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MONOGRAPH

a student-led magazine for the arts

MONOGRAPH

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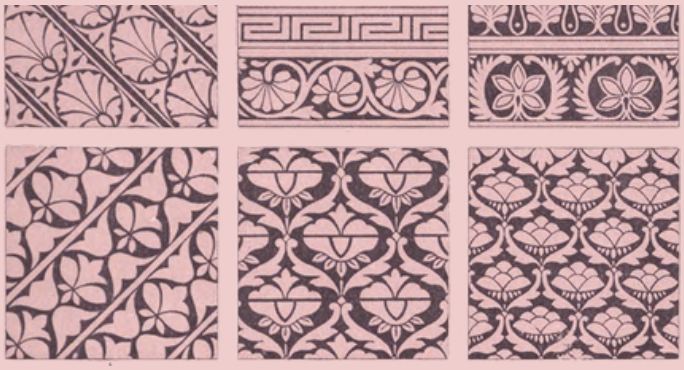
EDITOR'S NOTE



Insolence and innocence were twin sisters holding my clammy palms in an alien city, and I barely noticed which arm was getting tugged on as I stepped into the belly of the beast. A tongue I had detested for almost two decades of my life had begun to snake its way into my curses, seducing my static vocabulary into erasing from its pages little traces of home. *Arey bhai* soon became *arre yaar*, my larynx began to trade in soft phonetics for harsh, snappy rebuttals, and before I knew it, I sped through perfunctory greetings and highly emotional outbursts with all the warmth of a business transaction. This alien tongue, with its confusing gendered binaries, its history of imposition, its convoluted hegemony shrouded under the guise of unity had seeped into my skin; making holes in my arteries, slipping in and out of my peripheral vision in speeding autos, trying its best to remain in me. The best I could do was toss the rules of grammar out of the window, refusing to let my *talabya sha-s*, my countless inflections of *aw, aa, oo*, my sweet, sweet home to escape the cage it had belonged to even before teeth rose up like bars to shut it in place forever. First world problems, I know. The *real* problem lies in the fact that the custodians of this alien tongue have trained themselves to believe that a *golgappa* can compete with the *phuchka*.

Leaving one city for another can often feel like infidelity, especially when both cities refuse to ever let you stop falling in love. It's difficult to court two such tempestuous characters at once, with one turning her nose up at the mention of your new dalliance with freedom and clean metros, and the other scoffing at your nostalgia for broken monuments and *lebu cha*. There are moments when the marriage leaves you with a splitting headache -clearly not a quality unique to human relationships- and you nurse the hangover by browsing through your calendar, checking flight timings, making promises. You can never stop making promises to the cities that nurse you into adulthood, and the cities that embolden you enough to flash the middle-finger at catcalling passerbys. The alien tongue too, stops being alien after it's been around for a while, trying to secure citizenship in the realm of the soft vowels and music it once rebuked. The mild dread of return that follows home-coming takes a while to clear out from under your ribs, and once it's gone you look around for other ways to explain your discomfort away. Heady jargon you disdain splashes itself all over your feed, pinning down your ennui under labels that go viral for an audience robbed of critical thinking skills.

This February, Monograph turns to look at stories of migrations, homecoming and transition. I have been lucky enough to find a home for my wandering thoughts in these pages, and I hope you do too.

Ritobrita Mukherjee
Editor in Cheif

HOME IS WHERE THE—IS

AASTHA SINGH

home is where the heart is
and home is where the father who i cannot kill because he is the only one who brings us money
is
and home is where the mother who should have killed me because now i’m her Unsure Thing, and i do not know what to do with it
is

for two decades home remained the shape of
my father's cruel verbiage
my mother's wobbly smile
my brother's distant gaze
unmoving, careful, immobilizing at the same time

when home shifted strides, rocks beneath the feet
home became a litany of textbooks and assignments sheets

bringing with it tickets
to national museums
to mahesh dattani plays
to the delhi metro
to monuments with red-stoned walls

bringing with it
conversations with older women who size you up before they say
“you don't look like you're from delhi”
before they confess with a giggle that they, too, aren't from delhi
wondering if someone can really look like they're from delhi
and if trips to the book fair make you delhi-enough

bringing with it
thoughts that flip-flop between calling *dilli* a culture-less cult
and worshipping it for the messy amalgam of freaks it is

bringing with it
conversations with men who have known *dilli* longer than you have
telling you that this is the most polarized Delhi has ever been
looking at the city from the backdoor of your college campus,
you wonder if *dilli* can be taken away from you
by saffron-coloured men holding saffron flags
when it was never yours to begin with

finding delhi on walks to a nondescript park that could've been from anywhere
finding delhi in the shadowed shoulders of the people who are learning to call *dilli* their own for the very first time (kind of like you, but not really: delhi has never been on the periphery of their eyes and their mind)
finding delhi before it finds you first
finding delhi as if you invented it in your bedroom at the age of 12 and think incessantly of how it feels like to disappear in the delhi crowd
in crowds of men who dream, women who dream, and everyone who dreamt, and then never did again

HOMELAND

ANAM TARIQ

With all her uneven paths and unending homes,
soft strokes, gentle sways, skies, fields,
quiet holds, moulds: a beloved, haven, bubble.

The habit of hers that I'd fallen into,
or any habit,
craves constancy: soaking in the streets daily,
inhaling her imperceptibly pervading scent,
doing the routine every day,
and the same everyday routine,
all making me call her my own, my city, my homeland...

But just as parting ways with a beloved
leaves him just a man on another path,
cleaves the connection unfelt,
erases the traces of the previous journey,
a halt in the habit of my beloved,
the axing of the constancy makes her,
weirdly, just a land, some 350 km away.

Losing people, places, and things as you go (grow),
nothing in this world is yours (except your deeds)
to keep in your treasure chest forever.

HOME?COMING

ANEEK CHATTERJEE

All over the country, they call it Durga Puja. Here, it's just Pujo.

(I)

My head is in Dida's lap, her thin fingers digging into my scalp and oiling my hair. "Your hair is just like your dadu's. You'll not go bald young!" Dadu sat in his armchair beside her, watching a Test match on the TV, bouncing his feet in rhythm with the bowler's run-up.

"Tendulkar at the striker's end now."

But I was listening to Dida. And Dida was telling me about Pujo. About Pujo long before it was Pujo. Back when it wasn't after the monsoons (not autumn; we don't have flaming yellow-orange autumns with falling leaves here), but in the spring days before the summer sun peeked through the atmosphere.

"Not Durga Pujo, but Basanti Pujo. *Jokhon Choitro maashe Pujo hoto.*"

Our Bengali calendar was different, Dida would remind me, from the Gregorian the world followed. I listened to her voice, and Ravan abducted Sita, and Lotus-Eyed Ram readied his troops for war, and the cricket commentary droned on, and coconut oil was all I could smell, and Dida's fingers kneaded my scalp, and Ram prayed for guidance. He prayed to Durga, the Mother Goddess. Prayed for war and honour and love. He collected lotuses for the goddess, a hundred and eight sacred to her, and sat to worship her.

“And then?”

“The goddess hid away one lotus.”

“A scorching bouncer, oof. A hundred fifty clicks.”

Why? To test him of course. One hundred and eight was sacred. Now there were one hundred and seven.

“Tendulkar taking one to the chest now, he’s being pummelled here.”

“But Ram didn’t stop, right? He didn’t.”

He didn’t.

“How will the Little Master strike back!?”

There was war and honour and love at stake.

“Blimey he’s taking off his helmet! What’s gotten into him?”

“So Lotus-Eyed Ram hardened his will, notched an arrow in his bow, and turned the tip toward his own eye. His sight would suffice as substitute. A small sacrifice for war and honour and love.

“And Tendulkar smashes it over the bowler’s head! Six!”

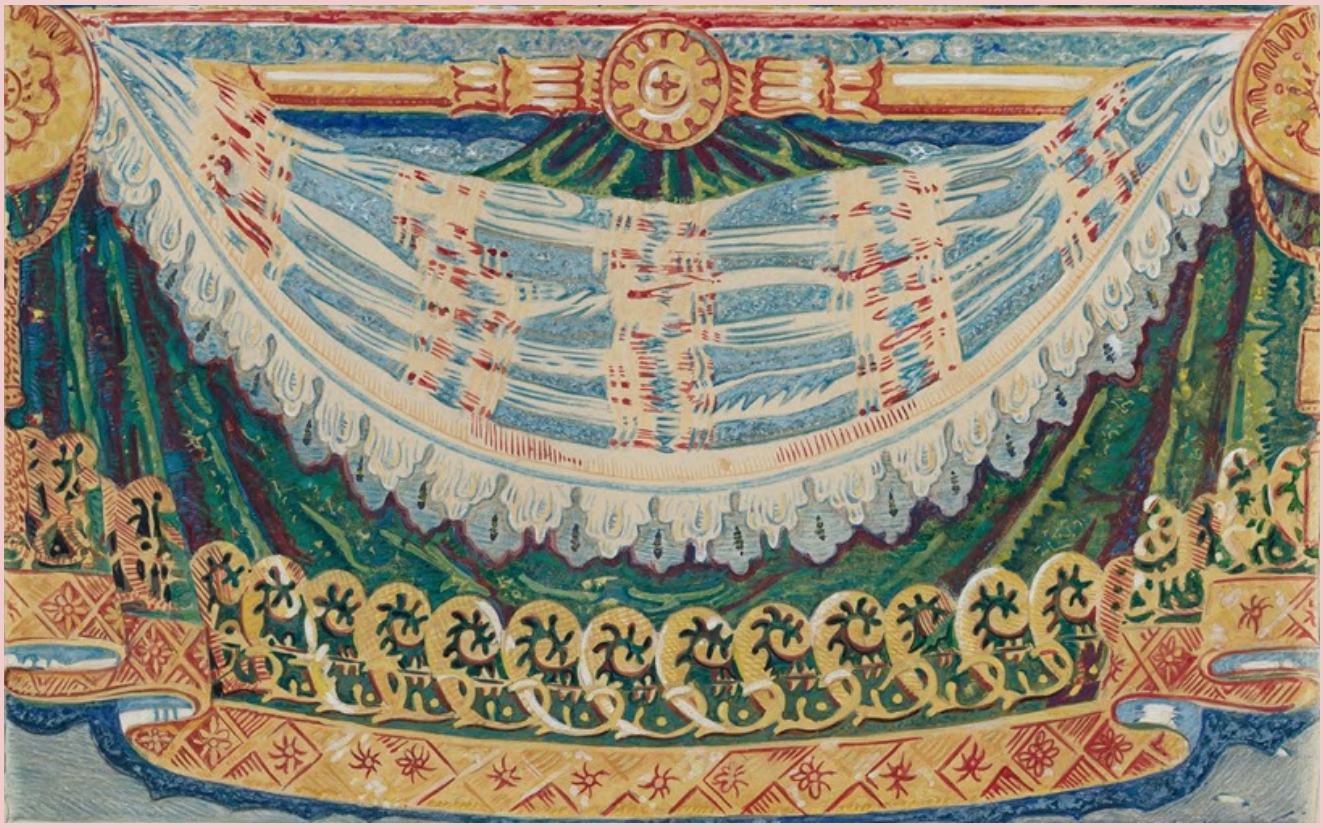
The arrow never touched him. Durga stopped its flight and revealed all. Stopped the arrow and blessed him.

