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पत्रिका के विषय में: *पत्रिका आरण्यक* साहित्य, भाषा, संस्कृति और मानविकी को समर्पित द्विभाषी एवं अंतर्विषयी पत्रिका है। इसमें हिन्दी और अंग्रेजी के मौलिक शोध-पत्र तथा कविता, कहानी और साहित्यिक निबंध जैसी रचनाएँ प्रकाशित की जाती हैं।

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मुक्त अभिगम एवं अस्वीकरण: प्रकाशित सामग्री पत्रिका की वेबसाइट पर निःशुल्क उपलब्ध है। प्रकाशित रचनाओं में व्यक्त विचार संबंधित लेखकों के हैं और आवश्यक रूप से संपादक, संपादकीय मंडल, प्रकाशक अथवा पत्रिका लिटरेरी कलेक्टिव के विचारों का प्रतिनिधित्व नहीं करते। तथ्यों, उद्धरणों, अनुवादों, अनुमतियों और नैतिक प्रामाणिकता के लिए लेखक उत्तरदायी हैं।

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विधि द्वारा अनुमत उपयोग को छोड़कर पुनरुत्पादन हेतु उचित अभिस्वीकृति और पूर्व अनुमति आवश्यक है।

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EDITORIAL NOTE / संपादकीय

Three, and What Lies Beyond It

Listen to one cycle of Teen Taal and you will hear something its name conceals. The cycle has sixteen beats, yet it is called "three claps": tālī on the first, fifth and thirteenth beats, and on the ninth a silent wave of the hand, the khālī. Three marks of sound and one of silence, and the silence sits not at the edge of the cycle but at its heart. It is the khālī that makes the return to the first beat feel like an arrival rather than a repetition.

We found ourselves thinking of this while preparing our third issue, because three has long been the number where things begin to move. The Pythagoreans, as Aristotle reports, prized it as the first number with a beginning, a middle and an end (a shape we hope our publication journey will not follow too literally). Where one is unity and two is opposition, three lets them speak to each other. Plato divides the soul into reason, spirit and appetite; Christianity confesses three persons in one essence. In Indian thought the triad is working machinery: Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva as creation, preservation and dissolution; sattva, rajas and tamas as the temper of all nature; waking, dream and deep sleep as the states sounded in AUM. Buddhists take refuge in three jewels, and Jains seek liberation through right faith, knowledge and conduct. The Dao De Jing says that "Two generates Three, and Three generates the ten thousand things," a line often read as opposed forces, joined by harmonizing breath, beginning to make a world. Even the plainest physics agrees: three points are the fewest that fix a plane, which is why a three-legged stool never wobbles. Some linguists even connect the Indo-European root of "three" with one meaning "to cross over," though the link is debated.

Yet the traditions that honour the triad rarely let it close. The Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad names three states of consciousness and then points to a fourth, turīya, which is not one more state but the silent ground of the other three. The alchemist Maria Prophetissa said the same in another idiom: "One becomes two, two becomes three, and out of the third comes the one as the fourth." Teen Taal is that intuition made audible.

This issue arrives in that spirit Pavle Radonić's wide-ranging travelogue, the pain of displacement in Mehrullah Rahmani's writing, and the poems of Francisco Izukiri and Thomas Piekarski all leave behind a pregnant silence once the reading is done. We thank all the authors who contributed to this issue, and our reviewers, who were kind enough to spare time from their busy schedules.

When we published our first two issues, we were confident about our English content; it was the Hindi that worried us. Several poems in this issue have eased that worry, and, like the silent fourth of AUM, they point to potential still unfolding. Hindi is our growing edge, and we invite you to send us your Hindi poetry, prose and essays. Three issues in, the fourth is the one not yet written.

तीन, और उसके पार

तीन ताल का एक आवर्तन ध्यान से सुनिए, तो वह बात सुनाई देती है जो उसके नाम में छिपी रहती है। ताल में सोलह मात्राएँ हैं, फिर भी उसे "तीन ताल" कहा जाता है: पहली, पाँचवीं और तेरहवीं मात्रा पर ताली, और नौवीं पर हाथ की एक मौन लहर, यानी खाली। ध्वनि के तीन चिह्न और मौन का एक, और वह मौन आवर्तन के

किनारे पर नहीं, उसके हृदय में बैठा है। यह खाली ही है जो सम पर लौटने को दोहराव नहीं, आगमन का अनुभव बना देती है।

अपना तीसरा अंक तैयार करते हुए हमें यही बात याद आती रही, क्योंकि तीन सदा से वह संख्या रही है जहाँ से गति आरंभ होती है। अरस्तू के अनुसार पाइथागोरस के अनुयायियों ने इसे पहली ऐसी संख्या माना जिसमें आदि, मध्य और अंत तीनों हैं (हमारी प्रकाशन-यात्रा, आशा है, इस ढाँचे का अक्षरशः पालन नहीं करेगी)। एक एकत्व है और दो द्वंद्व; तीन वह है जो दोनों को संवाद में ले आता है। प्लेटो आत्मा को विवेक, उत्साह और कामना में बाँटते हैं; ईसाई परंपरा एक सत्ता में तीन व्यक्तियों को मानती है। भारतीय चिंतन में त्रिक एक सक्रिय तंत्र है: ब्रह्मा, विष्णु और शिव सृजन, पालन और संहार के रूप में; सत्त्व, रजस् और तमस् समस्त प्रकृति के स्वभाव के रूप में; और जाग्रत, स्वप्न और सुषुप्ति चेतना की उन अवस्थाओं के रूप में जो ॐ में ध्वनित होती हैं। बौद्ध तीन रत्नों की शरण लेते हैं, और जैन सम्यक् दर्शन, ज्ञान और चरित्र के रत्नत्रय से मोक्ष की ओर बढ़ते हैं। दाओ दे जिंग कहता है : "एक से दो उत्पन्न होता है,दो से तीन और तीन से दस हज़ार वस्तुएँ", जिसे प्रायः इस तरह पढ़ा जाता है कि परस्पर विरोधी शक्तियाँ सामंजस्य की श्वास से जुड़कर संसार रचने लगती हैं। साधारण भौतिकी भी यही कहती है: समतल को निर्धारित करने के लिए तीन बिंदु न्यूनतम हैं, इसीलिए तीन टाँगों वाला स्टूल कभी नहीं डगमगाता। कुछ भाषाविद् 'तीन' की भारोपीय धातु को 'पार जाने' के अर्थ वाली धातु से भी जोड़ते हैं, यद्यपि यह संबंध विवादित है।

फिर भी जो परंपराएँ त्रिक का सम्मान करती हैं, वे उसे शायद ही बंद रहने देती हैं। माण्डूक्य उपनिषद् चेतना की तीन अवस्थाओं का नाम लेकर एक चौथी की ओर संकेत करता है: तुरीय, जो कोई एक और अवस्था नहीं, बल्कि शेष तीनों की मौन पृष्ठभूमि है। कीमियागर मारिया प्रोफ़ेतिस्सा ने यही बात दूसरी भाषा में कही: "एक से दो बनता है, दो से तीन, और तीसरे में से वही एक चौथे के रूप में प्रकट होता है।" तीन ताल उसी अंतर्ज्ञान का श्रव्य रूप है।

यह अंक उसी भाव में आपके हाथों में है। श्री सुशांत सौरभ की कविताओं का सधा हुआ और मितव्ययी शिल्प, सुश्री अर्शिया अंजुम की कविता में घरेलू जीवन का सादगी भरा मौन विषाद, या श्री अमित कुमार की कविता में उपस्थित जड़ों से दूर होने की पीड़ा: ये रचनाएँ प्रयोगधर्मिता और पुरातन संवेदनाओं के बीच की सीमारेखा पर सफलतापूर्वक संतुलन साधती हैं। हम उन सभी रचनाकारों के आभारी हैं जिन्होंने अपनी बहुमूल्य रचनाएँ इस अंक के लिए हमें भेजीं, और उन समीक्षकों के भी, जिन्होंने अपनी व्यस्त समय-सारिणी में से कुछ समय हमें देने की कृपा की।

अपने पहले दो अंक प्रकाशित करते समय हमें अंग्रेज़ी सामग्री को लेकर विश्वास था; चिंता हिन्दी की थी। इस अंक की कई कविताओं ने उस चिंता को हल्का किया है, और ॐ के मौन चतुर्थ की तरह वे उस संभावना की ओर इशारा करती हैं जो अभी खुल रही है। हिन्दी हमारी बढ़ती हुई सीमा है, और हम आपसे निवेदन करते हैं कि अपनी हिन्दी कविताएँ, गद्य और निबंध हमें भेजें। तीन अंकों के बाद, चौथा वही है जो अभी लिखा जाना शेष है।

Chief Editor

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Digital Storytelling and Queer Conversations: Social Media and Online Publishing as Sites of Negotiating Heteronormative Discourse in India*

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Abstract:

The recent exponential growth of digital media in India through the use of smartphones and the accessibility of online social networking sites has changed the way that gender and sexuality are perceived. This paper examines how digital storytelling on the queer subject matter across various online platforms participates in the ongoing heteronormative discourse in India. Drawing on select case studies available on the internet, the study finds that the narratives do not simply represent queer identities but actively intervene in dominant frameworks by reshaping how cisgender audiences perceive and engage with gendered difference. The analysis is guided by the work of Sara Ahmed and Zizi Papacharissi, whose concepts enable a reading of digital spaces as environments where emotions and discourse intersect. Through this framework, the paper demonstrates that queer digital storytelling operates at diverse levels, generating shifts in perception, producing new forms of recognition and unsettling the stability of heteronormative assumptions. By foregrounding the interaction between narrative production and audience reception, the study positions digital media not merely as a platform of visibility but as an active site where dominant understandings of gender are continuously reconfigured.

Keywords:

Digital Storytelling, Heteronormativity, Queer Discourse, Social Media in India, Gender Narratives

Introduction:

The explosion of digital media over the past decade has considerably transformed the socio-cultural conditions in which the expression and perception of gender and sexuality take place in India. The availability of internet, together with increasing popularity of smartphones and social networks has facilitated the distribution of stories previously told in marginal and private spheres. In this environment, the role of online platforms as sites of narrating gender and sexuality becomes significant. This transformation acquired particular urgency in the aftermath of a supreme court judgement in 2018, which decriminalized same sex relations and brought questions of queer identity into renewed public visibility. While this decision provided for a new legal reality in terms of recognizing queer identity, it did not necessarily mean the elimination of deeply rooted heteronormative attitude. On the contrary, such a decision increased the intensity with which the questions of queer identity started being discussed and challenged. In such an evolving context, online publishing platforms become the essential places where narratives concerning gender and sexuality are written in the form of reflective texts.

These platforms offer the opportunity not only to increase the visibility of marginalized subjects but also to start conversations that contest the prevalent ways of perceiving the world.

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For example, the introductory section above the selected entries published on the website Gaylaxy titled “Being Gay in India: Final Entries” says: "Being gay is never the same for any two persons, and the experiences and reactions vary from place to place, people to people, and culture to culture" (Being Gay in India). Such statements reject the homogenizing effect of heteronormativity that tends to perceive non normative genders as something identical and unchanging. In fact, the emotions in the statement integrate a universal sense of validation from people living in a particular society or culture. Another example of online reporting published on Queerbeat demonstrates how queer narratives connect with social institutions. In particular, the article "Queer Literature for Children is Changing Minds in India" illustrates how the introduction of queer literature into children's education facilitates changes in the social perception of such identities. In this regard, besides providing representations of minority genders, such texts are part of a larger pedagogical project of introducing alternative views of gender in children's minds. Moreover, other Queerbeat articles like "Love and Loss in Multai" describe the experiences of people in small towns, indicating that despite the social pressure exerted upon the LGBTQ+ population, such people exist, and few of them want to be noticed and listened to.

While there is an extensive body of literature devoted to queer theory and digital media studies, much of the previous research still concentrates on representation or visibility as central concepts. In particular, studies focusing on digital queer expressions tend to address the opportunities such technologies offer in terms of identity formation and community-building, whereas studies addressing heteronormativity in media discourse tend to analyze such stories in terms of bias and stereotypical representations. One area that remains relatively unexamined is how queer narrative production interacts with heteronormative reception, especially in the context of contemporary Indian society.

The current research aims to fill this gap by examining digital storytelling in terms of negotiation rather than representation. This paper will focus on case studies published online on websites namely Queerbeat and Gaylaxy, demonstrating how digital storytelling in contemporary India represents a complex process through which heteronormative discourse is frequently reconstituted.

Comprehending Digital Queer Discourse in India:

Work related to digital media and queer identity in India has centered on the assumption that digital technology fosters visibility. Blogs, web-magazines, and social networking websites have been investigated as spaces where the lives of queer people are told beyond traditional representations. Digital platforms such as Gaylaxy are presented as venues for posting first person stories and opinions which reflect lived realities. Likewise, projects on Queerbeat are often viewed in terms of creating a collection of documents which tell the story of queerness and bring to light the silenced voices in history. Therefore, online storytelling is regarded as a strategy for reclaiming erased realities and making queer people visible.

This emphasis on visibility has been productive but also limiting. Much of the scholarship assumes that once queer lives become visible, heteronormative assumptions begin to weaken. As a result, the outcome remains fixed on the production of chronicles rather than on their reception. The question of how these narratives are interpreted by wider audiences is left insufficiently explored. Documents from digital platforms can serve as an indicator that visibility does not undermine heteronormative assumptions as a concept. Texts from these websites are always addressed to a reader who is expected to understand the narratives produced by queer people as something else other than heterosexuality. It is evident from the analysis that storytelling through digital media involves more than just making a statement. Stories are created with the

anticipation of their reception by others. Therefore, they circulate as documents that challenge heteronormative assumptions by provoking a response and asking questions. Visibility as a category cannot explain this phenomenon. What is essential for digital queer storytelling is engagement and interaction with narratives. This engagement transforms digital narratives into collaborative acts of meaning-making rather than isolated expressions of identity. Unlike conventional print narratives that often establish a relatively fixed relationship between author and reader, digital platforms facilitate an ongoing dialogue in which readers actively participate in the production of knowledge. Such participation demonstrates that queer storytelling online is never completed at the moment of publication, it remains open to revision and reinterpretation as different audiences encounter these narratives from diverse social and cultural locations. Every interaction contributes another layer of meaning, revealing that queer identity itself is continuously negotiated through relationships rather than merely represented as a stable category. This dynamic process challenges the assumption that identity can be understood through visibility alone, since visibility without participation risks reducing queer lives to objects of observation instead of recognizing them as active producers of knowledge.

The digital environment also alters the temporal dimensions of storytelling. Queer narratives remain accessible anytime to everyone from everywhere after their initial publication, allowing readers from across the globe, readers from different timelines to revisit, reinterpret, and reconnect with experiences that may have originally emerged within entirely different historical contexts. The persistence of these narratives creates a living archive where memories, emotions, and personal testimonies synchronize without being confined to a single historical moment. Unlike institutional archives that have frequently excluded or marginalized queer experiences, digital archives emerge through dispersed acts of documentation undertaken by individuals and communities themselves. These archives preserve stories that might otherwise disappear from public memory, ensuring that everyday experiences receive recognition alongside major political events and organized movements.

The significance of such archives lies not only in their ability to preserve information but also in their capacity to generate new conversations about the past and its relationship to the present. Readers encountering these narratives often compare historical experiences with contemporary realities, recognizing both continuities and transformations in the lived experiences of queer communities. This comparative engagement encourages critical reflection on the persistence of discrimination while simultaneously highlighting the evolving forms of resistance developed through changing technological landscapes. Consequently, digital storytelling functions as an educational practice that enables individuals to understand their own experiences within broader historical and political frameworks.

Another important dimension of digital queer storytelling concerns the redistribution of narrative authority. Traditional media institutions have historically exercised considerable control over which queer stories become visible, how they are represented, and whose voices are considered legitimate. Editorial policies, commercial interests, cultural censorship, and dominant ideological assumptions have frequently limited the diversity of queer representation within mainstream media. Digital platforms significantly alter this relationship by lowering many of the barriers that previously restricted participation in public discourse. Individuals no longer require institutional approval to narrate their experiences, enabling a wider range of voices to participate in the production of cultural knowledge.

