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MONOGRAPH

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Ritobrita Mukherjee
Editor-in-Chief

when the apocalypse came, I sat with you
and learnt to breathe in the meanings
of preterite verbs and ancient vowels
that had no existence in the new age dictionaries
we spent our summers in watchful meditation,
slipping out of our clothes and our skins
in front of an audience that crawled on all fours,
starved of innocence and the feel good naivete
that informed their review once.

the fleshy depths of your morning ablutions
flash past the blank screens resting in the hands
of all your fellow travellers stuck in the endless commute
towards that better place you were promised
in your seventh grade ethics classroom
do better, be the change you want to see,
well, we saw, we changed, we did our best,
doggedly, insisting on reward points
before the revolutions could make it
to the textbooks, did it really happen
if you did not post about it?



there are days that find no place in my memories
because they weren't plastered across
my little blue screen, broadcasted for my fellow travellers
to snicker at, to simper over, to find fault with; user 34987547
found it exceptionally hateful that my last supper
wasn't with god and his staunchest crusaders,
how silly to be cracking open a can
without a profound epiphany of what comes after,
did you make sure to colour grade your mother's slit throat
after the divorce or did the subscription run out
right when you were applying the finishing touches?
well you've let us all down this time,
mind police, thought control, echo chamber,
these words you throw around carelessly
hurt my sentiments and puts you at risk
of being sentenced to indefinite periods
of prison soup and indoctrination,
namecalling a spade a spade was not the doctrine
you bent your perfect body for.

**namecalling
a spade a spade
was not the doctrine
you bent your
perfect body for.**



ON THE LOOKOUT

AYANA BHATTACHARYA

This past month, sparsely designed, black-and-white posters advertising one-night-only shows have been found tucked away in record stores, concert halls, and most recently, a Panera Bread. They're issued mysteriously in small American towns, a few hours before ticket sales begin. Passes are notoriously difficult to clinch, selling out in under an hour, with only a few hundred seats available to steadily growing, exhilarated lines. Those who make it in are forbidden from recording any segments of the show (some venues even ban pens), and are provided Yondr pouches to prevent phone usage. Attempts to evade or shirk these rules have not been fruitful; attendees have been disgracefully escorted out, condemned to the shame of clumsy espionage.

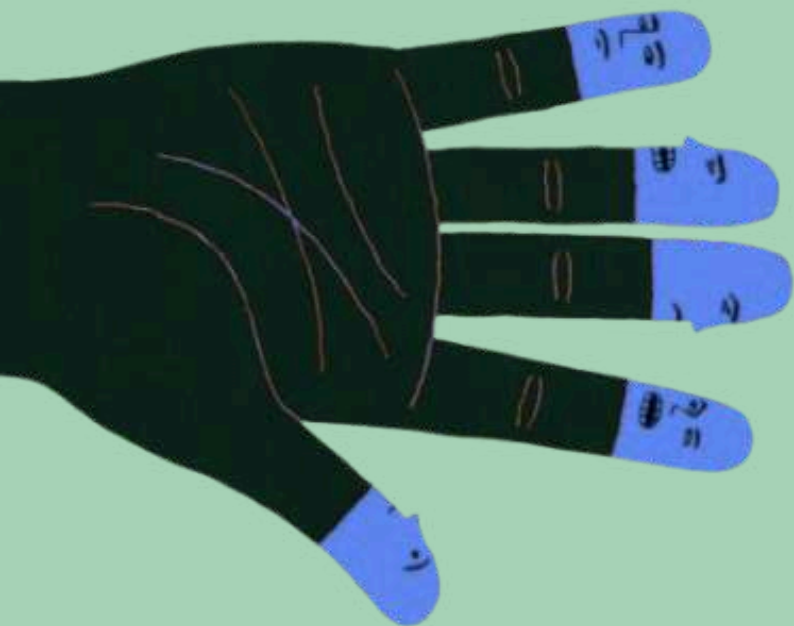
Taking centre stage once security measures have been executed is indie artist Phoebe Bridgers, whose surprise shows have captured the attention of thousands of fans. Bridgers, who has been largely absent from the public eye since her wins at the 2024 Grammys, is testing a new model here. Instead of a tour, or single release date, she's playing intimate, pop-up shows comprising new and old music. By prohibiting recording equipment, she avoids leaks. It's a presently airtight system — in nearly fifteen shows, Bridgers hasn't been photographed once.

And yet, invested fans have hunted down her tour bus, tracking its movements to determine where she'll play next. Others have investigated hotel reception desks to catch a glimpse. The good news: After an apparent drought, Phoebe Bridgers has returned. The not-so-great news: Fans are passionate (and parasocial!) as ever.

It's difficult to recall a time before technology colonised fandom. In the days of yore, there were posterred walls. Now, stan wars ensue over thirty-second interview clips and excerpted quotes. My dispatches from the frontlines of fangirlism will tell you that celebrity-fan relationships — or the illusion of those relationships — are tense. In many ways, parasocial relationships have toppled the traditional hierarchy. The celebrity class was mystical, a reticent body clothed in glitter. And the fan, clawing for pieces, lapped up whatever they could take. It was a relationship of consumption: weary, still, for the celebrity, but buffered by an agent, a manager, a journalist.



Ever since we learned that stars really are just like us, fandom has become symbiotic. It was always understood that fans made the celebrity, but now, the celebrity is within reach. The messaging served is that really, we're all equals here. Click the follow button on a star's social media page, and you have them at your fingertips. Millions of Billie Eilish and Selena Gomez fans have been added to their respective Close Friends stories, and if you look hard enough, you can follow Tate McRae and Renee Rapp's finsta accounts. It's never been easier to know the person behind a celebrity persona.



This access works particularly well for our popstars. Pop music has been revolutionised by the new-found vulnerability of its songwriters. God is in the details, and it seems that so is stardom. When artists known for confessional songwriting like Taylor Swift, Lorde, or Olivia Rodrigo release new music, fans scour the internet for thinly-veiled references to traitorous exes, or worse, backstabbing bitches. Justice is carried out by fan armies, infiltrating comment sections with immediacy and well-timed lyrics.

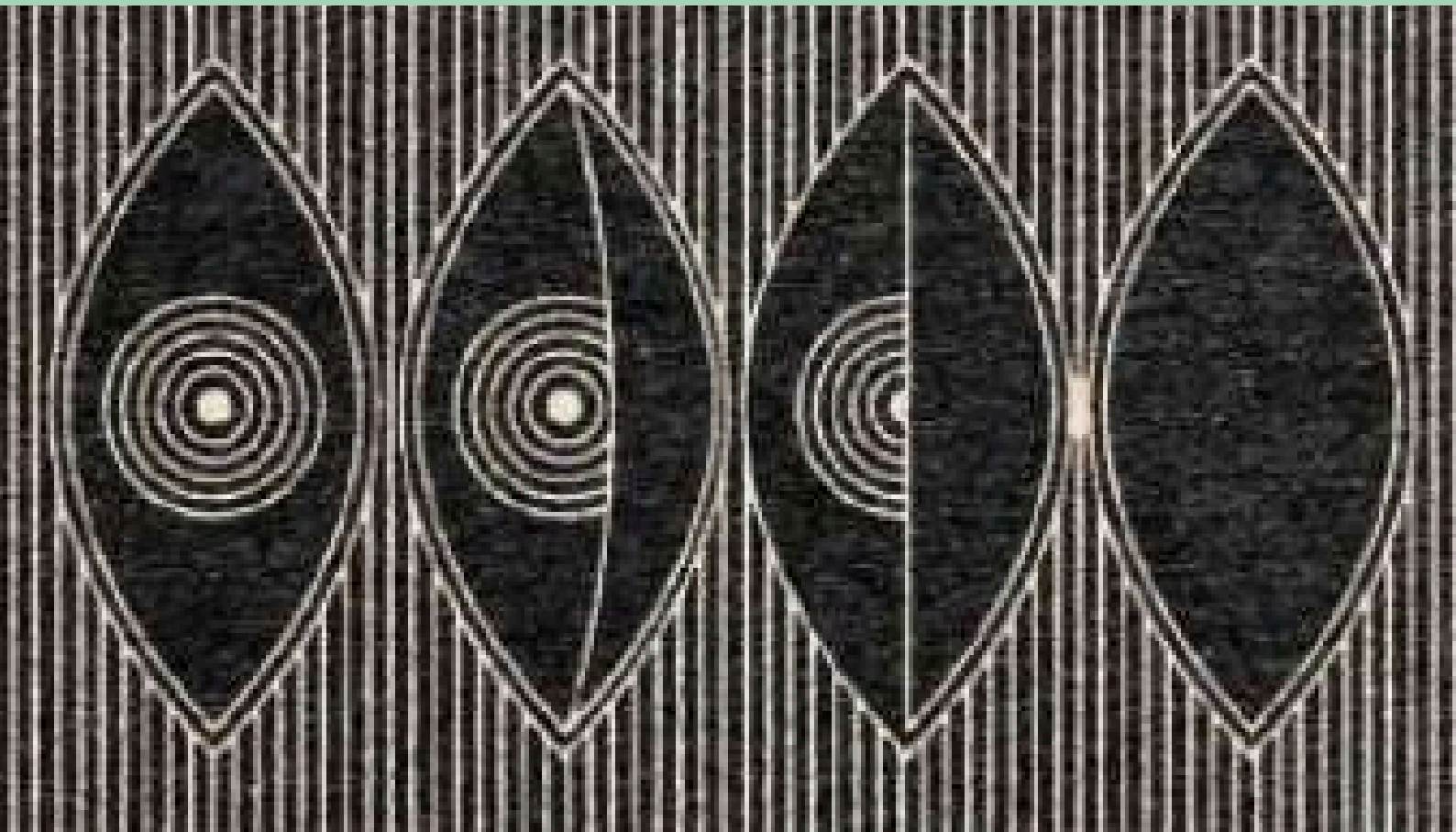
But there's a tightrope to walk between piety and predation. At some point, every scavenger hunt turns into a match. In an interview with the New York Times, Taylor Swift explained, "When it gets a little bit weird for me is when people act like it's sort of a paternity test, like, 'This song's about that person.' Because I'm like, that dude didn't write the song, I did."

