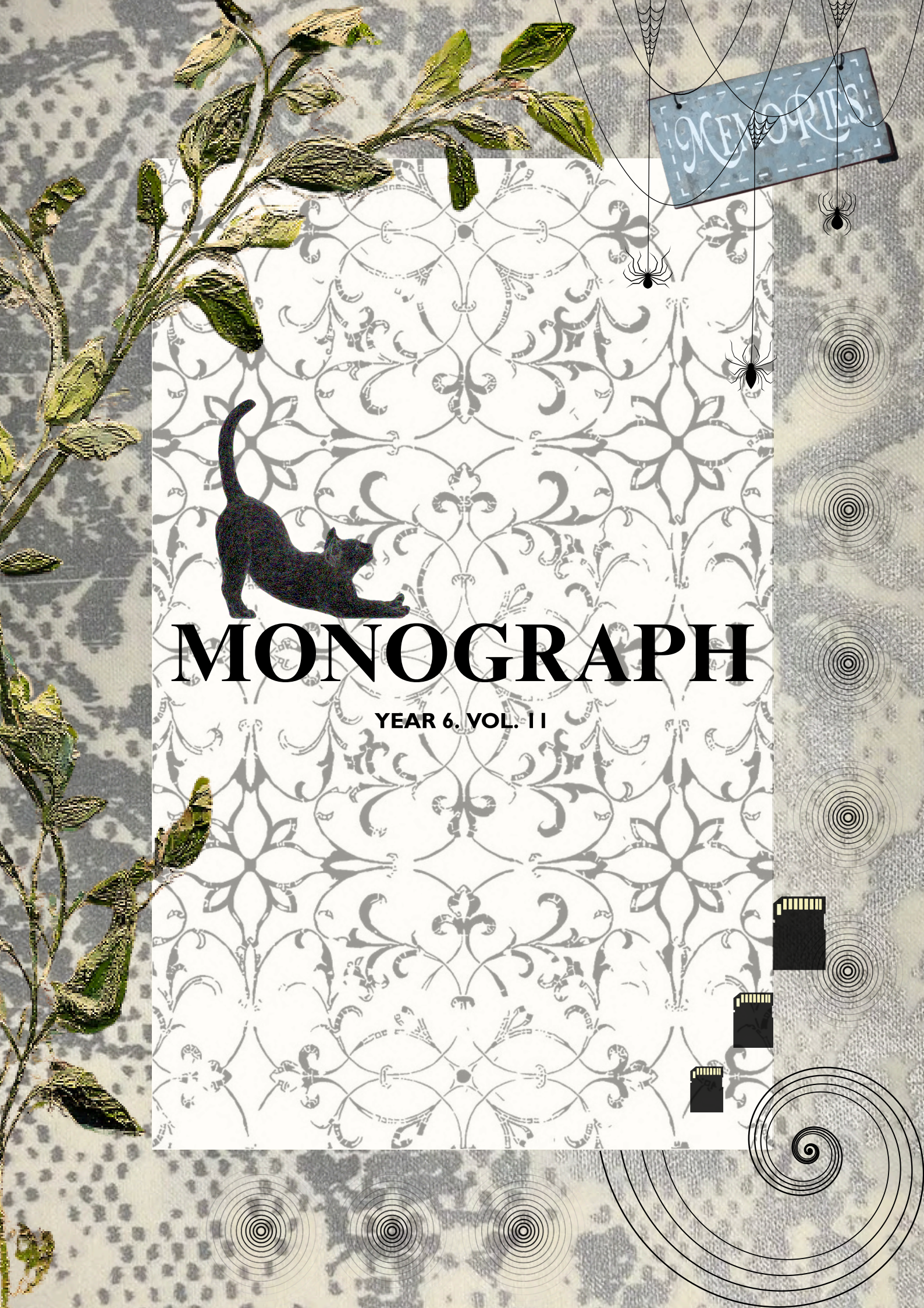
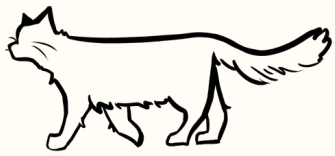


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EDITOR'S NOTE

Ritobrita Mukherjee
Editor-in-Chief

Monograph has brought me unending sleepless nights of tinkering around with templates and tearing out my hair over layout mismatches, but I have, over these past eleven months, incurred a great debt to it for allowing me to excavate the depths of innumerable, brilliant, funny minds who send in pieces trusting me and my team to give them a home. For this issue on memory, we received entries that made us belly laugh on Google Meets, made us go down rabbit-holes of eerily similar experiences shared across space and time, and made us wonder how we made our way to this moment where you, the contributor and the reader, gave us permission to sit front-row for screenings of the sparkling images that you conjure up through your words, your photographs, and your art.

When we first drafted the concept note for this issue, we thought of memory as a found camera with a half-used roll of film inside, or a record picked up mid-pause.

Across essays, poems, and visual art, we watched grief struggle to find its foothold and joy slip past like wind through winter fur. We saw how people conjure images to house their feelings, and how they build feelings to make sense of what they have seen.

What struck us most during the curation of this issue was how communal the act of remembering truly is. Memory is notoriously flighty, an unreliable narrator that edits with surgical precision—yet when placed side by side, these fragmented individual archives begin to speak to one another. One writer's screen memory echoes in the grain of another artist's photograph; a childhood room in one city shares its exact slant of afternoon light with a kitchen halfway across the world.

This issue is an archive of those non-linear geometries. It is a testament to the fragile scaffolding we build to keep the past from vanishing, and the inheritance we leave behind when days bleed into each other. To everyone who sent us their half-developed films, their paused records, and their ghosts: thank you for letting us hold them up to the light. This issue has no beginning and no end, only the places where you choose to pause.

Aitch

Sahana Ahmed

Congratulations on the Grand Prix du Film nomination. Tell us about Aitch.

Aitch is H, for hello. That's what my grandmother called her husband. Hello. She never uttered his name. If you say your husband's name, you take away one minute of his life. That's what she believed. That was unlike her, such mawkishness, but then again, she was filmi. In her presence, my father was Hello, my uncles were Hello. So much hello, hello, but we had no phone. We had no plumbing or electricity either. It was a pucca house, but we lived in a slum.

What were your earliest influences?

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

Go on.

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

So, you were born in Uttara?

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

Like Krishna...

See? I am from Keshtopara, after all. Anyway, somewhere across the Ganga was a burning ghat, a hub for tantriks. A couple of them were seen at our doorstep the day Mom fainted. She was in her second trimester, and Dad had to rush her to the hospital. He later found a pouch of sindoor behind his desk. That was one of the rare times my grandfather yelled at his wife. Honestly, I can't picture him doing that. He was benign, always smiling, his beard like that of Tagore. A freak accident had landed him in his Jeanneret. Half-drooling, invalid, he depended on Dadi for everything. So the act of throwing a 'Nonsense!' at her was nothing short of mutiny.

You dedicated Aitch to your grandfather...

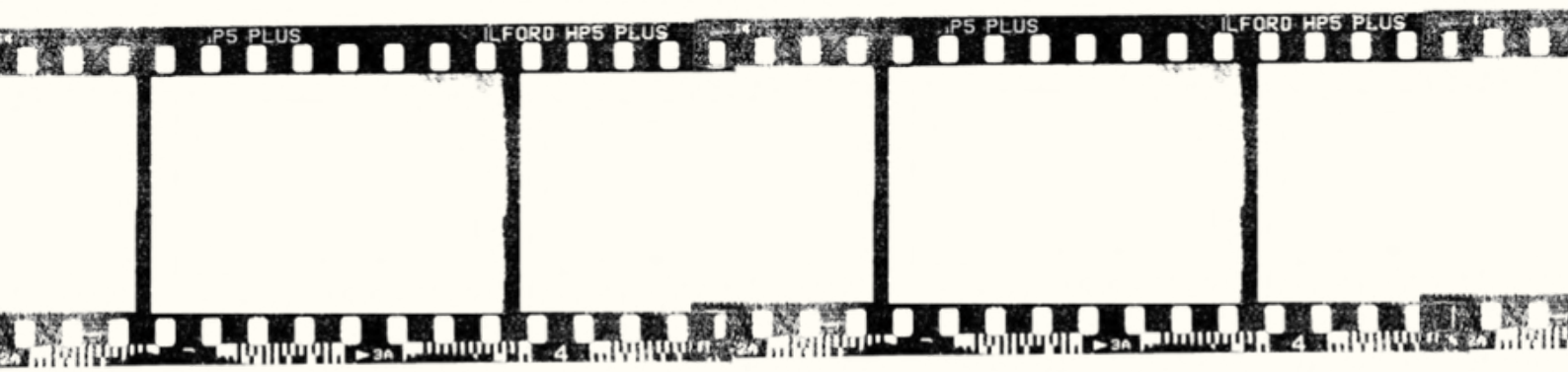
Yes, he bequeathed his books to me. His copy of PK De Sarkar, for example. Whatever I know of language comes from it. The text, of course, and my grandfather's turquoise notes in the margins. He had the most beautiful penmanship.

