hope in the birth, as if witnessing the rebirth of her daughter. This tale, translated from Hindi, takes place in the United States among Indians under a kind of cultural shock due to foreignness in the USA. The author writes every doctor can be a multimillionaire because in the USA, “every citizen has to be medically insured.” This small group often overcompensates for their foreignness (spending more on food to appear superior, for instance).**

**Popular fiction writer Khalid Hussain is represented as well with “The Story of a Dead Man”, a piece on the problems faced by a gentle family man when meeting with violent insurgents near Kashmir. The Islamic insurgents know the man and his family, but he does not know them. This mysterious and frightening encounter reveals volumes about the nature of this type of violence. Manzoor, a family man merely struggling to live on a border, opens the door for “travelers” revealing his gentle, and perhaps naïve, nature. As the story moves in just a few pages, Manzoor joins the violent men against his will. He becomes angry at authorities who fail to protect his well-being. This theme, which could shed light on government incompetence to protect civil life in such predicaments, also highlights the problem of terroristic violence generally.**

**The jihadists are able to speak for themselves, but the narrative tells of their actions more than their own words. As Manzoor joins the jihadists for his own complex motives, he is eventually killed by them. “I will go to those very terrorists because of**

whom, everything we once had has been reduced to a heap of ashes. No one can erase the bad name they have branded us with," Manzoor confesses. The strangest enigma of the story is unveiled at the final plot point.

This story renders both generational and cultural differences clear and simple. The story opens with the invitation of dialogue, but Sujata tells her husband the couple is too busy for her to approach the subject. Readers are not clear yet on what the subject may be, but as the story unfolds the difficulties her daughter-in-law and son are facing are brought into focus. Nagalakshmi's narrative is true to life, presented by a singular view. We are informed about the fickleness of contemporary couples, and the presence of the elder offers hope and reconciliation through a contrast between generations.

"They attach rather excessive importance to their job but not to their family life," Sujata reflects. Even the great-grandchildren are shown in their struggle through this narrative. Readers are inspired to wonder what might happen to the young one Shubham who is worried about his prospects during the ordeal. This story enables readers to reflect on what we as a society are doing to ourselves. We are granted insight into the emerging importance of social structures such as the welfare centers, but we are also led to the realization that caring for ourselves means caring for our society also.

Another connubial tale is "Being God's Wife" by Nandini Sahu. This piece of memoir fiction embodies the need for simplicity in social life, especially marriage. The father is seen as godlike in his simplicity and compassion. Several anecdotes from Sahu, revealed masterfully and interwoven carefully, remark on the character of her father. This story also reveals faults within social systems as the author notes that the Indian health care system focuses on physical, not such much on mental, health.

These tales are not merely stories but serve as vehicles for social criticism. They underline and emphasize problems within the global culture through the lens of Indian writers. Each tale is poetically compromising, challenging, yet universally applicable. As my aforementioned examples indicate, questions concerning what it means to be a citizen, domestic partner, child in a stagnating economy, and immigrant to another country in their own fashions suggest what life may become in the not too distant future due to social fragmentation.

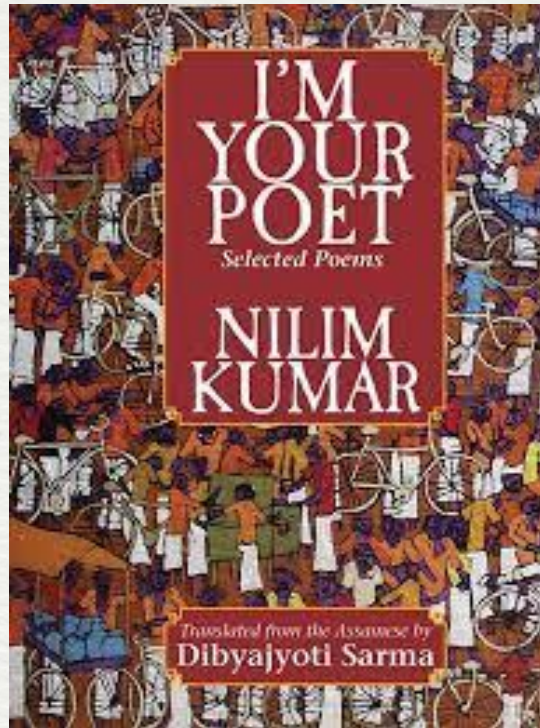




**Dustin Pickering** is founder of Transcendent Zero Press. He has contributed writing to Huffington Post, Café Dissensus Everyday, The Statesman (India), Journal of Liberty and International Affairs, The Colorado Review, World Literature Today, and several other publications. He placed in the top 100 out of 12,500 entries for the erbacce prize in 2021, and was a finalist in Adelaide Literary Journal’s first short fiction contest. He was longlisted for the Rahim Karim World Prize in 2022 and given the honor of Knight of World Peace by the World Peace Institute that same year. He hosts the popular interview series World Inkers Network on YouTube.