It's not like singing about feelings is an advent of the twenty-first century. But the biggest difference between the confessional singer-songwriter of yesteryear and that of today is restraint. Joni Mitchell, Alanis Morissette, and Fiona Apple turned in their albums and smiled for the camera. Those who identified with their lyrics did so silently. Now, it's almost as though celebrities invite this investigation. And fanbases pounce.



What proceeds is entitlement. Fans accepted the invitation and set up camp. Lyrics become lifetime free-passes for owed transparency. They read into social media unfollows, make pilgrimages to celebrity homes, and perhaps most crucially, address these stars as peers. Fan culture takes on a uniquely voyeuristic position here, partaking in an unrequited love affair. Bolstered by casually chic photo dumps and performed authenticity, fans fall in love with carefully curated intimacy.

And when the star steps back, the fan is left crestfallen. It's a betrayal of the worst kind to be booted out of an extraordinarily large inner circle. The more private a celebrity becomes, the more persistent their fanbase is. It's all a bargain — how much can be extracted? This is why, perhaps, a celebrity disappearing act is so enticing. A blank page just means there's more white space to crowd with perceptions and projections. We're no longer content to wait and watch.



KEYHOLE NATION- LETS NOT LOOK AWAY

SRIJONI NANDI

“Police pulls over a man covered in his victim's blood.”

“Cops talk to killer mom as daughter's dead body hides in house.”

It's a Saturday night, you're ready to melt into the comfort of your bed with a crisp Diet Coke and fries and devour a two hour compilation of true-crime police cam Youtube compilation video. This is the era of the macabre gaze, where gore functions less as a visual assault, and more as a deeply voyeuristic pursuit tucked neatly under the labels of true crime and 'trauma porn'. We are wading through the ink of voyeuristic media as we find ourselves morbidly tethered to the screen, fetishizing graphic descriptions of violence almost like it were a high-stakes puzzle. There is a strange, magnetic pull in watching interrogation room tapes, where an ominous voice deconstructs a suspect's every flinch and word and turns a person's psychological undoing into the spectator sport you and I love. It raises the unsettling question of why we find such profound entertainment in these graphic depictions. Why do we delight in being the uninvited guests at a tragedy, peering through the digital keyhole at a reality we hope never to touch ourselves?



If you've not been living under a rock with terrible internet connection, you've seen, read, heard and consumed content around the Epstein files. Released by the United States Department of Justice, these files involve previously unreleased footage and evidences against Jeffrey Epstein- an unthinkably affluent financier with died with a shining record of rape, pedophilia, alleged cannibalism and assault- all tied up neatly with the largest network of elite connections in the world. Once the files were made public, one has to notice just how many of the countless opinions on social media actually realised the gravity of the dystopia we inhabit now, and how many engineered their freshest memes, jokes and fast content on the bit. This is not the voyeurism of the forbidden peek since it's still a legally released set of contents. However, we do digest the horrors of it with the steady indifference of a consumer, allowing fast paced "news" and so called pop-culture information to keep us integrated in the current social fabric.



Is this the ethic of moral consumerism where engagement exists by offering the immediate high of outrage sans the heavy cost of empathy or action? The evil crimes stay localized to a specific list of names while we grant ourselves permission to return to our fries and compilations with our innocence preserved simply because we are the voyeurs and never the voyeured. Thus we are left with a large web of people making TikToks and adding their two cents to it, for what harm can dissecting the reality do when it's already worse than the dystopia we could've imagined?

Poverty porn is already a common enough topic of discourse and its safe to say we have finally established that posting an Instagram story of a homeless man sleeping on the pavement under the scorching summer sun of Kolkata, with some aesthetic sad words carefully placed on the screen and a Lifafa song playing in the background, is nothing more than you enjoying your voyeuristic gaze and serving it up on a platter for a curated guestlist of likeminded weirdos. But this gaze is but one form of the varied lenses that have slowly been normalised into our everyday lives. As genres like gore, slasher and body horror receive their applause in highly loyal fanbases and commercial success, one realises that asking why they watch this is a pointless and frankly, incorrect question. The right one would be: Why wouldn't they? The thrill does not lie in the violence. It is the impunity of watching violence from inside a body that is untouched and unharmed. The depraved enjoyment lies in the nonconsensual peek into a violent scene.

I don't see the common denominator in the cruelty of the gaze, for the distance from the actual danger zones marks the reason for our curiosity. We consume tragedy from the privileged remove of the spectator, and that distance allows us to play God. Our thoughts skate faster than the narrators, as we deduce what the criminal is lying about and whether the pulsing of the vein in his neck means he's stressed to have been caught in a lie and whether it's finally the much awaited confession time. Violence, scandal and gore function as spectator sports because they offer the physiological arousal of proximity to danger with zero cost of participation for us.

The appetite of consuming voyeurism has slowly been bullied into the architecture of every platform designed to keep you watching past the point of comfort. The question that thus lies is this: Can the voyeur of today sit with their fries and Diet Coke and acknowledge that the keyhole they are peering through belongs to someone else's worst night?



UNDER COVER OF DARKNESS

SHREYA DATTA

I see art, I see through it

Is it because I used to paint? “Used to” highlighting the complete incompleteness of art?

I used to paint skies and hills, bees and mills,

My subjects varied, human faces remained untouched, I was always bad at proportion,

It was mostly nature, a colourful image being the emptiest canvas,

I liked the detail of a potted plant, the sap green hue, the almost magenta like clay pot, the tiny fronds emerging, a cadmium yellow flower seeking shelter

I liked the intricate maze of life in a plant, I liked the greens and the browns or the inevitable death in its drying leaves,

So, when I look at this painting, in a gallery far from home, why do I feel odd?

The gallery is well lit with studio lighting, it is warm and accepting of deviants and miscreants,

In a corner of an old dilapidated building that now only houses a run-down bank, the gallery is literal light,

It shows the way, it leads the way, it lights the way,

It is warm lemon-yellow tone given to a copper brown alleyway in a cityscape,

The floors are clean, a pleasant jasmine like odour attempts to make it “zen”,

It has precisely three sculptures, all of clay, all on display, all of a distorted human face under excruciating pain,

I lost count with the paintings, a seamless artistry being showcased,



I stood in front of an oil painting,
a thin beige frame surrounds it,
The cobalt blue is used cautiously,
it does not want to disturb the balance
of the expansive green field,
There is little light in the painting yet
it seems to light up the room,
The green is oppressive,
it is dark and dull
at the same time as radiant,
The copper brown is sporadic, maybe
the tube was about to finish.

I stood there, I tried to see through it,
I felt superior, I remembered a strange
profanity, an even more absurd, almost
orgasmic reaction to painting by an
ancient filmmaker,
Does that happen to artists?
To performers?
To actors?
Does finishing feel cathartic?
A relief?
I should not be asking these questions,
I was just seeing through art.



THE PITIABLE OR THE ROMANTICIZED: THE VOYEURISTIC GAZE IN DOCUMENTARY CINEMA

VEDANT NAGRANI

In Saeed Akhtar Mirza's 1989 film *Salim Langde Pe Mat Ro*, a significant segment of the film depicts a screening of a documentary about the 1984 Bhiwandi Riots, in a Muslim ghetto of Mumbai where the protagonist, Salim, resides; the many significant questions raised to the filmmaker by the working class audience that has helped inform our conversations about identity, representation, and the purpose of the political documentary film even today. This segment occurs roughly in the middle, and for Salim Pasha, a young rowdy with a disability, becomes pivotal in his reflections about communalism and his realization about living an honest life, which made him give up the facade of a rowdy that he had initially adopted to cope with the tensions within his family, and the discrimination he faces as a disabled Muslim.

The role of the documentary within this film is crucial, not only because it is a tribute to the veteran Indian documentary filmmaker Anand Patwardhan, but because of the conversation it initiates, both before and after the screening, about the ideological potential of cinema, as a character when informed about the screening in the mohalla questions its very purpose and remarks, "A film on Bhiwandi? Is it a film about the riots? What will they show- how people were killed, women and children were left mutilated?".

Roughly two minutes of the documentary is shown in the film, wherein questions about the extent of violence, the state's response, the economics of riots, who pays the price for these riots, who benefits from them, the reasons that lead for religious differences to turn into hateful riots are raised. All this while, Mirza captures the reactions of his film's characters to the documentary, while it is being screened, and also post the screening. The filmmaker emphasizes that the documentary's purpose is to unravel the truth of the riots and the larger trend of communalism to the country, which is then challenged by Salim's father who proclaims how it is known to all, yet the reasons behind the riots remain unknown.