Ever thought of writing a book?

Yeah, maybe I'll write one about my grandparents. Sad geriatrics are literary gold. I'll dedicate it to Dadi: The Woman Who Wanted Me Dead. Funnily, she never read anything. When I got my first byline, she asked me if I had written a film. The movies and Rafi, that's all that mattered to her. She danced to Yahoo! at my wedding.

Any backlash...?

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



You were accused of indecency.

Yeah, and blasphemy.

Elaborate.

See, my mother was a Syeda. Being in a relationship with April was one thing. To make a film about it was unthinkable. They tried everything, from threats to fatwas to social media lynching.

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

Instagram is brutal. Reddit is worse. I don't want salacious speculation on how much salt I put in my chai.

Salt...?

Why, you don't?

Don't you think social media will allow you to reach more people?

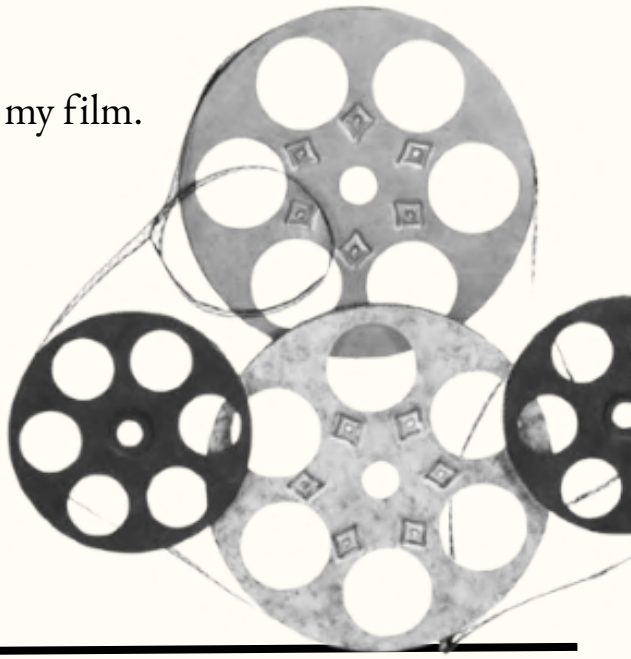
I do have a presence. I prefer that people who are familiar with my work visit my posts. I cannot make myself interesting for strangers. To be intimate with artists is never not disappointing. I am not your friend, sorry, and I cannot influence you.

But you can.

Maybe. I want to create awareness about representation. We have the Bechdel Test. We have the Riz Test. How many know of Vito Russo?

An actress recently said OTT is full of gay lesbianism.

I know who you are talking about. She needs to watch my film.





The scene with the cigarettes felt like poetry.

The censor board made me run a tobacco warning across the frame.

There's chatter about an Oscar nod.

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

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

What is simple? Simple is damn hard work! I am mindful of the budget, and I am a minimalist. If that makes me simple, I'll take the compliment.

What's a tip for aspiring filmmakers?

Awareness, authenticity, application. April taught me that. Stay practical. No debts, no bets. When in doubt, play Rafi.

You are still close to your roots.

What can I say? Bollywood raised me, louche as it is. Remember Lalon, from Uttara? He cried at Le Ballon Rouge, this veteran of Jeetendra bops. His son works with me now. He is my key grip.

What next? What are your plans?

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

Nina Kostiushko

Void



Hard Boiled Hearts

Dragan Todorovic

I am already looking for the end
My end, end of this, end, Arrabal says.

I have been beating pavements for years
now, looking not for me, or you, looking
not for our friends. Seeking
the originals of us.

This city had been sold at an auction
for what it was worth:
it hadn't been signed, it hadn't been built
it was only a battalion of lines
waiting for the orders.
The highest bidder was not an artist
played no instrument had no voice no characters no plot
but he knew who knew.
His people changed it easily
matching the popular motel utopian paintings
circa 1971: cosy little bridges arching over cosy
little peasants washing their underwear in the Flemish mud.
The villages were given room numbers. Pleasant
colours. Tobacco autumn.
Elegant women given by elegant fathers
to the elegant grooms with
marzipan smiles and cotton candy hearts.
Peaceful.

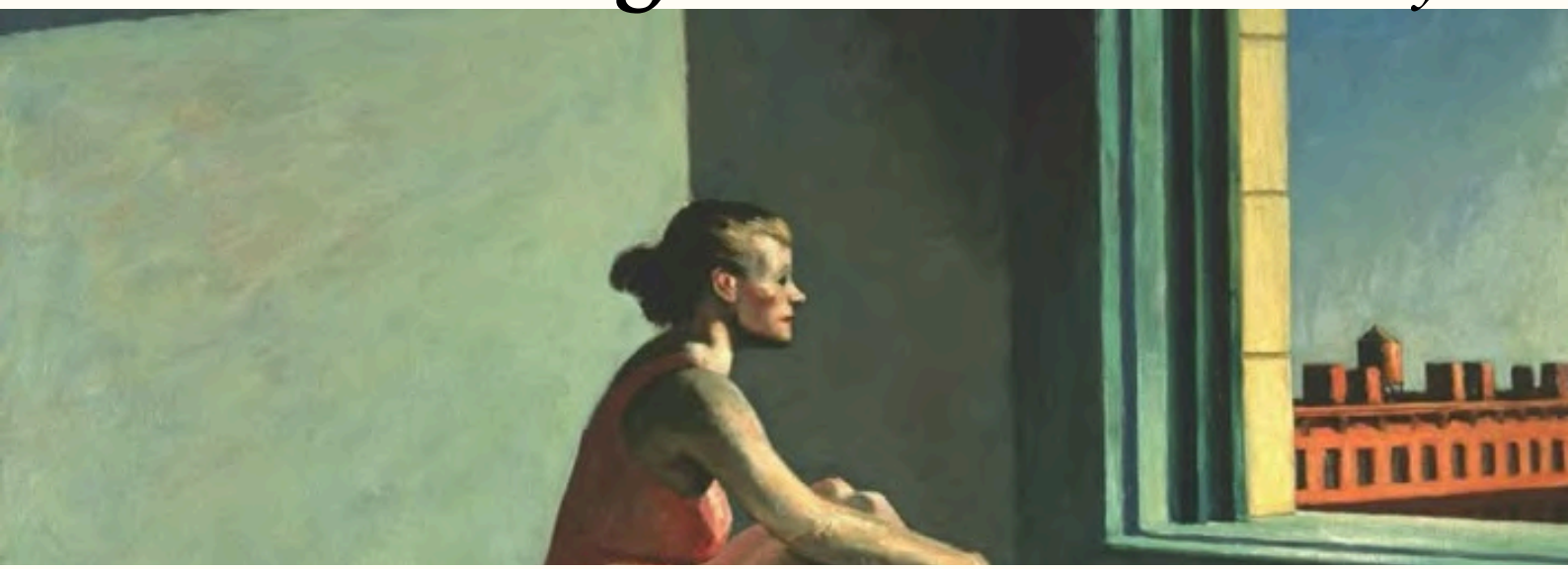
Little Red Riding Hood, the Wolves and the Woodcutter



Elina Bilous

This Morning

Analise McCully



your keys
were by the front door,
two pairs of shoes
sat on the floor,
and this morning this shelf
wasn't shattered.
Two days ago, your mom's
two cats were both still alive
a day ago, all my teeth
were still wedged beneath my tongue
I could still pull air
inside of my lungs
and this morning
there was no glass
littering the bathroom tile floor.

