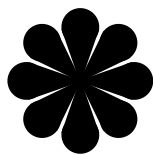
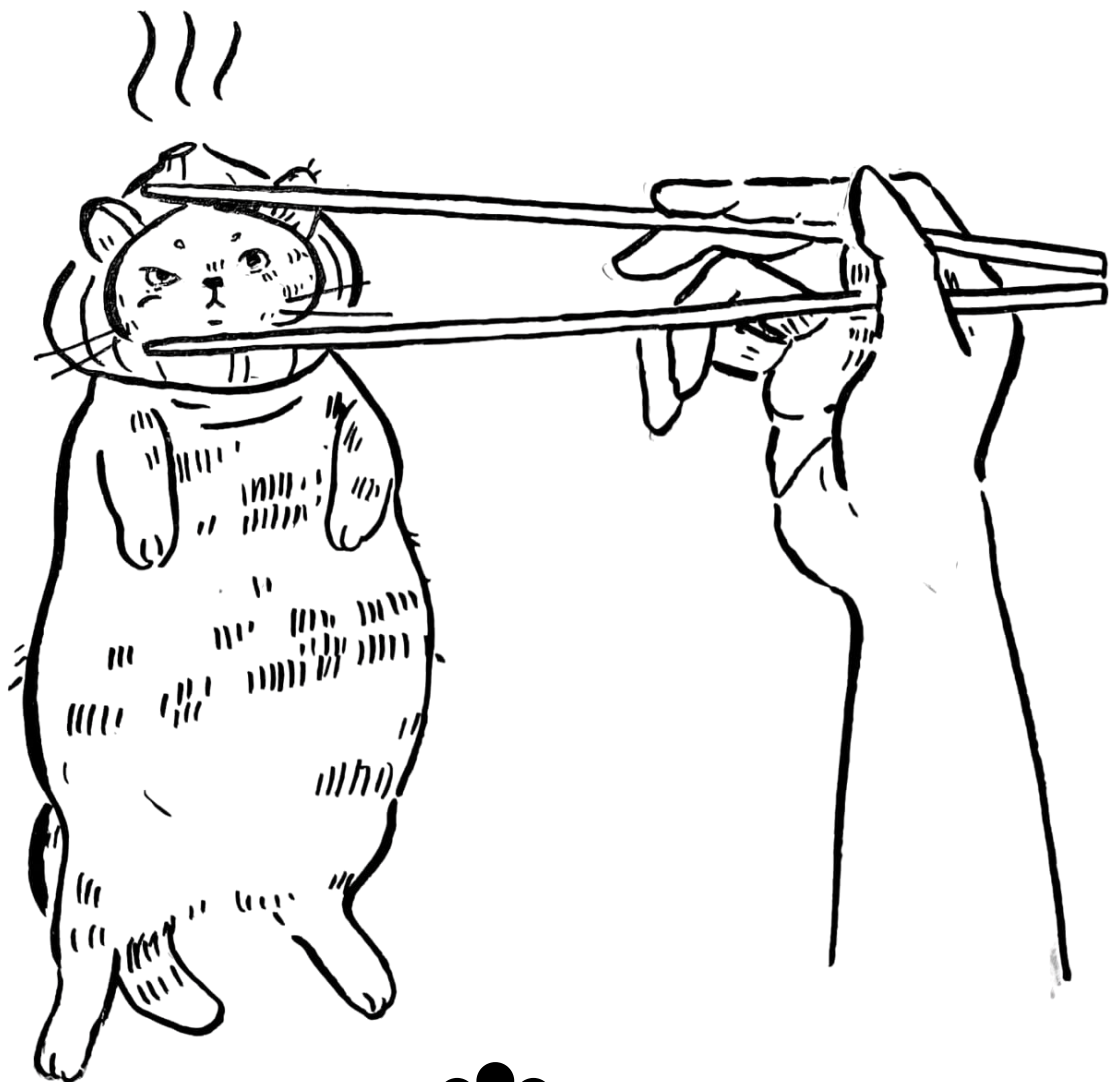
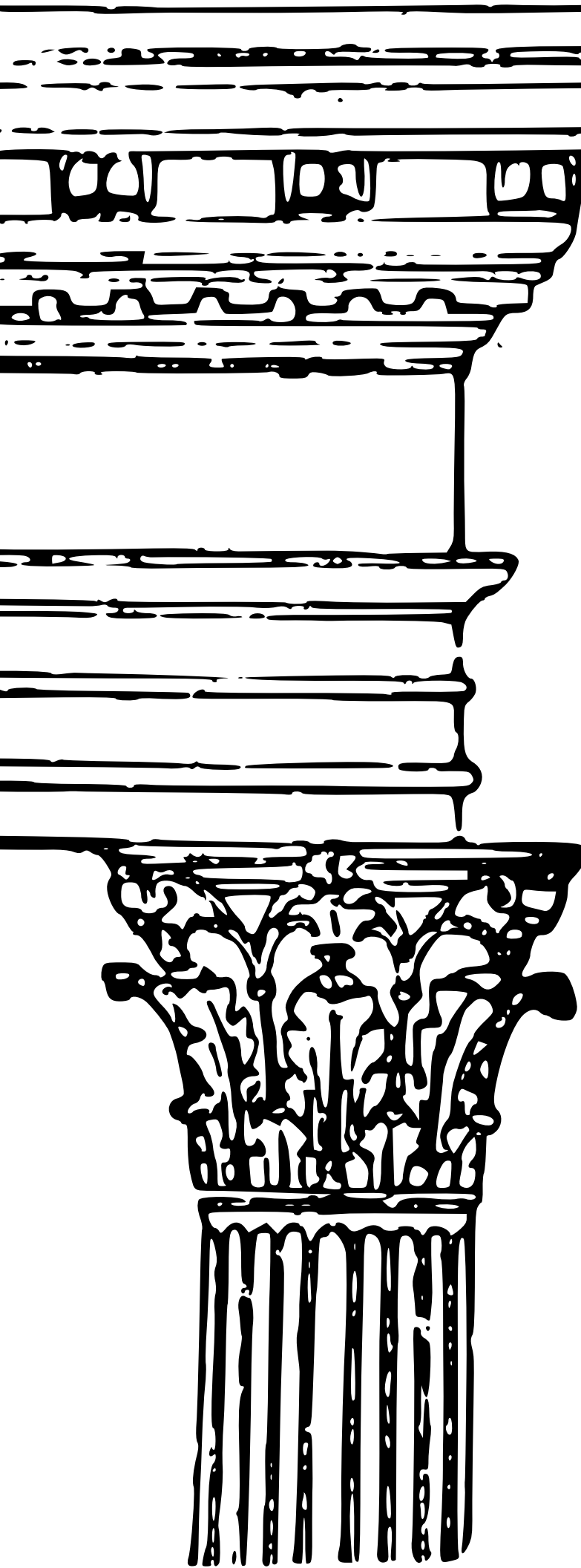


