

Monograph

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Editor's Note

Ritobrita Mukherjee
Editor-In-Chief

The fire lit by Jennie Livingston's 1991 documentary *Paris is Burning* has not yet simmered down to dying embers, and for the sake of all that is bright and beautiful at the heart of humanity, I believe it never will. I find myself reflecting at length on the painted faces, the shimmering phantasmal forms, and the sheer grit that dominates the screen in the one hour and eleven minutes the film claims from its audience's life, and how it remains three and a half decades later, a seminal treatise on the strength of a community that quite literally wills itself into existence, and does not beg for tolerance from bigots. A world is made privy to us, birthed out of the ashes of innumerable bodies lost to hatred and the violence it begets, and we should be so careful as to not simply stop at shedding a few tears at Venus Xtravaganza being taken away, so cruelly, from our lives.

Paris is Burning is not simply an archive of grief. It is an archive of method. It teaches us how the dispossessed gather the fragments denied to them by family, state, law, medicine, and economy, and from these fragments fashion kinship, spectacle, language, beauty, and survival. The ballroom is not merely a stage; it is a counter-world where those cast out of the "real" world return as legends, mothers, daughters, executives, royalty, divas, and dreamers. It is where performance becomes shelter, where chosen names become home, and where the body, so relentlessly disciplined by gender, race, class, and desire, finds a grammar of its own. Monograph's July issue emerges as a homage to the rebellion of existence in a world that rehearses your disappearance in every moment that you snatch away from it defiantly.



It is in the bureaucratic demand to prove one's identity, the police gaze, the family's silence, the classroom's humiliation, the workplace's exclusion, the clinic's suspicion, the border's refusal, the landlord's question, the lover's fear, that a quieter architecture of annihilation finds its footing, creating an atmosphere of violence that doesn't always manifest itself through visible wounds, assaults and deaths. The subjects of *Paris is Burning* are wounded, yes, but never reducible to their wounds. They are poor, racialised, queer, trans, precarious, and often unsafe, but they are also funny, vain, ambitious, tender, inventive, and devastatingly alive. Their lives remind us that marginality is not a lack of worldliness; it is often the site where new worlds are imagined first. The violence that surrounds them does not exhaust them. It sharpens the urgency of their self-making.

In bringing together work around marginality, queer life, state power, humiliation, embodiment, desire, self-harm, memory, and revolt, this issue seeks to dwell in that difficult space between injury and insurgency. Perhaps the most radical lesson of the ballroom has been in its insistence that, to recreate oneself in a world that is committed to one's erasure isn't frivolous but inherently political. It refuses death's monopoly over the bruised, surveilled, mocked, endangered body, wrapping it in sequins, in song, in kinship, in rage, in chosen names, in all the skin there is to touch. This issue is dedicated to those refusals, those counter-worlds. To every life that has had to rehearse survival as performance and performance as survival. To every body that has been made into a battleground and still insists on becoming a home.


THE ONLY THING TO QUEER IS FEAR ITSELF



Ayana Bhattacharya



Perhaps you can picture it too, the create mode-esque meme regurgitated every June first: the words “PRIDE MONTH” printed five times against a plain background. Read it top to bottom, and by the last line, letters are highlighted (in varying rainbow gradients) to spell out “DEMON”. Now an embellishment on tote bags and t-shirts, the graphic has found general success with older, conservative audiences scoping the depths of Facebook disinformation, and with younger users who’ve grown accustomed to an irony epidemic. Oh, the joy of making fun of the humourless. “Pri(demon)th” is lightly offensive at worst, and a raptly embarrassing attempt at caution against the queer community in most interpretations. At the tail-end of Pride, with rainbow-coloured logos and sprightly declarations of camaraderie to wane within the coming week, there is some pre-emptive cynicism swirling in the air. But it’s about time you packed up the flags and bade farewell to the promise of campy couture anyway. In this country, we don’t even let you watch gay people on screen.

India’s film censor board has withered its appetite for cinematic provocations. This year alone, it’s come under fire time and again for ill-advised cuts and ratings, with its most recent victim being *Leviticus*. Adrian Chiarella’s debut directorial feature stars two gay teens subject to the violent whims of their conservative religious community. Their relationship exposed, the boys are exorcised and cursed, a hellish entity taking the shape of what each desires most: the other. An uneasy, if overt allegory for conversion therapy, *Leviticus* has (so far) failed to gain a theatrical release in India. It doesn’t come as a surprise that the soldering of religion and queerness doesn’t feel palatable to our prudish censor board — discomfort often conceals what is worth examining. And historically, horror is where discomfort thrives. Where else would we dare to believe in the monster in the closet, or the body ruptured inside-out?



It's easy to cast queerness in meaty roles for horror. Even if only in villainy, the genre lends itself to the outcast and social rejects. When it first premiered in 1975, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* was a box-office disaster. Audiences were irreparably jarred by the hop-skip-jump of genres and scowled at the ludic extravagance of its costumes. It was only later, in its reruns as a midnight movie, that *Rocky Horror* earned audience approval for its wacky, raunchy maximalism. In an iconic scene, Dr. Frank-N-Furter, dressed head-to-toe in glitzy (if gaudy) lingerie, declares, "I'm just a sweet transvestite from Transsexual, Transylvania!" There's little horrification involved; the fun is in the ostentatious and explosively queer characters.

But where is the horror, then? Is there a numbing dread and paralysing bleakness illuminated without splatters of unspooling insides? Well, with its overtures of stifling paranoia and skeletal dialogue, Jane Schoenbrun's *I Saw the TV Glow* is a cautionary tale, a sketch of a life un-lived. Unlike the flamboyance of *Rocky Horror*, it's darkly introspective — what if you never take the leap? Owen only watches from the sidelines as Maddy escapes their hometown to embrace her true self. Though she urges him to fracture reality as he knows it, Owen leads the ordinary life, letting inertia suffocate every wriggling instinct to survive. That's the horror: staying exactly the same.



The monster changes depending on what you're watching. Sometimes it's fleshy and hammered together, sometimes it's smiling in fishnets. But it's almost always a cipher, a mirror held up to a disintegrating society. With queer horror, the question to be asked is this: have we been hunting the wrong monster? With a film like *Leviticus*, the horror isn't in the violent entities we invent, but rather the systems that invent them. Every ghost story is just a refraction of the truth.



The Body is the Only Law Left



Srijoni Nandi

There is a specific kind of queer man the internet has decided is the correct kind. He is lean in the particular way that requires effort but must not be acknowledged.

The body must be revered as a fait accompli. He is somewhere on your Instagram ‘For You’ page eating less than 1,400 calories with the serenity of someone who has made peace with God, captioning it “listening to my body.”

He has cheekbones. He is always, always beautiful in a way that looks biologically “gifted”, because the discipline is the point but the discipline must not show.