Ram repeated his ritual repeated every monsoon after that, and the new Durga Pujo was born.

(II)

Dadu’s sister, my mom’s *pishi*, lived in North Kolkata. My seven-year-old self had decided her name was Pishi Dida, and so it had remained.

Pishi Dida’r *baarir pujo* was an event. Two days of Pujo every year were reserved for pujo at her house. Every year I measured myself against the idol, standing on tiptoes until I was scolded for being disrespectful and ordered to sit with the family – Dadu’s seven (seven!) siblings and *their* in-laws and children, and their in-laws and children, all under Pishi Dida’s roof (courtyard, rather. Old Bengali houses were built around a central *daalan* – the family gathered in the courtyard), sitting cross-legged in respectful silence as a priest performed the rites.



The house had no name, only an address in Hatibagan and an instruction – *"Down the alley beside the petrol pump and to the right."* There was barely enough space to park a car, even less for another to squeeze through without a scratch. The ground floor was leased out to a printing press, and the halls would be stacked to the roof with bundles of funny-smelling white paper. The house and the press became one and the same, Bani Press, frameworks for the imaginations of running children who weren't allowed onto the roof and could run only in the *daalan* and its adjacent halls. *Bani Press*. Two days of Pujo every year at Bani Press.

The lunch never changed — *khichuri* with *jhuri aloo bhaja* ("French Fries are an abomination" was a usual refrain of Pishi Dida's), *mishti doi* for dessert and *paan* for the grown-ups. There was always a cup of ice cream in the fridge for me though. Strawberry and vanilla, two-in-one. She knew me too well.

I slept in her lap each year after lunch, her septuagenarian siblings chatting and having sweet paan while she listened and absent-mindedly stroked my hair. "Your hair is just like your dadu's." I always loved hearing that.

"And Tendulkar is out! The Little Master has his stumps cleaned up; he departs with 86 to his name."

Dadu passed away in 2020. I didn't watch a Test match again for years.

Bani Press, crumbling down, was sold to a developer in 2021.

My childhood vanished before I could outgrow the idol. I don't even remember my last Pujo there.

(III)

We lived near Deshapriya Park. It used to be a quiet neighbourhood. Even during Pujo, it was never *that* crowded. If such a concept could ever exist in Kolkata. The Park committee's *pandal* was never the biggest nor the flashiest. The crowds would flock to nearby Tridhara, perennially pleasing, artistically authentic and a regular in the "*Top 10 Pandals in Kolkata this Pujo!*" headlines.

Then in 2016, they made the largest pandal ever. An eighty-foot-tall idol of Durga. I didn't even have to enter the park, didn't need to leave my house, I could see it from my bedroom window some two hundred metres away.

Two thousand sixteen. The year everything changed. Deshapriya Park became the hottest spot in town. Footfall boomed exponentially, nearly ten times as many police and traffic forces were deployed, roads were blocked off and bamboo barricades erected to manage the crowd. To no avail. They'd closed off three of the five park gates, keeping only one entry and one exit. The crowds stampeded. Many were hurt.

Pujo was never the same after that.

Our street was closed off every year with the same bamboo barricades meant for *pandal*-visiting crowds. Advertisers saw profit in the residents' pain – the barricades became billboards, and the streets disappeared from our balconies. We were issued barely effective resident passes and required to show them each time we tried to enter the street, but still denied entry by traffic volunteers too busy to look at them but not too busy to stop us from entering our homes.

They never made an idol that large ever again; they didn't need to; Deshapriya was on the map now. Jewellers' sponsorships and sales of VIP passes skyrocketed. Local politicians became bigger icons than the goddess herself, their hands in pots more numerous than her mere ten and their handshakes far more influential. Pujo became a not-so-slow show of capitalism and corporatisation, a constant churn of Very Important Persons. Come September every year, the old facades would be covered, and posters and billboards would sweep over the city. A plague of advertisement. The monsoons were supposed to cleanse the city.

Maa aashchhen. What was ever the point?

Maa aashchhen. Would she even recognise home?

(IV)

There is a phrase in our Bengali. *"Ami aashchhi."*

Translate it literally and you'd interpret it as "I'm coming." You'd be falling short.

"Ami aashchhi." I'll come again. A substitute for goodbye. *"Until next time. Until we meet again."* No matter time, no matter space, no matter memory or speech. Our bond will remain, until we meet again.

(V)

It takes Maa weeks to reach the plains, far below the peaks where she resides; it takes her weeks but we prepare for months. The artisanal hub of Kumartuli is abuzz with activity from July itself. *"Maa aashchhen"*, but first, she must be reborn, in the minds of the artisans, in the iconography of their imaginations, in the dim workshops of the sculptors and painters, in the alleyways where divinity and humanity blur.

In Kumartuli, the artisans have been working for centuries. Generations have come and gone in worship of the goddess. But there's an urgency now, a desperation that wasn't there before. Make more, make faster. Orders pour in from all over. The city longs for its goddess, hungers even.

In Kumartuli, divinity is reduced to the material. Hay, bamboo, clay, paint. The idols take shape, but they're lifeless. Grey eyes, blind and unseeing. Until the eldest of the artisans steps up. Only the eldest, and no one but, paints in the idol's eye. Fingertips holding a paintbrush, moving with the surety of decades. And immediately afterwards, bowed heads. The material, imbued with divinity.

Dadu's voice, soft with reverence – *"Maa'r prothom nishshaash."* Her first breath. This is where Pujo begins.

(VI)

Takin' a drive, I was an ideal.
Looked so alive, turns out I'm not real.
Just something you paid for.
What was I made for?

As if a troubled conscience wasn't enough. Billie Eilish sings on the stereo.

I was seventeen when I left Kolkata. I am eighteen when I return. For Pujo. What that Pujo would even look like? I'm not keen to find out.

An endless sea of red brake lights. Blaring horns. Impatient. Angry. As if the city itself is screaming. The smell of *khichuri* feels like a distant dream. Now it's just exhaust fumes and the sour stench of sickly ambition.

I barely remember quieter streets. Before Pujo became a contest. Before tree branches had to be cut off so bigger and bigger idols could be transported down the streets. Before greed and ego overshadowed worship and ritual. Before devotion became secondary to this performance in capitalism.

"Ami aashchhi." I'll come again. But to what? This isn't the homecoming I imagined. The traffic crawls forward. I'm going nowhere. Stuck between memories and a home I can't recognise.

Pishi Dida's voice, cracking with age but warm with affection the last time I met her in her new flat. "Ki re, when did you get so tall? Remember when you couldn't even reach Maa's feet?" I'd nodded, smiled, hugged her tightly, but not replying, not trusting my voice. How could I tell her that I felt smaller now than I ever did back then, that my shoulders slumped and voice cracked, that the goddess loomed larger each year, heavier not by the gold she was adorned with but by the memories she carried?

"Ami aashchhi." I can't recognise home, and it only took me a decade.

Pishi Dida's *Pujo*, Dadu's *Pujo*, Dida's *Pujo*, my *Pujo* – each a different face of the same goddess. Each generation's icon, shaped by their hands, their hopes, their hungers. What will Maa look like when my children call her name? Where would it all end? In *pandals* with VIP passes? In streets choked with traffic and ambition? In the mortals we shake hands and exchange money with? Or the idols we worship on bended knees and bowed heads? The memories I run from, the fading traditions we cling to, even as the world changes around us?

"Maa aashchhen." What does she come to? She's the centrepiece of our calendar, we plan our year around her – new clothes, new prayers, vacations and the ever-expensive flight and train tickets. Icons change, don't they? Like the clay of Kumartuli, moulded and remoulded each year. An icon not trapped in amber, but evolving beyond recognition.

Perhaps that's the true nature of icons – not static idols, but living, breathing entities that change as we do. Maybe she comes each year not just to be worshipped, but to witness our transformation. Maybe, just maybe, that's the point of it all.

"Ami aashchhi." Maa says it as she leaves, promising return. We say it as we grow, promising remembrance. The city says it as it changes, promising continuity. It's not goodbye, never goodbye. It's a tale across time, binding us to what we were, what we are, what we will be.

Faces, flashes, sights, spaces. The promise of eternal return. Words. Memory. Icons galore. And I don't have to choose.

HOME AWAY FROM HOME

RAJSHREE DIYA

“Where are you from?” a question that I would delay answering because I have no idea what to say, where multiple identities have built over the course of my life in the many places I have lived. What about the place that I was born, what is my association?

“Chennai.” is what I say followed by the numerous questions of whether I know this place-that place or where I lived or where I studied, which is interjected by my saying “I was just born here. I haven’t lived here much.” The city drew me to its air twice in a span of one year, its remnants from my memory.