MONOGRAPH

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A STUDENT LED MAGAZINE FOR THE ARTS



MONOGRAPH

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Editor's Note



In this edition of Monograph, we are delighted to present a diverse array of literary and artistic creations.

Rohinee Sharma's enchanting short story will leave you with a sense of wonder and reflection, while Arya Malik's meticulously crafted article traces the intricate relationship between the body and time , offering a thought provoking exploration of our own selves.

Our artist profile shines a spotlight on Dhruva Lal, whose music harmoniously intertwines with the profound themes of the Tibetan Book of the Dead.

As we immerse ourselves in this rich tapestry of creativity and contemplation, Monograph extends its warmest wishes for a joyous Pujó celebration to all its readers. May the festive season bring you love, laughter and inspirational.

Ritobrita Mukherjee
Editor
Monograph

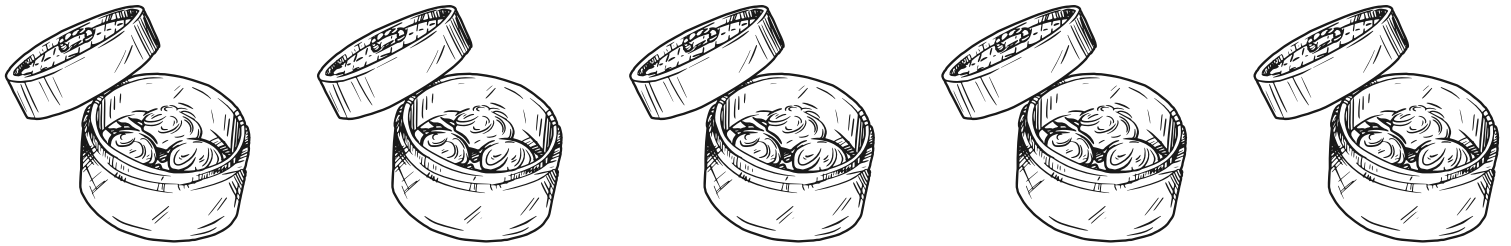




MIDNIGHT DUUMPLINGS



ROHINEE SHARMA



I

I was standing way too close to the balcony railing, peering into the few matchboxes that were lit at this hour. Perhaps, it was the caffeine that I had been imbibing- a cup every hour or two that made me do it. But it had been fifteen hours of being wide awake and nothing seemed more comforting at this moment than watching a few solitary diners ponder over their meals.

Perhaps the one on the 7th floor, in the block on my right, was twirling her marinara soaked spaghetti endlessly in her bowl. Perhaps, this other one, on the 3rd, of the same block, was convinced about the bonsai-ness of the tree that was broccoli. Maybe the grandfather on the 4th floor of the block in front of me was drinking soup every night and muttering- why? As for me, I began to wonder if Morpheus would like a barter? But then, what would he want with the wakefulness of me? Besides, I had trust issues with his dreams. I had trust issues strewn about everywhere; like the therapeutic ability of the Ikea grass tiles I had going on the floor of this balcony, or the 'Teacher of the Year' award I received earlier today, at school.

It was all very awkward- the ceremony, the celebration, the tear in my skirt which I desperately tried to sew in the cloakroom just before they announced my name. I wanted to disappear, run away as fast as my feet would let me. There was a back door exit to the left of the cloakroom, I was certain about it, but I turned right and straight into the hall as they announced my name. I couldn't even trust myself to run away.

I clumsily went up on stage as the picture perfect 'lost in her own thoughts' teacher, goofily accepting the award. I was anything but! And, as the award passed from the Principals' hand to mine, I knew then and there that physics wasn't a subject I wanted to help explore, it was a subject I wanted to delve in deeper. Teacher with a student complex? It was complicated.

I finally stepped away from the railings, having passed to it, the heat of my despondency. With my back now to the lonely diners, I walked into the unlit parlour of my own little box and settled into the teal, button tufted lounge chair which I brought on a whim, online. I thought it would take center stage, it seemed very bright and promising. But not one being paid the attention it warranted, apart from the pesky neighbour's cat. It always figured out a way to it at some unearthly hours of morning. If I ever meet my neighbour next door, I will give him a piece of my mind.