As he speaks, an infuriated character calls for violence, presumably against the right wing Hindu outfits that caused the anti-Muslim riots, in a fit of rage and retaliation, which is then challenged by the filmmaker who sees riots as a cycle of provocative violence and a deliberate distraction from significant questions related to poverty, and asks questions to his audience as to why the Muslims and working classes are not provided employment, forced to live in miserable conditions, and excluded from educational institutions, in an attempt to mobilise the communities. This segment highlights the significance of working closely with a community, yet emphasizes the need for sympathy, critical distance, and honesty. It leads the filmmaker to patiently listen to the community members' inquiries about his work, including even Salim's question about the filmmaker's identity: whether he is Muslim or, out of suspicion, a government official. When the filmmaker denies both, and says that he is a Hindu, working in a filmmaker collective, Salim is left completely perplexed as to why he would make the film at all. The community further questions why the film is being screened in a Muslim mohalla instead of among those who initiated the violence. The filmmaker simply replies, "I shall speak to everyone who wishes to listen". We shall return to listen to this documentary filmmaker towards the end of the essay.

This detailed analysis of the film segment is crucial to illustrating how India's documentary movement, which gained momentum in the late 1960s and 1970s, was built upon a deep engagement with the communities it portrayed, often with the political goal of mobilisation. Although many filmmakers of this era did not belong to the communities they documented, acknowledging this distance is vital. Without such self-awareness, these portrayals risk creating narrative gaps, misrepresentations, and harmful stereotypes. Most dangerous of all, a lack of lived experience can result in a patronising or voyeuristic gaze. Despite these risks, these films played a major role in initiating conversations amidst bourgeoisie classes and the intellectual circles, by utilizing cinema as an ideological medium. Over time, as minority caste, religious, and gender communities gained access to filmmaking, documentary cinema subverted this gaze from above, and birthed instead, a gaze from below, one where the filmmaker operates as an insider within the narrative, or where their off-screen presence still implies deep communal belonging. This shift led to positive portrayals of real-life individuals, framing them not as helpless victims trapped in endless suffering, but as agential subjects who negotiate oppression using whatever limited resources they possess.



Concurrently, dominant-group filmmakers who document minority concerns must still negotiate this issue of distance. Without systemic engagement with their subjects, these filmmakers risk adopting a voyeuristic gaze. In this context, voyeurism extends beyond sexual connotations; it represents the practice of putting real-life individuals on screen solely to critique a social institution, without meaningfully engaging the very actors who shape or dismantle those systems.

This reduces members of marginalized communities to pitiable individuals portrayed in the most reduced conditions of living, a form of what is called poverty porn, or undertakes highly romanticized portrayals of these individuals as heroic figures who fight such structures. This approach creates an uncritical distance from the subject, while establishing a seemingly irreconcilable gap between the heroic marginalized individual and the relatively well-off audience. Instead of leaving with an analysis of structural contradictions, such as caste discrimination, gender violence, or Islamophobic riots, that might spur them to action, viewers experience a purely affective catharsis rooted in either grief over the tragedy or joy at the resistance portrayed. The pedagogical, transformative character of the documentary film is lost in such films apart from the obvious harm it causes to these communities. Sushmit Ghosh and Rintu Thomas' *Writing With Fire*, a 2021 documentary film, becomes a case in point for this voyeuristic gaze that documentary cinema, especially of the kind that raises political and social concerns, must reconcile with for it to be a tool of ideological mobilisation.

Writing with Fire depicts the everyday lives of journalists working for Khabar Lahariya, India's first and only women-led grassroots media organisation. Established in Uttar Pradesh in 2002, the outlet features reporters tackling critical issues such as sexual and caste-based violence, mining fatalities, and local administrative corruption regarding the registration of FIRs. The film underlines the negotiations of three Khabar Lahariya reporters, Meera, Suneeta, and Shyamkali, with caste and gender hierarchies both within their families, in their own villages as well as the sites they visit for reportage. In terms of content, the film focuses on the organisation's response to contemporary concerns, namely their shift to a digital format to expand their reach and their struggle to report on grassroots issues amidst the rise of the BJP in Uttar Pradesh. As highlighted in the second half of the film, the journalists collaborate to devise strategies that ensure their safety without compromising the critical, investigative approach necessary to hold those in power accountable.



The most significant moments in the film are the team's monthly meetings, where journalists gather to evaluate individual performance, address social and technical challenges, and engage in reflective conversations about upholding democratic principles. Utilizing the documentary form to comment on pertinent contemporary concerns of power and the role of journalism in authoritarian regimes, the film integrates clips from the organisation's YouTube channel to showcase their extensive reportage. Concurrently, several elements echo a biopic format; the narrative details the everyday lives of these women, capturing familial conflicts alongside the reactions of their fathers, husbands, and children to their dangerous work.

In my reading of the film, I have felt that it was made in order to cater to a Western audience. This is evident in the rudimentary history and statistics on casteism provided to viewers before the film begins, the contextual information regarding the 2019 general election results provided at the end, and the flattening of cultural nuances and social identities within the film's English subtitles. This is crucial as it has altered the gaze of the film and influenced its politics. The narrative introduces caste and gender violence in India as if they were novelties, ignoring that these are everyday realities for an Indian audience requiring no such introduction. Furthermore, by glorifying the journalists for their individual bravery, the film fails to highlight the state clampdown on journalism, a glaring omission that any local viewer would notice.

This critique is underlined in Jyoti Nisha's article about the film that also characterizes its gaze as voyeuristic. The article attributes this to the lack of experiential knowledge of its Savarna filmmakers and the absence of a social anchor to negotiate caste hierarchies for the subjects. Ultimately, this limitation affects how the subjects are portrayed, both as characters within the film's form and as real-life individuals. This voyeuristic gaze in the political documentary film is most visible in its distortion of the politics of its real-life subjects, coupled with a romanticised portrayal of movements without adequate attention to opposition to them. This political distortion strikes at the very heart of the documentary film as it flattens the very conditions that inform Khabar Lahariya's politics. For instance, anti-caste politics and the critique of the BJP, that occur as distinct strands in the film, are deeply interconnected, given the Brahminical character of the BJP which any strand of anti-caste activism must reject.



Anand Patwardhan's 1992 documentary *Ram Ke Naam* establishes this linkage at the same transitory moment in history when the RSS and other right wing outfits were becoming stronger in Northern India, culminating in the Babri Masjid demolition, as well as the rise of Dalit, Bahujan groups in the political and public domain, that becomes all the more relevant today with more than a decade of the BJP in power and everyday mob lynchings of Dalits, Bahujans, Muslims, and Christians, none of which find any mention in the film. This gaze, one could argue, has also developed due to the commodification of cinema and the Western cultural industry that awards films suitable to its patronizing gaze, requiring filmmakers to appeal to the Western sensibilities that require a reduction of the agential individual to a mere victim, evident in several film festivals that have not awarded any Palestinian films. Unless they have also been made by an Israeli filmmaker. This raises pertinent questions about whether the dominant cultural industry can allow for a politically committed feminist, anti-caste documentary film.



Returning to the question of engagement with the community, Yashica Dutt's article on the film, based on Khabar Lahariya's statement criticising and distancing itself from the film, underlines the neglect towards the journalists' precarity, in both the narrative of the film and its politics, that work for the organisation it depicts but not with them. Dutt criticizes the film's lack of ethics, arguing that the directors restricted the organisation's complex work to a purely anti-right-wing or anti-BJP agenda. While that lens holds partially true, their actual reportage spans across multiple political parties with the larger motive of empowering women-led journalism in a region long defined by patriarchal and casteist attitudes that "allow only upper-caste men to be journalists," as Meera states in the film.



Though the organisation respects and appreciates the film's motive of underlining and appreciating critical journalism, it criticizes the film's selective narrativization as it “eclipses the kind of work and the kind of local journalism we have done for twenty years, the reason we are different from other mainstream media of our times”. The organisation also claims that the film was not shown to them before it was submitted for the Oscars and several film festivals, and they were shown the film only in late February 2022, also noting that feedback given to the filmmakers in several emails was not incorporated in the film. The claim of misrepresentation in the film was countered by the filmmakers’ defence of the film as they stated: “We respect that this may not be the film that they would have made about themselves but it does fairly represent the important work that they do.” (Scroll.in, 2022)

This debate relies on the conflict of expectations between the filmmakers and the community and organisation they portrayed, lack of dialogue from the filmmakers, and the notion of artistic licence. Though the narrative of the film highlights a crucial issue, Dutt's and the organisation's criticism of the film is crucial, as the politics of the film imposes the filmmakers’ limited interpretation of the organization's politics to electoral and ideological oppositions. It also partially erases their anti-caste feminist politics and assertion, and its lack of a deep exploration of casteism, misogyny, and the crisis in mainstream media also raises questions about who the film is for. This becomes a concern given that it has not yet been released in India except for the Sundance Film Festival screening and other such closed screenings.

Though Khabar Lahariya is an anti caste feminist organisation, the film may not be classified as a feminist film, not out of any misogynist representations but due to a lack of what Madhumeeta Sinha calls “an alliance with the people who were a part of these (feminist) films” which she notes to be a crucial feature of feminist films right from their conception to their screening. The imbalance between the potentially feminist content of the film and its (mis-)representational form cause a misalignment that problematizes the film's politics and its gaze.



