

MONOGRAPH

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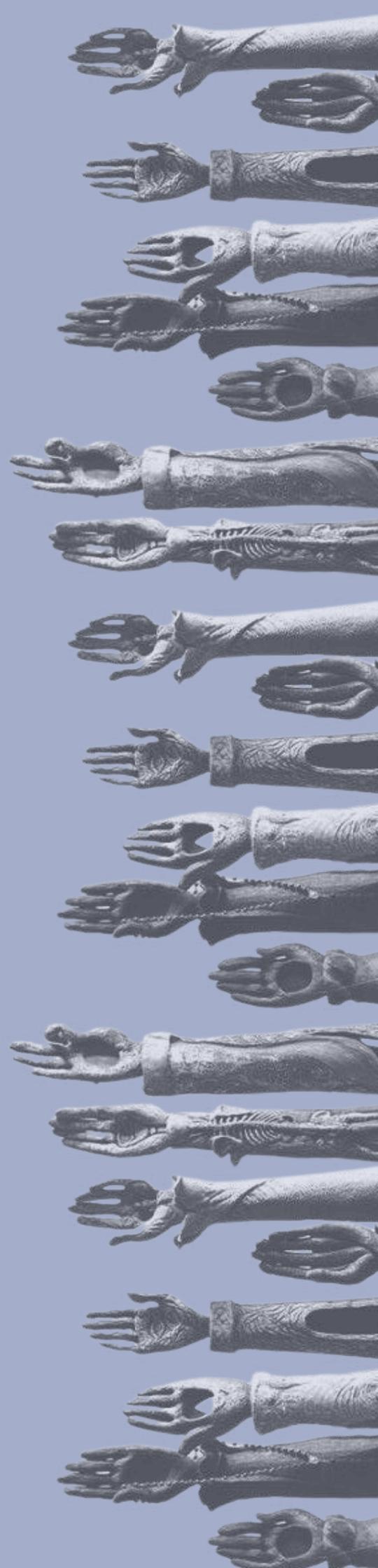
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EDITOR'S NOTE

Ritobrita Mukherjee
Editor-in-Chief

There is no greater game of seduction than the one we play with ourselves as writers, teasing our brains into various states of excitability, hoping the incessant probing will one day give way to effusive bursts of what can only be described as joy. There is something insidious about this smoke and mirror show, the siren song of words struggling to shape the unsettling, inexplicable horrors lurking beneath the surface, mired in sloth, sulking, taunting the wilful mind that dares to grasp at straws even as it sinks into cryptic oceans of obscurity.



Fashioning itself after the ways of the dark and the doomed, Monograph's April issue delves into the fever dream of phantasmagoria, tossing and turning in the uneasy bed that all contributors have carefully, painstakingly laid out for us. Like you, I sit as part of an amused audience in constant search for novelty, shuffling to get away from the places and the faces wishing an increasingly macabre existence into being.



Our senior editor, Aastha Singh baptises us in the murky waters of Goya's Black Paintings, deliberating at length upon the sheer ordinariness of what we usually consider grotesque. The darkness of these canvases become inescapable because of their familiar, domestic settings. The space folds in on itself until one's own home begins to resemble a Goya painting one cannot step out of. Elsewhere, Chandrashmita Mitra's *On Board the Subjunctive Express* drifts through memory as though it were a transit system without fixed stops. A discarded diary becomes an archive of overlapping lives—banal, absurd, grief-stricken—held together by the fragile act of recollection. Ellena Kappos's *A4* unfolds in the aftermath of an encounter that cannot be properly named. The body on the road is neither fully recognisable nor entirely alien, rudely disrupting the logic of response. There is an impulse to end its suffering, to impose a familiar script, but nothing quite fits. Lois South's *Dangly Earrings* turns inward, where the self becomes both witness and adversary. The poem moves through time as though summoning earlier versions of the speaker, each carrying its own injuries, compulsions, and refusals. The repetition of address does not resolve into reconciliation; it deepens the sense that identity is something one survives rather than inhabits cleanly.

What connects these works is not a shared aesthetic but a shared unease with certainty. The world they move through remains resistant to clarity despite being saturated with images, histories, inherited forms. Surrealism and its afterlives flicker at the edges, dwelling in sin on the margins of a scripted existence. To build phantasmagoria now, one has to look past the recreation of spectacle. What begins as a trick of light, gradually devolves into anomalies feeding voraciously off the fertile terrain of spineless unaccountability we have cultivated with great care for decades now. These bastardised illusions linger in the periphery of the in-between spaces shaping our reality, uncontrollable, puppeteered by a select few. Waiting amongst us, the ghost no longer requires conjuring.



THE GREAT HE-GOAT OF THE LIVING ROOM

AASTHA SINGH



The Great He-Goat of the Living Room is unlike the painting. He is not enshrouded in darkness, and does not bear the horns that his fiendish presence would necessitate. He sits enthroned, the shadow of his back casting dark wings on the wall. There are no horns on this twisted king, no throne to cushion his autocracy. Just the faint, loose-lipped smile of appeasement his companions wear.

He is not a frenzied demon. He is still. He need not raise his voice to command his choir, they move at every beckon of the hands. They lean in, straining to catch every word, their faces flitting between mirth and horror. Fear dances her icy cold fingers down their spines, and they think of the day / week / month before, steam bellowing from their mouths, memory saturated in falsehood and glistening like the pricked finger of a bloody, permanent sleep.



He does not need to be loud, he just needs to be there. The silence before he spoke hung like a curtain on our backs, anguish seizing our ankles in a collective drag as we pleaded for release. We look at his face, try to read it but skirt away from locking gazes with Him, anticipating the mood and trying to see if it is safe. This terrible stillness was suspended from the ceiling like a three-tiered chandelier, seconds away from collapse but the uncertainty of how much longer it will take chains us. We look at each other through the hollow in our bodies, the transparent curve of spines offering a far-cast glimpse into the still, full figure of Him.

A woman in the middle clutches an infant. To the right, a smaller figure sits, wrapped in a shawl, face hidden. They see. That is all they do. They see.

The infant watches the dances of drunken rage; still as the earth, quiet like the moon. She is not spared. She learns to make out footsteps in the dark, ears preening to the sound like a deer's.

One of the hollow beings used to cajole me with, "that is your father." Now she just stares, her eyeballs turning inside the socket, whirring like a car engine when she coughs out a meagre, "just a little while longer." It is more for her than it is for us, but we listen anyway. She is no longer requesting us to perform devotion, but only making excuses. We toe the threshold of staying in the room but refusing to join the coven. It costs us everything.

The scene is rendered in paint. You eat, sleep and sit in its presence. It is not background noise, but a lingering wispy cloud in the corner of the room. Not all homes hang such paintings, but we do not know that. Years blur together. We know that we live our life out of a Black Painting, but cannot put our finger on why. What is amiss is everything, and I try to fashion a nothing of it.

The Black Paintings inhabit the walls of your conscience, changing shape on the plaster, liquifying into pools of darkness that take on lives larger than your own. Strangeness finds form in mantras that encircle the anxious human mind. In public, you wear a clean, respectable facade. In private, you inhabit the dwelling of the goats and the witches.



WHAT ARE WE SO SCARED OF?

SHREYA DATTA



Literary genres and cinema are not distinct from the world of politics, but an extension of it. The political baggage of horror is immense, often problematic, but has often been reduced to a “jumpscare inducing” genre. To determine what the audience will be scared of, writers of the word have re-imagined the fear generated in the world. This means that horror movies can be a reactionary or a conservative critique of modernisation and the perils of diversity, or emerge as a middle-class retelling of structural inequalities. Horror has the ability, and capability, to be a liberating art form where the marginalised revolt against the ruling classes, but can also reaffirm ruling class interests through the retelling of the “other.” This holds true for all art forms, as art has the ability to empower as well as disempower. However, it is particularly intrinsic to the nature of horror to create a phantasmagoria, a bad dream of sorts, told through the lens of both the King and the subject.