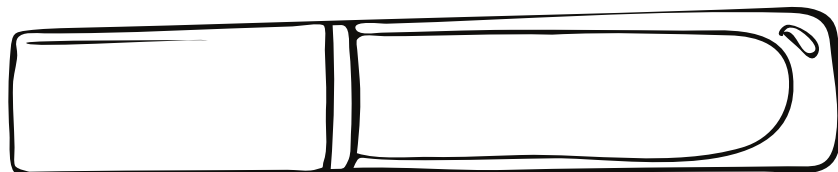
Some things were non-negotiable, especially the morse code like gurgling and gnawing sent between the belly and the heart. I almost always ignored them, especially when they arrived at 11:10 pm. But today, my brain was determined to override my will. I tried my best to make these silly circular movements on my belly, hoping it would understand my code and quiet down. Then I tried to assuage my heart similarly. Both were in no mood to yield. They seemed to have sent a word to higher authorities, demanding action against my will! So, I had to close my eyes to understand the nature of these demands. Surprisingly, it was something we all could agree on. Dumplings. The only vector with the instant ability to accelerate the slope of the persistent concave curve on my face to a beaming convex. They were bite sized parcels of joy and portkeys to the floodgates of my memories.

II

The trouble, of course, was that hunger arrived with strings attached to wistfulness, often leaving me completely exhausted before either could be alleviated. On their own, they were very simple things to sort, but bound together they became an indeterminable complexity, an emergent phenomena- a tour de force- summoning me to find faith and food in memories.

I got up and didn't need much thought around what I had to do next. I walked up to the hallway console, opened the drawer and picked up my keys and access card that were beside a copy of an abstract painting representing The Second Law of Thermodynamics in a gold frame. It just looked like a stack of colours, not meaning anything. But the colours seem to be fading, melding into each other slowly. You could sense some disarray and in that it looked pretty. I gave it one quick look, and then looked at myself in the mirror right above it. Something was missing. I grabbed my tote from the coat rack, dug into it for my pencil pouch, scrambled through the pens for the mini Tony Moly lip balm, applied it on my eyelids because facemask. Then, I ran my fingers through my hair to give it some semblance of neatness, tucked the strings of my black cargo pants in, checked for any coffee stains on my faded carmine T-shirt, slipped on my black Havaianas and was finally out the door.

I walked towards the elevator, and called for it. I didn't need to wait for the car, it was there, ready to take me. I stepped in and quickly spotted the floor panel on the lower right side and pressed 1. As the door closed in on me, I took a deep breath, watching the levels descend 30 years to how it used to be.



III

It didn't matter how tired my father was when he got home from one of his long haul flights, there was a routine that we looked forward to. We would all be seated in the living room, dressed casually. My brother, who at 12, was older to me by 2 years, would either be busy reading the Brain Power section of the Young Generation Magazine or watching some reruns of an AC Milan match that showcased Marco Van Basten and Ruud Gullit on TV. I don't remember much of what I did but I certainly must have been busy poking his ribs to get him to change the channel to anything but football. What I do remember, though, is Ma pacing the room because any minute, Father would ring the doorbell. When the bell finally rang, Ma would come alive, her eyes would twinkle, and her pace would quicken to open the door. As soon as she did, Father would walk in wearing his SIA pilots' uniform, Wayfarers on his face and the luggage stroller in his right hand. When Ma closed the door behind him, Father would, in slow motion, take his sunglasses off, swerve it across his face and formally announce "Its Treat Time!" just like Tom Cruise! Me and my brother, at the sight of him, would join in and behave like the star crazy fans that we were, screaming "Daddy! Daddy!". We would then run over to hug him. Ma, who was dressed up, usually in a tan box pleated skirt and some pastel blouse for the inevitable outing, would try to hush us up. She would giggle with a straight face and put her finger on her lips and go "shhh". She would tell us to quieten down, reminding us that we had elderly neighbours who were prone to complaining of even the slightest of sounds post 10 pm. But that never really worked on us. Father would then gather us all in a group hug and whisper how much he missed us and how happy he was to be home. In return, Ma would, on behalf of all of us, tell him how much we missed him. I think she meant it the most.

He would then put away his luggage, change into Jeans and a T-shirt and proceed to sit down for a while to sip on some water that Ma brought for him. And that was when my brother would get to egging him with chants of "Let's go! Let's go!". Father would nod happily and in a matter of minutes the whole household would be out the door.



IV

I got off the elevator and made my way through the entrance lobby; then on to a little walkway that would eventually lead me to the security gates. The walkway was flanked on both sides by a common garden catering to the folks of five other blocks on the estate. Dawn was the best time to take in the beauty of this landscape- with the sunrise in the backdrop, the ivy palms and eucalyptus trees could bring out the non-existent poet in you.

But their presence in the moment was marked by a slight breeze rustling their leaves and tickling me wistfully. I wanted to stop and stand still. Then I wanted it to rain, just so I could wipe my eyes, because that would then seem perfectly normal for a grown woman who forgot to carry her umbrella.

V

By 11 pm or so, mostly on a Friday night, the four of us would head out from our HDB Flat. We would walk as quietly as was possible through the corridor, past the 2 elderly neighbours, up to the lift, down five floors and straight out into the small Neighbourhood Park that was adjacent to Block 147 where we stayed. Once there, I couldn't ever control my excitement and was prone to letting out a "Yaaay" as loudly as I could- a sort of confirmation I guess of having made it this far without a sound! This time, Ma wouldn't try to hush me up. The four of us would take turns holding each other's hands, hopping and skipping while father, over the course of the next 10 minutes, would slowly hum or whistle the tune of some Carpenters song.