This democratization of storytelling does not imply that digital spaces are free from inequalities or power relations. Access to technology, internet connectivity, language proficiency, economic resources, algorithmic visibility, and platform governance continue to shape whose

narratives receive attention and whose stories remain marginalized. Nevertheless, digital environments provide opportunities for voices that have traditionally been excluded from dominant cultural narratives to articulate experiences on their own terms. The emergence of independent blogs, online magazines, discussion forums, community archives, and social networking platforms illustrates how marginalized individuals actively construct alternative spaces for representation rather than waiting for recognition from established institutions. The emotional dimensions of these narratives are equally significant. Queer storytelling frequently communicates experiences that cannot be fully understood through factual description alone. Feelings of isolation, fear, desire, shame, joy, intimacy, and hope constitute essential aspects of queer existence that often resist conventional forms of representation. Digital storytelling enables these experiences to circulate among readers who may recognize similar emotions within their own lives.

Furthermore, digital narratives frequently disrupt the expectation that queer lives should conform to linear developmental models. Conventional narratives often portray identity formation as a progression toward self-discovery followed by acceptance and integration into society. Queer digital storytelling repeatedly complicates this framework by presenting identity as fluid, uncertain, and continuously discussed across different social contexts. Individuals may describe multiple processes of coming out, experiences of changing identities, discussions between public and private selves, or shifting understandings of gender and sexuality throughout different stages of life. Such narratives resist simplistic models of personal development and instead emphasize the complexity of lived experience.

The interactive character of these platforms further demonstrates that storytelling is inseparable from community recognition. Narratives often receive validation through likes, comments, reshares, collaborative discussions, and collective consent of pushing the desired content through the social media algorithm. Recognition from anonymous crowd contributes to the construction of identity by affirming experiences that dominant social institutions have historically denied or ignored. This recognition does not eliminate the challenges associated with queer existence, but it creates forms of solidarity capable of mitigating isolation and fostering resilience. Throughout the online interaction, the community becomes an active participant in the ongoing production of meaning, reinforcing the idea that digital storytelling is fundamentally relational rather than an individual aspect. The existing body of work leaves this interaction underdeveloped. While it establishes the importance of digital platforms for queer expression, it does not sufficiently examine how these expressions intervene in the everyday frameworks through which gender is understood. The movement from representation to negotiation marks a shift in emphasis from what is shown to how it is taken up or reinterpreted within a broader social field.

Affective Circulations and Digital Orientation: A Theoretical Framework:

It becomes easier to see the change when one takes the timeline in consideration. Social media content provides even clearer evidence of this transformation. Instagram feeds of creators like Patruni Sastry regularly post videos that tell stories about the lives of queer parents and their everyday lives. Similarly, videos posted on youtube and instagram by Anwesh Sahoo tell the stories of his life and the responses he receives when people ask him stereotypical questions. Instead of reflecting on their experience through written reflections, creators in this stage produce video content, which encourages interaction and engagement from the outset. Unlike earlier blogs where written articles were only accessible to a certain group of online readers, the modern day mains stream social media posts rely on algorithmic circulation. One way to think about this transformation is through the use of the concept of orientation proposed by Sara

Ahmed in her book Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others. As she writes, "If orientation is a matter of how we reside in space, then sexual orientation might also be a matter of residence; of how we inhabit spaces as well as 'who' or 'what' we inhabit spaces with" (1). By consistently occupying the same spaces and aligning ourselves with particular people and ideas, we get used to seeing the world as aligned with certain norms, which we consider as natural. Within the online environment, such orientation happens because of constant repetition, through feeds, timelines, recommendations, and other means. Whenever queer narratives emerge in such spaces and repeat themselves, they cause reorientation. And every time a reorientation happens, we perceive reality differently.

However, while reorientation explains how perceptions are modified, we need another term to describe what happens after that. That is why the concept of affective publics articulated by Zizi Papacharissi in Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics is helpful. According to Papacharissi, "affective publics are networked public formations that are mobilized and connected or disconnected through expressions of sentiment" (125). It means that digital platforms organize discourse not just through logic and rationality but through feelings, moods, stories, hashtags, images, and everyday expressions of sentiment. Digital storytelling of the contemporary kind creates this intensity of feeling and invites participation. For example, comment threads on Instagram posts about queer families show both sympathy and some amount of curiosity, and videos explaining stereotypes often prompt strong feelings of either agreement or disagreement.

Thus, the suggested framework allows for a comparative analysis of the two phases of queer discourse transformation in India through digital media. The first phase, represented by blogging, can be examined with regard to its capacity to reorient through reflection and complex storytelling. Subsequently, the second phase, marked by digital storytelling, can be analyzed in connection with the generation of intensity and affective public negotiation. This transformation constitutes a progression in which digital storytelling evolves from articulation into engagement. This framework does not assume that queer narratives always redirect people into accepting queer community. People may or may not strengthen their biases through encountering queer stories and there is a possibility that they form new opinions on the kind of content that is being consumed by them through social media. However, what matters is the processes of reorientation through an established path and mode of expressing sentiments.

Negotiating Heteronormativity Through Digital Storytelling: A Close Reading:

The changes that have occurred within Indian queer discourse through digital media became much more pronounced in the recent times. While at the beginning of the last decade, online queer stories were forming themselves on such mediums as blogs and independent publishing sites, a piece like "Mom… I want to Tell You Something" published on Gaylaxy demonstrates one of the key aspects of queer discourse at this point in time. Specifically, the story is introspective and based on the need for a personal explanation to the reader. The narrative presents a personal account of the narrator as he comes out to his mother. However, the way in which he approaches the matter highlights the complex nature of queer identity and its relationship with normative discourses. As explained by the author Amol More, "It's neither your fault Aai, nor mine, that I am gay. But I don't have the courage to tell you the truth. Because I fear you will not understand." (More). Indeed, queer experience needs to be understood within the context of heteronormative discourse to some degree as well, since this is the only medium that exists to communicate ideas about queer identity to the reader. Here, identity is formed through anticipation and persuasion of a particular reaction rather than as an independent concept.

New digital content, however, appears to move away from explaining queer identity towards more assertive modes of expression. Stories posted online in Queerbeat provide new insights into queer identity by situating it within other social systems of power, including caste. In particular, articles like "What It Is Like to Be Queer in a Casteist Society" present the complexity of queer identity through the lens of marginalization based on caste identity. The intersectionality involved in queer experience means that one's identity is recognized with reference to various structures of power, including classist and casteist oppression of queer identity and marginalized communities. As the author Aadhi reflects, "As a dark-skinned person from a historically oppressed community, my feelings of insecurity with my body and my mental health struggles aren't just inherent. They are rather a consequence of the classist, casteist society I grew up in."(Aadhi). The fact that such expressions of queer identity take place in such an environment shows that queer discourse is not always simply about gender performativity, it must be actively inhabited in a certain society. Since caste is an important structure for organizing social and sexual relationships, the non-conforming genders tend to establish certain directions to regulate them. The relationship between being queer and having a socially discarded identity cannot be looked at on its own. It has to be seen in connection with the systems that manage society. Sexuality and gender identity are felt inside the systems of caste, religion and region. These systems shape how queer lives are seen or not seen. Because of this the idea of one queer group often hides big differences inside and even though queer politics has fought against the ideas about being straight it has not always stayed away from other power structures. These structures still decide who gets resources, who is shown and who feels like they belong. People from groups that are not in power like certain dalit castes or other marginalized communities often face exclusion that is very different from what more privileged queer people face. Their exclusion is not just added on. It comes from how different power systems work together. This makes identity and life experiences shape each other.

The idea of intersectionality helps explain this because it shows that being treated badly usually comes from than one source. Caste bias, money issues and the idea that being straight is best often work together. This makes experiences that cannot be explained by looking at sexuality. In places that claim to be queer being in a better position still decides who is heard, who is seen as the example and who is left out. Getting education, knowing a language, being part of a city group or having money often decides if someone can take part in queer activities or build a community. This puts people from groups that have been left out at a disadvantage. Because of this many still feel alone in places that say they are inclusive. This shows that being included is not about accepting different sexualities. It also shows that being unfair can happen in ways through everyday actions what people think is proper what is seen as beautiful what is seen as educated or what is seen as valuable. These things keep up the power structures that are in the big society. These experiences affect how people think about themselves how they feel and how they can take part in group life. Carrying identities often makes people not speak about one part of themselves to be accepted in another place. This creates a struggle between being seen and being safe. This is especially important in places where caste and race still control how people move in society, how they talk to each other and what chances they get. Because of this, being queer cannot be separated from the society. An intersectional view makes queer studies go beyond gender and sexuality. It includes the current situations that shape different queer lives. This way studies become better and challenge the idea that being free can come just from identity politics. It says that real change needs to look at all the unfair systems that still control the lives of people who are not in power. The experiences of people who are not in power because of caste make scholars rethink the words that are used for being part of a group. It shows that real support only comes when queer talk sees differences of thinking everyone is the same.

Therefore, any narrative emerging within such an environment actively participates in building its heteronormative beliefs. And what the narratives achieve as a result is not the substitution of heteronormative discourse but its consistent confrontation within what Ian Palmer and Richard Dunford call "discursive tension" in their article "Managing Discursive Tension: The Co-Existence of Individualist and Collaborative Discourses in Flight Centre". In this article, Palmer and Dunford explore how conflicting narratives persist in the organizational environment without subordinating one to the other (1045-1069). Although developed in the context of organizational change, the concept can be translated productively to digital queer discourse, where heteronormative generalizations and queer narratives about all castes and communities collaborate in a shared society.

Performance and Affective Response:

The process of negotiation is also complicated by the use of digital storytelling in highly interactive spaces such as Instagram. As previously mentioned, posts by Patruni Sastry shows queer domestic scenes and parenthood that places non-conforming gendered subjects in everyday social settings. Visual depiction of regular actions creates a sense of normalization by putting the queer experience in a familiar context. And the content of Anwesh Sahoo involves addressing stereotypical questions with irony and humor. Such interactional posts challenge the underlying assumptions of heteronormative thinking. However, they do not stop at being posted online. The conversation expands to comments and shares where users provide feedback by agreeing, asking further questions, showing disgust or disapproval of the subject matter. This is where the concept of affective publics by Zizi Papacharissi comes into play. The meaning of the content does not lie solely within its primary message. It is constructed by people's reactions and emotional investment in the topic. In this case, a story that causes more online engagement will travel further, attracting audiences outside the original space and encouraging discussion.

In the described scenario, it is possible to see the formation of heteronormative thought process in action. Supportive comments indicate acceptance, whereas negative reactions highlight the continued prevalence of stereotypical ideology. Regardless of the type of reaction, both of them belong to the same context. The content does not solve the dilemma. It allows it to exist. Throughout all cases, the described transition is evident. Digital stories from early years relied on explaining and reflecting on issues related to heteronormative beliefs. Later approaches to digital storytelling were based on online trends, public engagement, and social media reach. However, the change was not linear. Elements of reflection remained along with continued resistance. What changed was the method of observation.

This shift also redefined the relationship between storytellers and audiences, placing greater emphasis on sustained interaction rather than one-way communication. Consequently, digital narratives increasingly became sites where meanings were assembled collectively, allowing queer experiences to be interpreted through participation and evolving forms of community engagement instead of singular acts of representation. Thus, digital storytelling can be viewed as a means of neither reproducing nor dismantling heteronormativity. The discourse was questioned and reconstructed multiple times through interactions. The shift from self-reflection to interactional discourse marked the evolution of queer narrative in the digital environment.

Conclusion:

The materials examined here reveal that digital storytelling in India does not function merely as the means of representation but rearranges the circumstances of the emergence of perception and questioning of gender. Through queer storytelling in the spaces of Gaylaxy and

Queerbeat, as well as the interactive environment of main stream social media, queer narratives undergo the transformation from narratives based on explanation to the narratives which are integrated into the ordinary experience of their consumers. This transition is vital for the ability of these narratives to move away from the framework of representation and become instruments of intervention in the dominant frames of understanding, altering the way cisgender people interpret gender difference. It is important for the process of communication within digital discourse since narratives do not just challenge the established frames. By integrating them into the process of reinterpretation, these narratives force cisgender people to reconsider their perception of gender and to recognize its contingent and diverse nature. Multiplicity disrupts expectations and makes it clear that identity is not stable and fixed. At the same time, queer lives narrated from inside the family challenge the assumption that there exists an ordinary and normative social structure.

It is crucial to recognize that this revolution is not always a successful outcome. There are instances of resistance to reorientation and rejection of narratives which fail to persuade their recipients despite the strong affective responses provoked by them. The increased visibility provided by digital platforms is accompanied by a greater potential for conflict and controversy. While this is the case, both heteronormative and queer ideologies coexist, interact and remain unresolved. Hence, heteronormativity must be challenged consistently, through interaction with narratives, and within certain perspectives. These findings also suggest the possibility of future research, which would involve the investigation of patterns of reception among different communities and regions of India, as well as more detailed attention to the peculiarities of circulation in specific regional and social contexts.

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POETRY / कविताएँ

Traces

Sambhu Ramachandran[1]

Getting out of bed, I notice the traces I have left—
the valley in the pillow formed by the pressure of my head
and the bedspread twisted into the curves of my sleep.
I wonder what part of me, invisible though,
is still left in bed when I pad over to the bathroom
and thrust a toothbrush into my mouth.

All that up and down motion
makes me feel like the bristles have stolen
a share of my teeth's gleam.
When I stand under the showerhead
needled by hot water,
it is not just a mixture of dirt and sweat
that is washed away along with light green soap suds,
but something more—the liquid shape of myself.

The wet soles of my feet leave imprints on the tiles,
and I feel like turning around to look
at the face of my mysterious pursuer.
I find it unsettling that I am
scattering myself all over the house.
It's not just my reflection in the mirror,
which as soon as my face is turned,
must fleet to another dimension and lie in wait,
or the air I breathe out, which carries with it
the animal warmth of my interior.

Sitting at the table for my breakfast,
I lift a glass to my mouth,
and in the soft morning light,
see around it a girdle of fingerprints.
I take a few mousey nibbles at a banana
in my hurry to catch the train,
but when I look at it again—
half-eaten with the impression of my teeth—
a cannibalistic shiver runs down my spine.

When I lock the house and go out,
I am still thinking of these traces—
these orphaned bits of myself—
waiting to exit through the keyhole,
to follow me wherever I go.

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[1] Assistant Professor, Department of English, N.S.S. College, Pandalam. Keralam, India

Lines Written While You Were Putting on Makeup

Sambhu Ramachandran[1]

Your mascaraed eye now flashes
like a snake boat oared with lashes.
Shaken by seismic waves of smiles,
it bobs and lurches yet beguiles
the laws of movement, staying fixed.
Another gaze and I am transfixed
by how it morphs into a kite
fastened to the string of my sight.

If it were just to aestheticize
that my eyes ever sought your eyes,
you could say I saw only half
the truth and a quick polygraph
would expose me for what I am:
a peddler of elite flim-flam.

But I also see a penguin
bereft of all its wobbly kin
stranded on the melting ice floe
of your sclera. Does it know
it's our greed and mass delusion
about GDP that brought the ruin?

An atom bomb sending shock waves
across all our impending graves,
a swirl of dust and detritus—
that's what your dilated pupil is.
A charred planet floating through space
before fading without a trace.

[1] Assistant Professor, Department of English, N.S.S. College, Pandalam. Keralam, India

Argument for the Existence of the Soul (Composed While Listening to Gypsy Jazz in Downtown Vancouver)

John Menaghan[1]

body built
to break down
programmed to
fail but some
thing inside
still feels like
forever eternal
motion always
at rest body
doing its best
moving forward
through world
and time part
machine and
part will
soul sits
contented
at the center
of all knowing
nothing at all
about when or
if or would or
might or now
or then or
after or
until

[1] Independent Writer, California, United States of America

Whereabouts

John Menaghan

Get yourself if you can
to a place where
everything matters
or nothing does

Take the train of destiny
or the next bus that passes
thru featureless landscapes
brimming with symbols

Follow the winding path
vanishing before you
to a secret location
known to one and all

Go right away while
you still have the chance
although to leave later
would do just as well

When at last you arrive
make sure to keep moving
for there will be nothing
you'll need to take in

But be certain you don't
let yourself miss a thing
or forget why you came
to wherever you are

Then leave it behind
as quick as you can
and begin to pretend
you were never there

Tidings

John Menaghan[1]

Think on this now the tide is always turning
never still no more than those surging waves
it rules regulates restrains yet far inland away
from clamorous swells this rising and falling
incessant as time we forget about the baptism
of surf breaking over us purifying each moment
anew stripping our souls clean of decay debris

Bury me I pray when the time arrives there
on the shoreline or better still strew my ashes
across the turbulent ocean as it gathers up its
garments and makes for dry land or best of all
plunge me deep in the element out of which
all life emerged so whatever remains of what I
once was advances recedes forever caressing or
kissing the edge of this earth I once inhabited

night after day after night the endless rollers
delivering the news that though I seem to have
vanished from this world I have instead become
one tiny untraceable portion of swirling sea and
sand and sky on this ceaselessly spinning planet
a speck in and of the churning cosmos an enduring
aspect of the flux spirit energy movement chaos
of which our universe every bit of it is composed.