The horror film has fallen on “hard times” after its beginnings in the Weimar cinema and Universal studios in the 1930s. Films of Val Newton, Terence Fisher and Roger Corman made notable contributions to the genre, where the context of the death of the roaring twenties and the rise of authoritarianism played characters in their films. This changed with the end of the Second World War and the rise of Hollywood as the birthplace of modern cinema, independent of European cinema. In the 1960s, the horror genre became a subversive art form which challenged middle-class patriarchal leanings. American horror films of the 1960s included Alfred Hitchcock’s “Psycho” and Roman Polanski’s “Rosemary’s Baby”, both of which attracted attention for their criticism of institutionalised inequality. Thus, we were scared of our inner demons and the pain human beings are capable of inflicting on each other. We were not scared of a mad scientist’s freak accident, but were terrified of human infallibility and the power of man over man. This period is connotative of a thematic change as well, as the supernatural was slowly denigrated and the psychological was embraced. The supernatural, when it appeared, was a product of social relations, an exploration of social oppression on the lives of the “other.” In Robert Wise’s “The Haunting”, ghosts and demons are entrapments of the female by patriarchy and misogynistic practices.

The resistance movements of the 1960s paved the way for the horror genre to pin their fear on social oppression, as opposed to the other. However, both American and European cinema of the time focused on the white woman’s struggle, with little reference to the lived experiences of coloured and racialised minorities. bell hooks argues that these lived experiences of women shape their identity and the effects of “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” seeps into popular culture as well. Judith Shklar in her 1998 essay titled “The Liberalism of Fear” argues that liberalism reduces individuals’ fear of dominating power by limiting state action. Thus, fear becomes the determinant of liberal or illiberal societies. The clash of opposing and otherised identities from the 1960s onwards has led to the “War on Terror” as well as different power relations emerging in cinema. Horror catches up on this trend.



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The 1980s and 1990s did not share the same resonance of social movements with the horror genre. It led to misogynist “slasher films” where women being tortured by the antagonist were grossly depicted, to cater to an inane male fantasy. The subversive agenda of the horror film vanished and jumpscare and the “boo!” element were its differentiating factors. Films like “The Hills Have Eyes” (2006) respond to the atrocity of the Bush era, in their own way, while mainstream horror cinema continues to be centred around serial-killers and the violent demise of female characters. This era politically paved the way for conservative narratives that are centered around women needing saving or women being dependents to the combative male protagonists. The most apt example for such a turn in cinema is after the “Saw” franchise was popularised during the nineties. For example, the antagonist of the film, the “Jigsaw killer” believes in inculcating morals and virtues by through torture and violence, an unknowing nod to Bush and his ideas of wars to weed out terror. Thus, democracy promotion, or the process by which American interventionism is justified, is covertly used to imply the acceptance of gore and violence in teaching the bad guys morality. Jigsaw is the cruel but necessary father who will show his victims the path to goodness, highlighting the “innate morality” of a torturer. Christopher Sharrett states that Jigsaw is consciously painted in this way to show how white male characters are “fed up with democratic institutions, determined to set their own rules.” So, you should be scared of those who you are not supposed to be scared of.



In the 21st century, this trajectory has opened up horror to mainstream audiences. The horror of illiberal societies travelling home have frightened citizens and an enlightened democratic citizenry. In 2025 and 2026 alone, major horror themed movies like Ryan Coogler's *Sinners* or Guillermo del Toro's *Frankenstein* have taken centre stage. Both set in a political climate of the past that remains relevant till date, they have raised questions on racialisation, the hidden monsters of the powerful as well as anti-migration rhetoric that has plagued cinema and politics. These films, through supernatural elements like the monster created by a freak scientist who nurtures it like a son, or through blood sucking vampires who reveal the worst of the human race, have tried to tell a tale of power, humanity and relationships. They operate through the liberalism and horror framework, but are albeit more intersectional and diverse in character selection and portrayal. Horror battles the conservative and reactionary critique by embracing this mainstream-accessible-to-all nature, for the very first time since the resistance movements of the 60s. Only this time, these films resist race, class and ethnicity. Films like *Frankenstein* and *Sinners* represent a post-ideology society. They are not bogged down by the ideologies of the ancient, boxed into categories of right and left. Instead, they represent a counter culture of conservatism and authoritarianism. The conservative argument of humans being more comfortable among those they feel similar to, has been thrashed by cinema that highlights diversity instead of villanising it. Indigenous horror movies from countries like Japan and India have tried to mould their own narratives, distinct from Hollywood. Horror as a genre received mainstream recognition with a plethora of awards for *Sinners* and *Weapons* (directed by Zach Cregger) at the Screen Actors Guild Awards and the Oscars. While award recognition does not imply outstanding quality, this definitely signals a shift in the perception of horror as a genre. Directors of these films have also embraced the political character of horror, as it tells us what we should or should not be scared of, what we should shun from society and what we accept as fallibilities in ourselves. What should we be scared of? We should be scared of power, not the other, no the comrades who share the solidarity of otherness.



THE BRAIN SEES MAGENTA

SRIJONINANDI



Woozy hallucinations flit across the black of my mind when my eyes stay shut. I tend to enjoy them, the unpredictability of which vivid colour will pop up next and which unknown shape it will inhabit. At least that's one abyss I can peer deep into without cold, unforgiving sweat slithering down the nape of my neck, without the lingering hush of a gaze that waits to condemn. There's a tiny magenta whirl now, I squint my already-shut eyes in an effort to focus on it. The colour intensifies, the whirl spins faster and faster, so impossibly fast that my head starts to hurt, but I don't give up, I refuse to. My sole aim is to focus impossibly hard on this shade, to control its boundaries, to predict what shape it'll shift into next and which direction it'll move in. I'm fairly confident that I can dominate this vision, I can oppress it, break it down into diminutive particles till it acquiesces into submission. Frowning harder, I concentrate on it till the veins on my forehead bulge out, grotesquely prominent. The string of my focus holds taut, threatening to come undone as I sense a low buzz right above my clavicle. *Fucking mosquito.*



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I swat at it carelessly, annoyed that a pesky mosquito would dare interrupt my trance. The magenta fades in and out of the black and I desperately cling on to the string. *Bzzzz*. I swat at it a second time, my focus is now tinged with irritation. The mosquito shifts from my clavicle, buzzes in front of my closed eyes, so close to my face that I can almost feel the air shift with its flighty movements. *BZZZZ*. The string breaks. My focus is lost. I failed to control the magenta whirl. Overcome with an intense aggravation I slam my hand on the bedside table to my left. A second too late, I realise that my coffee mug stood on that very table. My hazy, unfocused eyes watch haplessly as the mug crashes down as if in slow motion. The off-white carpet is now stained a dull brown with the remnants of my midnight black-coffee. I twist and bend my upper body down to pick up the ceramic shards. One...two...three...four...*five*. *Wait*. I squint my eyes to confirm that what I am seeing is truly what's lying in front of me. There in the center of the fifth, jagged shard of my broken coffee mug, lay the squiggly magenta whirl of my brain.



The phantom mirage conjured out of the deep abyss that I think of as my mind, had escaped and now glared back, as if taunting me. I shudder at the sight- the whirl emerging out of the illusion I had been confident I could control, now looks strangely slimy with a slug-like sheen coating its body. Its tentacles grip on to the rough edges and once my mind recovers from the horror of it all, I resolve to catch it. I need to suppress it. I pounce on it with an abrupt, jerky movement, expecting to catch it off-guard but to no avail. A wet, shiny layer is all that's left on the shard as the pesky mirage slips away right in front of me, flitting to the edge of the bedpost. The mosquito was not half as annoying to catch as this.



I start from my bed a second time but the flesh of my back sticks to the headboard and refuses to let go. Dread starts to fester within me, the unsavoury feeling gnawing at my insides. I tug at the headboard a second time, determined to nab this darned magenta whirl, determined to squash it between the weight of my clammy palms, resolute in crushing its tiny, fiery, stupid spirit. Determined to pick at its vividness, to tear its colour away till all its left with is a dull, pathetic, flickering shadow. My tugging grows incessant, more violent, my neck strains at the exhaustion with rivulets of sweat rushing down my armpits. The dread is slowly giving way to panic, alarmed that my enemy is now flickering brighter. My enemy is whirling faster. It starts from its position at the foot of the bed, moving towards me, gaining momentum with each spin. The enemy has changed its aim, its planning to revolt. *Why can't it just listen and get back inside my brain.*



My desperate attempts at breaking free and regaining control over it seem more futile by the second. Goosebumps rise all over my arms as the whirl hurtles towards my face at lightning speed. It devours me. The will to fight dissolves, leaving only the uneasy stillness of surrender. I was oppressed, dominated by its sheer force, broken down into diminutive particles till I acquiesced into submission. The last tiny remnant of my consciousness could only form one resigned thought.

