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Sobremesa

Editor

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Wednesday night family dinner by Adritanaya Tiwari

maa yells my name
her voice cutting through
layers of concrete and oblivion
maybe ignorance.
it's dinnertime
three other people in this house
but only I show up
to a half dusty half clean
dining table
fit between two walls.
there is no pre/post-dinner conversation
nobody asks me how my day went
what was it like in college
what does it feel to be home after months?
maa, would if she didn't know already.
there is no conversation
only noises in the background
some from the television
some from the neighbours
some from chit-chat over things that don't matter
I fail to differentiate between the three these days.
it all sails by like a paper boat in a puddle
until the rain drowns it into nothing.
'sobremesa' you say
I didn't know they had a word for
things I try to forget about,
like the wrongs in people, I share genes with.
I can't eat anymore,
I was never taught how to only why.
I can't eat anymore
so I scratch my spoon on stainless steel
nobody likes that sound

they notice the cutlery but not how less I've eaten.
the television shows up a break
three pairs of eyes turn to me
'how do you feel?' they ask.
like a paper boat melting away
in water and mud
run over by cars
torn apart and splattered around
in a filthy mess.
'it feels so good.' I say
finishing one last bite
and leave
I've never felt full anyway.

ABOUT THE POET

Adritanaya Tiwari is a dental intern from India. Her work has been in Nightingale and Sparrow magazine, Ayaskala, Esthesia magazine, and others.

Ode to afternoons by Anoushka Kumar

content warning: death

the tenant above Watson's hotel moves to
Delhi again, and hey, *isn't this what dreams
are made of?* when you're puffing cigars
on your college roommate's terrace and mamma
tells you to put honey in chai like words aren't
caught in throats every speech-debate contest and
you don't toy with jute mats during family dinners.
like over-spilled blood looks the same on marble.
papa tilts his head and asks you if she's in medical
this year, linoleum holds his disapproval. *tut,*
you've spilled glitter over the carpet again and god
she's exhausted, you know she's not a career woman
and when Dada is pulled away on a stretcher she tells
you this is destiny. but now you're writing POETRY(?)
about it. this isn't your pain, your grief. this is a dumb
activist teen who reads Kipling and rewrites endings
when all she needs to do-
is come for lunch on time.

ABOUT THE POET

Anoushka Kumar (she/her) is a student and writer from India, with work forthcoming or published in the Heritage Review, the Bitter Fruit Review and the Trouvaille Review. She is also on the editorial team of Cathartic Lit, Gossamer Lit and the Interstellar Review. When not writing, she can be found listening to Phoebe Bridgers, crying over poetry, and debating the queerness of complex female characters. Find her on Instagram as @outofthebluewrites.

Balcony by Helen Bowie

The low evening sun bounces off the bargain bistro table
Which briefly doubled as a desk but now has pride of place
On the balcony, which is all ours, our tiny patch of sun-kissed
air and evening chill, of fallen leaves and sideways rain
Our viewing platform over the neighbourhood we call home
For a glass of wine, and after dinner show, as the world goes by
On our long evenings together, which never feel long enough.

ABOUT THE POET

Helen Bowie is a writer and performer based in London, UK. Her words can be found in *Beir Bua Journal*, *Eater London* and *Daily Drunk Mag*, among others. Helen has one cat, and several bafflingly strong opinions about extremely trivial matters. You find her opinions on Twitter @helensulis and her words at linktr.ee/helensulisbowie.

The Lunch After Your Funeral by Megan Cannella

content warning: death, drug use

After we said
goodbye to you,
we sat
at a brunch
that turned into lunch
that turned into dinner.

We picked at cold fries
and wouldn't let
the server
clear them away.
We couldn't have
blamed them
for being annoyed
with us. Our table
was cluttered
with half-empty
drinks. Coffee,
watered down
Diet Pepsi, spicy
bloody mary
with extra olives,
mimosa no orange juice.

We did careless
bumps in the bathroom
off of whatever
tattered old used book
I had been carrying
around in the suitcase
I call a purse
so that we could

keep day drinking
and grieving
and laughing
so hard that we
couldn't breathe either.

ABOUT THE POET

Megan Cannella (@megancannella) is a Midwestern transplant currently living in Nevada. For over a decade, Megan has bounced between working at a call centre, grad school, and teaching. She has work in or forthcoming from *Versification*, *The Daily Drunk*, *(mac)ro(mic)*, *Taco Bell Quarterly*, and *Perhappened*.