## THE GOSPEL OF THE BODY: A Review of Nilim Kumar's *I'm Your Poet*

Reviewed by **BASUDHARA ROY**



*I'm Your Poet: Selected Poems*

Nilim Kumar/ Translated from the Assamese by Dibyajyoti Sarma

Red River, 2022

Pp. 177 | Rs. 399

I was about to write a poem  
digging the soil, pulling out words

then the girl of soil who doesn't  
wear clothes arrived and said

don't dig the soil  
don't dig the soil

- 'A Poem's Body'

What is a poet made up of? If poetry is the life-blood of a poet and the essential soil of his heart, the reader, in order to establish intimacy with a book of poems, must ask what this soil is made up of. Is it layered by history, memory, desire or grief? Is it

private or public, porous or impermeable? What hopes and fears have nurtured it? In the case of Nilim Kumar, one can say with conviction that the poet is intensely and accretively made up of the teeming world around him – his native land of Assam and his people who perfuse him with deep, overwhelming feeling.

To come to Nilim Kumar's poetry, one has to abandon the notion of the poet as conscious artist or as master of disguises, and return to the idea of the poet as inspired troubadour. Here is primarily a people's poet, someone who writes out of his fathomless love for humanity. Refusing to place the poet on an ontological elevation, Kumar, like Wordsworth, regards him as a man speaking to men. People are integral to Kumar's poetic vision, and for the humanist that he is, the focus on humanity overrules the love for land, the latter meaning nothing when estranged from its people.

In 'Save Poetry/ Save the Mice', the poet describes how, in order to meet a deadline for a magazine, he tried to secure the solace for writing poetry by doing "the most non-poetic thing" – "I put up a sign: / Busy Writing Poetry, Do Not Disturb". Nothing comes out of this endeavour for "In the house without people,/ the mice were the poems" and the poet concludes that "You cannot write poetry/ with these thoughts and images". To write poetry, Kumar needs in his world the density of people, a fact remarkably symbolized by the book's cover and its title. 'I'm Your Poet' is, thus, both acknowledgement and surrender – the acknowledgement that one's poetic task or destiny lies mired with one's people, and a surrender to public estimate, however harsh or unjust it might be. In 'Tree of Love', for instance, the world climbs the tree of love in the poet's heart "with a machete" cutting down everything till only "the roots remain" but this does not defeat the poet's resolve to offer love to his people:

this time, I'll grow underground,  
I'll grow underground

you're all invited,  
come again

"For me, poetry is the language that facilitates conversation between life and the world. There is no place for the artificial here," states Kumar in a conversation with Anindita Kar. His poems bespeak intensity, authenticity, great depth of feeling, unbridled lyricism, and a strong humanist predilection. There's a sharp earthiness in these poems -- a scent of sun, soil, sweat, tears, rain and blood that connect man to man. Poetry, for Kumar, is intrinsically a social act by which the poet and his people enter into a commune, and the joys, sorrows, aspirations and dread of his fellowmen become his own, pining for expression. Here is a shared vision of the world, an aspiration for common good, and a desire to remedy the pain of others by reminding them of the gifts of life – beauty, human connection and love, through poems that Subodh Sarkar finds "as life-giving as a plateful of rice"

**“Poets,” writes Subodh Sarkar, “have always found a thrill in the quest of good people. There are times when the way is lost. But the search for human goodness has not diminished in poetry. There is no poet in the world who has not, in his own unique way, dived into the depths of the world looking for a good man. Nilim Kumar has been doing the same.” The nearly hundred poems in this collection are an evocative testimony of the poet’s journey with and through his people, an attempt to voice the angst of his times, and to relentlessly search for sources of succour and shared vitality, envisaging for himself the same role as he does for sunshine in his poem ‘Sunshine’:**