We were all, of course, making our way to the Round Market and Food Centre where Uncle Li had his hawker stall. Uncle Li was perhaps as old as Father- in his early 40's. A genteel man, he had over the last few years taken over running the stall from his father who largely sold noodles and dim sums to late shift workers and migrants looking for a quick but satisfying bite on their way back home. The shop was originally located in Toh Payoh, Lorong 2 Hawker Centre from the 1970's to early 1980's. But the area itself was demolished to make way for the Mass Rapid Transit System and so the Li family became one of the initial stall holders of this new concept market in the then newish township of

Tampines. The stall was an instant hit despite its late open and close timings, it saw a steady influx of family diners as well as mostly late shift workers who would come over for a meal.

In its early days, in Toh Payoh, it used to be called Uncle Li's Noodle and Tim Sum. The younger Mr. Li often helped the Senior Li at the stall and made friends with many of the regulars. Whilst there, often his conversations with the migrant patrons, would lead to lively discussions of them telling him how much they enjoyed his father's fare and how the dumplings, especially, reminded them of a similar dish back home. In fact, some of them even prodded him to introduce these just so that they could get more of their friends over who otherwise went elsewhere. The good Hakka that he was, he made some mental notes and once the family shifted to the new township, he told his father of his ideas.

Often, the father, while busy cooking up the noodles and dim sums, had also kept an eye on his son and watched him mingle with the diners. He marvelled at the ease with which his son could speak across languages- Hakka, Hokkien, Malay and in some bits and pieces Tamil aside English. He appreciated the initiatives and approved of his son's enterprise to better the business. So, it was not hard for him to agree to his son's ideas or at least give them a fighting chance.

The base ingredients were broadly the same oil, wrappers made of either rice or all-purpose flour and starches like tapioca, or corn. A few basic meats- pork, fish or chicken and some standard veggies- onion, potatoes, carrots and cabbage. Spicing was easy with mostly ginger, garlic, chili-padi and soy. All served with a special sauce to get you coming back for more. The new menu was quickly designed keeping 5 of the classic dumplings intact, adding 4 new ones to pique curiosity. The noodles were completely done away with. The number was keeping in mind Senior Li's wishes- 9 was considered a propitious number that sounded close to the word 'long-lasting' in Mandarin. Thus, there was Jiaozi, Shui Mai, Har Gow, Cheong Fun and Uncle Li's best seller Xiao Long Bao. To these, 4 new creations were added that were relatively easy to modify from the doughs they already had- Momo, Samsa, Siopao and a sweet- Lavariya made with jaggery, cardamom and shaved coconut stuffing offered in a string hopper casing. Thus, with the re-designed menu, a new location – a new name was also born- *Midnight Dumplings*.

VI

I didn't need to book a ride. At this hour there weren't many trying to go anywhere, so all I had to do was stay put on the side of the street outside the estate and wave to any passing cab. Eventually, an elderly uncle on his night shift stopped.

“Round Market, Uncle?”

“Ok! Can!”

I got inside the ComfortCab and was very relieved at the air-conditioning that met me. I put my tote by my side and crossed my left leg over my right and rested my head on the window. I was seated behind the Taxi uncle just so he wouldn't get any notion of wanting to speak to me. I had begun to feel a lot better cramped up like this and my thoughts too had packed themselves away—at least for the moment.

“Meeting Boyfriend aah?”

I realised my seating plan had failed. I could never understand this incessant need to comment, communicate, generalise. Why do strangers feel the need to know one another? Why do neighbours who live next door never see or speak to each other for months? Why do families eventually behave like your neighbours?

“Yes uncle, my boyfriend is a pilot. So I can never meet during normal hours” I lied.

White lies, little white lies to get away from engaging in a conversation, and no ones the wiser.

“Aiyoh! Get married ah!”

“Don wan, uncle! Don wan...”



VII

On the periphery of the round market were the wet stalls selling you all kinds of stuff- flowers, meats, fish, fruits, roots, vegetables, spices as well as brooms, aquarium equipment, battery operated toys and things as such. We would all walk inside and meander about quietly for a little while just to check out the wares from anyone who was open at this hour. More often than not Ma would get a bargain from the veggies and meat shops that were winding down for the day. It was not like we needed to bargain hunt for our food- Ma was like that. She had grown up in a kampung where scarcity of anything was a reality. It was also a thing she never wanted to forget. The rest of us on the other hand, had only one goal in mind-to quickly make it to the inner stalls where all the hawkers sold their wares.

There was the usual wanton mee, yong tau fu, chicken-rice, kway chap, dosa, carrot cake, nasi lemak and a coffee stall. And then, there was uncle Li, who had the maximum number of diners for a shop at this hour. Weary work men, couples meeting in secret, elderly folk having nowhere else to go and us- a family of 4 drooling at the mere mention of the word dumplings!

“Lai! Lai! Lai!” Uncle Li would call out gleefully waving his hands as soon as he saw us. Father would wave back, while me and my brother would rush to seat ourselves at the first available 4 seats and table. We all knew the menu so all father had to do was signal the number associated with the dumplings of our choice. The warmth of the many steaming dim sums engulfed the place- it invited us into a world where joy was about being present with our eyes, our hearts and savouring the varied flavours it offered. Hygiene wasn’t a word we associated with the place- there were bits of food, empty bottles of beer, spilled curry on some tables, the random pigeon or mynah mistaking tube lights for day and scavenging for food. And if the cleaners weren’t on time for their jobs- smelly ammonia wafted through. But nothing deterred us from coming here because it was communion we sought.