Two inkler under the red sun



Sabrina Bachrach

Woven in Iran, Named in Europe

Nasim Hasani

The name arrives before the place. A visitor encountering a ‘Polonaise Carpet’ might reasonably expect something made in Poland. The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s record supplies a different geography: Iran, Isfahan or Kashan. For the Czartoryski Carpet, another example associated with the designation, the attribution is more narrowly phrased: Iran, probably Isfahan. The hesitation concerns the city. It does not concern the country. Yet the Polish association remains prominent enough to require an explanation before the object can be understood.1

It would be easy to resolve this discrepancy by striking out a misleading name. There is a stronger reason to keep it visible, provided that its status changes. ‘Polonaise’ should identify an episode in the reception of Iranian weaving, rather than function as an unexplained substitute for its place of manufacture. That distinction would give the term something useful to do: preserve evidence of how an attribution went wrong without obliging the carpet to keep performing the error. The difficulty is deciding how much history a name can bear before it obscures the object beneath it.

Tomasz Grusiecki’s study of the designation traces its consolidation to the Paris World’s Fair of 1878. The Czartoryski Carpet appeared in a Polish setting, among objects belonging to Polish collectors; its ownership helped sustain an inference of Polish manufacture. Grusiecki also shows why the corrective ‘so-called’ remains inadequate: it repudiates an attribution without explaining the carpet’s movements. His argument makes the familiar terminology available for scrutiny rather than treating it as harmless professional shorthand.

There is a practical consequence. A visitor should not need prior knowledge of carpet scholarship to discover that the most memorable geographical word on a label is the one requiring correction. A catalogue can accommodate a long history of terminology. A title occupies a different position. It is the part of the account most easily carried away, repeated or attached to a photograph. Retaining an old classification may be useful for specialists searching earlier literature; that usefulness does not settle what deserves to be said first to everyone else.



The Czartoryski Carpet. Iran, probably Isfahan, seventeenth century. Cotton, silk and metal-wrapped thread; asymmetrically knotted pile, brocaded. 486.4 × 217.5 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, 45.106. Gift of John D. Rockefeller Jr., and Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, by exchange, 1945. Public domain.

The Czartoryski Carpet gives this question an unusual sharpness because its identifying marks have themselves been misidentified. According to the Met, the armorial devices at its centre and ends were mistakenly associated with the Czartoryski family. The museum records cotton warps, silk wefts and pile, metal-wrapped thread, and an asymmetrically knotted, brocaded construction. Its length approaches five metres.3 These are different kinds of evidence. A family attribution concerns the interpretation of a device. The technical description concerns the organisation of the textile. Neither should be made to answer a question for which it supplies no evidence.

In the published photograph, five shield-shaped devices punctuate the long field: a single central example and pairs towards either end. Around them, stems curl and branching forms unfold; along the border, repeated compartments carry the eye onward. The badges offer conspicuous points of recognition. It is understandable that a viewer might begin there. The mistake is allowing what is easiest to recognise to determine the explanation of everything around it.

The old inference becomes less persuasive once its steps are separated. Possession by a Polish collector does not establish a Polish workshop. A European-looking emblem does not identify the hand that wove it. Even a securely identified patron would establish a commission rather than the nationality of every person involved in producing it. These distinctions may sound elementary. Their importance lies in how readily they disappear when an object receives a single adjective. 'Polish' can slide between ownership, destination and manufacture while appearing to make one straightforward statement.

There was, nevertheless, a real Polish connection to Iranian carpet production. In the account of his journey of 1601–1602, the Armenian merchant Sefer Muratowicz describes ordering silk-and-gold carpets for King Sigismund III in Kashan. Michael Połczyński's study makes the account available in English translation alongside documentary material concerning the journey.4 The surviving relationship is therefore more interesting than a simple tale of European ignorance. People in the Polish king's service knew where to obtain such work. The later misattribution should not be projected backwards onto the customers who travelled to Iran to purchase it.

Nor should the journey be turned into a provenance for a carpet it cannot identify. Muratowicz's order establishes a transaction; it does not, by itself, establish that the Czartoryski Carpet was among the purchased pieces. The distinction matters because a compelling traveller can too easily become a convenient explanation for every surviving object of the relevant kind. A route documented for one commission is evidence that such a route operated. It is not a substitute for the missing history of another textile.

The account also needs its own label. Połczyński consulted eighteenth-century printed versions derived from an earlier text; he cautions that their completeness and relation to Muratowicz's original wording cannot simply be assumed.5 That is a limit on how confidently we can reconstruct a conversation or repeat a picturesque detail. It does not make the source useless. It asks the reader to distinguish the surviving document from the experience it represents. Here the discipline required of a historian closely resembles the discipline required of a curator: identify what has been transmitted, and make the uncertainty belong to the specific claim it affects.

An Iranian attribution consequently need not erase a Polish commission or an Armenian intermediary. It gives those relationships a more intelligible structure. Someone ordered; someone negotiated; someone wove. These roles may overlap, and the surviving evidence may leave some participants unnamed, but they remain distinct activities. Describing an exchange as international should increase our attention to the distribution of work. Otherwise, the attractive language of connection risks making the workshop disappear as completely as an incorrect national attribution did.



Carpet. Attributed to Iran, probably Kashan, late sixteenth–early seventeenth century. Silk and metal-wrapped thread; tapestry weave. 221 × 148.6 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, 43.84. Purchase, Rogers Fund, and Mr. and Mrs. Isaac D. Fletcher Collection, Bequest of Isaac D. Fletcher, by exchange, 1943. Public domain.

The same care is necessary when the eye moves from geography to material. ‘Silk and gold’ sounds like an inventory of substances. In a textile, it is also a description of decisions about structure, surface and labour. Consider the Met’s smaller carpet numbered 43.84, attributed to Iran, probably Kashan, in the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century. Its catalogue describes a tapestry weave, with flying cranes in a central medallion and animal combats in the field.6 This is a useful comparison with the knotted Czartoryski Carpet precisely because the two constructions should not be collapsed into one technique.

A shared vocabulary of luxury does not guarantee a shared method of making. An account interested only in magnificent courts and travelling treasures can pass over that difference without noticing it. Yet the difference is where much of the maker’s knowledge resides. The question is no longer only who could afford silk or obtain metal thread. It is how those materials were made to form a continuous patterned surface. Technical description restores an active verb to an object that a collector’s name can leave sounding passively possessed.

Janina Poskrobko’s conservation study of 43.84 explains that adjacent coloured wefts turn around a common warp in a dovetailing arrangement, producing softened boundaries. Its metal threads consist of flat strips wound around a silk core; the study identifies silver and gilt silver. Scientific examination also identified safflower, madder and cochineal among the dyes. The accompanying photographs show variation within a pink area and tarnished metal thread. Poskrobko allows more than one explanation for the variation: different dye batches or differential fading.7

That last qualification is especially valuable. It prevents a visible irregularity from being assigned a single, satisfying story. A change of colour may record something that happened during manufacture, something that happened afterwards, or an interaction between the two. The distinction cannot be recovered by admiration alone. Nor does a finding for this tapestry-woven carpet establish the dye composition of the Czartoryski Carpet. Comparison becomes informative when it specifies the relationship being compared; it becomes misleading when one object's laboratory results are allowed to stand for a whole named class.

There are thus two different ways of losing sight of the work. A geographical label can substitute a collector's world for a place of manufacture. An aesthetic description can substitute the surface now available to us for the surface first produced. The second problem cannot be solved by recovering a perfectly authentic appearance in words. Without sufficient evidence, an imagined reconstruction would add another unearned certainty. What can be recovered is a better question: which features belong to the making of the textile, and which may belong to its subsequent life?

A reasonable objection follows. No short label can tell a workshop history, explain a classification, summarise scientific analysis and trace centuries of movement. Insisting that it do all of these things would produce an unreadable miniature essay. Furthermore, keeping familiar terminology helps readers connect an object with earlier catalogues. These are substantial reasons for retaining 'Polonaise' somewhere in the record. They are weaker reasons for allowing it to carry the first and least qualified geographical claim.