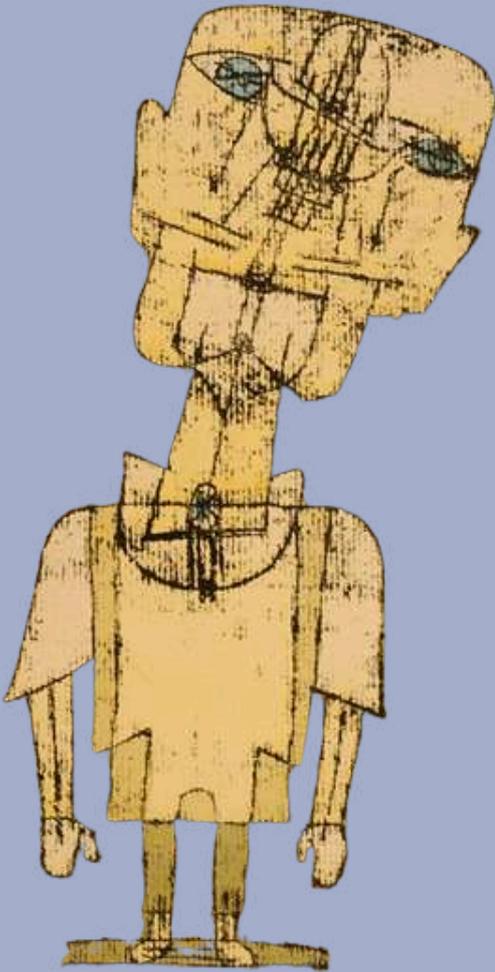
I knew I shouldn't have killed the lady in magenta last night.



THIN ON THE GROUND

NICHOLAS VIGLIETTI

Don't speak,
 They don't want to hear.
 Never share,
 They'll *never* care.
 Don't waste your breath –
 You ain't got much to spare.
 Screw the reasons,
 They ain't got *guts*.
 Screw their worries,
 The jealous
 Will just call brave,
 Nuts.
 Nobody will admit it,
 But we're all headed down,
 On the same
 Nowhere lanes.
 Don't quit on yourself, though.
 Don't do like everybody else,
 Be brave,
 Go for broke.
 It's the only way
 A long-shot
 Has got to cope.
 Thin on the ground,
 Nobody wins,
 There's no fangs of meat to fear,
 Stay crazy between the ears,
 Brazen bellied hope.





HITEN BHUNDIA

BODY CHORUS 004



DANGLY EARRINGS

LOIS SOUTH

*"Ring the bell, Lazarus.
It's time to let the ghosts out again."*

I know it's been a long time,
but we still make the same shapes,
You and I.

Will you forgive me, now that I have killed you?
Eight years is a long time to grieve.

Our prayers remain the same.

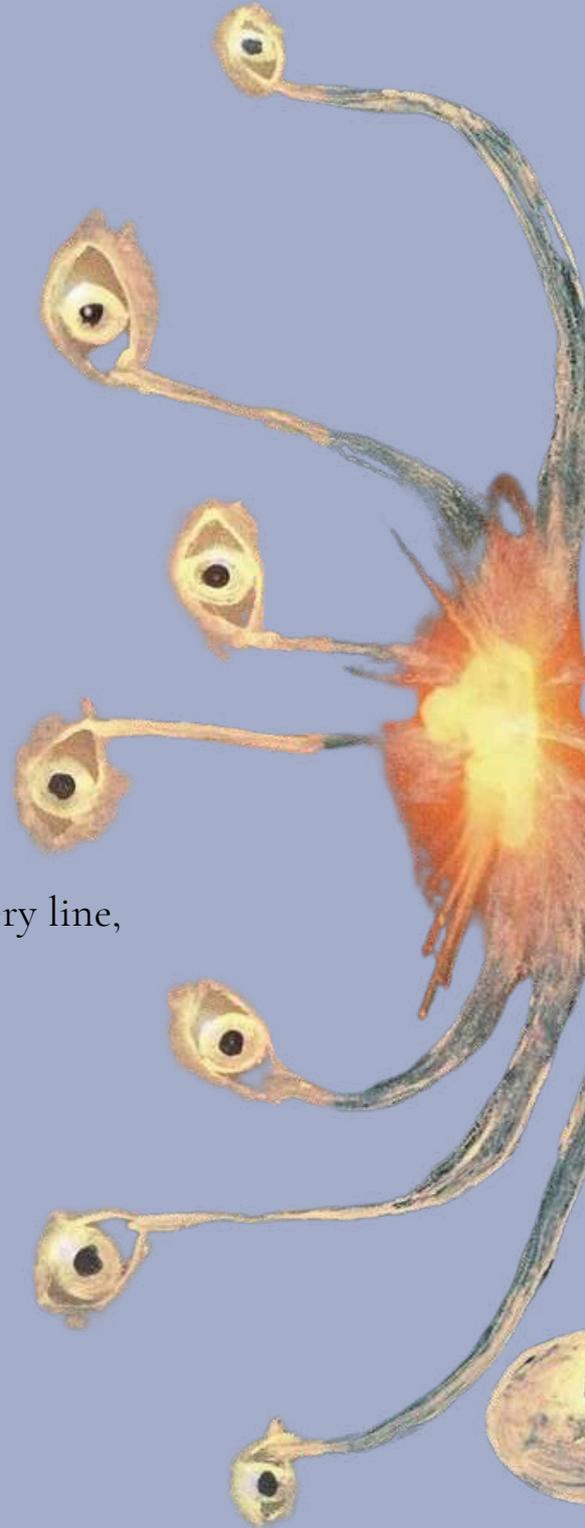
Sabbath night was for shoe polish and stew
chicken. Mum would pull up your tights.
Her secrets ached from collarbone to ankle.
She'd seal those ladders with nail varnish.

I can still trace the room,
Tweenie's wallpaper, lilac blankets and
red walls, red floors, red like my hands.
Out, damned spot!

You were a strange mix of fear and fight, toeing every line,
smiling as they chipped at you.
Perfection wasn't nearly enough.
You had to let it eat you,
the way it did them.

Snarl with your bones in its teeth,
it had to gut you,
prise off your shell,
hold you, raw and reeling,
'till you, were never you again.

And you were glad,
because you can't lose the fight if you never showed up for battle.



MONOGRAPH

Rest now, child.
Hell is certain and heaven's dead.
Now, to bed, to bed, to bed.

New woes have risen.
I can no longer carry you, little lamb.

The stilling of your broken heart will ring in my ears for eternity.

Every time I hear the chimes,
I'm reminded of what I buried in the bosom of time.

Your spectre follows me down Camden High Street,
gasping and gaping at every daemon I let in our bed.

Away with you now.

Hey, so, I know it's been a long time,
but we still make the same shapes,
You and I.

Can you forgive me now that I've killed you?
Seventeen years is a long time to grieve.

Our prayers have long since shifted.

And today, you will taste rage and consume spite.
You enjoy letting its weight crush you, understand what it means to lose—
the game is never kind to winners after all.

You will soon learn,
liquor and Lauds make strange bedfellows, little girl.

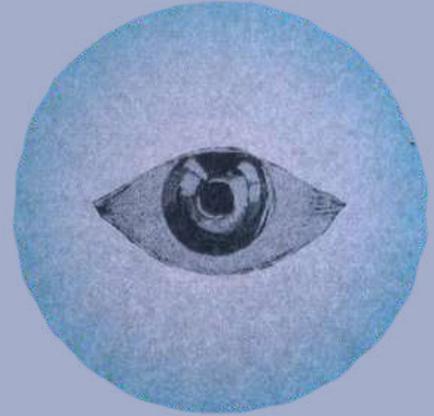
All combat boots and pregnant,
I know what you did last night.

We all saw you crawl into that man's bed.
You craved chaos and left the consequences to me!



I can still trace the lines,
 red,
 behind your eyes,
 red,
 between your legs,
 red, like my hands,
 Out, damned spot!

It's easy to remember your power,
 harder to stand in it,
 harder still to claim it back.
 But don't you dare doubt the mustard seed yet.



Come in close
 while I tell you that hell is certain and heaven's a fib.
 You follow me down the Baltic and Bootle strand,
 wittering and whining whilst I build our temple on solid ground,
 laughing at every misstep
 Loving you was a yoke around my neck, and I will no longer bear this weight.
 Now rest in the ditch I dug for us.

These bells ring loud beneath my ears,
 waking my pasts and singing my shame.
 Every time I grow,
 You rise to stifle me again.