Since we wanted to eat everything that was on offer- we sufficed this urge by ordering at least 3 of the varieties. The non-negotiable were: 1- Jiaozi, 2- Har Gow and of course 6- Xiao Long Bao. As soon as Uncle Li brought over his tiered push card filled with the dumplings in their individual bamboo steamer, the family would begin to apportion one of each type. Our plates would then resemble that of the tasters- a little bit of everything and we just couldn't wait to dig in!

My brother found the Jiaozi funny for some reason he said they looked like ears and would hold them up to his to demonstrate the likeness. This was much to Ma's disdain, she firmly believed in symbolism and you didn't play with things that symbolise money! On her part Ma loved the Har Gow, its air-thin skin belied how firm it was, its delectable shrimp filling beaming through its translucent skin invited you to take a bite. Me and father, though, were Xiao Long Bao Fans! Now eating soup dumplings is an art which my father knew well. After scalding my tongue, the first few times, thinking I knew better by simply dunking it in my mouth, I learned my first lesson in humility, observation and respect by watching him.

Father used the chopsticks to hold the dumpling at its knot, then he lightly dipped it in some soy sauce with ginger strips and placed it in his soup spoon. He then proceeded to put a tiny bite near the knot to let some steam out for a few moments- moments, he used to glance at all of us as we devoured ours. Then after a minute or so he would put the soup spoon to his mouth and let the Xiao Long Bao's mildly oily, mildly salty with a touch of sweet and spicy warm broth and meat, wash all over his taste buds.

I don't remember any of the conversations we had together. Father may have asked us about our school, our friends, what we were reading, or he might not have. But what never seems to evaporate from my mind is the comfort of that ambience, the longing for that noisy childhood and the innocence of my age. There are parts of me that still echo the longing for that togetherness, now ripped apart by distance and dimension.

VIII

My cab drove into the parking lot of the Public Housing adjacent to The Round Market. I paid the taxi uncle the fare plus the night surcharge and got out wishing him goodnight. A hint of plumeria met me, possibly from all the trees lined up on the sidewalk and this made me notice that there were so many of them in the vicinity, but not so many in my recollection. Even the streetlights were brighter than what I could recall, and, in that illumination, I noticed the old buildings with new facades- tall, rectangular, hard edged. They all appeared similar and familiar and yet not much was the same about them.

Barely a few feet from me stood the reason why I was here, the rotunda with its roof still resembling the bows of many a ship jutting out from a single point. I had heard that the place had undergone some renovation, It was supposed to be better ventilated and cleaner. The grime on the signboard seemed to have been scrubbed off and the dust of nostalgia swept clean from the entrance. As I walked in, greeted by the airflow generated by the newly installed HVLS fans. I realised that it had been five years since I last saw this place, five years since the dumplings urged me to give them a chance, five years since the one who connected me to this place – disconnected from this world.

IX

The market periphery at this hour, expectedly remained unremarkable. Most of the shutters were down or at least halfway there. A few vendors were busy mopping and clearing their shop spaces or taking in accounts. I didn't have it in me to walk to them and say anything – I was not my mother, nor her sensibilities. Though some part of me could imagine her picking up a vegetable and sizing it. I wanted to tell her there is no need for it but decided against it. I followed my father instead, walking along the radius straight to the focus of my yearning. And like a faithful, the stall stood where it always had, waiting for the prodigal to return. There weren't many for the dumplings today- just a handful in their safe, distanced, lonely space. An old man who had finished his shift from mopping the tables was taking a breather on a seat, a nurse on her way back home sat staring into some nothingness, there was another middle aged man on an animated video call- perhaps speaking to his family somewhere far away. Then, there was me,

looking at them and then looking at the dumpling stall, slowly making my way towards it.

There seemed to be no one at the stall front, but a pile of 6 or 7 steaming bamboo baskets to the right of the till caught my eye. It felt reassuring. Everything inside seemed spick and span – neatly arranged melamine dishes and saucers, some chopped spring onion greens in a bowl on a work counter. The “A” grade certification awarded to the stall by the NEA was also neatly displayed on the wall facing the counter. Then there were a few cartons of 500 ml mineral water bottles that lay on the floor waiting to be picked and moved to the side. I went up on my toes, to try and peer at the back of the stall and that’s where I noticed two youngish folks in their chef’s whites and catering hair net caps. Their backs turned to me. I rang the call-bell once and received an immediate response:

“Weilai! Weilai!”

One of them, a girl perhaps in her late twenties, walked towards me from the back of the stall.

“Yes? What can I help you with?” She seemed earnest and happy to see a customer. I was hoping for Uncle Li.

“Oh! Hey! Was wondering if Uncle Li is around?”

“Oh! Mr. Li! He sold the shop to us last year” She responded grinning.

My heart sank.

“But why?” I blurted. I guess I must have seemed so disappointed that she must have felt compelled to carry on the conversation.

“We get this all the time! So many old patrons come by, especially in this Phase Three of the reopening...but I can assure you, we do our best to give you the same taste and flavour.”

“Is he...unwell?” I tried to be conscientious about my questions.

“No! No! He is all hale and hearty!” The girl replied, laughing through her mask.

“We get this too a lot! I think he just wanted to move on. Was tired but didn’t find anyone he could pass on the business, until we asked him if would let us. His children were not keen. We had been working part time with him for a while now and we fell in love with everything about the art of dumpling...me and my husband at the back, there...and so...”

“I see...” I cut her short.

“Do you have the XLB?” I asked.