Grusiecki's objection goes further: locating manufacture does not supply a sufficient account of an object formed through wider relationships.8 That challenge deserves to survive the correction of the label. Yet insufficiency need not mean indeterminacy. A place of weaving can be a well-supported fact even when it cannot explain every material, motif or subsequent use. The alternative to a single origin that explains everything is an account in which different claims have different degrees of precision. Iran and probably Isfahan are compatible statements because they describe different scales of knowledge. Removing the qualification would overstate the city attribution; spreading it across the whole account would understate what is known. The reader needs access to both the evidence and the limits of its resolution.

An order of presentation would do more than another attempt at a perfect name. Begin with an Iranian silk-and-metal-thread carpet and the museum's qualified attribution to a city. Give the date and construction. Then identify 'Polonaise' as a historical designation and explain the Polish association. Longer interpretation can distinguish evidence of commissioning from ownership, and documented travel from possible travel.

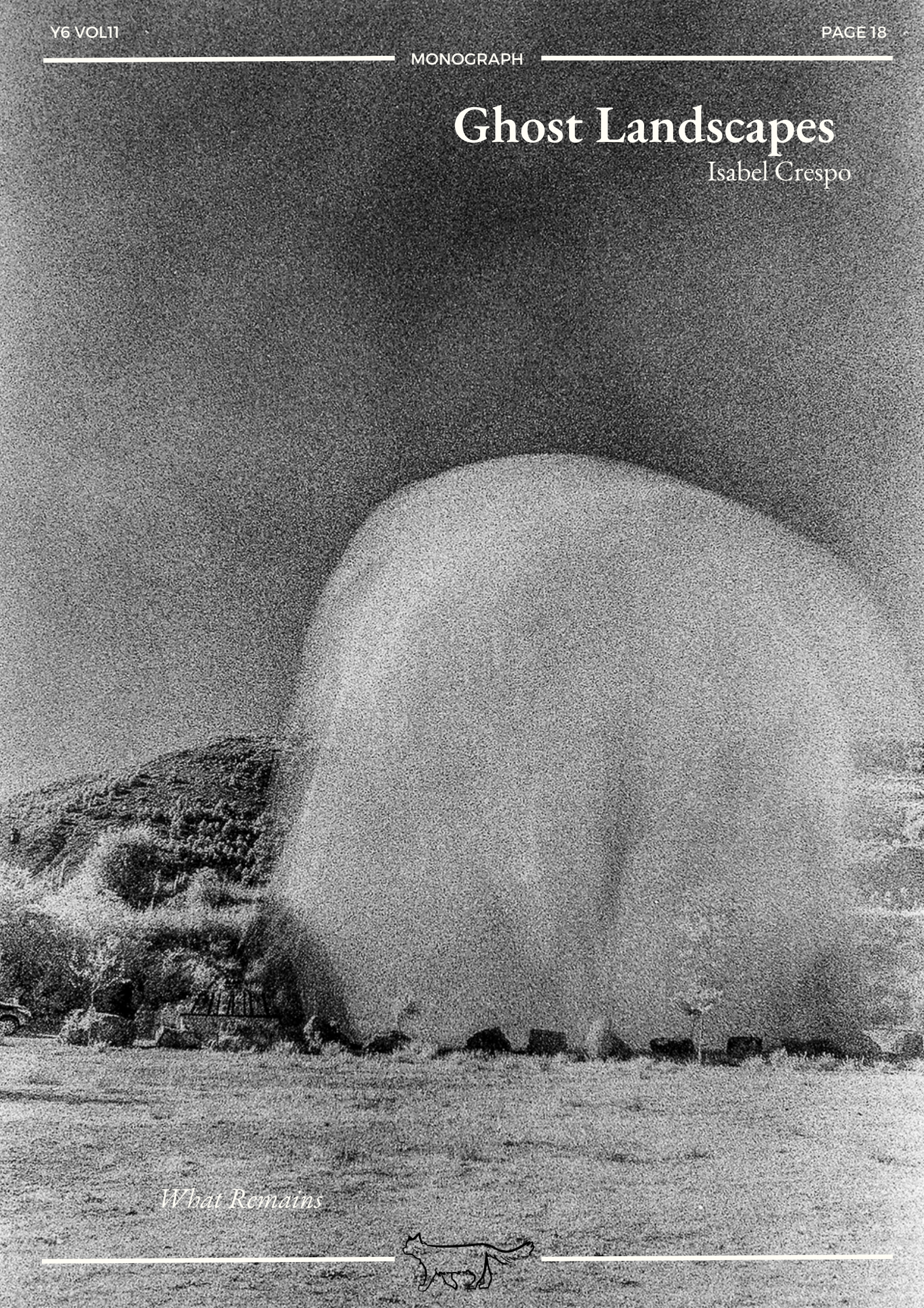
This arrangement does not pretend that the country of manufacture tells the whole story. It lets each part of the story answer its own question.

The benefit extends to the unnamed weaver. Correcting a country does not recover an individual biography, and a technical description cannot manufacture a signature. But it can prevent the best-documented collector from becoming, by default, the principal person in the object's history. We know some people through names and others through the patterned results of their decisions. A responsible account should make room for that unequal survival of evidence instead of allowing the inequality to determine whose activity counts as history.

The Czartoryski name can remain attached to the carpet without becoming a claim about its loom. 'Polonaise' can remain searchable without becoming its unexplained identity. What deserves to change is the burden placed on the visitor to disentangle them. A carpet should not have to lose its journeys in order to regain its place of making. Begin with the work in Iran; then follow what happened to it. The surviving name becomes more revealing once it is treated as something the carpet acquired.

Ghost Landscapes

Isabel Crespo



What Remains


Leaving away


erosion



farewell



bedroom

The gay porn gaze and the memory of Prague

Lance Peng

Memory is supposed to follow experience. Mine ran the other way. I remembered Prague before I had ever been there: its apartments, its soft, diffused light, the particular hush of its interiors, all learned on a screen, in the dark, at an age when I had no word for what I was learning. It was less like remembering than like developing a roll of film that someone else had exposed.

Freud called a certain kind of memory a screen memory: a vivid, apparently innocuous image that stands in front of something harder to look at. In this essay I want to ask what happens when the screen is literal and when the image that arrives first is a pornographic one. My argument is that what I call the gay porn gaze works as a machine for producing such memories - it teaches us to remember places we have never been and, in the process, covers over what those places actually carry.

The place is Prague. The gaze is the one through which Eastern and Central Europe has been made legible to Western gay men since the end of socialism.

It was in Prague that I read Altering States: Ethnographies of Transition in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union (2000). Its essays treat post-socialist “transition” as political and economic restructuring and also as something lived through bodies, domestic life and desire, including the emergence of gay tourism in Prague itself. Reading it I began to wonder whether that transition had ever ended, or whether it had simply migrated into new forms of mediation.

The gay porn gaze as geography

Laura Mulvey's "male gaze" describes looking as a structure that organises desire through power. Queer theorists have since complicated it. What interests me here is how a pornographic gaze operates on places as well as bodies.

The gay porn gaze, as I want to think it here, is a way of seeing geography itself as erotic potential. Certain cities become charged with affective and sexual meaning long before arrival. Prague is one of these cities.

In gay porn, particularly in categories tagged "straight/bi Eastern European", "rent boy" or amateur-style studio productions circulating on major tube platforms, men from Eastern and Central Europe are often framed through a visual economy of raw masculinity and economic ambiguity. The recurring "Eastern European guy" figure is coded through specific markers: minimal grooming, gym-built or working-class bodies, accented English or non-verbal performance and a framing of sexual availability that is often implied to be shaped by financial precarity. Positioned against Western gay porn's emphasis on choreography, body branding and self-conscious performance, this figure is constructed as more "real" and less mediated.

This can be a representational stereotype but also an aesthetic trope and a post-socialist fantasy structure, where the afterlives of socialism are converted into erotic legibility.

Arjun Appadurai's notion of "mediascapes" (1996) feels useful here: global flows of images and narratives that shape imagination at a distance. But what porn does is slightly different: it circulates images of place and it attaches desire to them in ways that feel bodily, habitual, even intimate. Before I ever came to Prague, I had already learned how to look at it.