[1] Independent Writer, California, United States of America

करवट

सुशांत सौरभ[1]

दो दशक पूर्व
बाईं करवट—
पिता की साँस
मेरी साँसों को धकेलती
दाहिनी करवट—
माँ

अभी
बायाँ कमरा—
खर्राटे
बीच-बीच में चुप्पी
दाहिना कमरा—
माँ

[1] स्वतंत्र लेखक, बाँका, बिहार, भारत

तिलचट्टे और केक

सुशांत सौरभ[1]

मेरे मस्तिष्क की दीवारें
संकीर्ण होती जा रही

रोशनी की पतली सी किरण
जब धमकती बिना आमंत्रण
उसके भीतर सैकड़ों तिलचट्टे
कुलबुलाते हुए एक तरफ हो जाते

जिसके भार से
मस्तिष्क की फर्श डगमगाती

कुछ तिलचट्टे फिसल कर बाहर
रसोई में गिर पड़ते
फ्रिज के नीचे घुसते कुछ तिलचट्टे को
मैं बेझिझक कुचल देता

और उनकी लाशों के बगल में
मेरे जन्मदिन का कई दिनों से ठंडा पड़ा केक
टुक-टुक ताकता मुझे

[1] स्वतंत्र लेखक, बाँका, बिहार, भारत

A Bang from Kobani

Michael Roque[1]

BANG!
A gun blast—
a spray of brain matter
mere hours away
rose emotions
with the hot air balloons
rising over Cappadocia's suddenly stained sky.

This just in!
Kurdish teen—
The brains she blew out
through the back of her skull
to avoid capture in Kobani,
one country south of us in a Syrian civil war.

Bang!
Heroism
formed in a 25-year-old mind
while Southbound train whistles screeched in our ears—
or a sole rifle shot.
I begged, tried to convince—
Tommaso, wasn't in.

Visualized glory
onboard an Istanbul-bound bus—
my unwritten myth was as dead and distant as Ceylan Ozalp—
Her courage,
the shattered dream of my own
both pierced upon Cappadocia's spiraling spires.
bang!

[1] Independent Writer, Tel Aviv, Israel

Egg to Crack

Michael Roque[1]

All I ever wanted to be—
was a chicken.

An egg
hatching at my own pace,
gluttons watch,
plotting to cook me into a snack
they can season to satisfy
their own taste.

Two sets of hands,
four rows of teeth—
opposite appetites.

One wants me boiled in scalding water
till my soft center hardens.

One wants me scrambled
on a sizzling skillet.

Both
aim to crack open my shell
before I can hatch—
into myself.

[1] Independent Writer, Tel Aviv, Israel

The Fairytale's Over

Michael Roque[1]

The credits rolled
on a predictable "happily ever after" note.
Bambi, triumphant, stood with his dad,
seven dwarfs chased the Evil Queen
off the mountain's ledge
and a generation of kids
were tucked into a million little racecar beds.

A generation adrift in dreams,
snoozed through their fairytales
flattened by the collapsed walls
of a caved-in 20th century,
AWOKE to mounting debts.
AWOKE on sidewalks.
AWOKE to the reality
that this movie was never Disney,
but just a handful of happy little scenes
in a bizarre film by Fellini.

ACTION!

Caught in a rifle's scope,
Bambi and Faline are butchered in a human home.
A divorced drunk,
sleeping Snow White is sneakily felt up
by the dwarfs
she so dearly trusts.

And the film—
rolls—
on.

[1] Independent Writer, Tel Aviv, Israel

दिनचर्या

अर्शिया अंजुम[1]

सिंक में पड़े बर्तनों का ढेर,
उनकी खड़खड़ाहट के बीच
दूर बिल्ली की म्याऊँ सुनाई देती है।

यहाँ कितना भोजन बना है,
वहाँ अभी शिकार की तैयारी है।

तभी फ्रिज का ख्याल आता है,
दरवाज़ा खोलती हूँ
कुछ ढूँढते-ढूँढते
दृष्टि जाती है एक पैकेट पर।

एक्सपायरी डेट देखकर
हटा देती हूँ।

अचानक कुत्तों का शोर बढ़ता है।
चौखट किनारे
बचे-खुचे भोजन में मुँह लगाए
आपस में लड़ रहे हैं।

इन सब से उकताकर
मैं छत पर कपड़े सुखाने जाती हूँ।

वहाँ भरी रस्सियाँ
मुँह चिढ़ाती हैं।

इनमें जगह बनाते हुए
एक मद्धिम-सी आवाज़ घुलती है।

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[1] अर्शिया अंजुम, सहायक अध्यापक, बेसिक शिक्षा विभाग उत्तर प्रदेश, भारत

सामने की खिड़की में
दो परछाइयाँ दिखती हैं
छोटी परछाईं
हठ से पाँव पटकती है

"मुझे नई जींस
कब दिलाओगे?"

मैं कुछ क्षण ठहरती हूँ।

फिर वापस आकर
अखबार की सुर्खियाँ देखती हूँ
और सो जाती हूँ।

Anthropological Debacle

Thomas Piekarski[1]

1. Biopic

Should one day we run out
of possible serums, antidotes,
and ideas that might help
this flailing species survive,
prevent its tumbling
into a morass
of sheer madness,
mortally wounded,
hands cinched
behind our backs,
nothing gained
and everything to lose,
we'd have proven pathetic
failures, our existence
but a silly ruse.

Thus the choice whether
to rejoice in daybreak
or slump and watch
the clock ticktock.

Rascal clock running us
out of time, perhaps closer
to an abstract otherworld
where choices come cheap
and sense stands no chance.

So observe that eye in the sky
as it recommends we attempt
blending sugar and spice

[1] Independent Writer and Former Editor of the *California State Poetry Quarterly,* United States of America

in equal proportions,
bake succulent pies
loaded with diamonds,
and ponder how together
we can make better
a successful forever,
evolve into a breed
worthy of preservation.

2. Collateral Damage

First they bombard you with gloom
then follow it up with doom
that bristles brains, renders insane
the meek with its utter delusion.

As though conspiracies weren't
insidious enough, they pile on vile
politics that appeal to suckers
who feast on ridiculous doctrines.

Resigned to maintaining equilibrium
and engrain an unnatural status quo
religion dupes many a seeker
into thinking adoration is fruitful.

Enlisting the zest of carnal lust
embroils failed souls that shed
their virginity while bathing in
molten stone during nightmares.

Maniacal consequences stoked
by a whirlwind worldwide media
designed to lead astray both pastor
and worshiper drenched in dismay.

Porous those flecks briskly lit
resting upon the sill at dawn,
loose from a nuclear reactor,

their purpose a mystery.

Take Jed who should be dancing
and stung by love, but instead
choses scuttlebutt with scrubs
mainlining down in the subway.

Immortal words of the mockingbird
race, charged like electric current
through Earth's innumerable veins
and the greater population's spines.

Amethyst, tourmaline, ruby, garnet,
oh dandelion, Pikes Peak, Sinatra,
mighty Mississippi, Ponce de Leon,
won't you kindly ferry me home?

3. Kangaroo Court

Phenomenology dissolves in a vat
of pure molten gold. Heidegger
defiant, douses Husserl
with coal oil.

Sartre stuck full of darts
and Titian buried deep
beneath ruins of the Acropolis.

Imperious ghosts emerge
full of germs, tattooed
with swastikas.

Hypocritical oaths
a bucket of oats
to be munched
by the mangy burro
upon which rides
some motley fool.

Most regretful the many
slain spirits wafting
within rain clouds
that darken every second.

Patron saints
of beauty and grace
whose woe is intensely felt
whenever voices are thwarted
dangle from electrical wires
like shot birds,
upside down
swinging by their claws
and out of options.

4. Reflections and Redactions

There is no need to fuel succession,
nor recipe for intellection ferried
on wings of fantasy where creatures
stalk the imagination in lurid dreams.

Staying focused spurs contentment
for those lucky souls above ground
hovering amidst love's lofty clouds,
shrouded there in luxurious mists.

Service to oneself always comes first
no matter what the politicians claim.
I praise you because I've examined
your heart from every tangible angle.

Knowledge answers only to itself,
inclined to dissipate over time
for some who've become ostracized,
too long operating in overdrive.

Waves curl in shimmering sunlight

on a winter morning along the Pacific
where during low tide seraphs confide
in one another and polar bears slumber.

Step up and take control. I'm waiting
to watch as you carve that solid marble
statue of the ideal mate. You were born
to take advantage of such superior skills.

Forget about all the frills, flimsy tastes,
slander hurled from wannabe ingrates,
gory dismemberment of innocents,
dead presidents and worn sentiments.

Creation wasn't made in a day said
the owl with a nest in the woodshed.
Its wisdom as sure as your face even
when showing remorse or pure rage.

5. Pipe Dream

Like starlight you glide
around downtown
investigating places
never encountered
in any past life.

There to explore
and survey
but not report.
Now you are your own
unique government,
boundless energy,
intrepid entity
viewing some
addict asleep beside
his tent at the corner
of eighth and Capitol.

Anxiety is repressed
for the moment but
could pick up suddenly
which depends upon
concocting a workable
excuse in time to talk
your way out of it.

Potential reprisals scare
the bejesus out of you,
for who safely traverses
this gritty urban core
dodging vagrants
    and sewers clogged
    with cardboard
after a steady rain?

Take heart, be patient
until the band starts up,
then go plant sunflowers,
impregnate the land
with precious essences.

6. Identity Theft

With no Bastille to storm the invaders
instead razed Baalbek. Natives scattered
like flocks of geese. Those foreigners
toppled sacred statues, installed gods
and enacted stringent statutes
such as no loitering in Dead Sea foam.
Devastation lay in their wake.
Sacrifice denied except on Saturdays.
Bread given out by the slice, miserly
the hierarchy of that new united front.

7. Pariah

Enter the sound of the leprechaun playing his lute
and you find the world has become an empty shell.

You retreat to childhood habits taken for granted,
not mindful of the present scene. The prime image
is lost in a summersaulting body excommunicated
from saving grace. Antithetical to life experience
this is, although inside the psyche still luxuriates.
You once shadowboxed with a soul that knocking
you out felt like demotion. Your ego took quite a
pounding. Alligators and toads slithered through
the slimy bog wherein sin stuck as with mucilage.
Cityscapes all ablaze, and you surely responsible,
impossible to blame Flaubert, Baudelaire, or Poe.
Macro economics irrelevant, and still unresolved
are ancient myths that haunt, taunt, and admonish
the heart. You are undetectable now, understood
by nobody, even in outmost mind of the world's
conscience. Brute thought disgorges you, this as
winds of indecision like hurricanes assault vague
windows of your wildest visions. Hence you skirl
outward, through untold empyreans, and desolate
hells where the rudely sacrificed have in due time
served proper penance. Next time around will not
come because there is no thunder, force of nature
creating an undertow to ferry you toward society.

8. Grief Thief

Grief thief be gone,
no longer albatross
circling my head,
courier of pain.

Get lost! You are
not a boss of mine.
I annihilate the grip
you've had on me.

You say you make art
but I'm bright enough

to know you only
pantomime the part.

You are hereby
expelled, at liberty
to meander through
the perilous void.

I don't condemn you
who would perplex
soundest of psyches
though I'm tempted.

No paradisical mind
would ever enlist
you as captain
of its magic ship.

Oh you grief thief
vanish from view
and allow my soul
its rightful delight.

On A Dark Night

George Freek[1]

In moments of insecurity,
I ask things of the stars,
but they're buried in the sky
like insects in a tree.
Their powers are faulty.
The moon, their companion,
hangs like a confused question mark,
an upside down clown.
Nothing can tell me why
I'm alive. I ask myself,
when my life is over,
will I be able to enjoy
the rising of the sun,
the way I enjoy daffodils,
as they rise from the earth,
or will my life end
like a shooting star,
and it will be over,
as soon as it appears.

[1] Independent Writer, Douglas St., Belvidere, IL Illinois, United States of America

Night Poetry

George Freek[1]

Leaves descend cheerfully,
and circle fraternally,
then fall into snug beds
when they're dead.
The sun disappears each night,
as the moon takes its place
but it's a phoenix-like fate.
Tonight night is a placid sea,
which overwhelms me.
It has no shore.
It doesn't roar,
But it creates shadows,
which, like lizards,
crawl along my floor.
They're a kind of poetry,
and poetry reflects life,
but I find there's no grief,
when they exit my back door,
leaving with the wind,
as it blows away dead leaves.

[1] Independent Writer, Douglas St., Belvidere, IL Illinois, United States of America

The Facts of Life

George Freek[1]

Winter freezes the hands and feet,
as life continues,
but the mind is numbed to sleep.
Nature maintains a balance.
It's laws are complete.
They're devised
with an unseen will.
As a hawk spies a wren,
he dives with an acrobat's skill.
The wren's death
is the hawk's gain.
With no knowledge of science,
or employing a disguise,
he must survive,
and the hawk
accomplishes his task.
It's a riddle to me.
If I look in my books,
They'll give me answers,
but I feel that they're
merely ingenious lies.

[1] Independent Writer, Douglas St., Belvidere, IL Illinois, United States

the last sip of you

Francisco Izukiri[1]

A grape-to-oxblood
fragment of luminous sky
besieged by cinereous clouds.

[1] Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Venice, Italy and an Italian Zen Buddhist poet writing from the Venetian Lagoon

The Only Open Eyes in the Temple

Sushanth Shyamsundar[1]

When every forehead lowered to the flame,
I kept my eyes on every painted face.
The adults knew the posture and the name.
I watched the god who occupied the place.

They closed their eyes as proof that they could see.
I opened mine, too curious to be blind.
No thunder punished disobedient me.
No deity reached down to change my mind.

I did not know this undevoutened gaze
would follow me through every form of doubt.
I learned the hymns, accepted all the praise,
yet looking mattered more than finding out.

The others bowed. I watched the camphor climb.
I still look straight at God from time to time.

[1] Writer and Performer, Chennai, India

Head of the Family, Eighteen

Sushanth Shyamsundar[1]

At eighteen, I reached the hospital gate,
still someone's frightened, unprepared son,
and left it carrying a different weight.

My father's final hour was already done.
My mother held me hard against her arm.
They looked to me as though I were the one.

I had to keep my grandmother calm
and guide her through the crowd that spoke his name
while swallowing each shiver of alarm.

The man who gave our family shape and name
was gone, and every relative watched me stand
while priests and mourners called the gods by name.

No one had taught the boy how to command
a grief that could not fit inside his chest.
They simply placed the family in his hand

and called him head before he could find rest.

[1] Writer and Performer, Chennai, India

The Delivery Rider is India's Greatest Hero

Sushanth Shyamsundar[1]

The delivery rider is India's greatest hero.

Not film hero.

No slow-motion entry. No six-pack lighting. No background dancers appearing from a tea stall.

Just helmet, raincoat, phone mount, petrol fumes, one insulated bag, and the full emotional weight of my decision not to cook.

The app says arriving. The road says good luck.

Let us be honest.

I had ingredients.

Onion. Tomato. One chilli. A pan. Some amount of self-respect.

Then evening came.

The body sat down. The brain dimmed its lights. The stomach opened negotiations.

I opened the app not to order, just to look.

This is how collapse begins.

Fifteen minutes later, one man on a bike was carrying my lack of discipline through traffic.

The app says arriving. The road says good luck.

Look at what the rider faces.

Speed breakers with no warning.

Potholes with local confidence.

Rainwater pretending to be road.

Autos rejecting geometry.

Buses breathing heat.

Dogs holding committee meetings near the divider.

Some uncle reversing with only vibes and no witnesses.

And somewhere above all this, my phone says:

Your order is delayed by 4 minutes.

My order?

Brother, a human being is fighting three traffic signals, one wet flyover, app pressure, customer impatience, and a pizza that has started losing structural faith.

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[1] Writer and Performer, Chennai, India

The app says arriving. The road says good luck.

And we become monsters.

Tiny, hungry monsters.

We watch the dot move.

Why is the dot not moving?

Why did the dot turn left?

Why is the dot near petrol bunk?

Why is the dot living its own life?

The rider calls.

Location, anna?

I say, come straight, then left, then small right, then near that building, then opposite one shop, then ask watchman.

Beautiful.

GPS has resigned.

Cartography has fainted.