“Absolutely!” Her voice still seemed cheerful; it gave me hope. “Please take a seat I will get it to you very shortly”

I sat down, joining the few who were present. I kept thinking about the conversation I just had – something about falling in love and art, that I could not get over. And that was when my anamnesis set in, my own transition from the liminal spaces of the many conversations I had with my father right here to the full blown love affair with the subject that was Physics.

“Daddy, I think it’s incredible how some hot soup along with stuffing is not giving away from this air thin skin! It’s wizardry!” I remember having asked my father as I held up the Xiao Long Bao at the knot with my chopstick.

“Yes! But it's mostly Physics” father replied, “It’s really the tensile strength of the skin and pressure exerted by the stuffing inside. And those top knot folds, even pleats, with a little hole in the centre – that lets the steam off.”

I remember marveling at the creation that I held in my soup spoon. I must have been in my secondary or post-secondary school, but sitting there studying the delectableness of this delight, thrust me to trust my need to understand natural philosophy.

I didn’t realise that, while my mind was on a trip, the very physical me had been grinning in the direction of the steamers, that the young stall lady was now walking towards me with my order, that her eyes were smiling back at me – were mine smiling back at her? I don’t know.

But her voice snapped me out.

“I am really grateful you are giving us a chance. I hope you enjoy them, they are just hot off the steamer!” She said sweetly.

“Aah! Yes! Yes! Thank you, I’m sure to enjoy them.”

I took my face-mask off, along with my glasses that had misted up from the steam of my own breath. Then, I picked a pair of wooden chopsticks from the many that were arranged in a steel cutlery stand on my table. With them, I held the top knot of one of the Bao’s and noticed the heat escape and then quickly took a small bite near the knot to accelerate the soup cooling inside. I took a minute to take in everything around me, and then dipped the bao in soy sauce and ginger strips, finally taking the dumpling in my mouth and allowing it to consume me in its succulent juices.





THE BODY THROUGH TIME



ARYA MALLIK



We are in a room, in the middle of which stands a woman. She occupies most of the picture despite her feet being hidden. She wears a faded yellow cardigan, red skirt, blue apron and white headscarf. On the table before her, there is a cooking pot into which the woman pours milk from a jar with her right hand. Her posture is not quite relaxed, but not hurried either.

Quite obvious? Well, the purpose of the text is to show that the portrait, like a wide majority of fine arts, uses the body to say what it wants to. The human body in art – through painting, architecture, sculpture or film – has been expressed in myriad ways. Gods as humans: be it the chiseled, monumental blue of Shiva, or Apollo's perfectly-proportioned, imposing built. Women less as themselves and more as the object of a man's desire: either a lithe, voluptuous, enticing apsara gazing shyly at her admirer, or a homely handmaiden, her arms and legs rough, red and swollen from housework and birthing children. Such art has championed the notions of a body perfected by the hands of White masters like Botticelli and Michelangelo. Such art is not passive; in fact, it has actively influenced human perception and behaviour for millennia (where did the craze for tightfitting, waist-cinching, rib-crushing corsets, or the glorification of unfeeling, domineering, Zeus-like men come from?).



The silver lining, however, is thanks to the so-called anomalies, deviants, and sore thumbs – people who blatantly reject conventional artistic representations to redefine and assert what they think is true art. The 1960s saw social movements against colonialism, racism, slavery and patriarchy, which in turn reflected in the art and culture of the times. Since then, global spaces have been reclaimed by Asian, Black, indigenous, women and queer community artists, who use their bodies to question gender norms and convey how intersectionality defines their experience of identity. Where once it was a vessel for the fancies of society's powerful, the body in art has now become the strongest medium of expressing identity, sexuality and ethnicity.

In the history of art, we have seen the body idealised, either made into the portrait of a very powerful emperor, or sculpted into the form of a beautiful naked woman. I, for one, find very little interest in such representations. The body for each of us is our first habitat, our first space – the first place in which we live. We are so used to seeing art from a distance: from the other side of a glass-walled panel, up on a pedestal, or within a grandiose museum (I'm looking at you, David). But art – although it aims to unite – is a personal, intimate, and humane thing. Its representation of the body then, must also be so.

Before it is a temple, my body is a home. And I worship it not because it's special, but because it is the only bit of the material world I live inside. It is my first home. My body is far from something grand or golden, like men from the Renaissance crafted it to be. My body is a flawed, open, irregular, honest and ever-changing place.

And what is the body, if not the truest work of art?

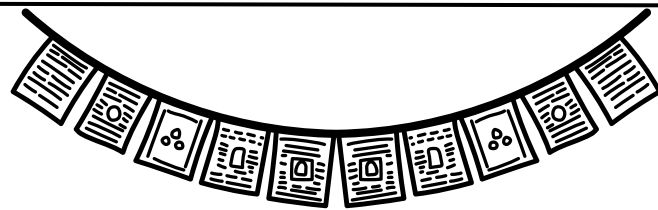
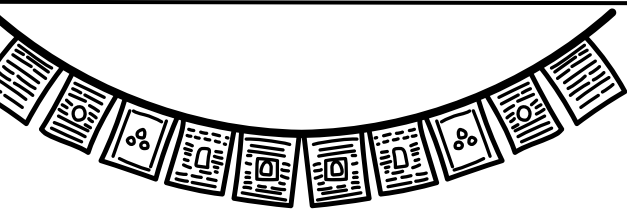




ARTIST PROFILE: RIFT VALLEY



ANURAAG DAS SARMA



Dhruva Lal left the city of Kolkata years back, hungering for the hills and its promise of an indie music scene far removed from the metropolis. Manali, cradled by the Beas, called out to him and he left a promising career as an actor in Tollywood to do what he had always wanted to do—music.

