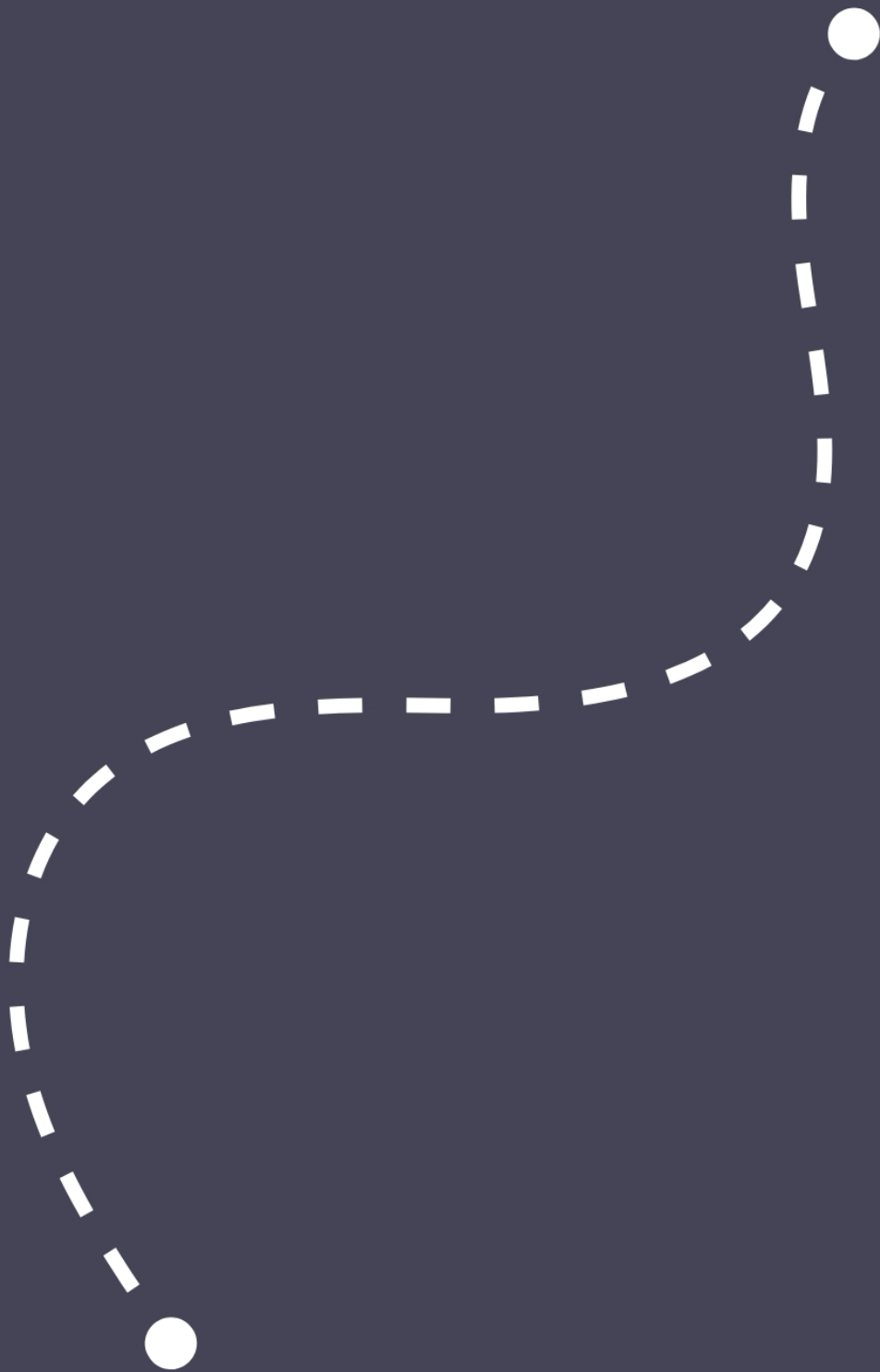


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Learning to Coexist

Editor

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In This Issue –

Editor's Note

Aishwarya Javalgekar	1
Akansha Patra	2
Alvin Kathembe	5
Debasis Tripathy	7
Grace Alice	8
Gurleen Kaur	9
G. Keller	12
Hannah Storm	13
Karo Ska	14
Kashvi Chandok	18
Laura Owens	19
Leela Raj-Sankar	21
Marc Brightside	24
Miriam Navarro Prieto	28
Navashree Nandini	30
Noreen Ocampo	31
Prithiva Sharma	32
Sanjyokta Deshmukh	34
Sena Chang	36
Suhana Simran	38
Swethlana Saraswat	40
Yelaina Anton	44
Adritanaya Tiwari	46
Arsha Adarsh	49
Catherine Kleindienst	52
Kanjam Bhat	54
Mandira Pattnaik	58
Megha Nayar	60
Mugdha Nanal	64
Sahana Arun Kumar	67

Zachary Schroeder	70
Kunal Panda	74
Bidisha Mahapatra	77
Sarah Loverock	79
Surina Venkat	82

Editor's Note

As a part of an Indian joint family, coexistence elucidates itself in my life abundantly. Sometimes, something as elementary as an afternoon meal implies learning to exist in a harmonious space with another family member and succumbing to a consensus. On other occasions, coexistence springs up in the *avatar* of a mother hoping to bind her sons to herself in the guise of "family" while simultaneously suggesting that their wives are "outsiders". Fast forward to high school and learning to accept myself with all my faults, acne, and stretch marks; only to realise that the paramount form of coexistence is the conjunction with self. Today, coexistence reflects itself in the corners of my room - a book on Mathematics sits atop a Romance novel, a sticky note on my wall reminds me of my academic work while a diary rests inside my cupboard with poetry scribbled on its pages. We, collectively, observe coexistence in diverse platitudes of our existence. In science, atoms coexist to form tissues, tissues further coexist to form muscles, and muscles coexist to form the functional human body. In social studies, we explore the concept of social concurrence of human beings with nature, with other species, and amongst themselves. In language, the coexistence of words forms the writing you are able to read today. We've been taught from an early age that the world is meticulously built upon the phenomena of conjunction. The theories of peace, conflict, and survival, can all be traced back to mere 'coexistence'. Coexistence cascades itself into our lives as simply as sunshine falling on an indoor plant's leaves, as diversely as a shelf filled with read and unread books alike, as majestically as rivers flowing through the cracks between mountain rocks, as motherly as valleys lying on the lap of the hills. The writers of this issue prompt us to explore coexistence in everyday life as well as distinctive settings. **Leela Raj-Sankar** traverses coexistence in a relationship while underlying a simultaneous discovery of self in her poem. In another corner of the issue, **Marc Brightside** writes a poem on the journey of coexisting with anger. **Prithiva Sharma** takes us to a family's dinner table while navigating coexistence in a domestic dynamic. There are many more poets and writers that will provide you with a curious perspective towards this issue's theme '**Learning to Coexist**'. With this issue, we hope to bring to your screens the plethora of contemporaneousness and its kaleidoscopic interpretations from writers and artists across the world. Happy reading!

Vaishnavi Sharma,
Editor-In-Chief

Terrible by Aishwarya Javalgekar

Don't ever have children you'd be a terrible mother
Don't ever have children you'd be a terrible mother.
Don't have children
ever
you'd be a terrible mother
Don't
have children you'd be a terrible mother
Don't have children you'd be a mother
Don't have terrible children mother
Don't have children
a terrible mother
a mother
Won't have children I'd be a terrible mother.

ABOUT THE POET

Aishwarya Javalgekar (she/her) is a feminist writer and editor with a Masters in English (Public Texts). Her recent work appears in *perhappened*, *dreams walking*, *Dust Poetry*, and *Ghost Heart* literary magazines. She is the editor-in-chief of *ang(st)* zine and explores identity, mental health, and the body through her writing. Find her at aishwaryajavalgekar.com or follow her on Twitter @aish_java.

my skin, my sin by Akanksha

my mother smears my body with a paste of turmeric,
and rubs it all over my five-year-old frame,
like one rubs soap over oil spills and curry stains,
or, when the living-room wallpaper blotches,
like, how menstruating women clean their bedsheets.
my mother says, turmeric is an antidote
for my skin,
as if it were a disease, plaguing my body, making me sick.
so, she rubs fast and frantic,
determined to make me look brighter, lighter, quieter.

my mother births an infant and the neighbour pities,
"Oh, the boy is fairer than your daughter!"
on the bus, in Kindergarten, a girl with two ponytails asks me,
"Why are you always dirty?"
at school, in art class, we draw fruits and vegetables,
and the skin-coloured crayon is peach,
but I'm not.

my father reads me fairy-tales,
of pretty princesses, who live deep within the woods,
and are fair like the morning,
I learn, fair means beautiful,
and the witch is dark like dusk, with her skin
growing boils and itching all over,
I learn, dark means ugly.

the school stage doesn't accept me as *Sita*,
I am capable of being neither goddess nor princess,
the *Brahmin* boys in my class tell me, I must be a *Shudra*
unholy, sinful, lowly, disgusting.

I was born the colour of the evening sky on an August day,
the colour of drenched earth after a night of rain,
the colour of my mother's eyes,
the colour of *Krishna* himself,
and yet, I am an eclipse,
my skin shadowing, my body a celestial object.