The rider says, okay anna, with the calm of a man who has heard worse nonsense before dinner.

The app says arriving. The road says good luck.

Then comes the gate.

Apartment security has entered boss level.

Which flat?

Name?

Phone number?

Why food?

Who ordered?

Go basement.

No, go lobby.

No parking here.

Call customer.

Customer does not pick up because customer is watching little dot with spiritual attention but somehow ignoring actual call.

The rider waits.

Food waits.

Hunger becomes accusation.

The app says arriving. The road says good luck.

And customers have demands.

Please bring change.

Please come fast.

Please don't call.

Please call when near.

Please leave at gate.

Please come upstairs.

Please don't ring bell, baby sleeping.

Please ring bell loudly, I am inside bathroom.

Please get extra ketchup from restaurant that packed the order nineteen minutes ago in another pin code.

We are not customers.

We are weather events with coupon codes.

The app says arriving. The road says good luck.

And then there is rain.

Rain changes everything.

Rain on helmet. Rain inside collar. Rain on phone screen. Rain making maps drunk. Rain turning lane into soup. Rain making every brake light look like a warning from God with weak electricity.

Still the rider comes.

Meanwhile, I am upstairs, inside, dry, tracking progress with the seriousness of a control tower and the courage of a wet biscuit.

Order late.

Shame also late.

But arriving.

The app says arriving. The road says good luck.

Let us talk about ratings.

Five stars. Four stars. Three stars.

As if the rider's entire battle can be reduced to my mood when the fries arrive slightly tired.

Was the food hot?

Was the rider polite?

Did the delivery meet expectations?

My expectation was that dinner would teleport.

That was unreasonable.

The rider is not magician.

The rider is a person with knees, fuel, time, sweat, rent, phone battery, possibly back pain, and ten more orders stacked behind my craving.

The app says arriving. The road says good luck.

And yes, there is exploitation here.

Let us not wrap guilt in peri-peri fries and call it appreciation.

Convenience has a rider ID.

Discount has a spine.

Free delivery is never free for the person getting rained on near the signal.

Every time I say, just order, someone else says, where is parking?

Every time I say, I am too tired, someone else climbs stairs with my laziness packed in foil.

The app says arriving. The road says good luck.

Still, when the rider arrives, there is a small ceremony.

Helmet lifted. Bag opened. Steam released. Name checked. OTP given.

For one second, two strangers meet around hunger.

I say, thank you, anna.

Sometimes too softly. Sometimes while already smelling food. Sometimes with guilt that should be bigger but is distracted by biryani.

The rider nods.

Already leaving.

Another dot waiting to become dinner elsewhere.

The app says arriving. The road says good luck.

So here is my small prayer— no, not prayer, my small request from one lazy citizen with a fork in hand.

Tip when you can.

Answer the call.

Give the location clearly.

Don't punish the rider for the restaurant's cold samosa.

Don't make someone wait downstairs because you are busy choosing which plate looks less embarrassing.

Don't write rude instructions in the notes section like hunger has made you emperor.

The app says arriving. The road says good luck.

Because the delivery rider is carrying more than dinner.

He is carrying our late nights, our bad days, our office fatigue, our exam panic, our heartbreak meals, our family fights, our rain laziness, our “I cannot cook today,” our “I deserve something hot,” our “I will be a better person tomorrow.”

Tomorrow, of course, we order again.

But tonight, when the map says arriving in two minutes, remember:

that is not a dot.

That is a man cutting through heat, water, horns, rubbish, wrong turns, and our collective inability to make dinner.

The app says arriving. The road says good luck.

When he reaches, do not treat him like the last step of the transaction.

Treat him like someone who fought the whole city so your stomach could stop making speeches.

The Sound of What Arrives

John Brixter Tino[1]

Approaching now, the hum beneath the calendar, a low wire singing
in the floor of the year. I press my ear to Tuesday and hear it—
the drone of a decade still forming, its pitch like a coin dropped down
a well that has yet to strike water. I have always been able to hear forward.
The way heat ticks in pipes before dawn, the way a house settles toward
its eventual collapse. The future has a sound. I am telling you. A specific
resonance, mineral and clean, like glass being cut in another room. I was
twelve when I first caught it—a whine behind the weather report, thin as
a filament, and I followed it for years. Now I wake and the morning carries
a particular chord, lower than speech, a vibration I feel in my teeth. Whole
cities approach me as frequencies I cannot name. They arrive the way
thunder arrives: the sound precedes the thing. I charted what I could.
Small predictions: a letter, a phone call, the exact hour a woman would
leave. Then larger ones—the static before markets fell, that electric whir
before the towers. I wanted silence. I drove into the desert. Still it came:
the tone of the day after tomorrow, insistent, a single sustained note rising
from beneath the sand. There is no deafness deep enough. The years keep
sounding ahead of themselves, and I keep hearing what the world
has decided to become before it arrives, before it knows
its own full and terrible name.

[1] Department of English, Foreign Languages and Linguistics, Polytechnic University of the Philippines, Manila, Philippines.

At the Bus Stop

John Brixter Tino[1]

I stand where the bench has worn its green paint down to bare metal,
cold against the backs of my thighs. A woman folds her newspaper
into smaller and smaller squares until it becomes a thing she can hold
in one fist. The wind lifts a receipt from the gutter— it catches against
my shoe, a stranger's groceries: milk, bread, six limes. I have waited here
before in rain that fell so fine it seemed less water than intention, less sky
than breath released. The diesel smell arrives before the bus does. Always.
I know the order of things— first the bitter air, then the sound like a throat
clearing, then the great blue body rounding the corner. A child beside me
counts the cracks in the sidewalk, her lips moving. Her mother watches
traffic with the stillness of a woman who has memorized departure.
I watch my reflection in the shelter's scratched glass— transparent, layered
over advertisements for teeth whitening, for cruises to places I will never go.
The bus opens its doors. We step forward together, strangers practicing
the same brief trust—that the floor will hold, that there is a seat,
that the driver knows the way.

[1] Department of English, Foreign Languages and Linguistics, Polytechnic University of the Philippines, Manila, Philippines.

We were only Bright for a Moment

John Brixter Tino[1]

I burned the way a match burns, all the way down
to the fingers. There was a summer I carried light
in my chest like a swallowed coin, and you were
there, radiant with the particular fever of being young.
We stood in the parking lot at dusk, our shadows long
as declarations. I remember the heat off the asphalt,
how it made the air visible, trembling. We thought
we were infinite. The night disagreed. I have kept
the photographs where our faces are overexposed,
white flares where eyes should be, proof that we looked
directly at joy. The sprinklers came on. We ran through
them anyway. Water on bare skin, the shock a kind of
baptism we invented for ourselves. I think brightness is
a unit of measure no instrument records. It lives in the body,
then leaves. A filament thins. Goes dark. You drove away
in October. Leaves the color of a wound healing. I stood
on the lawn and watched the taillights shrink to red periods.
Two dots. Then the road swallowed everything. Now I carry
the afterimage, that green ghost the retina makes when
the source is gone. I press my palms against my eyelids
and see us still, faintly, the way a bulb remembers
burning for one full second after the current stops.

[1] Department of English, Foreign Languages and Linguistics, Polytechnic University of the Philippines, Manila, Philippines.

Two Cups of Indian Tea—

Anatoly Loginov[1]

Two cups of Indian tea—
dark and dense as dried blood.
The cup is full of the South—
cardamom burns, clove scratches
and warmth comes slowly from within, heavy as an animal.
The table smells of daily life,
the spices carry the breath of another continent.
A single trembling thread of steam
binds the two poles before they can tear free.

We sit close.
The silence sits closer.
Whatever might have been said
stays in the window.
Two breaths hover above the table.

Tea—the hot distance between us.
The whole of a memory,
held in two hands.
It burns the lips.
And warms the place beneath the ribs.
Where the cold has been waiting.
The cold stays outside.

[1] Independent Writer, Clinical Psychologist, and Director, Center for Interdisciplinary Social Research "Intellect," St. Petersburg, Russia

पीतल और सोना

अमित कुमार [1]

चैन से थोड़ा रह सकूँ
दुनिया की बातें सह सकूँ
पूछे जब कोई नाम मेरा
सर उठा के कह सकूँ
बस इतना सा पाने को
खुद को ही फुसलाने को
मीलों दूर मैं दौड़ आया
सब कुछ अपना छोड़ आया
छूट गए सब साथी संगी
छूट गई पतली पगडण्डी
अब कहाँ वो घर का ठाठ
भूल गए हम छठ का घाट
ये कहाँ पहुँच गए चलते-चलते
धुएँ से आँखें मलते-मलते
चैन किसी को यहाँ कहाँ है
पाँव हैं भागे, राह धुआँ है
अब मैं वीरानों में रहता हूँ
जो भी सब बोले सहता हूँ
कुछ भी कहने से डरता हूँ
खुद से ही बातें करता हूँ
किस से पूछूँ मेरा गाँव कहाँ है
पीपल की वो छाँह कहाँ है
यहाँ तो सब-के-सब भाग रहे हैं
रातों में भी जाग रहे हैं
यही पाने क्या निकला था
क्या सोच रहा जब फिसला था
झोली में भरने पीतल थोड़ा
मैंने हाथों से सोना छोड़ा

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[1] स्वतंत्र लेखक और सॉफ्टवेयर प्रोफेशनल, पुणे, महाराष्ट्र, भारत

Blue Frights

Gabriella Garofalo[1]

To Y.

Snap it now, a dewy-eyed display of innocence,
Her dazzling talent for lying-
Elsewhere, sudden, mad hopes, a desire you'd like to burn
On days when blue shadows fall across the floor,
And how do you write them? Hidden words,
Or in the spotlight? Either way, they drive you mad,
And don't get me started on the cheap treasures
Of spring, grass, flowers, scents-
A garden of love, or betrayed trust?
No, just a dead blue hidden in your time,
Blue thoughts nowhere to be found,
So, cut it out, let's buy all tales and myths,
Let's get our minds blasted by dreams, no harm at all
In the breaking of days and blue rooms,
Let's get high skies, and a lavender scent everywhere,
Home, cider, sofa, no smashed horizons,
Only a twilight to shield you, such warm, cosy room,
Your nights, such warm, boundless quilts,
And shades of spring look so caring, you know,
Like the wolf in Red Riding Hood-
O moon, by the by, what colour is your soul tonight?
Just hunger, or swathes of loss and distress?
Don't play dirty, c'mon, we are among friends,
No secrets here, and shame a way of life,
Your soul's pour-out days among dark knots,
Or tangled branches where light waits,
Out of reach like words never dreamt of,
And who cares if the heat makes souls a still life,
If love or loss are sitting on a park bench at night,
If stumbles come quickly, or demise gives you words,

[1] Independent Writer, Former Teacher and Librarian, Ferrara, Italy

Yes, who cares? A safe distance, or fading obsessions
Will see to that, no need for stars' dirty stares,
So, waste no time, ask angels round cribs,
Don't look at blue mayhems ready to sweep away your mind,
Count blessings, or your lucky stars, and may your desire
Be bare as a winter branch, be hard, bright, and distant
As night sky, so much for Hyperborean stars
Always mistaking hungry hopes for truths so keen
On dashing into a tangled loss of summer flings,
Half-witted plans, so heedless of life and her greed
For abstract blue skies, well, short of them,
Your supernatural mind.

****

To M.

'Pick up a brush, paint the light,
Skip archives and museums,
Just drink in the hassle of the streets'-
What bloody nonsense they spout
When you're up to your neck in a journey
Through secrets and darkness,
How these words keep coming back,
Scarred by the spring graffiti and all that blue,
Haunting, unreliable, the dust of dead workers,
A sky that tricks, then dumps you,
Ah, some dreary tales of lovers wooed and ditched-
But then again, what's desire but a site
Where you pay so high for back rooms,
Or a nook under the stairs?
Not hands here, nor eyes looking northwards,
So, who cares if Persephone's back
Like a sudden spring when things go bust,
Who cares if her light is faint or a bit dim?
Time, don't get worked up, don't get topsy-turvy,
Just keep in mind the sea's delight
In the brine holding to the limbs, and you, sky,
Forget cryptic texts, save hidden codes
For the clouds, those chatty, daft teens-

Oh soul, if only God had you handy
When nights only give heathen prayers
Blessing the limbs, and the mind's shenanigans,
Or a jumble of dreams go out of their way
To break your pledge to the stars-
An eerie scene, I know, like out of a film,
As no kind touch lingers on dark rays dazzling
From fading stars, the years of research.

****

To P.

So, what have we got just now?
No scary stuff, easy, easy,
Bit of suburban adulteries, unimportant trysts,
Those ill-starred lovers of yore,
Or daydreaming tourists of the mind, words dancing away
From cheap resorts as if nothing is on,
Just cheap snacks, and ordinary wine-
And just when you think you've got it straight
Along she comes in a dire need of diversions,
Spring roaming souls to stave off sparks
Of doubts, a slew of slave thirsts-
Well, that's family again for you,
But please spare me old shenanigans or daft wordplays,
I know, the sky is doing fine, but his boho shenanigans
Cut no ice with conservative trees or a shy grass,
The retired old lady who keeps coming up with new games-
And don't act up a storm, mind, you frolicker
With no sense of decency,
No matter how early you wake up,
Fear'll wake up before you do, some early riser,
As implacable waves feed words, maybe frighten them,
When shouting 'Come into my life', of course
They stay put and never give in-
So, just out of curiousity, do words hit the mark?
Yes, sure, particularly if spring reminds you
Reminds you of a young wife in love, turned a shrew

Within a few months, if sky and clouds look like
Hyper teens on a first date, so psyched-
Beware then, seeds of discord, the fields are parched-
Nothing for sale as yet?
A bunch of cheap junk you'd gladly do without,
Shards of hope, maybe, maybe dark waves.

Easier Roads

Bainapalli Vishal[1]

It was all a jungle
where we plucked wildberries,
offered them to our Kuladevi
on the hill,
evenings filled
with sounds of crickets
and little green lanterns
as we walked down
chatting, eating prasadam.

The roads are wider now,
safer, and easier,
the hill barely green,
a layer shedding every season,
cement walls,
bustling streets,
and roaring horns.

But the shrine is nowhere.

[1] Independent Poet, Palasa, Andhra Pradesh, India

She Arrived by Dawn at My Gate

Bainapalli Vishal[1]

She arrived by dawn at my gate,
hoping she could pluck
flowers from my garden.

Clothes tattered, putrid stench,
discoloured skin.

I sit at my stairs,
listening to her
recite stories from past,
incomprehensible.

Poverty
kinship,
divergent roads.

Ties flowers in her dupatta,
crooked smile,
asks if she could come again
tomorrow.

Her silhouette disappears
in the road,
flowers carried away
for her God.

[1] Independent Poet, Palasa, Andhra Pradesh, India

अब व्योम विमल है

कविता चौधरी[1]

तपती थी दोपहरी दारुण, झुलसा-झुलसा था वन-उपवन,
पत्ते-पत्ते मौन खड़े थे, बूँद-बूँद को तृषित हुआ मन।
अंग-अंग से स्वेद टपकता, घुटती थी नभ में भारी उमस,
तप्त श्वास थी, रुकी वायु थी, शिथिल-विकल था सकल चराचर।
सहसा घिरे गगन पर अंबर, घन घहराए नीलम-कजरारे,
फूट पड़ी सावन की धारा, रोए बादल अश्रु बहाए।
जी भर बरसे मेघ गगन में, धुल-धुल निकली तृषित धरा,
शांत हुई वह अगन पुरातन,
अब आकाश विमल है,
अब आकाश विमल है!
संध्या की पदचाप हुई जब, भीगी माटी महक उठी,
ढलते दिन की रक्तिम आभा, नभ-मस्तक पर चमक उठी।
दिन भर का दहकता जो लावा, शीतल झोंकों ने शांत किया,
ज्वाला-सुलगे व्योम-पटल को मेघों ने वरदान दिया।
धुल गया सारा ताप गगन का,
छूट गया वह भार सघन-सा,
शांत समीरन बही सुखद अब—
प्रक्षालित आलोक धरा पर,
अब आकाश विमल है!

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[1] स्वतंत्र लेखिका, झालरा, राजस्थान, भारत

FICTION / कथा साहित्य

I-Spy

Samuel J Smith[1]

"Ok boys, screens down, eyes up", Dad says, turning around to look at me and Isaiah in the back of the car.

We both slowly look up from our tablets, yawning and stretching.

"Are we there yet?" Iz asks, looking around at the two rows of cars either side of us.

I snort and roll my eyes.

"Yeah, we're going camping in the middle of the motorway, doofus."