Blush or red? by Shringarika Pandey

The evening slushes around in wine glasses,
a joyous company to sparkling pink wine.

Reminder. Feet are to be tethered to the ground
at all times. Lest you find yourself lifting to the
dusty beige ceiling. People are flesh-made
balloons tonight. I have been tying loose strings,
around my fingers for hours now; the knots come
undone at every jolty, snarky, nostril flare from
one of the aunts. The next morning, I am eating
leftover cheese. I am rubbing out the smell of
celery salad from the dining tablecloth. I am
remaking the yellow china plates, to look dull again.

ABOUT THE POET

Shringarika Pandey (she/her) is a 20-year-old poet with an upstanding admiration for all houseplants, cats and the occasional evening rainfalls. On good days you can find her listening to Phoebe Bridgers and writing at [instagram.com/boot.theory](https://www.instagram.com/boot.theory)

Self-Addressed Haibun From My Future Self by Sung Cho

You should stop drinking milk now. The skin can only stretch out so far, and the body only has so much room for your bones to grow. Mother fed you unwanted dinners like a prayer to God that her child would grow a few more inches closer to the sky. Years later, and you are still as close to the sky as you will ever be. So cherish every inch of your body, and waste no more time drinking milk.

*

But let me tell you how the body has so many clever ways of telling us to move on. The newborns now have a full set of baby teeth, and they can chew their food by themselves. The double-digit youngsters have learned to tear out all of their beloved pearls like seeds to make room for sharper canines and tougher molars. Your middle-aged teachers are older, but they still teach until their hair grows silver for them to see that their bodies are begging to stop. Your grandmother and grandfather, like everyone else's, use their legs less often now to let their soft bodies float to the sky's blue arms.

*

I remember when the world lost its balance some summers ago. I remember the hurt. When Earth heaved of emptiness. When isolation became stale language. Let me remind you, though, that the body has so many clever ways of nourishing—and Earth is one of the oldest bodies we know. And though the blue-green body has its scars to remember, believe me when I tell you that flames no longer pepper the sky. There is nothing to cover our long-unused smiles, and we continue to hunger the way our bodies have always known.

*

So, love, stop drinking milk, and do not waste space on what your body does not want. Let us eat together beneath the clouds, you and I, the half-baked moon, the citron stars, the soupy

dayglow of dawn like
we used to, like our bodies
always wanted to.

The Burial Of An Ancient King by Sung Cho

They say that a body can still feel
a type of hunger once it leaves
us. So they made a cornucopia of
my body. I remember the way
I died—it happened so
beautifully. They stuffed my lungs
with cloves of black garlic, doused
them clean with myrrh. My lungs became
the twin faces on a luna moth's wings.
Then my liver decorated with leaves
of vanilla, lathered in rose honey,
the sweetmeat of my eyes scooped smooth
like soft yogurt. They fed me rubies
of ripe persimmons through the openings
of my head, crowned me with a helm
of saffron and perrilla. Tell me, are we only
noticed once we are gone?

ABOUT THE POET

Sung Cho is a student from the suburbs of Pennsylvania who enjoys reading and writing in his free time. His work is published/forthcoming in 3Elements Review and MORIA. He hopes you've had a great day.

To a lover by Swagatika Sarangi

On days you choose to visit me, dear afternoon nap,
mostly minutes after eating a plate of chicken biriyani,
I draw the curtains and the act for the day is paused.
I sway in your cradle of comfort with the motion of
uncooked spaghetti softening in boiling water. You
come as a no-alarm-staycation. You seep in gently
pulling the plug off all the sounds — the kooing of the
koyal, noisy neighbour, & the grr-grr of the grinding
machine. Being with you is like soaking myself in a
bathtub filled with warm water, laced with lavender
scented candles, while sipping a glass of rose wine;
my ideal way to rejuvenate. You surprise me with a
bouquet of sunflowers in every dream. Sitting
surrounded by purple walls, my favourite colour, you and
I know the hours we spend together aren't enough,
we want five more minutes of this. But the water in the
bathtub is becoming colder, and I have been told if you
love someone you should let them go, they always find
a way to come back.