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The first time was to spend the weekend in my birthplace city (or madras as many, including I still say). My visit had been postponed for the past 11 years making it a dream for me to visit my city. Upon landing at Chennai Central Station, my sketchy memory geographically located the station as I went, *"Oh! I remember this!"*. Was Chennai still the same as I knew it before? That's all the memory I had (a brief time) adding some of the streets I roamed in the name of buying candy, going to the park, the beach, or something else.

The second time, was on my solo journey from Pondicherry to Chennai where for 5 hours, I took ownership of the AC three tier upper berth and refused to come down. *“You will travel through the sea side, do see that!”*, paati (my grandmother), a voracious traveller remarked when I had told her of my journey. In my fate, I travelled within the land and hence my reasons to step down the berth was not needed till I reached Egmore station.

Stepping foot again in a space that once belonged to me and still does, does not feel the same anymore. Maybe that is why the majority don’t come back to a place that once belonged to them. Is it the fear of losing the originality or the image in your head? Did I create sketchy memories that pieced my imagination, experiences with filler moments? An ideal image I had created in regards to the years of rehearsal of how I left Chennai.

Amma remarked over the old street and the yellow building where we resided once, followed by the photo studio, “*Konica*” where a photo of me as a baby was taken. Streets that once were a daily routine became a lost address. Passing by Marina Beach on the driveway, the air smelt of fish and salt, glimpses of boats, and shack shops. I remembered some of them.

With what expectations did I enter the city where an auto anna stopped traffic for me to cross the road? Where they would request with politeness to cross the road if it was a one way road, or stop on the side and apologise if they went too harsh on the road.

Studying literature gave a way to understand the many complexities; *“Bumboat Cruise"* by Miriam Wei Wei Lo, who explains the alienating feeling of going back to one's home town. I had been away from my so-called *“home”* as Emily Dickenson mentions in her work *"I years had been from home"*, a melancholy I feel not knowing what was left the way I left it, for that materially belonged to me. As many say and Miriam denotes how she is treated like a tourist in her own place due to the language. Similarly, my identity gets mistaken for something else till I speak Tamil; the face of surprise still gets me as I question what characteristic hides my identity whenever I see myself in the mirror. The metro stations looked like an infrastructure building, at towering heights, reminding me whether Federico Garcia Lorca was nearby as he mentioned in *“City that Does Not Sleep”*.

Besant Nagar Beach, a home to my wild personality, the beach baby in me, welcomed me with a warm hug with its sand, moonlight glistening on the soft waters crashing that would rise up to the heightened shore, battling each wave with foams. The salty air seeped into my frame and feet, where my hair was ridden with salt that gave the perfect beach waves and on my skin that felt grainy as I would smack my lips.

However, it wasn't the same as how I remembered; I remember going with plastic buckets and shovels with snacks. Settling in the beach's shell ridden sands I would make castles or watch people pass by for hours till the sunset began to set; a beach quiet like its nature. While leaving, I walked through the shops having simple old games like ring throwing on simple things, having parrots that read your future, and balloon shooting showed a life I am far away from, detached, and realised that I am a stranger in my own city.

Shopping was my motive, if nothing, one good traditional saree or cloth material for stitching. On our way, amma located where she and appa met because I keep questioning where they met over instances where either would remark dumb things; such a nineties thing to meet at a bus stand, no? And a temple which I remembered from my faint memory.

“I'll take you to pondi bazaar, sundari silks, pothys, nallis, let's go to Edens. I'll show you all we did not see last year.”, amma further remarked, planning out a day after my arrival from Pondicherry.

Sundari silks held the magic of an old world architecture and a quiet ambience with a possible filter coffee somewhere in the corner that kept it hidden from the city outside, all encapsulated within the sarees.

“I want those old pattern saree, the traditional types that possibly our paatis used to wear.” I stated my request to the staff and they looked at me with surprise. *“Those designs we don't get anymore ma’am. It's very rare. It's a bit unusual to know that people, especially of your age do still like these designs.”*

Possibly what lost the traditionality of weaves, patterns, borders and designs? Was it modernity, the idea to level up to the current standard of trends, like a thermal receipt print that loses its ink that fades away with time? Was it the years of care, the rigorous wearing that made the saree I own soft, like the people’s nature who dressed in them? Did I mimic people? Or merely was it simplicity, the idea of having time to slow down for people, just like the saree with minimal designs or majestic border or simply for the idea of functionality?

Close by was Usman Road, where amma denoted the many shops. One by one, I could see the madness amongst the crowd because of the present metro construction. Sarees have always given me contentment, there's some magic in the colours that gives a sense of beauty that makes me realise how far away I am from my tradition. Traditional sarees that amma or paati wear interest me more. Nalli Chinnasami Chetty on Nageswaran Rao Road / T. Nagar opened its doors like an old building with hidden treasure; wooden chairs, glass sliding shelves, small hidden ways to other fabrics, sarees and cloth materials with a musty smell. Dim lighting and time ticking slowly, I could find what I came for just like the last time; 11 years ago with nothing changed.

It's with what shock amma stood in the middle of her seeing those covering jewellery from the street shops, when the vendor lady remarked that pondi bazaar does not have the street shops anymore. *“That’s what I wanted to show her! She was a baby at that time!”*, amma chided as the lady looked to the road opposite of her barricaded with the metro sign boards. The creation of immortal memories of places we believe that will not change, to suddenly vanish from our eyes, a melancholy had struck. Just like how Mylapore slowly whispered to me, *“the hospital you were born in does not exist anymore.”*

The city had changed, just like me. However, some things do not change. With yellow autos, playing songs of Ilaiyaraaja & SPB from movies like Mouna Ragam, Thalapathy, and more that I grew up upon, the city is an eminent piece of fragility like e.e. cummings states. Where nostalgia is nestled away in pockets, alleys, buildings, transportation, amongst people and within the city itself.

72 hours, the longest record I have been, Chennai on a short notice was like reaching to the edge of the beach where the water kisses the toes, recedes back leaving a child-like awaitment for the next wave. And I hope to see you more before I lose the memories of what you meant. And just like that Chennai, *naan poitu varen* (I will go and return).

UNTITLED

IFRAH FATIMA

Cantonment, Varanasi, circa 2008

I call it the Big Flood. The ebbing Varuna never forgets to assert her importance. Assi demands to be seen, she leaves high-water marks on tall temples. Ganga passes the city by. The might of her quietness gives the city its *wajood*, while the roaring anger of the other two crushes it like a tightly closed fist, giving it its name- and its narrow alleys. The story of Banares has been told by many. This is how I see it-

Jheeni jheeni beeni chadariya.

Many threads come together to weave a city. I believe the most humane definition of a city emerges when its geographical borders begin to blur. Varanasi is its vendors, its muddy alleys, its cows, its temples, its riverside, its *tamatar chaat*, the JHV Mall, and its weavers.

Our cantonment house flooded once. The guest room had a *sheesham* sofa, imported from some faraway land. I never liked how poor it looked. Others had foam couches. Since Mumma received it as part of her wedding dowry, I had to bear with the tarnished, tokenised comfort it carried.

It survived the Big Flood. It followed us until 2024. The bedroom in that house stood on a raised platform; the water filled everything else. The rest of the house was loved, not chosen. The morning after the flood, my elder brother and I began our de-watering adventure. We grabbed utensils of all shapes and sizes and hurled the excess water out.

The city was forsaken in a hurry. Although the brain tries to erase the images of the disrupted 18 years I spent in the city, and succeeds to a great extent, whenever I'm in a gathering and my friends talk about their childhood cities and the memories tied to them, I find myself thinking of Varanasi: how it stayed back after recess, waiting for me to switch off the classroom lights- how it loved me, but never chose me.

Vasundhra Enclave, New Delhi, circa 2010

Varanasi's submerged memories echo the similar longing to belong in the Delhi of my adolescence. Every weekend, we used to visit each other's houses. There was always something to show off. New toys from our fathers' foreign trips. Sparkly toothpaste. New skates. Bracelets.

My father lived in another city, and my mother worked full-time. The house I lived in wasn't mine; it belonged to my grandparents. The only dread in my young life at that time was the approaching weekend, when everyone would come to my place.

I thought about buying a toy from the local market, just to have something, anything, to shroud my naked shame. I invented stories about vacations that never happened. I laid on my back and stared at the ceiling. It seemed high, distant, almost achievable.

Sunday. The doorbell rang. I flinched. I told my grandmother that my friends had come to play. All I could do was hope they would leave quickly and brace myself for the inevitable gossip about how boring my life is.

We talked for a bit. Then my grandmother asked to meet them. We sat in a circle around her in her room. They were captivated by her- spellbound, unable to move. It was the longest they had ever stayed at a friend's house.

Next weekend, they want to come again.

My foreign trips and fancy toys were right there, within the cracks of Delhi's concrete- in a person.

Dalibagh, Lucknow, 2021

Ye khamosh mizaji tumhe jeene nahi degi. Iss daur mein jeena hai toh kohram machana hoga.

I don't write when I miss her. When I miss her, I just miss her.

I write when I'm afraid I might forget her.

When I was a child, she took me on a trip. She led me through the alleys of Purvanchal, into the homes of distant relatives, some I hadn't even known existed.

To truly stay present, to live life fully, you have to find your way back to people. You have to listen to their stories.

For the first time, I packed my own luggage. I organised my thoughts the way I folded my clothes into the attaché. I eavesdropped on hushed conversations- people whispering that she was mad.

That's when I learned: in a patriarchal world, the declaration of a woman's madness carries more weight than any clinical diagnosis. The world quickly discredits her by declaring she is crazy. This reflects a common pattern of society, where women who speak out are often dismissed as mentally unstable, a symbol of how female rebellion is pathologised- *madwoman in the attic*. Declaring a woman mentally unfit is often a major step in silencing her resistance.

I remember her today. My thoughts about my grandmother are scattered, elusive, veiled, and always evolving. And the only way they find form is through small fragments like this.

She was a woman who taught me things- like detangling your hair from the bottom up to avoid breakage, or always keeping the zip of your attaché on top so you don't have to bend every time you need something. She taught me to fold back the end of a roll of cello tape so it wouldn't disappear when I needed it next. To wrap someone else's money in a folded piece of paper and write their name on it, so it's safe, and so they know it was respected.