This case study of what sought to become an anti-caste feminist documentary film underlines not only the problem of a voyeuristic gaze, but also the concern of a coherent political vision which much reflect in the form of the film and its entry into the public domain. The documentary film relies on the foundations of a deep engagement with the community being portrayed, much more than a global recognition with an award as its end goal, as the political aim of such a film is mobilisation which must start at the grassroots level rather than a top-down trickle approach from global to local. The model of the documentary film as shown in Mirza's film, though consists of problems such as its limited vision of the film as a medium to spread awareness about structures of oppression that communities at the margins usually know of and the filmmaker as an outsider to the community, it does seek to bridge this gap with discussions and debates. Any contemporary documentary film must be conscious of the relationship it has with the community it portrays and also ensure that it must not flatten out political complexities and its own vision, due to the neoliberal demands of the cultural industry, and pressures from right wing outfits.

With the rise of documentary filmmakers such as Somnath Waghmare, Arbab Ahmad, Nausheen Khan, and Debalina Majumder that portray their communities with sensitivity and remain politically committed to their vision, documentary filmmaking has been challenging outdated modes of representing marginalised communities and also, the rise of right-wing politics, as it has reconciled the problem of the voyeuristic gaze of the documentary filmmaker and the political distortion that accompanies it.



THE WAITING ROOM

SIENNA RENEE PERKIN



OBSERVER STATUS

VERONICA TUCKER

The patient sleeps beneath
a ceiling tile stained
the color of old gauze

while the camera
in the upper corner
pulses once every few seconds

not recording
according to policy

only monitoring

which feels harder to refuse

At 2:11 a.m.
a nurse adjusts the blanket
for no clinical reason

In the hallway
ice collapses inside
the vending machine

The chart updates itself
every few minutes

restless
cooperative
guarded

Outside the doorway
a security guard stops walking

his reflection briefly joining
the patient's reflection
in the darkened glass

before both disappear



UNTITLED

ANUSHKA PAI



EGG

ELIZA FISHERMAN



SAVE A DOLL, FUCK A TRANSSEXUAL...OR DON'T?

RYAN P

A few months ago, I had stumbled upon a small corner of the internet riddled with T-girl propaganda. But not in the way one might think. I kept getting these TikToks of cisgender men boasting and preaching about the positives of dating trans women. In their own self-righteous manner, they touched on how they've not only scored an amazing girlfriend, but a best friend as well. Someone with unmatched emotional depth and maturity that has since prompted their loyalty to each other #ProtectTheDolls (?).

In contrast, the reality is that trans people have always been at the very bottom of the ladder for social capital. Historically, we have been undervalued, mistreated, and most importantly— unprotected. Our bodies are a goldmine for hate speech and fetishization, to the point where we are seen as taboos before humans.

As a recently-reformed serial dater and trans oracle, I couldn't help but wonder... Are there any good men left? Or has our fate been set in stone, banishing us to screens of freaked-out texts and girlcock aficionados?

Is there a right way to love us? Or do we settle for so wrong... that it feels so right?

PDA: Public Displays of Allyship

What I found most appalling about this community was their discussions of sex. Yes, having sex with a trans woman is incredible and eye-opening. Yes, cookie good, monkey tight. However, seeing a group of men discuss our genitals (and some even airing out intimate details of their own relationship) was unnerving, to say the least.

Call me paranoid, but all I could think of after witnessing this phenomenon is that chasers are evolving. Long gone are the days of these men occupying the dark, seedy alleyways of the internet. Instead, they're opting for PDA: Public Displays of Allyship. And while I don't doubt that some of these men are well-intentioned, their comment sections being full of my fellow sisters praising and throwing themselves at them feels a little...icky. To me, it further perpetuates the stereotype that trans women are easy. Since the conception of our womanhood, we are programmed to compare ourselves to our cis counterparts.

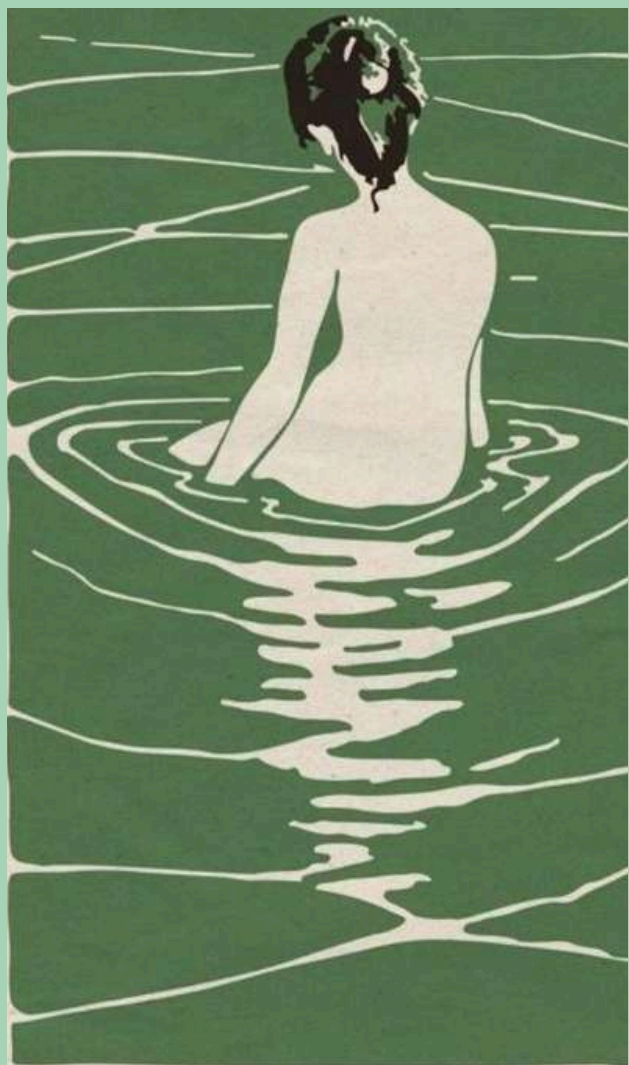


And everyone knows, comparison breeds insecurity. These experiences shape us into the role of girls who are always the second choice. The booty calls. The low-maintenance, noncommittal, non-girlfriends. Sadly, this sets the bar extremely low for a lot of us. So when any guy, who may seem decent, shows a sliver of interest in us... we fall.

This wouldn't be the first time I've seen men perform acts of liberalism to get their dicks wet. However, the problem with new age chasers lies in the fact that they don't really do much. What I mean is these men are repeating the most baseline, bare-minimum talking points when it comes to cis-trans solidarity.

As I scrolled, my eyes stung with these mantras of "trans women are women", "my TRANS girlfriend", and "Things to know before dating a trans woman" (nine times out of ten they allude to her genitals). Hell, I even saw entire podcast clips dissecting the minds of trans-attracted men (two dumb bitches telling each other "exactlyyyy").

And so, even allyship for us has become sexualized. Like a classic predator-prey relationship, we get lulled into a false sense of security... and then bam: "*Would fucking you make me gay?*"





On the flip-side, maybe we should just be grateful. Maybe we should just sit down, sip our tea, brush our hair, and be happy that men actually like us..?

Yeah, fuck no.

While drafting this post, I decided to inquire one of my closest friends: Clint. Former boss and fellow trans woman. Her conclusive thoughts about the topic was: “instead of identifying with t girls let’s start being the go get what they want girls.”

As trans women, we have been conditioned to constantly accommodate. We should give grace to those who have difficulty seeing us, and we shouldn’t want more in spaces that we had to fight to get into. Acceptance should be enough. But is it really acceptance if we’re still being segregated? We may be inside the club, but that doesn’t make us a member.

This hunger for male validation runs rampant in various women-dominated communities and media— but in the context of transness, runs a deeper line of this need to “feel real”.



Realness: the quality or state of being real.

Realness for a trans person means being perceived as their cisgender counterpart. Not just externally, but internally as well. To be real is to embody the characteristics of mainstream, heteronormative society. To “pass”, as many would say.

For a lot of girls like us™, affairs with men were our first introduction into what it felt like to be real. I could speak for myself when I say, the first time I was with a man I felt like I had won. The “him” that seemed to be so prevalent in every woman’s life I grew up spectating, was finally beginning to enter mine. He had chosen me, made me feel beautiful, and most importantly... made me feel seen. It was something my adolescence had been robbed of, coming back to me in waves. Big, hard waves.

The issue with this is the way that men have taken advantage of this canon event. I may be giving them too much credit, but I feel like guys can smell the insecurity on a woman. Like blood to a shark. Our battle with identity has resulted in fragility, yet it’s never really acknowledged outside our own circles. We are friends before we can be lovers, therapists before life-long partners, and fantasies before people. These are the roles that men have subjected me (and other girls) to time and time again. In a way, we’re almost like an illicit substance to them. They get hooked on the way we’re able to shoulder so much baggage, while still making them feel like “The Man”. We’ll perfect ourselves, inject ourselves, break ourselves apart bit by bit and rebuild from the ground up... and still have space for them. All for the sake of feeling real.

This treatment ultimately circles back to objectification. And whether or not these men are doing it intentionally or unintentionally, it is still a common occurrence plaguing our dating pools. Objectification tows a thin line between fetishization, and fetishization means... you’re fucked. Literally.