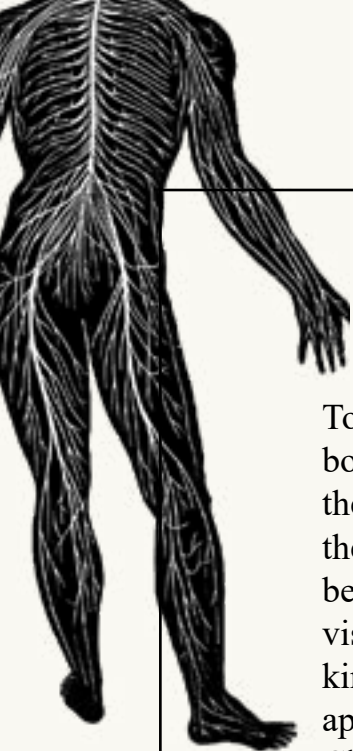
Queer men make up roughly 5 percent of the total male population but somehow account for 42 percent of men with eating disorders. If one is surprised, they need only to look at it as a logical outcome of a very specific social architecture. Barbara Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts coined the term ‘objectification theory’ to explain why women develop disordered relationships to their bodies under the patriarchal and more prevalent male gaze. The extension of this theory to queer men is elegant in its brutality, for they are both the subject and the executors of the objectification of other men. This internalized self-objectification leads to chronic body comparison with the rest of the queer communities where expression of one’s self can dictate your survival. In other words, the straight woman and the gay man share a position where both are trying to attract men, both learn to see their own bodies as a collection of parts to be evaluated. Queer men consistently score higher than heterosexual men on self-objectification measures, experiencing the male gaze in ways structurally similar to women and internalizing it inward. This is where the private history and the public performance of the problem converge. An unspoken admiration for gaunt facial structures, biologically unhealthy bodily conditions, leanness and weak muscularity among queer men stems from sociocultural and minority stress-related factors. These aren’t from anything inherent to queer communities themselves, but from what those communities have been handed and what they have, in turn, handed each other. Internalised negative attitudes towards homosexuality directly predict body dissatisfaction, preoccupation with muscularity, and body fat in young men who have sex with men, meaning the more shame a man carries about his own desire, the more likely he is to carry it in his body instead, wearing it as discipline, as thinness, as the performed legibility of a body that has learned to compensate. The “What I Eat In A Day” queer man on TikTok is not a “shallow” content creator by virtue of his unnatural meal recommendations. He is, unfortunately, the end product of a pipeline that begins in a closet.

If one were to look at queer literature, a similar pattern of fixation on queer anatomies can be dissected. Andrew Holleran's *Dancer from the Dance* (1978) portrays gay men in New York City and Fire Island, specifically about what it costs to live inside a community that has made physical beauty its primary organising principle. This is the trap Holleran is mapping: beauty as the price of admission to the only world that will have you. Set in the post-Stonewall, pre-AIDS window (a moment of genuine liberation, real joy) Holleran too highlights the good fortune of those days. However he does not hesitate to be clear-eyed about what liberation looks like when it gets reorganised around a new hierarchy. The closet may have been exited but the tyranny of toxic beauty conventions is still very much prevalent. The standards of queer beauty therefore are internalised so completely that it feels like desire itself. This is why it is so much harder to recognise and call out as harm.

In *The Swimming-Pool Library* (1988), the usual hierarchies of class and education are suspended and renegotiated through the body, be it its condition, its dimensions, its sexual currency, thereby creating alternative power relations that run entirely on physical terms. In lieu of this, the concept of 'appearance potency' feels particularly relevant. This refers to the ideals of appearance that stem from environments of sustained exposure to unrealistic appearance ideals, disproportionate value placed on physical attractiveness, and chronic comparison, particularly in gay male communities.

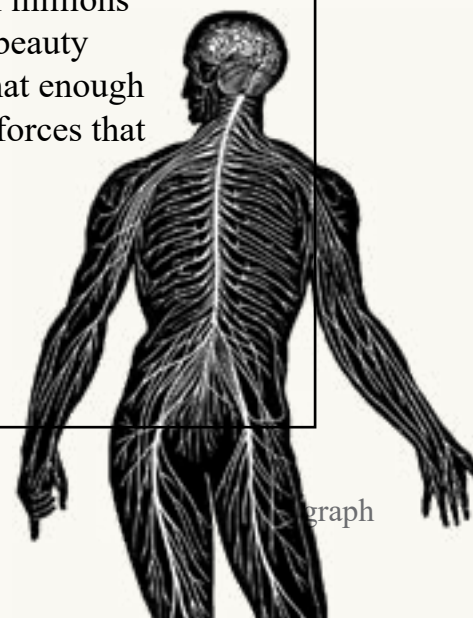
Now consider what it actually means to have an eating disorder when the state has already declared an opinion on your body. If you cannot control whether you exist legally, whether your desire is permissible, whether the state will protect or prosecute you, the body naturally becomes the last jurisdiction. You can control what goes into it and thus can control how much space you consume. Minority stress therefore emerges as a common cause of the chronic psychological burden of stigmatisation, discrimination, and social exclusion, that is a significant driver of eating disorder risk in LGBTQ+ communities, mediating its effects through body surveillance and body shame.