ABOUT THE POET

Swagatika floats between feeling like a cloud and a tree. A cheerleader for solitude, she writes, performs poems & stories, makes zines, and goes on dates with art. Living in Bangalore, she is a copywriter by profession. When not thinking about afternoon naps, she travels alone to anywhere her bank balance decides. As a spoken word artist, her work has been featured by Tales & Tacos. Meet her @swagatika.sarangi on Instagram.

Girl next door by Vamika Sinha

I am in the other
room, the language
I am still breaking
into like my first
pair of heels, bouncing
on the floorboards, dancing
through throbs of laughter &
feet, coming to rest
for a breath — just enough
I can understand
even the feeling of swimming like tongue
underneath the roof
of the words — they are happy
tossing them in
between their mouths
like spoonfuls of supper or
kisses; it's a party
I am not part of
but the music filters in, &
my head tilts, nods
like dewdrops off tin.

ABOUT THE POET

Vamika Sinha is a writer, poet, and photographer from India and Botswana, currently based in the UAE. She is the co-founder and editor-in-chief of Postscript Magazine. Vamika holds a B.A in Literature and Creative Writing from New York University Abu Dhabi, and her writing and art can be found in The Independent, KGB Bar Literary Journal, The Bangalore Review, and AAWW's Open City, among others. Visit her website at: www.vamikasinha.com

Sobremesa by Abhinita Mohanty

Tautology appears as a gift-wrapped paper around families in leisure, creating illusions of sameness; like a tree, apple bundled into cardboard boxes. Sobremesa is when conflicts trickle into coffee mugs, giving sheen of softness. It trod in shadows of evening mirth, waiting to fade away under the glow of the morning sun. It is the time when conflicts get a seat on the table and perhaps occupies the centre table. Yet, its flow smoothens into the rim of coffee mugs and mellows into the dermis of the palms. Inside placid walls of bland houses, dim lights shine and voices hush into discussions. They whisper a quarrel, lather arguments with the piping smell of scones and cookies. Nothing comes strong, because Sobremesa is filled with the aroma of homemade snacks and soothing noise of chewing.

Tautology remains despite the differences that breed between families over the years as they branch out or between old lovers on shiny restaurant tables. But during Sobremesa the greediness to munch on something, the beauty of hunger pangs at the sight of savoury knick-knacks solidifies sameness. It reminds us that humans have this inescapably beautiful nature when deliciousness can silence our tumbling selves. Perhaps it would if only momentarily, makes us feel we may inhabit a small slice in the universe, a dot in the galaxy; yet we are significant. Our brief moments are punctuated by mellifluous laughter of a child at the sight of chocolates or lights from a local bakery during a snowstorm.

Sobremesa is a space where we unmask, under the compassion of friends, family and close ones, and we whisper secrets. Conflicts get resolved in a wisp of banter or get entangled in the fading glory of the day. Sobremesa is a panacea of restlessness, loneliness and the solipsistic rhythm. It is a place where small talk becomes art, and cloaks of intellect can safely hide without judgment. In a world of 'big talks', politically correct chutzpah and stiffness of public conduct, Sobremesa is a space of heavy giggles, light delicacies, approved silliness.

Some have made it an art of leisure or 'dolce far niente', Sobremesa is its unpretentious twin. For some of us, Sobremesa can exist in the corner of time or space when we can be comfortable with our vulnerable selves and even, flaunt it.

ABOUT THE WRITER

Abhinita Mohanty is a research scholar in the department of humanities and social sciences, IIT Madras, India. Some of her works are published in Punch Magazine, India, New Asian Writing, Outlook Magazine's Website, Feminism in India, Green Ink poetry, Ponder Savant, Sheepshead Review (forthcoming) and a few others. She tweets at: twitter.com/AbhinitaMohanty

“Nourished” by Ari FitzGibbon

The seven of us cram around a plastic folding table, two three-person benches and a chair on the end which seems to drift further across the lawn each night, no matter how often we tug it back over. We've beaten the rowing team to dinner to snag this spot: it's the best place from which to spot the campus turkeys, when they come strutting out from behind the natural sciences building and into the grove where they roost overnight. Plus, a few faculty members like to walk their dogs along the nearby road around sunset. We whisper choruses of *awwww* and *good boy* when the pups trot past, hoping they—but not their owners—will hear us.