I try to shed my skin every year,
like snakes below the kitchen sill
I try to pull apart the edges under my fingernails,
as if my skin were a half-wrinkled, half-rotten potato peel.
I've eaten detergent,
I've drunk bleach,
I've scrubbed my shins with sandpaper,
I've spun myself in the washing machine.

but my skin sticks to my skeleton like honey,
it doesn't give way, it stays.
the colour is thick and rigid, alike my spirit,
it doesn't erase, it doesn't fade.

and when the world comes to my rescue,
redeems me for my sins,
"but you're beautiful on the inside,
some men actually like your type."
I become more than just ugly,
I become a fetish, a preference,
another prop for inclusiveness.
I become screens on a matrimony search,
I become a confession at the city Church.

and the years turn as the world phones each day,
to harass me with their schemes,
I've been a sloth at grasping, what it all means.

and even though, I harmonically hang,
swinging between wanting and not wanting
my snake-like skin,
I slither around in it,
and show myself to people who fear it,
whisper-looping in my head,
I'm a goddess, I'm a princess,
I am a sin of Jesus.

ABOUT THE POET

Akanksha is a 21-year-old Master's student of Clinical Psychology, who's often found hiding behind the giant heap of books on her table, reading poetry late into the night and writing out detailed stories off minor incidents that mean nothing, really. She is a lover of skies, chaser of butterflies and the smallest person in a room, always. Her Instagram is @annesextonstan.

Goldilocks by Alvin Kathembe

Stumbling through this strange and foreign
hovel we call a world
looking for a place to call your own,
looking for home:

You have tried to sit in many different chairs
and found them
too hard
or too soft
to hold you.

You have put your lips to many bowls of porridge
and found them
too hot
or too cold
for your mouth.

You have lain in many beds, and found them
too rigid for your bones
or
too fluffy for your muscles.

So you stumble on through
this strange and foreign hovel we call a world
looking for a place to call your own:
looking for home.

One day you will find it
and it will be
just right.

ABOUT THE POET

Alvin Kathembe is a writer from Nairobi, Kenya. His poetry has been featured in Dust Poetry Magazine, The Short Story Foundation Journal, Poetry Potion and other publications. His short stories have been published in Omenana, Brittlepaper and Digital Bedbugs, available on Kindle. Find him on Twitter @SofaPhilosopher, and on Medium <https://medium.com/@alvin.kathembe>

When My Son Discarded Bread Crust by Debasis Tripathy

Three slices of bread, two layers of garlic cheese
sticking them together, browned and hardened crusts
neatly torn off and placed by the side, food wasted -
that's my son, who doesn't know hunger. Well, good
for him. He is born at the right time - age of plenty
or lack of empathy? I stare at his plate. My father
on a dining table chair, reading newspaper looks sideways
his eyes shift to his grandson, down to the food placed
in between and loudly remembers the time that used-to-be,
offending Gen X/Y/Z and who not, essentially faulting
the upbringing of everyone born after his generation.
My son is busy multitasking - playing a game on phone
and breakfasting - doesn't give a shit to what
we are discussing, leaving us alone and behind
so much like history. He loses a game, *Oh shit!*

ABOUT THE POET

Debasis Tripathy does a regular desk job in Bangalore. He also writes - poems and short fiction. His recent work has been featured in Collidescope, Squawk Back, Turnpike, Kitaab, Punch Magazine & elsewhere. Occasionally, he tweets at @d_basis

Reminder by Grace Alice Evans

you learn to live intimately with the phantoms
co-habiting your body -
making themselves heard
scuttling between the uninhibited spaces

in-between eye sockets and day-mares

where your mind-children have once slept,
now stirred by their lives becoming real
their ink-blood weeping onto the pages,
into the material world.

they have taught you

to create a balance between the frame of your mind

and the bones
and the truths.

ABOUT THE POET

Grace Alice Evans (she/they) is an LGBTQ+, mixed-heritage poet, writer, sound/visual artist and survivor, whose work explores living with mental illness, trauma, recovery, and the dichotomy between the inner and outer worlds. Grace's social media handle is @gracealiceevans.

Untitled by Gurleen

I've often considered
myself weird for
not liking chocolate cake-
there's something about the
richness that bites me
like how roaming in the night
sounds alluring until
my senses snap.
Maybe because the night is dark
or maybe the persons around me are-
but I'm scared to point it out
for not all persons are bad
yet I'll be blamed for trusting them
if they find my clothes torn someday.

I don't talk about how
every morning I depend on
stories of hope and a million giggles
to get me out of bed,
how I still regret
some decisions, of how
frustrated I get if I can't
find the second sock.
I decide to stay shut because
somewhere someone can't find their will
to live and I'm scared of disrespecting that.

Every Thursday I sit on
that same rusted bench in the park
gathering that one ounce of
bravery to call my friend
and vent, scream and cry
as freely as I do in the shower

or on the torn diary pages
but code blue- my brain strikes
and only gossip leaves the place.

There's a story of dreams,
ambitions, a solo Turkey trip
made by a naive 7 yrs. old
circling inside each day
dodging all delete attempts
for it seems now,
someone else crafted it
somebody who could dream,
and it's not me anymore.

It was third period in school
when I thought how it would
feel to kiss someone.

As society screams immoral at me,
the first drunk kiss comes to my mind,
and how I would now like to kiss a girl
under the clouds
hoping they'd not tell my parents.

As I sift through my 9th cup
of coffee a stranger (read -a fellow Potter head)
on the bus taught me how to perfect
my heartbeat dwindles,
to the realisation of how the only
regret I'll carry is to
not make my story known,
to remain concealed forever
under the myriad of world.

Yet when it's 11:11
my only wish is to be lost forever.

ABOUT THE POET

Gurleen is a medical student wishing to become a part-time poet. She stays in bed all day, munching everything spicy, banging her head once in a while to try to write. You can talk to her about any show for she's a serious binge watcher. If you're a fan of Agatha Christie and Potter fandom, she's your person.

Instagram: @notsoleengurl @fazedfolie

Stab Wounds by G Keller

We have all been stabbed.
with each generation
we take the knife out of our backs
and plunge it into the backs of our children
calling it an inheritance,
a lesson,
or reality.
WE HAVE ALL BEEN STABBED!

To remove the knife from your being and to remove it from, being
Is to become the only god with no victims

As we bleed,
and try to see all blood
within, and without
Us
We shall embrace,
linked together by
what the man who would have been called
a heretic
before this reckoning
spray-painted on abandoned buildings all over this decaying city;
WE HAVE ALL BEEN STABBED
WITH THE KNIVES OF OUR OWN CREATION
AND WE MUST HEAL TOGETHER

ABOUT THE POET

G Keller is a Pennsylvania based poet currently attending Vassar College. They are working on an illustrated chapbook titled "The best explanation I can offer" (due to release soon!). Follow them on
Twitter: @moon_voyeurism
Instagram: g.b.keller

The Rules of War by Hannah Storm

They smoke Gauloises at the bar below the signs that show they're banned,
blow out rings of grey to still their hands, smooth the lines on their faces,

inhale each other's tales of the places they can't shake:

Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen: this roll call of fickle mistresses.

They've never felt so light or so alive as when they're there,
their heads so free, bodies immune, hearts seduced into breaking the rules.

Now drink is the armour they crave.

The first beer slides down. Then on and on, making them greater men, braver, their
fragile

frames upheld by the scaffolding of shame.

They are the tellers of tales that grow in the silences they can't share, truths they can't
bare to

anyone else but the names half there.

Only when they're blind drunk, can they cry for their daughters and sons - the lucky
ones.

ABOUT THE POET

Hannah Storm is an award-winning writer whose work has been published online and in print. A journalist for the past 20 years, she writes flash fiction, poetry and creative nonfiction often inspired by her experiences travelling the world. She lives in the UK with her family and works as a media consultant and director of a journalism charity. She is on twitter @hannahstorm6.

Back to the past by Karo Ska

in 2019, in july, disney releases *the lion*
king in cgi, starring beyonce.

the original hand-drawn big-screen
cartoon came out in november 1994.

the weekend i went
to a dinner party
with my mother.

our first & only.

i brought a centerpiece:
a turkey i drew, its feathers
my four fingers, its head
my thumb. after dinner,
the kids & adults planned
to go to the movies,
but my mom complained:
i'm tired, i'm tired, i'm tired
& took me home.

it would've been
my very first movie
in technicolor & dolby sound.

in 2019, i'm trying to re-live my child-
hood, trying to go back
in time but mufasah still dies
again, again, again.

simba paws the tender slope
of his father's snout, trying
desperately to wake him
but it was instant --
this snap from mortality.

in 2019, a tear sneaks out
through a cracked window
of my eye, my cheek
guides it toward my ear
out of sight.

four seats down someone
wipes away childhood sorrow
while i
keep rubbing mine,
grieving for a child-
hood i never had.