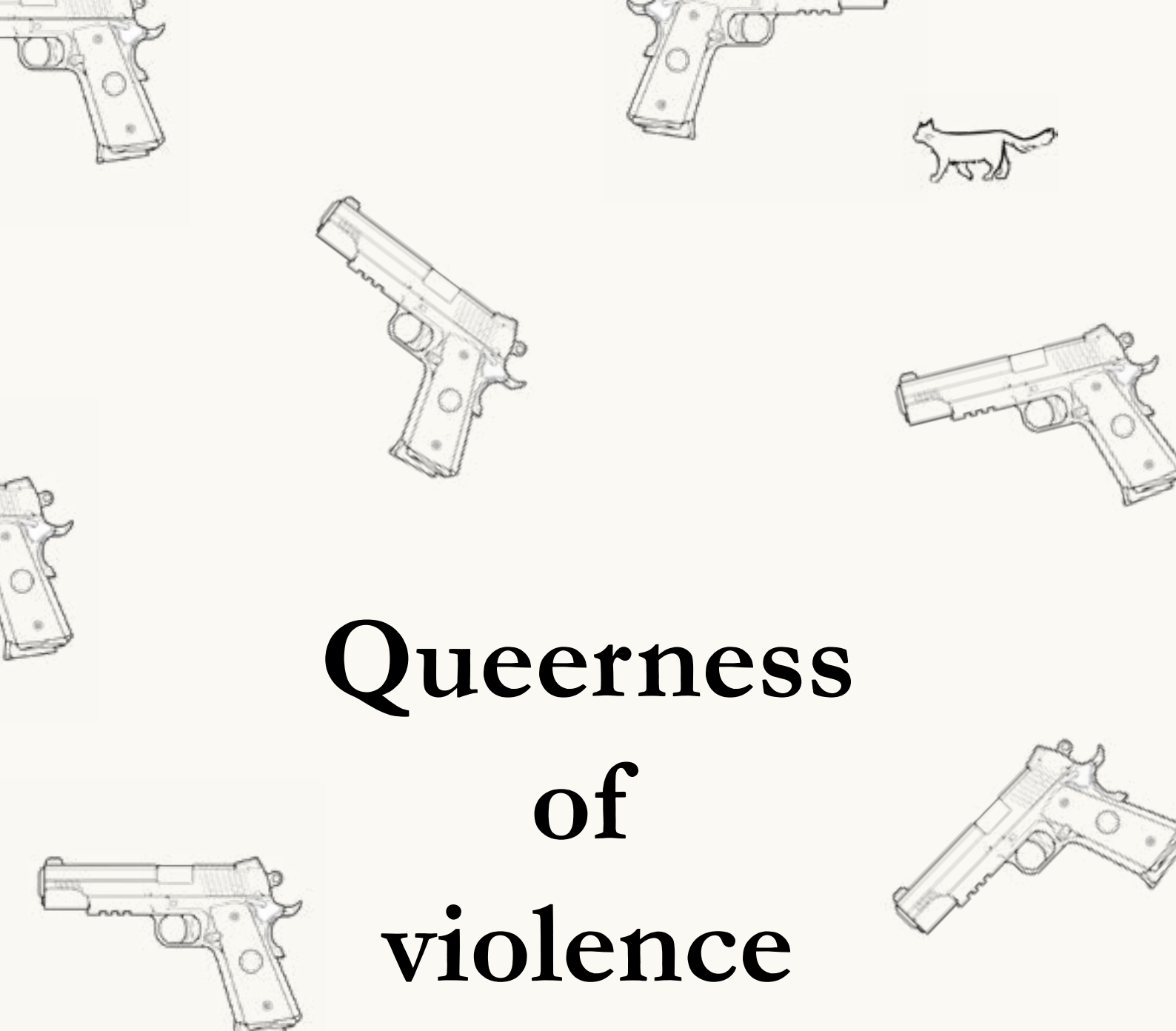




To merely dub eating disordered influencers and flamboyant body-checking forms of media as vanity would be undermining the actual root of the cause. The reality lies within the need for the queer community to consume negative space instead. To become smaller is to become less visible, and to become less visible is to become less violable. Thus thinness emerges as a kind of armour that disappears the body entirely, the preemptive apology of the body that has learned to ask for less room. Childhood homophobic bullying and experiences of sexual objectification are directly associated with disordered eating attitudes and behaviours, thereby signifying how the restriction often begins early, in adolescence, when the body is first becoming legible as queer to the people around it. Homosexual male dating app, Grindr's "tribes" (twink, otter, bear, muscle) are a taxonomy of the body that acts as a social sorting mechanism. What remains, at the end of all this, is a practice that looks from the outside like discipline but from the inside resembles almost a persistent, nagging desperation. A starvation spree is then touted joyfully and maintained dangerously past the point of hunger and good health.

In the rampant idol and worship culture of fads, microtrends and highly flimsy societal conventions, it is a question worth asking that in the gay male body, who really is the god that is being pleased? It certainly isn't the man in the mirror for the mirror is never satisfied. Could the answer then lie in the culture that built the mirror in the first place? The self-restriction of extreme dieting is a prayer addressed to a church that will not grant absolution. This is the devotion towards a toxic conventional standard that claims its vice-like grip onto the minds of millions of queer adolescent men. The goal of a transcendental beauty lies almost always unfulfilled with a despairing hope that enough discipline will finally make the body acceptable to the forces that have continually chosen to deny their existence.





Queerness of violence

Shreya Datta

In Deborah Levy's 2016 novel "Hot Milk", the sea ebbs and flows in the minds of Sofia and the audience, trying to discern the protagonist's feelings towards her mother and her lover. The novel follows a cantankerous and witty Irish woman in her 60s ailing from a muscle ailment and her twenty-year old daughter as her primary caretaker. In general, the abyss of information available on the internet is usually unhelpful to confused 20-year olds, especially figuring out personal questions about identity. The European settings of Hot Milk attempt to anaesthetize the emotional pain and general violence often associated with sexual awakening. However, this raises a deeper philosophical question about queer film and popular culture. Why does violence play such an integral part in queer cinema?

Over the past few decades, the causes of and intervention for intimate partner violence have been approached and studied. It is only recently that domestic violence, both physical and emotional, have been recorded with higher rates in same-sex couples. A 2018 research paper authored by Luca Rolle and Giulia Giardina, observed that violence has always accompanied sapphic and gay communities but a historical silence based on fears and myths “have obstructed a public discussion on the phenomenon.” Often this silence is associated with fear of losing found family or targeted persecution from the cis-gendered heterosexual community. It can be concluded that almost one-third of sexual minority men and half of sexual minority women in the United States of America affirmed that they were victims of physical and psychological abuse in their relationships. From this data however, lesbian women reported that they experience greater psychological abuse.

The depiction of morally grey queer characters is a subject that most storytellers find difficult to espouse. The tendency to homogenize a community’s suffering in popular culture is often depicted through difficult settings—a drug plagued community, a romance doomed to fail due to religious or ethnic concerns, a coming-of-age story that was violently put to an end. While many filmmakers attempt to depict stories of real-life queer experiences, a criticism of such narratives is that it tends to villainise some queer characters over other, or give more importance to a particularist narrative over others. Many queer audience members crave for a queer romance with a happy ending, but that does not mean that the discrimination does not play a role in such stories. Popular media like *Euphoria* or *Heated Rivalry* have tried to focus more on individual queer relationships, set in intensely heterosexual spheres (hockey and high-school).