It's only 5:30, but with daylight savings ended, darkness and chill blanket us. We stave off the latter with layers of denim and flannel, the former by setting clear plastic cups of tea and lemonade over phones with the flashlight function switched on, makeshift lanterns illuminating our food. The menu changes every night, but there are constants: meat overcooked or underdone but never just right, rarely an ounce of salt on the nightly fries, go back inside if you want the ranch you requested (they'll never remember the first time), and though we pray the new brand of tofu's texture will grow less off-putting with time, months have passed with no improvement.

Last year, we ate off tables crammed with food we'd made together, bumping into each other and every surface in the basement kitchen as we'd try to use the sink and stove at the same time. Every week we had fresh-baked bread from a recipe that never tasted the same twice, made without aid from the measuring cups forgotten at home, but always coated with the homemade jam that had been prioritized in packing. There was chilli, fondue, and chocolate pudding, made in a pot that was emptied and rinsed three times in one night; thick stacks of crepes, topped with everything from syrup to sriracha; and mountains of dollar-store popcorn, anointed with a shaker of yeast filched from the cafeteria. But this year we wouldn't dare share a bag of chips without a bottle of hand sanitizer to pass alongside it, and the stove/oven combo in the sophomore dorm is busted anyway.

We are lucky, nonetheless, and we know it. Although many people we know could not, many of our friends, even those who once sat at our tables and shared our food, the seven of us could all come back this year. And though it is not like it used to be, we prize this hour under the darkening sky, our laughter soaring over the roar of

trucks on the nearby highway as we swap stories of the strangest moments from class that day and pictures of the pets we've left at home. (Well—at our houses. *This* is home, as much or more.) Though our fingers stiffen and our noses grow pink, we linger after our takeout boxes are picked clean, pulling at the thinning strands of our conversation until they fray and sag.

Sooner rather than later, the grim promise of homework will pull us back up the steep hill where our dorm rests, lungs straining to suck air through our masks as we climb, eyes scanning the bushes for the coyote who sometimes lurks near the base of the path. (We call him "our dog," not having yet found a name we agree on.) We'll discipline our clump into a single-file line as we trudge through the entryway and down the hall, spacing six feet apart as we must do indoors. Bidding early goodnights, we'll wall ourselves away in single rooms, each separated by a couple of feet and an ocean of rules keeping the people under this crumbling roof—even those in the same social bubble—masked and apart. And when the door closes behind me and leaves me to myself, I will slink back to my bed and hope no one can hear my loneliness seeping through the walls. Alone, I am not big or strong enough to chase off sorrow.

But it is not later or even sooner yet. It is now. And now, not yet cold and newly full and bubbling with mirth in the lemonade light, I am more than myself. I am part of a seven-headed beast, strange and lopsided and beautiful, feeding the fire in its heart with memories of when times were brighter and hope that they can be that way again. And down to the smallest molecule of my being, I am awash in love for the people who are alongside me in bad times as they were in good ones, miraculously constant and consistently miraculous.

ABOUT THE WRITER

Born and raised in Alaska, Ari FitzGibbon is currently studying English at Mills College in Oakland, and has had previous work published in the Pomona Valley Review and the 2019 Harmonious Hearts anthology. Ari can be found on Twitter at @unassumingowl.

The feast by Zahirra

A wave of warmth billows across your body as the robes of velvety rose syrup, fragrant cardamon, cubes of multi-coloured jelly and milk glide down to join the chicken, yellow sweet rice, steak pies, samosas and lime pickle. They jostle for a comfortable space in your crowded belly. The same belly which gurgled with hunger all day. A hunger you tried hard to distract yourself from by reading, and when that didn't work, you drowned it with an afternoon nap. You heard your name being called repeatedly from the vicinity of the kitchen where your aunts and grandmother were busy preparing the iftar meal. It's the end of the first fast of Ramadan and you are on holiday from university. At your age, you are expected to take your place in the kitchen and help with the food preparations, but you pretended you didn't hear and ignored the calls. You knew the enticing smells would make the gurgling louder and it still feels strange to be back. Now that you've broken your fast, you are satiated with a warm contentment and your eyes feel like tiny weights are pressing them down and drawing you into a long dream.