Xvideos, BelAmi and sexual initiation

I am cautious about over-structuring this but much of my early sexual imagination was shaped through platforms like XVideos and studios like BelAmi. If I think about what one might call a sexual epiphany, or gay coming-of-age moment, it was mediated, compressed and repetitive and it came through screens.

BelAmi occupies a distinct position in the history of gay porn. Founded in Prague in the 1990s, the studio developed a recognisable visual grammar: scenes are frequently shot in neutral interior apartments or hotel-style rooms, with soft, diffused lighting that flattens shadows and reduces visual harshness.The camera tends to remain fixed or only subtly reframed, holding bodies in mid-shot compositions that resemble posed photography more than handheld documentary movement. Performers often enter scenes through extended pauses (standing, undressing slowly or maintaining eye contact with the camera before physical contact begins): touch delayed, repetition of gestures and long takes that extend moments before penetration or ejaculation.

The effect is sustained compositional exposure, where eroticism is produced through duration and controlled stillness.

For a younger viewer, what was being learned here was more than sexuality - it was a way of remembering a place. Alison Landsberg calls memories of this kind prosthetic memory: memories of events and places one has not lived, acquired through mediated experience and worn almost as one's own. Prague arrived in me this way, as a sedimented archive of accented masculinity, eroticised austerity and bodies that were available to the gaze but seemed to withhold their meaning even in exposure. The encounter preceded the place. Prague became legible first as an erotic idea, a coherent aesthetic of hardness, distance and exposure, before it was ever a lived environment. In Appadurai's terms, the mediascape does not distort Prague so much as produce the conditions under which Prague can be encountered at all.



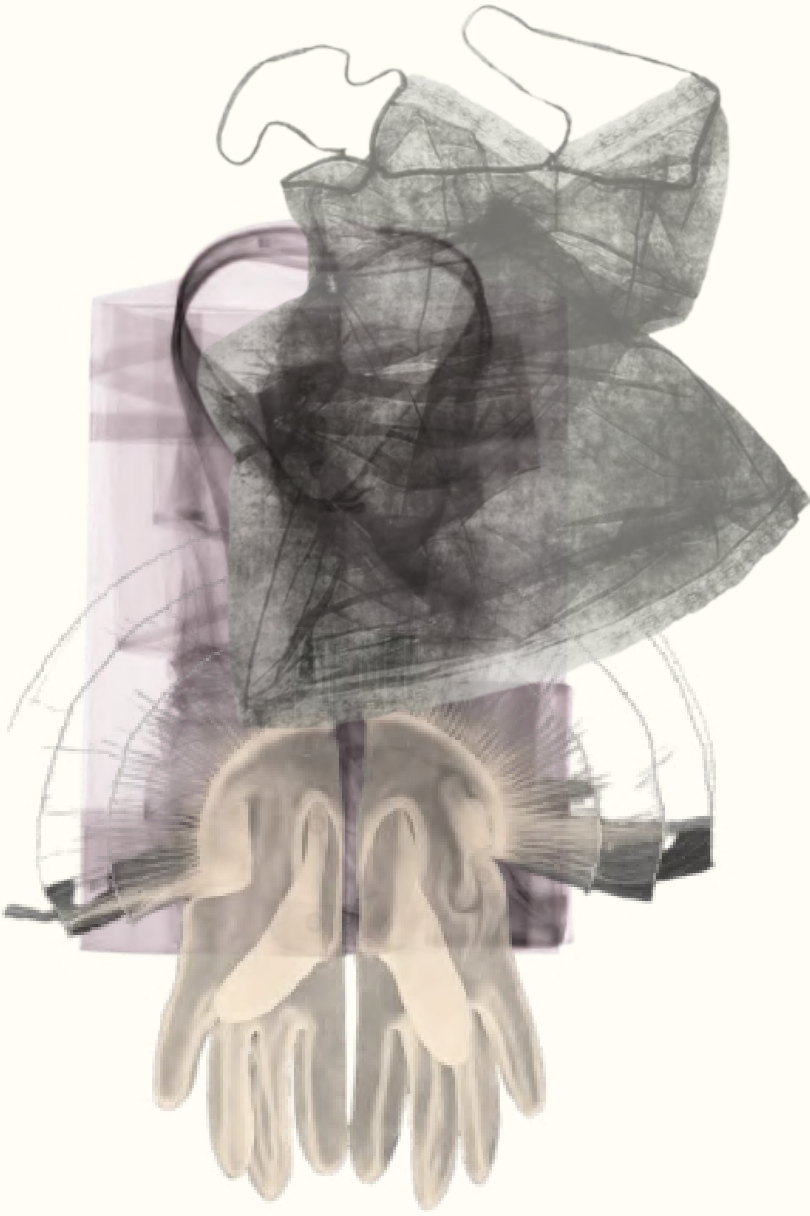
This is where Freud's term (borrowed loosely) becomes more than a metaphor. A screen memory is vivid, even luminous, because it is doing other work: it stands in front of something. The Prague I carried was sharp in every detail, but nothing in it spoke of occupation, socialism or the economic precarity that the images only gestured at as atmosphere. The vividness was the cover.

As Daphne Berdahl and others in Altering States suggest, transition was institutional and very sensory. It involved the reconfiguration of desire, aspiration and visibility. In hindsight, it feels significant that my own sexual imagination was forming through those same global circuits in which Eastern Europe was being newly visualised for Western consumption.

Lukas Ridgeston and the fantasy of the "real"

Among these figures, Lukas Ridgeston occupies a particularly resonant place. One of the most recognisable performers associated with BelAmi's early period, Ridgeston became emblematic of a certain Eastern European pornographic ideal: controlled, distant, slightly melancholic masculinity.

Ridgeston matters here because he crystallises a broader structure of looking. In the gay porn gaze, authenticity is often displaced onto Eastern Europe itself. The fantasy is that desire is less mediated there, less constrained by the rules of Western identity politics or commercial self-consciousness.



Of course this is itself a projection. What is being consumed is not Eastern Europe as it is but Eastern Europe as it is imagined to be after socialism: economically unstable, socially fluid, sexually open yet somehow still "raw". This is where fantasy becomes geographic ideology.



Standing in front of the Astronomical Clock.

A clock is a strange thing to stand before in an essay about memory. Henri Bergson distinguished the time of clocks, evenly divided and measurable, from durée, the elastic interior time in which past and present fold into one another. Before the Orloj I felt the second kind. I had been here already, in some other duration, and the city was catching up with me.

It is strange how often arrival feels like recognition and not discovery. Certain corners of Prague felt familiar in advance because I had seen versions of them repeatedly on screen. Some streets felt already "framed", as if the city had been pre-edited. It resembles déjà vu, except that the earlier viewing had really happened, only on a screen.

Unlike conventional cinema, pornography does not usually claim narrative realism. Yet it produces its own kind of spatial repetition. Rooms, corridors, lighting conditions and architectural fragments all become part of a visual grammar that can be recognised instantly across contexts. The result is that cities like Prague become strangely over-familiar before they are known.

This raises a difficult question: what does it mean for a city with such layered histories (occupation, socialism, fascism, neoliberal restructuring....) to become legible through such a narrow aesthetic register?

Pornography, I think, orients us toward certain forms of proximity while silently obscuring others. It teaches us what to notice and what to ignore. This is the work of a screen memory: it is vivid enough that we never think to look behind it.

What becomes visible

One of the recurring themes in Altering States is visibility: what becomes newly seen after socialism's collapse, gay tourism in Prague included. Sexuality becomes more publicly legible, more mobile, more tied to transnational flows - but visibility is never neutral; it is organised by desire, money and representation.

Mulvey's male gaze assumed a heterosexual masculine subject who looks while women are looked at. My position as a gay man watching gay porn complicates that. I look from inside a system calibrated to make male bodies available for consumption, and the looking circulates among bodies that are at once subjects and objects. It is a more fluid circulation than Mulvey described, but no less coded.

Bodies are performed and stylised into recognisable types. The "Eastern European man" becomes one such type, circulated across platforms until it feels natural.

This is where the gay porn gaze intersects with post-socialist transition. Both involve processes of making legible what was previously unstable and both involve new economies of attention. And both are shaped by uneven global power relations in which Eastern Europe becomes both subject and surface.