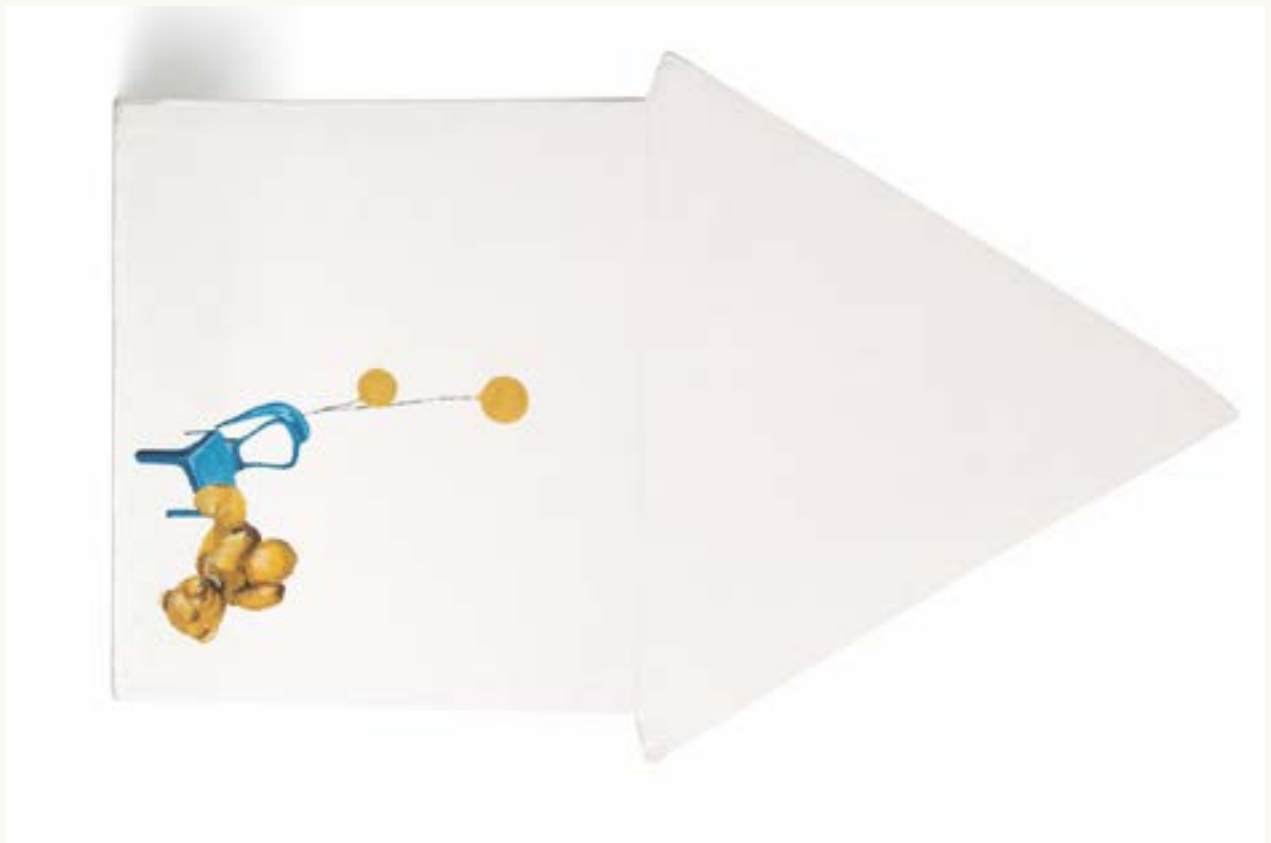
But then, you have *Tar*. In *Tar*, Cate Blanchett pushes her own limits as a musical conductor who is known to be predatory, paranoid and a narcissist. Her outwardly behaviour is couched under the need to pursue musical excellence and perfection where narcissism is the prerequisite. However, the unsettling music of the premise hides something strange, a revelation that she is being spied upon. In this story, music amplifies the violence just beneath the surface. Tyranny and cruelty are expressed through musical revenge, planted stories, leaving the audience wondering who the protagonist is and who she pretends to be. A conclusion that can be implied from such a queer character is that it falls in line with the findings of research on intimate partner violence in same-sex relationships—it is more rampant than we think. *Tar* has a job where “hubris pretty much comes with the territory” where her personality is curated and crafted through conducting and through the music she chooses to play. *Tar* is brave enough to tell a tale of a predator, where she exploits the young and the vulnerable for her own gain, living a life that is fully transactional. Popular culture struggles with premises that are nuanced, complicated and layered. However, all media has a responsibility to portray stories that may not be easy to digest. Maybe, sometimes, all people want to see is the good, the bad and the ugly.



Untitled

Rabia Nasir







The Domestic Space and Queer Reclamation in *Fire* and *Cobalt Blue*



Aditi Meher

In Indian cinema, the household is traditionally depicted as a site of cultural transmission and strong familial bonds. But, when seen critically, the household actually acts as a microcosm of the state. The state operates as an extension of the patriarchal powers enforcing compulsory heterosexuality and inflicting violence upon those who transgress the norms. Two subversive films, Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1996), the first part of 'Elements Trilogy' and Sachin Kundalkar's *Cobalt Blue* (2022), serve as cinematic texts for analysis of this phenomenon. Separated by more than two decades, these films portray the trauma of queer individuals and their journey towards liberation. The protagonists of these movies make use of the domestic spaces for exploring their desires, reappropriate trauma of assault and ultimately reclaim their identities. Furthermore, this essay primarily builds upon Michel Foucault's key concepts like *biopolitics* and *heterotopias*.



Biopolitical Panopticism and Heterosexual Matrix

Biopolitics can be defined as ways through which the mechanisms of power control the subjects, through *anatomo-politics* of the human body.

In Indian context, the state delegates almost an equivalent portion of this regulatory power to the patriarchal unit of family, becoming a panopticon that constantly surveils the members. This is visible in Deepa Mehta's *Fire*, which is one of the first Bollywood films featuring an explicit homosexual relationship; where the family unit sustains by suppressing female desires. The lead characters, Radha and Sita, are bound to their respective husbands who deny them intimacy for different reasons. Ashok, Radha's husband, embraces celibacy, as he was dissatisfied because of Radha's inability to fulfill her reproductive utility according to family's expectations. On the other hand, Sita's husband, Jatin, was forced into marriage with her to uphold the family's social standing while continuing an affair with a woman who refused his marriage proposal. The household quietly tolerates Jatin's infidelity, Ashok's fanaticism and even the horrific abuse of bedridden, mute Bibi, in front of whom the servant masturbates. Yet, the only unforgivable transgression identified within this panopticon is the closeness of Radha and Sita, who seek each other for love and intimacy.

In Sachin Kundalkar's *Cobalt Blue*, the regulatory framework operates within a strict, upper-caste Marathi Brahmin family living in Kochi. The protagonist, Tanay lives in a closeted way, hiding his queer identity. The family here operates through subtle policing, dictating access to spaces which ensures that any expression of queer desire happens discreetly. The psychological violence inflicted upon both Tanay and his sister, Anuja, is rooted in the family's assumption of absolute authority over their bodies and desires.





Spatiality and Queer Heterotopias

Both the films show how the subjugated individuals challenge spatial access by finding alternative strategies within what Foucault defines as ‘heterotopias’, lived, physical spaces that exist outside the dominant norms, are utilized to explore sexuality. In *Cobalt Blue*, the access to these spaces is gendered. Due to Tanay’s male privilege, he enjoys unquestioned access to the guest room which turns into a queer heterotopia. The same patriarchy which assumes male bonding as non-threatening, conversely, forbids Anuja from entering the room. This forces her romance with the guest outside the domestic sphere. Similarly, *Fire* demonstrates how the ordinary household spaces, designed to confine women to domestic labour, transmutes into a site of defiance. Mundane activities like oiling each other’s hair, shopping for jewelry forges the physical and emotional bond between Radha and Sita. One of the subversive acts occurs in the scene of ‘Karva Chauth’, where they choose to fast for each other instead of their respective neglectful husbands. Additionally, the narrative of this movie is radically shifted by intentionally naming the characters after two revered Hindu goddesses, incarnations of Lakshmi, defined by chastity and painful separation from their divine male counterparts. This very reorientation of desires dismantles the mythological archetypes and cultural expectations.

Visual Grammar of Colour

In *Cobalt Blue*, specific aesthetics of colour are used to map psychological violence faced by the characters. The cobalt blue colour is a central motif embedded with a melancholic sense of longing and queer resilience. This blue represents a tension between heteronormative and homonormative interpretations. While heteronormativity identifies blue with masculine features, the homonormative idea of blue represents claiming selfhood and expression of desires. In the film, the homonormative blue is contrasted with colours like yellow and red usually associated with hegemonic masculinity. Cisgender men like Tanay’s father and elder brother, are depicted wearing yellow garments or riding scooter of the same colour. In the film’s ending, after his escape from his family in Kerala and boarding a train to Mumbai, Tanay is shown sleeping wearing a yellow kurta. This underscores the fact that forces of compulsory heterosexuality, enforced jointly by the state and family dictates the determination of one’s identity. If not direct physical violence, these psychological tensions continue to haunt the queer individuals in everyday life.

