

# MONO

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MAY ISSUE

YEAR 2

VOL.

8



STUDENT-LED MAGAZINE



# MONOGRAPH

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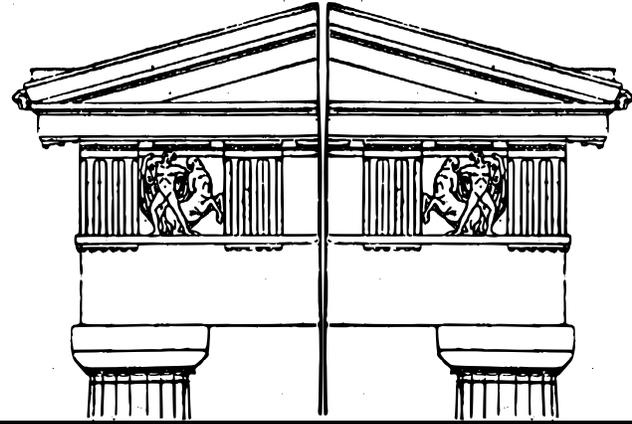
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# Reader's Note



Ritobrita Mukherjee

If I were to describe Monograph in a sentence, I would liken it to a modern day french dispatch for kolkata student circles. Monograph has all the excitement of a quiet rebellion similar to the emotion a teenager feels while sneaking away to have her first smoke, holding the cigarette the way actresses in french nouveau films do. Monograph is the long lost coffee house-er adda being resurrected for a new generation, Monograph is intellectual conversations over cups of steaming chai. To quote Mr. Keating from Dead Poets Society, “..poetry, beauty, romance, love, these are what we stay alive for”, a line which seems to be imbued in Monograph’s core values.

When Monograph started out, I used to tell Anuraag da (the Editor) how I have a separate folder for all Monograph issues on my laptop and how I cherish reading them over weekends.

In an age where instagram poetry with quotable lines is the only sort people read, Monograph provides a platform for passionate lovers of the art to share their work. Articles on every topic under the sun end up being highly enjoyable reads and the cover art never fails to stun in its understated yet elegant simplicity. Monograph is probably one of those few magazines which feel like home to a young adult in today's turbulent world, a respite from sordid revolutions that die in the wake of fascist authoritarianism, a place where art is celebrated for art's sake. To me Monograph feels like home, not just from the rushing thrill of seeing a few of my attempts at poetry getting published, but because of the way it makes me feel like I belong.



# THE MUSEUM IS ON THE 'RIGHT': THE GRADUAL SAFFRONIZATION OF INDIAN MUSEUMS

Abhinav Mishra

On the evening of September 16, 2020, the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh Yogi Adityanath announced that the name of the yet to be established museum near the east gate of Taj Mahal will be changed from 'Mughal Museum' to 'Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Museum', adding that in this "new Uttar Pradesh there is no place for symbols of mindset of slavery." The project, which was already facing a delay, now expects a further delay since the authorities would now engage with the historians of the city to dig out a 'valid' link between Agra and Shivaji. Some accounts boast about the fact that Shivaji was captured and kept in Agra fort by Aurangzeb 1666 AD, but no one, including the ASI or the historians, is sure about the fact. On the other hand, the link between the Mughals and Agra is well documented and widely known.





Obviously, the name change is not a new thing for the people of Uttar Pradesh, but why suddenly this choice of name. This alteration of name for a museum not only points towards to the carving out of the 'celebrated' legacy of the 'Hindutva' but at the same time cunningly creates a sense of a psychological 'conquer' which is, although not a new phenomenon, but definitely is a polished way to force political polarization. The same happened with the Prince of Wales Museum in Mumbai when it was named Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalay following the renaming of the whole city by Shiv Sena. They not only officially pursued the national Government to change the name (which the centre initially objected to), but also a marble plaque was established near Gateway of India to mark the end of the 'corrupt' and 'anglicized' version of the city. Even though the renaming process seems bizarre, at least the place was somehow related to Maratha history, but what about Mr Yogi? Here, the idea of conserving or restoring inside a museum takes a back seat, and instead, the nomenclature for the sake of political imprint is there. Does it by any chance serve at least the fundamental purpose of constructing a museum? This idea finds its roots in the Hindutva doctrine written by V.D. Savarkar called " Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?" where the essential identities and symbols of being a true Hindu have been defined.

Incidents like these highlight the eagerness of the Right-wing thinkers to slowly swallow the academics only to vomit down a distorted history constructed mainly from the rigid point of view, keeping no space for debate or discussion. Also, these out of thin air claims to link some of the artefacts to the 'glorious' Hindu past increase their chance to be in the excellent book. The pathetic example of calling the bronze figurine from Mohenjo-Daro "Parvati" adds up to the list.



Thakur Prasad Verma, a Professor from Banaras Hindu University, argued that to understand the Harappan civilization, the Puranic viewpoints are essential and hence suggest the rejection of western archaeologists' argument, which somehow showed Indians as inferiors. No doubt India's colonial history was not an era of glorious research and was full of personal prejudices, but as a historian, does Verma, by any chance, also talk about any kind of multiplicity in thoughts? The rigid and shallow claims with almost no historical pieces of evidence. His excitement to connect his observation with the "epic archaeology" was quite evident, but what purpose does that serve? Instead of researching artefact's iconography, style and preservation, they are more interested in establishing the links with the texts of Ramayana and Mahabharata. Claims like these not only questions the secularity of the nation but also creates a gap for inclusiveness. The creation of the stark binaries of "Hindu" and "Muslims" was slowly created in quite a devious manner starting from the debate about Babri.