Iz ignores me and watches the cars out of his window.

"Why are we slowing down?" he asks, a whine creeping into his voice.

"Not sure pal, could be anything", Dad says. "Maybe there's been an accident, roadworks, people on the motorway. Or just your standard bank holiday traffic."

"Maybe someone died", I say as we pass under a bridge, and a shadow passes over us all. I look at Iz, his eyes now wide with fear. Dad taps on the headrest of the passenger seat to get my attention.

"Arlo, don't say things like that, you've frightened your brother." Dad sighs and shakes his head. "Just think before you speak."

I glance at Iz and mumble a quick, "Sorry."

We both sit in silence as the car creeps along. There's a woman asleep in the car next to us, her pale face pressed against the glass.

"Daaaaad, Arlo won't stay on his side of the car!", Iz yells, making me jump. I turn to him and he grins mischievously.

"You liar!" I shout back.

"Boys!" Dad shouts and slams his hands on the steering wheel. We fall silent instantly.

After a few minutes, we start to speed up, the fields flying past us in a blur of greens and browns. Dad clears his throat.

"You know, we used to have to make our own fun on long car journeys. We're going to forget screens and engage our brains. I-Spy, who wants to go first?"

Me and Iz look at one another.

"Ok, fine", Dad says, after a moment of silence. "I'll start."

He looks around.

"Right. I spy, with my little eye, something beginning with B."

"Boys!", shouts Iz.

Dad shakes his head.

"Backpack", I say.

"Nope", Dad replies.

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[1] Independent Writer, Manchester, United Kingdom

"Bald!", shouts Iz.

"Cheeky!", Dad shouts back, glaring at Iz in his mirror. The car starts to shake as we burst out laughing.

After we calm down, Dad points out of the window.

"I'll give you both a clue, it's outside the car."

"Bush!" shouts Iz.

"Not so loud, Iz", Dad warns, putting a hand to his ear.

"Bridge", I say.

"Correctomundo!", Dad says. I pump my fist in celebration, whilst Iz makes a show of folding his arms and sticking his bottom lip out. He always does this when he loses. Which is all the time.

"Ok Ar, your go!" Dad says and begins to look around.

My eyes light up as we pass under another bridge, and I glimpse a thin lady in white stood staring out at the traffic.

"I spy, with my little eye, something beginning with W", I say, a smile on my face.

"Wheel!", shouts Iz, pointing at the front of the car.

I shake my head.

"Windows?", Dad tries.

"Nope!", I say.

"Warren!", yells Iz, holding up a well-loved toy rabbit that had been the fourth member of our family ever since he was a baby.

"Nuh-uh!", I reply.

Dad looks up as we pass under another bridge.

"Wagon?", he guesses.

"It is outside", I say.

Iz and Dad sit in silence.

Suddenly, Iz shouts, "Woman, like on my tab!" and Dad jumps, making the car bounce from left to right. The cars either side of us blast their horns in anger as Dad spins around to glare at us.

"Iz, stop shouting in the car, you're going to cause an accident", he booms, even louder than Iz shouted. He looks down at the floor as the satnav starts beeping.

I peer into the front of the car and see a big red triangle flash up on the screen. As the cars begin to slow once more, Dad sighs and taps on the steering wheel.

"You'll have to tell us what it is, Ar", Dad says, "I don't think we're going to guess it."

I make a face like I'd bitten into a lemon.

"Iz was right Dad, it was woman," I say.

Now it was Dad's turn to make a lemon face.

"I thought you said outside?", Dad asks, looking left and right.

"Yeah, she was up there", I say, nodding, "on one of those."

The cars had begun to slow down as we approached another bridge. As we creep under it, Dad also looks up, slowly scanning left to right.

"Dad!", Iz shouts, and we look back down to see that the traffic has stopped. Dad slams on the brakes and we all jolt forward in our seats.

The sun had now begun to set, making weird shadows on the cars in front of us. I follow the shape of the bridge across the 3 rows of cars before staring at the white van in front of us, its back doors splashed with mud.

The shape of a head rises from the shadow of the bridge, appearing on the back of the van. The head moves left and right, as though it's looking for someone, and sways from side to side. Suddenly it ducks out of view. I gasp and look away.

When I look back, the shadow of the bridge is breaking apart as the cars start to move, making it look as though it's collapsing.

As we move forwards, a sign outside the car flashes with the same red triangle that was on the satnav earlier. Dad puts the radio on, and happy music fills the car. Iz grins like a crazy person.

"Hey Arlo, it's your girlfriend Taylor Swift!"

"Shut up, doofus", I say, pretending to punch Iz, who flinches. He grabs his tablet off the seat and pretends to look innocent.

As Dad is turning around to face us, a traffic announcement interrupts the music, and we stop below another bridge.

"And for anyone travelling southbound between junctions 7 and 9 of the M62, there's been a serious incident, so please be aware if you're headed in that direction."

"Swiftie, swiftie!" Iz sings, holding up his tablet to reveal a video of a Taylor Swift concert.

"Stop it!" I snap, snatching his tablet and swiping at the screen. The concert video disappears to reveal a blurry video of the motorway, and the camera moves around so fast, it makes my eyes feel funny.

"I did that before!" Iz says proudly.

I ignore him and carry on watching. The camera stops moving around and focuses on a bridge in the distance. A slim white figure can be seen walking slowly onto the bridge, before stopping and facing out over the rows of cars. She then looks right and left. A few seconds pass before she quickly climbs over the railing and looks straight at the camera, her face a smudge. Then she jumps. I gasp and throw the tablet down onto the floor.

"Hey, that's miiiiine!" Iz whines and hits me. I barely even register it.

Dad spins around in his seat once again.

"Right, that's enough", he barks. "You've been warned about screens before."

I clear my throat.

"Dad, there's a video on Iz's tablet of a woman jumping off a bridge."

Dad frowns and glances down at the floor.

"Show me."

I grab the tablet and bring the video up again. Dad watches it and reacts like he's been punched when it gets to the end. He puts the tablet in the glovebox then looks us both in the eye.

"I don't want you looking at that stuff, boys. It'll give you nightmares."

There's a flash of white over Dad's shoulder, followed by a loud crash as something lands on the bonnet. Dad spins back around in his seat and we all watch something slide off the front of the car and land with a thump on the road.

Nobody breathes. A few seconds pass.

There's a soft rustling sound from just outside the car. We all turn to see the top of a head, black hair covered in blood, outside the passenger window. Dad puts a shaking hand over his mouth as the door handle begins rattling, and me and Isaiah start screaming. Dad stares out of the window, his face white. He slowly opens the glovebox and begins rummaging around inside. A long, pale arm appears and starts tapping on the window. Dad makes a sound like he's choking. As he pushes things aside, Iz's tablet falls out onto the seat. The arm lowers, then starts to use the handle as a lever to pull itself upright. The top of the head appears once again, hair shiny red, and now the eyes, wide open, as if someone is pulling them apart with their fingers. The black pupils dart around, looking at Dad, me and Iz, then down at the tablet on the passenger seat. They seem to grow even wider, if that were possible.

"Dad, give me the tablet", I say, my voice sounding strange and far away.

He moves like he's in a dream, slowly and unsure of what he's doing. Picking up the tablet, he passes it to me, and the wild, black eyes follow as it moves into the back of the car.

I swipe the screen to get to the video from before, then press the little trashcan to delete it. I look up to see the head duck down and the snake-like arm fall away.

Dad sits up straight, wiping tears from his eyes with the sleeve of his jacket before glancing out of the passenger window. Nothing there. He breathes out slowly with a shaky laugh. Iz is still gripping onto me for dear life, sobbing like crazy. Dad turns to face us and smiles, but it looks more like he's about to cry. He reaches out and strokes Iz's hair, and for once he doesn't pull away or moan. None of us speak.

A car horn from behind makes us all jump, Dad shouts, "Shit!", and me and Iz both start giggling. Behind us is a row of cars. Dad holds up his hand, clears his throat, and we slowly move away. We all glance up nervously at the next few motorway bridges we pass under, but we don't see anyone. The traffic clears up and we start going faster.

After a while, Iz falls asleep, and I ask Dad what happened before. He says something about crossing that bridge when we come to it, then laughs to himself.

I don't get it.

The Third Date

Andrew Borneman[1]

She fell into my arms in sweat and half-groans. Hungry kisses like bites, missing the lips, catching an eyebrow or an ear.

I planned an evening paddleboat ride as a sort of foreplay to our third date. Two weeks ago on our second date, she brought me a daffodil and dropped it in my beer. She blew me a kiss at the door after I drove her home. I opened car doors, picked up checks, pecked her on the cheek. She giggled as we stepped gingerly into puddles as we boarded the paddleboat. I didn't think to tell her to wear sneakers.

We'd met online, of course, like everyone else. Her pics: wide-set eyes, a half-smile that tempted, a lock of auburn hair dangling in front of an eye like a hypnotic watch. The hottest: she licked a lollipop. On the first date she had worn a sleek suit the color of sand, her hair in a smart bun. But then the second date: coming in out of the rain, droopy flannel shirt, slipping on a wet floor. Now this, the third date. I once thought her turned-up nose was cute but now asleep in the bed next to me, she looks childish, ordinary, one knee with a bright surgery scar I hadn't noticed before.

Now I lay here in bed, the two of us under a single sheet, the blanket and quilt having fallen to the floor. Her name slips my mind for a second as I drift in and out of sleep. I don't get up because I don't want to wake her. Then we'd have to navigate through the sharp, uncomfortable edges of banal talk that follow third-date sex.

If this were college, the compulsory walk of shame would follow, the one that accompanied impulsive trysts. I'd prefer that now to a series of sluggish minutes waiting for dawn. The first kiss now feels millennia old. I spot my boxers on the floor, a plaid puddle next to the bed. I don't see my other clothes or keys or phone I discarded earlier, just how many hours ago I don't know. Under the sheet my penis looks garish, ornamental, unnecessary. I want my own bedroom, the warmth of my ancient dog Jake who can't see or hear but smells out my loneliness and sleeps on my feet.

When I eventually get up, she doesn't move. Phew. I pace her house. I look at labels on pill bottles. Drugs I don't recognize. Maybe for cramps or headaches. She's an attorney, I remember that now. I imagine her thin fingers gesticulating wildly in front of a jury, her tall, lithe figure propped up by stilettos that clack on the hardwood court floor, her hair stabbed into submission with a pencil, delicate pearls dipping into the darkness of cleavage. What was her name again? Bess, that's right.

I return to the bedroom. I think about a clean getaway. Under the blanket on the floor, I find my clothes. Then I spot a condom wrapper. Should I leave a note or send a text? Her snore is a slight whistle, her body an amorphous lump under the fawn-colored sheet. I drop my clothes back into a small pile. I don't trust myself to make nice over morning coffee and then leave forever. I put on my boxers and return to laying under the single sheet. Her breathing changes, evens out, shortens. I wonder if she is awake.

My stomach knots itself several times over as I lay there. I want to leave. Somehow, though, I am frozen. Women across the last decade parade through my mind's eye – cheeks blushed, eyes sharpened with mascara – their movements assured. They each say what I once said to them.

"I'll call you, I promise," said Debra.

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[1] Teacher, Baltimore, Maryland, United States of America

"We don't have to do anything. We can just hold each other," said Elaine.

"I'm not ready to date," said Mariah.

"You'll be great for some other lucky girl, just not me," said Kate.

My legs throb, which is often the case when I'm exhausted. Under the sheet, I notice my hairy lower torso, flabby skin, old stretch marks now more white than purple, the appendectomy scar I often forget about. I am much too old for this. I turn away from Bess, flip over on my side, butt to butt. I hope she's not awake. I can't face her. I sleep.

When I wake, the bathroom light is on, and the other side of the bed is empty. I don't even know what day it is or what I have to do tomorrow. No, not tomorrow. Today! In a state of drowsiness, I forget my age. I think of Bess's soft, supple body falling on top of mine. This, our third date. Her fluid lines. I can't move and the house is dead quiet. Perhaps she is gone from the bed, from the house, and I am alone.

The Girl Who Died

Calvin Mills[1]

Genevieve had always felt invisible. Yes, she had a live-in boyfriend, a job in women's apparel at a posh department store, and a nuclear family in the same zip code. But a social life? Much of her invisibility was self-inflicted quiet. She was pleasant to look at, yet utterly unassuming—a touch plump, with pink cheeks and arms that flushed crimson when jogging, which she did regularly in an attempt to keep her weight under control. Then there was her name. She often noticed customers' eyes drop to her brass badge, though they almost always stopped short of attempting its pronunciation.

Most days she was neither particularly happy nor unhappy, but a thing called depression sometimes submerged her in the latter, pressing her backward into the depths of a dark, coagulated place. Life was rarely terrible for Genevieve, but it was often dull. Her live-in boyfriend, Trevor, was supposed to care for her, but moments of genuine tenderness could be counted on her thumbs. They had sex on a semi-regular basis, perfunctory encounters where a thing was to be done, and so they did it.

Trevor never mentioned marriage. And so Genevieve often wondered if there was more to life. During darker bouts of self-reflection, she asked herself whether Trevor, her family, or her coworkers would be sorry they hadn't treated her better if she were to die suddenly.

During one of those deep, backward-pressing moods, contemplating a half-formed urge to leap from the overpass she strolled across on her way to work in downtown Seattle, she was struck in the back of the head by a long two-by-six timber dangling precariously from the side of a passing flatbed. The truck was hauling construction debris from a remodel down the avenue.

The driver had swung around a corner two blocks back too sharply, shifting the lumber until one board jutted out, cantilevered over the sidewalk. He rattled along, oblivious, right past Genevieve—who was knocked unceremoniously to the pavement—until the board struck a stop sign with a deafening clang. Only then did he pull over. He shoved the protruding timber back into the bed, adjusted the red warning flag, and tightened the twine. Crossing his arms, he inspected his handiwork, wiped his forehead, and drove away.

Genevieve was not knocked unconscious. Although the pain was blinding, her immediate terror was having made a spectacle of herself before the well-dressed commuters in the shopping district. Finding herself splayed on the concrete, she scrambled to her feet lest anyone witness her clumsiness and feel awkward on her behalf. She was half a block away before noticing the shredded knees of her stockings, and a little farther still when she realized something was fundamentally wrong. Her stomach, in solidarity with her skull, flooded and churned. She felt as if she might tip over—yet strangely, she felt that if she fell, she would float up rather than down. She was buoyant with nausea, adrift on a blurred sea of vertigo.

At work, she made it to her locker and then to the stall to vomit. She changed into spare nylons and touched the crown of her head before the mirror, feeling for blood in her thick brown hair, but found none. In the break room, she washed down two aspirin with black coffee.

She tried to tough it out, but her peripheral vision was disintegrating. When her department manager, Laura—a lithe, recovering Mormon in her early fifties—inquired after her, Genevieve mumbled, "I have terrible lady trouble." It was the universal workplace euphemism.

"You must have it badly, dear," Laura murmured, taking in Genevieve's dilated pupils, the pallor of her skin, and the cold beads of sweat shining along her brow. She sent her straight home.

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[1] Professor of English and Film, Peninsula College, Port Angeles, Washington, United States of America

Genevieve had not told Laura the truth, partly because she hated being a bother, but mostly because she couldn't piece together what had struck her. By the time she had stood up on the overpass, the truck was gone. She felt no panic, only a heavy, biological exhaustion. She craved a quiet room, a tumbler of whiskey, and sleep.

Because Trevor was not there to warn her against sleeping with head trauma, she crawled beneath the duvet and closed her eyes.

And that was how, on an unremarkable Tuesday afternoon, Genevieve died in her sleep.

In any ordinary circumstance of massive intracranial swelling and hemorrhage, that would have been the end. But Genevieve's passing was distinguished by an unusual circumstance: when she died, nobody noticed. Not even Genevieve.

She woke on Wednesday morning with two dark, bilaterally symmetrical rings bruising the skin beneath her brows. This might have alarmed Trevor, had he not been running late and mistaken the pooled blood for the smoldering eye makeup she wore on rare occasions—a heavy cat-eye he considered uncharacteristic, and therefore exciting.

"Mmm," he murmured, catching her by the elbow on his way out the door. He pulled her against him with an urgency he had never shown near an open front door. Nibbling her earlobe, he whispered, "Wear black panties to match those eyes tonight, and I'll take them off with my teeth."

His flirting was clumsy and did nothing to stir her, but she couldn't recall the last time he had demonstrated sexual interest, let alone planned for it in advance.