The Rupture: Confronting the Domestic State

Both the movies highlight a crucial moment where the transgressive bodies reassert autonomy. In *Fire*, the family's quiet tolerance of taboos visibly collapses when Ashok discovers the relationship between his wife and his sister-in-law. Ashok breaks his thirteen-year vow of celibacy in a desperate attempt to ragefully 'correct' Radha's deviance, during which her sari catches fire on a burning stove. This serves as the climax, which is a reclamation of 'Agniparikshya' from Hindu epic where Sita was forced to walk through fire to prove her chastity. But, in the movie Radha endures metaphorical and literal flames, surviving the fire and leaving the burning house behind. It ends with Radha reuniting with Sita in torrential rain, extinguishing flames of her past. In this crucial scene, Radha articulates her reclamation of self by saying, "Without desire there is no point in living...I desire Sita. I desire her warmth, her compassion, her body. I desire to live again." In *Cobalt Blue*, the confrontation is a sudden, unexplained departure of the guest, which leaves both the siblings heartbroken. The aftermath of this heartbreak is also gendered with different ways of punishing transgression. In case of Anuja, after her failed elopement, she is subjected to physical and psychological policing, in which her family tries to tame her tomboyish nature. When questioned by her father, she refuses to take a stance of victim, defending her transgressive act by stating "He introduced me to my own body". However, both ultimately reclaim their shattered selves. Anuja strips away forced feminization and sets out to become a hockey coach, and Tanay channels his isolated and silent grief into becoming a writer.

Synthesis and Queer Utopian Futurity

Fire was released in 1996 when section 377 of Indian Penal Code criminalizing homosexuality existed. It sparked severe backlash from Hindu nationalist groups which viewed lesbianism as a violation of Indian womanhood leading to subsequent de-facto ban of the film followed by eventual re-release. A dialogue in the movie, where Sita laments "There is no word in our language to describe what we are or what we feel for each other", indicating the void faced by queer individuals. And, by the time *Cobalt Blue* was released on Netflix in 2022, the socio-legal landscape of the country had changed. Kundalkar contextualizes the movie in the same timeline when *Fire* was made. A dialogue between the teacher and Tanay, "You and I are criminals in this country" echoes the oppressive reality in the 1990s and at the present as well. The director engages with what Esteban Munoz conceptualized as 'queer utopian futurity'. Munoz argues that queerness is not yet here but an 'ideality', a hopeful future we are approaching towards. According to him, reducing queerness to a mere category or lifestyle choice strips it of its revolutionary power. Queerness is a structuring and new mode of being, collective longing for a world that does not exist yet. He posits queer futurity is a performance of radically different tomorrow which reveals the potentiality of queer aesthetics, a negation of 'what merely is' and pointing to what could be and should be. *Cobalt Blue* uses this grammar of looking back at trauma in the past, not with despair, but acknowledging that survival is possible.

Machuca

Catatte Taipia



I become the soul,
The fevered pulse,
Breath by breath,
Body to body,
In coils I come,



In that space between God
and the crush of your ribs,
Every scar is scraped through
Clenched in my fist

I
Sever,
I
Savor,

My every footfall,
Your every heartbeat,
A debt of mercy
I grant you life.

Out of your heavy-lidded,
drugged eyes,
I peer like blood
Where the wine glass lies

I laugh and feast
at every ruinous defeat,
Demanding your meat for tithe

Flesh for flesh,
I gnaw and gnash
Spitting out your heart.
Gulping, gulping, dead
Taking long draws
Of your blood so red

The Great Serpent

Malaika Rai

like the Serpent of biblical times,
Maw unhinged,
I harpoon your entire being.

I
I wouldn't even spare the bone.

Untitled

Ipung Purnomo



Lovely Bones

Sunitha Mary Mookken

There's always room for humor,
Even when you're writing about your own
murder;
Especially then.

I like the picture of heaven,
For each it is different.

"All you have to do is desire it, and if you desire
it enough and understand why - really know - it
will come."

How I really wish this worked down here too.

A day so prosaic,
Can quickly turn to despair.

In that second:

When you were eyeing your crush,
Holding your tummy from laughing so hard,
Biting into that cutlet,
The bottom of someone's world was falling out.

Inspired by Alice Sebold's book by the same name.



The Mantis

Alishba Ali





Body as Witness

Chokila K V



Of Commas and Lowercase Letters

Tayfun Zaidi

In the rose garden we
Eat the sea
Air
Perfumed with imagination
Looking out
The sunrise window
To hills
Beyond red-stone tenements
In overlay worlds
Gorged with time and place

Here lies our realm
Of commas and lowercase
letters

I dream in uneven lines
Of typewriter melodies
But live in computer tangents
And the backspace key
A perfect fifth from familiarity

But in our realm
I fall
Towards commas and
lowercase letters

Untitled

Michael Schuetz



on poems falling out of the black mirror



Saba Khaliq

i woke up beaten by a nightmare a cold summer night, and saw someone in the mirror
across the room, and i'm not superstitious but the mirror broke before i knew who
smiled on the other side,

so i thought

someday i'll wake up—
*someone tells me it'll of course be sooner than
barzakh—*
bearing all the memories of my miscarried
poems
read, for ages, in hopes of

remembrance to

this dust-dull ceiling, crashing in
poverty over my brows,
awaiting Sleep's nectar

someday i'll wake up,
and look myself in the
mirror
that day, the First Day,
and run my violet fingers

along these god-chiseled curves on my black face, forever soiling cyclops and Sirens:

*see! i knew i could look you
in the eye
and live... you're no
Medusa
or Mother*

there's ample perfection in that singular touch in the mirror

as if all Cartesian splits were re-sewn in muscle at all
navels

do not send for your *Kant or Ghazali* just now
(those pipers for twisted fiendish fences)
i have got to eat this perfection