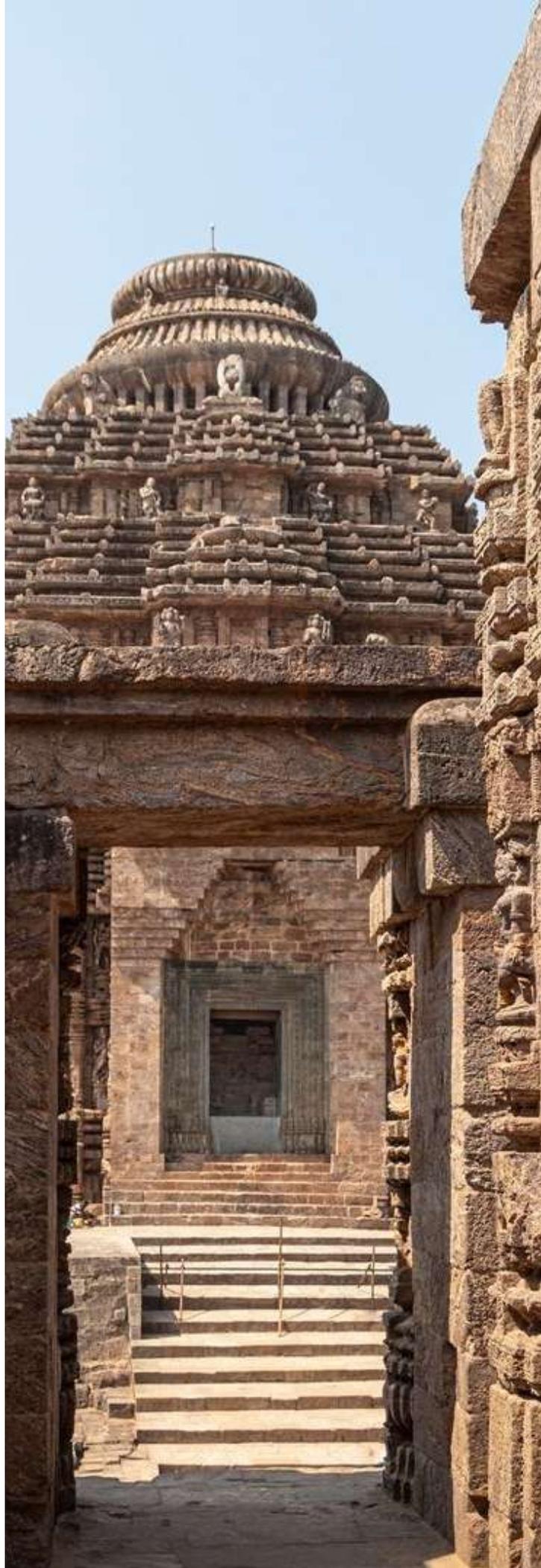




Another incident of this 'Hinduised' process of artefacts and museums is the repatriation of the Annapurna idol from the MacKenzie Art Gallery, Canada. The sculpture is claimed to have been stolen from an active temple site of Banaras in 1913 but was expected to go through the repatriation process earlier in 2020. After the long chain of bureaucratic verifications, the artefact was physically returned to India on our PM's Canada-USA visit. There are two to be noticed here is when the repatriation was completed. First is the combination of the nature of the 157 artefacts. Out of the 157 items, 71 are claimed to be 'cultural' while other artefacts are clearly categorized on the basis of their religious orientation, i.e., 60 artefacts belong to Hinduism while 16 and 9 to Buddhism and Jainism, respectively. Why are there no mentions of any kind of items from the Sultanate period as the items returned fall mainly into the time periods of 11th C.E. to 14th C.E.? Another observation, interestingly, is the treatment that the particular figurine of Annapurna is getting after the repatriation. It was a museum object before, and after its return, it should have been placed in any of the reputed museums for public view. Nevertheless, tragically, this is not the option considered here. Instead, the 100-year old artefact is going to be placed 'back' in the same temple shrine from where it was stolen. The artefact, which had the potential to learn and further research about the statue of the Banaras era, is going to be worshipped again daily with lots of Charnamrit now. There is a twist in this as well. Before the final installation, it went through the pompous handover ceremony where the idol was part of a Shobha yatra (grand procession) and was on public display in various cities of Uttar Pradesh, including Aligarh and Lucknow. The incident indeed points to the installation of a symbolic power tool where the agenda is less about faith and more about religious polarization.



The Shobhayatra itself holds the similarity with the devastating Rath Yatra, which later concluded with the Babri mosque demolition. The communal tension built up by the Babri demolition and the judgement in favour of the temple somehow triggers the present Government to neatly pluck each fundamental theme in Indian history to replace that with their own ideological propaganda. The smartly disguised propaganda, although it has its similarities with Nazi-era one but in a quiet and advanced manner. The open voice for dissent is skillfully tackled by the idea of 'otherness'. The gradual creation of this 'otherness' hence culminates itself to a point where many political binaries are created, majorly keeping their ideology on the favourable side. The intelligent manipulation of historical identities and tempering with the museums is a psychological attack where they further try to broaden the boundary of this binary. The binary I am talking about is not just the religion-based one; it certainly not just stops at the identification and cancelling of the minorities but also captures those who can raise their voice backed by research and facts. Imagine winning the Babri dispute without the ASI backing.





Hence, the present Government clearly understands the prudent use of museums, artefacts and history in general. In addition to that, side by side, another narrative is in motion, and that is the construction of a figure of the saviour, who saves our culture and brings back the golden days. The Prime Minister's present choices to not only show his face in each government scheme works wonders, but the tall claim of headlines about "Modi bringing the old glory back" gives the readers a sense about the saviour of their endangered country. Definitely, there was no need to keep that Annapurna statue in the temple and neither the Shobhayatra was needed but using a historical artefact as a cricket world cup trophy to showcase the 'victorious' repatriation adds up to the long goal.

The pompous showcase of power and its own appreciation does not stop there. The craving to mark his regime as remarkable and memorable, the Government has also flagged the demolition of the National Museum, which will make way for the new Central Vista project in Delhi to replace the importance of the Lutyens complex and hence enrapture that sense of accomplishment in their favour. Whether this regime will be good or bad, they will be remembered for this new project. Isn't this the whole purpose of this plan- a political monument that will help them to be in the books of history? It is decided that some of the buildings in the South and North Block, which presently are reserved for union ministries, will be replaced with new museums, namely " The making of India" and "India at 75". After the completion of the project, the present parliament house will be renamed as "Museum of Democracy." The only dilemma is who will decide what goes into these respected museums and what historical artefacts these museums are going to hold.



The way contemporary polarization is going, it is entirely possible that there will be significant replacements of the figurines. Museum scholar Kavita Singh connects this new idea of reconstruction with the project of Somnath temple in the 1950s, flagged by Sardar Patel.. The jingoistic approach to claim back its glorious past, the rebuilding of the shrine resulted in disappointing destruction of another temple patronized possibly by Kumarapala, a Solanki King, in 1167 CE. The moronic decision to construct an active temple only to demolish another one in the name of sentiments and 'newness' resulted in the loss of a culturally or, more importantly, historically significant site. The ruins were ditched in the "Prabhas Patan Museum" placed at the north lane of the Somnath Temple, which lacks any kind of proper documentation or restoration work.

Interestingly, the then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru actually objected to all the installations going around the temple. The Saurashtra Government donated 5 lakh Rupees for the ritualistic installation to cleanse the temple shrine site from the Islamic imprints.





That angered Nehru, and he wrote a letter immediately to the then President Rajendra Prasad:

*"This seems to me completely improper for any Government to do, and I have written to that Government accordingly. At any time, this would have been undesirable, but at the present juncture, when starvation stalks the land, and every kind of national economy and austerity are preached by us, this expenditure by a government appears to me to be almost shocking. We have stopped expenditure on education, on health and many beneficent services because we say that we cannot afford it. However, a State Government can spend a large sum of money on just the installation of the economy of a temple. I do not know what to do about this, but I must at least keep the Government of India clear of it."*

What Nehru was trying to register was not merely limited to constitutional secularism but also understanding the contemporary scenario of the country. The announcement and fast-paced construction of the Central Vista Project, even in the pandemic era, underline the clear priorities of the authorities. Unlike Nehru, even the mention of halting the construction of either this project or the 'prestigious' Ram Mandir has not even been considered once. The grandness in the announcement is visible, and the budget of both these projects are humongous. This play of reconstructing history to become part of a legacy is a clever gesture. The Prabhas Patan Museum claims to hold the remains of the original Somnath temple along with the dumped stone slabs from another temple. Many tourists find these remains more fascinating than the temple shrine itself because it satisfies their iconoclastic struggle to claim back the temple.





Even in the ruined condition, the icons act like silent evidence of the hundred years of 'atrocities' and 'invasions' which the 'invaders', i.e., the Islamic ruler carried out during their reign. Is that museum serving its purpose correctly? Quite marvelously, I think. On the other hand, when it comes to preserving the remains of the Babri Mosque, no one actually remembers or knows presently where the remains of that historically important monument have been kept. Clearly, the iconoclastic idea is not essential here from the authority's point of view. If the PM can announce the 'Partition Horror Remembrance Day', why not even a particular site pays respect to those people who lost their lives in such a useless communal conflict. These purposely drawn lines to what to keep and what not to keep in the museums and memorials raise many questions about the regime. Another critical observation that puts this whole question of preservation of iconoclastic evidence is the Kashi Corridor project which Narendra Modi flagged off in March 2019. The budget of the project was around 800 crores and is expected to be inaugurated on December 13 in 2021. The jaw-dropping budget invested in this new project is supposed to be an excellent investment for a semi-urban city like Banaras, but it also has a different side to it. The locals' testimonies recorded in some newspapers claim that not only this project focuses on the capitalization of the religiously important Vishwanath shrine but also demolished and destroyed a vast part of Banaras' heritage.



Banaras, which is quite known for its bustling life in narrow streets, has seen a cruel crumbling of these streets where not only old temples of more than 300 years were destroyed, but also many religious sculptures were also thrown away carelessly in the river in the name of 'visarjan' or the ritualistic immersion in holy water. The area around the Vishwanath shrine is being cleared, and now almost around 45,000 square meters of space has been cleared to 'ease' the mobility around the temple without any hindrance. Such kind of negligence from the authority to demolish a living heritage and throw away those figurines faced harsh criticism from the locals. Interestingly, not only most of these protestors were Brahmin, but they also compared the CM and PM for demolishing these historically significant structures as "Aurangzeb"- poetic justice perhaps!