You don't think you'll be able to squeeze anything else in, but when the tray of shiny metallic wrappers is offered, you don't refuse. You take a handful of hazelnut chocolates for your palms and more to fill your pockets. The congregation of overfed relatives with re-energised limbs have moved from the long rectangular dining room table where you had your iftar feast into the large living room at your grandmother's house. The curtains are still open and the glaring summer sun which made your throat rough and dry with an unquenchable thirst, is now emitting a soft orange glow as it sinks slowly down beyond the horizon. A miasma of satisfaction settles like dust on the green sofas, glass coffee table and wooden mantelpiece above the fireplace. It's Saturday and the family business will be shut tomorrow. Time to fill stretches out lazily like a sleeping cat. The urgency that characterises the motions of your father and uncle during the weekdays dissipates as they spread out on the sofas and put their feet up on the pouffes.

You can't remember a time when everyone got on so well. You've been away for six months and your life on campus feels more and more distant. The extreme hunger of the fast followed by the abundance of the iftar feast paints everything with harmonious rose-coloured hues. Old rivalries and simmering resentments have been

doused for now. Your aunts have forgotten they hate each other. They spent hours trying to outdo each other with the presentation and taste of their culinary offerings but are now congratulating each other on how glorious the chicken was, how tasty the pies were and how divine the rose milk tasted. Even your mother, who is usually very quiet on these occasions because she generally dreads any interactions with her in-laws is being magnanimous with her words, the lilt in her laugh makes you smile from the inside out. The conversation becomes more and more animated and you close your eyes and visualise the shapes of the words rising higher and higher into the air where they meet briefly and then tumble back down.

Your uncle tells all your younger cousins who fasted half and full days to line up behind him and he doles out crisp green \$5 notes to each waving hand. You remember a time when you lined up wide-eyed with open palms. Now you are in that in-between place of young adulthood still holding onto your escaping childhood. Your cousin brings out the Monopoly game and you are appointed the banker. You start distributing the paper money and setting up the board on the floor while the corn kernels explode loudly in the kitchen. Your grandmother hands you a bowl overflowing with buttery popcorn seasoned with salt and hands dive in as you buy and sell get-out-of-jail cards, houses and hotels on the yellow board.

Once the popcorn is devoured, platters of cold watermelon wedges and slices of fresh mango appear from the kitchen. The sweet red juice tickles you as it drips down your chin and the yellow mango strings get trapped between your teeth. After the monopoly game, your grandmother gathers her 15 grandchildren around her like cubs. She tells a story of devils being chained up in cages for thirty days during Ramadan which makes it easier to be good. She says now there's no excuse for not being good. Her storytelling lulls you to sleep and it feels like home again.

ABOUT THE WRITER

Zahirra is a writer and English language teacher with a Masters in Education. She has done short courses in creative writing with the Open University and her work can be found in various literary magazines including *Ayaskala*, *Fahmidan Journal* and in upcoming issues of *Opia* and *Small Leaf Press*. She has lived in Zimbabwe, South Africa, the United Arab Emirates and the United Kingdom and draws from her diverse life experiences. Zahirra can be found on Twitter @ZahirraD.

A meal for one by Megha Nayar

I say to my mother this morning that I have come down with the coronavirus.

It isn't easy. At first, the guilt of lying to her feels like a road roller flattening my heart. Twenty-seven years of painful coexistence and innumerable moments of casual violence, I realise, haven't done much to alter my good-girl constitution. A simple lie — even one abetted by the opacity that telephonic conversation affords — makes me so jittery I can't stop shaking. I speak at a higher pitch and sound more earnest than usual. It prompts Amma to ask, "Aaru, are you feeling okay?"

Usually, when Amma asks if I'm feeling okay, it is to be understood within a specific context. My feeling okay is always relative to something else. For instance, am I feeling okay enough to make lunch? To massage her legs? To meet a suitor? To dress up for relatives she abhors? When Amma inquires if I'm okay, she generally means to ask if I'm okay enough for her.

But today, for a change, I'm not okay enough for her. I'm just about right for myself.

Today is Diwali — my first away from home. I have decided to spend the day in my little rental flat, sixty kilometres away from Amma's. This would normally be unimaginable but I've figured out how to make it happen. Anxious though I may be, I'm armed with a plan.

So, in the morning, I tell my mother that I've come down with the dreaded virus. It is quite the performance.