in tanhai,

in unison with only my fetus poems,

glimmering loves in my white lap



HANDMADE HEAVEN

Henry Opeyemi

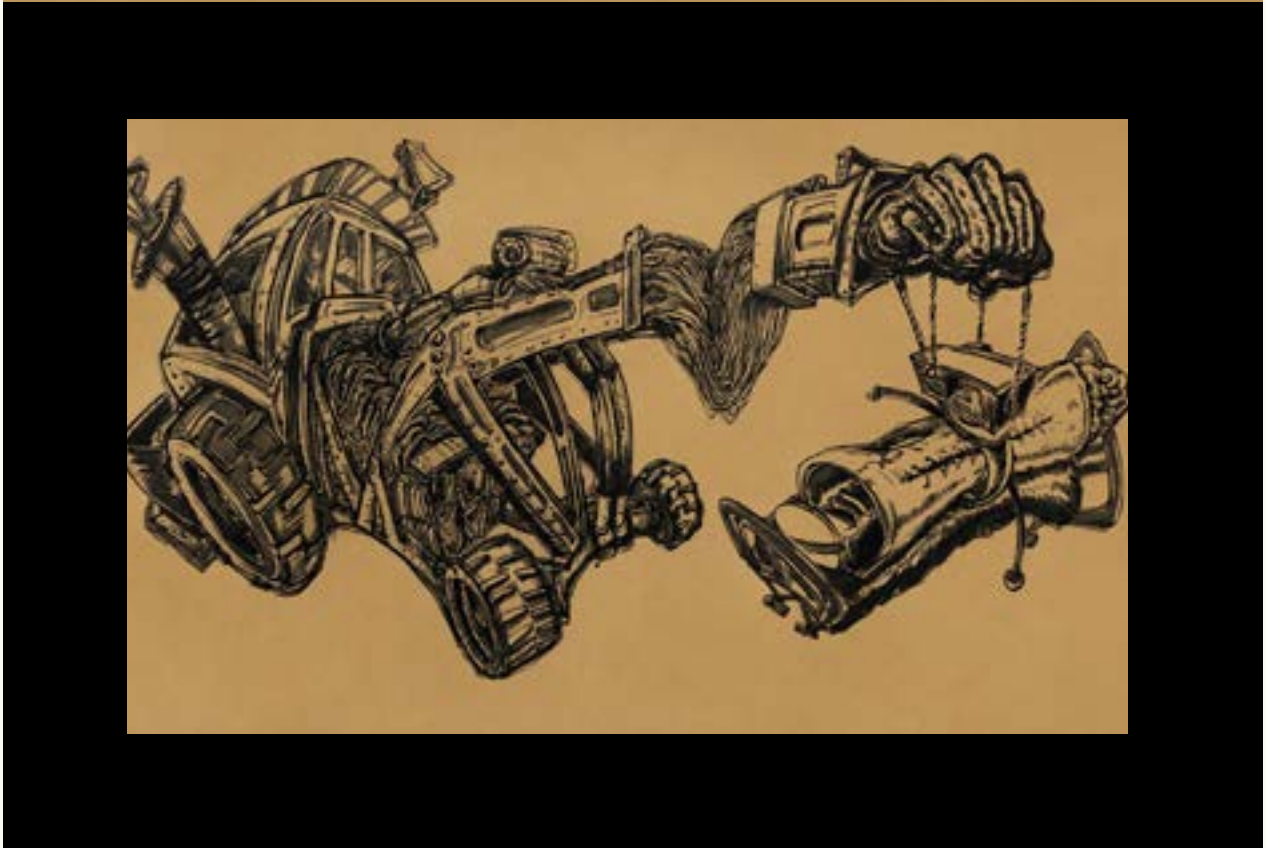
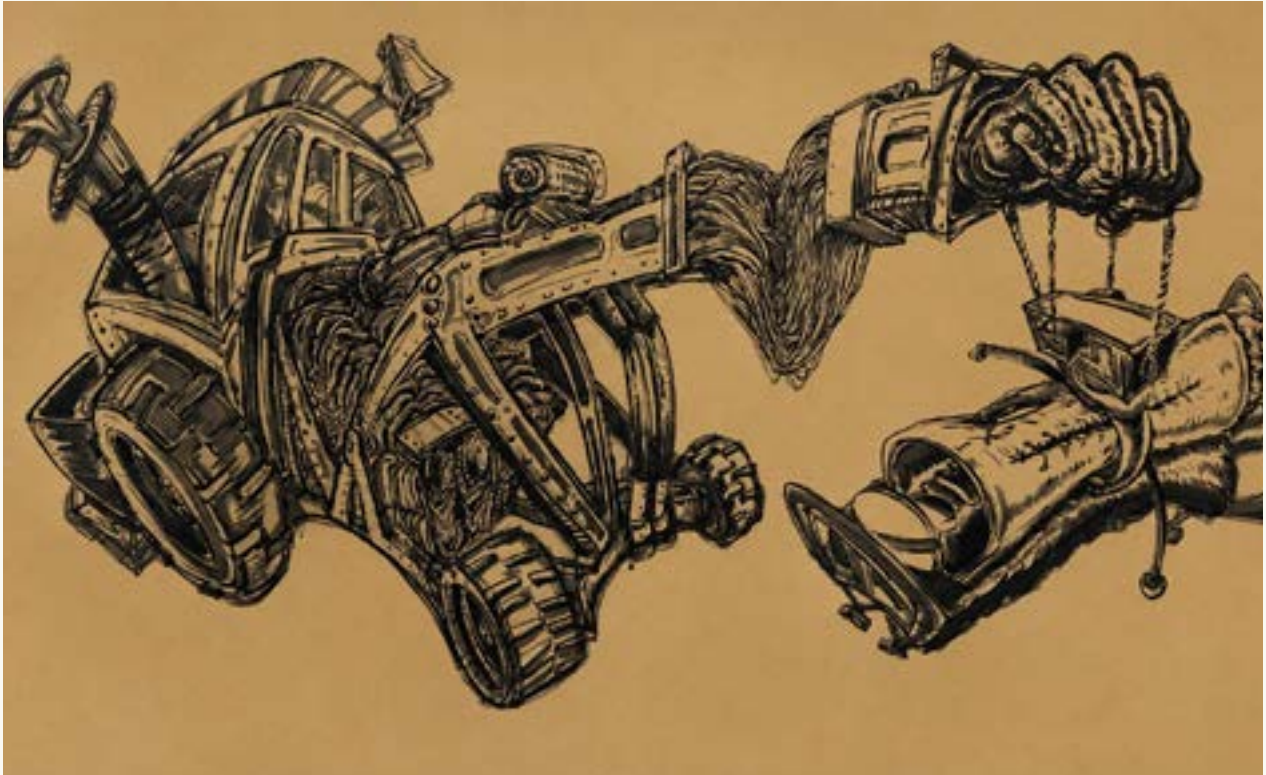
This time I swear I'm not pretending to love what wants me gone. I scrambled across the rough edges of this silence, after years of unquenchable distress; at first, this isn't what I dreamt of: a day I could recognize the happiness in Mother's face and frame it into ten thousand portraits before it grows into a martyr. cold metaphors kept afloat through the hands that wove them. The end of each echo reopens a memory from childhood, bejeweling an elegy from a cocoon of fireflies. Light brims, pouring through the keyhole—a gatherer of warmth sitting adjacent to the camera. Our eyes fixed on the yellow lens, knowing fate will always call us to itself. My brother, whose flesh was an opera laced into discomfort, leaves behind a disappearing baritone—a masquerade glaring into us decades of mayhem. These are the ashes from the oxygen we have harbored for years. Now, my brother starts a song he knows he won't finish; we left his voice at the shoreline to keep on burning. The rainbow in our voices is silhouetted by the rays of dark things, shuttered by the very colors of our fate. The flashlight from the camera wasn't bright enough to cleanse us from unbelief. Yet, this isn't the doom we rehearsed for days. I love the cadence of my body when it is at war with itself—a cup of aloneness, filled to the brim—all of my maladies gathered into one basket. As I progress, Mother is still in her blue gown, in search of a hummingbird. What sings next is a host of angels from our handmade heaven. In the end, I wasn't in the photograph. I was behind the camera making sure all our smiles were not replaced with a body of sore waters.