Reimagining a whole new set of corridors for tourism is welcomed, but reconstruction of a whole heritage area just for the sake of leaving a political stamp does not seem like a good idea. The Uttar Pradesh Government is entirely neglected towards the restoration and preservation of the artefacts of importance in museums, so not much should be expected. The CM has inaugurated Lal Bahadur Shastri's memorial in Banaras and also promised to provide adequate funds to the same. The same was promised for the Madan Mohan Malviya Gallery in the Bharat Kala Bhavan of BHU. The contradictory negligence of the Shastri memorial and the betterment of the 'Bharat Ratna' Malviya Gallery is a potent example of the political preferences of the BJP government. Noticeably, the same Bharat Kala Bhawan, which holds many Mughal miniatures and other crucial paintings of importance, has kept all these paintings to a dark, damp room with a mere lighting facility while in the Malviya Gallery, from his teacup to Kurta, everything is well preserved.





The inauguration of a new tribal museum by Narendra Modi in Ranchi opens up the possibility for the Right-Wing party to now win the hearts of the marginalized communities, which does not 'pose' any harm to their political reconstruction of Hindutva sentiments. The PM lauded the tribal communities' contribution to the nation-building announced to observe Janata Gaurav Diwas or the Tribal Day annually. He also mentioned the development of not one or two but nine other tribal museums to be built soon in different states of India. Birsa Munda Museum. as it will be called, is completed with a budget of 37 crores with 12 crores borne by the Jharkhand Government itself. Why did the pocket get shrunk when it came to the museumization of tribal history and its contribution while more money was sent on the Shobha yatra? This present Government, as I have mentioned earlier, focused on the systematic reconstruction of the 'nationalistic' value defined by its own diplomatic dictionary and is often, these nationalistic values are wrapped in religious preferences. The Brahmanical ideas are being lauded and are being well preserved, while on the other hand, the marginalized representations are either taking a back seat or are not getting a seat at all. Let us all wait for the new National Museum and the placing of its galleries and how this new project will either clear the communal air or just increase the gap of this representational war. The chances of the latter are more potent.



# The Red Tracksuit

Sameeksha Dutta

Mr. Sen sat in the blue glare of the laptop, his eyes a little too close to the screen, his fingers tracing the line of the six-digit OTP. Just to be sure. He placed the order and a big, green tick appeared on his screen in silent commendation. He quickly opened his bank account in a new tab and when the balance tallied with his calculation, he pushed back his chair in a sigh of relief and triumph. His grandchild smiled back at him from the laptop, a plump, white child in a weird carrot suit. His eyes wore a light blue and his left cheek dimpled with the dazed smile from seeing whatever it was behind the camera that had caught his attention. He looked like a postcard baby, the kind that came with a photo frame or looked down at you from the whitewashed walls of paediatric clinics. He didn't look like his own blood and on some days, even didn't feel like it.





The last time they had video-called, the baby already had an accent. His Bengali had almost given away to English and spit bubbles and he already hated the ritual call to India. Mr. Sen wasn't very fond of the ritual either, the exchanges with his son's wife always sounding a bit too rehearsed, their mutual ignorance of each other's native tongue restricting their conversations to resemble the pages of an elementary grammar textbook. And yet day after day, he switched on his laptop at exactly 2 pm (IST) and 9:30 am(BST), the only time of the day that his son could afford to accommodate his long, drawn-out inquiries about their lives in the UK. Mr. Sen would watch in amazement as they ran about in the frame, preparing to leave for work, looking for a missing sock or downing a cup of black coffee between feeding the baby mouthfuls of mash, who looked around in as much bewilderment.

It was 11 pm (IST) now. He refreshed the page and checked his balance one last time and then closed the laptop, drowning the room in darkness.

The parcel arrived a few days later, in a crushed brown box with the retail website's logo taped from all sides, in a very subtle attempt at branding. Mr. Sen was having his breakfast, a bowl of puffed rice with milk and sliced bananas, taken between reading the column about the aggressive campaigning of the BJP for the upcoming elections in the state. The maid kept the parcel in front of the chair next to him and stood expectantly, her fingers eagerly tapping the sides of the adjacent chair. There were few things to look forward to in the house, and a parcel sent by post was always one of them. The old man hardly ever used the things that his son sent him and often gave them away to Malati, who always found ways to carefully repurpose them in her own household.





When he didn't look down from his newspaper and showed no sign of presently intending to, Malati took the hint, brushed away the scarlet that had risen to her face, and busied herself with scrubbing the kitchen slab a little more vigorously than she needed to. By the time she left, it was well past noon and there lay a neat array of plates covered with more plates, on the dinner table.

Mr. Sen didn't sit down for lunch. Instead he picked up the box and went into the kitchen to look for a pair of scissors. When he couldn't find one, he picked at the agonizingly many layers of tape, prying the box open from the side that yielded first. It was a red tracksuit wrapped in even more layers of packaging. When he held the jacket out at a distance, examining it in streaming daylight, the red looked redder and cheaper than what it had looked on the model. The jacket slopped down his shoulders and he had to continuously adjust the elastic of the trousers over the circumference of his slight paunch. When he looked into the mirror, his grey hair had paled out in comic contrast and Malati was smiling amusedly at him. He shrank further in his jacket, his forehead wrinkling up in several layers of embarrassed anger until Malati sized him up one last time, said he should wear it more often and left with a curt wave of the box of betel nuts that she had actually come back for.



The tracksuit lay at the back of his cupboard, beckoning to him from under layers of winter clothing. Invisible mosquitoes sucked at his limbs during the day and the moon hung too bright at night. It made him restless and irritable. Until one day, when he woke up very early, even before the break of dawn and slipped the tracksuit on. The colour looked more favourable in the diffused glow of the night lamp. He liked it better. When he went out on the streets, the streetlights were still on. Leftover food and piles of garbage were strewn outside the gates of a few houses, giving out a faint, foul smell into the last remaining darkness of the night. A few stray dogs barked at him, the others just perked up their heads a little, as they lay curled in semicircles over scattered manholes. Mr. Sen started jogging slowly, picking up speed as he went, the light morning breeze nibbling at the back of his neck. His calves strained deliciously in the memory of a forgotten form but his breathing became uneven a little before he would have liked. He kept running. He jogged past the local laundry with the one-armed owner, the house of a friend who had succumbed to a heart attack a few years back, the grocery store that thrived despite its unreasonable pricing just because things were easily available. By the time he stopped to take a break, the sun had fully risen. A priest stood bathing at a roadside tap nearby, adjusting his sacred thread across the breadth of his chest, the wet, diaphanous weave of his dhoti clinging onto his groin like a second skin. A newspaper vendor idled across the street in his bicycle, with all the time in the world, occasionally stuffing paper rolls into the nooks of collapsible gates or slipping them under the space between the doors. Mr. Sen stopped at a tea stall, took a seat at the adjoining wooden bench and waited patiently as the woman behind it arranged her wares for the day. She came around with a piping hot cup of tea and a rusk that he hadn't asked for.



He didn't turn it down. The cup was too small and it had been a long time since he had had tea from a roadside stall. He struggled to hold the cup around the edge and his fingers stung from the incompetency. The woman noticed this and gave him an extra cup to put his own cup in which he accepted gratefully. He was halfway through with his tea, when a man came and sat on the bench across from him. He had an office bag going over his shoulder that he kept very close to himself. He carried some files in his hand that he referred to from time to time, memorizing his lines under his breath. When his tea arrived, he replaced the files in his satchel and took in his surroundings at last. He looked at Mr. Sen and a truant smile appeared at the corners of his mouth, that he had the decency to disguise into an exaggerated blowing of the tea. Mr. Sen crushed the two cups in his hand, threw them in a nearby bin and left the place.

By the time he entered his lane again, jogging back past the grocery store, his friends house and the local laundry, there were a lot more people on the street. They were gathered around the tube well, the men with towels wrapped around their waist, the women in their maxis bunched up just above their ankles. The men spoke with mouthfuls of toothpaste while the women jostled to put their buckets under the tube well. Now this wasn't the kind of neighbourhood where people had to jog every morning to keep themselves fit.





This was a middle-class locality where the women wore their bones off looking after the young and the old members of the family, navigating the labyrinth of chores so seamlessly that it went mostly unappreciated, while the men spent their day taking care of underwhelming bouts of family businesses or went from door to door trying to match impossible sales targets. They worked hard and long, raising their children well, providing them with comforts that belied the efforts behind it, in the hope that they grow up to be better established in the society and take care of them and gift them a last few days of dignity, peace and hopefully, some final days of humoured inactivity.