This time, grief managed to end up in the seepage of the wall. Now, even oxygen came at a price, paid for with your hope. Lucknow had to be abandoned now.

New High Court, Lucknow, circa 2025

‘I have made my commitments now.

This is one: to stay where I am,

As others choose to give themselves

In some remote and backward place.

My backward place is where I am.’

-Nissim Ezekiel, *Background, Casually.*

I found myself crawling back to Lucknow again, to the place where my people lived. I see my father standing alone on the balcony. I don’t usually intrude on his contemplative silence. Sometimes, though, I do.

Men should be left alone, sometimes. Left to sit with their thoughts, to confront their actions, to settle into their emotions, to flow with them, to reconcile with what they find within. For a moment, just a moment, men should be allowed to be women.

The onyx tiles here are sleek, reflective surfaces. They don’t absorb you the way old cemented floors do.

We have foam couches in teal colour. The sheesham sofa was sold a few months ago.

My cities are my rooms, and I have lost their keys. Only stories remain, like keyholes, offering hopeful glimpses into these rooms of my past.

FEVERISH SIBLINGS

ABIGAIL CAIN

Jeanie and I were coal miners
playing pirates in the Gilded Age.
We were full of fantastical feasts and
parrot feather hats and freshly scrubbed boots.

Jeanie and I drew on ourselves with soot
and thought maybe we could be painters.
We were full of tickling brush strokes and
wooden frames and murky paint water.

Jeanie and I twirled around
and thought we could be ballerinas.
We were full of blisters and glitter
and face powder.

Jeanie and I jumped between cities,
around the trains and through various
orchards. We ate apples and sucked in
the sweet juice.

Jeanie and I jumped on beds,
we let our heads gently touch low rise
ceilings and painted white rooms maroon
with traces of our blood.

Jeanie and I declared the only rules
were that we slept hip to hip to absorb
each other's feverish sweat. Were that we
cut each other's hair and kept it in lockets around necks.

Jeanie and I collected praying mantis arms

and carried them to the altars in run
down, rotting, wooden churches. We lit
candles and danced gently for them.

Jeanie and I tried to summon

Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds in the
counterculture. We were anti-war hippies
in short skirts living from a van.

Jeanie and I tried to fish

out all the spotted red darters
of the North American rivers,
where we choked on worms and flopped on shores together.

Jeanie and I once milked cows

in pastures in 2010. We
drank it straight from the uterus
and the calf laughed at us when we gagged.

Jeanie and I died

on a spaceship with aliens in
the year 2089. We were sucked dry
of blue blood and more beautiful things
like the red ribbon of our necklaces.

Jeanie and I sat

in the dark of purgatory,
where we played hopscotch in
our minds because God found out
we were once angels.

THE SOFTNESS OF REMEMBERING HOME FROM COLLEGE AFTER SCHOOL

LUNGMYING LEPCHA

We are living in an era where home has become less of a sanctuary and more of a stopover town, where even vacations have deadlines. For a student like me, preparing to study within the same state, the journey between college and home is shared not just by my own experiences, but also by the stories shared by friends. Time, after school, begins to glide past almost unnoticed. The place we once called home no longer responds to us with the same warmth. Instead, it greets us with a fleeting sense of urgency as if whispering, *"This will end soon."*

And it does.

I used to wonder why my older cousins would complain about not having enough holidays to return home, even when they had the freedom to live away. But now, I understand. The longing to return home lasts only for a few years until we're back again for work. Yet, even then, something feels different, as if someone has taken a blunt pair of scissors and severed the threads of childhood. The cut is dull, but it loosens everything: memories, feelings, ties.

"Busy" is the word that echoes in everyone's mind, but often it's not busyness at all; it's a quiet kind of laziness wrapped in self-imposed isolation. Over the past few days, I've been meeting my school friends, many of whom are leaving for colleges in other cities. Listening to their stories of routines, lifestyle shifts, and academics, I've noticed a pattern. Almost all of them say that once their priorities change, they return home mainly to meet old friends and pick up conversations as though they were never interrupted.I, too, am caught in a tsunami of emotions, memories of school days flooding in, leaving me stranded on unstable ground where each step forward feels uncertain. Life after school truly feels like a turning point. The brief pause before college is a time to catch up on family moments; a temporary pause before separation becomes oddly comforting, and adulthood turns into a responsibility we must accept. But what matters, in the end, is the bond we choose to hold on to, the ones we nurture and rekindle with shared memories that last a lifetime. As my hometown, Sikkim, undergoes rapid urban development with tighter spaces, rising temperatures, and lifestyle upgrades, I can't help but reflect. The place that once felt like a refrigerator now seems like it may soon need a ceiling fan.

These are the words we carry with us, soft, honest captures of a time and place I will always call home.

BENT SHAPES

KEVIN DANIEL SHEEPERS

In his dreams all circles were ovals,
inner critic was inaudible—
false calibrations could be adjusted.

In his dreams he carried an invisible camera,
and took incredulous polaroids
of those no longer with us.

Disfigured paradise,
diaphanous white-blue like leftover clouds—
thick, brumous smoke, thin walls.

There's a false widow that lives
in the corner of my room,
perfidious shadows move on their own,
these are not his dreams.

BETWEEN 4 AND 7

JENNIFER FREYA HELGESON

Jan:
I write at odd hours,
when the house is still
and I am not.
Thanks for not asking
why.
I've learned insects hold the world together—
ugly, vital things.
Like truths we avoid
but live with.

Jan:
I'll come softly,
no orchids, no talk of illness—
just reflections,
and maybe
steamed broccoli.

Jan:
Some memories return
in the scent of warm earth,
or the sound
of someone saying
my name without hurry.

Jan:
I'll be there,
between 4 and 7.
No more,
no less—
and that will be enough.

Sebastian:
I slept well last night.
The new meds help.
Small victories
feel like
miracles.
Come at 4.
Leave by 7.
Time matters differently
now

Sebastian:
The grapefruit seed grows
indoors.
Strange,
what we choose
to keep alive.

Sebastian:
I don't look back much.
The past is planted—
what matters now
is what still
grows.

SUMMERS ON THE ROOFTOP

ISHA ARORA

The ceiling fan sliced the air like a helicopter. We sat beneath it, dipping chapattis in hot dal despite the balmy day. Summer in India was the moment a seesaw was suspended in the air—when the future felt as bright as the sun shone during the days. This summer, however, wouldn't be the same. Nothing would ever feel the same on this suspended, unmoving seesaw.

"How is everything going in London?" Jagdev Uncle interrupted my thoughts.

"Yeah, it's going well," I said by default.

"Good, good. A career in drama." He pursed his lips and nudged his eyebrows upwards. "Where have you been acting?"

I cleared my phlegmy throat, "Mostly on the West End. I have been in some commercials as well."

"She is very busy nowadays," my nani was thrilled, "I barely see my beta anymore." Just before her fingers pinched my cheek, I turned sideways.

"Good, good." Uncle had a penchant for repetitive phrases. "Not everyone gets to do what they enjoy." The faces on the table dimmed as if light were vacuumed from the sky, encasing us in darkness. "I feel sorry for the Magoons. Did you hear what happened? I don't know how much they told you." He nudged his head towards Ma and Nani.

I did hear what happened. "No, what happened?" I feigned a composed, yet curious expression.

"Surya, their son, took his life. He was in his final year of mechanical engineering." Uncle's voice was nonchalant.

"I still remember how shocked his parents were," Ma added lamentfully. "They barely spoke to anyone after. He wasn't the only case last year; we heard of others on the news. Do you remember Surya?" Ma looked at me, and I hoped the pools of water swelling within my eyes didn't reveal too much.

"Vaguely." I had, however, seen Sunny many times during the past few summers in Panipat. I never forgot the day Sunny's roommate called. His wavering voice came through the phone after a long pause. He used the word dead. Not passed away, or gone, or no more. The word was a cymbal struck beside my ear. I called Sunny mine because I thought we were a whole at one moment in time—like a cell before mitosis. When I heard he was gone, I felt a part of my insides had been run through a shredder.

"You played together when you were kids, but I don't think you've seen much of each other after that," Ma added. She thought she knew me, turned inside out. I looked at the empty plates around the table, relieved lunch had come to an end.

"I could take a nap." Uncle burped brazenly. "Do you nap after lunch?" He asked me like I was still a ten-year-old child.

"I've never really felt the need." Although nowadays, sleep has never found its way to me, even as the sky turned midnight blue.

"You should take naps after lunch," Jagdev Uncle said comically. I became five years old. Never suffering, susceptible to any sliver of advice. I nodded submissively as Ma, Nani, and Uncle left for their rooms.

Once everyone was out of sight, I got up from the deserted table, my chair grinding the floor beneath with a shrill. I was compelled to go outside despite the humid air. With each careful step up the terracotta stairs, I reached the cement-floored roof displaying what little there was to see of Panipat. I gazed over the ledge, remembering the spot I stood on with every bit of my body.

The grooves on the rooftop floor were filled with puddles of water. Scant renovations throughout the years left a swamp on the roof even after a drizzle. Despite that, I enjoyed coming up every morning when the air was still tepid. I placed my elbows on the ledge, staring at the broken streets and zooming cars. Although the roof was always silent, the sound of footsteps splashing in puddles travelled towards me.

Surya Magoon was soon standing by my side.

I had only seen glimpses of Surya for the past many summers—ever since kids stopped playing and began to wallow in their own homes. I looked at those familiar chocolate eyes. My heart couldn't help but flutter.

"Is it okay if I stay here?" Surya's voice was mellow.

"Yes...I don't need the whole roof." I smiled, and he returned the expression with dimples chiseled deep into his cheeks.

"I'm Surya, by the way." He extended his hand towards me. I grasped it, flummoxed. He didn't seem to remember who I was, despite the summers we spent as kids.

"Ananya," I whispered.

"Oh, Ani!" He exclaimed, and I blushed. "Oh, wow," he muttered. I saw his face turn a shade of pink. "You're all grown up."

"So are you!" I laughed. He joined in my mirth as our hands were still within a firm grasp. I could imagine my fingers interlaced with his, but the thought made my heart pound so hard, I dropped my arm to my side.