But I bared my teeth,
 and will vanquish each of these lives.
 I stand upon the bones of all the mes I've
 overthrown.

Cleanse the spirit and burn the tares,
 My bells shall summon fresh hells,
 old promises and new rhymes,
 and I know—



that it's been a long time,
but we all still make the same shapes,
You and i.

Did you forgive those that killed you?
A thousand years is a long time to grieve.

Have I answered your prayers?
I burned the mustard seed.
But you still know my crimes
That damned spot is still red!

I trace your lines lazily.
Virabhadra thinks me silly,
Anacacuya thinks I'm high.
Queen Nanny says to finish the fight.

Yet I am just a vain repetition, grasping at faded ripples,
terrified of the night.

So I adorn myself with these bells to ward off tales of heaven
and draw near murky hells.



THERE IS A MARBLE MAN THAT LIVES IN THE MIRROR

SHANTILLY TUAZON

He looks like my father
We awaken in the mid-afternoon
Late again, we brush our teeth
Shower, he walks along window sills
Hides behind the occasional makeup counter
We lock eyes, dead, cold
Sometimes I think of taking a chisel to him
But I fear I'll cut myself
I have never been deft with a blade
The marble man only knows violence
Speaks only in whispers and screams
Do not look at him
Do not make any sudden movements
We move in tandem; he likes that



UNRAVELLING BY THE FOX

ISABELLA LUNEL ALAMO



A4

ELLENA KAPPOS

May had seen films, of the wild west variety, where men with large hands held horse guns and colt revolvers. Unload the bullet into the skull of a horse or cow and put it out of its misery. These crisp images snapped back into her head now. The camera aimed at the man's face, never the horse. Closeup. The gun flashes once, then silence. Maybe a score. You put the horse out of its misery. You aren't supposed to let it endure the pain. But she didn't know how to kill this. She wouldn't know where to put the bullet.

What was left of its quivering anatomy, stretched out across the front of the toyota. Gleaming wetly and underlit by the headlights that reflected off the dark road. Reflected off Matthew and herself.

She'd been asleep when the car hit it, or when it hit the car, she didn't know. Like she said, she'd been asleep. They'd left the airport, her and Matthew, ears still blocked and still carrying the little plastic bottles handed out during the flight. In her sleep daze, her left hand clutched the bottletop defensively, half-filled with warm water that tasted like plastic. Her right hand dragging a wheeled suitcase like a dead limb, she'd folded into the passenger seat of the rental car, trailing bags and jackets. Matthew was driving. Because Matthew was driving she'd wanted to stay awake. Because she felt guilty. Once again, he'd pooled resolutely into the driving seat without asking if she wanted to drive. Sparing them both indignity of her excuses. With the pink imprint of an airplane folding-tray blotting his forehead, he'd pulled out of the parking lot and turned onto the motorway. Above his right eye, broken by one furrowed eyebrow the looped incurve of a cup holder.

In an effort to remain conscious, May pawed through the passenger bag jammed into her footwell, where it crushed her feet. Hopefully prying a chronically unfinished airport novel from beneath a magazine. But, in the dark of the car May never opened it. It was 6 in the morning and quiet. The beaten book, sitting heavy on her thigh. They'd been chasing red-lights on the motorway for about an hour before she gave up. Climbing over the center console into the back of the car to rest on the bench seat. The seat belt warning system bleating obstinately.



Eventually, they'd turned off the motorway onto the smaller more intimate road and tiredness dimmed the aperture. Just the car's quiet movement as it passed family houses, community parks and empty supermarkets. Then a little further, past more manicured vegetation. Taller trees. Further into the country to where their parents would be waiting up. The car was silent, except for Matthew's breathing, Always just a little too loud. And even as she thought it she felt, once again, the guilt. Every now and again, a singular calculating alert from the phone sat nav. It was docked against the windshield, glowing. May watched its reflection on the glass of the opposing window. Like a ghost or a hologram, the snaking line of the map and their little car, marked by a blue dot. Folded into the back of the Toyota, she freed herself of her seatbelt, stretched out over all three car seats and slipped into an uneasy sleep.

The movement of the car crash ripped her eyes open before she'd even realised she was awake. An unpleasantly confusing moment accompanied, ceremoniously, by a squeal like Jello sucked through the rotor blades of a house fan. Her forehead made contact with the back of the driver's seat. She'd been dreaming about an aeroplane crash. So this was, in a way, almost a relief. Almost. Outside the car, the road was frosted with glass. They were fine; the car was not. Through the broken windshield like frost, the road was gore-soaked and glittering.

Matthew would never tell his sister that there'd been two people asleep in the car at the time of the crash. Half-conscious he'd turned off the public roads onto a dirt track, feeling the change in the texture of the ground beneath the wheels. It was a quiet road, only ever used by people who needed to access the farmland near the house, somewhere they'd had no business driving so fast. When the movement of the car, the sound, snapped him back awake he thought that they must have hit a deer. But it was too big for that. Multiple deer? A herd? Could he really have laid waste to a whole family of deer? But that wasn't right either. It was too... *Aquatic*. He opened the door.



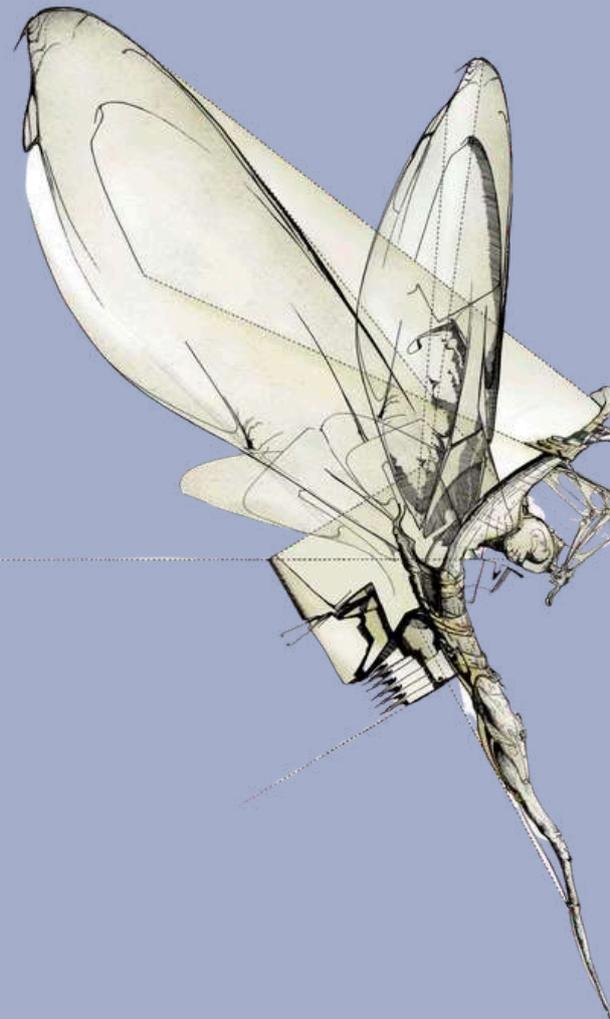
From the warmth of the backseat, May watched her brother sidestep the assorted viscera. “What is it?” He didn’t answer. Picked his way back to the open car door. Leaned in and turned on the emergency lights, and then, after a moment, the high beams.

It was too dark without streetlights but the highbeams lit the road like a crime scene. Even as May followed her brother out to the front of the car, picking her own way across the road, she caught herself thinking about those old cowboys again. The images snapping back into her head like gum. It looked like a squid, or what was left of it. Large. More than double the length of the car and still moving. Slightly. All of its insides outside and all over the front of the Toyota. They stood in front of the car, quiet and unsure. Henry’s breath fogging in the space above his head and May thinking that even if she could pick a target, some area where she figured there’d be a heart or a brain, she didn’t have a gun and there were no rocks around them big enough to do the job.

They emptied their half-empty water bottles on the front of the car but it didn’t help much. A few minutes passed in silence before Matthew suggested that they hit it again. “Yanno” to put it out of its misery. She didn’t know if he was joking but when they got back into the car, the engine didn’t start, so they cut the radio and waited for the creature to die.

Cicadas buzzing like an electric fence on the side of the road and the A4 too far away to walk back to. They watched it slough off its life like snakeskin. Like something dirty it was glad to be rid of, something with a smell. It dissolved like snow.

Three hours later, AA finally arrived.