In Women's Apparel, just around the corner from the makeup counters where stylists demonstrated bold palettes under halogen rings, her bruising caused an immediate sensation. Genevieve was known for neutral blouses and quiet compliance; the dramatic staining around her orbits looked like deliberate, smoky rebellion.

She said little, partly from habit and partly because her head hummed with a low, dead static, but she couldn't deny the modest thrill of the fuss. Her look was impossible to replicate with commercial shadow—the dark pooling was the product of deep intracranial extravasation. It was wider than eyeliner, softer than charcoal powder, settling naturally into the hollows of her eye sockets.

Within forty-eight hours, two associates in petites were blending dark greasepaint to mimic her. Over the following weeks, as the blood under Genevieve's skin broke down into plum, bilious green, mustard, and finally a dull café-au-lait, she carefully touched up the original contours with dark pencil, dutifully preserving the bloom of her trauma.

With death came the complete evaporation of her appetite.

For the first week, the change was imperceptible. But by the second, her skirts began sliding off her hips. She had stopped jogging the morning after the incident, yet without any effort, the stubborn fifteen pounds she had carried since high school melted away.

At home, Trevor transformed. As her collarbones emerged, he grew tender, attentive, almost reverent. He washed dishes unprompted and folded laundry. He watched her undress with a hot, desperate focus, his face tightening with an undercurrent of territorial jealousy she had never seen before.

At work, her silence was no longer read as timid; it was read as aloof, chic, enigmatic. At five-foot-nine, she had always felt bulky, but now her lengthening silhouette drew glances of genuine envy.

She had no desire for solid food, subsisting almost entirely like a hummingbird on sugar and scalded milk—tall caramel macchiatos and heavily sweetened lattes that cost nearly as much

as groceries. Aside from the occasional crust of bread she chewed in the break room as a camouflage, her system processed only caffeine and liquid glucose, running on sheer momentum.

Her colleagues became almost devotional. Though Genevieve still spoke no more than a dozen words a shift, the sales associates treated her silence as sacred discretion, coming to her to unload their deepest secrets. They confessed miscarriages, venereal panics, clandestine affairs with Geoffrey from Cosmetics, panic attacks, and aging parents dying slowly in Midwest suburbs. The quieter and more skeletal she became, the more wisdom they projected onto her hollow face.

Her orbital fat withered, leaving her eyes immense and glossy—the exact sunken, luminous stare celebrated in runway editorials.

Other changes were less photogenic. By the second month, having plateaued at a featherlight one hundred and nine pounds, she noticed a dull ache in her gums. Her front teeth had developed a faint, unsettling wiggle. Worse, her breath had developed a sour, sweetish rot. She stopped kissing Trevor with an open mouth and took to carrying travel-sized flasks of green antiseptic wash, swishing constantly in private.

Trevor took it as a slight. “What, saving your mouth for someone else?” he muttered, rolling away from her in bed.

Candace and Gwen finally dragged her out for drinks on a Friday—the night Trevor spent lost in his decadelong Dungeons & Dragons campaign.

At the crowded cocktail lounge, Genevieve discovered she had become an object of prey. Men stared openly. “The guy in the leather jacket hasn't stopped looking at you,” Gwen whispered, nudging her ribs. “Want me to slip him a napkin with your number?” Candace teased.

The attention felt electric and repulsive all at once. Because alcohol turned her stomach, she sipped soda water stained crimson with cranberry juice, which the bartender poured for free. Above the tiered shelves of liquor, Genevieve caught sight of herself in the antique mirror. In the cool blue wash of the neon sign, she looked porcelain. Her skin had taken on a polished, waxy finish, as though dipped in hot paraffin. She ran her tongue over her upper incisors; they felt rough, crusted with sugar, loose in their sockets.

When she returned home near midnight, Trevor was propped up in bed, reading under the amber lamp. He watched her cross to the bathroom without a word. She spent ten minutes flossing gently around tender gums and burning her mouth with mouthwash until her tongue went numb.

Stepping out, emboldened by the hungry looks at the bar, she decided to test her new power. She met Trevor's gaze and let her silk robe slide from her shoulders, baring the corrugated cage of her ribs, the sharp ridges of her hips, and her shrunken breasts.

Weeks ago, this sight would have brought him to his knees. Tonight, his jaw remained set, cold and hostile.

“Is there something you want to tell me?” he asked.

By Monday, the atmosphere at work had chilled. Candace and Gwen no longer traded confidences; they traded sidelong glances.

Two weeks passed under this polite freeze before Genevieve cornered them in the dressing room under the guise of wiping down mirrors with glass cleaner.

“What did I do?” she asked.

The two exchanged a synchronized, conspiratorial glance—the kind of silent communication that made clear they had held several meetings about her in private. Whatever followed—murmurs of “You’ve just gotten so aloof,” and “It feels like you think you’re better than everyone now”—washed over Genevieve without meaning.

In the three-way mirror, she caught her profile. She was exquisite: carved down to sinew and architecture, her sallow face gleaming with an unnatural glycerin sheen. Never mind that two lower incisors rattled slightly if she sneezed, or that her breath required industrial vigilance, or that her breasts had withered to pale confections tipped with hard almonds. Look at the lines of her waist! Look at the way the room parted for her!

Descending the escalator for her lunch break, she heard Trevor's parting shot from that terrible argument echo in her ears:

"Why are you so outgoing all of a sudden? Out drinking in bars."

"It was one night," she had replied.

"I liked you better before."

"I was depressed! I spent half my life asleep."

"Yeah," he had said, staring at the floor. "I know that wasn't healthy either. But at least I could trust you."

"You can trust me now."

"I've seen how men look at you."

"I only ever wanted you to look at me like that."

"Right," he sneered. "And it's so convenient to say nothing happened."

"Nothing did happen," she had said evenly, her voice eerily level, devoid of tremor. "I came home trying to seduce you."

He had simply grabbed his pillow and slept on the sofa.

She was on the avenue now. The gap between her inner thighs was a clean, uninterrupted corridor of air. She marvelled at the mechanical, rhythmic swing of her hips—stiff, unyielding, exactly like a high-fashion model pacing a Parisian catwalk.

She walked past her usual café, past the edge of the shopping district, deaf to the ticking of her lunch hour. A semi-truck roared past, its backdraft whipping her hair and filling her throat with hot diesel.

Three more blocks dissolved under her heels. A strange, cold current stirred in the hollow of her ribs: *Would it really be so terrible to never go back?*

When she reached the concrete overpass above the Interstate, she did not look down into the roaring canyon of traffic to wonder if anyone would miss her. That was a living girl's question. Instead, she hitched her bag higher on her shoulder and set her heel onto the waist-high concrete retaining barrier.

For a brief, brittle second she scrambled like an awkward fawn, her stiff joints grating as she hoisted her weight. But then she was up. She stood completely erect on the narrow ledge, sixty feet above eight lanes of rushing steel.

Traffic slowed below; drivers tapped their brakes above. She felt every single eye lock onto her—the courier on his bicycle, a bearded commuter straddling a motorcycle, the horrified woman in a Volvo wagon. Genevieve tilted her chin toward the grey Seattle sky, pulled her hollow stomach inward, thrust her narrow chest forward, and began to sashay down the parapet in her high heels, basking in the rapture of their undivided attention.

The Masculine Virtues

Frank Diamond[1]

"Joe Claimer. Tell us your story."

Claimer shifts in his folding chair, the squeak echoing through the recreation center's gym.

McKinley's probably reading his body language, because that's what shrinks do, you know. Hell, that's what everybody does: cops, clergy, pimps, and poodles. Claimer pretends to get less fetal, uncrosses his arms.

I'm ready!

Ready, but not willing. Claimer indicates the rest of the support group, some members of which — in prior sessions — have offered bits about wrongdoings here, and pieces about transgressions there, but nothing you could describe as a complete story.

"Again, Doc?"

"Please," says McKinley.

That's Christa McKinley, MD, PhD, standing in the middle of the circle. Over 40, Claimer figures, but she could pass for 30. Disciplined. Ex-military with boyishly cut blond hair. Married to a somewhat famous neuro-physicist, and they have two beautiful little children — boys. They give to charities, they help others. Like right now. She can't be getting much for conducting these sessions. Possibly even donating her time. A real pillar.

She's dressed, as usual, in a business suit: Black jacket and pants, and a light gray blouse that doesn't quite camouflage some nicely turned curves. Wedding band and watch, but no earrings. Also, what Claimer guesses Mom would describe as sensible shoes.

"Well, Doc," Claimer says patiently, "it's like you've been teaching. You need to recognize the problem in order to deal. Period."

Nice try.

"But tell us your *story* again, Joe," McKinley insists. "Not just the lesson."

So, Claimer tells it, or the version that McKinley wants to hear, the version that gives him some shot of getting his life back. It started when he broke up with Janet. No, wait, that's not it. She broke it off. That's the official ruling. OK. And Claimer didn't like that, no sir, didn't like that one bit.

Then they meet at a frat party a few weeks later and he thinks that they still have feelings and they hook up, and….

"I was stalking," Claimer confesses, hands raised in surrender. "Simple as that. Creepy as that. I refused to admit it at first and I am certainly sorry. I've learned."

"You've evolved, Joe."

"Yes, Doctor, I have evolved."

Just give me my life back. Please.

Janet filed a complaint, the dean's people investigated and next thing you know Claimer's expelled. No hearing, no finding out his side. Claimer didn't get a chance to see any evidence, or

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listen to testimony. Did someone other than Janet claim this happened? Who knows? Did she confide in a friend? Maybe, maybe not.

Note, though, that she accuses him of *stalking*, not of rape or assault. Why? Because, Claimer figures, Janet's case for anything more serious than stalking falls apart if it goes to court.

But that's not likely to ever happen because Claimer can't afford an attorney and any ambulance chaser that might take it pro bono would make things worse. Claimer just wants it all to go away. The university administrators know that. So, when he did threaten to sue, they told him that they might — might, that is — consider readmitting him under certain conditions, the kind found in a restraining order. At the very least, he takes a certain anti-harassment course (this one, on the other end of the city from the university, meets the requirements) and the expulsion disappears from his record so that it seems as if Claimer just needed a break from school.

Meanwhile, what about Claimer's baseball scholarship? A lot depends on how this here with McKinley turns out. It started bumpy because Claimer did in fact give his version — aka reality — some weeks ago during the first session. He just had to defend himself.

"Janet came on to me!" Claimer said, palms outstretched, pleading his case. "I kissed her back! I responded! Hey, I'm a guy! Not an android! I thought it was makeup sex! Or at least one for the road! It was consensual! I did not stalk her!" Exclamation point, exclamation point, exclamation point, exclamation point….

McKinley had said, "We'll return to this," and flashed a smile in which her eyes did not participate. American sniper. "For now, Joe Claimer, calm. Deep breaths."

That's when Claimer realized that he'll have to admit to this lie, because he's screwed if McKinley doesn't affirm that he's been rehabilitated. In subsequent meetings he retreated, letting her lead him to "the truth."

This sucks.

Claimer takes up drinking as a hobby in the weeks after he'd first moved back onto Mom's couch, and usually she'd be zonked in bed by the time he crawled home. She'd been on a long decline since Ghost Dad deserted them on Claimer's fourth birthday. But one night she waited for him.

"I need sleep," Claimer says. "Go to your room."

"Well, I was wrong," she says, not quite able to keep from listing.

"You're slurring."

"I was wrong! Wrooon-ga!"

"Now you're shouting. And wrong about what?"

"College taught you, Claimer."

Mom calls him Claimer because "Joe" had been Ghost Dad's name.

"Taught me what?"

"Life ain't fair, sonny boy. Life ain't fair to people like us."

A week later, he moves to a cousin's couch.

Claimer wonders what he'll remember about Janet — other than this expulsion bullshit — when he looks back in coming years. Memory boils things down: They met in line at Hoagie Haven, attraction extending the encounter into an afternoon of walking along the river. A tap-you-on-the-shoulder wind sounded the Autumn leaves as if they were tiny cymbals. Janet's blue-black hair framed a face slightly off-kilter because of a broken nose that had never healed properly. (She played soccer, but that's not how the nose got broke. Claimer never did find out how.) And then,

of course (probably foremost; who is Claimer kidding?), her body. The unapologetically animal robustness of it.

Boing!

He might recall the passion of those first weeks, then the malaise of letdown as Claimer realized that Janet just wasn't the one. What got in the way? Nothing and everything; they didn't fit, was all. When he called it quits, she said that she understood. Well, well, he thought, this might be one of those amiable partings that he'd heard about. She did text him a few times late at night. Just to check in. "Hey! Glad we can still talk!" That sort of thing. It should have clued him.

The next girl he'd dated, dumped him. When he and Janet bumped into each other at that frat party, he needed affirmation. He needed her to need him again. And maybe he made some promises. And maybe she believed him.

My weakness did me in.

At the university, Claimer had been studying construction engineering, and the fine art of fooling big dope batters with his change-up — his out pitch. But now he's studying that you shouldn't make unwanted overtures to a woman, or that "no" means "no," or that a supervisor doesn't try to mentor the shit out of some pretty young underling. (That just about covers every romantic comedy Claimer's ever been forced to sit through, by the way.)

Still, he admits, women do have a legitimate gripe. Some of these guys in this group straight up did what they're accused of, Claimer has no doubt. They belong here. The dude with all that ink and piercings, for instance? The Pirate? Yeah, the Pirate slipped something into his victim's drink, that's for sure.

Then there's High Roller, the businessman who tools around in a red Corvette and mentions that he'll be eating at the country club this weekend? Flashes creds, drops names? Yeah, High Roller definitely choked and slapped his girlfriend in the elevator at that casino. That girl drops the charges, wants High Roller back. (Talking about priorities, here.) The judge says not so fast because there's video.

But, give him this, High Roller figured out the game right off. Become the prize the do-gooders want most of all — the newly woke man. Win by losing. Surrender. High Roller's taking an anger management course and seeing two shrinks. Handed paperwork to McKinley to prove it. In front of the group, no less.

These ruminations ebb under the flow of Claimer's presentation; both his conscious and subconscious on cruise control.

That presentation — what McKinley wanted him to tell yet again — ends when Claimer says: "And that is my story."

And that is Janet's story.

His gaze sweeps the faces in the circle.

See? Nothing to hide.

McKinley keeps nodding, though, as if he's still talking. What should Claimer do? Bobble-head back? Take a bow? High-five the other miscreants? Ask to go to the bathroom? What?

"Ramon," McKinley commands to somebody her back's turned toward. "You're up."

And the guy sitting directly across from Claimer, the guy who always looks as if he's asleep, might really have been for once, because he jerks as if someone elbowed him. The others snicker.

Ramon stutters: "Yeah, well, um…."

McKinley pivots, facing him.

"So that our group can hear you, Ramon," she says. "Share."

"I didn't do shit, that's my damn share," Ramon grumbles. "I tell ya'll but ain't nobody listen. I tell everybody, but not one says, 'Yeah, Ramon. I feel you. Bitch framed you.'"

"'Bitch', you say?"

"Well…."

Poor Ramon still doesn't get it. Claimer wonders about Ramon's situation. For a few of the repeat offenders it's either this or prison. Now who's not going to take that deal?

"OK. Let's look at this again, Ramon," McKinley begins in kindergarten-speak.

On break outside Claimer huddles with Boomer and Paco, two other college kids in trouble. Though Boomer and Paco's stories differ from Claimer's, they too boil down to girls making accusations. Claimer doesn't know if they did it either, but they sure as hell didn't get a chance to make their case at school.

They loiter on the sidewalk a good distance from the rec center entrance because they smoke. Traffic on the highway behind them struggles to find a rhythm. They're an odd triumvirate. Boomer's a barrel at 5' 5" with a wrestling scholarship on the line. He's studying accounting, sports a mountain-man beard. Paco's a little over six feet, same as Claimer, but not as lanky. He's copying Claimer's "look," as if Claimer chooses to wear too-loose jeans, a jacket with worn elbows and stretched shoulders that won't zip, and unmatched sneaks that resist lacing. Paco's an artist of some sort, always massaging his goatee. (Claimer manages to shave every day, no matter the living conditions. That's one way he stiff-arms despair.)

"Ramon still doesn't get it," Boomer says.

"I keep telling him," says Paco, "but, no, he's got to fight. Truth-to-power. Good luck with that shit."

"He'll come around," says Claimer.

"What's the over/under?" asks Paco.

Most of the other members of the therapy group sit, stand and even lie over on the rec center steps. Smartphones drawn, of course. High Roller's usually calling or texting someone before he's even out the door because there are important things that he — and only he — must attend to.

"Asshole," Boomer says.

"Hey, 30 seconds after the last session are we ever going to think about any of these people again?" asks Claimer.