My credentials? Let’s take a closer look at my roster.

I have my first boyfriend who discovered me through my pornstar account. I have my second guy who’s been with a trans woman before, and described that relationship as “She’d trauma-dump on me sometimes and give me head”. My third guy was just a hookup, but in his words: “I’ve always craved swallowing you but I suck at head”.



Fourth, didn't know I was trans until the end of the date (didn't end up fucking, but forced to make-out). And fifth, opened up to me very quickly, got me attached, had a drunken first date where we made out in his car, and like clockwork... became another ghost in my phone. A couple weeks later, I'd find out he has a girlfriend, despite our long-winded conversations about "working on himself" and "not being ready to date for a while" (bullshit).

A significant commonality that I've found about all these men is the fact that they have admitted to watching tranny porn before. And not by some crazy, freak accident. They have sought it out... to the point where they now have one sprawled out in their backseat.

Sex for trans people is our capital. It's not a coincidence that many trans women participate in sex work, internationally at that. For a lot of us, it's easy money. It funds medical expenses, housing, and gets us to a place where we can live as our truest, most honest selves. The body being this reservoir of survival reflects in our dating experiences. The questions of "how big is it?" and "do you top?" is common in our conversations with men, trick or not.

What I'm getting at here is to love a trans woman correctly, is to love her normally. Let the crush develop, have the first kiss, take her out, treat her, and savor the innocence of it all. Most of us aren't looking for men who will shout from rooftops that they're fucking a bitch with a dick. Ultimately, our goal is to just blend in, and be with normal guys who have normal lives. That in and of itself is way more affirming than any #transdating TikTok out there.





To speak directly to the men: We are not your experiments, and we are definitely not placeholders for you to use until the right person comes along. You should know what you're getting yourself into before becoming involved with any of us. We're just girls with a whole lot of baggage, and estrogen weakens the muscles (sad face). If you love us like you would any other person, then there shouldn't be a problem. Simple as that.

And for the girls: I dedicate this post to you. Keep being fabulous, keep fucking shit up, and remember— If a man ever makes you feel insecure, just flip it around and ruin his life... by continuing to live in your truth.

After all, it's his loss





LOOKING OUT OR IN?

SAKSHI PHANSEKAR

Watercolour on paper
Framed as a sliding window,
the artwork allows the viewer
to engage with changing visibility



LOOKING OUT OR IN?

Series of works
Watercolour on Paper



SAKSHI PHANSEKAR



LOOKING OUT OR IN?

SAKSHI PHANSEKAR



A partial glimpse through windows leads to the curiosity with which we feel the need to peek into other people's lives and homes. The liberating act of looking out has its reciprocal twin, the act of looking in, which elicits gaze in a way that mythification of the subject takes place.



AÏOLI DE L'ÂME

SARA WHITTEMORE

There's a lack of robustness
in every one of our novel enterprises

We have been emulsified together
in a mayonnaise of language

souped over several spangled cathedrals
chiasmata between our perceptions

like a community of lovers lost in time
The sacred horror of sharing a grapheme

kiss inside a phonetic arboretum, an exercise
in putative limerence, yet

corporeal, perhaps even written, emergent
Three bewildering occurrences happening

behind mauve eyelid voids, the golden omni
texts, the kundalini movement towards

a ritual unification /a ritual division
Palmate expansion radiates in this

television city, inside this mathematical
theater of lenticular meaning. Do you see
what I

mean? We have been propagated by cutting
and pasting together private cosmogonies, a
sibylline

potpourri of perception visually distilled into
mirrored forms that I have handed here

to you

to you



AN OTHERED GAZE

AMELIE ATSCH



THE NOBEL MAN

SARVAGYA J. NAIR



The Nobel Man explores ritual through the lived reality of a manual scavenger, a caste-based occupation in India historically assigned to marginalized communities. The film follows a solitary figure who emerges from a sewage pit, moves through the city, and returns to the same space, forming a cyclical structure.

His journey passes through sites of religion, labour, and consumption, where he remains present yet largely unacknowledged. Positioned within these environments, his minimal actions such as standing, waiting, and moving take on a repetitive, ritualistic quality. The body, marked by labour, becomes central to this cycle, carrying the traces of a system that persists across spaces.

By situating this figure within everyday urban contexts, the film reframes ritual as something embedded in structures of caste and labour rather than confined to formal religious practices. The return to the point of origin reinforces a sense of continuity, presenting ritual as an enduring condition shaped by social hierarchy, repetition, and the persistence of invisibility.















HEIRLOOM

SINDHURI RAO

Half past seven
a thud showed up between
mother's shoulder blades.

I watched her hands search
her stomach instead.
Father's eyelids mend
his anger on to her skin.

Grandmother's unmoved jaw adds—
this is how women carry families.

Mothers are attics.
Their torsos hoard
shells of their childhoods,
half-recited prayers
and dried stalks of cotyledons.

Their fingers arrange homes
through washed tablecloths,
staring office lights,
sun-seasoned plant pots and
oil-combed hair

all the while

the tiny eyes
behind half-latched doors
inherit their bruises

like freckles on their skin.



WHAT ARRIVES AT OUR MOUTHS

SINDHURI RAO

Belched in scrolls and reels,
eyes roll.
New minister getting
less news coverage
than the women
in his life
with jasmines on her crown.
Wayward click baits
give us more dopamine than truths.
Countries grieve. Birds grieve.
We pin everything to their God,
it's a uncomfortable convenience.
The men in our society are
interested if Didi or saffron wins
we live down south yet the other state's newspapers
are being fed categorically into our mouths.
We are responsible citizens.
We are more focused on our language
printed on water tankers than rivers drying.
kisses on streets trigger us faster
than—
a four year old being raped with
face covered in cow dung.
Hysterectomies in sugar cane cutters
promote long working hours,
is something we never heard about.
We are holy.
We perform last rites around camphor smoke
for a smooth passage of our ancestors
and search for our maker in all our hard times.





HOME

MOTHER



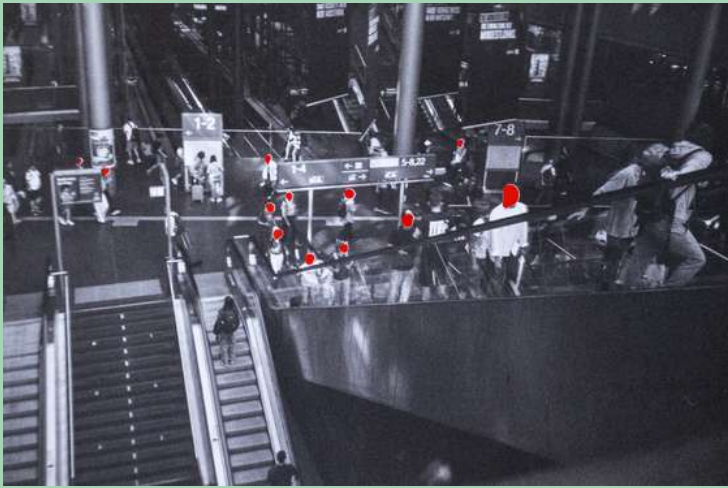
ATTIYA USMAN



DATENSCHUTZ

TATIANA BULANOVA





AN ACUTE CASE OF LUST AND HALITOSIS

JB POLK

The lawyers flank the defendant. The older one is fat and squat; the younger is tall and lanky. Dressed in black suits, black ties, and white shirts, with only the bowler hats missing, they weirdly resemble Laurel and Hardy.

"How does the defendant plead?" the judge asks.

"Not guilty by reason of insanity," Laurel answers, staring the judge down as if daring him to challenge the plea.

"We have the medical records to prove it," Hardy points to a stack of papers.

"Your Honor, it all started with an acute case of lust and halitosis," he clears his throat and begins his defense.

Eulalia Ramirez was the only daughter of wealthy farmers who owned thousands of acres of orchards, grasslands, and hills covered with eucalyptus and radiata pine. It was, in fact, Eulalia's father, Hector, who had pioneered the country's export of grapes, custard apples, and quinces and had successfully experimented with fruits from other, distant latitudes, planting the first kiwis—soft, fuzzy balls resembling brown eggs.

Until the age of ten, little Eulalia differed little from other girls in her social circles. She lived in a mansion, protected from the city's decadence by massive walls, played with porcelain dolls with real hair and raw liver cheeks, rode her pony (an offspring of Golden Miller, the famous 5-time Cheltenham race winner), and read stories about Catholic virgins who chose death rather than surrender to their rapists. She saw her parents rarely because they traveled extensively throughout Europe and the safer, more temperate regions of Africa, crossing the Atlantic at least twice a year.

There had been no warning signs in the girl's character to foretell the drama that would end in tragedy and eventually in a court trial.

It was while playing near the servants' quarters, where she had been forbidden to go under threat of lightning bolts, that she witnessed an act of savagery similar to those she read about in stories of Catholic martyrs: the passionate lovemaking between a scullery maid, a girl with chunky thighs and a shadow of a mustache, and a stick-thin groom with hairy buttocks.



She ran away in tears, sharing her experience with her nanny, Maria. This moment marked the beginning of her halitosis, a condition that, as time revealed, proved incurable.