"Where are you based these days?" Sunny asked as we both stared at the cloudless sky.

"I'm in London," I beamed towards him.

"Oh wow, are you studying there?" There was a longing inside him, as his silky voice curdled ever so slightly.

"Yes, I am. I'm studying…musical theatre," I felt shy uttering those words in Panipat.

He raised his eyebrows. "Your parents are okay with it?"

"It took some convincing, but they eventually realised it was the only thing I wanted to do."

"That's great to hear." He pressed his hand on my back, and my heart was in a frenzy. "How long are you staying here?"

"A couple more weeks," I said to my dismay.

"That's not very long."

"Not at all." I was deflated. As I looked at Sunny, I eagerly memorised his face. The few acne pits left from his childhood, the bridge of his nose, and his crooked front teeth. London was my dream, but at that moment, I wanted to stay in Panipat forever.

My fingers lay bare on the stained ledge. I was all alone on the rooftop. For the first time since coming to India for the summer, I allowed myself to weep, unafraid the cries would travel down to the streets where children ran barefoot and dogs barked sonorously.

Sunny came to the rooftop every morning that summer, and so did I. I wore my pastel frocks that showed more bare skin than Nani could handle. She, fortunately, never caught me as I slipped out well before the crack of dawn and returned before anyone would stir in their beds.
Although he tried to hide it, Sunny's eyes sparkled every time I reached the top of the terracotta stairs. Hugs morphed into tender morning kisses on the rooftop as the sky was tainted orange and yellow.

As we held each other on the bench with a view of Panipat and its worn-out features, I asked Sunny if we could lie down in the garden below. He said I didn't live in this small town, so I might not have known, but distasteful gossip and unsolicited thoughts on young love echoed down every hallway and street. It wasn't like that everywhere, but it was at Nani's place. So, Sunny and I remained in love on the rooftop. If I'd known there weren't many summers with Sunny, I never would have left.

After another year of singing and dancing in London, I was back in Panipat, heading to the rooftop. Although it had been a year since I visited Nani's home, Sunny and I were always in touch. I was jittery to see him all the way up the steps.

Sunny was staring out in the distance with stubble across his face. Despite his worn eyes, he was elated as I approached the top of the staircase.

"You look beautiful." He meant that with all his heart, and I planted a firm kiss on his cheek.

"How have you been?" I asked as we lay down on a paisley blanket.

"I'm fine." I tightened my grip on his hand, sensing the sorrow beneath those flimsy words.

"Is everything okay?" While I chased my dream, Sunny spent countless hours perusing through heavy textbooks that didn't pique his interest. All the while, he would deface the pages with cartoons. I had seen many of those drawings, always surprised by what he could do with a pencil and the scarce margins of a textbook.

"If you don't want to be an engineer, why don't you just say something to your parents?" I added that when Sunny continued to stare into space.

His sharp eyes then sliced at me in despair. "I'm sorry," I said, immediately fumbling for the correct thing to say. I knew better. He didn't have a choice. Magoon Uncle said Sunny would be an engineer, and so he would be. I tried to diffuse his tension, "Remember, it's two more years of studying. Only two. And just because you studied engineering doesn't mean you can't do something else later..." I trailed off as Sunny's face remained still. "What can I do?" I propped up onto my elbow. Without so much as a shuffle from him, I placed warm, ticklish kisses onto Sunny's face. He laughed and pulled me into his chest.

The hot air disappeared as heavy rain droplets fell from the sky. I plopped onto the floor, unencumbered by the dirt that would stain my dress. I craved the paisley blanket Sunny brought for us each time we met in our special place. Although I longed to ask Magoon Uncle for the blanket, he would never know why Ananya, a girl his son had only played with as a child, would mourn Surya so deeply.

Thick beads of rain fell from the sky on the first day I met Sunny during the summer of my graduation. We clung onto each other, unwilling to move. I could sense everything was about to change.

“I was thinking,” Sunny started as his forehead rested against mine, “of applying for some illustration courses in London.

Once I complete my degree, I don’t see why I can’t pursue something I want to do.”

“That sounds amazing.” My excitement had no bounds. I always thought I would move to India for him, but the possibility of Sunny coming to London was too good to be true. “I think you’d be great at illustration.”

He grinned, and I pressed a finger into one of his dimples—that always made him laugh. “You think?” he said.

“Have you spoken to your dad?” I asked eagerly.

“Not yet, but he seems to be in a good mood these days, for a change. He might agree to this.” He held me by my waist and we twirled, drenched and stuck together for infinity. “I can’t wait till we’re both in London,” he said.

“I can’t wait either.” It was one of the best days on the rooftop.

Hope was a fickle thing. It disappeared faster than it came. It could disappear over a single phone call. Unwillingly, I returned home, dripping water into a living room where everyone was wide awake.

After a long look, Jagdev Uncle asked, “Why are you all wet?”

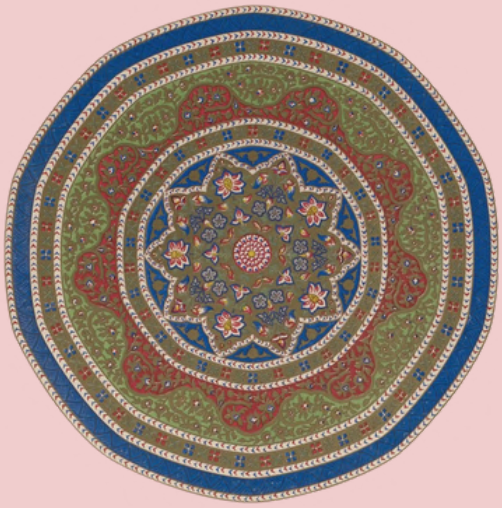
“I went for a walk and it started to rain,” I said while rushing to my bedroom.

“Hold on, let me get you a towel first.” Nani skittered towards the cupboard to pull out a paisley-patterned one. “Is this okay?” she asked.

“This will do.” I grabbed the towel, unable to say anything more.

THE MORNING CARS

GONZALO REVELLO



No one explains the rules well
No one says anything
I just give directions, nod,
say such a thing, as if it were so
I'm part of the game
I dodge the silences,
caged by the symmetry
Guarding an almost
made up world

In a cube
inside a
cube

Inside a
cube

As above,
nothing below
The river devours
the morning cars
Golden and peaceful
Everything goes down
down
and often doesn't return

But these words that repeat
numbers
This hand that scans ticket after ticket
ticket
ticket
writing
Mailing envelopes

What do they have to do with
me?

REMNANTS OF HOME

ZAINAB MEHRAJ SHAH

Having come so far from home to Delhi, I see its remnants everywhere: women donning kurtas with kashmiri embroidery, paper mache handicrafts and a plethora of questions thrown your way:

It must be so good to live between the mountains.
Do you own apple orchards?
Do all of you have long noses and red cheeks
Saffron? Walnuts?
Beautiful.

Never had I been more aware of being a Kashmiri than after being away from it in a city that never lets you forget you're not welcome. The fascination which might, at first, feel inviting soon dissolves once you realise they hardly ever ask about the ‘other’ side. What lies behind the careful façade of the paradise seems not interesting enough for their notice. And soon you realise the problem - the ‘other’ is not digestible to their palettes reserved for pretty things. The ‘other’ makes them uncomfortable and therefore they simply choose to evade any chance of confrontation with it.

On the other hand their fascination with the ‘pretty things’ has problems of its own which cannot be overlooked either. Taking the liberty of appropriating and exoticising a culture, from their food to their fashion, has become commonplace. This appropriation gets even more problematic in the case of platforms that claim to ‘represent’. Their idea of representation seems to lack empathy with the people who are merely reduced to ‘subjects’ of their discourse.

This fascination, as much as it irked me, reminded me of what I did not have access to: to be able to simply look at the beauty of those things without the consciousness of the violence that they are constantly surrounded by. For the people who live amidst conflict, violence is not easily separable from everyday life, it becomes a part and parcel of it. In such a situation holding on to one's culture and language becomes a way to resist. One cannot talk about pheran without understanding how it has been a symbol of resistance for Kashmiris. However, not only has it been stripped off of the symbolic meaning that it carries, but it has been commodified to the extent that what people popularly refer to as ‘Kashmiri Pheran’ now bears very minimal or no resemblance to the actual garment.

One wishes to remember home with love and longing, but as much as I see its remnants everywhere around, I wish these, instead of being objects of aesthetics, were allowed to carry the voices and stories of the people they belong to.