The bridge

As I walked across Charles Bridge, I took another photograph. It was crowded, as expected. Yet I found myself thinking less about tourism and more about repetition. How many times had I already crossed this bridge in my imagination? How many versions of it had I seen filtered through screens, edited into atmosphere, detached from historical specificity?

Tourism already runs on expectations formed in advance. The pornographic gaze saturates them with affective anticipation. There is something slightly disorienting about recognising a place before you understand it.

What I am circling here is not a critique of pornography in any simple moral sense. Rather, it is an attempt to think about how desire produces spatial knowledge. Prague in this sense is a city and a sedimented media form. It is shaped by tourism, post-socialist memory, global capital and queer visual culture. It exists simultaneously as a material location and as a fantasy archive. If memory can haunt cities, perhaps fantasy can too.



Landscape view from Charles Bridge (Karlův most), Prague, taken by the author.

What the screen remembers

Svetlana Boym distinguished restorative nostalgia, which tries to rebuild a lost home, from reflective nostalgia, which lingers in the longing itself. What I carried to Prague was something adjacent: nostalgia for a past that was never mine and never quite there, a longing for an Eastern Europe that had been made, elsewhere, to be looked at. To recognise this is the beginning of the reflective kind. I can keep the image and still ask what it covers.

The gay porn gaze shapes what is seen and it shapes what feels already seen. It produces a kind of temporal collapse in which anticipation, consumption and arrival blur into one another. What Altering States offers, read today, is a reminder that transition is never only structural. It is also intimate, sensory and unevenly distributed across bodies and images. Post-socialism opened markets and borders and it also opened new ways of imagining desire. And in that opening, cities like Prague became something else entirely: places to visit and screens onto which desire is projected, repeated, rehearsed long before arrival. The question is perhaps not whether this is true or false. It is what kind of geography this produces and what kinds of bodies it teaches us to recognise as real.

A screen memory is a way of remembering one thing so as not to remember another.

Mine is a heart of a carnelian...



Lariab Ahmed

Recompense

Charles Tarlton

There's an unheard tremor comes just ahead of the wind, makes the grasses bend to the ground,
in the rhythm of push, and run down to the sea. And the sea pushes back over cast up shells and the sand. When I walk out on the deck I can smell salt carried on the wind.

As illusive as the weather, changing from hour to hour; find a spot where rain is likely or draw in the snow line. The music air makes against the turning sphere, a grinding sound, imaginary.
Fictitious pages stuck up on a wall, beginning and the middle, someone wrote several endings, keeping options open.

¡Juega! Tu guitarrón, Ramón. Make the music of the spheres. Your sounds, rising up to the sky!
Later, when they were taking down the tents and loading them onto the trucks, the boys from town hung on the fences to watch. The ship listed hard into the wind, leaning over to starboard. Counting telephone poles through the night.

The sidewalks end at the corner, where flowers grow amongst the weeds; no birds sing now in the giant Hawthorn. Summer is holding back the winter, making it rain rain. There's a bird nest on the Eucalyptus limb, bouncing in the wind; little chirps pitiful in the night. They say each lightning bolt illuminates the Quercus alba, the White Oak.

Tip Tip Tap

Madhav Rathi

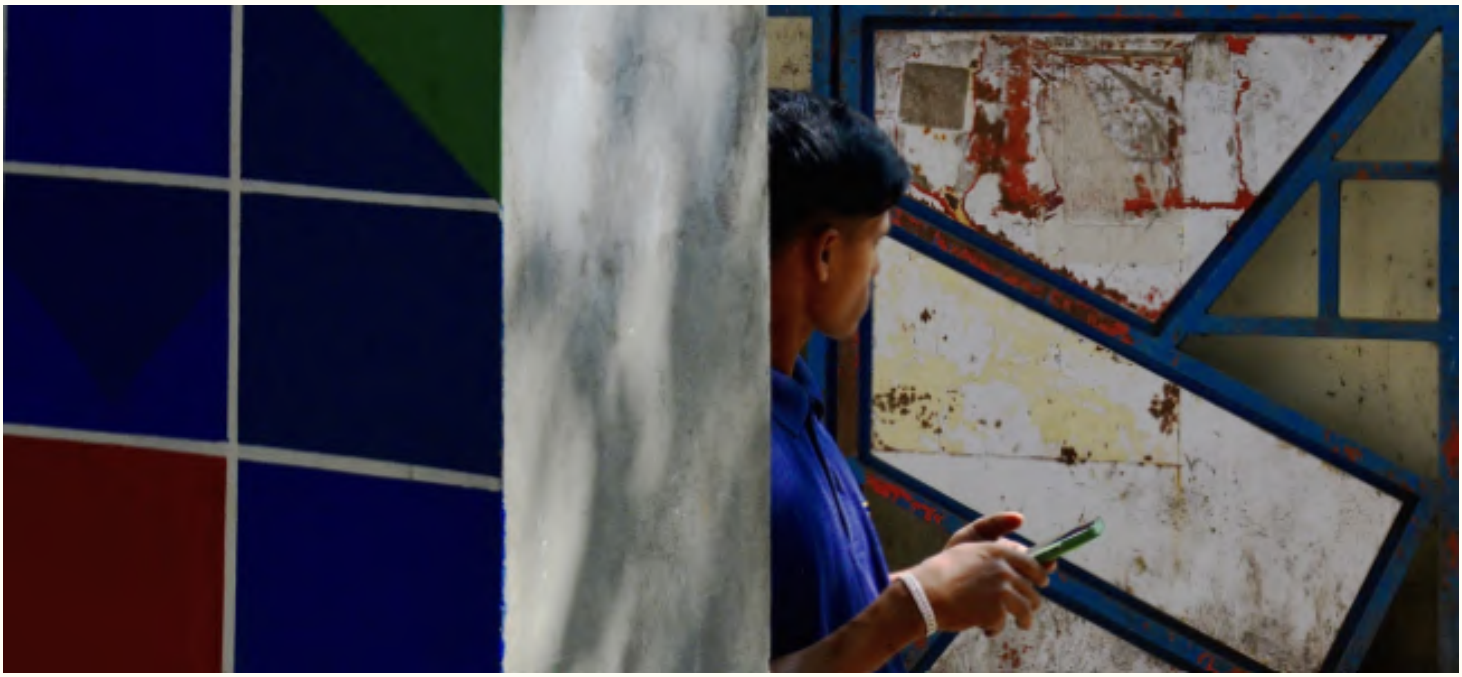
The title comes from a childhood game where we'd leave the outcome to chance, pretending we had some say in it. I find that idea quite interesting when looking at photographs, too. A lot of what makes an image work is completely outside the control of the person in it. The colours, the light, the arrangement of things, the person who happens to walk into the frame. None of it necessarily comes together with any intention. And yet, sometimes, it does. A worker against a blue sky, a cyclist passing a wall of colourful buckets, a man caught between painted surfaces. The subject becomes this final, unpredictable variable that brings everything together. Without them, the photograph might still exist, but it wouldn't quite be the same image. I think there's something quite instinctive about how we recognise these moments. We find harmony in things that were never meant to go together. We see a composition where nobody intended to make one.





The colours in these photographs are deliberately pushed, perhaps a little beyond what we'd consider natural. I like to think of it as a way of looking at the world as a child might. Everything seemed brighter then. We didn't really question why something looked beautiful, or whether it was supposed to. Things just were. Maybe it was because we were protected from certain realities, or maybe we simply hadn't yet learned to look past the beauty that existed around us. Tip-Tip-Tap is an attempt to return to that way of seeing, even if only momentarily. To find something in the everyday that nobody planned, and to let chance have a little say in what we end up looking at.


SHIVAM
MATKAKULFI





I have stopped telling lies

Palak Raka

There came a point between feeding and feeling, which was unfamiliar.
I remember feeling the happiest here (there), without any presumptions and memories. Even more than happiness, it was a kind of ease that dreading the newness of change felt comforting, for now I like it's fleeting nature. There is a line by Isabella Pedicini which goes "Photography weaves itself into the literary experience, where the epidermis always refers to the deeper psychic dimension which controls action, whether latent or manifest, static or dynamic, in dreams and waking". You are not seperate from the world around you, the invisible essense in everything is also inside you. And somewhere I have stopped telling lies, mostly to myself. I wish viewers to experience this honesty and vulnerability through each frame as I got to live it. I only call to inquire and not analyse, let it find you where you are. This photo project captures the irony as well as a realisation through a series of frames around the waves, sand, people and objects. My newfound adoration for the ocean only reflects this exact feeling: that it is constant; yet constantly changing.