**Sunshine descends not just for the woman.  
It comes down for everyone.  
It opens its arms for the people.**

**Through people’s skins, through  
their skins and bones, Sunshine wants  
to reach for people’s hearts.**

**When does a poem become a poem? When it has gone through the heart’s grist, Kumar would say, poetry recording for him “the language of the human heart”! One is, indeed, moved by the wide range of feeling that these poems effectively handle – love, friendship, family, the innocence and nostalgia of childhood, the striking lust of adolescence, the enigma of youth, the betrayal of old age, and the sharp sting of loss at any age whatsoever. There is no observation for Kumar that is also not emotive, no emotive apprehension that is also not aesthetic, and no aesthetic perception which is also not sensual. This does not imply a dismissal of rationality but the privileging of a different kind of logic that places intuition and subjectivity at the centre of his vision. Passion is the pen of Kumar’s verse. Nothing that does not touch his soul can be a part of his poetic canvas about which there is nothing private or veiled. The self that he writes is essentially a public self whose myriad emotions he explores with unabashed authenticity and overwhelming devotion.**

**Given Kumar’s thrust on the human, there is little wonder that these poems engage in an intimate relationship with the human body. True to his training as a doctor, corporeality becomes integral to Kumar’s poetic praxis, a fundamental source of both being and knowledge. For Kumar, there is nothing ignominious about the body’s essential humanity and vulnerability. Not merely a physical entity but an intensely social and political site for experience, communication and belonging, it is the body that gives pain and “pleasure to another body”, gives “birth to another body”, and is responsible for honour and shame (‘Memoir’). The body, whether it is that of the mother (‘Carry Me Again in Your Womb’), the grandmother (‘Grandmother’), the beloved (‘Pregnant’) , the servant boy (‘Childhood’) the girl at puberty, (‘Puberty’) or whether it belongs to Radha, Ruby Gupta, Achina, Kamala Konwari, Sukhpa, Nandini or to women in a painting, becomes central to both the ontology and the**

epistemology of these poems. For a poet as devoted to the gospel of the body as Kumar is, the celebration of its beauty through love becomes the prayer and salvation of poetry.

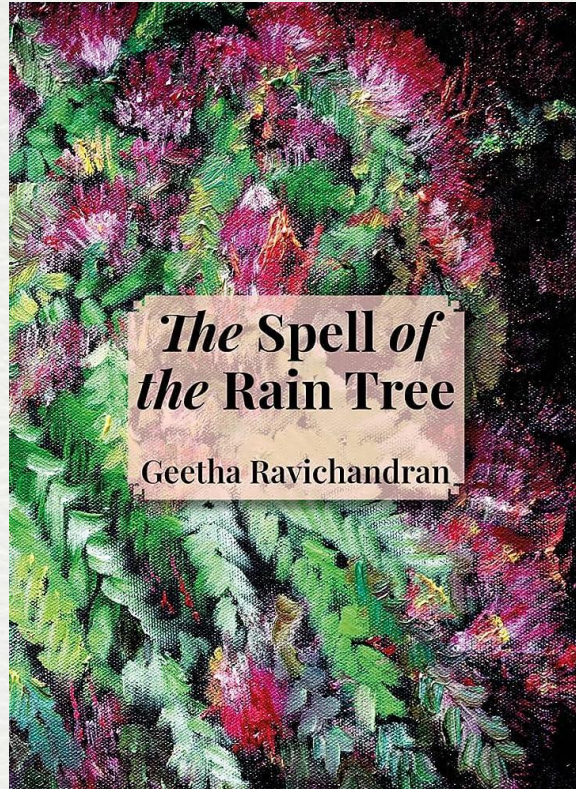
Love becomes a human practice in *I'm Your Poet*, therapeutic and resurrective in lightening the burden of life's essential absurdity – this living “just to spend the hours” which have “No meaning. No meaning.” ('Cohabitation'). A flair for the narrative marks many of these poems, Kumar's primary urge being anecdotal and often surreally so. Translated with as great a passion as engendered the original poems, this collection that richly infuses Indian English with the deft and fluid syntactical structures of the Assamese language and with an extraordinary range of sensuous and sensual images drawn from its local flora and fauna, constitutes a timeless gift for readers of English, buttressing Nilim Kumar's status as one of the most significant poets of our time.