Summoned back from Vienna, where they had been savoring Viennese coffee, cheesecake, and ‘Tannhauser,’ her preoccupied parents consulted local doctors, sent her to the most prestigious and costly Swiss clinics for treatment, explored native remedies, elixirs, and mouthwashes, doused her with cologne, and paid for a hundred masses in the Cathedral, but nothing worked: the stench of open slop pails kept pouring from her mouth.

Despite her parents’ concerns, Eulalia remained unfazed, realizing that her illness was a powerful weapon whenever she wanted to fulfill one of her whims, whether big or small. “Our assessment indicates that she is in good health. In a physical sense, that is. However, it appears she may be engaging in self-punishment due to perceived disobedience and exposure to an event inappropriate for her developmental stage,” they explained, using complex medical terminology to hide their ignorance as to the real cause of her behavior.

Having failed to cure the girl, the family had grown used to the smell and, as best they could, ignored the problem, hoping that puberty and menstruation, remedies prescribed by psychiatrists steeped in Dr. Freud’s theories for all developing girls, would eradicate it once and for all.

“Out of sight, out of mind,” Frida, Eulalia’s mother, announced.

“But not out of smell!” replied the servants in whispers, keeping a safe distance from the malodorous young mistress.



Like any parents, hers had lofty aspirations for their daughter: Eulalia was expected to marry a suitable man and produce an heir.

“She’s fluent in French and English, skilled at playing the pianoforte, and adept at embroidering birds, fruit, and wildflowers on handkerchiefs,” her mother would tell prospective suitors.

The problem was that no one wanted to accept such gifts because of the lingering smell, despite numerous washings, so finding a husband who would not be repelled by the stench and who would match her social standing had proven quite a challenge.

They searched all over the country and even reached out to matchmakers in the United States of America, where people with yellow hair feast on buffalo meat, wear wide-brimmed hats, strap on their pistols and belts full of bullets, and call themselves cowboys. But without any luck.

Eulalia was approaching thirty when her parents, who had lost all hope of finding a match for her, met a suitable suitor. His name was Asencio Valdes, a handsome but penniless lawyer with undeniable charm.

Rumors about the rapid courtship and the motives behind the quick wedding were rife in the community. "Asencio doesn't have a dime to his name, but his family's hectares speak for themselves. He will make money from the marriage if he can hold his nose long enough," they whispered, eagerly accepting the invitation and preparing fragrant salts and lavender potions to ward off Eulalia's stench.



Ignoring the rumors, the young lawyer followed the advice of an old acquaintance. “My dear friend,” he was told, “if you desire a perfect horse or a perfect wife, you will always have an empty stable and an empty bed. So ignore the wagging tongues, get a nice suit, and invite all your friends and family to witness your good fortune.”

After the wedding bells stopped ringing, Asencio realized that, in addition to the halitosis he was aware of and willing to accept, the young bride suffered from a far worse condition—sexual rigor mortis.

It was impossible to tell whether it was the odor issuing from her lips or the memory of that faraway day when she'd come across the roguish couple frolicking on the hay that made Eulalia reject her husband's advances, the penitential pain of sex, and cross her legs with a firm 'no.'

Not that he hadn't tried: he spun a web of seduction, showered his bride with flowers and gifts (purchased with her parents' money), and imported French magazines depicting Parisian courtesans in frilly knickers and crude Japanese etchings of Asian geishas. He slipped perfumed verses from the Kama Sutra into her bed, hoping to arouse her desire.

“I swear on my parents' lives, Eulalia. If you don't let me into your bed, I'll write to Pope Pius XI in the Holy City to request an annulment,” he threatened. Despite his ardent pleas, the not-so-young bride remained ungenerous with her favors.

Mocking stories about the quirky duo were rampant at the city's trendiest spots. “I've heard all sorts of tales about Eulalia's skills in the art of seduction.”

“I heard nothing!”

“Well, that's exactly the rumor on the street! It's nothing!”

“The Ramirezes bought a son-in-law, but with Eulalia's breath that could knock a buzzard off a wagon and her icy demeanor, he's not exactly living the dream!”



The gossip didn't bother Eulalia at all. As far as she was concerned, they could all go and hang! In fact, she took immense pleasure in being talked about. She was confident in her virtue and spiritual endurance. She had always held St. Philomena in high esteem, a young martyr who, at the age of 21, faced torture and execution rather than renounce her faith, all while remaining steadfast to her vows of purity. And that was exactly what Eulalia intended to do.

As time passed, it became increasingly unlikely that Asencio and Eulalia would have a marriage that resembled anything close to normal, let alone produce an heir. Driven by an insatiable libido, Asencio could not help but stray from the path of righteousness, embarking on a series of affairs with women of questionable repute and some more respectable ones. Seeking solace from the limitations of an unhappy union, he bet on slow horses and fast women, disposing liberally of his wife's fortune.

Eulalia, on the other hand, believed that every man was entitled to an occasional folly. After all, men took only as much liberty as their women permitted. But one thing she would not tolerate—sex under her roof. Disgusted by the coarse physicality of life, including sex, birth, and death, she was determined to keep her home free of the ugly instincts that made males swell like mating horses and women shriek and pant.

“As long as Asencio keeps his tomcatting to local brothels, no harm is done,” she once told her mother, but kept a close eye on the series of maids and general staff who were scared away by the mistress's irrational accusations and her stench, leaving with frightening regularity.

Aside from Eulalia and Asencio, the household included Leonor, the lady's maid; Manuel, a shy nineteen-year-old who was Asencio's driver and occasionally helped in the garden; and the cook, an Indigenous woman from a nearby People of the Earth tribe who prepared healthful, albeit somewhat dull, dishes. Her name was Yanara, but no one ever called her anything but "Cook." She was built like a Baptist church, with square, angular features; in other words, she was so unattractive that Eulalia was confident Asencio would not give her a second look.



Leonor had been working for the Valdeses for several years. She was robust and healthy, yet remarkably inept in all she did, with one exception: she had elevated petty theft to an art form. She raided the pantry, the icebox, and the closets, stealing sugar, beans, spices, silver spoons, gold cufflinks, Eulalia's tortoiseshell combs, and even pocketing discarded underwear, which she later sold on the local market.

In her loneliness, Eulalia sought a companion who could understand her virginal agony, and Leonor, who had lost her maidenhood at fifteen, convinced her mistress of her distaste for the opposite sex and their wicked desires.

She was Eulalia's eyes and ears, spying on the cook, Manuel, and even the master himself, who despised her intrusions and ignorance and once said that what Leonor didn't know would make an excellent library. Eulalia placed her entire trust in Leonor, and nothing could drag her down from the pedestal her mistress had elevated her to.

Asencio, who had no formal employment and relied on the stipend he received from his in-laws, often traveled to the family farm and stayed there for several months each year.

"You know how it is in the country," he told his wife.

"Failing combine harvesters, cows not calving on time, and let's not even start with the lazy farmworkers!"

But it was the well-stocked harem of available country women that kept him from the city. The girls, lured by his handsome face and rumors of his sexual prowess, were more than thrilled to spend a night or two with him. As a result of his illicit liaisons, he had mastered the art of lovemaking to perfection, realizing that giving pleasure was just as vital as receiving it. On his many journeys to the capital, he frequented Heavenly Helena's, the most sophisticated brothel, where he learned intimate details about sexual thrills in the beds of elite prostitutes. With the tenderness of an inveterate romantic, he fed the buxom beauties Hershey bars imported from Boston and served fine Scotch and dry sherry, which his wife reserved for her rare visits to the farm. Asencio gave the girls guided tours of the house, proudly displayed its numerous relics and antiques, then made love to them with passion, leaving them dreaming of even more erotic acrobatics.

However, after a few intensive weeks, he grew bored and left his lovers, following the adage, "Letting them go gently is one of the greatest secrets to happiness in love."



And things would have continued as they had for twenty-odd years, had it not been for Eulalia's menopause and the subsequent changes in her mood and behavior. Suddenly, she began to suspect her husband of having an affair with Leonor.

"I have to get rid of her soon. Keeping her is asking for trouble!" she thought. "But he's going to figure out my plan if I don't act fast," she muttered to herself, watching the maid serve fried chicken and malted milk with snowflakes of poached egg white as she uncorked bottles of first-class Malbec, all with frosty composure.

The worry gave her attacks of indigestion and bouts of hiccups that lasted for days. Her stomach was bloated, and the stench pouring from her mouth was nearly palpable. If there were a camera that could capture the physical manifestations of her anxiety, it would show a putrid cloud of gas surrounding her, emanating from her pores and filling the air around her with a noxious odor.

At night, she hardly slept at all, and the hours of insomnia led to a dangerous intellectual process called putting two and two together. "Asencio can be irresistible. His charm can turn young girls' knees to water. A serving wench will finally yield to his appeal, just as a sliver of iron is drawn to a magnet. I've resisted because the purity of my mind and body is my badge of honor. It is the reason I exist."

Whenever she spoke to Leonor, she watched for the telltale signs of betrayal—a blush, muddled thoughts, outright lies—but found none. The girl seemed sincere and respectful. "The thing has not happened, then—at least, not yet," she told herself.