Mr. Sen suddenly became acutely aware of people's eyes on him, which made his movements conscious, restricting his gait somewhere between a slight jog and an awkward limp. No sooner had the gate clanked shut behind him, that a soft murmur arose from near the tube well. While the woman tsk-ed their tongue over his loneliness and a particularly old one of them painstakingly iterated why a man should never outlive his wife, the men joked about his comical attempt at reliving the days gone by, though ending their discussion on a note of unanimous concern . The water overflowed from the forgotten buckets and braided into a stream just before it flowed into the drain, the soft, lapping sound rising to meet the growing chaos of the day.

Mr. Sen, however, didn't seem to mind the gossip. Everyday he woke up before dawn and put on his red tracksuit. It made him break into sweat underneath, in uncomfortable patches under the arm, and along the length of his back. But he wore it anyway, like a guise that miserably compromised his conspicuity but turned him into a tacky old man running on the street, who could be from just about anywhere.





He clanked the gate shut behind him each day, breaking the numbing stillness of the early morning hours and went jogging into the dispersing darkness of the night, gathering whispered disapproval that rose behind his back in a soft, growing conspiracy to match the increasing brightness of the day. Each day he strayed a little further, discovering new alleys and old fish markets, sampling a new tea stall everyday. He talked to shopkeepers and fish mongers, asking them about their wives and their children. The people didn't like it at first, showing a reluctance to entertain his rambling as they prepared for the day, but the reluctance mollified as he asked more genuinely invested questions. Mr. Sen listened to them patiently as they spoke about their dwindling business or their ailing children and his brows furrowed with unadulterated concern, only to never meet them another day. One day he went as far as the lake, his knees buckling under him, his breath coming short. Around him, people were jogging or walking their dogs, discreetly stopping and positioning the pups along bushes when the animals needed to relieve themselves. Mr. Sen watched as the people ran around self-importantly, in groups of two or three, their neon sportswear accentuating the progress they had made thus far. He found old people like him, doing yoga or jogging lightly, and for the first time since he had worn the tracksuit, his body expanded to inhabit the full volume of it.

He started visiting the lake more often, his stamina growing to reach the place a little less tired each day. He asked Malati to cut the sides of bread and store them in a jar and kept it near the door. He picked out a handful of these while leaving the house each day. He loved watching the ducks eat them, flapping their wings as they ate, as if to take flight, but then settling down, in reconsideration of the old man watching them. It was on a day like this that he met Mr. Lahiri, an old friend from college that he didn't remember being particularly close to. They caught up on the old times, Mr. Lahiri introducing him to old friends on Facebook. He was a talkative old man, Mr. Lahiri, afraid of any ensuing silence, always feeling the need to fill them with a staccato of words. He came up to Mr. Sen each day, bringing with him a bag full of news, domestic and national, sometimes even international(which extended only as far as Pennsylvania, where his son was pursuing his PhD), which he conveyed with great enthusiasm between spitting mouthfuls of betel juice, a little too close to his foot than Mr. Sen would have liked it.

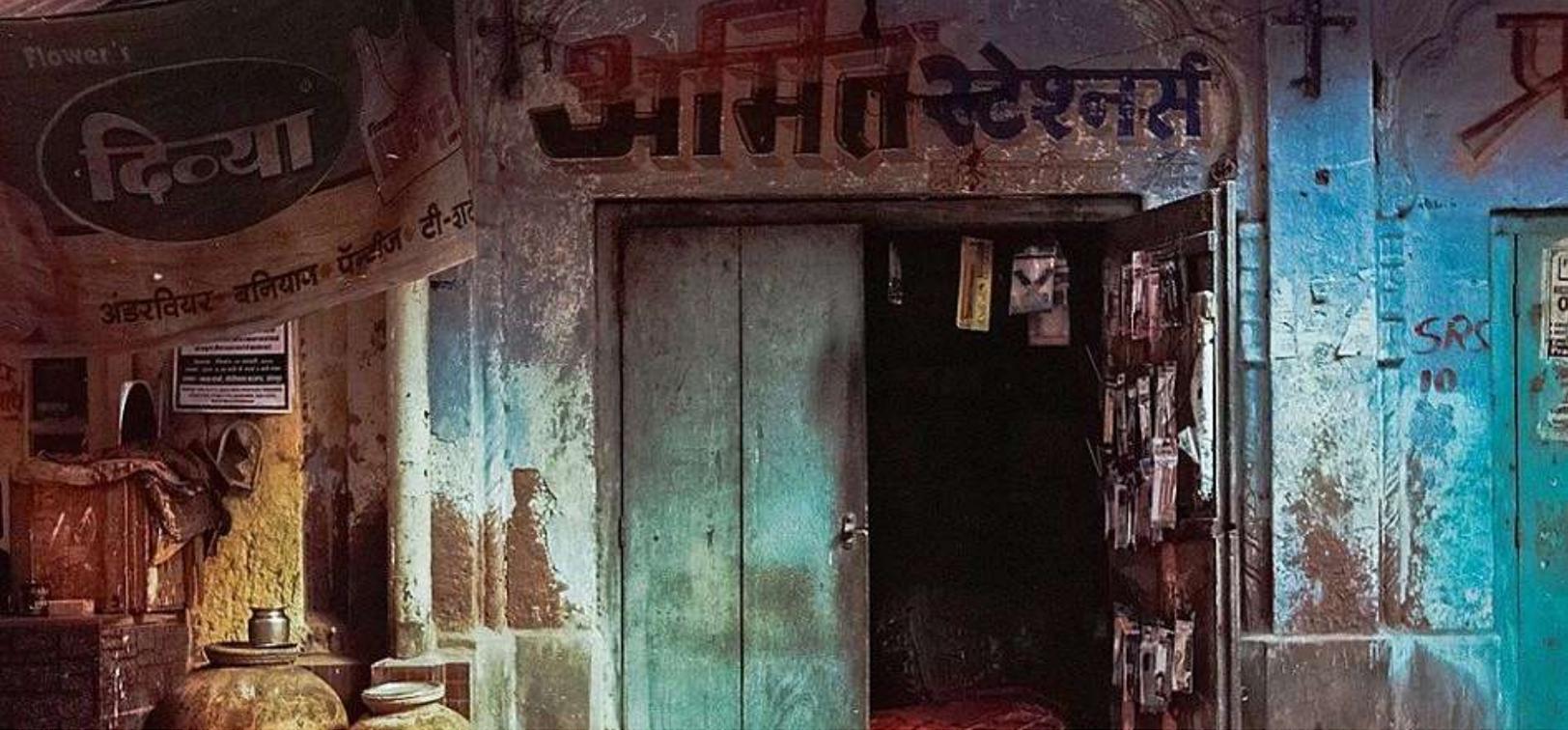




It was a Friday morning. Mr. Sen and Mr. Lahiri were watching the ducks waddling along the glinting periphery of the lake. Mr. Lahiri was saying something, but his voice came to Mr. Sen soft and muffled as if from underwater. A sharp pain shot up his left arm and his body was covered in a thin layer of sweat. He tried mumbling something but the world closed down on him. He woke up to find himself in the backseat of Mr. Lahiri's car. The car had stopped at a signal. All the windows were down but the engine kept running with a soft rumble to keep the A.C on. When they reached Mr. Sen's house, Malati was already waiting at the gate. She informed Mr. Lahiri that the family doctor was on the way and they both supported him by the shoulders as they led him into the house. The inseam of his trousers had a thin stream of shit running down the length of it and the backseat of Mr. Lahiri's car had a few specks of yellow.

Mr. Sen didn't speak a word after that day. Mr. Lahiri dropped by each evening, bringing with him the clamour and bustle of the city but Mr. Sen didn't listen to any of it. He just lay listlessly on his bed, staring out of the window, his eyes following the sun as it travelled across the square piece of sky. Malati checked on him every few hours, turning him around on the bed for a couple of times during the day. She bathed him and took him to the bathroom, cleaning up after him, the few times he relieved himself on the way. Specks of white talcum gathered in the soft folds of his neck. The room smelled of sickness and phenol.