YASHASWI DUGAR

ONCE UPON A DREAM



PALINDROME

JAYROLD D. TRASPORTE

After Marcus Silock's Great Expectation

I'm afraid I'm losing myself. I've lost myself twice today. One in the office. The other in the street. When was the last time you lost yourself? Have you ever lost yourself? Do you like losing yourself? How many times do you lose yourself in a day? Is twenty times an exaggeration, would you say? When you lose yourself, how do you feel before and after? Losing yourself is expensive. Sometimes cheap. Agree or disagree, having a self is scarier than losing a self? How do you see yourself in this world? Do you see yourself in this world? How would you like yourself to be seen? When you look at other people, do you see yourself in them? Do you also think of them losing themselves? Have you ever thought of losing yourself with them? What do you think about the whole population losing themselves altogether? How many selves do you have? Which self do you see on a computer screen? Should we believe you if you say you are this self now and that self minutes ago? How many selves do you lose per week? Would you prefer losing that self or the other self today? Do you love having many selves? When you look in the mirror, out of a hundred selves, which self do you see? Do you even see the self you wanted to be? Do you? Do you?

A THOUSAND HEADLINES BEFORE BREAKFAST

SUPRATIM HALDER

Morning arrives through the rectangle of light,
The sun hasn't even negotiated with the sky.
My thumb starts with a small pilgrimage,
Scrolling through wars, elections, and scandal -
As the market falters and bridges collapse, lives are forgotten.

A thousand headlines before breakfast.

The kettle whistles like a distant siren's cry-
Somewhere, a village watches its rivers dry.
Somewhere, a minister asks to enjoy rape,
Somewhere, the judiciary cleans its stains -
Between an iPhone 37 ad' and mobile games.

The world trembles in bullet points.

Truth arrives fragmented -
Half sentences gasping for context,
Statistics stacked like unfinished buildings.
Somewhere between certainty and rumour,
A story mutates quickly.

The algorithm knows my appetite:
Fear, outrage, and curiosity.
Served hot and endlessly renewable.



My bread burns while the world rearranges itself,
The expert netizens argue in the comments,
Where everyone is a brief sovereign.

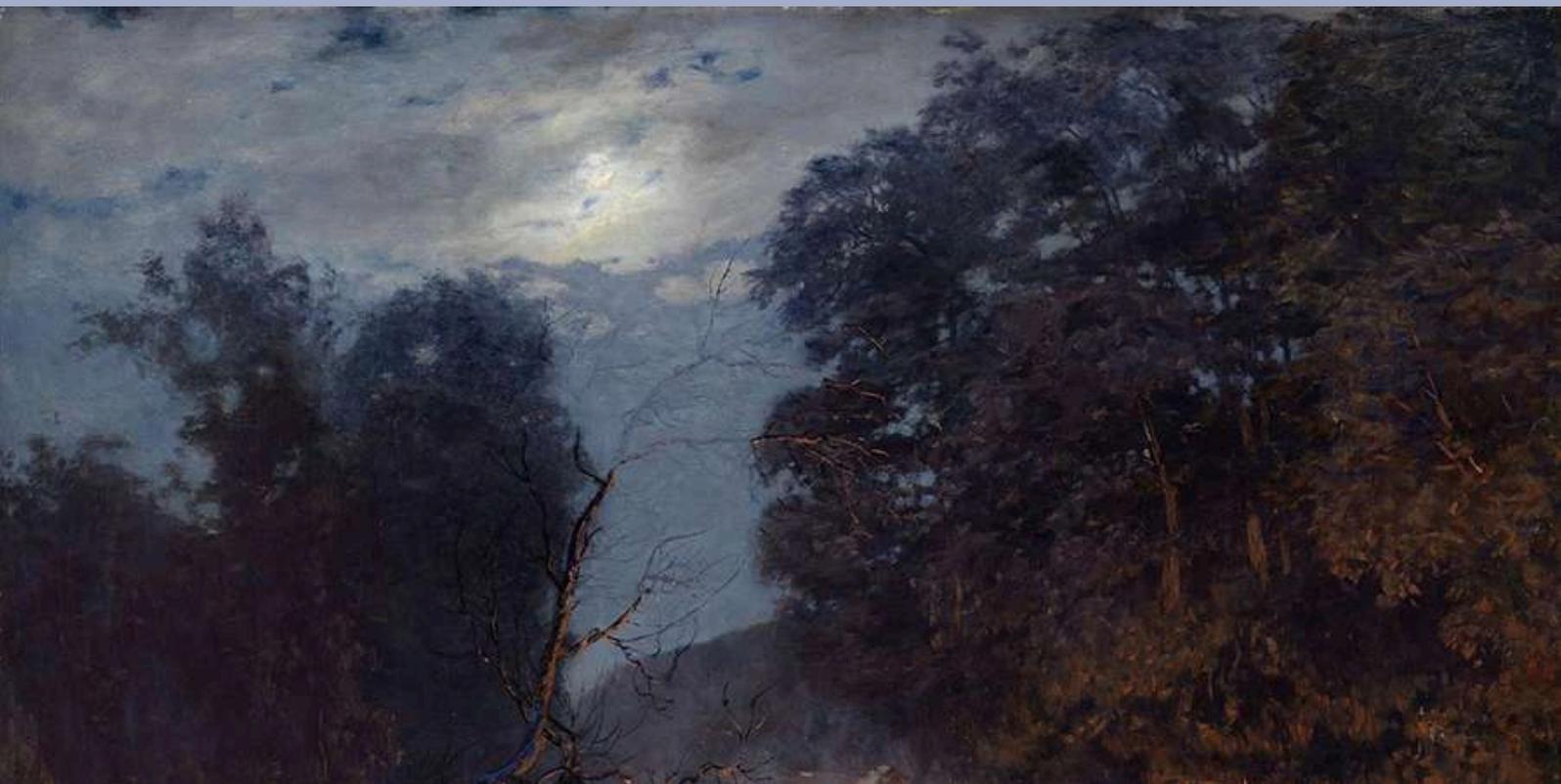
I swallow the news with my morning tea -
Bitter, urgent, incomplete.

Outside, the street is ordinary -
A milkman ringing his bicycle bell,
The mason crying, for gas is nowhere to be found-
While the affluent look for many an induction oven.

Yet in my pocket, the planet spins faster -
Tilting under the weight of the headlines.

By the time the cup is empty, plates rearranged -
I've survived bombing, hate speech, and a genocide,
And rumours that walked like ghosts -
Truths that dissolved even before the afternoon.

A thousand headlines before breakfast
And the day still has not begun.





UNTIMELY RIPPED

LIMERENCE

MAZ JARDON



ON BOARD THE SUBJUNCTIVE EXPRESS

CHANDRASHMITA MITRA

In retrospect, Jonas notices for the first time the peeling tiles and the caving ceiling and the bent stools. The walls are serrated with uneven primer coatings. The air happens to be viscous with greasy steam wafting from noodle bowls. It is a night to be remembered whilst it is in the process of being eventually forgotten, left to collect dust in some crenellated corner of the brain. The mind is always falling through, catching against loopholes, that attraction to gravity. Centre of the earth. Laws of physics spent on unscientific ramifications of disjointed projections.

Memory is a funky thing, no?



It's a back alley story, hunger numbing all the rest of the senses, the smell of seaweed rotting under his nose. He must have choked once, because Jonas remembers gulping down water (which he generally does not consume during a meal) from a crushed plastic bottle that had likely been drawn from a vending machine at some deserted gas station. Recalling events gives him a migraine. Better to have lived the moment and be done with it. Perhaps Jonas is under the influence of some drug. Perhaps he had been so then. Whatever the case, time is as relevant to him as legality is to the criminally inclined.

One entry goes like, 'Died a week ago and the tombstones in the cemetery rise up like teeth chronicling around my heart, which sometimes seems like it has still retained its pulse. Can psychosomatic tendencies run even in death? God, please answer. Otherwise I may have to have to scratch the ghostliness away.' There are scrawled observations about clinical emotions and scheduled grief, life's complexities draining down the sides of vacuous eyes, some grandfatherly ghost expelling a spectral stream on his equally-dead brother's grave because 'Don't you dare burrow your way into my wife's coffin, Henry, you grimy bloody bell-end!' and the like.