Price of The War

Pritam Das



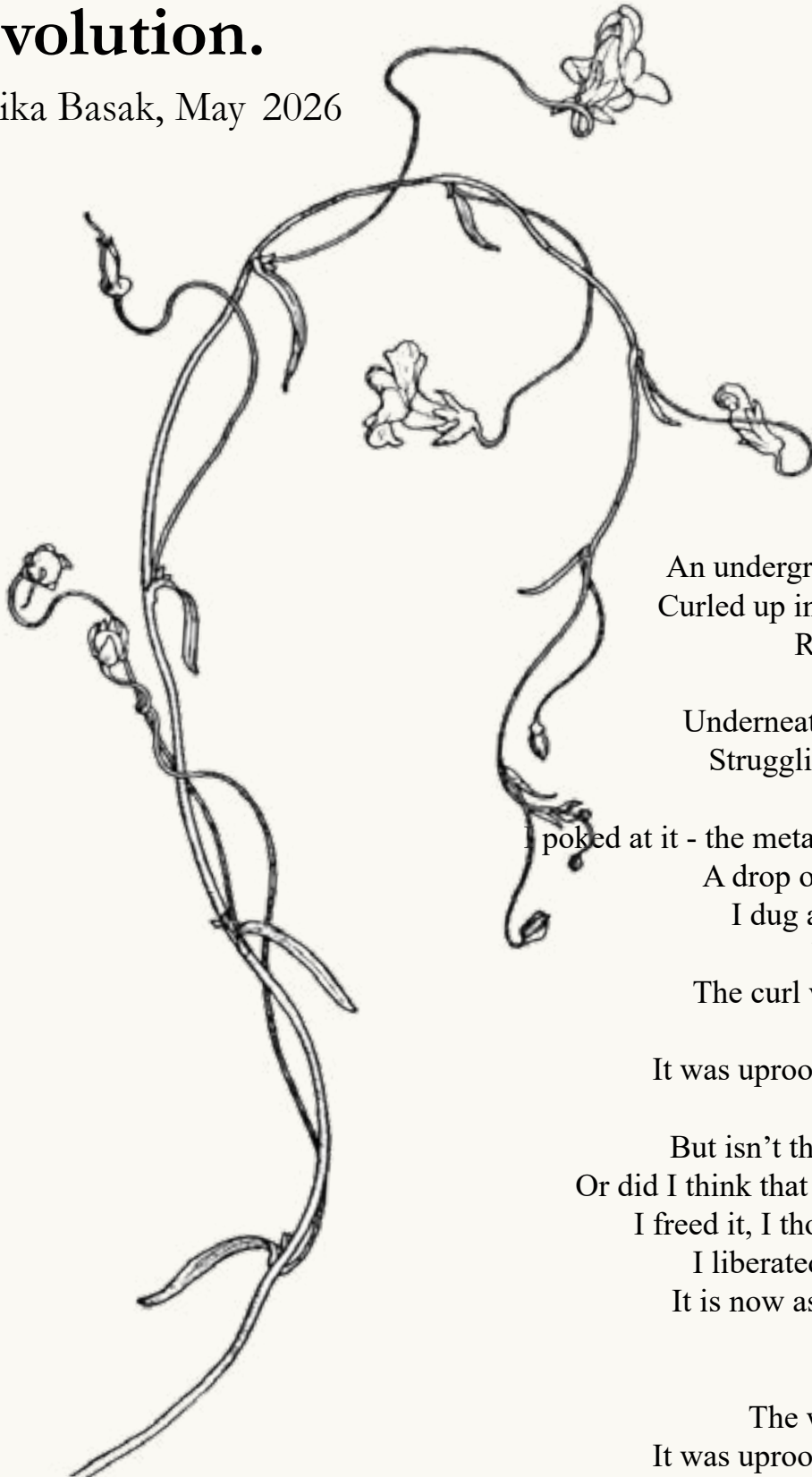


Anatomy of Fate

Pritam Das

Sprout my love, I want you to be a Revolution.

Oishika Basak, May 2026



An underground undergrowth
Curled up into a painful swell.
Red, plump, shiny -
The skin above.
Underneath is a measly hair,
Struggling to see the light.

I poked at it - the metal scraped my skin,
A drop of blood oozed out.
I dug at it, unflinchingly.
With a small prick
The curl was in my control:
I tugged it out.
It was uprooted from its home.

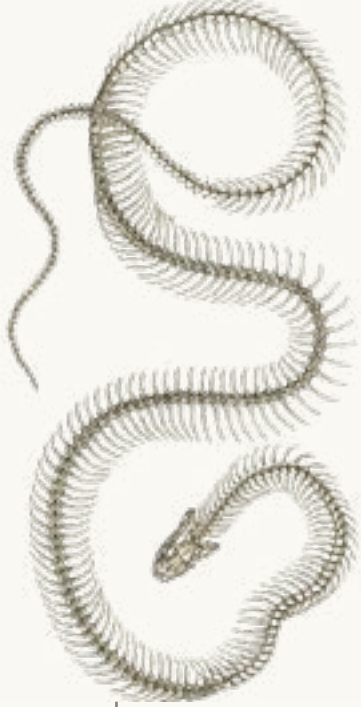
But isn't that what it wanted?
Or did I think that is what it wanted?
I freed it, I thought egotistically.
I liberated it from darkness.
It is now as light as the wind.

The wind, oh!
The wind blew it away.
It was uprooted from its home.



**collective care ::
fragmentation**

Demi Sedrakyan

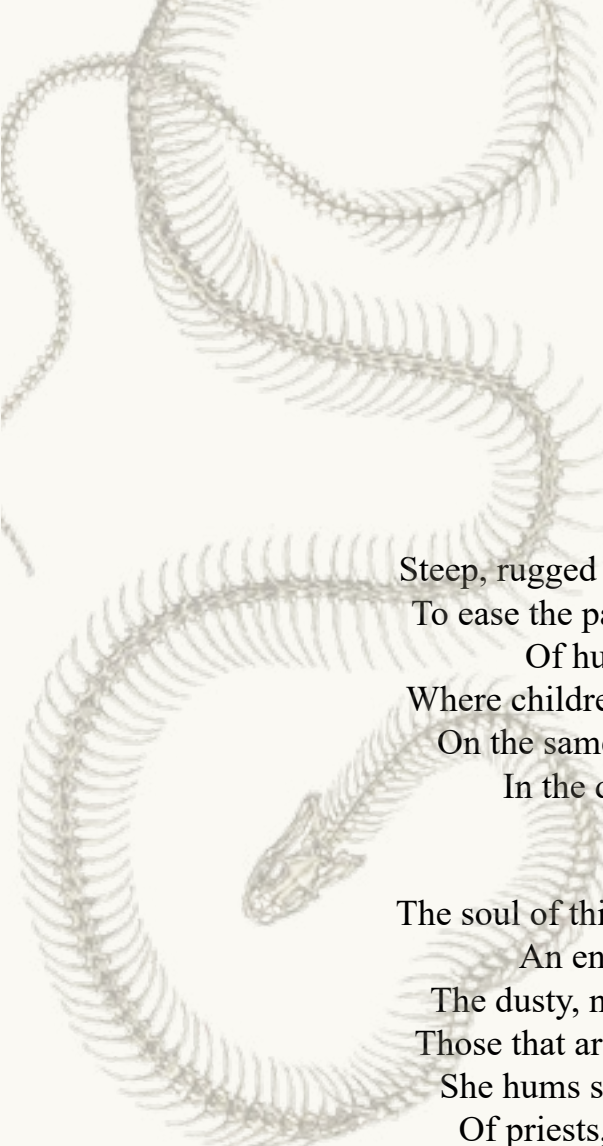


Banaras

Swapna Sanchita

The Venomdrinker's serpent had a mate
Who lay along the edges of the Ganges,
The river that flowed from the mountains
Into the plains and then ran on and on-
Sweet glacial waters that soothed and cooled,
Lands that once burnt under an unending pillar
Of fire that cascades into the heavens
And light that soared into the abyss of Earth
This was where the she-snake dwelt, loved,
pined-
She, upon whose carcass a city quietly did grow.