I don't have any dietary restrictions by Karo Ska

like my sexuality, my diet knows
no boundaries, changing
daily, weekly, monthly, yearly.

some days, i gnaw on chicken breast.
other days, my tongue wraps
itself around asparagus or celery.

today i order un taco de papa.
tomorrow, i'll have your lengua, flesh
melting in my mouth. why settle

for sliced wonder bread when i
could have focaccia or brioche
or a still warm bolillo from the panaderia

down the street. i like you steaming
in my fingers, i want to unfold you,
savor your softness, your buttered dough.

desires like apple varieties from gala
to red delicious or pink lady. some days
i'm vegetarian, other days,

especially when the moon is full,
i devour carne asada burritos,
licking fatty oil from my fingers.

i climb trees naked, i trace
my tongue on red spotted mangoes,
undecided but joyful

because we both
taste
so sweet.

ABOUT THE POET

Karo Ska (she/they) is a South Asian & Eastern European non-binary femme poet, living on occupied Tongva Land (aka Los Angeles) with their black cat muse. Anti-capitalist & anti-authoritarian, they find joy where they can. Their first chapbook, "gathering grandmothers' bones" was released on February 29th, 2020. For updates, follow them on instagram @karoo_skaa or check out their website karoska.com.

An Attic Full of Salvation by Kashvi

Content Warning: *Hints at death.*

Today, I found a handful of your shadows in the attic,
holding a glass of *rum*;

Father, you said that grief was just a
sting of scorpion lurking under the carpet
waiting to latch on my skin

but you see, I shed my skin
like a sharpened jaw spitting out
seeds from rotten blackberries

igniting sweet gasoline on the kitchen table
sprouting from the acid burning my tongue
till there's no distinction left between blood and water.

So today when I saw a part of you linger in the attic,
I set the entire roof aflame; fuming smoke to the pregnant grey clouds,
till a realisation of translated aching ebbed across my spine;

grief is like angst
with a wheelbarrow glistened to it

It always finds a way to slit your back.

ABOUT THE POET

Kashvi is a Literature student from Delhi, India. When not writing, she can be often found in a cafe admiring the works of Sartre and Kafka. Her poems have been published/ are forthcoming in Rust and Moth literary journal, Stone of Madness press, Dreams walking amongst others. She is the Editor-In-Chief of a literary magazine called The Remnant Archive. @kashvichandok on Instagram and @25_kashvi on Twitter.

A couple living apart isolate together by Laura Owens

when violet chaos thrust you into
my orbit, an imbalance ensued,
your life in a suitcase, the desire
for you to impose only mine, we
clashed, juggled asteroids, a cosmic
performance of adult tetris and elbow
grease, adjusting to life as one, soon
enough our poles would align. you
made your first mark before all this, a
pair of glossy cheeks on my bedside
now in all dimensions to my left, is
there even a my side of the bed
like there's a dark side of the moon?
you slowly uncover my craters, my
blemishes, the ones always hidden
away now luminous all hours of the
day. we learn to mould time, at the
start an infinite sum, borders blurred
but respected, an effortless rhythm
forged, a harmony even Libra would
envy. but now the hourglass runs low.
I dread the inevitable: the day you
leave this house, the day it stops being
a home. vacant drawers, barren shelves,
this binary star bereft of its other half.
so you hold my heart in your palms, and

promise that soon we'll share the same
orbit again, that we'll entangle celestial
bodies over cotton skies, after scrawling
two illegible names on the dotted line.

ABOUT THE POET

Laura Owens is a full-time animator and part-time writer from the North West of England. She ventured south to pursue an animation career in the videogame industry, where she also fell in love with poetry. Her words have appeared in online publications such as Q/A Poetry, perhappened, Re-side, Versification, and Detritus, among others. Say hi on Twitter/Instagram @laurabethowens

Breakup texts signed "best regards" by Leela Raj-Sankar

we're looking at an oil painting of
an open window. you offer me half
an orange: small enough to be cupped in
the center of my palm but soft, too,
sweeter than i'd expected. *today*, you say,
was simple. it was easy--we walked down to
the farmer's market and shared fruit, bought honeycomb
from the beekeeper with crooked teeth. we made the bed;
folded our laundry. we finished every errand on the list--
even cooking a real dinner, which i always
seem to forget. the narrator points out this
snapshot, how if you were just looking at
these moments, nothing would ever go
wrong. the narrator points out how
humans carry so much at once and it only hurts
some days. you, of course,
see the worst of me:
the endless pacing around my
bedroom, the glazed-over eyes and
conversations where i lost the plot
halfway through. i throw out my toothbrush
and find a new apartment for my memories, tilt my own chin up
with two fingers. i say,
i'm waiting to be myself again. you say,
remember to buy groceries tomorrow. this is where we

exist: together, whether you
like it or not. the narrator says,
i need you, i love you so much, and i say:
this is a sunset in central park. i say,
i hope you like what i made for
dessert. i'm sleeping on the floor. i'm
covering your eyes with my fingers. i'm
letting orange juice drip down my jaw and apologizing
for my appearance, for the entrance fee to the
art museum and the days we spent
locked inside. we romanticize this
lyricless music, this quiet life we've built for
each other in the space underneath
our fourth ribs. we're looking at an oil painting
of an open window and you see just
that: a glittering light,
the brilliance fluttering its wings beyond
the frame. a peeled clementine and a crowded
room and your words:
would you like to dance? i'm looking at an
open window and i'm debating whether or not
matisse would think we're standing
too close. i'm looking at an open window and i say it, i say it
loud enough that you'll hear me over everything:
give me your hands.

ABOUT THE POET

Leela Raj-Sankar is an Indian-American teenager from Phoenix, Arizona. She enjoys drinking obscene amounts of coffee, researching her latest obsession, and making far too many Richard Siken references. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in *Perhappened*, *Ex/Post Mag*, and *Stone of Madness Press*, among others. You can find her blog at <https://wildflower-of-the-sea.tumblr.com/>

On Anger by Marc Brightside

It was thrilling, in a guilty way,
the feeling when it took control.
I used to hate people, so easily,
that it was almost comforting,
a bottled, rage-induced religion,
sermonised in bitter diatribes.

These days, anger is a pen-pal
shouting from across the pond,
and daily life, with all its trials,
brings little more than sour sadness,
temporary indignation, irritation,
where hate once reigned supreme.

This must sound very positive.
Yet, they never showed me this,
the art of how-not-to-be-angry.
I was born to be a loaded gun,
a double-barrelled death stare;
transitioning is harder than it seems.

This book has changed along the way.
It was about surveillance, censorship,
communication and degeneration,
but in five years' time I will be thirty
and I'm already sick of being angry,
tired, of the inconvenience of hate.

My uncle's husband, clever man,
told me that I need not worry.
He said, think about when Dylan
shifted from acoustic to electric;
not everyone will like the change,
but you just can't rage forever.

Processing by Marc Brightside

Someone told me it takes time,
learning how to open doors.

I have been vulnerable, before,
unwilling and afraid, useless,
as a fragmentary larval child
suffocating in my cell,
until the day I grew beyond my shell,
split the seams, dug my claws
into the earth and wriggled up on land.
My evolution brought a new conclusion;
there is value in preparedness,
the instantaneous cartoon escape hatch,
a hidden blade, a kevlar vest,
the assurance that I still know best.

The years have taught me
how to safeguard my own interests;
lock the door, transfer the data,
screenshot every temporary value,
cut the line, backup the system,
record your conversations in a secret folder.
Catch them, in a web of their own words.
Flip the bayonet against them.

It's 20:22 and I am Southbound,
on return from Red Light Reading,
bleary-eyed, when all at once,
my sudden insecurity becomes unshakeable.
And I am flooded with a new grief
for the death of certitude, the loneliness
who shared my bed in many forms,
sober and awake, empty vessels

lingering in coffee shop reflections,
faces of the lost-but-not-forgotten.

She challenges my way of being,
chips away my steel chrysalis
with kindness, thoughtless gestures,
cover versions of our favourite songs,
morning coffee waiting by the bedside,
quiet applications of sustained metaphor.

Because of her, the twilight hum,
the inevitable bedside whiskey,
is at risk of dying young.

She deserves more than this,
a future made of glass and eggshells,
playing around firewalls and cold,
unbreakable machinery.

Someone always gets hurt in the end.

I hope it's not her.

Shifting Sands by Marc Brightside

Venom resonates within the box.
One tick, and you're home again,
a sleeping fixture in the cobwebs,
calcified like sullen architecture
in the temple of your memories.

Through the excavation process,
you unearth yourself anew,
a morbid wind-up toy surprise
waiting to explode, pressurised,
a sandstorm in a treasure chest.

One last time, I cradle you,
feel you shifting in your catacombs,
listen to the spiders running
through your desiccated wasteland,
and as always, you say nothing.

You were never quite a father.
In my role as your eternal guard,
perhaps, I can be something more
than you: free, but never quite free.
Unable to forget.

ABOUT THE POET

Marc Brightside is a UK-based author who discovered poetry under the tuition of Julian Stannard, his work is characterised by darkness interspersed with humour and introspection. His debut collection, *Keep it in the Family*, was published in 2017, while the poems featured here were taken from his second manuscript, *Personal Impersonal*. Marc be found on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook @MarcBrightside. He writes at <https://marcbrightside.wordpress.com/>

Teenage Useless Pains by Miriam Navarro Prieto

The first time I shaved
my legs, thirteen, awkward
as hell, my mom said
my hairs weren't
that dark at all, chill,
relax. But I could see
each of them stabbing
the faces of the boys
I wanted to impress,
I could feel my clothes
getting ripped in thousands
of tiny stupid threads.