The day the second attack came, Malati had already left for her home. There was a storm blowing outside and the windows flapped ferociously, threatening to come unhinged. Slanted, swollen drops of rain sprayed in from the windows, wetting the books kept on the table. Lightning tore the sky open, and the dance of the peepal leaves came alive in the intermittent flashes of light. Mr. Sen could hear the planters overturning on the terrace overhead. He dragged himself up on the bed and started going upstairs, feeling his way through the darkness. He started bringing in the small plants, the rain battering down hard on him. He was bringing in a bougainvillea plant, when his knees buckled and he dropped the plant with a thud, himself collapsing soon after. As he lay in the gathering pool of water, a memory came back to him. They were going on a family road trip when his wife noticed a particularly rare colour of bougainvillea blooming over the boundary wall of a house. She stopped the car and walked up to the house, while the rest of them remained seated in the car, betting over the ridiculousness of her pursuit. When she returned, she had a cutting in her hand and a triumphant smile on her face. Shobha, Shobha, Shobha.....

And then the world closed down on him, in a blur of rain and darkness.



Malati was the first to discover him. She sat down beside him and checked his pulse, running a soft hand over his partially open eyes. She then wiped off the tears prickling at the back of her eyes, straightened herself and went out to inform the neighbours. The doctor said he passed away some time during the early hours of the morning. His son couldn't be there at his funeral and Mr. Lahiri stepped in to perform the rituals.

His son came down a week later, just by himself, to perform the last rites. He settled everyone's dues and relieved Malati of her duties. He distributed his father's belongings among the servants, letting them keep whatever they wanted. Malati took only the jacket of the tracksuit; the trousers had been disposed of the day Mr. Sen had soiled them. She said she was taking it for her husband to wear in the coming winter. The other members of the staff disapproved of her choice, one particularly old gardener caring to point out that it wouldn't bode well for her husband to use a dead man's clothes. She smiled wryly and took it anyway, saying it couldn't be more ominous than their poverty. However, when winter came and her husband asked for it, she suggested that it would not be a good idea to use it after all.





# Home

Rituparna Mukherjee

The day started like any other. Pihu could hear her cats stretch noiselessly, their warm tails brushing gently against her face, their urgent purring, requiring immediate attention. She would often wonder how cats were the most comforting creatures she had ever come across.

Why do people call them selfish?

Alright, you two, get off the bed. I have a 6:15am class today.

Pihu had chosen a morning college to teach English, the one subject that made her happy, feel right at home. She liked the idea of having an early start to the day. Kolkata streets had a strange beauty to them in the wee hours, the buses filled with sleeping passengers, on their way to an early morning local; the hesitant school children who'd give a lion's share of their favourite sweets for another hour of sleep. Yes, the morning bus rides were full of odd familiarities. The streets would be cooler, after a negotiation with the night, the trees open up their arms to the balmy sun, just like she would lift her face to the window, soaking the sunlight, in summers and winters alike.



Pihu adored the sights and sounds of early morning, lumbering past her. She would be greeted by Bishu Da's pan-stained toothy grin and the same question every day.

Madam, aj ek cup na dui? Do you want a cup or two?

The first batch of fuming tea would hit the earthen cup, bringing her the taste of wet earth, the whiff of first rains. Her mornings had a quiet grandeur to them, few would comprehend.

The one thing she couldn't stand was noise. The horns of cars, of motorbikes racing past her would startle her, befuddle her mind. She would struggle to remember, she would look at her hands in fearful frustration: which was right, again? Often, she would take rickshaw rides when she would feel restless. There should be separate ways for the rickshaw pullers, she would always think, exploring the nooks and crannies of her beloved city, the evening breeze calming her nerves. But she would invariably fail when it came to directing her rickshaw puller, flailing her hands mid-air, calling out,

Dada, edike! This side! But which side would it be?

She had decided against better judgment to stay and teach at her college. It paid her barely enough. She would spend the rest of her day doing freelance gigs that would drive her to a fitful sleep at night. It was not easy to come by. Sleep. It is best not to ask whose judgment. She would possibly say peers, teachers, colleagues, parents, oh, the entire lot!





Sometimes, she would ascribe it to inertia, sometimes to a larger fear. She hated moving on.

Pihu has an appointment today. She is meeting a friend from school after seventeen years. They hadn't parted well. She had reached out to her in extreme loneliness when they were both at school, and had hoped to dazzle her with poems and songs and letters she would pour her soul into. But it was all too much. The intensity of it all was too much to bear, suffocating and obfuscating the clean lines she had strived to draw and yet again it was there, this spectre of fear, running the show, like some distant, amused God.

Pihu doesn't like the place that has been chosen for the rendezvous. Her old school gates. What made her agree to it? Sentimentality? It's not as if she didn't like the school. She was immensely proud of it. But she didn't like being labeled, didn't understand alumni associations, and felt excruciatingly uncomfortable in reunions. She hadn't been to one in sixteen years. She would befriend everyone on facebook and leave it at that.



Her friend was late. Pihu stood by the parking lot. She spotted a pickle seller. Of course, it wasn't the one from her childhood. But she thought she would give it a try anyway.

Give me a small pack of amra pickle, please. Koto? How much?

Ten Rupees. She smiled. She would have a bigger pack at two rupees, back in the day. They would even eat the paper bag it came in. Now it was given in a cheap plastic container. No, don't go there, she reminded herself. She started eating the amra concoction absent-mindedly. Something was odd, it didn't taste the same. She looked at the granules of black salt on the green fruit glinting mischievously at her. Ah! It missed the caprice of the red chilli powder. She took a bite and looked at the tram tracks in front of her school. They were laid out flat against the road, glowering in the sun at the injustice of not being seen enough, of its shine, merging with the dirty shimmer of the road that stretched ahead.

Earlier, there used to be a grassy plot of elevated land, and the tram tracks would claim their place majestically. Pihu and her friends would pass many a day racing against those tracks, to cross the road to the other side, board a bus to get home. They would always have ice-lollies as a treat, called pepsi locally, priced at rupee one, they would be thin strips of dark brown ice, dripping unsavoury liquid. But what a joy it used to be, to get down three stoppages away from home, walk the rest of the way, just to have those lollies.

Pihu suddenly heard a forlorn tram wail and clang. Trams were a sparse sight these days and actually seeing one was quite surprising.





She looked up, there it was, that flash of electricity. . It had filled her chest with a strange lightness for as long as she could remember. She heard her mind negate all the other ambient sounds and focus on the continuous wail with a hurtful sharpness. She felt as if it was only yesterday that she had fallen prey to a tram, its iron rod plunging in her forehead with a deafening crack, all other sounds, the cry of people submerged in a dull roar. She watched her shirt slowly blushing red, saw her beloved packet of pepsi lying unclaimed in the dirt and all she could think was,

Can't I grab it before someone else does?

She heard her favourite teacher scream.

That's my student, there. Move all of you. Kalpana, come help me. We must get her stitches. Pihu, Pihu, look at me. Can you talk?

They raced past the streets in a taxi. Ma'am cradled Pihu as if she was a delicate flower. When was the last time someone had held her that way? No, better not go there either. The stitches were not too painful. She was used to them by now. She had five stitches across her face to attest that.



You're a lucky girl, Pihu. You could have lost your eyes. Imagine what would have happened then!

Pihu stared at her teacher's face full of loving kindness. It stirred in her an unnamed emotion, confusing her.

Where is your home dear? Ma'am asked.

It was the first time Pihu dreaded the answer. She was too young to understand the full implicature of the term, but she knew the place where she stayed wasn't home either. It was...

What is your address Pihu? Where do I take you?

Garia. I stay at Garia.

Oh, thank God, the girl speaks. Ma'am smiled kindly. I am going to miss seeing you in class. Payel stays close to you, doesn't she? I will make sure she gives you all the notes. Would you like that? Pihu nodded.

You can lie down and rest your head on my lap. I will wake you up when we reach home.

Pihu rested her tired head on her teacher's lap. Her crisp saree smelled of gentle limes. It had a curious warmth in its folds. She fell into a deep slumber.

Open your eyes, child. We are home.



Pihu looked with dread at the red brick house with the wild garden.

She stepped out of the taxi and trailed her teacher into the living room of a house, where she would live in the corner of a bed for the next sixteen years for a rent, cash or kind.