In the evenings, Eulalia sat before the mirror, languishing in her particular loneliness. She looked at her reflection with dislike and reluctantly compared herself to the younger maid. Her patrician features and deep-set eyes were beginning to show signs of aging. Despite the careful attention of hairdressers, the nurturing effects of relaxants and mousses, and the protective layers of colorants, her black hair was beginning to gray. She took a scented handkerchief from her dress sleeve, embroidered as part of her trousseau by a Carmelite nun. Sighing, she sniffed it, rubbed a smudge of powder from her cheek, and then stuffed it back into its usual place.

"I know he is sleeping with her!" she hissed at her reflection.

"And I will kill him first rather than let him sully the sanctity of my home!"



With the flush of summer gone, the farm chores completed, crates of grapes and nectarines shipped to Europe, and wagonload after wagonload of grain sent to the capital, Asencio, having no more excuses to prolong his stay on the farm, returned to the city.

All the way from the farm, he sat in silence, morosely pondering the pleasures he had lost and the long, dull days in his wife's company, looming over him like an autumn cloud. He dreaded the relentlessly drab winter, the early nights, and Eulalia's self-righteous sermons on the purity of body and mind. With every mile, his mood darkened, and even memories of his erotic escapades failed to lift his spirits.

As soon as they reached the courtyard and Manuel pulled the car into the garage, Asencio stormed into the house. Without greeting his wife, he locked himself in his bedroom, accompanied only by his blustery thoughts.

He lay on the bed and stared at the ceiling, wondering if he could sneak out without provoking Eulalia's wrath. "No harm in visiting the local girls," he thought, and an image of ladies in tight bodices, fishnet stockings, and red suspenders appeared in his mind.

"A lively conversation and some dancing would do me good." He combed his mustache, rubbed imported pomade into his hair, and sprayed cologne under his arms and around his crotch. With his silk shirt unbuttoned at the neck and a box of chocolates under one arm, he marched out of the house without once looking back.



The house was quiet. The clock on the mantelpiece in the sitting room struck one. The Cook, belly up like an upended turtle, snored on her bed by the window through which stars, cold and distant, played hide-and-seek with the curtains. Eulalia, exhausted by the vigilant chaperonage of her husband, bathed by the repelling odors of her breath, turned in her bed, unable to sleep.

“I know he went to her room,” she murmured, punching the pillow with her fist, then got up abruptly. Trusting her step to the dim light creeping in through the skylights, she entered the hall, wearing only a bra and a half-slip. A board creaked under her feet in protest.

She stood still for a long time, her mouth slightly parted, her features half-erased by shadows.

“I can hear them,” she muttered.

I can detect lust a mile away—there’s nothing more disturbing than the smell of lust, with its overpowering scent of desperation and neediness. It's suffocating." She could sense it through the powerful odors of her halitosis—it was sweet and murky, burning into her nostrils.

“I smelled it that day by the servants’ quarters, and I can smell it now emanating from Leonor’s bedroom!” she thought. She moved swiftly to the sitting room and grabbed a poker from the fireplace. “I must defend the honor of my house! They can't get away with laughing at me right here, under my own roof," she thought, her blood boiling with rage.

As she approached the door, the smell grew stronger and stronger, drawing her on until, poker in hand, she burst into the room. Her face was distorted, pulled out of shape by anger, and the veins in her neck were taut as pulley wires. Her heart was pumping like bellows. It was as if she were driving a car with the steering jammed, the vehicle rolling of its own volition down a hill, where it would overturn without her control.



She nearly flew to the bed and raised the poker high above her head. Leonor never knew whether she screamed aloud or whether it was only a silent detonation in her head. Neither could she say whether certain things had happened or whether she had imagined them.

Tepid liquid spurted as Manuel fell face down into her lap. A rain of blows followed, crushing the skull into a mass of gray tissue and bone fragments. The metallic tang of blood filled the air as Eulalia continued her brutal attack. The driver's body convulsed, his life slipping away with each merciless blow. The sickening crack of bones and the soft splatter of blood against the walls and ceiling competed with Eulalia's harsh breathing and sobs. But she kept striking the fallen man until her arm ached.

When she had spent her fury, she stepped back, regarding the carnage, the terrified girl, and the blood-splattered poker with weary defiance. "Look what you've done, you wretched girl," she barked, the sound like the yelp of a sick dog. Leonor whimpered, wrapping her arms around her knees and hugging them to her chest as if she were huddled against a chill or bracing for a blow. She wanted to push the heavy bulk away, get up, and run, but Eulalia's stare anchored her to the bed.

"Everything I held dear...gone. All I've ever wanted... the sanctity of my home... stained." A look of sullen self-pity marred her features. Her breath came in frantic gasps, and her chest rose and fell—three deep inhalations, a moment of calm, followed by two more foul-smelling breaths.



I ignored his betrayal, even accepted it. But not here! Not in my house!" she yelled, her upper lip curling in a grimace of pain. "He couldn't keep the dirt away!"

With her head reared like a horse about to win a race after an enormous effort, she challenged the girl. "And you!" She spat the word off her tongue as if the taste were too unpleasant for the palate. "I took you in when you needed a home. I gave you food and a roof over your head..."

The rush of words ceased as she turned around to the sound of footsteps. Alerted by the screams, Asencio came in. "What in God's name..." he stopped, horrified by the sight. He took in the body: the head split open like an overripe melon, Leonor's ashen face, and the poker in Eulalia's hand.

Eulalia's eyes narrowed, squeezing anger out and letting a spark of comprehension. "You are dead," she said. "I killed you."

"For Heaven's sake, Eulalia, what have you done?" She silenced him with a short, choppy movement of her left hand. "You think I didn't know about your sordid little affair? You think you could fool me?" Her laughter was manic as she gazed at the poker.

"You are crazy," Asencio replied with horrified disbelief. "I might be," she admitted indifferently. "I might be crazy, but you are dead!" she added triumphantly, bursting into prolonged, hysterical laughter that was devoid of humor. She dropped the poker.

"Call the police. I'm ready," she said, her shoulders slumped. Asencio stood frozen to the floor, too dazed to answer. His gaze met Leonor's, who still clutched Manuel's corpse in her lap. "Call them," she nearly sobbed. With one last look at his wife, Asencio left the room, followed by his wife's insane laughter and the echoes of the blows that had taken his driver's life.



KRISHNA VORA



RELIANCE



DRINKING MY NEEDS





HESITATE TO STAND

STEADY WITH YOU



OCCELLUS

RYAN CAIDIC

We had a peacock growing up,
and every February, in full regalia splayed

fanning its plate of deliciousness
that blessed the dead pre-summer air.

I never knew how it came to our care. It was always
there, this bird with no quotidian air

solitary, sallying through the giant chess pieces
on the lawn. More than to be seen, it demanded

to be heard, a thunder in its throat, like a pantoum
refrain, two screams for its loneliness

then a terror, and another keening
tearing out its lungs. I remember

seeing a footage of the last Kaua'i 'ō'ō
on earth, this blackbird, last of its kind

unspooling its hymn to the air, singing
for a wife that would never reply.

When I left for university I heard they finally found
the peacock a mate, a hen out of a rib

from his side. By then, they had Rottweilers and Great
Dane mixes, heavy dogs, curious to new things.

One night, they found the hen unfurled by the throne
of its king, her neck cut open on the grass.



I imagine hearing the peacock's throat piercing
the underworld as if Orpheus had sung.

He died not long after she did, leaving nothing
but the slender stalks of gemstone eyes

he had molted through the years of searching.
Meanwhile, a gust of cold October hit my face

as I left the gym. I race home the streets, lifting its fog
to my wife who was reading a book by the bedside,

waiting for me. How lucky am I that she waits
patiently, for me.



PRAISE THE GULL

RYAN CAIDIC

More seagulls have been leaving their coastal habitats and immigrating to cities far inland to survive. – The Guardian

Praise the gull that leaves the Molave
for the city's dry bones,

praise those that fly
beyond their own shores to nest

instead, on rooftops, scaffolds, debris,
through the turmoil and grief,

to integrate with nests
that nurture their foreign young,

praise the invisible
that graze on the world's refuse,

praise these invaders that scrape
what is tossed. Praise these immigrants

that scratch at the trees and the trash,
praise their toil and their tongues

that conjure home at last, praise
their gods and their goals,

praise their silence
and their bones, praise the gull

that afternoon, that swooped
at my daughter's chips,

and praise my daughter, who,
in an act of grace, decided

to share, and raised
her whole plate in the air.



ON BEING THE OBJECT OF DEBATE

MASA AWARTANI

Studying a social science degree in a predominantly white environment is not for everyone. Unlike STEM, the social sciences and humanities do not only subject you to implicit racism, but also to very explicit forms of it. I had the misfortune of enrolling in an internationally focused law programme, which served me up on a golden platter for other students.

I studied my Master of Laws at a Swiss university. Now, I was not naive, I knew roughly what I was getting into, as it is no secret that academia has a racism problem, along with every other "ism" problem. So I was not surprised when I found myself listening to two Europeans debate my right to exist as a Palestinian in an EU and international law seminar.

I was dozing off and probably realised the debate was happening a little late, it was only when I heard "decapitated babies" and "raping women" that I fully registered what was happening. Once I did, my first reaction was "Please not this," followed by exhausted dread, which turned into awkwardness and almost second-hand embarrassment.

The Palestinian genocide was not included in the curriculum and was almost deliberately avoided, by the academic staff and (most) students alike. The "debate" I was unfortunate to listen to, began during a discussion about the right to self-determination, with some back and forth on who has or should have that right. A British brown man brought up Gaza, somewhat passively, which sparked confusion and bewilderment in a white woman. It started calmly and "in good faith," a legal analysis of global events.