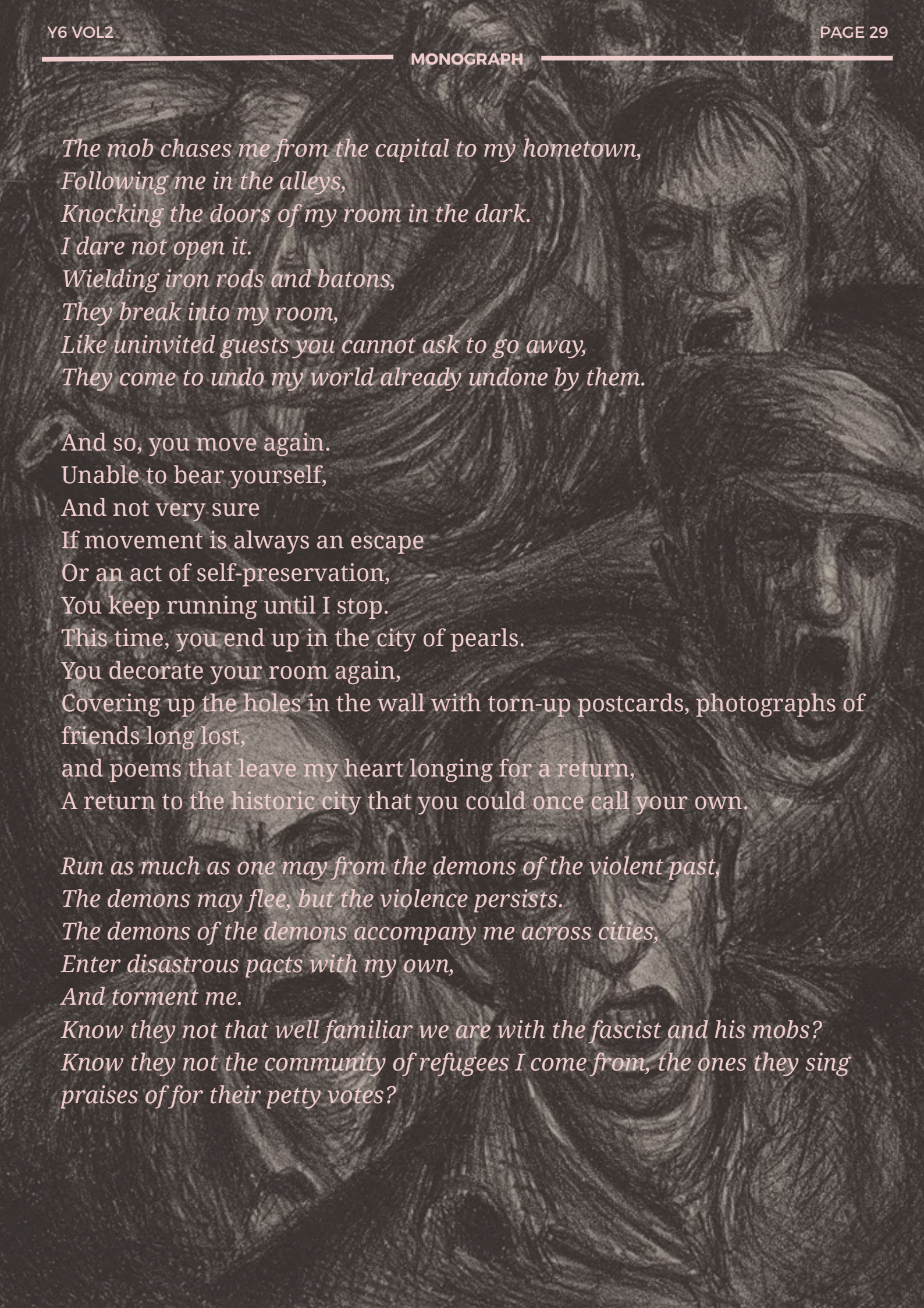
CITIES I COULD NOT SAY MY GOODBYES TO

VEDANT NAGRANI

To leave a city is to leave unwritten and unaddressed postcards for a lover you could not say goodbye to.
Elaborate maps, paintings from its museums, notes from your friends, receipts from that one restaurant
The ink faded into oblivion,
Fragments of a city in the dire hope of a return.
They do not make a city.
You paste them on your wall
Yet you dare not look at them.
You take them with you as you move in to another place,
One, hopefully lesser painful, less bitter than the godforsaken capital Delhi.

I am awakened into the horrors of my dreams.
A mob surrounds me, hungry for my blood.
The mad king's lumpen, they are stopped by nothing.
They make tombs of humans, and break shrines of saints and gods.
They will not stop. A mob surrounds me. I cannot run away from it.

But cities are not fruits you can bargain for.
They are the oranges that the fruit seller gives you, as you, confused and awkward,
Fail to choose the ones sweet.
You end up with a mixed bag,
More oranges bitter than the ones sweet.
Your birth in the orange city does not help.
The shame for the saffron brigades sharing your birth in the city,
A constant reminder,
Undoes you.



The mob chases me from the capital to my hometown,
Following me in the alleys,
Knocking the doors of my room in the dark.
I dare not open it.
Wielding iron rods and batons,
They break into my room,
Like uninvited guests you cannot ask to go away,
They come to undo my world already undone by them.

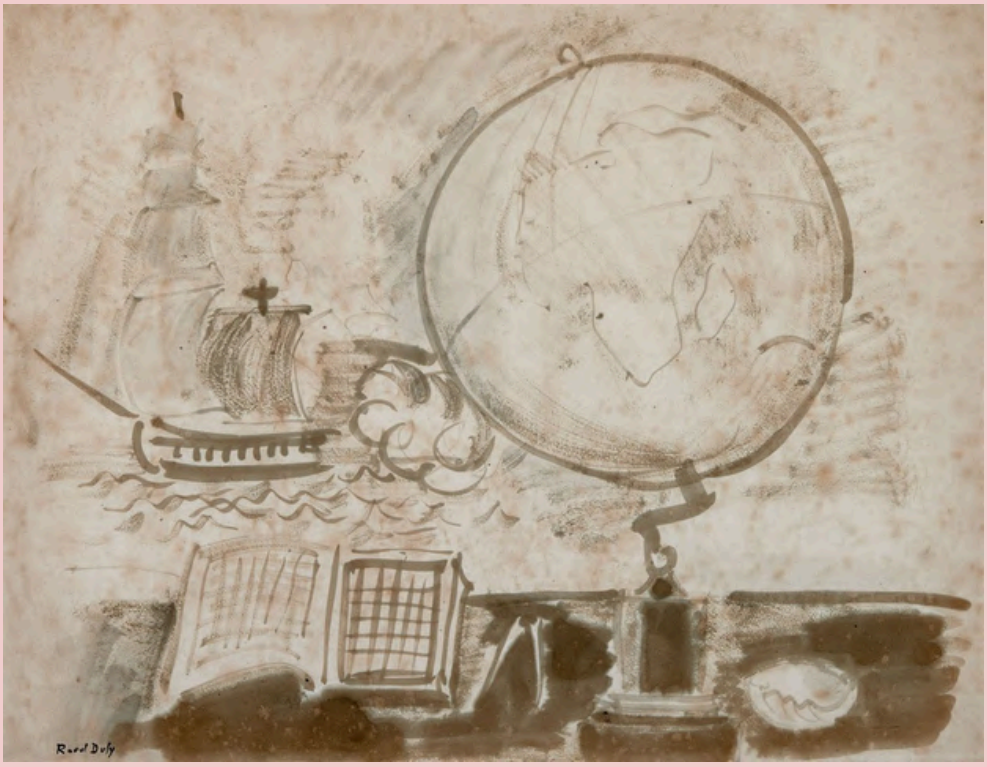
And so, you move again.
Unable to bear yourself,
And not very sure
If movement is always an escape
Or an act of self-preservation,
You keep running until I stop.
This time, you end up in the city of pearls.
You decorate your room again,
Covering up the holes in the wall with torn-up postcards, photographs of friends long lost,
and poems that leave my heart longing for a return,
A return to the historic city that you could once call your own.

Run as much as one may from the demons of the violent past,
The demons may flee, but the violence persists.
The demons of the demons accompany me across cities,
Enter disastrous pacts with my own,
And torment me.
Know they not that well familiar we are with the fascist and his mobs?
Know they not the community of refugees I come from, the ones they sing praises of for their petty votes?

You, who are tired of running, decide to stop today,
To return.
Not to the city that undoes you,
But to your undone self.
As you refuse to be haunted by the blood thirsty mob
Who dare not look into your eye,
When you look into theirs
With no fear, as you undo the violence they do to you,
And reclaim your voice long lost to the mobs of cities.

HOME IS WHERE THE HEART IS

SHREYA DATTA



Geographic luck is something that has been weighing on my mind. It began with Palestine. With Palestinian children laughing and crying on our social media feeds, only to last a second long.

But before that it was because of the exodus of Rohingya refugees being told their homeland is not theirs anymore.

Even before that it was Kashmir, whose home is contested. You have to be the right kind of Kashmiri to be allowed to thrive. Thrive at what cost? Thrive at the cost of no political representation?

But what about Bengal? Undivided Bengal, inclusive of Bengalis, Assamese, Oria, Bihari, Jharkhandi and other local tribes, who find home in its flowing rivers. The marshlands soak up the water, the pelting rain can be distracting. Bangladesh becomes "Bangal der desh", we forget our home.

But even before that was Partition. Families not willing to move because of the orange trees they planted in their gardens. Families not willing to move because they have not seen any other place, other than their confined brick walls. Families not willing to move because a border is a bully, it never listens to those it divides. It's still surprising that Toba Tek Singh was considered a stray, not the norm.

Geographic luck plays on my mind. It determines our home, and the privilege that comes with knowing we can call it home for time immemorial.

IN RESPONSE TO THE MAN AT THE BAR WHO ASKED ME WHERE HOME WAS

DANIEL DUFTON LEYLAND

LAST YEAR

SAMAH AYESHA

i spent the better half of last year

staring at the ceiling,

watching it bend more crooked

the longer i looked.

but it wasn't just the ceiling

it was the walls, the floor,

maybe my footing,

maybe my mind

from being indoors too long.

each time i completed ablution,

each time i laid down my mat to

pray, it seemed off too.

i checked the compass,

adjusted,

checked again

but the mat wouldn't

straighten. or was it my

footing?

i wasted the better half of last year
trying to stop walking in circles

or was it a triangle?

the doorways.

the roof.

all of them slanted.

and i'm still not sure

if i ever fixed the mat

or just learned to pray at an angle.

BOBBINBEAR

DARRAGH COADY

it's probably no longer right for me
to call you Bobbinbear
but I'll keep that name burnt on my heart
along with all the other wear and tear

and you're too big to take for ice cream or
hold my hand walking down the street
i know deep down you love me
when your pout melts away in unabashed defeat

you don't have time for cartoons or
to re-read the works of Roald Dahl
too wise to even believe in fairytales
tough took over from gentle

when your pigtails get much shorter
and the pimples disappear
when the sun sets in a decade's time
and the gaps draw wide not near

i guess it's no longer very cool to
be giving out hugs now
but the hugs always come back around
i just haven't worked out how

pinks turning to black, all the colours
of the rainbow break on through
on the good days they will return just
don't forget the girl who grew

now your pigtails are there no longer
and the pimples have disappeared
and the sun has set so, so many times
and the gap's drawn even wider now,
nowhere close to near

i'd part with you some wisdom but
you taught me all I ever knew
about how to be the man I am
parenting pros and cons, the don'ts and can dos

so thanks again my Bobbinbear
for the smiles and memories
that shine on with your greatness
i'm so proud of all you have achieved

and you know just where to find me
should you ever need a friend
i'll always be right in your corner
my Bobbinbear until the end

MONOCHROME HEART

AL AMIN AL HASSAN

I stare sometimes without seeing
through the wall of glass from where I sit, out
into a street of hued monochrome vision
where everything has been drained
of colour and life

where wilted bellflowers with soft pale petals lay on
walkways
where complexity is in crisis
and misted clouds of thought hovered heavily
over my head

I remember old leaves withering away; minute by minute
like evening's passing clouds.
like morning's dew

I could see fading green and gray
the branches that stretched its hands towards the heaven

I could almost hear my ancestors, rooting for me
almost hear the whispering words in the wind
the undertow of a promise, running under

I could sift my hand through time
and leave the trials of memory

But what if vibrancy is lost on us
what if we do not believe our own complexity
what if my heart glitches as if in a matrix,
pumped black and white blood instead
only to hemorrhage in a world
that can only handle binary

What if all that illuminates
awakened a partial sense and overrides positivity
what if it whispers indifferences
and assumes a shape of superiority?