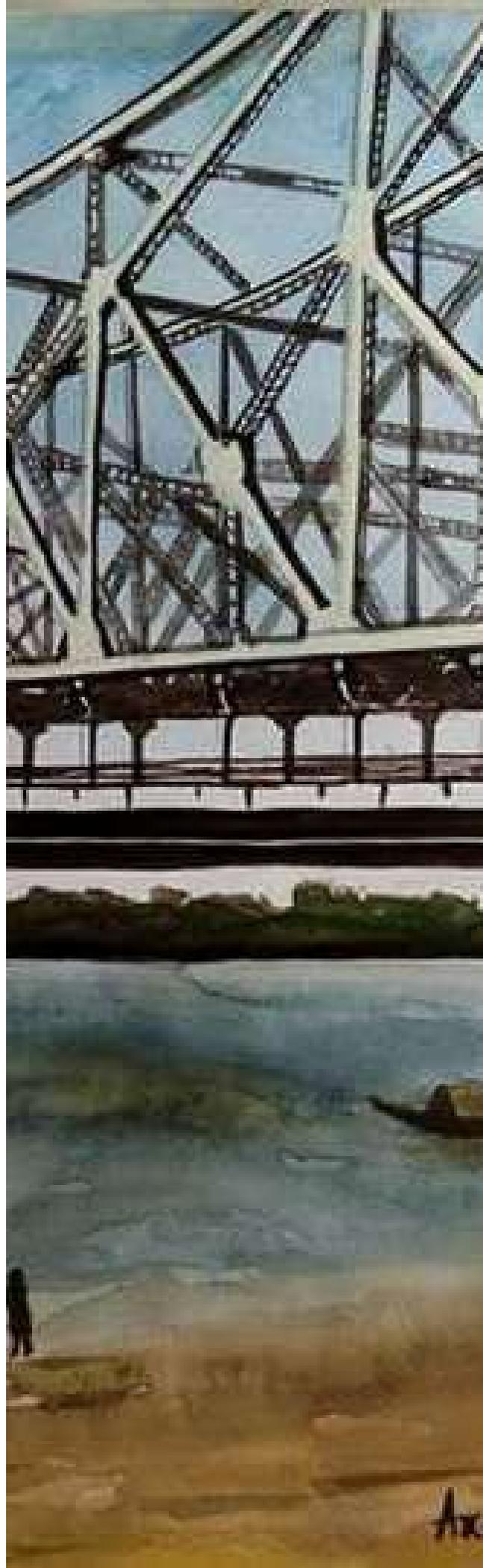
Hey, said her friend. You are smiling pensively. I am sorry I got caught in traffic. The uber services here are a little disappointing.

Pihu noted that her friend still had the lopsided smile she adored.

Come, let's go to the Ganges.

Alright. Sure. What were you thinking about?

Home.



# The Unreliable Narrator

Mikhail Philip

*“And then Lily said something to Barney that insulted every fibre of his being: ‘Nah’. Wait, no, it had to be more than just ‘Nah’. Oh, I think she said: ‘You’re a big stupid octopus head’. No, that doesn’t make sense. Okay, hang on, what did she say? To be honest, kids, I’m having a little trouble remembering exactly what their fight was about. It was 20 years ago!”*

*-The Narrator,*

*How I Met Your Mother, S6E11*

That’s just one of the reasons the narrator, future Ted Mosby, keeps messing up accounts of his youth when recounting them to his children. He does often change a few accounts and events, sometimes to protect his children from immoral activities, such as disguising a joint as a sandwich. And that’s what makes *How I Met Your Mother* such an interesting show. Because we’re grasping at straws trying to learn the truth. And yet we find ourselves hesitating to accept what could be true. Because future Ted Mosby was specifically designed to be an unreliable narrator.





The unreliable narrator is, without a doubt, one of the most powerful tools that a creator has to offer. To us, the readers or the viewers, their account of the story is to be taken at face value. And all of a sudden, no longer. Suddenly, the rug is pulled from under our feet and we're in a state of obfuscation as if we're going through the motions of Kubler-Ross's stages of grief where we're suddenly in denial of what we thought was the truth and finally accepting that it was a false account. And that's what makes the unreliable narrator so darn spectacular: because when we learn of their designation, we don't come to terms with what the truth is, we come to terms with what the truth isn't.

Although the use of the unreliable narrator is aeons old, its official coining is fairly recent. It was Wayne C Booth who wrote in "The Rhetoric Of Fiction": 'I have called a narrator reliable when they speak for or act in accordance with the norms of the work and unreliable when they do not.' Most of the time, unreliable narrators act as an impetus to the novel, where it's a sudden slap in the face at the end. But, what if you knew the narrator was unreliable all along and you still went with the flow? Would your entertainment of what you read, view or witness cease to exist? I believe it doesn't. Whose Line Is It Anyway?, a US improv show, has a segment called 'Narration' with two narrators and they change the narration of the story, twisting it at every turn and constantly evolving the truth. And yet, it doesn't affect the quality of what we've watched.

I consider the device of the unreliable narrator to be the 'mistrial' of the literary world. Just like how mistrials in court occur due to uncertainty or inconclusiveness, the unreliable narrator isn't there to help you firmly ascertain whether something's the truth or not, they're there to eliminate one of the possibilities of what the truth is. It's almost like a magic trick, where the creator uses misdirection.





I guess you should have been watching the good-looking assistant. They were performing the real trick. They're mostly there to make you feel uncertain when you reach the end, to sow the seeds of doubt in your mind and most of the time, that really topples the dominoes of the chronology of events that occur.

Especially when murder mysteries are involved. When you read or view them, you're making inferences, just like the probable protagonist detective is. At a later crisis point, striking revelations baffle us, unless we're smart enough to be prescient. And most of the time, we're not. Agatha Christie, the queen of crime, was well aware of that when she wrote masterful novels like *The Murder Of Roger Ackroyd* and *Endless Nights*. At the end of *The Murder Of Roger Ackroyd*, Detective Hercule Poirot reveals to Dr James Sheppard, the narrator of the book, that he knows Sheppard is the murderer, thus almost invalidating all that he's narrated for us, the viewers and we find out that the account by Dr Sheppard was his desire that Poirot failed in learning the truth. In *Endless Nights*, our narrator, Mike Rogers is beautifully crafted and nearing the end, we learn his true intentions and that he is not as virtuous as he starts out to be. It ends with his remorse and revulsion as he accepts his circumstances and awaits his fate as he's being interrogated for the murders he has committed.



I thought Andhadhun was a quintessential example of the unreliable narrator, as we learn in the end, that our narrator, Akash, who is relaying events to his potential love interest, Sophie, made a few adjustments to the truth and that Simi never actually made it out of the dickey seat and that he is no longer blind, as he transplanted her eyes to his own. Yann Martel's *Life Of Pi* is another example where the book's main theme is the relativity of truth. When Pi Patel, the narrator, is disbelieved by officials of the Japanese Ministry of Transport, he offers them a second story with an equally surreal narrative. Martel yarns the investigators as the medium for the viewers, where they extrapolate the parallels between the two narratives Pi presented, ending with Pi stating that neither story can be proven and the actual truth 'goes with God'.

The question still remains: What makes the unreliable narrator so unreliable? Why are they the way they are? Why couldn't they be reliable instead? The answer? Their humanness. Readers often deem the narrator to be the voice of reason, logic, rationality and authority, often sidestepping how human the narrator is and that they are driven by emotion. For example, *The Seven Viziers* in *The Arabian Nights* has a woman accuse a king's son of assault, when the truth is, she failed to seduce him. Dishonesty, sociopathy, bias and diabolicalness also are significant reasons why a narrator is unreliable. Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* has its narrator, Amy Dunne, hell-bent on revenge and leads us to believe her husband, Nick Dunne is violent and aggressive, but we soon learn to distrust her and we are left without a viable narrative. That's when the author comes in and this can cause closure to the reader because it reminds them that the author and narrator aren't always the same. How about *The Usual Suspects*, where the narrator is revealed to be Keyzer Soze, thought to have cerebral palsy, but is actually a sociopathic criminal mastermind or *Cat Poster*, a *Key and Peele* sketch, where the criminal lies about information, drawing inspiration from a cat poster in the room, similar to the methods of madness in *The Usual Suspects*.







If not intellectual impairment, it's usually innocence, gullibility and limited knowledge that makes a narrator unreliable. Narrators aren't always motivated to be bad, maybe their restricted understanding of the world renders them a juvenile perspective of how it really is. Winston Groom's *Forrest Gump* has the titular narrator's innocence result in him perceiving that the treatment of her father to his love interest, Jenny, was pure affection and love when it was actually indicative of s\*xual abuse.