But Jonas also comes across entries which are so lovelorn that he feels ashamed of even having known a sliver of affection. Neighbours as star-crossed lovers, school mates going from writing of each other in their lock-and-key journals to including each other in their marriage certificates and wills, a coworker turned into an expectant father at the maternity ward as he loses his calm and his will to live so that someone is forced to release a headline that reads:

Man Crash Lands Into An Anxiety So Deep That Even The Love-But-Also-Mostly-Worry Of Upcoming Fatherhood Can't Cushion His Organs From The Fall.

There are also pages of banality that rise like convex pleas protruding heavenwards from a promontory of desperation. 'So yesterday I had my first ever college entrance test, and boy did it go shite. I have no hope of being selected but I still want to be. Now see I know that you have nothing to prove to anyone, God, but please prove to me just this once that you exist somewhere out there. Please, please, please just help me.'

Jonas sometimes laughs and sometimes cries while reading all this. Train windows fog up by the sheer force of human breath, collective life. A stink-eye is thrown and a shy grin is received, words are exchanged and facts spar against each other. The sky stretches wide and open like a generous smile. Split knuckles turn to embrace a caress for a change. Jonas leaves the platform with a lightness to his step. He leaves the diary on an empty bench—neglected, awaiting, steadfast as a Benedictine brother, possessing a severed-a-star type of foreboding. Feelings-watery-enough-to-slip-between-the-cracks-in-your-ribs sort of premonition. And I turn away from him, having done my part.

It is only this moment, these minutes sifting in a person's mind which keep the walls of reality standing on porous theories of itself.



A CITY THAT KEEPS ON CHANGING



YASH CHOUDHARY



THE PIT

PRIYANKA KAPOOR

The spark at the centre of the spiral burned down the streets,
and in a faraway land
Shabu catches the smell of death
and dances with his torn feet

as the hollow men portion out
blood, their hearts—wet earth
thrum with the seismic pleasure of
swatting out a fat mosquito,
one humid afternoon.

Up on the mountain across the
border, a flurry of birds wring in a
final flight, as demon eyes fall upon earth,
rumbling the primordial pit of their stomach
—that remembers the terror from the egg—
as they lay down to sleep.



NIGHT SONG

SARAH KERSEVICH

the cord to the light swings off and on
light then dark

we are revived by all that has been washed
clean

the spark of cinnamon and rosehips

pores in powdered brick

mother prefers not buttercream nor rye

but she sings the high and dry

a song about a few long faces and their
place in time

a few points in a line on display

in the stacked constellations of each octave

her voice spreads its roots through her
baked red earth

a ribbon of parallel waves crescendos

decrescendos

adagio cascading like silk

on alabaster stone



WHILE IN THE BATH, I DREAM ABOUT TAKING A BATH

SARAH GREENWOOD

That time I drew a bath
and it grew stone feet
swayed and rocked me like a babe
drew me to its breast
where I suckled and grunted

The time it stamped so hard
on the white tiled floor
that it crashed through
into my neighbours' bedroom
where they too were wet and shiny

That time it made a babe of me
wet and shiny and newborn
It emptied and then filled again
with water too hot or too cold and
no control of the taps

The time I drew a bath
and it drew my blood
dark and sinister up the wall
and the water was suddenly gone
and I was afloat





TEMPESTA

ILLARIA VENTURI



LOITERING IN THE LIMINAL

NANDINI UPADHYAY

A photo essay by a girl visiting eerie, liminal spaces at night in Delhi

The first time I was introduced to the word “loitering”, it was a conversation I had with my dad while I was an Indian teenage girl living in Europe. I had long been protesting what I perceived to be a lack of freedom in “going out” the same way my European classmates could go out into the city freely, even at night, without any adult guardians accompanying them. Since I belonged to an Indian household, and being a girl at that, I always got the impression I couldn’t do so. The very fact that I used the public bus to go to school and back home was in and of itself notable. My dad then told me that simply “loitering” attracts undue attention, especially due to my identity. He then informed me that some officers asked my brother-in-law what he was doing while he was in a train station waiting for a train. Once, during the three years that we lived there, my mom and I, along with my friends and their mom left the store Müller, and the guard at the store took my mom and my friend’s mom inside a small room for checking, shutting the door even though no “theft” tag had beeped. However, such an incident was a rare exception in the city I lived in which for the most part was quite safe for everyone. Years later, in Indonesia, a newly made French friend, then 17 years old, had gone back home at midnight, while her dad said goodbye and left hours earlier. The next day, my dad again explained how the Nirbhaya case happened at around 10 PM. When I studied in school in Indonesia, I felt comparatively restricted compared to my classmates who even went clubbing, and during spring break also went to Bali with their friends. Granted, I had no friends during school to “go out” with, even if I would have had the permission. But I felt that I didn’t quite have the opportunity to build those friendships, significantly due to the fact that I was more restricted.



I'm 26 now, back in Delhi, and so obviously I go to places with friends, but the protectiveness looms still. My uber rides are always shared, oftentimes I'm even picked up and dropped, and obviously discouraged from staying out after dark. Being a musician I leave gigs of fellow musicians earlier than my male colleagues. Unsurprisingly, all throughout my college years, my clothes were never "too revealing", since I used public transport for commuting, even though the college itself had no dress code. A concerned aunt has pointed out to me that being "pretty" makes me more vulnerable, and I had heard she disapproved of my use of an Ola or Uber bike. This opinion was also shared by another male colleague, as I was preparing to leave for home at night after a recording session. "You're cute no, if you weren't, I wouldn't have an issue." The thing is, it HAS in fact happened that an Ola bike driver was inappropriate with me. He texted me calling me "cute" later in the day after dropping me off to college in the morning. After a recording session, a drunk dude was inappropriate with me in the metro, even though I was on the edge of the women's compartment, even going as far as sitting in front of me. Collegemates have crossed the line of acceptable behaviour several times. So, if it is true that these unwanted advances and incidents of harassment occur, isn't it fair for well-wishers to then be protective? Isn't it fair then to ask that I don't stay outside after sundown, that I keep my parents updated about my whereabouts? I don't go out much at all, owing to my introverted nature. But perhaps if I was a man, maybe I would take more night strolls, being a night person as I am, through and through. The issue is, little is said of the inherent right of women to be out and about in public spaces, even after dark, and truly feel like they belong.

It is with this context that Shilpa Phadke, Sameera Khan and Shilpa Ranade wrote the book *Why Loiter?*, which was released in 2011. It was mainly concerned with the city of Mumbai and that despite Mumbai's reputation as a safe city for women compared to other major cities of India, women still strategise their safety and movements in public spaces. Moreover, it pointed out how women had to be seen as being out for a particular reason, whether that be university, work or the femininity-acceptable shopping, and that the spaces viewed as "safe public spaces" for largely middle to upper class women, such as coffee shops and malls, were actually ever-increasing private spaces masquerading as public spaces, owing to gentrification.



The book fundamentally posed the question of women being able to loiter, just be outside in public and take up space, not have to make themselves smaller by clutching their bags and folders. The book also addressed the demonisation of poor, lower caste and Muslim men, done in the name of protecting the women (assumed to be “good” Hindu, upper-caste, middle-to-upper class, heterosexual, cisgender), which adversely leads to the increased surveillance of women. The then increasing right-wing politics and visions of a neoliberal “global” city were increasingly gentrifying areas and attempting to “clean up” the city of the poor and the marginalized. The night is seen as the realm of men and not “good girls” since the sexuality of the “good girls” is of paramount importance, and is controlled so that women don’t get with the “wrong” type of guy outside religious, caste and class lines. Muslim women face struggles related to being ostracised both for being Muslim and controlled by their own communities. The increasing lack of accessibility and gatekeeping of public spaces, which are being gentrified for primarily the middle to upper classes ultimately keeps everyone out, and the “othering” of different communities only leads to increased surveillance of women. Ultimately, the book advocates for people of all different backgrounds comfortably loitering in public spaces, without the expectation of consumption or productivity, and feeling safe while doing so. The book underlines the necessity of sufficient and inclusive public spaces, with accessible infrastructure and at the same time, ensuring the safety of everyone. The most significant argument of the book did not concern avoiding violence, but the right for women, and other marginalized groups to prioritize their own pleasure: “While foregrounding violence has put women’s issues on to the national agenda, it has also meant that violence becomes the only language in which one can engage with questions of gender in public space. Every time a woman steps out of her home, it is the spectre of violence that she must confront rather than any anticipation of pleasure.” Ultimately, we can’t just “protect our girls” forever, and girls can’t just strategise their safety in public and freedom in their homes forever. We must move towards building cities and societies which guarantee freedom and security for everyone.