The heavy February air muffles the question. A couple of squirrels busying around a tree to the side of the softball field settle for a moment, standing on hindlegs with cuffed paws and looking over at the college boys. Claimer flicks his cigarette their way and the squirrels start squirreling again.

Boomer says: "Thought we were buds, Joe Claimer."

Claimer's eyes bulge in mock horror: "Is this some sort of bonding thing?"

"Chump," says Boomer, flicking his cigarette as well. It lands farther out.

Claimer right away knew that he and Boomer are on the same wavelength. Paco, not so much. Guys who brag about their Tinder shenanigans annoy Claimer, and it seems to annoy Boomer as well.

Boomer just got a new apartment about 10 blocks from the university, and Claimer and Boomer have discussed Claimer moving in. Claimer would love to have a bed again, not to mention

his own room. The dorm had been his most stable residence ever. But there are known unknowns like, for instance, how much rent? Also, would he and Boomer get along? So, they prod and poke; a roomie audition.

Paco says, "This is the last time with the Kents, dudes. Buy your own."

"Really," Boomer says.

"Yes, really," Paco says, putting the response in air-quotes. "You guys don't even inhale. My dinero up in smoke."

Paco now inhales deeply and blows perfect rings at the rec center entrance where some of the others start filing back inside.

"How much time?" Paco asks.

"Four more minutes," Claimer says.

"Doc should come out and ring a bell or something," Boomer says. "Recess is over!"

Paco says, "I'd like to ring Doc's bell. A skinny woman with big tits. Yum!"

Claimer glares at Paco as if he's a batter he's about to brush back.

"Really?" Claimer says. "You're going there?"

"I wouldn't say it out loud," Paco says.

"Just did," says Boomer.

"You learn anything?" Claimer says. "If it gets back to her…."

"How's what I say going to get back to Doc?" Paco asks.

Boomer says, "If people kept their damn mouths shut in the first place ain't none of us would be here."

"You guys would rat me out?" says Paco.

"Man, what's to prevent Claimer here from sucking up to Doc by throwing you under?" Boomer asks.

Paco looks at Claimer.

"I wouldn't, no. But you don't know that for sure. And where does it leave you if I do?"

Paco laughs; a whinny.

"So paranoid," Paco says. "Chill."

"Yeah, OK. Chill this: Trust no one," Claimer insists.

"Now that there's just a beautiful way to go through life," says Paco.

Says Boomer: "Let's see where being honest and open gets you."

Paco spreads his arms to the sky. "We are not that important," he says. "Do you really believe that someone's interested in what we think?"

"That's why we're here, right?" says Claimer. "To learn to think the right way?"

"Dude, we're not here because of what we think," reminds Boomer.

"Sure, yeah, it's what they accuse us of doing," says Claimer. "But it's what they *think* about how we *think* that makes them say 'Guilty!' without even getting our side of it."

"Well, I *think* that I actually follow," says Paco. "But, Claimer: Literally tracking us?"

"They want to know if we're for real being reeducated."

"Who?"

"They," says Claimer, gesturing toward the traffic.

Paco squints on his last drag and then flicks his cigarette. He says: "So you think *they* are bugging us or something?"

"Possibly."

"My man, where *they* going to put a bug?" Paco asks. "In them trees? On them fences? In that grass there? *They* going to know where we'll be standing beforehand?"

Claimer begins to protest but Paco cuts him off. "Get over yourself, Joe."

Claimer looks at the ground, scuffs the concrete, stuffs his hands in his pockets.

"OK, then," says Paco, sounding perplexed with what seems to be his sudden victory. "Settled."

Indeed settled, because "Get over yourself, Joe," is something Coach in high school used to say when Claimer protested getting yanked from a game because they were killing the other team and Coach wanted to give the scrubs some playing time.

As they walk back toward the rec center, Claimer only half listens to Boomer and Paco's banter. He is a little paranoid, sure. Paco nailed it. But after the Janet bullshit, who wouldn't be?

But I guess Paco's right. Bugs? Not likely.

About an hour and a half later, Doctor McKinley confirms this diagnosis: "Bugs are so 20th century, Joe. You don't need bugs for surveillance these days."

They sit at the table at the far end of the gym, where everybody signed in that first session. It's probably where the timekeepers and scorekeepers sit during basketball games. McKinley stopped Claimer as she dismissed the group for the day.

"I have that clarification you requested," she said.

Claimer had asked her to certify that he'd been to every session. He'd gotten a letter from some stupid university bureaucrat asking why he hasn't attended.

They don't get anything right.

He says to McKinley, "How can something like this even happen?"

Her head's hidden behind her opened briefcase; she's rummaging and doesn't respond. Finally, she flashes a folded-up business letter and says, "Here we go." She snaps the briefcase shut, places the paper on the table. They face each other.

Claimer reaches for the letter, but McKinley shakes her head.

"Listen."

McKinley thumbs her smartphone. Then comes the recording.

I'd like to ring Doc's bell. A skinny woman with big tits. Yum!

Really? You're going there?

I wouldn't say it out loud.

For a moment, Claimer doesn't recognize the conversation, or even his voice. When he does, his arms fall to his sides.

McKinley turns it off.

"Just a sample," she says. "We got the entire discussion, of course. And other discussions, as well."

"We?"

"Not important."

Claimer feels his eyes water as if allergies set in.

He says: "I … I just don't know what to say."

McKinley's focus sharpens.

She says, "Some in your spot will cry that it is illegal in this state to record a target without his knowledge."

Target.

"Is it? It is."

"Yes, but then there are all those consent forms you signed that first day that you didn't really bother reading, Joe."

"But I told Paco — and it is Paco, by the way — don't go there. You can hear me."

"I can hear you, Joe. But you're obligated to report such an exchange immediately. Another form you signed."

"Where did you plant the bug? I guess you won't say."

"It's like this, Joe…."

That's when McKinley explains to him how today's technology makes bugs obsolete, her hand flat on the letter as she speaks.

"What did you write?" Claimer asks.

"I wrote what I felt obligated to write."

"Shit. Screw this."

He starts to stand but McKinley stops him like a traffic cop.

"Have you not learned anything, Joe Claimer?"

"Yeah, I learned what my wreck of a mother always says: Life ain't fair."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning this bullshit, Doctor McKinley. Meaning having to take this rehabilitation when the only thing I did was break up with a girl."

McKinley begins to respond but this time it's Claimer who cuts her off. "And that's all I did. Enough pretending. Janet's nuts and pissed off. Yet, here am I, while she's back at school. And she still got a future. Ah, what's the use?"

"Wait," McKinley says, sliding the letter toward him.

Claimer looks at it.

"Go on. Read."

Claimer picks it up from a corner as if it's litter, shakes it open. He skims, seeing that it's confirmation that he's attended every session and appears well on his way to being rehabilitated. Claimer begins reading it again, this time holding it firmly with both hands to see if he missed something.

"You're confused," McKinley says.

"What is this?"

McKinley cups her head in her joined fingers as she tilts back.

"I have two sons, Joe: Tyler and Paul."

"You gonna break out the home movies?"

"Don't be flip. Flip is easy. Flip is schoolboyish, and you're better than that, Joe Claimer. You're a man, not a man-boy. And over in Iraq I watched men die. Real men. They came from all parts of the country, from all backgrounds. But they sacrificed. They sacrificed because of the classic masculine virtues."

"Masculine virtues."

"They manned up. Real men deny themselves. Real men don't cave into their weaknesses. Real men are courageous and real men avoid the easy path. And, yes, before you protest, real men can be flip, too. They know how to have fun."

"Real men."

"Yes, real men, Joe."

Claimer nods the obvious at her.

McKinley says: "Yes, and we women in the military sacrifice just as much as the men do. But that's because we believe in the masculine virtues, too. It's the masculine virtues that win wars. That keep us safe."

Claimer can't resist: "But violence is never the answer, Doctor McKinley."

"Flip, again, but I actually welcome it this time. It's a segue. Because well you know, Joe, that violence sometimes is, in fact, *the* answer. It's often the only possible answer. Violence stopped Hitler. You, Joe Claimer, in the subway see a man beating a woman."

"I pull him off. Call the cops."

"Yes, you pull him off. And yes, you call the cops. But you, Joe Claimer, would also make him dearly pay."

"Maybe. But what does this have to do with my situation?"

What does this have to do with anything?

McKinley stands and begins pacing the length of the table. She's lecturing.

Is she crazy, too?

He's transfixed, though. McKinley moves in and out of light streaming from a window at the other end of the gym. When Claimer shifts, she remembers he's there, and breaks out of reverie.

"Don't even try recording this."

"OK. Fine."

Then, she's back to her monologue.

What does she see, Claimer wonders, while she's gazing at the walls and talks, and talks, and talks? A crowd, he decides. She's making a speech to some imaginary audience because, he realizes, this woman wants to change society. She wants revolution. Her sensible strides percuss her words along, and taut muscles shift economically under her outfit — her uniform. When, at one point she pauses and puts her hands on her hips, Claimer sees the pistol strapped to her side.

Claimer takes mental roll call that includes Ramon, the Pirate, High Roller, and the mumblers, grumblers, stumblers, and soon-to-be convicts.

Shit. Maybe I should get a gun, too.

As McKinley continues, Claimer wishes he could take notes, wishes he possessed the memory that would let him recall every word. He will always remember parts of it.

"A nation that wants to offer equal opportunity to little girls and little boys should not deny the essential nature of little boys," McKinley says. "That's not equal opportunity. Little boys like my Tyler and Paul are more energetic and aggressive than little girls. That's DNA and those qualities need to be channeled, not suppressed. You can bet that my boys will get dirt bikes when they are ready, Joe."

"When's that?"

"Next year for Tyler. He turns six."

Back to the lecture. Claimer's in class again except this time he's learning. (Sort of at gunpoint, true, but still….) For instance, he didn't know that the NCAA's transgender policy makes it so that the person who holds the record in the U.S. for the women's 400-meter hurdles was born male. He didn't know that transgendered women smashed world records in weight lifting, tennis, and several other sports. Of course, he couldn't avoid knowing that Facebook recognizes 58 gender options.

"It's unfair, and it's illogical," McKinley says. "Illogical because biology trumps labels, Joe. You can label them whatever you want, but there are only two genders at birth. And where has this myth of gender fluidity gotten us? Girls in swim class at this very rec center protested that a grown man — now identifying as a woman despite possessing all the male physical accoutrements — uses their locker room. A complaint's filed. Do they arrest him for exposing himself to underage girls? No, the city apologizes for inflicting psychological harm on him. The swim class gets cancelled. Who's going to subject their daughter to that? Unfortunately, more and more will, Joe, because those who we used to refer to as normal people will have fewer options. Meanwhile, that person with a penis continues to use the woman's locker room."

McKinley swings her attention back to Claimer.

"What do you think, Joe?"

"That I shouldn't be here?"

McKinley smiles.

"We still have a chance," she says.

"Chance?"

"To save civilization, to preserve Western culture," McKinley says. "Civilizations that are dying, cultures that no longer believe in themselves always become transfixed by gender fluidity. It's a death rattle. And those societies get swept aside by the barbarians at the gate, the people who still believe in heroic masculinity."

McKinley sits again, faces Joe. He doesn't blink.

"I want my Tyler and Paul to grow in a society that makes real men, Joe. I want my sons to be brave, and honorable, and strong."

She pauses, taps on her briefcase.

What now?

"You're going to move in with Boomer," McKinley says. "I think he can be recruited. Paco, maybe. Keep in touch with him. Then you'll return to university. Your costs will be covered."

"Recruited to do what?"

McKinley smiles.

"Listen…."

And Claimer does indeed listen. Closely. He's compelled to. Because McKinley tells him about this secret organization, the Brotherhood, that will take back the culture, capture the future. Claimer doesn't ask what if he doesn't cooperate. It's understood: His life will be hell.

McKinley's got the tape, and she'll deny that they ever spoke. She even hints at one point that she could make it so that he goes to prison. No way he'll test her. What's worse Claimer knows — he just knows — that she would kill him to save the Brotherhood.

He's involved whether he wants it or not. He has been chosen.

So, as she speaks, Claimer begins to sweat. He's afraid. His breath quickens, hands quiver. Claimer's never fainted, and now wonders if this might be what the leadup feels like. He remembers riding a rollercoaster just a few years ago, the wildest one on the East Coast, and the fear-rush that accompanied him. His stomach seems to fall away.

I don't want any of this.

No, Claimer wants to run.

Is that a masculine virtue?

But then it happens.

The light through the far window dims; a cloud makes its presence known. And Claimer sees it. Him. Sees him. He stands in the corner behind McKinley; a faded snapshot of a man waving, a blanked-out face that could be smiling. At least Claimer thinks he sees him. The man's there and then — like that! — not there.

And that shadow's wave might have in fact been a blessing because suddenly a strange grace engulfs the day, settles upon everything. Excitement pushes Claimer's fear aside, making room for something totally unexpected: joy. A joy he'd never before felt. It might be the joy Claimer's heard that overcomes mystics when they experience God. He's intoxicated. He wonders if he can fly. He is flying. They all are. He feels the earth's rotation. This Christa McKinley; she's the one who did this. Her words brand him.

"I'm in," he whispers.

"Yes, you are."

Claimer asks: "And when I get back to school?"

"You'll get instructions."

"Instructions to do what?"

"You'll get instructions."

"From you?"

"From somebody. Goodbye, Joe Claimer."

"See you next week, Doctor McKinley?"

"Doctor Andrea Patterson is leading this course the rest of the way."

Claimer doesn't ask: "Is she one of us?" If "they" want him to know, "they" will tell him.

"You're a warrior, now," says McKinley. "Part of the fifth column."

Some hours later, Claimer stops by Mom's. It's early evening, and she's at the point where today's buzz greets last night's hangover.

"You again."

"Just getting some shit. Not staying long."

"I am your mother, you know. You could spend *some* time with me."

"Doing what?"

"Television?"

He doesn't hate her. He doesn't even feel sorry for her anymore. Or himself, for that matter. In fact, much of what troubled him up until that very morning troubles him no longer.

Claimer says: "Me and somebody from the group are moving in together."

"That won't last."

"Why's that?"

"Cause life ain't fair, Claimer."

"You keep saying."

"And ain't nothing ever gonna to change that."

"Maybe."

NON-FICTION / कथेत्तर साहित्य

A Child's Journey: From Kabul's Dreams to Survival in Pakistan

Mehrullah Rahmani[1]

The walls of exile echo with silence, but inside that silence, hunger, fear, and survival scream loudly. In refugee settlements across Pakistan, hunger gnaws at bellies, shelters are makeshift, and work is a privilege. For Afghan refugees, food, shelter, and dignity are not rights, but distant dreams. Before fleeing to Pakistan, I was a high school student in Kabul, my heart full of dreams and my future bright with possibility. Living with my family, we had the simple joys of life: food to eat, a home to sleep in, a yard to play in, and the freedom to move without fear. I spent my days laughing with friends, pursuing knowledge in school, and dreaming of becoming a doctor. But beneath the surface, a storm was brewing, and soon our world would be torn apart.

Everything changed in August 2021. When the Taliban took over, my father—the bedrock of our family, the one who made us feel safe and loved—lost his job as a government prosecutor. Because of his position, he was now at grave risk. Former government employees were seen as enemies, and soon we became targets. Anonymous calls began to reach us, warning us to leave or face severe consequences. The man who had always been our shelter and guide, our everything, was now powerless.

Security vanished, and fear crept in, suffocating us. Neighbors whispered of families like ours fleeing—some to Iran, others to Pakistan. Then came the moment that made our decision unavoidable: a direct message warning that our home was being watched. We knew we could not stay.

We had little time to pack. Each moment we had taken for granted—our home, our yard, our village—was slipping away. We were not just leaving a country; we were losing a life. We left with hearts heavy, carrying both fear and a fragile hope that across the border, we might find safety—and perhaps a future.

Crossing into Pakistan, I remember every detail: my foot freezing as it crossed the border, stepping into a strange world where nothing was certain. I could not have imagined how quickly everything would collapse. We arrived not with hope, but fear, confusion, and emptiness. Survival was our only goal, replacing every opportunity we had dreamed of in Afghanistan.

We lived in a small, dark, suffocating room in Rawalpindi, seven of us crowded into one cramped space, where breathing felt heavy with fear and exhaustion. The room felt too tight, leaving us trapped, powerless, and quietly breaking inside.

Time passed only through hunger, a constant, painful ache slowly draining strength and hope. Many days we had no food, and the emptiness felt deep and unbearable.