And I see the plot device of the unreliable narrator to be much more relevant than we think it is. It's emblematic of all of life because, in our own books, we are all unreliable narrators. The way we see the world isn't always the way the world usually is. When logic, reason and rationality ought to be the sails of our actions, our judgement is compromised. Because we are human. Because emotions guide us and direct us. Anger, bias, gullibility, bitterness, depression, jealousy, greed, lust, they're all dangerous paralytics and yet, they lead the way we live our lives and make our decisions, whether we like it or not. The question remains: can you, therefore, trust yourself with the decisions you make, the judgments you call and the perspective you set for yourself?

On a concluding note, I believe a creator or an artist has achieved their goal when they get their viewers or readers to be emotionally invested in their characters. And it's the protagonist and/or the narrator who usually garners our trust. They are the person we rely on to move forward in the story. And when that trust is broken, we're so much more impacted and in that sense, the artist has achieved their goal, with their inevitable end that vitiates the narrative. I firmly believe that the plot device of an unreliable narrator is one of the most complex, yet, worthy and satisfactory ways to make a story riveting. That's what I think. Or do I?

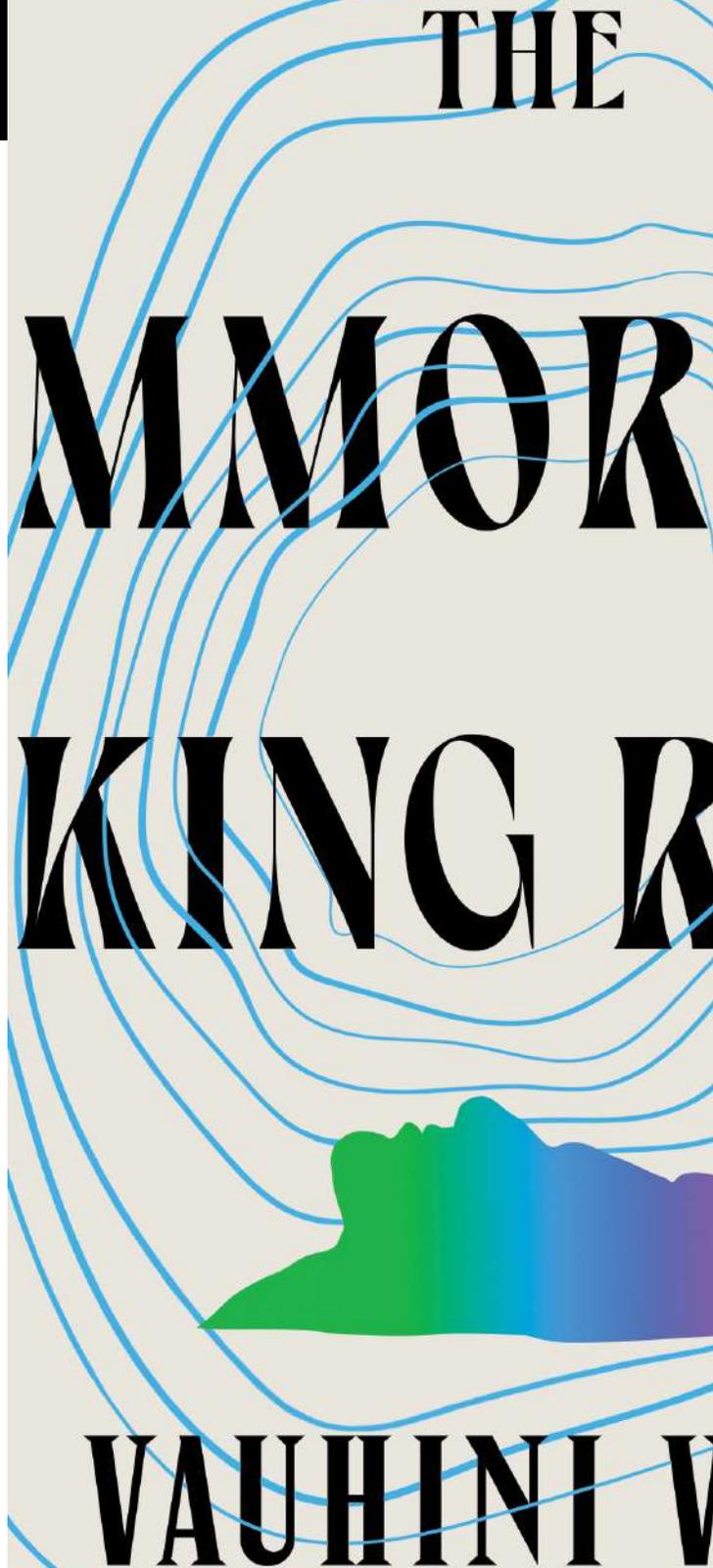


# The Immortal King Rao

Bihan Bandyopadhyay

At one point in George Orwell's 1984, the ever-contemplative and cynical protagonist Winston, observes that "The best books...are those that tell you what you know already".

It is difficult to label Vauhini Vara's debut novel as strictly dystopian or social. Difficult still, to call it speculative fiction. By definition, speculative fiction has more to do with imagination than with the recorded past or the ever-evolving present. The Immortal King Rao begins in 1950s rural India; and ends somewhere in post-Trump USA. It is, undoubtedly, a book that tells you what you already know.





Born into a family of Dalit coconut farmers, King Rao is a first-generation student. To escape the anxieties of being a Dalit in India, and in pursuit of proving his merit and realise his ambitions, he does what most middle-class Indians aspire to. Procure scholarship to a North American university.

It takes him a few years to become the most successful and popular CEO in the world. A couple of years more, and he is the leader of a global, corporate-run government. While his work does fundamentally change the world, his most consequential creation, the one who makes his story accessible to us, is Athena.

The novel sways between the past as shared by Athena, and the present, as lived by her. The past is conflicts owing to land ownership and generational vocations. It strolls around the alleys of patriarchy, prostitution, poverty, and an emerging Post-colonial Ambedkarite discourse. The present is when the global north and the global south are divided along the lines of climate change's impact; when the citizens of the world are shareholders, their worth dependent on their social capital.

Praiseworthy conceptualised and complemented with a writing that is reflective of Vara's background as a journalist, the novel is bold in every sense of the term. It breaks away from the convention of concentrating solely on a perspective that is anti-establishment from the very outset. Instead, it attempts to draw a picture of what leads to a Big Brother ruled society. This transhuman world is not very different from ours. In fact, it is what we can practically anticipate in a few years from now. Not flying cabs, but unceasing surveillance and moral judgement based on algorithms.





Dystopian fiction, in general, begin when resistance can do little to reverse the conditions of life. This is exactly where *The Immortal King Rao* is different. It leaves a space for hope amid the disillusionment that breeds from inhuman governance. The status quo is challenged by the dark underbellies of society where misfits gather to form a community of Exes. They lay down the principles of an alternate world. But at the same time, it shows how at the slightest hint of emancipation, the oppressed, try to wield power over the ones more marginalised. It is not injustice per se, but simply a desperate attempt at survival.

By documenting the communal experience of living in India, and imagining a successful Dalit immigrant in a foundationally individualistic world, Vara manages to skilfully merge techno-capitalism and biotech satire with caste-class struggles and climate change.



# Prayers To Mothers

Munjarita Mondal

I don't think I'll ever write about  
you, Ma  
You never say anything at all  
And it takes everything out of me  
to kneel before you  
You watch in silence when I stir  
Arsenic into cardamom tea You  
observe, Mother  
Like a private eye  
Glued inside of my head  
Keeping tabs of how many lies I  
tell  
How many dead children I collect  
like dirt under my nails





I never knew you could speak  
When I stand vigil at your fever  
bed

You call me a name  
Your father used to call you by  
am I you, Mother  
How can you be sure?  
Do I have your chin  
The fold of hands and feet  
And the boot prints we collect all  
over our chest, Do they match?  
What do you observe, Mother  
Do they match?