In 2014, in the aftermath of the 2012 Delhi case, the book inspired a campaign Why, Loiter, started by Neha Singh, in which women went out at night for leisure, singing songs in public transports, and simply existing in a public space at night. The movement garnered significant attention both nationally and internationally, and Neha Singh was featured as one of the BBC 100 women. Recently, I have heard of many women sharing their experience of Mumbai being a much safer city for women, and them feeling more relaxed to be outside even at night. However, there are many more women out and about in Delhi too in 2026. I'm writing this essay sitting in an "upbeat" coffee house, and it is well after dark yet I see many girls with each other and occasionally a guy around me. I'm also fulfilling the 2026 "urban girl" cliché by trying a matcha for the first time, though that is more out of sheer curiosity than anything else. Granted, that this is still one of the "private public spaces" with a jazz playlist, still catering to the middle to upper classes, but things seem to have changed from the time the book was written. Not all spaces and places are as safe however. "Access to public space is even more fraught with anxiety after dark. For seduction, pleasure and risk are deeply interwoven with the night. Darkness represents the possibilities of both danger and pleasure- a device used by various popular narratorial texts, audio-visual and written," the authors write. "The darkness of the night presents the possibility of meeting the proverbial stranger, a source of both anticipation and anxiety." During the research for Why Loiter, the authors asked women about the public spaces that made them feel unsafe, and they reported street corners, staircases and foot over bridges as unsafe, the most important factor in the comfort that women felt being lighting. Adequate, warm lighting makes any of us feel safer and welcomed. The authors found that there were crucial parts of stations such as toilets and exits which were dimly lit. Unused platforms too were seen as threatening. It could be said that the spaces that bring with them anxiety are liminal spaces.

"Liminal space" has emerged as a popular internet aesthetic, with images often evoking the exact eeriness that women in Indian cities like Delhi avoid. The word "liminal" originates from the Latin word *Limen* which means threshold. "Liminal landscapes are in-between spaces. Seasides and beaches are archetypal liminal landscapes," writes Bjørn Thomassen in his essay titled "Revisiting Liminality: The Danger of Empty Spaces". He further notes:

"The seaside is something more than just the end of dry and inhabited land: it is a coastline with something on the other side of the threshold."



For the pre-historic, neolithic man caves could be regarded as liminal spaces, as they were often passageways. Shamanistic rituals often took place in caves. Rites and rituals themselves are liminal, since the time during a ritual is an “in-between time.” The Greeks thought of the middle of rituals and rites as having their own spatial reality. Arnold van Gennep introduced the concept of liminality in his book *Les Rites de Passage* and it was further developed by Victor Turner who described liminality as anything “betwixt or between.” He showed “how ritual passages served as moments of creativity that freshened up the societal make-up, and argued that rituals were much more than mere reflections of social order.” Van Gennep also mentioned ‘the territorial passage’. “Van Gennep clearly saw territorial border zones or border lines, thresholds or portals, as structurally identical with the intermediate period of a ritual passage: spatial and geographical progression correlates with the ritual marking of a cultural passage. Moreover, van Gennep even indicated that perhaps the physical passage of a threshold somehow preceded the rites that demarcate a symbolic or ‘spiritual’ passage: ‘A rite of spatial passage has become a rite of spiritual passage,’” Thomassen writes. Karl Jaspers described the “axial age” as the “in-between period between two structured world-views and between two rounds of empire building.” Jaspers described this time as an “age of creativity” with “free-standing intellectuals” who were “often wandering ascetics and therefore spatially uprooted.” These axial ‘leaps’ happened at the “in-between areas between larger civilisations in liminal places: not at the centres, nor outside reach of main civilizational centres but exactly at the margins, and that quite systematically so in the Eastern Mediterranean, China and India.” Anthropologists have described various kinds of fluid and hybrid culture as encompassing liminality, such as transgenderism and transexuality.

Returning to the internet aesthetic of Liminal Space, it began trending in the late 2010s, with origins from 4chan. The /x/Paranormal board was asked by an anonymous user to “post disquieting images that feel off” and the image posted was of an empty office with nothing but an empty chair. This then led to “The Backrooms” phenomenon, originating from a “creepypasta” story about backrooms, even spawning its own video game. Today, the subreddit r/LiminalSpace has over 500,000 members and on TikTok #liminalspaces has over 2 billion views. The aesthetic has a particular surrealist feel that is evoked in books like “I’m Thinking of Ending Things” by Iain Reid, which has also been adapted into a similarly surreal and liminal movie on Netflix.

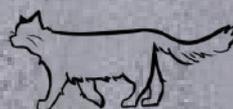




Photo by Lucas Rackliffe on the 4chan "Paranormal Board"



Original depiction of "The Backrooms"



It occurred to me that this is exactly the kind of space that feels even more “off” to us as girls in Delhi, and the exact space that we avoid whenever we are out. Abandoned office rooms, dark, lonesome corners of the metro stations and public transport are no-gos if you’re a woman in Delhi. The night in general is a time when “good girls” aren’t out. In the Indian middle class context, the terrace is a perfect example of a liminal space. It is neither in nor out, it is part of the house whilst also visible, and women’s access can be restricted on a terrace. Conversely however, a woman often dries clothes and spices on a terrace, and this can also be an important place for homemaker women to bond. Dr. Vidya Hariharan points out movies such as the Bengali movie *Chaad* and the Bollywood movie *Delhi-6* portray the terrace as an important space. The character Bittu in *Delhi-6* frequently practices her vocals and dance on the terrace, and reminisces of leaving her patriarchal, middle-class surroundings. She notes:



“The terrace becomes her Liminal space, between tradition and modernity, domestic duty and personal freedom. From a feminist spatial perspective, the terrace allows Bittu to temporarily transcend the restrictions of gendered domesticity and reimagine herself in a different socio-cultural world.”



MONOGRAPH

So I set out to create a photo essay of the liminal spaces in Delhi, and connect it to the extra eeriness they present to us as Indian women. My first attempt was in haste and I wasn't quite as satisfied with the photos in my camera. I also couldn't venture any further from the park in front of my house, because of safety concerns obviously. In any case I had dedicated the whole day to research and so missed the deadline for the open call. So today, I took the metro and headed to Connaught Place towards the evening, went to a café that had matcha and hojicha that had my curiosity, and wrote part of this essay, clicking some snaps at the metro station and on the way. Perhaps surprisingly, perhaps not, even as the night set in, Connaught Place was filled with people, both guys and girls. It should be noted however that CP is a more "upscale" area where the collegiates and office-goers come to hang out. For the photo essay I specifically looked for the eerie lanes, conveniently a couple were near the coffee house itself. Even though I did get judgemental glances I took out my tripod and began. While dealing with a frustrating storage issue a group of guys was chatting nearby, I was so engrossed in fixing my storage issue that I didn't really pay attention to them for a while, until I sensed that they MIGHT have mentioned me. I went out of their sight to my next spot to solve the issue and click some pictures. The storage issue was solved but then I couldn't figure out how to set the timer in selfie mode. Luckily, a girl came asking whether I wanted to take a picture. She then took some pics on my phone, and I was relieved. She asked whether I am an influencer, and I answered I was taking the pics for a project. She mentioned that she herself is an influencer and followed me. It was overall a warm interaction for a girl alone in CP at night. Going back to the eerie gallis I had seen earlier, one of the stall guys after seeing me for the second or third time asked "kiske saath aayi ho? (who are you with)" After all, a lone girl loitering with a phone and a tripod is strange. Despite my consciousness over appearing "weird", I still took some pics at the gallis. Obviously I still received the "when will you head home" calls from my parents. For the record, I didn't do anything too insane, I was still only at the periphery of those lanes and not entirely alone. It was still a project out of my comfort zone, and I made sure to wrap it as quickly as possible. I even discovered the emergency balconies in the Rajiv Chowk metro station which gave major "Backrooms" vibes. Finally, I took the pictures I most looked forward to, which were at the metro station near my house, and the pictures at my house.