Then my armpits joined
the party and I couldn't
wait to leave at ten sharp,
arms always down, head bent,
don't look at the eyes
searching for minuscule
uncut follicles.

And finally down, lower
than I'd ever tell my friends
I roamed to when I had
the house for myself,
then the hate lovers gave,
wrinkled noses never
going down enough. And the ache
that day I decided to chop
the forest back to baby-state,
but still unloved by men.

No more
love for the blade,
grudge for the rash,
never again the salt
of the sea in my freshly
poured blood, no more
sting after peeling
layer after layer
of myself behind
doors of shame.

My body won't accept
any more useless pain.

ABOUT THE POET

Miriam Navarro Prieto (she/her), Spanish artist who drifted from visual to performance art, now mostly focused on writing poetry and short stories on autobiography, ecology, queerness. Her first self-published poetry chapbook is called 'Todo est vivo' ('Everything is Alive'). You can find her here:
[instagram.com/miriam.writes.performs.quotes](https://www.instagram.com/miriam.writes.performs.quotes),
cargocollective.com/MiriamNavarroPrieto

BIG CITY'S DREAM by Navashree Nandini

I remember the first breath in Mumbai
that my lungs puffed out
And my heart tasted privilege.

As the monsoon showers knocked the city on the first day of July, I saw strange faces flooding the city as if to ask me where I come from, people who would not be able to locate my hometown on the map, won't be able to pronounce *Bihari*.

It suddenly hit me that I was made of molten rocks, the city had buildings higher than the mountains, I was used to thatched roof, the city had decorated them in its museums, I had learnt to store history on the moss-laden walls of my home, city had decorated its tiny balconies with artificial ones.

I realised air here was different from the tiny place miles and miles away I call home. I wondered how am I going to live in this city that smells of everything that my lungs doesn't know how to in-take? I wondered why was I suddenly jettisoned here to fend for myself - won't going back is easy, easier?

Two years, five months, three days, twenty-five minutes and seven seconds later when I look back at my hometown I can still see the lantern glowing above the makeshift table made by my father that we used both as study and dinner table at home. As I sip *kadha* from a handle broken cup, curse myself for the 1476th time for not making it like my mother does, and look outside from the only window of my one room flat in the city, I smile - the rudiments of that smile screaming stories of separation from home as well as creating one - at a place unknown, its genesis telling me how unequal the world is.

ABOUT THE POET

Navashree Nandini is a full-time journalist with her heart wandering in a room full of poetry books. When she is not on her desk, you'll find her clicking rocks, rubbles, leaves and roads. She is on a self-mission of writing one Haiku a day (@breathehaiku) and can be reached out at @navun02.

Knees by Noreen Ocampo

you've sat on the edge of the bed I now sleep in every night. if I close my eyes, I see
your dark socks pacing over my carpet. & then I'm pacing over to you. your heartbeat
smiles against the better side of my face, warm. our hometown cradles us both for
the first time in two years: I wander outside to toe at the cracks opening the sidewalk,
& an hour later, the smell of the sun will bloom on your skin. I remember you
memorizing
the greenery, the sprightly stance of our trees. we're memorizing my hands at your
back, my
hands in your hands. what did I confess before? *I miss everything*. even my knees ask
me to walk
to you. for a little while longer, I could walk to you, but I'm afraid that I'll never get
there.

ABOUT THE POET

Noreen Ocampo is a Filipina American writer studying English and film at Emory University. Her poems appear in *perhappened*, *Crpe & Penn*, and *Versification*, among others, and she is also a regular contributor for *Maras at Sampaguitas*. Say hello on Twitter @maybenoreen!

Ode to Family Dinners by Prithiva

four plates, three steel glasses, two bottles of water, one empty seat.
dinner is served.

i sit for dinner with my parents, and I don't know the first thing about love
which is strange - a minute ago i was falling like sweat drops on my phone screen
as i hid in the bathroom to text you
(the dining room has two fans)

the only way i've ever seen love is in the way dad doesn't ask for another roti
and mom doesn't offer him one
instead, she adds another to the pile of two on the plate set out for the empty seat
laid out for my brother who mastered the art of missing stifling conversations at
thirteen
(he will be fourteen tomorrow)

my father doesn't use a glass; he doesn't need water during the meal and once he gets
up
he can reach to drink directly from the bottle, out of my mother's line of sight
that feels compelled to stop him. our house has rules the makers themselves loathe
following

he sits not as the head of the table
but more as a maker of cacophony - creating noises as he repeatedly clinks his spoon
against the plate
it's his loudness that lets my brother know when it is safe to enter the territory -
which is,
after he's done and gone.

father doesn't need water because he eats light; he likes eating.
just two rotis, a dal, veggies on demand, my smiles, my mother's criticisms and my
brother's avoidance. a balanced meal he has been eating for two decades now.
my mother is silent. she eats with her hands, close to the food she made,
touch before taste, texture before spice; it's her legacy - faded palms from years of
making
and eating and washing with hands.
legacy that she forgot to pass down to me.

when i sit there, i can't know the first thing about love, let alone to be able to love,
let alone to be able to love you - the same as me except with longer hair,
smaller eyes, painted nails; the same as me except with answers other than violence
knuckles that aren't bleeding, palm up, open, offering me your long hair to use as a
noose

mother drinks boiled water - the gas stove a fire that burns inside her and the water
her resentment.

father and mother haven't been mom and dad for a long while now; they love in
silences

which may be born from twenty-five years of marriage
where they lost vocabulary.

father and mother love in shared sabzis leftover from yesterday and martyrdom in
saving

fresh curries for others.

i love in hiding, like my tryst with sabzis i don't like and hide in the fridge.

none of us talk about what the dinner table knows. silence is safer.

my love for you is temporarily out of service.

ABOUT THE POET

Prithiva is a student, currently pursuing her MA in Literary Art. She is an Editor for Teen Belle Mag and Nightingale & Sparrow. She spends her time reading fanfiction and procrastinating on everything else. Her work has previously appeared in Lihaaf Journal and Wellington Street Review, among others and can be found at <https://campsite.bio/prithuwu> and on Instagram @prithuwu.

Grovelling in Gravel by Sanjyokta Deshmukh

I remember when I was seven I grazed my knee in the playground. But the sheer prospect of tag turned the red that dribbled down my shin into just another colour in the rainbow. The pink slithered and stirred on my knee like a deposit of poster paint. So, I shooed the stained gravel.

And ran.

Even now I still have the scar. The pale sliver of silver from when my flesh hit the tarmac for the first time. When the breeze bit the wound, a hiss blew through the gap between my missing teeth. If you looked closely, you could have seen the blue streak of electric adrenaline shoot through the gash and into my smile like a route on an Underground map. Only now does it sting as if the bone was tugged through the slit.

My pain tolerance is much lower now.

If I fell today, I would sob.

That I am sure of.

Two Thousand and Sixteen by Sanjyokta Deshmukh

It all began when I was sixteen and my gums eroded and lips peeled back over my head.

I drifted into a place as black as the brain that leaked sap from its edges.

You know you can still see space even when your eyes are closed?

You know you can still feel cold air even when your skin has keeled over?

I have been told that the stars are lighthouses I am not bright enough to see.

But the first thing I did when I was born was open my eyes.

And then I breathed.

It all began when I was sixteen and I had to learn how to heave my eyelids from the ground so that I could see a future in which I existed.

ABOUT THE POET

Sanjyokta 'Yukta' Deshmukh is a Welsh-Indian poet currently studying her B.A. in English Literature and Creative Writing. She has previously been published in both print and online in the likes of Eclectica Magazine, The Everyday Magazine, Street Cake Magazine and more. She was also shortlisted for the International Dylan Thomas Day Competition 2020. Twitter: @sanjdeshk.

Her Bloody Sunrise by Sena Chang

i.

dark, cold, and damp
she sits curled in her precious cave,
glistening with stalagmites of red blood.

the city roars symphonies
of honks and screeches
yet she exists in a dark universe
so close, yet so distant

small, and nothing more than a tiny beating heart,
she patiently waits in her mother's uterus,
lungs awaiting their first breath.

ii.

thirteen. thirteen candles wrap the room
in a warm glowy light
sparking what is a chain of memories
spanning thirteen years outside her cave.

thirteen. the wax dripping off thirteen candles stains my cake
as blood stained on the pale linen of my pants that day.
that day, a sun of blood rose from a sea of white,
as taunts of

"Weirdo."

"Freak."

stained my conscience beyond repair, for
the same paint that painted the walls of my first home- their first home-
has become a subject of ridicule.

iii.

the daggers they threw at me at 13 harm me no more
for it is the same blood
that has bathed him in his mother's womb;

that created a life out of nothing.

it is the same blood

that will bathe his daughters

it is also the same blood

that will shame his daughters

no longer do i fear the rising red sunrise that appears every moon;

instead, i greet it, embracing all it means

to be female.

ABOUT THE POET

Sena Chang is a musician, poet, and artist. In addition to writing poetry related mainly to her Asian heritage and Kafkaesque scenarios, Chang is the founder of The Pandemic of '20 Project. There, she seeks to give a voice to Tokyo's youth through creative writing and other mediums of art. Her most recent works have appeared or are forthcoming in Raised Brow Press and The International Educator, amongst others. Chang attends an international school in Tokyo.