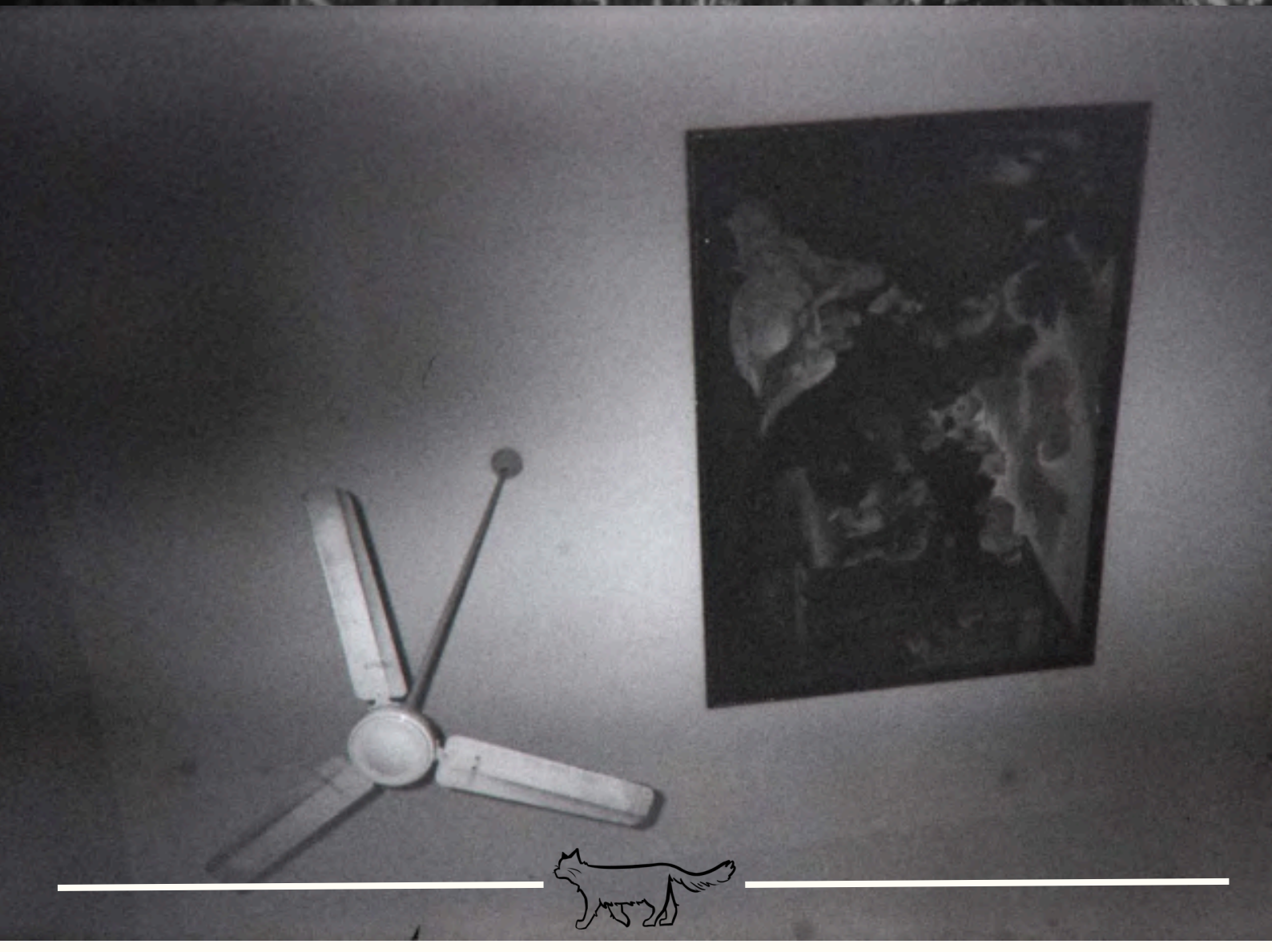












Labyrinth of Recall



Neena Makhija

The Centre of the Matrix

Jahnavi Kumar

~ What keeps you afloat when you're on fire?
~ Love.
The world is on fire, my love. I need you.
But my love is in Sarjapur, and I will be toast by the time I reach there from Whitefield on a Tuesday evening.

Let me be upfront from the start: I haven't seen The Matrix, but who doesn't have the gist in this economy, when things increasingly feel like an absurdist dream? I am also not a chaser of controversies. Life is too chaotic and controversial for me to go looking for them outside.

Well then, how did it start, you might ask?

As far as I can tell, there is no exact point in time when this realisation started dawning on me. And as I elaborate, you'll understand why that also makes sense.

I started living in Bengaluru two and a half months back. Us college-spirited kids, with wonder in our eyes, were out to conquer the city, make it our own, until every after-work baithak with Instagram open, trying to find a new place to go to, seemed to end with the same result: it was an hour away.

My cousin's place? An hour away. My best friend's college? An hour away. I resign myself to looking up my aunt's place. Also an hour away. And all of them are an hour away from each other. Bobs is an hour away, Blossoms is an hour away, and the office is an hour away. And all of them are an hour away from each other.

Every-everything is one hour away. The city has a default loading time.

I suspect Bangalore is located inside a gravitational anomaly. This would explain why time moves differently here, though admittedly not why your cab driver is hell bent on taking the furthest U-turn after ignoring the first two. Google Maps doesn't predict arrival times. It estimates how long the simulation needs to render the next location. The metro is an attempt to escape the space-time continuum which is why the blue line exists only on maps since forever.

Which makes you finally wonder: perhaps the one-hour commute isn't a consequence of Bengaluru's infrastructure. Perhaps it is the infrastructure.

So, like any reasonable emotional human being, we complained about it to every well-meaning soul who asked us newcomers, “How are you finding Bangalore?” and got the standard response: “Well, at least the weather is good, maadi.”

And, well, that got me thinking. The weather is good. Suspiciously good.

Whoever designed the simulation knew that pleasant weather was necessary to keep the subjects docile. You can't revolt when it's 22 degrees and breezy. You can only order a coffee at Kaapi or Matteo or Third Wave or Lavonne or...

The weather is the city's retention strategy. The rent is extortionate, the roads are unusable, the water situation is questionable, but the air-conditioning is free because the entire city is air-conditioned by the Matrix.

The breeze feels artificial because it is. The clouds are rendered. The rain is a server reset. Let me elaborate.

We play a game called ‘Thethharai’, which is basically people going in rounds and saying the most thethhar thing they have done. Thethhar, in Bihar, where I’m from, means—wait, I'll have to look this one up. Google says “shameless, stubborn, audacious.”

My thethharai is that I refuse to buy an umbrella after two and a half months here.

An umbrella is an essential in Bengaluru, despite the ‘amazing weather da’ claims. An umbrella is what my aunt had gifted me the first time I came to Bengaluru last year for my internship. An umbrella is your closest compadre in Bengaluru.

Do you know why?

Because it can rain anytime, anywhere, for any amount of time. The city slows down, roads flood, traffic becomes impossible, and everyone is forced to wait. You call it the monsoon. I call it scheduled maintenance. A system update.

I am writing this from home, and the first thing I felt on landing here was a full breath of fresh air passing through my trachea, filling my lungs, and aerating my brain. In namma luru, the air barely touches my lungs. I live in a lull.

Probably because the air hasn't fully settled into my lungs, because I haven't completed onboarding. My body is still waiting for the local environment pack to download.

Coming to my homecoming, which godforsakenly requires you to go to the Bengaluru airport. An expedition in all its glory that will put Odysseus to shame. You spend more time reaching the airport of your “city” than travelling from one city to another.