What if we could build bridges
that connects us in unity

What a wonderful time
to be alive that would be

A time of new suns
where the shape of the sun rays doesn't matter
where the arch of the rainbow doesn't fade

where people are neither out of sight
nor out of love and light

where this is all that matters.

A world so serene
a scene your eyes has never seen
a landscape scraping the skies

I too, want to live in this world
accept this newborn reality like my last name
accept this difference like my last breath

I want us to live
I want us to want to live

For this place of colour and clemency
where the moonlight is divinity
and where peace is normality
contrasting time for eternity.

RAYITO DE SOL

JENNIFER FREYA HELGESON

It was morning in North Center,
the kind with light that forgives—
soft gold on brick and laughter,
steam curling from paper cups,
tiny shoes slapping pavement,
the chorus of “¡Buenos días!”
drifting into November air.

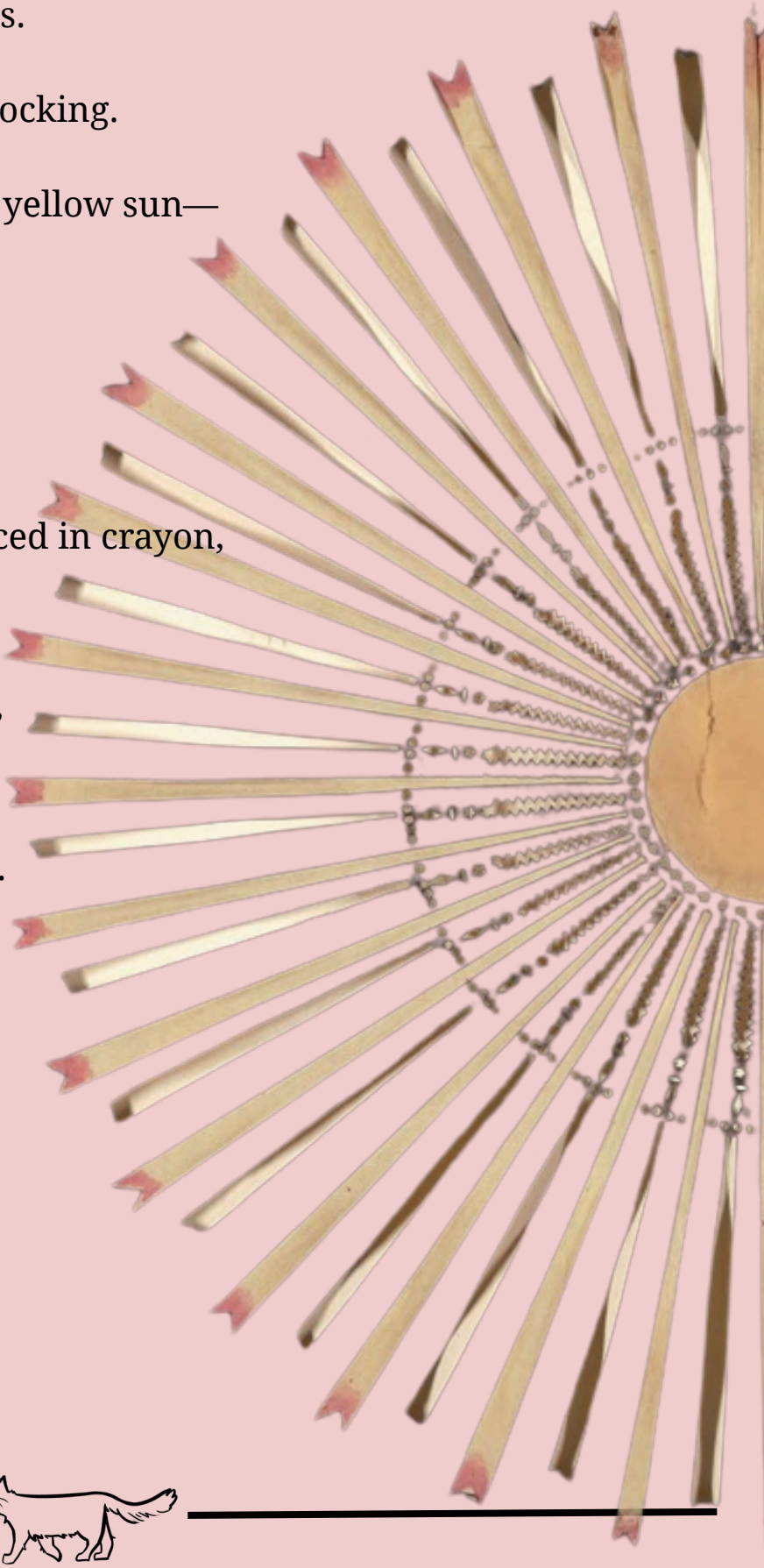
Inside, walls bloomed with color—
painted suns, green handprints,
the alphabet in two languages,
voices learning to belong.
Miss Diana’s keys jingled
as she stepped from her car,
a blue sedan humming its usual song.

Then—
two gray shadows slid to a stop.
Engines cut. Doors opened.
Vests and ski masks,
boots quick on concrete.
Her name—called sharp—
split the air like glass.
“Yo tengo papeles!” she cried,
words tumbling in two tongues,
as if either might save her.
Children laughed down the hall,
counting crayons, singing “Los Pollitos,”
their innocence intact—
for a breath longer.

Parents froze between doors and duty,
phones raised, hearts stammering,
mothers whispering prayers in Spanish,
fathers clutching coffee gone cold.
Someone shouted, “The kids are right there!”
but law does not hear lullabies.

Handcuffs clicked like a door locking.
The sun, still rising,
touched the mural of a bright yellow sun—
Rayito de Sol—
its painted rays
reaching toward a sky
that did not answer.

By noon, the flowers came.
Paper hearts, small hands traced in crayon,
notes in shaky letters:
Los niños te extrañan.
A child’s voice asked,
“Will she be back tomorrow?”
and no one knew how to say
that even the safest places
can shatter before snack time.



ODE TO ENO PEEING IN DUCHAMP'S URINAL

MARK BLICKLEY

October 23, 1990: "I thought, somebody should piss in that thing, to sort of bring it back to where it belonged. So, I decided it had to be me…I described my action as 're-commode-ification.'" Brian Eno

There's a fly in the urinal, apparently deceased

No movement at all, that I can see at least.

As I unzip, I wonder, do flies have a soul?

Is there a fly heaven where they can go?

Are there fly preachers for this tiny species?

Promising rivers of honey and mountains of feces

Vowing streets will be paved with rotting meat

Exuding ambrosial fumes in eternal heat.

There'd be no dread swatters with dried guts of kin

And of course, no birds or spiders would be allowed in.

But that's all too silly to seriously think so

They're just not important enough as species go.

No there's no heaven for this little fly

With fields of garbage awaiting on high

No celestial bliss for this little fellow

Just a watery grave of pale yellow.

It crosses my mind that at this junction

I should probably feel some sense of compunction.

I mean, it's not very nice, no way to behave

Peeing disrespectfully on someone's grave.

But this fly's not a someone, is he? Just a dead fly

And surely not as grand and deserving as I.

Granted—a fly's existence has a useful role

In our planet's system as a whole.

While I and my kind in the name of progress

Pollute and destroy and make a big mess

A fly's not been known to murder his kind

To hate and cruelty he's not inclined.

And a fly wouldn't enslave one of its own

To greed and corruption, he's not prone

He really does nothing to which a fault you can pin

OK—so he pukes on food, but that's not a sin.

But a fly deserve heaven? Who'd believe it?

No, that's reserved for the species who can conceive it

And who continue to hold a dogged insistence

That they somehow deserve a continued existence

Free from pain and sadness, no old bones creaking

No spiders or swatters, metaphorically speaking

No maladies producing moaning and crying

No hunger or sorrow, no anguish, no dying.

What great hope and comfort in this grand ideal

Is it any wonder the mass appeal?

But now—a fly needs no solace, he doesn't fear death

Has no selfish longing for eternal breath.

He just does what he does 'cause that's what he must

Then it's ashes to ashes and dust to dust

And someday my fate will be the same

I'll return to that from which I came.