But first, I spend long hours in preparation. Symptoms? Testing? Result? Hospitalization? I speak with a colleague's cousin and a friend's friend who've recovered from the virus. Borrow the former's prescription and the latter's test report. Photoshop my name into both. Visit an online forum for COVID-19 survivors. Analyse and memorise the most common indicators. Even eat a handful of peanuts before making the big call, to provoke a bout of coughing that will lend credence to my claims of sickness.

All the groundwork helps, because my mother is not an easy person to convince.

As the conversation progresses, I feel lighter. Amma asks eighteen questions, most of which I am able to answer well. I told her I got the infection from a market visit.

Describe my condition in vivid detail — a sandpaper cough that grates against my throat, a mild yet persistent fever, and a shocking loss of taste and odour. Food feels like bile, I complain. Water has lost its miracle. Head hurts, limbs hurt. Lungs seem fine though. No breathing complications so far.

That last bit has to be clearly stated and reiterated, because she demands to know why I'm not checking into a hospital. "Why take risks, Aaru?" she asks, her voice thick with doubt. I reply that I'm monitoring my oxygen levels at home.

"Consistently around 98%," I assure her, having learnt from my research that blood oxygen is a cause for worry only when it dips below 90. "And hospitals have no room for stable patients anyway."

She isn't done. More details are sought. What did your office say? How did you procure medicines? Who will cook and clean for you? Has the municipal corporation sent a health team to visit you?

I answer patiently, like a student appearing for a viva. Office has sanctioned two weeks of leave. Medicines have been supplied by a kind neighbour. Food parcels will be delivered by a local tiffin service to my doorstep. Cleaning can wait till I feel better.

Alert as a hawk, she repeats her last question.

"What about the municipal corporation? Did they send a team?"

"Oh yes, they visited yesterday."

"So, they must have put up a sticker at your door, no?"

"What sticker?"

"They put up a warning sticker at the doorstep of every coronavirus patient, to keep visitors out."

"Yes, they've put one up here too."

"Send me a photo."

"Why, Amma?"

"Just. I want to see what it looks like."

For a few seconds, my mind goes numb. But then, I recover and do a quick Google search. I find a picture of the sticker from a COVID warrior's personal blog.

"Here you go, Amma. Happy?"

"What is there to be happy in my daughter falling sick?"

"I ... No, I mean I hope you're satisfied that I'm following due procedures."

"Yeah, yeah. You take rest. I must get going. I was counting on you to help me with the ceremonial lunch today, but well. These rickety legs will do a solo dance now."

She disconnects.

I sit by my bedside for a while, staring first at my phone screen, then at the creases on my palms.

This woman. My birth-giver. Carried me in her womb, as she likes to remind me often. Nourished me with her own flesh and blood. Struggled over fourteen hours to bring me into the world, the umbilical cord having entwined itself around my neck, making for a precarious delivery. It is a strange story, simultaneously poignant and unrelatable. I wonder sometimes if she is making it all up. Maybe I am not hers to begin with. Maybe I was adopted, on the premise that I would ignite motherly affection in her like babies are known to, but then I didn't, and maybe that is why her experience of motherhood has never been a boon, only a burden, but she isn't allowed to say that, because, after all, which woman can live with the aftermath of declaring that they don't love their child. Maybe I've been no more than dead weight to her all along; she just won't say it out loud.

I'm staring at the three primary lines on my left palm now. I'm told they represent life, health and family. Which one is the family line? It must be this one here, the one that trails off mid-way. It is the weakest of my fortunes. Quite apt.

A small, hot tear trails across my cheek and lands in my palm, at the intersection of health and family. More tears emerge, threatening to flow like a stream. I cannot allow this. If I am to enjoy the festival of lights, for the very first time on my own terms, I must distract myself from wreaking darkness. Crying does nothing but irrigate old wounds.

I go to the bathroom and wash my face, thrashing my eyes with so much water they dry up. Wiping off all traces of rumination, I walk up to the kitchen and put on my apron. Today, for a change, I'm going to treat myself.

At noon, I'm at the dining table — laid out for one, adorned with a vase of lilies and a new set of placemats, not to forget a brand-new set of Corelle crockery — with a heaped plateful of delights. I've made myself some carrot-and-green-pea dumplings, baby corn fritters, tamarind chutney, a platter of roasted vegetables, and my favourite, a bowl of fruit custard. There's also a hamper of Diwali treats I received from office: namkeens, dry-fruit cake, and chocolate chip muffins.