A small attic, covered in instruments, posters, and equipment, perfectly captures Dhruva's lifelong fascination with music. It also serves as his personal museum. Diaries with songs written fifteen years ago are lovingly kept and consulted regularly; stones and trinkets collected over the years find their rightful places on his desk; and a quote from the Tibetan Book of the Dead hangs over his bed. His music, in many ways, is a confluence of all these artifacts, and Rift Valley, his independent solo outfit, benefits tremendously from this personal touch.

Now, Rift Valley is old, and so are the songs. Written while he was still a guitarist for the St. Xavier's School Band, back in the late 2000s, the songs had been collecting dust for the better half of a decade. Ideas of a rock opera, spread through three intricate albums, floated around in his head. The story of Ravi, and his journey into adulthood, thematically portrayed by the soteriological transcendental existentialism that Buddhist Philosophy has to offer, brings in wonderful contradictory moments surrounding what we have come to think of the circle of rebirth that befits the stage as much as it does streaming platforms.

It is at this point, I should point out the unique methods that went into recording this album. The songs, technically very simple, enjoy a sense of richness that is often lost with studio polish - and this is apparent from the get-go. Listening to it, on any platform, through any pair of headphones or speakers, conveys a raw sense of musicality. It is a man, who taught himself the guitar, drums, and bass in front of a microphone, recording everything in analog using a Zoom H4 and a Tascam DP 004 (both archaic pieces of technology by modern standards) from his bedroom. As Indie as it can possibly get. I mean, this is a man who, in the past, moonlit as a waiter in Goa, putting blankets on beach chairs. He knows what a low-paying gig as an independent musician, far removed from the glamor of Bollywood, has to offer, and chooses to go along with it. He has no wish to walk into a recording studio. And that shows- especially in his music. Equal parts sweet and coarse.

The entire concept that he has spread out over Monody, Madman's Vinyl, and White Privilege demands more than a perfunctory listen. Three albums that merge into what can only be defined as theater in musical form and it is meant to be heard in full, at once. Very few artists have been able to pull this off. Pink Floyd did it with Dark Side of the Moon (with the human consciousness playing the part of the protagonist) and The Wall. Bowie did it, and so did Frank Zappa. Dhruva Lal joins this eccentric crowd, if not in

musicality, then in conceptuality. Far removed from the melodic virtuosity of a Zappa, the album isn't necessarily something to write home about when you simply consider the theoretical merits of the mish-mash of chords that pulsate beneath the lyrics. The underlying music is very simple, and so is the rhythm. Chords that can be picked up and played without need for dissection. That does in no way mean that the songs are musically bad or even uninteresting. The songs are well written, sound great and I personally still enjoyed trying to pick up a few riffs here and there. But, where Dhruva really shines are his lyrics, and the concept behind those lyrics.

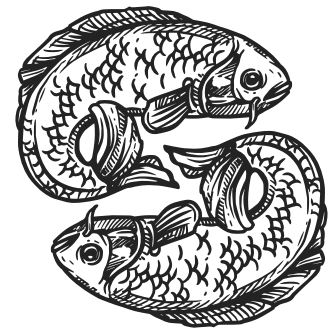
Coming to the concept that he has ideated, I must admit that it isn't common to face the Tibetan Book of the Dead as a music critic. A book that captured America in the 60s is largely forgotten now, and I can't really blame anyone for it. At the end of the day it is a ceremonial rite, read out to help the person escape the confounding cycle of rebirth. But, it conjures up fantastical visions, making it a rich and fertile ground for storytelling. Lyotard tells us that all stories have been told; that they are metanarratives told over and over again. That the limits of human creativity are exhaustive. And Ravi's story, in this era of postmodernism in art still adheres to a metanarrative. The return of the prodigal son, the Xaverian of the Year, finding his way back to this country, before he finally "blows up."



It all fits so well into this traditional form, yet the lyrical style remains as modern as possible. There is no allusion to the past, you live in every moment which becomes an extension of the present. The albums might deliver a non-linear story, but it holds true to what I can only call Borges' principles of the Tlön- the past is nothing but present memory, and the future is nothing but present hope. The albums aren't grounded in a sense of time, as if the whole of it has already happened and we are witnessing a memory, a ghost of Ravi going through the motions, as if trapped in the cycle of rebirth again. This is a mean feat that Dhruva has pulled. Challenging our senses of time, the basest of senses that beings possess, by inverting and arranging a musical story, and making it fit a traditional form. Tolstoy famously said, "All great literature is one of two stories; a man goes on a journey or a stranger comes to town." Ravi does both. When he leaves the city, he goes on a journey he could never have expected. When he returns, he is the stranger who comes to town. And this conflict that Ravi faces internally lies at the crux of this album. A conflict that can never truly be resolved.

I leave you simply with this:

Mahamaya,
Owner of this transactional realm
When will you choose to lose yourself?





TALES FROM THE HILLS



K R I T T I K A M A J U M D E R

i.