Identity crisis by Suhana Simran

Erik Erikson wrote about identity crisis. In adolescence.
So I assumed it would burst like a bubble when
I hit my twenties.
But guess what? It didn't.

At 13, I laboured to find the right adjectives,
To sum up my identity in 50 words.
I am still looking.

Lazy or hardworking?
Introvert or extrovert?
Realist or romantic?
Smart or dumb? Book-smart or street smart?

But what if,
Neither?

What if I am the grey area?
What if I cross over from one side to the next
Like the swinging pendulum in the physics lab?
What if I don't know
Who I am?

(And while I was looking for adjectives
The pronouns lay ignored,
Taken for granted.)

(And while I was looking for adjectives,
I realised that so many had been shoved down my throat like bitter medicine-
Plastered on my head with indelible ink-
My race, religion, culture, gender
All clipping my wings one feather at a time.

So many adjectives
Yet puberty had me believe that
I needed a few more.)

I have hit my twenties.
And my identity crisis hasn't been resolved,
The way Erikson would have wanted.

Yet in some strange way he was right.
An identity crisis is not a crisis when you have made peace with it.
Especially when identity crisis itself,
Is your identity.

ABOUT THE POET

Suhana Simran (she/her) is an undergraduate student of English literature at Miranda House, Delhi University. While juggling between parliamentary debates and academics, she scribbles poetry at the back of her notebook. She regularly contributes to online pages, blogs and magazines. And sometimes she hops into creative writing competitions that challenge her to write on unique prompts. Insta handle: @suhana_simran

/ Toye Room in Mussoorie / by Swethlana

***Note:** The haibun was an act of making peace with the sad memories of my adolescent years.*

My butt tucks in my toes and protects it like a blanket, while I'm sitting on the platforms attached to the window pane of our hostel's toye room. I let my head rest on the closed glass and let my eyes throw dart gazes on to the olive-green ground outside. This hour is a luxury in my existence, a problem child conscious of the rise and fall of her chest which is enclosed within this chestnut-coloured room. This room is one of the many cellular units making up my school, whose body during the day runs thanks to the adolescent women circulating within its brick-red walls. We are the school's blood. This hour, no words decide to visit me, no poetry returns to haunt, and no memory is left with the energy to cross my mind. This room is a makeshift hall of peace and I am wrapped warm in it. Tucked in, I cried happy tears for the relics of safety left in the corners of senior hostel.

barren toye room breathes
along with me in comfort
we live in midnight

/ A guide to loving my body / by Swethlana

***Note:** A simple instruction manual for me and my lovers, on how to love it in its state of expansion.*

First look at her and gently touch
bring your fore finger
where her hair
has left,
invite your other fingers in and caress
right before kissing,
caress.

Second let your hands become feet,
by that I mean make them run
across that grainy skin
and the full hair and misplaced lashes,
then water those houseplants
between her lips, fill in the cracks
that have come from not being kissed by anything close to Love.

Third Press your palms against her Blouse. Can you feel it?
The Ill-Fitting of clothes
that are never worn to be worn
but worn because it is The Magazine's top recommendation.
Her blouse is damp from hiding her forever

Fourth hug the comforter back,
bury your body in it,
you are in love with her pillow body
and stare into her eyes
and thank the world that nothing
in herself is ever going to be
without miles of depth.

Fifth drop down to your knees,
kiss her belly

don't close your eyes
watch her when she stretches out
and rolls them in
don't pretend she's small
hold tight the extra her in her hips
and whisper into her navel how desperately you wished the room was the world
because you never want to leave
you never want to leave
whisper that into her skin
like a prayer.

Sixth take her out
to dinner and to movies
to art exhibits
to parties
when drunk friends accidentally let a joke slip out
kindly knock the humour out of their alcohol wet throats
kindly fight
Fight because she's tired
from being the only hero in her story
Join her army
big girls don't need saving but what we'd appreciate a little bit of company
her body is accommodating
but what we cannot is accommodate abuse

Seventh don't let her finish this poem snatch the virtual notepad from her hands let
her know
the world isn't so bad
that loving some bodies
will need an instruction manual

Eight she is tired
give her a peck
when her judgement falls asleep

ABOUT THE POET

Swethlana is a generic word-scribbler, often found dabbling with poetry, prose and everything in between. Having featured on college campuses of NIT and Mount Carmel College, and events frequented by Bangalore's young literati, she's a fresh baby in the publishing world, and plans to stay in it for the long haul. To read more, click on her writing account: https://www.instagram.com/@letters_by_lana.

After Adolescence by Yelaina Anton

You walk the line drawn between
graveyards and elementary schools,
seeing the headstones from your
pink plastic seat, tasting the air of
the dead on your tongue while you eat
peanut butter sandwiches and potato chips.

Look around you. A bell sounds;
you and the other corpses come alive,
sauntering from one class to another,
quiet, listening, obedient. Faces hovering
high above yours; pupils looking
to tutors, bodies watching

from coffins as visitors stare at the
dirt. Look around you. The afterlife is
youth for the dead. Funerals

are births, and gravestones
are little shoes saved from
childhood. Children frequent

cemeteries, drawn to death;
seniors wait in nursing homes,
reminiscing their younger years.

Look around you. The in-between
is an illusion. You're either living
or dying.

ABOUT THE POET

Yelaina Anton hails from a small city outside Boston, USA and is studying Creative Writing at NUIG in Ireland. She tends to write about things that confuse and distress her, which is unfortunately everything. Find her in *Perhappened Magazine*, *Versification*, and *Neuro Logical Magazine*, and on Twitter at @yelainaanton

Lightsaber in the Dark by Adritanaya Tiwari

The most frustrating but intriguing fact about darkness is the same. You never figure out the starting point.

One moment you feel light and happy and it's all slowly fading away, in the next. It didn't happen over-night, it took years. And I never saw it coming.

But this is not a piece on mental illness. This is a piece about how to rise above the darkness and maybe smash a brick in its face. This is about acceptance, learning, and improving.

I spent 16 years of my life revolved around people, family, friends, peers, strangers. They commanded all my attention and interest. I was the perfect people-pleaser, all submissive and timid. I remembered birthdays. Ignored any negatives. Denied all the wrongs. Let it go. I did what I was told. Stayed polite. Studied hard. Did not engage. Tried so hard to fit in and be liked, it was practically pathetic. Remembered little things about everyone, like my eighth- grade class teacher's sulfur allergy. Didn't call people out or stand up for myself, I doubt I knew how to.

Hoping that one day I'd be deemed worthy.

If I'd known you, I'd have cut up a piece of my soul, wrapped it up in the prettiest bow I could find and dropped it at your feet then spent an eternity waiting for you to notice. You could very well crush it, and it still wouldn't bother me. I was too blinded by my need for validation.

I'd practically forgotten about myself. I had no idea who I was, what I liked or didn't. My entire personality was based on outsider's perceptions. I had no potential or hopes or dreams except being worthy of someone's time.

I was a shattered, empty shell of a person, a big ball of anxiety (Not that big I'm only 5ft 2) and sadness with more tears flowing out than blood flowing in. I was in no way, shape, or form - human. Spent two years drowning in despair and fear, cried to sleep, contemplated drastic alternatives to life, didn't bathe, comb, brush, eat, sleep, study, smile, breathe, try.

Came across a box of my old certificates and prizes one day. I took them all out, wore all the medals, held the rest in my hand, walked to the mirror. I must've stood there crying at my reflection for hours.

That day when I decided to try, trying, even though I didn't know how to. As a woman of science, I formed a hypothesis that pointed to dangerously low self-esteem. So I started an experiment.

Every day, I'd wake up with a vision of myself surrounded by all my accomplishments. Disguised it all, with fake smiles and an Academy Award-worthy performance, dragged my depressed ass to school. Fake it till you make it, after all.

Over the next three years, I fixed all my attention on myself. My time was spent unlearning problematic notions, understanding myself, and focussing on my thoughts, opinions, hobbies, talents, and ambitions.

Like a track on repeat through the day, and I mean 24 x 7 x 365. I would tell myself I'm worthy, I'm loved and deserve to be, I'm smart and fun, I'm talented with immense potential. I deserve better, It's not always my fault. I'd obsess over anything that gave me any joy. And most importantly, I decided other people weren't worth it until they just were.

I would praise myself in my head until I ran out of adjectives and until all the self-flattery overpowered the darkness. The world refused to give me the love I deserved, or the validation, so I decided to create my own and be done with it.

Two years in and I had learned to be happy alone, or otherwise. I'd go out for lunch or a movie by myself. Sometimes I'd get a burger and fries to go and roam Delhi streets listening to music, writing, or just looking around. I found new hobbies, made a lot of new friends, tried new things, socialized, meditated, read books, studied, had fun. I learned independence and self-sufficiency.

And here I am, today a glorious narcissist, (which is not exactly a good thing but well better than depression) who refuses to believe there's something she can't do if she puts her mind to it. (except sports, I have bad reflexes.) Studying at one of the best colleges in the country. I'm slowly learning how to take care of myself and growing into the person I've always been. I've accepted this experience as a part of me and to my mother's dismay, my sense of humor.