All these flavours for myself. A private paradise of my own, unblemished by Amma's presence. It makes me smile. How I have longed for this.

Half an hour later, I let out a hearty burp. It makes me giggle a bit. Back where I come from, only men belch at the table. Amma would have castigated me for this.

My stomach and soul have both had their fill. I continue to sit there nevertheless, staring at the feast of my making, grateful for my hard-earned solitude. This has been a memorable Diwali.

Somewhere, up in the skies, my old man must be twinkling.

ABOUT THE WRITER

Megha Nayar was longlisted for the Commonwealth Short Story Prize 2020. She spends half her time teaching French and English. The other half, she devotes herself to learning Spanish, writing prose, and pondering the purpose of human existence. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Variety Pack*, *Burnt Breakfast*, *Cauldron Anthology*, *Potato Soup Journal*, *Riot Act Mag* and *The Daily Drunk Mag*, among others. She blogs at meghanayar.tumblr.com and tweets at @meghasnatter.

Dear Ayesha by Almas Sadique

Dear Ayesha,

I have safely reached Barcelona and settled in. I have a sweet little apartment that overlooks a narrow alley. I often shut my lights at night and look down into the alley. Sometimes, I catch a group of friends smoking, sometimes a couple making out. It reminds me of all the times we did both of those, got caught and had to bribe our way out of it.

I also visited Sagrada Familia yesterday, like you asked me to. I am going to be attaching the photographs that I took there. It was unreal and I imagined sitting there with you. The thought instantly put a smile on my face. I imagined you gawking at every door, every arch, and every spire. I know how much you love Gaudi's work and I wished for you to be there with me. I even tried calling you, but I guess it did not get through.

I miss you, Ayesha. I know I caused an upheaval in your life and then left for Spain two days later. But, I know you will forgive me someday. You have to believe me when I say that Ayaan was not the right partner for you. Trust me. I am saying this as your childhood best friend and not as your ex-boyfriend.

Anyway, it's my birthday in two days. I do not expect you to wish me, but I hope that you do. I want you to know that the only reason I have been able to make it to Barcelona is you. Do you remember how I used to come over to your house for lunch but would stay for dinner? We would finish lunch and talk about everything in the world while sitting on the dining table. We would laze around on the dining table, then on the sofas in the living room and then come back to the dining table for dinner. We'd always joke about how we can extend and merge all the meals of the day with each other. You know what, this practise has a term here in Spain. It's called *sobremesa*. People don't just finish their lunch or dinner and leave. They extend it to several hours, just sitting on their tables, talking to each other, and sharing their stories, and their experiences. Turns out, it's an alternative to the long *siestas* that were the culture here in older times. Afternoon *sobremesas* are just more practical than *siestas*.

Turns out, we were already practising Spanish traditions since we were little. Those hours-long sobremesas helped heal me more than anything else ever did. I would always turn up at your house unannounced and you would always welcome me in without a single question. Those were days when mum and dad would be fighting or when I would be feeling the need to eat the sleeping pills from my mother's drawer or when I'd have spotted my father's new shaving blade and would have the urge to use it on my wrist. Those were also the days when my results would come in and my parents would invite their whole family for dinner without once acknowledging or congratulating me on my result or the days when I knew that Khanna uncle was invited and that no matter where I hid, he would find me and take me to the terrace.

Ayesha, your unquestioning acceptance has been healing me for years. It was your dream to come and live in Barcelona. Please, come soon, for your sake and for mine. I know that you will heal me once more and the city will heal you.

Ayesha, I feel like Julian from *The Shadow in the Wind*. Barcelona is beautiful just like Julian described, but with every passing day, I am inching closer to the Julian that became in the end.

I miss you.

Hope to see you soon.

We can build many more castles in the air here than we did back home. You see, the policemen won't throw us out or threaten to lock us up.

Love,
Yash.

ABOUT THE WRITER

Almas Sadique is an architect, an aspiring writer and a perpetual daydreamer. She loves old buildings and vintage paraphernalia. Her guilty pleasure is reading too much of Wikipedia. She also writes short stories which she posts on her blog: almassadique.blogspot.com. She is mostly active and reachable on instagram @almassadique.