You see—the atoms which constitute all creation

Give all things in nature an unbiased relation

And when everything's reduced to the bottom line

A fly's basic makeup is the same as mine

So maybe someday will our atoms unite

In a tree or the ocean or a bird in flight

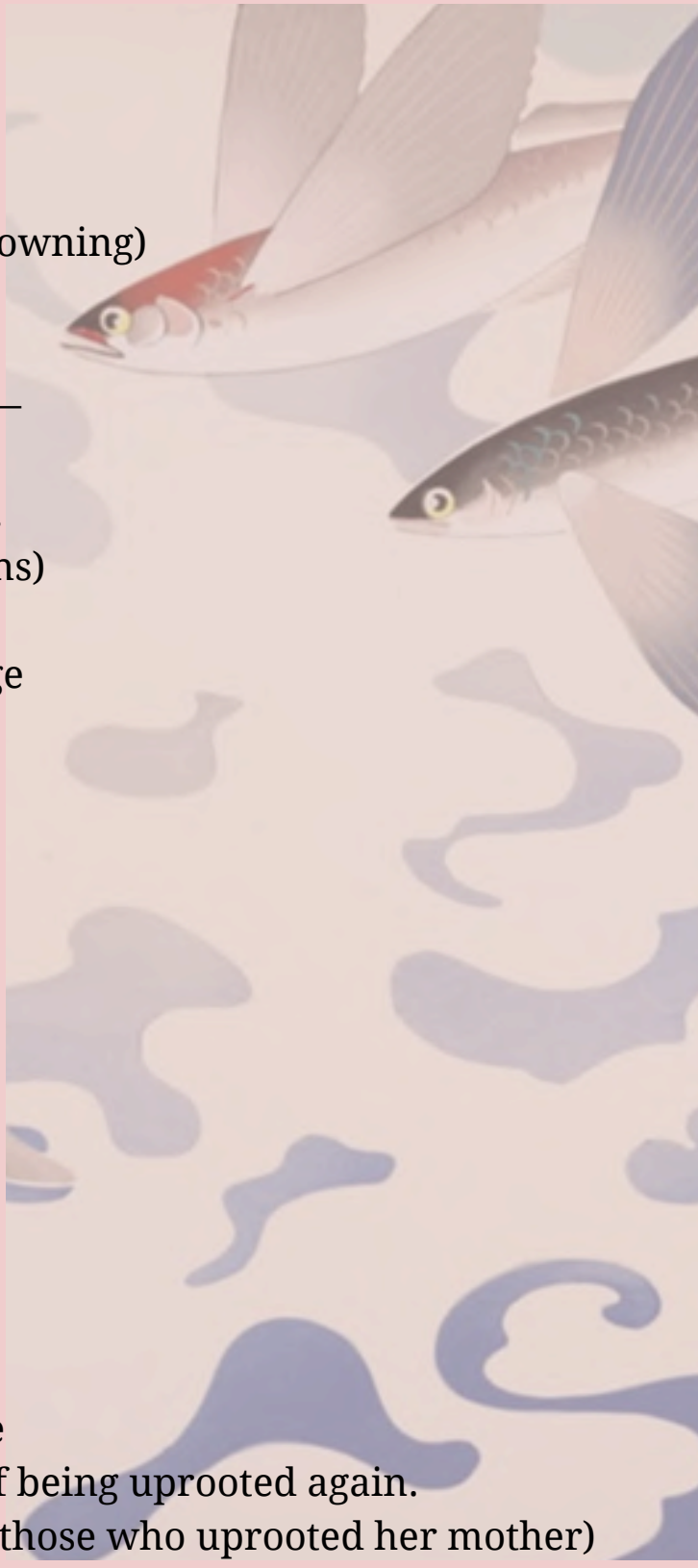
We might meet again this side of forever

So, I say "Adios, little fly guy,"

and I pull the flush lever.

TONGUE TIED

CHAHNA AHUJA



You ask me to say something
in my mother tongue.
I give you a three-fourth smile,
as fish swim inside my lungs.
(I don't know if they are breathing or drowning)

My words begin to choke on
slanting braids of a Perso-Arabic script —
defaced by white cartographers —
before jumping off the tongue-tied cliffs.
(and swallowing all the heirloom hairpins)

My grandparents bartered their language
for tattoos of safety.
My mother says:
Our hearts have literature.
(but they don't have literacy).

To speak in my mother tongue
is to speak entirely in longing
and partly in
Partition
(a slip of the tongue)

To speak in my mother tongue
is to speak without my mother in it.
She refused to break down our language
into bite-sized pieces to feed me, wary of being uprooted again.
(yet I can only consume the language of those who uprooted her mother)

Egyptian novelist Naguib Mahfouz once wrote:
"Home is where all the attempts to escape cease",
but my roots are the hair ties I keep losing on the streets of my hometown.
My Memory Studies professor terms this as ‘generational trauma’
(what is generational trauma, if not my grandpa’s stories ending in a
comma, but not a period?)

But longing is such a gullible word
for something so predatory.
I keep saying that my tongue is mine
like the national anthem.
(I know it by heart even if it always causes a heartburn)

I will say it is mine
because I was born a premature child
with an insatiable appetite for oxygen
on the ventilator of history.
(It is mine)

It is mine
It is mine
Until it is not.
Fish swim inside my lungs.
I don’t know if I am breathing or drowning.
Champagne

I’m counting down the hours until I can numb the pain.
Until people won’t frown when I indulge in numbing the pain.
My pain.
They smile as I grimace
I sigh;
Pure, unfiltered relief.
Is it wrong?
I’ve been wronged, and I am coping
That makes me a winner.
Reeking of stale beer and tequila
My survival comes with a side of Sauvignon
And I am okay with that.
My medicine burns my brain,
like scolding hot metal melting my flesh.
It is ruining me
And I love it
It helps me escape.
If I mar myself enough I am no longer me
And the escape is bliss
though it hurts like hell.
It is not your fault I cannot cope alone
whilst you gave me life.
The drink helps me evade death.
I can flirt with her
Let her graze my thigh
Or cut it
The red trickles out
Blood and wine mix to make some sort of life-saving fluid
And I drink
I drink deep.
My half a life is worth living–

I think.

NIGHTHAWKS

AYANA BHATTACHARYA

After Edward Hopper's 'Nighthawks' (1942)

Last call long rung in, the slouch-
backed bartender lit fluorescent
still serving up celebratory clinks
and cheapie wish-aways. Here,
there are no regulars; this last-stop
destination for the broken-hearted,
unlucky troops silvers the city's rust,
scoops alone-ness onto a scalpel edge,
leaves it glassed-in.

FLOWERS OF THE NIGHT

SEETA MULLER

WHEN THE SHOW GOES ON

AYANA BHATTACHARYA

When Murphy's Paradox clattered into the Indian alternative music scene in 2019, they landed faint and soundless, buried under the hordes of contemplative, whispery singer-songwriters crowding playlists and genre-specific Top 50 charts. Sonically, they were poetic, rock-and-roll-adjacent revivalists sharing cramped leg space with Prateek Kuhads and Anuv Jains, grossly underestimating (or wilfully overlooking) the mass appeal of a sad boy. Lyrically, their work bears sharp resemblance to Peter Cat Recording Co.'s music, which accrued a cult following soon after Murphy's Paradox's debut. It's their deft songwriting that saves the band from banality. There's a wistful, romantic viscerality to much of their lyricism — a real faith in the power of their message, no matter how stale themes of love and reflection may appear. With press from Rolling Stone and Indulge, they could've barrelled towards casual celebrity, but the pandemic's arrival the following year arrested their progress. All momentum gained was lost. Then came the hiatus, the cancelled tour, the matters that plague every band that could've Made It.

Lead singer Durjoy Choudhury doesn't concern himself with this. He's in it for the love of the game. Of the hiatus, he remarks, "Nothing happened, actually." A band member moved away, he explains. "We were kind of disbanding at that point." When I ask if things felt like they were falling apart, he laughs. There's a resigned acceptance to his answer: "I was already thirty-four when we started Murphy's Paradox. We're technically old guys doing a band, so we don't feel it that way. There's no hard feelings when separation happens." Long before his days as the band's frontman, he was part of Bee & the Buskers, which disbanded in 2016. "I could see it from before," he says. He insists it was a mutual separation, as opposed to a break-up. "When things don't work out, people need to disperse." Choudhury is evidently creatively inclined: he is a multi-hyphenate performer, writer, and erstwhile lecturer at Jadavpur University. He also founded Friday Night Originals, an indie-music showcase.

He tells me how it started when he was “pretty drunk and pretty high.” A colleague had asked to record his music for practice. Choudhury replied, “Don’t record me. Let’s record the fucking city.” Within weeks, the first episode of Friday Night Originals was aired. It worked.

Murphy’s Paradox took its time with the comeback. In 2024, they released two singles. “Saba and Her Cat Named Grey” is a jingly track that corresponds to Choudhury’s novella of the same name. The quippy writing is a departure from the band’s usual lyrical style, but a welcome change nonetheless. Their follow up, “Dreams in Technicolour”, is mellow and stunningly crafted, but lacks the precision of their best work. Even their debut record, *Something Like Love*, released in late 2025, flails around skeletal concepts.

The band ascribes eight sequential stages to love, culminating in an “acceptance of the estrangement.” “Bonnie & Clyde”, the album’s standout track, is energetic, and almost twangy. But others pale in comparison to its promise. “Once Again” and “Us” are vacant and adrift, often dawdling. The title track is lost. It’s evident that conceptuality is at the crux of this record. It’s certainly brave. And competent. But half a decade into their bandhood, Murphy’s Paradox must evolve past potential and carve out the singularity it so desperately seeks.

Their last show at Skinny Mo’s Jazz Club (and their first in a while) made that clear. A small, intimate show, played to twenty faces; bottles of beer and Bisleri littering the stage. Even at the end of the night, the latter remained intact. In between songs, Choudhury read text and poetry, occasionally stumbling. One was a passage about a cat’s grooming habits. Another, about America and war, provoked furrowed brows and sympathetic nods from the audience. I wondered what stopped them from erupting into finger-snaps and jazz-hands, à la slam poetry etiquette. But this audience was awkwardly silent, sometimes unresponsive, clapping out of polite habit after each song. (Choudhury muttered a nearly inaudible “thank you” following the applause.) Towards the back, suited men conversed over martinis. A woman smiled sheepishly when her phone rang too loud, as the band and crowd dismissed it with laughter. And when Choudhury tried to incorporate the audience into the performance, signalling he wanted them to sing along, no one knew the words.

There are moments when Murphy’s Paradox redeems itself, when the band forgets they’re playing to an audience, consumed by a brilliant built-up drum solo. They look at each other, grinning, and the headbanging begins. The band sounds fantastic live, if at times, a bit slow to build connection. Such is the plight of the indie act. The poetry-reading and shy gratitude certainly stunt the coolness three seasoned musicians could cast, but as Choudhury establishes early on, that’s not what he cares about. This is the esoteric, eccentric niche they’ve dug themselves into. Are they willing to dig a little deeper?

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