The darkness still lurks behind me, waiting in the shadows. Waiting for the next moment of weakness. On some days, it manages to devour me whole.

But as long as I accept myself flaws and all and remember who I am, I can gather my shit together, switch on a zero power bulb or pull out a lightsaber (whichever I can find first.) and slash through the void. Only to step back out into the day and sip my hot chocolate as I watch the darkness slither away into nothingness.

The last part's really fun.

ABOUT THE WRITER

Adritanaya Tiwari is a dental student from India who has been published in Nightingale and Sparrow Magazine and Live Wire. She spends her time making strange analogies and calming her artsy alter-ego to focus on never-ending syllabus. She can be found on Instagram and Twitter - @adrillusioned.

Passing Buses by Arsha Adarsh

The bus pulls in. The driver clocks us- one in a chair, one on a crutch- and the hydraulics sigh as she lets it sink to the ground. Tav glides with ease up over the ramp, taps a card. I stroll up after them; the drivers are always so preoccupied with *the wheelchair* they don't notice I don't have a ticket. An old woman follows, huffing behind her walker. She winks at me and slips in after us.

The driver gets up, and Tav holds out an anxious hand.

No don't worry, I can strap myself in-

For once, that's not it. The air is tense. She addresses a bald white man in his thirties. *Sir, if you keep making people uncomfortable, you're going to have to leave.* He wears a sneer, a petulant swagger and a pseudo-camouflage jacket. He's leaning into the aisle, right on the edge of his seat. Next to him, a Black woman in her thirties grips her handbag and stares out of the window. In front, an old man wears an anxious frown.

Didn't wanna be on THIS bus anyways he spits, eyeballing the other passengers; a mass of outraged black and brown faces. The driver is no exception.

The old woman is still struggling to get to the flip-up seats, but her walker is stuck in the narrow aisle. The white man charges forward, shoulders squared.

Get out of the way. Bitch.

The bus erupts, a single furious voice. *Get off the bus!*

The driver moves, ready to eject him-- but the old woman's face is livid as she rams him with the walker. The cheap heavy steel is better than a battering ram. He tries to mask his stagger to the jeers of the other passengers.

The driver shuts the doors as soon as he's gone.

Ma'am, are you ok?

I'm fine. The old woman sits down primly. Her walker is squashed into the aisle next to her; on the other seat is an old man, his own walker piled high with bags crammed in next to him. Clearly, the bus designer had not expected four simultaneous disabled travellers.

You should have let me deal with him, the old man says. She cuts him off.

You're just as old as I am. Anyhow, I dealt with it.

I know, but a lady shouldn't have to-

I ain't a lady. I'm a BITCH she smirks. *Now, together, that would've been a different story.*

Let's see how he'd handle two old people!

You know, this wheelchair's built like a tank, Tav offers. *I'd just need someone to hold him down.*

There's a reason I carry a stick and all I add. He hoots in delight. *Can you imagine? Four of us, all beating on that one guy all at once! He wouldn't stand a chance!* he mimes kicking the floor repeatedly.

The other passengers nudge each other at the old man's animation. The air relaxes. *This is why I love this city* he proclaims, *I'm homeless, but I feel the the love of God in all of us right here!* A refrain of *Amen* emboldens him, and his arms fold the whole bus into his congregation. *When people only act like they in church when they in church, they're doing it all wrong. You bring church with you. This bus, this is Church. Amen, brother!* Louder this time. The driver pipes up.

My grandfather always told me the same thing. He told me, you don't spread the love of God with words. You spread it with kindness. I always remembered that.

Others join in. Shy at first, they hearten at the old man's reassuring eyes and the others' rapt attention. A tiny, sudden church of strangers. Then-

The bus heaves as a red Mini Cooper swings wildly into the freeway, passing inches from the side of the bus. It freewheels into the other lane to slip by; the bus driver slams the brakes as it cuts in front without warning. A few passengers shout profanities as she blares the horn. Many congratulate her on her driving.

Thank you. Is everyone OK? Her voice is shaky when she glances at the mirror.

We're good! comes the reply. A young Latina catches my expression.

I dunno why people gotta rush like that she says. *What's worth the danger?*

I'd rather be late than dead, I gasp.

Our stop arrives. The hydraulics sigh again as we prepare to leave.

Thank you, Tav tells the driver. I turn to the old man, to the warmth of the other passengers.

Stay safe, I tell them.

You too, comes the reply.

ABOUT THE WRITER

Arsha Adarsh is Queer, Desi, chronically ill and so damn tired.. Their writing carries themes of identity, healing, and home. Their work has been published in Ang(st), Ghost Heart, The Daily Drunk and others. Find them on Twitter @arsha_writes. read all their published work at aadarsh.ink.

Flags by Catherine Kleindienst

There's no flag for indecisiveness. There are no colors for "I don't know." Just curious glances begging for an answer and headshakes later, when you think you say you're one thing before realizing you're not. Unspoken judgment, when the scales are tipped. When girls were all you wanted one moment, and boys aren't so bad the next.

There was an alligator in a cage at my first pride parade. That sounds weird, but I used to live in Florida, so what can you expect? I remember peering into the cage, watching this baby alligator and realizing that this trapped creature knew more about himself than I knew about me.

People in the streets were smiling, laughing, rainbows of color displayed over their chests, matching flags carried and waved in their hands. But when I found where those flags were sold, where I could finally find my own, I felt nothing but the panic of indecision. No pride. Not happiness. A smile crossed my face, but a worried one, at best.

The people around me were happy and I knew I should be happy, too. I know people had to fight and are still fighting to give us the right to march around the streets, to wave our own flags proudly in the air.

But I don't even know what I am, so what am I allowed to be happy about? How can I celebrate something when I don't know what that something is?

I remember looking at the people marching beside me and the people cheering us all on from the sidewalks, and it hit me that I was standing in a road full of happy people, but I didn't know how to be one of them. When would it be my turn? There were flags everywhere, and I knew the meaning of them all, knowledge gained from countless hours of staring at a computer screen, taking online quizzes in hope that some random assembly of answers might know more about myself than I did.

Each answer felt more wrong than right, for some reason. And each time I claimed one title for myself, thought one finally felt right, the feeling would never last.

Two more pride parades have followed since the first. I tell myself I would have gone to more, if I had a flag. I would have gone to more, if I wasn't so afraid of those judgmental stares. Because for each parade, there's been a feel that I can't truly be

myself. I haven't yet found what being myself means. I don't know what shades of the rainbow I am, what color flags I should own. I might own all the flags before finally finding the one that suits me. And maybe, that's okay. Maybe it takes time. Maybe it'll be my turn, one day.

Sometimes, I think back to that little alligator in his cage. I wonder how he's grown. Most of all, I hope he wasn't afraid, that day, of all the screaming people and happy faces. We both lived in cages, I guess. I hope he found a way out of his, too.

ABOUT THE WRITER

Catherine Kleindienst has an ever-expanding library, a dog who might be a demon in disguise, and an unhealthy obsession with black clothing. You can find her other work online at HerStry, Vamp Cat Magazine, and upcoming at MookyChick. You can follow her on Twitter and Instagram @CDKleind.

The Rat by Kanjam Bhat Lidhoo

It all began when Mark mistook a raisin for a pest problem. I still remember the day quite vividly. We were cleaning our balcony. I was sweeping near the balustrade and he, with a broom in hand, swept away at the veranda, without care. It had been some time since either of us had thought of cleaning the balcony, but, as we succumbed to procrastination, the porch became harder and harder to look at. One morning, I asked him whether we should clean the balcony. He said he was thinking the same thing.

And, so, we decided that we would do it that evening after arriving home from our respective jobs. So, that evening, we talked about our jobs, cursed our bosses, and went off to complete the work we had both agreed upon in the morning. It was then, while sweeping, that he stopped, stood still, and asked,

'Jenny, what is that?'

'What is what?' I asked, without turning.

'That.'

I turned and looked to where he was pointing. It was a dried-up raisin. We had had a packet full of them, and I assumed that one had just gotten away somehow. 'It's a raisin', I said. He stood silent for a while. He was - and I derive no pleasure in saying this - hard to look at. He had boyish features - soft hands, flimsy skin and absolutely no hair anywhere on his body. He even dressed childishly - a t-shirt and baggy pants, which shared the same colour - and had a shock of frizzled hair.

'No, that isn't a raisin, Jenny. Look closer.'

I bent and looked closer. 'What is it then?'

'Well, it seems like rat turd.'

'What!?'

'A rat turd', he repeated. 'I think we may have a pest problem.'

'I haven't seen any rats around. I'm sure I'd have noticed.'

'Huh', he mumbled. 'I'm sure that is a rat turd. Even if it isn't, there's no harm in taking precautions.'

I nodded.

'We have rat poison, right?'

I nodded again, and continued sweeping. He did too, and, after we had exhausted ourselves, we decided what we needed was some sound sleep. We live in a one-bedroom apartment, the bedroom boxed in from all sides with thick, white compact walls, making it seem like an asylum. Since childhood, I've suffered from acute claustrophobia. Moving into this apartment - especially the bedroom - was nothing short of a Herculean task. The only relief is the bedroom window and the sliding glass door, beyond which lies our balcony. As we were getting ready to tuck ourselves in, Mark asked me to close the door and the window.

'Why?' I asked.