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THE CRAWLING MONSOON

Reviewed by **KABIR DEB**



The value of a spell lies in the one who is the speller. If a speller is traversing the world through a hymn, wisdom and simplicity find release. In a completely different circle, a complex affair starts to pile up for a spell that brings chaos and turmoil. Geetha Ravichandran's poetry works like the former one – wherein a wise woman believes she has a lot to learn – persuades her heart to be a coincidental being. Her recent book 'The Spell of the Rain Tree', is a breath of fresh air. An amalgamate of integrated ideas, it has a substantial amount of patience to decode her reader's life.

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Memories have weird lives (to simply say, bipolar). They are either glorified or criticized. Pretentious writers fabricate ruins and manipulate the constructs. When Geetha writes:

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"Now we chatter

**to the waltz  
of walking sticks  
speaking without listening.”**

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...honesty gets verified – a large mass of realization that’s not a burden on her shoulders. Something we do not see in the mainstream, especially around magnified livelihood. Practicing the remembrance of a moment is essential to brighten it even under a shadow. ‘Sepia’ acts as an abode for our mind where we deliberately nourish the fading. Sometimes the formula of fading something works in our favour – but not always. The line where the poet says: “All that unfelt joy/has been pixelated”, comes from a place where burying is not a trend or tradition. But taking something out surely is.

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Silence is overrated. We come across quotes or teachings about its importance. But when Begum Akhtar sings: Mere Humnafas, Mere Humnava/Mujhe Dost Banke Daga Na De”, a warm voice and molten conversation arrive with finesse. The absence of a presence, and the presence of an absence is not something we like to feel. Geetha’s poem ‘Listen In’ crawls through the edges of the heart where the desire to feel someone’s presence took birth. The poem strikes a blow, quite effectively, and at the same time, makes an attempt to skin our soul. It demands absolute nudity.

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**The poet writes:**

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**“If only there had been  
someone who had locked  
eyes with her, and did not yank her  
off her rocking horse she may have healed.”**

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Life is not certain or perfect. It has blurry sides, and devious territories. But like Oscar Wilde says, “Life is far too important a thing ever to talk seriously about”, one must reveal the vision that does not live on the surface. The poet has a very witty and churning way to let her readers experience her paradise – we call it home. Although her perspective has a sense of sewing the fragmented pieces (which is general), but the telling of this generalised idea is not popular. She does not bereave the presence of some pretty significant beings. Rather she is kind to keep them in her fertile mind.

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So, Geetha writes:

**“There is nothing else to do as the Wi-Fi is dead  
So, I watch the plants, succulents, and creepers  
filling out broken teacups and decoupage jars,  
grow and exhale oxygen in an inconspicuous corner,  
surrounding a painted, wine bottle.”**

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We often forget to practice what we preach, and vice-versa. Therefore, we have an identity that’s chewed to our very bones. Quartered between hatred and love, we have become conditioned to choose the former one. The dementia of being hateful is more lethal than its idea. So, the squeezing space around us should not surprise us. Brewing business on the spine of religion, priests who have distanced themselves from Gyana and Guidance, and a room with no choice, elevates wildly through the poem ‘The Forgotten Temple’. A poem of immense importance to know the knower.

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**Geetha writes:**

**“In a quiet corner  
sits a desultory priest  
tending an oil lamp.  
He does not seek to impress  
scattered worshippers  
about favours granted,  
or prayers answered.”**

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**The person who cooks knows about the pavements of our dreams, desires and differences. It becomes true when the masalas blend with the thought of love. All that matters is how we sprinkle both of these entities to process our rationality. When Kirtana Kumar writes about her mother’s food preparation, she says: ‘It is far more than food we are talking about here. It is the post-Independence zeitgeist, yes, but it’s also about a food culture that dares to break the shackles of caste conservatism and its hegemonic purity and pollution theories’. Something that flows through the poem, ‘When Less is More’. Although the personal references formulate a different smell. But the soup of the item penetrates to dissolve the divisions, on both our public and personal levels.**

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**“a plate halved  
by sharing,**

windows sans curtains,  
the smile on wrinkled skin.”

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‘The Spell of the Rain Tree’ makes a deeply private corner on its own. It does not require cleansing or curation – it has the ability to adhere to our core emotions. Geetha Ravichandran’s poetry is an imaginative spectacle wherein the colours we love grow on our body, the people we love stroll through our head, and the consecutive moments stay alive. Finding solace in a book is the utmost desire of a reader. To keep its existence enlightened within it, leaves room for no corrosion. The write-ups keep on helping or haunting us, and this book does justice to writing.



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