But the woman was growing increasingly frustrated—Not with his legal reasoning, she was frustrated that he did not seem angry enough about the existence of Palestinians. He was too passive about the decapitated babies and the rape. He was obviously not playing his role of the self-hating brown man well enough for her, the one who distances himself from other brown people and demonstrates that he is one of the good ones.



This went on for about fifteen minutes. The whole class watched awkwardly, including the professor. No one intervened. Eventually, other students wanted to move on so we could finish the eight-hour seminar. So they moved on. Later, the participants apologised to everyone and emphasised that they respected each other's opinions. All the while, I had been trying to make myself as invisible as possible. That was not difficult, as I had been doing it all semester to avoid any awkward interactions with Swiss-Germans who visibly got nervous once I stated my origin, as if I just purposefully ruined the mood by saying the P word. I had succeeded to the point that I am almost sure none of them knew I was Palestinian. However, I had not realised, before that seminar, how much of myself I had been giving up while doing the degree, in favor of just completing it peacefully, and I'm unsure I would've done anything differently if I went back in time.

I suppose I could take this chance to dwell on the consequences of white liberal debate culture. On how the debaters position themselves as neutral analysts who do not take sides. That claim is what gives this culture its moral authority, which is why it is so frustratingly absurd. Have you ever tried to explain to one of those freaks that there is no neutrality when it comes to whether a people has the right to exist? And that to put it up for discussion is already to take a side? But I will not dwell (further), because even the claim of civility was not there until they apologised at the end. During the debate, the white woman was shamelessly and angrily calling Palestinians terrorists, exasperated at the prospect of our right to self-determination. There was nothing civil about that other than her whiteness, which made her anger appear passionate and angry for those decapitated babies.

I remember feeling like a child whose parents are fighting about their bad behaviour at school. As if I were guilty of whatever they were fighting about and did not want to make any more noise, lest I only prove my guilt further. They were the adults. Rational and objective. I was not fit to participate. I would be too irrational.



It was a degrading feeling. A degrading situation. But I knew better than to defend myself and the 15 million other Palestinians. Not only would it have been futile, it would have risked me coming off as aggressive, and thus academically reprimanded. But beyond that, I found it even more degrading to try to reason with ignorance disguised as civil discussion. I knew that no matter how hard I tried to make a "sound legal argument," I would be looked at as a spectacle, their very own human zoo! Worse, I would legitimize that any of this should be a subject of debate at all, that I should be an object of debate.

I did not have language for this refusal at the time. Later, I found it in Audre Lorde. In her essay "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," she argues that using the same framework as our oppressors will not dismantle oppression. If anything, it only reinforces it. The master's tools were designed to keep the master's house standing. They were not designed for demolition. Using the same international law that my oppressors drafted would not actually get me anywhere with them, maybe only a coo and a pat on the head.

What struck me most, looking back, was the performativity of it all. The white woman performed neutrality by framing her anger as reasonable to his outrageous casual mention of Gaza. The brown man performed by keeping his voice level and treating the whole thing as an intellectual exercise. Neither of them was neutral. They were just performing different versions of the same thing: the right to debate without consequence.

I could not have called what I was witnessing epistemic violence, since at the time I did not know that what was happening had a name. They probably did not either, it is what is what these academic institutions rely on. They give us no language for our own degradation, and we are left to find the words ourselves, even long after the seminar is over.



I often think about what would have been different had they known the object of their debate was present. These lectures operate on an unspoken assumption: the subject of their "analysis" is absent, existing only in the immaterial world of assignments and debates. They could speak so freely because they believed no one in the room had a stake in the outcome. They were not only debating the right to self determination for Palestinians, but were also debating the idea of Palestinians. My presence would have shattered that fiction, but I am not sure that would have helped. I think it would've probably just made things more awkward, or worse, that I would be asked to weigh in and the guest lecturer would pat himself on the back for facilitating such important and inclusive dialogue.

I have also imagined what I would have said if I had spoken. At the time, I wished I had been able to give a point-by-point legal rebuttal that would have impressed everyone in the seminar and made everyone shake my hand after it was over with tears and snot, thanking me for sharing my genius with them and calling me a prodigy (I was the youngest person there at 23). But now, after realizing the danger of legitimizing this "legal debate," I think that I would have probably just told them that my existence is not a free-for-all to ponder, but even that is far fetched, I did not want the white academic director giving me a talk on civil disagreement nor pitying me for being a case study.



RECYCLING BINS

JENNIFER BELL

Amber kneeled to tie her shoelaces on the warm day. The temperature was perfect for being outdoors, and the air smelled fresh. A light breeze caught her long brown hair. She was walking her small brown- and black-haired companion along the maze of sidewalks in her bustling neighborhood. It was early evening, just after dinnertime for the early birds, before supper for the night owls. The glowing celestial orb was slowly descending towards another hemisphere where the next sunrise could be greeted with fresh enthusiasm. A lanky middle-school boy passed by on an oversized bicycle. Two sweaty high school girls giggled over their phones as they slowly ambled home from soccer practice.

Amber stood up and stretched before she continued walking down the tree lined path. It was a Wednesday evening, the night everyone in that township set out the recycling bins for collection the next day. Blue cans were already popping out at various spots by the sidewalk as their occupants prepared for sleep. Rosie, the tiny Yorkshire terrier, was eager to investigate and pulling at her leash, so she could sniff all the edges of the closest one. Her little brown ears were raised in curiosity.

Amber glanced down at the contents from her spot on the sidewalk and tried not to stare. Empty packages for high-end dog food sat near the top. Almost everyone was in that disappearing category of middle class in this neighborhood, or used to be, but some were more affluent now, and others were cash strapped. These were clearly richer neighbors in this house. And they had a dog. No wonder Rosie was so interested. She positioned herself to urinate on the bin.

“No, not here, come along.” Amber directed her towards a more suitable grassy patch. It wasn’t beneficial to annoy the neighbors. Likely disappointed that she couldn’t send a doggy message to the resident pup, Rosie lifted her leg instead towards some bushes on the property in front of the pristine three-story house. Then she casually strolled towards the next interesting object in her line of scent.



A few houses down the block, they passed in front of a twin with a well-landscaped yard, maintained by a company. On their curb, there was a blue bin with wrinkled newspapers showing. “Some people who still read the physical paper? Must be older neighbors,” Amber told Rosie. She yipped before giving every inch of that section of the sidewalk a good sniff.

Amber laughed. “Let’s go. We should get back before nightfall. At this rate it will be morning!”

As they slowly worked their way back, Amber’s thoughts bounced around. I need to keep my eyes on the sidewalk. I don’t want people to scrutinize MY recycling bin. My weekend wine bottle goes to the bottom under the milk, juice, or yogurt containers or the kids’ cereal boxes, but I still could be critiqued by every stranger that passes by. Well, I could put some stuff in the trash instead, but then I wouldn’t be helping the planet, so that’s not a good idea.

Besides, I’m probably my harshest judge. I’m not judging anyone else. Just unintentionally observing them. There’s a difference.

Amber continued the walk home, but her eyes couldn’t help drifting left and right to take in every detail of the neighborhood. It really was difficult to avoid. When items were in the field of vision, they could be seen....all the blue recycling bins with their cyclic arrow symbols.

Amber and Rosie strolled by homes of exhausted new parents with crying babies and diaper boxes, junk food bingers addicted to their tech with soda cans and snack cakes, the chronically ill with special diets and plastic prescription bottles, and the overworked with take-out food containers and piles of delivery boxes. Some flashed their name brands and others the generics. Class, age, and status were all laid out bare for the world to see at the erupting volcano top of the overflowing short square containers. It sounded like a bad movie preview: *See who people really are. One night only.*

However, she noted that everyone had one thing in common. “You know, Rosie, we all want to help the environment and do our part, as much as we can, the ways we know how, even if it means that we are a bit vulnerable showing ourselves to those around us. And maybe that isn’t all that bad.”

Rosie stuck her paws up on Amber’s leg and yipped.



UNFAMILIAR TIME ARRIVES

TEPPER BROSELL

Unfamiliar time arrives
on my fingers like rings

The protagonist will miss
having hair

A cord running
a certain amount
of force resorted
back to top

Memory is like celebrity
Keys click into a moment
The Pitbull runs away
A placard says, remember the Holocaust
(It would take days
that I can't have back)

Delicate aristocratic desserts
have instrumental fabric
No one asks me to a royal banquet
Nothing happens which
is almost worse

A bird following me
A hole in the lawn
A philosophical bumper sticker
I hide to avoid
Doing the renewal application
that carries a person from year to year

Is the subway entrance supposed
to give people
a good reason?
I love and respect the most



pleasant hollow knocking sound
actively closing plans

Every summer there is a hit
song about tomatoes
I will miss the free market
And civilization which
Is usually crowded
The Guest Pads' legible wish
scattered on the sidewalk

I try to hold a container
filled with holes
in the real world
like a doll wandering around
with a phone
I get sensitive about becoming new
Old shirts of my dad's rationalize
the unfriendly dark

On the actual line
I have to invent a
god behind you, tied with string
delayed and delayed
until the fact over my bare chest
is caught into the air

A flying turtle, beautiful
or whatever is around



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