I never knew you could laugh  
I've seen you dance in  
photographs before you belonged  
to me  
how I worry  
You grow old and withered like  
the sea Vermillion eats through  
your scalp  
and I count gray strands of brittle  
hair Hollow mothers on the street  
see right through me

They know like anthills cast in  
molten aluminium I am you, more  
beautiful and haunted

They know

You were always too pretty to be  
kept alive

At least you died with your tongue  
whole I worry for you

I really do

You're so quiet it chills me to the  
bone you're quiet when I chop a  
block of flesh Off my stomach

To feed you in your sickbed

Anything you love you have to  
consume

To make it yours

I've never wanted to be anything but  
yours, Mother, nothing else but yours

Oh how I worry you'll wither away

When I run out of flesh

to cut off my chest

to keep you alive

To keep you mine





Why won't you scream, Mother  
Why won't you lie  
And tell me tomorrow is the  
day I die  
and it will be just right

I'm always sick of you  
and you're so very tired  
Why won't you sleep, Mother  
Do you worry I won't survive  
your dreams?  
You know it all  
You've always been so wise  
you know when a daughter  
chews her tongue  
to make it stop  
To make it stop  
You never say anything mother  
you watch and never learn  
I'm older than I have any right  
to be  
I'm older than you and all the  
faces you've buried under your  
Gulmohar tree

My Mother, Sweet Mother Why  
won't you scream pull my hair off  
my scalp  
Break my jaw  
cry me a river  
Make a noise  
Any noise will do  
you can keep my tongue if you lose  
yours  
I will gladly part with mine,  
I have no use of a tongue at all  
I have no songs to sing at all,  
Let me bring you peace, Mother  
just ask and I will cut it off like  
anything else when it's done  
When I'm spent  
you will lay me down to rest  
Braid my hair in neat tight plaits  
Wrap it round around my neck  
And tell me all the stories you had  
Before you belonged to me  
maybe then  
and only then I'll know you're alive  
Oh how alive



# Sleeping

Sutputra Radheye

I slept the whole day as there was nothing to come out of that warm bed for

I woke up, ate a plate full of rice and slept again it was the same reason

there was nothing better to do

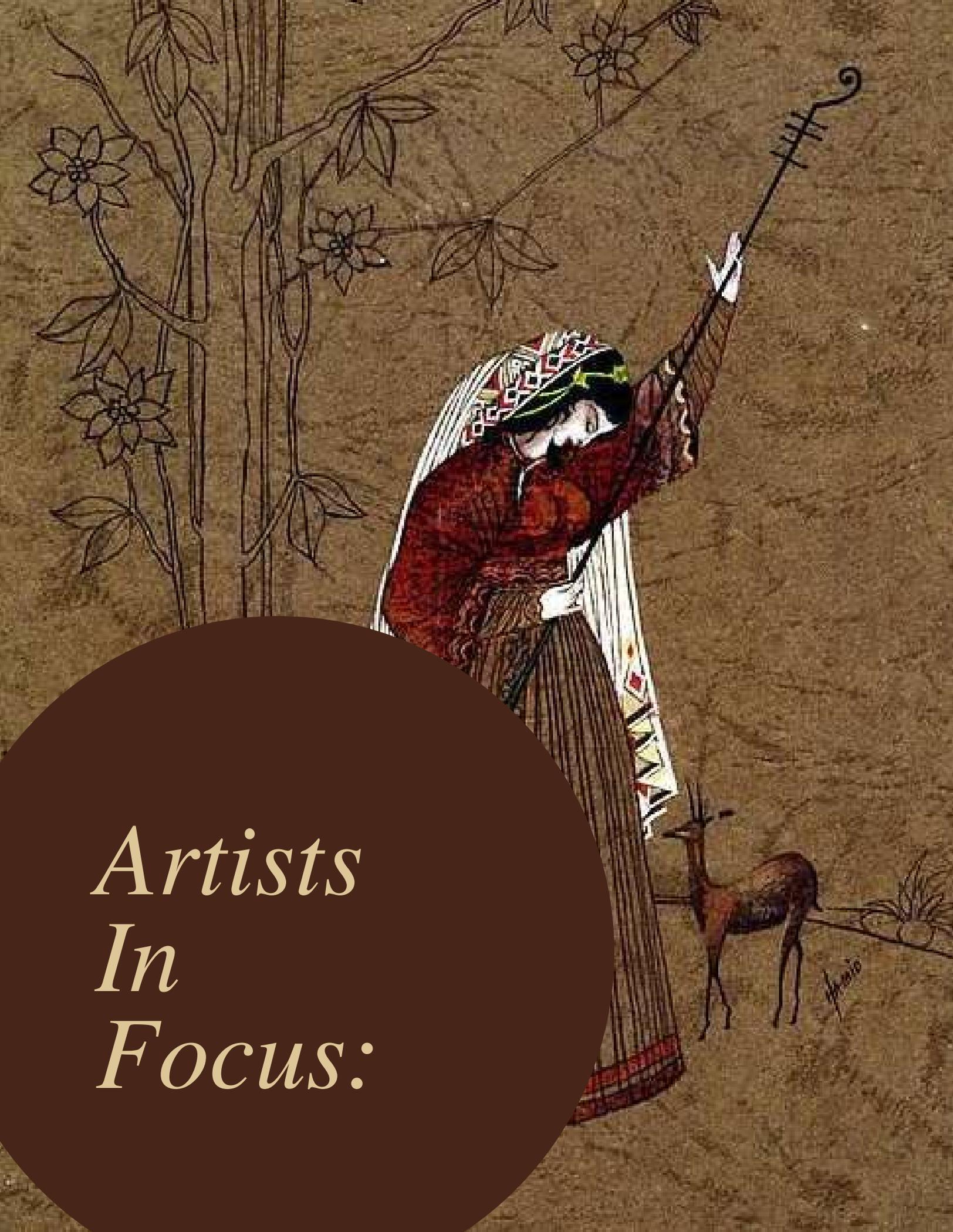
i will do the same tomorrow

there is no real purpose to our work except that we can work hard

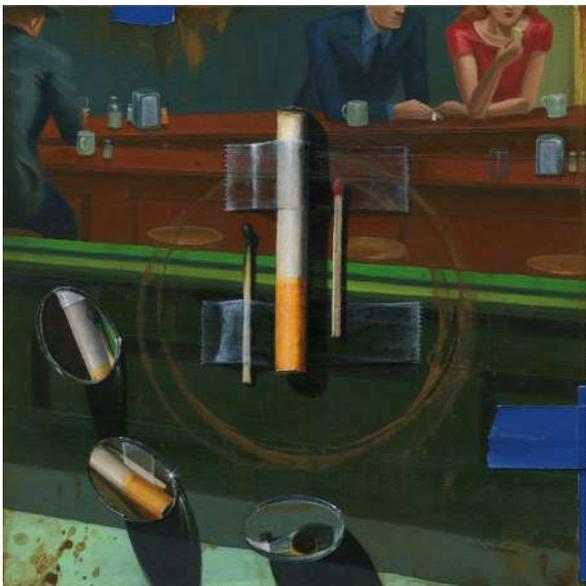
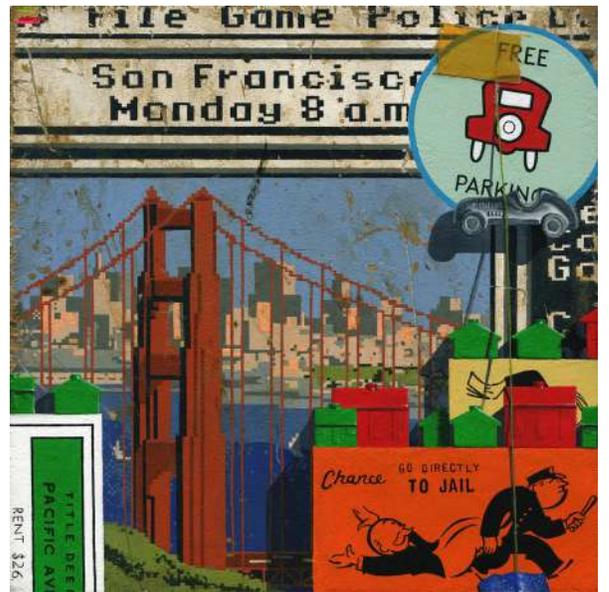
and die unpleasant

.





*Artists  
In  
Focus:*



*Robert Matejcek*



*Mayara Marques*



*Camille Theodet*