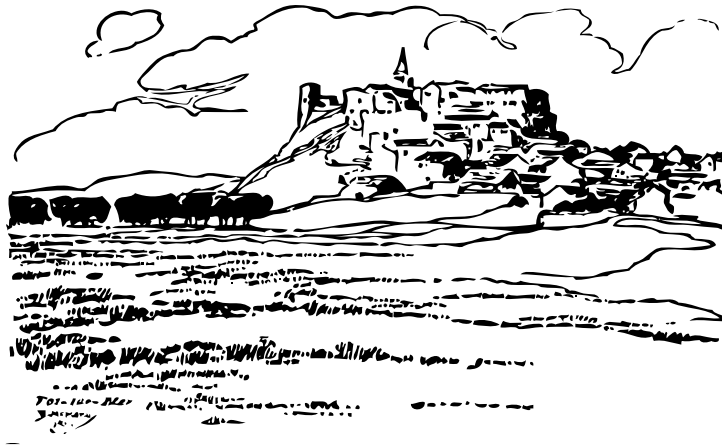
a woman climbs to her roof,
sits there and chews her bread
each time the sun's soft eyes
fall upon her.

she has no name
and her time stands still.
she smiles,
leaps down her rickety stairs
into her life of deathless toil.

ii.

i dawdle in the woods,
in its mystic, trackless paths
where i shall get lost
in a while or two.

i remember that for mary¹,
to pray in the wild was
to hug a black oak tree,
and so i pray
and so i hum a song.



iii.

i'd wish to remain
a companionless wanderer
walking ungracefully
like a child that knows joy.

but the clouds irk me
as they float by
and i stumble a little
before i long to float with them
like a child that knows joy.

iv.

the sun yawns a little
as it drapes the hills,
its eyes rosy, guileless,
as i sit and recall monet's² art.

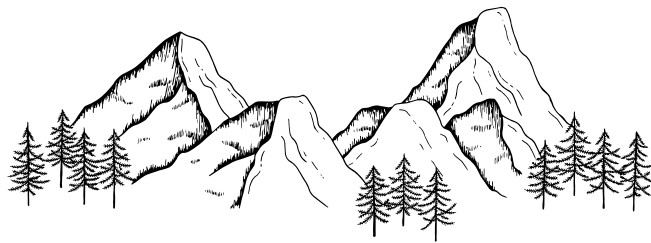
i think of the woman;
i think she must be home now,
lulling her sons to sleep
and perhaps, she is chewing
a second piece of bread.

(epilogue)

i return to the roads,
to the dust and the dirt
and i feel great delight
to long for the verdance
to long after it is insufferable
to long till i am stifled
to long endlessly.

i wish to never know
when i shall return
to the hills again
for when i do,
i should have longed enough
for my heart to be
piled with love upon love.

upon love for the hills.





AN OCTOBER SONATA

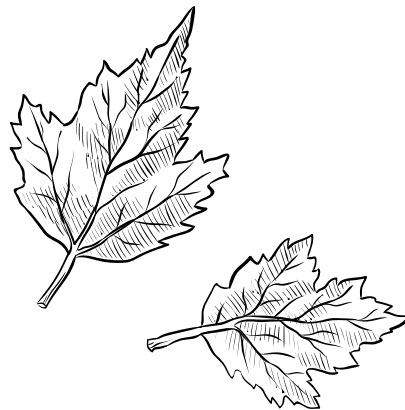


MUSKAN

In October's grasp, sweet pleasures take their flight,
His voice, an echo in the autumn's breeze,
His smile, a sight filling me with light,
In cinnamon and coffee, fond memories seize.

We donned our soft and cozy sweaters, found our space,
In love's embrace, October did we meet,
Our hearts entwined, like two souls in an embrace,
A love that's warm, like a fireside's gentle heat

Now October's here again, our love's encore,
This endless ache and yearning, through every passing year,
I'll love and cherish him still, as autumn's beauty soars,
For he's the maple tree that's always near.





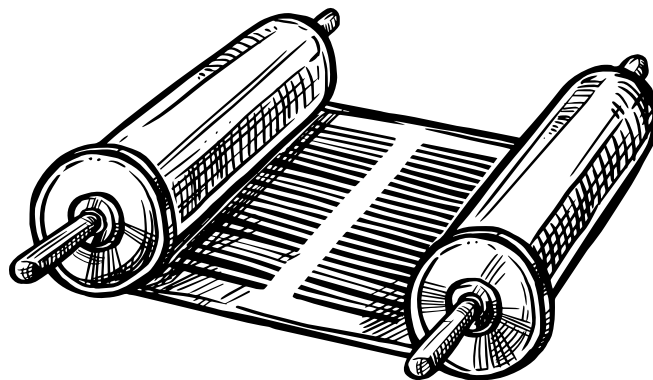
ON TRANSLATION OF DYING TEXTS



ANURAAG DAS SARMA

So painfully unsure of where I stand.
The point of convergence-
The little hand. Now revere the circling
Hours of strife. Where nothing
Is breathed Into life. Crumbling edifice
Of stone and wood, standing
Still where nothing stood.

Jerusalem, as drawn in ancient maps-
Cosmic axis, centre of the world.
Breathing city, caught between the dying,
And the dead. Where do I stand?
Ursprache. With the velocity of
Lost words hurled through time,
Once living, once dead. Caught
In tongues. Stuck in sand.



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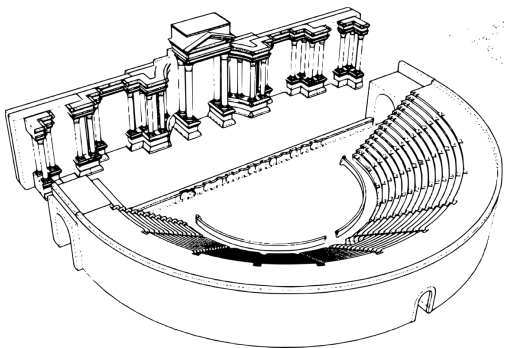
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