'Because we don't know whether the rodent has gotten in. All we can do is speculate. What if he is still lurking out there somewhere and decides to jump in through the window?'

It was a possibility, had there been such a rodent. Nevertheless, I played along. 'Well, you know that I'm claustrophobic, don't you?'

'Yes, I know that Jenny. But that is a risk we'll have to take.'

Would you have said the same thing had you suffered from it? I thought. But I kept quiet. 'Well, what if I feel boxed in?'

He sighed that petulant sigh of his. 'Can't you pull through tonight?'

I stared at him. This was not new, I told myself.

'Fine.'

The next morning, I found myself bathed in sweat. The sheets, too, were drenched in cold sweat.

Overnight, they had developed an obnoxious, almost pungent smell. I got up, washed my face, brushed my teeth and woke him up. After that, we bathed, dressed, shared a kiss goodbye and went off to work.

'Jenny', Mark called, ready to leave.

'Yes?'

'I just wanted you to know that I'll be home early.'

'Ok'

He began again, 'You closed the doors and windows, right?'

'Yes', I said.

'Ok. Bye.'

'Bye.' I said, and left.

When I came home late in the evening, I found Mark sitting on the couch, watching television. I made a little conversation, changed and then headed toward the kitchen.

'Don't go in.' Mark called out.

'Why not?'

'I sprayed rat poison all over there.' he said.

'In the kitchen?' I cried.

'Yes.'

That's where we keep our food! How am I supposed to make dinner!?' I screamed.

'We'll order takeout.'

This was it. The last straw. 'You ruined the entire stock, you moron!'

'No need to scream! Better to throw away the rat-infected food than eat it!'

'There is no rat!'

'Yes, there is.'

'Oh yeah? Where is it? We have not seen any such rat!'

'Yet', he broke in.

I slumped down onto the floor, my hands curtaining my teary eyes, 'Why did I marry you?' I screamed at myself. 'There was no rat! There is no rat, Mark! There isn't one!'

I rambled on hysterically. He fell silent. After a brief pause, he came near and held me in his arms. 'Ok fine. Maybe I was imagining it.'

I looked up. All this seemed like some bizarre dream. 'Can you please let go of this? Please?' my voice was broken.

'Yes.'

Later, getting ready to sleep, we kept the door and the window open. He kissed me and told me he loved me, to which I said nothing. This has happened before, I reminded myself. It was about two-o'clock in the morning when my slumber broke. All I could hear was a strange sound coming from the hallway. I rose, and to my surprise found the window and the door closed. Unaware, I slid out of the bed and crept toward the living room. The room was draped in complete darkness. The only light- was the flashlight, clasped in the hands of my husband, who was crouching low - trying to find something that wasn't there.

ABOUT THE WRITER

Kanjam Bhat Lidhoo is an undergraduate Computer Science student in Bangalore Institute of Technology, Bengaluru, India. Alongside his fervent passion for computers, he also enjoys writing- mostly short stories and poetry. An avid reader- he loves to read psychological literature- his favourite author: Dostoevsky. Previously, his poems have been published in the bimonthly journal of the magazine: 'Indian Literature'. He is also keen about learning different languages, and has developed a fluency in the following four: English, Hindi, Kashmiri, Urdu. Kanjam enjoys a good Netflix binge once in a while, and also can be found doing Yoga on sunny mornings. You can follow him on twitter: @KanjamB

Cold by Mandira Pattnaik

Somebody died! Because of twenty dollars, Dad!

On the evening of Memorial Day, May 25, someone purchased cigarettes at a grocery store in the Powderhorn Park neighborhood of Minneapolis, US. He was killed, assuming he paid with a counterfeit bill.

Dad sat to my right at our dining table in a modest suburban leafy neighborhood, India, examining the freckles on his clasped hands like the cartography of the world's problems. Mum clanked a pan louder than necessary from the kitchen. We know she disapproves of this discussion. *Not because of twenty dollars, the reasons are far greater than that!*

Of course, I understand. Twenty dollars is the sum I won at an international writing contest this week. The only dollars I'd ever owned, the only time I'd felt like there was an invisible pageant crown on my head, even if it were for a day!

Of course, I understand. Twenty dollars is less than a couple of hours work in the US. Worth about eight, eight-hour days of unskilled labor here. Half our country lives on a dollar per person per day.

This time one death had made a difference. It may or mayn't have a lasting impact, but for the time being it has stirred people in fifty nations, taken down mascots of injustice and abuse, if only through their statues. It's the same way horrific rapes jolt our people here. We cascade down promenades, down lanes bracketed by monuments from our Mughal past, sit-in on busy intersections at Delhi or Lucknow, without banners or flags, only vociferous sloganeering. All we want is to make existing laws functional. But weren't they framed, in the first place for the same purpose? Without the nudge of a thousand voices of commoners, students, masses? The high and mighty remain in their ivory towers though, and for some in power, they'll continue to happen because, 'Boys will be boys'!

After days, as best-case scenario, the guilty are apprehended, tried for acts more heinous than murders, and in rare cases, hanged. Then we go back to our innocuous slumber, ignoring the many other similar devilish acts taking place. One every fifteen minutes. And wait for another tide of voices.

My mother keeps away from the bold prints in press or media trials. She says they nauseate her; says it must've been difficult to write the small bits where scribes delve into the voyeuristic details. Perhaps they're intended to split us to the core, she adds.

Dad and I agree.

So usually we do not discuss news over dinner. We like to believe the walls of our modest rental apartment will shield us from the wrath of not only the elements, but the barrage of filth floating outside.

But I'm sure Dad knows, as much as I, that we can't remain immune forever. We've crammed our heads with those tiny bits Mum talks of, and stored them like cud, chewing them and compressing them to be able to pack in more of the strange events taking place all over the planet.

Tonight we retire to our respective white-washed tiny bedrooms with wall-mounted television sets, mute the noises and watch thousands of barefoot men women and children make the long arduous journey from the cities where they worked for our industries and homes, back to their rural homes where the same poverty and exploitation awaits them from which they escaped. It is a march that is continuous and soundless, like a stream carving its path through the collective stone-cold conscience of a nation. They are called migrants laborers as if they are some other species and the rest of us can forget them and go to sleep. On the way, many are dying for the lack of a fraction of twenty dollars.

This time there's no tide of voices. Perhaps we're too cold and hibernating. Do we, Dad and I, store our accumulated wisdom to prepare ourselves for the worst as and when that occurs? Or do we use them as shields to defend ourselves when we become a part of that news --- we, as objects, exhibited over millions of television screens --- dying of twenty dollars or equivalent, of hunger or pesticide, or of an engineered chaos?

Either way, we can't sleep until our bodies become cold, very cold.

ABOUT THE WRITER

Born in India, Mandira Pattnaik graduated in Economics, but is an activist-writer by choice. She is humbled to have work published or forthcoming in *The Times of India*, *Watershed Review*, *Citron Review*, *Commuterlit*, *DoorIsAJar*, *Lunate* and *New World Writing*, among others. Her short fiction is currently the Editor's Pick at *Juggernaut Books*. She tweets @MandiraPattnaik

Deciphering Daadi by Megha Nayar

Over the past few years, my grand-mother has morphed into Captain Obvious. She says things everyone knows and gives instructions no one needs to hear.

Have your coffee while it's hot, she reminds me every morning. My response is to scowl. How else does one have their coffee?

The reminders keep coming. Go put your shoes in the shoe rack. Yes yes, there.

Thanks, Daadi. I know where we keep shoes. I can see the rack.

Are you going for a class? Get home as soon as you're done.

I'm going to work, not party in the streets. You think I will hang out at the traffic signal for no reason?

On and on it goes. The cycle restarts every 24 hours. I know, the moment I wake up, that she is hovering at the door with her arsenal of questions. She will press down on the door handle very gently, enter the room on tip-toe just in case I'm sleeping, and once she sees I'm up, she'll ask me in dead seriousness, "Did you brush your teeth?"

As a self-respecting 33-year-old, I get righteously annoyed.

Why do you do this, Daadi? I'm neither a kid nor a moron. Do you really not see that I can function without reminders?

In response, she rewards me with a wide, toothless grin. "You are still my tappu," she says, reaching out for my cheeks. It's cute, I know, but I always wind up irritated.

The philosopher in me starts to get angsty. Would Daadi infantilize me similarly if I were a man? Or, if I were married, and came home only on visits? Would the fact that I was managing my own household convince my grand-mother to finally treat me like a grown-up?

This lockdown though, has thrown some light on Daadi's mystifying ways. In cooling my heels indoors, I've realized that while I have scoffed at the whats of her behaviour, I have never pondered the whys.

That she is touchy and temperamental is common knowledge. But now, I also know that she is grappling with a loss of autonomy. The older she grows, the more frightened she feels about not having pride of place in the household anymore.

Especially since, even at her ripe old age, she is capable of remarkable lucidity.

A couple of months ago, when a relative suggested that clanging plates and lighting lamps might help abolish the coronavirus, she chortled. Then she sneaked up to me and whispered, "What are all these crazy people saying? How will this monkey business destroy the virus?"

I grinned. "How do we say 'everyone has gone bonkers' in Malayalam?", I asked.