The airport is located outside the simulation's primary rendering zone. This is why getting there requires leaving home four hours before your flight. It’s a Faraday cage. Aircrafts cannot be allowed too close to the concentration of electromagnetic radiation generated by the Matrix. Bengaluru makes leaving easier to imagine than to execute. I say the airport journey is a loyalty test. If you are willing to spend three hours travelling to leave Bangalore, you have demonstrated sufficient commitment to be permitted to leave.

Bengaluru contains an absurd concentration of intelligent people. People who build autonomous systems, optimise databases, train machine-learning models, and design technologies intended to solve problems before they occur. And yet they cannot get across their own city.

These people can teach a machine to recognise a pedestrian but cannot book a Rapido without being cancelled on three times and overpaying—or, in my exceptional case, getting robbed (but that's another story).

They can reduce a model's inference latency by milliseconds but cannot reduce their own commute by fifteen minutes.

They spend eight hours building the future and two hours trying to get home from it.

Every traffic jam is a room full of people capable of solving the problem, trapped in a system that prevents them from coordinating to do so.

At this point the famed Bengaluru traffic is not a bug. It's a firewall.

The simulation cannot let its subjects gather in one place long enough to compare notes. So it distributes them across the city, keeps them moving at three kilometres per hour, and ensures that by the time they get home, they're too exhausted to question anything.

So the smartest people in the country are kept from discovering the Matrix by the fact that they have to be in a meeting at 10:30. (I hope my manager doesn't read this.)

But us jolly avengers with extra chutzpah, we still decided not to let the Matrix defeat us so easily. After all, we are engineering kids from IIT Guwahati. We stayed (read: frolicked, partied, LIVED) on a campus with lakes and hills and the Brahmaputra River right by our side, an overly saturated piece of heaven. We are creatures of the sun, the grass, the blue, blue sky.

Now where do you get grass in Bangalore? Cubbon Park!

But wait. The park closes at five p.m. Gurl, who is going to the park on a weekday before five? The logistics won't let me ever reach the park before five from the office. Yes. Bangalore's parks close at five, as though nature is a government office. The trees are available to the public on a schedule that assumes the public has no jobs. You're allowed to see them from your cab, which is the intended user experience.

They know if you experience too much nature, your system will dream of a green revolution, and the Matrix can't afford that.

I, on the other hand, still dream of a desk under a tree, and I swear to Lorde I would work ten hours a day happily if I'm offered that.

You cannot be a productive unit and a person at the same time. The city has chosen which one it needs you to be. You pay an obscene amount in rent to live in a city that offers the possibility of doing things.

Everyone is here for something that is supposed to happen later.

You're here for the job that will get you somewhere.

You're working towards the promotion that will let you live better.

You're living in the apartment you can afford until you can afford the apartment you want.

You're saving for the holiday that will compensate you for the work that prevents you from taking it.

You're waiting for the weekend, which disappears into traffic, errands, and recovery from the week.

You're waiting to feel settled. But the air hasn't settled into your lungs, and neither have you.

Bangalore has no present tense. You live in a lull.

After living here for a bit, with nothing making sense and people being okay with nothing making sense, I think this is what makes sense.

I live in the centre of the Matrix.



Linda Adel





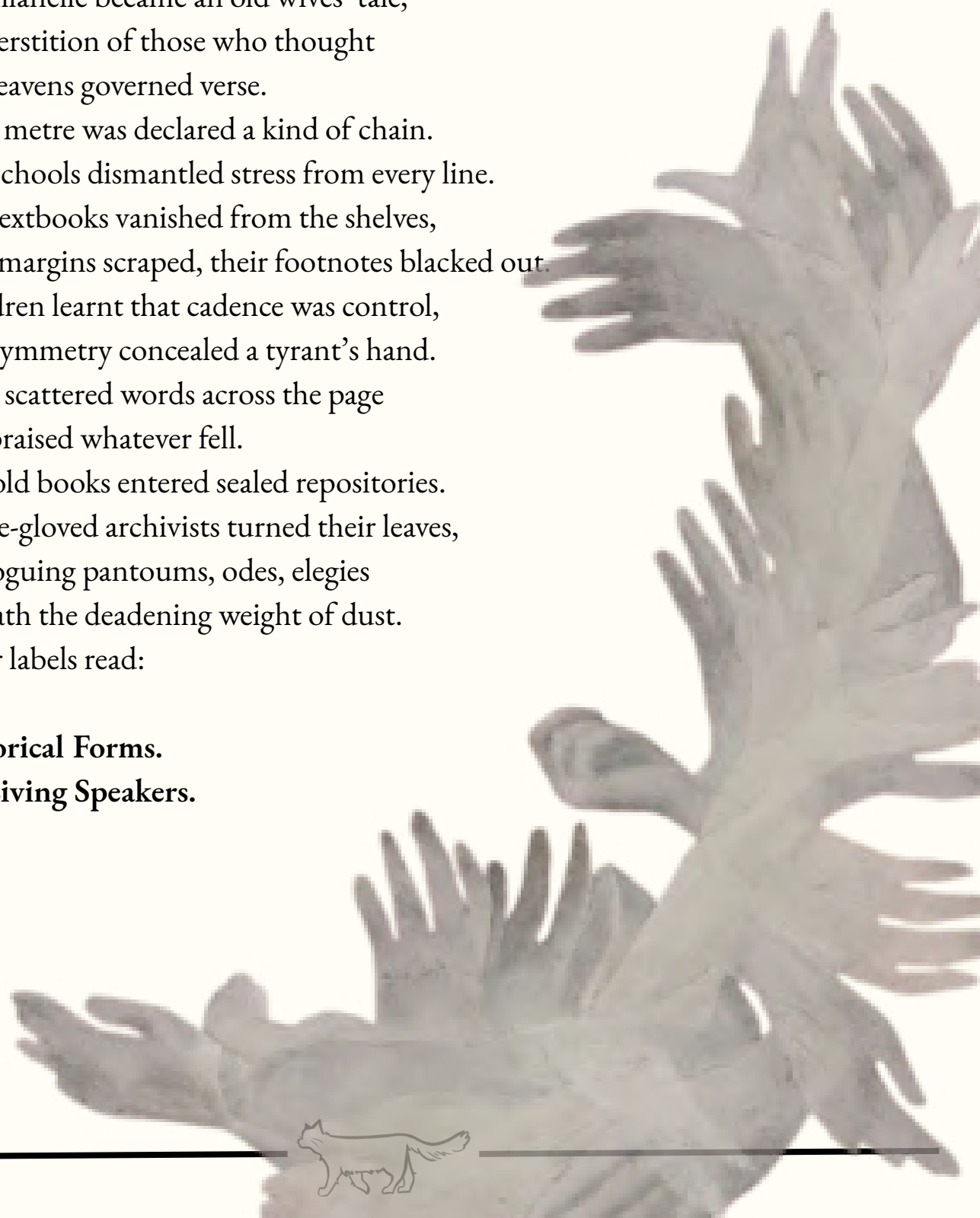


The Last Formalist

Natalie Harveld

They came for rhyme to begin with.
No one objected. Couplets fell
out of common speech; the sonnet went,
the villanelle became an old wives' tale,
a superstition of those who thought
the heavens governed verse.
Soon metre was declared a kind of chain.
The schools dismantled stress from every line.
Old textbooks vanished from the shelves,
their margins scraped, their footnotes blacked out.
Children learnt that cadence was control,
that symmetry concealed a tyrant's hand.
They scattered words across the page
and praised whatever fell.
The old books entered sealed repositories.
White-gloved archivists turned their leaves,
cataloguing pantoums, odes, elegies
beneath the deadening weight of dust.
Their labels read:

Historical Forms.
No Living Speakers.



Yet something passed beneath the shelves:
a line recalled, a rhythm kept in mind,
a rhyme that surfaced years after it was read,
a phrase that would not leave the tongue.
In cellars lit by one reluctant lamp,
a handful gathered after dark.
One kept the count upon her fingertips.
Another tapped the table for the beat.
The eldest spoke a line from memory;
the others answered with the next.
Outside, the city praised its formless age.
Inside, we practised the old architecture:
the measured foot, the turn, the answering rhyme.
We passed one triolet, copied out by hand,
until the page grew thin with faithful use
and every line was known by heart.
No one spoke of revolution.
We had another name for what we kept.
We called it poetry.

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