This experience led me to really look at places and spaces differently. I peeped in the rooms only for staff at the metro station. I looked for the eerie galls and lanes in CP, and the contrasting warm lighted entrances to coffee houses and restaurants. It made me notice places I hadn't noticed before, and specifically looking for liminal spaces made me see many spaces differently. "Places remember events", James Joyce had scribbled in the margins of *Ulysses*. In the research paper "Places Remember Events: Towards An Ethics of Encounter", Emily Orley mentions how ecologists think of the Earth as a living organism, and how travel writers have frequently anthropomorphised cities and places in their documentation. The anthropologist Keith Basso too spoke of an "interanimation" between spaces and individual people: "As the place animates the thoughts and feelings of the attentive visitor, these same thoughts and feelings animate the place in turn, in a reciprocal and dynamic process." Emily Orley writes, "Places, which he calls 'human constructions par excellence', are thus brought to life, so that 'even in total stillness, [they] may seem to speak'." She also mentions how places contain traces of what happened there in their physical make-up. Scientists have uncovered marine fossils near the summit of Mount Everest, telling the story of how Mount Everest was once a sea floor.



Another obvious example is how Leopold café in Mumbai still contains the bullet holes in its walls from the 26/11 attacks. Doreen Massey calls for a progressive sense of a place that is “unfixed, contested and multiple . . . [and] open and porous” to see it as a “constellation of trajectories.” She argues that we cannot, or rather must not establish boundaries around, or attempt to secure identities of, place (or places). While creating boundaries can provide stability and security, they also lead to attempts to “fix” a place. This leads to “reactionary nationalisms, competitive localisms and introverted obsessions with “heritage.”

Photos from “Remains (2009)” by Lucy Harrison (credits: Emily Orley)



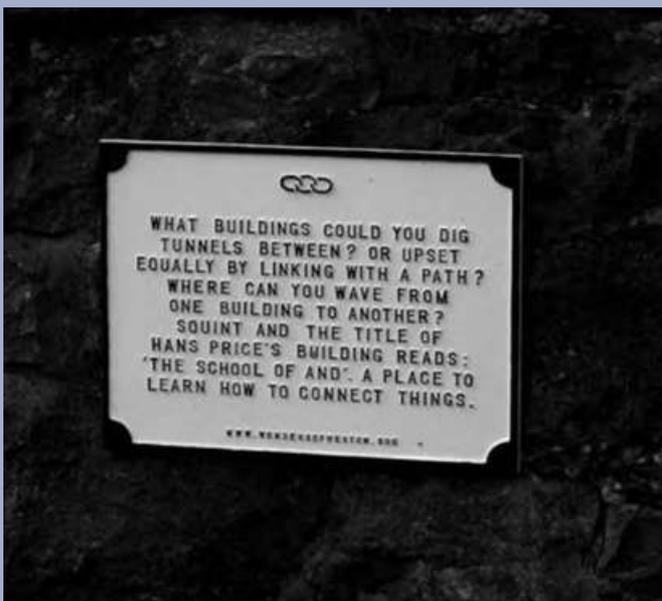
For Massey, therefore, to want to fix the identity of a place is an essentialist tendency that reinforces past traditions and staid ways of thinking. Emily Orley also speaks of viewing a place as an event, since other people influence a place where they visit, and that no place is the same at two different moments: “Place is therefore relative and nowhere is stable. Seen in this way, all landscapes are liminal, transitory by their very nature, constantly suspended in a state of in-between-ness.” Artistic works mentioned by Orley that really embody her ideas are *Remains* by Bath University graduate Lucy Harrison, made in 2009 and *Everything You Need To Build A Town Is Here* by Wrights and Sites (when I tried to google “Lucy Harrison Remains” I came across another Lucy Harrison who had been shot dead over an argument about Donald Trump. The one who shot her was her father. Should we as women also consider the private sphere “risky”?). Ultimately, what Emily Orley points out is that any place should be encountered ethically with the mindfulness that the collective memory of that place, and its individuals may remember you.

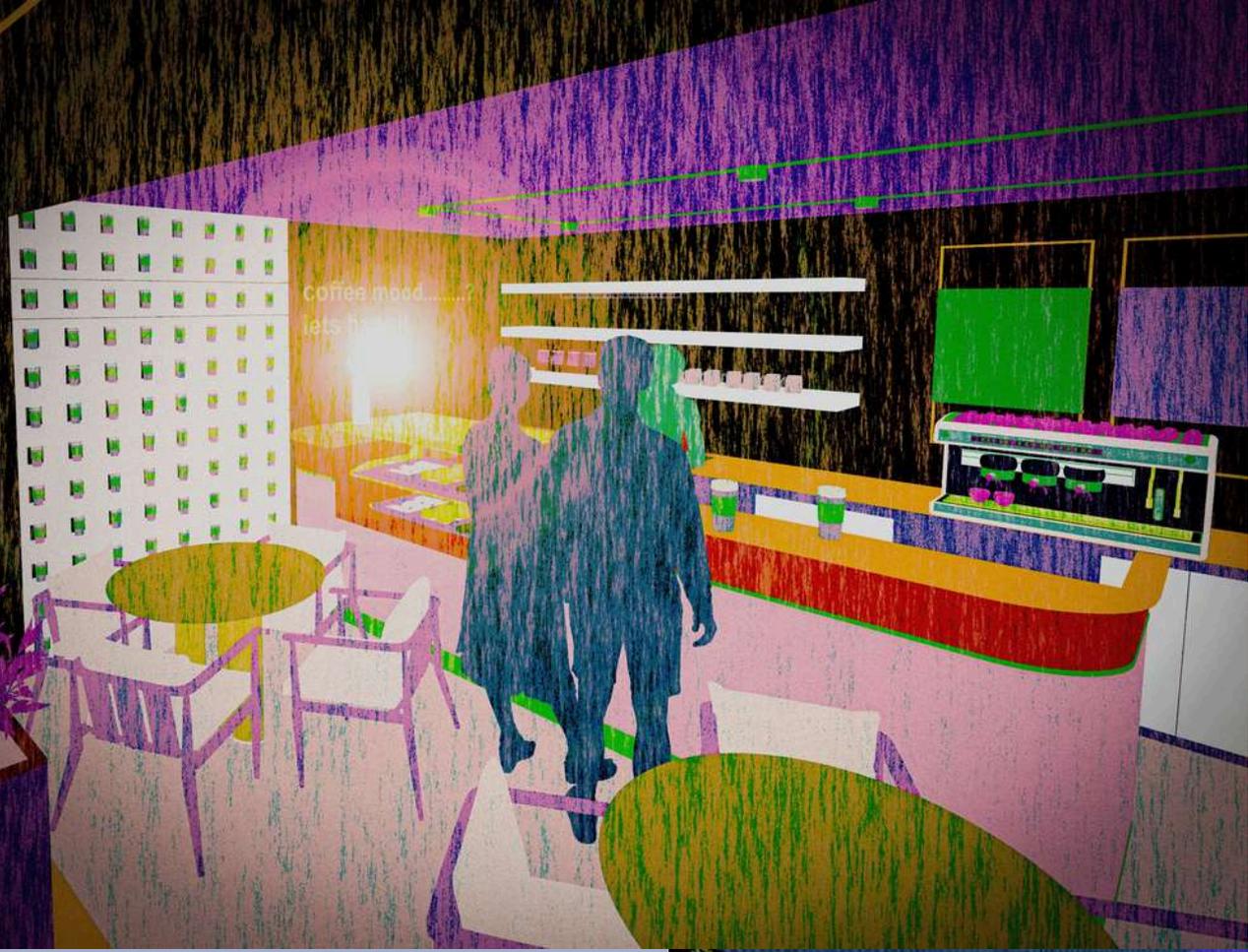




I may have appeared weird tonight clicking pictures with a phone and tripod but I wasn't rude to anyone or hurt anybody. In fact, it is the creepy guy crossing the line who should keep in mind that the individuals, the collective and the place will remember his transgression. This includes the places that we take for granted (where we sleep, where we work), places of transit (for example, the station we rush through each morning on the way to work, the garage where we refuel the car). It includes places we do or do not want to let go of (where we grew up perhaps), places that are forgotten and neglected (underneath, behind, and of course between) and smaller places still: table-tops, pages in books, folded-down corners, margins. Joyce scribbled the words 'places remember events' in the margin of his notes for Ulysses. The margin on that particular page, as a place in its own right, remembered him. This place, here and now (where you are) might remember you. You are implicated. You are responsible. Perhaps this is why we as women should loiter more often in Indian cities, and take more space in the public sphere. So that the city remembers us girls, and that we are as much a part of it. And maybe this all can be the mindful food for thought the next time you're loitering in a place.

Photos from
 "Everything You Need To
 Build A Town Is Here"
 by Wrights and Sites





COFFEE BREAK/ CONSUMERISM



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