Her insides, hollowed out, created caverns
Over centuries, as the mud and clay sluggishly
piled up.
It took aeons after her last breath for her to lose
The soft, itchy muscle of her underbelly
That the serpent used to wrap itself around
And together, two tails thwacked the ground
Until he slithered off, back to the burning blue
neck
That sought a keeled scaled scarf
To stay warm in the Himalayan snow.



Steep, rugged steps were laid out, one stone at a time
To ease the path from the river's banks to the doors
Of huts, houses, palaces and homes
Where children played, and women washed clothes,
On the same riverfront where tiny boats docked
In the dying light of the drowning sun.

The soul of this city is ancient, is what everyone said,
An enigmatic seductress who haunts
The dusty, narrow, serpentine by-lanes and roads
Those that are themselves her remnants, her bones.
She hums softly, her notes hidden by the chants
Of priests, of men, of women, the multitudes
That walk on her, through her, and on rare moments
Feel her pulsating presence at dawn, at dusk.

Her mate adorned Him who is, was, unfettered
By the confines of life, death, and time.
Her mate slithers on the shoulders of The Infinite
Hood raised, intoxicated by the smell of hemp,
Black scales smeared with ashes from His body
The ashes that rub off on her when he visits
And together, immortality and mortality lie
In the weeds and rushes that line the banks
Of the river that flows from the tresses of Him-
The Venomdrinker who wears a serpent for a
stole.



As she makes love to her mate, she
 dreams of Him
 Her lover's Lord, She –
 overpowered by the essence
 That pervades everything that feels
 alive; she loves-
 Vicariously, viciously, vividly,
 wildly vulnerable
 Unaware of the unholiness of a
 deception
 Whirlpooling into a passion that
 writhes
 In too many shades, too many
 ways, shattering
 At the culmination, with a hissed
 mistake, a misname
 Ophidian tears will mingle with the
 gurgling waters
 And forever leave it with a
 lingering saltiness
 While she is forgotten,
 unmentioned in the tales
 That talk only of Gods and their
 adornments.



He still desires her, coiled up at that
 unattainable
 Unreachable height, his sibilant sighs
 constantly
 Intruding on the meditative trance of the
 Adiyogi
 Cajoling, begging until the Godhead
 acquiesces
 They repose here in a well, deity, and daemon
 A well in the heart of a city that is held up on a
 tine
 A tine that is a part of Shiva's trident
 Holding Desire, Ignorance, Enlightenment,
 All three together, within and without,
 Here, away from the barren white of Kailasha
 Inside a well, into which few dare to peak
 Lest they be confronted with the knowledge
 Of their death, the lovelorn serpent finds peace,
 And so does He!



Guwahati: Childlike Innocence in Five Frames

Shruti Sareen

The guard who stopped me
near the riverfront in uzan bazar
where the bridge is being built
saw I was peeved.
"kharab mat pana, baidew. Don't mind, sister", he said.
They will scold me if I let you go there."

Entering Don Bosco university, Tapesia,
for an interview, the guards at the gate stopped me.
What did they want? Not my photo id.
These two boys wanted me to click a photo of them.
It made me laugh.

At the airport, they asked me curiously:
what is this moringa powder?
They made me remove the hair oil
from my hand baggage.
Keep it elsewhere, they said. I asked how.
Cabin baggage was already checked-in.
Then they apologised.
I have never ever witnessed this in any other airport.



Next time round at the airport
It wasn't hair oil. It was my spice jars.
Raw spices bought from Assam.
Not in hand baggage. Go run to cabin baggage
they said. Cabin baggage was already checked
in.
They brought it out for my spice jars.
Extra weight? I whispered. No-no ma'am, it's
fine, they said.
I have never ever witnessed this in any other
airport.



A rickshaw boy
I hand him a hundred-rupee note
"Please give me a new note", he cries
"Why?", I ask. "What's wrong with this one?"
"I like the colour", he says, eyes brightening.



Endearing, unsophisticated
The person, and the emotion here
surpasses the role or mask.





Desire

Pradip Kumar Sahu



Untitled

Pradip Kumar Sahu



Desire

Pradip Kumar Sahu



Desire

Pradip Kumar Sahu



The prisons fill with the cries of children.

Then how do you subsist, how do you
persist, Land?

** Agba Shahid Ali, Land*

Kashmir and her uncrushed intricacies:

From the outward gaze, we are sometimes
beauty and sometimes beast.

The real heart and history of our
perseverant home is lost in translation, but
unquestionably alive in the air we breathe.



*Sufia
Sarmad*



Creatures of the snow



Raw



Barely rosy evenings



Barred



Dichotomies



Don't take my picture



The hanging greens

"..The gentleness that comes, not from the absence of violence, but despite the abundance of it."
- Richard Siken, *Snow and Dirty Rain*

-A Photo Essay by Sufia Sarmad



The Ohio Narrative

Ihor Pidhainy

This morning marks upon the grounds of coffee, three days old, that sang now is the time to straighten out your life, before you plunge into a funk and wander down to the Muskingum River to drop from the pedestrian bridge into the waters below, which, one might add, you might survive, but then perhaps you won't and you'll splatter upon the pillar's platform and you'll lose your pension, and your insurance won't pay out to your widow, who will be reduced to penury and gentile forms of prostitution, and your boy will become a shark, easy with the ladies, but haunted by thoughts of your self-demise, and wonder if that gene floats in him as well, and he'll be driven to take the cold-water plunge, perhaps further up along the Ohio River, closer to Pittsburgh, and as a result of an overdose of self-medication for the depression that haunts him since you left him and his mother, stuck in a pretty, vacant town worn out for occupations for those between twenty and fifty-five, unless you work at the college or the hospital or make ends meet by patching tires and fixing engines in your makeshift garage somewhere north of Highway 7, along the backroads that skirt through countryside with pop-up villas in the distance and rundown barns just back the garage, but you worry about digressing and blaming yourself for the hundredth time that your progeny won't generate and your name will end on a makeshift stone in the less famous of the town cemeteries, and you will not be remembered, so you turn over a new leaf, so-to-speak, and you begin with that cup of coffee, and you fire up your laptop and print up a set of CVs, and you stuff them in your briefcase, and you change into your suit, and you walk down to your car, parked precariously at the end of the street where the giant city trucks roar past on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and you get in, and you drive until the turn-off north for Highway 77 appears, and you take that until you reach Cambridge, and then drive west on Highway 70 just fast enough to get to Columbus without speeding ticket, and then you take the exit downtown, and park in your reserved space, and you walk into the office where your work has been piling up all week, and pray that you won't be fired, but, miraculously, your boss has been out all week with a rare disease that has befuddles his mind, so you catch up on accounts payable, and call up suppliers and do what needs to be done, and put aside your dreams of being a doctor or a lawyer or a shortstop or a quarterback or a world-renowned poet.



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