Clean water was uncertain, something we waited for with silent worry. Without legal documents, every moment was filled with fear—arrest, being sent back, or losing this fragile shelter that was our only protection.

Life kept getting harder. My two younger brothers worked long hours in a sandal factory, their small hands worn by labor. They left early in the morning and returned exhausted, earning almost nothing—just enough to delay hunger. Organizations such as UNICEF warn that refugee children are often forced into labor, losing access to education and the chance for a future. My brothers were living that reality every day.

My father had tried to protect me from that life for as long as he could. He believed in my education—he knew how deeply I wanted to continue my studies and become a doctor, and he held onto that dream for me even when everything else was falling apart. My younger brothers

[1] Independent Writer, Kabul, Afghanistan

had started working first to help us survive, while my father still tried to hold onto my future—the one we were slowly losing. But hunger does not wait, and hope cannot survive on emptiness forever.

That afternoon, I was sitting quietly with my younger brother lost in thoughts of what lay ahead. When my father opened the door, something in his face made my chest tighten. He looked at me for a moment, as if searching for the right words, then placed his hand on my right shoulder—his eyes heavy, urgent—and, in a quiet, gentle voice, hesitantly asked me to go outside and find work. That moment changed everything. It was the moment I felt my childhood slip away. I stepped into a world where survival was no longer a choice, but a duty I walked those streets afraid and silent, each step heavier than the last. as if I were carrying more than just my own weight.

The heat was unbearable, and everything felt unfamiliar. For hours, I worked beside my brothers, my body weak, my mind numb. That day felt endless. I watched time crawl forward, pain spreading through my body in ways I could not explain. When I returned home empty-handed, reality crushed me—no food, no money, no hope.

That night, when my father saw my pale, exhausted face, he sighed deeply and decided I should not go out like that again. For weeks, we lived in uncertainty, sometimes surviving on a single meal a day, holding on to the last fragile pieces of hope we had left.

Then, unexpectedly, something changed. Early that morning, as the sun rose, I was still asleep, deep in dreams of food or work. My father's phone sat on the shelf; a ray of sunlight hit it, and it rang, waking me. When he picked it up, he was called to a meeting by the IOM, an organization supporting Afghan refugees. I watched him leave quickly that early morning, carrying a fragile sense of hope.

I lay on the floor, covered by a thin blanket, wondering if anything would ever change. When he returned, I lifted my head, my eyes fixed on his hands—small bags of rice, oil, and beans—but more than that, he carried hope that I had been waiting for since I left Afghanistan. He set them down on the floor and knelt beside me, gently resting his hand on my forehead, and spoke softly: "My son, there may be an opportunity for you at a pharmacy, because of your abilities."

In that instant, something inside me broke open. I exhaled and tears welled in my eyes. After such darkness, even a small light was overwhelming. I stood, kissed his hand, and stepped outside, unable to believe what I had just heard. For the first time since fleeing Afghanistan, in a long while, I felt something I had almost forgotten: Hope.

Across Pakistan, countless Afghan children faced the same uncertainty. The fear of losing home, being separated from loved once, or returning to the place we fled hung over us like an endless storm. Each day brought new struggles. Survival grew harder and the dreams carried across the border grew more fragile. Still, we held onto the hope of finding safety and a place where we could live whit dignity.

Afghan refugees are not asking for sympathy; they are asking for dignity. They are asking for protection, for human rights. We do not wait for charity; we wait for justice —so that no child has to trade education for survival again.

And even in exile, even in silence, sometimes it only takes one voice to remind us: our future is not over—and no child's dream should be lost to survival.

Cave Man

Pavle Radonić[1]

Only on the return was the crowding of the *koc*, coach noticed. This was a narrow gauge line. The Ottomans had done the same for the silver and other mines in the Balkans, the English through India, no doubt.

The women's compartments had been noticed going out. Among the rest of the prohibitions displayed in pictorial form, kissing was disallowed. (Evidently the shorter distance trains had lesser risk of molestation & amorousness—there had been none of those notices.)

Tourists to Batu Caves would think to themselves, — Oh! Full marks for urban planning, bringing a major train line from the city centre directly to the temple complex.

As the return train slowly filled, a young mid-teen Indian-Malay boy left the seat by his mother and came into the next compartment to assume a place beside a chap on his phone. At the previous stop a pair of girls couple of years older than himself had entered and looked for a seat. Nothing to their liking; men dotted throughout and no two seats together. Unbidden, up and into the adjoining carriage the lad went, leaving the lasses nice and snug beside mum.

Fine grace-note, young fellow. Bully for you!

As expected, the rock forms inside the caverns produced fine curves and textures, marvelous shaping from untold ages of rain and wind on stone. Luckily, without any prior photographs—only images of the giant statues and the stair—all the impressions arrived immediate and direct.

Perfectly understandable how the place could have initially been adopted by the toilers in the mines and on the rail-lines; as time went on slowly becoming consecrated as a holy site.

Indentured labour, they would be called by Imperial historians.

There was cool within the walls. And the ghosts of the past not difficult to imagine.

Fresh water seeping from a mostly cloudless sky made the rock gleam.

In other circumstances twenty millennia past, finest paintings of tigers & songbirds from the forest would have adorned such walls, rendered by the sure hands of hunters.

In the Tropics the abundance of foods of all kinds gave rise instead to *lepak*—lazing & ease. Instead of earnest hunting and trapping, the energies here were directed to catching the melodies flitting through the canopy overhead. (The Malays loved their karaoke.)

At the small Murugan temple at the top of the tiered platforms a four or five year-old was attempting to seize the smoke from the incense burning in a corner. With his lack of success the lad began fighting and swimming through the veils, the reverberating music of bell and drum accompanying.

With the monkeys cavorting throughout the ceremony, how was the boy supposed to sit tight. None of the adults minded and the ceremony proceeded.

The Hindu observances were always something to behold

The bell-ringer here pulled his cord lazily, one hand behind his back in a jerk-off motion.

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[1] Independent Writer, Montenegrin, Melbourne, Australia

Priests might have been housed near-by; low-level multi-storey housing stood on all sides in the contemporary sprawl of Kuala Lumpur.

The old Sri Lankan Tamil met at *Mehran* a few days before—a man opposed to the Gujarati Modi—suggested for Thaipusam one million people gathered at Batu Caves. It seemed an impossible number, but then the grounds were large and the tourism could not be under-estimated.

A Japanese or perhaps Chinaman from the Mainland had stopped on the 227 steps to ask a woman what she was carrying in the pail on her shoulder. As in a comic opera, much tongue-twisting and ear-bending involved.

M-I-L-G? the man repeated her spelling.

A steep climb even with a small 2-3 litre pail, slopping a few drops as she went.

Like other temples in the region, the depth of treads on the stairs was scaled to dwarf-size. The Tamil labourers were short-statured, like their descendants. (The civic-minded technocrats in Singapore had planted an escalator on the grassy side of a hillock in the city for the convenience of elderly & infirm nature-lovers.)

Some of the devotees climbed barefoot and prostrated themselves full-length at the landings, arms out-stretched in front like divers, foreheads to the ground.

An identical pair of roosters in lustrous copper & ebony circled up on the rocky ledge to the right of Muguran, monkeys screeched & scampered beneath Mug's skirts, various birds coming & going through the opening above. There was nothing untoward; all the elements here added to the spiritual possibility.

Inside the caves some of the striking gestures among the statuary was lost now to the living realm. It was retained only in ghostly form in the histrionics of the stage, the screen and places of worship in far distant corners.

Ardency, compassion and the greeting of wonder in the generations past were notable. Impressive acrobatics and poise were shown by the gal against the wall at the back of Mug's entrance, one of his chosen consorts kicking her left leg out wide across her body and swanning bird-hands either side. Bollywood musical sequences took their cues from the statuary.

Some of the sinuous movement in the forms could be seen occasionally among the diaspora in Little India, Singapore, among the women particularly.

Our smaller, more modest cave near Nikšić in Montenegro, where the preserved body of the local Saint Vasil was housed in a small niche in the rock, gave out to a dizzying prospect over the valley that held the town below. In the 1930s Grandma Rose had walked one or two days barefoot from Boka, in order to visit the shrine.

Closer by Village Uble, within one of the peaks, stood *Boškova Pecina*—Boško's Cave—where young, handsome Boško had met a foul and violent end. A generation or two later the child shepherds scared each other in the shadows of the place with Boško's terrifying agonies. Mother had been among the number.

The damnable, jealous Vukovići had murdered innocent Boško. (Beauty was all on our side of the family.) That was the reason Grandad Rade had been outraged when his famous cousin, incomparable Elena Blagojeva, from the house of his mother, choose to marry one of the clan.

Pop Rade's nephew Stevo had been mad for Elena too. Once, following some understandable confusion, Blagoje and Stevo found themselves waiting together at the same place for Elena's promised arrival. In umbrage the pair pledged to throw the hussy over once and for all; nothing more to do with her.

Eventually, half-mad Stevo had gone to consult the monks at Nikšić beneath Saint Vasil's cave, where he received the bad news on second cousin unions. The kill-joy monk’s prohibition

was to ruin Stevo for life. (How the Arabs would scoff at such delicacy over consanguinity, and even for second cousins.)

There were few selfies 8:30am on a Saturday morning at Batu Caves. The majority of visitors were pilgrims from near and far in the Hindu world.

The wise old monkeys in the cave had provided a reminder of the greater creation. Even cats had no place in contemporary churches (therefore the mice).

Limestone forms here on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur, instead of Balkan karst. The rocks were not dissimilar. Croatia further North was well-known among speleologists. Within the hollows of his native Lika in Croatia young Nikola Tesla had made his first discoveries of electrical current.

Batu Caves, Kuala Lumpur

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John Menaghan is a poet and author of four books published by Salmon Poetry, Ireland. He has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize six times and has received an Academy of American Poets Prize. His poetry has appeared in literary journals and publications across Ireland, Britain, India, Malta, and the United States. His publications include work in *Ambit*, *Orbis*, *Pratik*, *The Hopkins Review*, *Poetry Ireland*, and *American Arts Quarterly*. His literary career reflects a sustained international presence in contemporary poetry and a continuing engagement with journals and literary communities across different geographical and cultural contexts.

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सुशांत सौरभ का जन्म बिहार के बाँका ज़िले में हुआ। उन्होंने भारतीय विज्ञान शिक्षा एवं अनुसंधान संस्थान (IISER), भोपाल से भौतिकी में स्नातक की शिक्षा प्राप्त की है। उनकी पहली कविता-पुस्तक *मुझे पुकारती हुई पुकार* प्रकाशित हो चुकी है, जबकि उनकी दूसरी पुस्तक *रेत से आकाशगंगा* बोधि प्रकाशन से प्रकाशन की प्रक्रिया में है।

उनके लेखन पर मुक्तिबोध और फ़्योदोर दोस्तोयेव्स्की का गहरा प्रभाव रहा है। उन्हें पहाड़ों से विशेष लगाव है और प्रकृति, विशेषकर पहाड़ी भू-दृश्य, उनके जीवन और संवेदना का अभिन्न हिस्सा हैं। उनकी साहित्यिक रुचियाँ कविता, प्रकृति, दर्शन और मानवीय संवेदना के विभिन्न आयामों से जुड़ी हुई हैं।

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Born and raised in Los Angeles, Michael Roque began writing poetry and prose while studying at Pasadena City College. Since 2013, he has been based in the Middle East, where he has continued his literary practice. He is the author of *Writing to a Raid Siren*, published by Pomegranate Press. His poetry and prose have appeared in literary journals including *North Dakota Quarterly*, *The Queen's Review*, *The Roanoke Rambler*, *Poetry Super Highway*, and *BlazeVOX*. His work brings together poetry and prose within a literary practice shaped by experiences across different geographical and cultural contexts.

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अर्शिया अंजुम उत्तर प्रदेश के अयोध्या जनपद के एक छोटे से गाँव से हैं और बेसिक शिक्षा विभाग, उत्तर प्रदेश में सहायक अध्यापक के पद पर कार्यरत हैं। वे पिछले 11 वर्षों से जूनियर हाई स्कूल स्तर पर भाषा-शिक्षण से जुड़ी हुई हैं। उन्होंने उर्दू विषय में एम.ए. किया है और अध्ययन एवं लेखन में विशेष रुचि रखती हैं। उनकी उर्दू नज़्में और लेख विभिन्न पत्र-पत्रिकाओं में प्रकाशित हो चुके हैं। पिछले चार वर्षों से वे हिंदी कविता-लेखन में भी सक्रिय रूप से जुड़ी हुई हैं और उनकी कुछ हिंदी कविताएँ राष्ट्रीय स्तर की पत्रिकाओं में प्रकाशित हुई हैं। भाषा, साहित्य और शिक्षा—इन तीनों क्षेत्रों को वे अपने सृजनात्मक जीवन के महत्वपूर्ण आधार मानती हैं। उनका लेखन उनकी भाषिक रुचि और साहित्य के प्रति निरंतर प्रतिबद्धता को अभिव्यक्त करता है।

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Thomas Piekarski, who writes under the name Piekarski, is a poet and former editor of the *California State Poetry Quarterly*. His poetry has appeared in hundreds of publications, including *Modern Literature*, *Poetry Salzburg*, *Creation Magazine*, *The Museum of Americana*, *South African Literary Journal*, *Home Planet News*, and *California Poets Anthology*. His published books of poetry include *Ballad of Billy the Kid*, *Monterey Bay Adventures*, *Mercurial World*, *Aurora California*, and *Opus Borealis*. His extensive publication record reflects a long-standing engagement with poetry and literary publishing.

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Gabriella Garofalo is an Italian poet and author whose relationship with language and poetry began at an early age. Born in Italy, she developed a strong interest in the English language at the age of six and began writing poetry in Italian during the same period. Her literary work extends across both Italian and English-language writing. Her books include *Lo sguardo di Orfeo*, *L'inverno di vetro*, *Di altre stelle polari*, *Casa di erba*, *Blue Branches*, *A Blue Soul*, and *After The Blue Rush*. Her body of work reflects a sustained engagement with poetry and multilingual literary expression.

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कविता चौधरी (kavita6006006@gmail.com)

कविता चौधरी राजस्थान की युवा लेखिका एवं कवयित्री हैं। उनका जन्म 15 अक्टूबर 2006 को हुआ और वे वर्तमान में विश्वविद्यालय के द्वितीय वर्ष में अध्ययनरत हैं। साहित्य के प्रति उनकी रुचि बाल्यकाल से रही है। उनकी पुस्तक *संघर्ष*तथा अंग्रेज़ी काव्य-संग्रह *Rays of Light* प्रकाशित हो चुके हैं। उनकी रचनाएँ *राजस्थान पत्रिका*, *दैनिक भास्कर*सहित अनेक पत्र-पत्रिकाओं में प्रकाशित हुई हैं। वे अनेक पुस्तकों की संपादक भी रह चुकी हैं। साहित्य में योगदान के लिए उन्हें दिल्ली, अहमदाबाद फिल्म सिटी सहित विभिन्न स्थानों पर सम्मान एवं पुरस्कार प्राप्त हुए हैं। उनकी लेखनी प्रेम, करुणा, मानवता, आशा और जीवन-संघर्ष जैसे विषयों को स्वर देती है। उनका लेखन युवा साहित्यिक संवेदना और समकालीन मानवीय अनुभवों के प्रति उनकी रुचि को अभिव्यक्त करता है।

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Mehrullah Rahmani, born on December 16, 2006, in Kabul, Afghanistan, is an Afghan author, global literary figure, English literature instructor, and advocate for refugees. His engagement with literature is driven by a deep passion for storytelling. His writing has reached readers in more than 30 countries worldwide, reflecting an international literary presence at an early stage of his writing career.

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Australian by birth and of Montenegrin origin, Pavle Radonić spent ten years in Southeast Asia, where a significant proportion of his publications originated. His recent work has appeared in *Action, Spectacle*, *Blood+Honey*, *Packingtown Review*, and *Sagebrush Review*, with forthcoming work in *Denver Quarterly* and *Post Road Magazine*. His literary presence extends across different geographical and cultural contexts. A collection of his literary work and writing-related material is available through his online literary archive, *Axial Melbourne*.

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|| कल्पितम् द्वैतम् ||

Patrika Aranyak

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उद्देश्य | Mission Statement

पत्रिका आरण्यक: साहित्य और मानविकी की पत्रिका एक स्वतंत्र, द्विभाषी साहित्यिक मंच है जो हिंदी और अंग्रेजी साहित्य में मौलिक, चिंतनशील और नवोन्मेषी रचनात्मक आवाज़ों को प्रोत्साहित करने के लिए समर्पित है।

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