"Ella vurukkum vatta pidichu" she replied, clearly enunciating each syllable for effect. "Ella- vu-ru-kkum-va-tta-pi-di-chu. Got it?"

It took me a while to memorize. I'm a teacher of foreign languages but shamefully inadequate in my native tongue.

When I did get it right, we giggled together, and then I repeated the statement a few times like a pre-schooler, which made her giggle even more. It dawned on me that the last time we had a moment like this was when I was about five.

It was a daily ritual. While laying out my lunch after school, Daadi would try to teach me a morsel of Malayalam or two. "Chor vanam?" she would ask, and I would nod my head. Yes, I wanted rice. "Enneke chor vanam" I would parrot after her, and encouraged by my response, she would offer other things - curry, buttermilk, pickle. "Pachhidi vanam? Mor vanam? Achaar vanam?"

My answer to most things was 'vanam' but when I did reply with 'venda' (no), she took sweet revenge. "Then what do you want? Adi vanam?" she would ask with mock anger, holding up her hand for effect. This would crack me up. Which kid says yes to being thwacked? "Venda, venda, venda!" I would shout, and she would cackle.

Sometimes she'd chase me around the table for effect. She loved theatrics, and so did I.

Daadi doesn't know her exact age but estimates being around 85. She says she studied only up to class 5, although that does not impede her from being able to read Malayalam, Gujarati, Hindi and even bits of English. She is an ace in the kitchen, and like most lifelong housewives, cooks so well you could demolish your fingers.

She is short and slow to move and sneaky. Her one big preoccupation in life is to keep an eye on her daughter-in-law, my mother. It's not because she doesn't trust her. It's because she has a pathological need to supervise the kitchen. My mother politely reminds her to stay out and let us do the sweating. But Daadi is reluctant to surrender her fiefdom. She saunters into the kitchen a million times a day, usually on the pretext of drinking water. While she fills up her glass, she scans the expanse of the kitchen slab, the pots on the stove, and the contents of the sink. She simply cannot help the scrutiny.

She is also an aggressive woman. She doesn't like being disagreed with, which explains why she sees my mother as a threat rather than an ally. When she is in one of her moods, expect full-blown meltdowns accompanied by copious tears of the crocodile kind. She has a water dispenser in her tear ducts - they can rain down at a moment's notice, harder and faster than thunderstorms in Cherapunji.

My father remembers evenings from his childhood when my grand-father and he would be deprived of dinner as punishment for having incurred her wrath. She would coolly refuse to cook and send them both to bed hungry. Neither would squeak in protest.

Those were her heydays. But with time the human body ages, and as the bones grow older, the spirit softens. Karthiyayini Amma is now a mellower version of the terror she used to be. She remains a creature of habit, however, and though she has made grand efforts to be peaceable, we still get to glimpse her dramatic self very often.

In that sense, the *saas* remains a *saas* - even when her *bahu* has acquired a *bahu* of her own!

I noticed Daadi this morning while she was glued to an Asianet soap opera. She looked so engrossed that I thought she'd stay put for a couple of hours at least.

She proved me wrong. In twenty minutes, she made one of her kitchen rounds. "Is there anything you want me to do?" she asked my mother, who turned down her help. "We'll call you when it's time for lunch," my mother told her. There are younger women to manage the kitchen now, so Daadi can happily retire.

But Daadi does not like the idea of retirement. She has spent six decades playing the matron. Being able to tell people what to do gives her a sense of purpose. This is a

woman whose vital faculties are still on fleek - she could catch stray hairs on the floor even before her cataract surgery. Now, she can spot errant strands in HD vision.

She is not prepared to throw in her ammunition. Not yet.

No wonder she tries to latch on to whatever semblance of control she can find - which, as I've realised in a moment of epiphany, sometimes translates to asking pointless questions. I know now, that the content of my response does not really matter to her. What she wants is the reassurance that she still counts in our lives, especially in mine.

Last month, on a Sunday afternoon, we were winding up lunch. My mother, having discharged her duties as the chef, had left for her siesta. My sister-in-law and I had replaced her in the kitchen, to do the dishes.

Just when we were about to finish, we were ambushed by Daadi. She walked in quiet as a kitten and tapped me on the shoulder. "What?!" I was startled. "Let me clean the sink and slab," she said earnestly. "You girls must be tired."

We're not, my sister-in-law told her. This is easy work. Go, lie down.

But Daadi's request was not about the intensity of the task anyway. And she was very keen on doing it - so keen that I had to set aside my disgruntlement at her insistence.

"Let her do it," I said to my SIL. "Here, Daadi. All yours."

We stepped out, letting her have the last word and do the last chore.

Ten minutes later, as she lay down for her nap, I heard her peacefully snore, perhaps out of satisfaction at her continued relevance.

ABOUT THE WRITER

Megha Nayar is a language coach from Ahmedabad, India. She spends half her time teaching French and English. The other half, she devotes to learning Spanish, taking long walks, and pondering the purpose of human existence. Writing is her validation and catharsis. She was longlisted for the Commonwealth Short Story Prize 2020. She blogs at meghanayar.tumblr.com and tweets @meghasnatter.

Shuffle by Mugdha Nanal

It's a quiet Sunday afternoon. Ma has appointed me with a sewing duty, which means that we are going to have to spend at least two hours together. Two hours is a lot; talking the bare minimum wouldn't suffice. It's not that I don't like to talk, but for me to have a conversation, the universe needs to conspire in every possible way. As today is not one of those lucky days, I start to make a playlist.

I am not very picky when it comes to music, but if I were forced to choose only one category of songs to listen to for the rest of my life, I would go with heart-wrenching, melancholic stuff; the kind that goes well with sunset and coffee. Ma, being the personification of glass-half-full stereotype, would probably slightly resent me for the choice. I feel that she doesn't appreciate emotions on the sadness side of the spectrum enough. She thinks I appreciate them a little too much. So, to avoid possible confrontations, I am carefully leaving out the sad songs.

Armed with supplies to last me four hours, I take a seat in the corner of the room. The duty that I am appointed with is to attach a lace to a sari. Ma runs a school for special children, which is facing some financial problems due to current crisis. We have come up with an idea to make the students paint saris to get some funding. This will also act as a rehabilitation strategy for these children who don't respond well to conventional methods of education. To make this idea a success, we first need to try sewing and painting on our own and then teach the students. Today's lace-work is part of the same project. Ma gives me some instructions and goes back to her part of the work. I am focusing on moving my clumsy hands. Carefully curated playlist full of feel-good songs is playing in the background.

I am done with three-fourth of the work, when Ma suddenly exclaims,

"Wow! This song is amazing."

It's 'tum saath ho' from the movie Tamasha. How did it get in the playlist? Also, did Ma not listen to the lyrics? Even if she didn't, the melody itself is pretty melancholic. What is happening?

"Amazing? I thought you didn't like it when I played sad songs."

"Oh but this song is not sad. It is beautiful. It makes me want to have someone beside me, and it is quite a warm and fuzzy feeling."

"I don't know where you are getting the warm and fuzzy feeling from, but I think the song is actually pretty sad. Did you listen to what the male voice is singing? He is saying he doesn't care whether he is with her or not. She desperately wants to be with him and he doesn't care because he thinks that love is not real..."

I look up. I see Ma getting ready to attack me with either a 'see, you are negative because you surround yourself with negative stuff' bullet or an 'it is a shame that you don't talk more often, even when you are so good at expressing what you think' one. Before she gets a chance to do so, I add hurriedly,

"That is not why I like this song though. I like it because two opposite perspectives towards a same thing exist in complete harmony. No particular perspective is deemed to be the only truth. The usual dichotomy is shed, and something much more profound comes out of it; a little vague, but profound all the same. I really love these kinds of songs. This is a commonly used trick in musicals. It is called polyphony. Here in this song, at least the melody is the same, but in polyphonic songs, two different songs with both lyrics and melodies different are sung together to form a whole new song; and the goose bumps are guaranteed. It is my dream to live inside a polyphonic song. All the paradoxes, and contradictions and different streams of thoughts are allowed to exist together, without a trace of distress there. Kind of makes you think: it's probably not about the difference in opinions, but rather how the different opinions are presented."

I stop to catch my breath. Adding a 'sad song' to the mix was not as bad as I thought it would be. Ma patiently listened to what I said. I should give her more credit than I do.

"Hmm...I see...I hear what you are saying, but I missed half the song because you were talking. Play it again, will you?"

ABOUT THE WRITER

Mugdha Nanal is currently pursuing BA in Japanese. She lives in Pune. Her hobbies mainly include staring: staring out the window, staring at the screen, staring into the abyss etc. You can find her on Instagram at @unreal_conversations where she writes conversations.

Elephant in the Room by Sahana Arun Kumar

In R. J. Pallacio's *Wonder*, one of Mr. Brown's precepts goes as follows: "When given the choice between being right and being kind, choose kind." It means to appreciate that everyone has a history, and their present is a product of their struggles, either active or passive. What we say then could come from kindness or a point to be proven. It is with the people we live with and see everyday, whose histories we recognise, that we don't always shy from being brutally honest. Now, while we're all stuck at home, wondering when the end is in sight for Covid-19, what would kindness look like?

Social distancing means physical coexistence at home. Prior to the pandemic, a home worked well through the optimum avoidance of each other, in the form of sleep and professional engagements. Children spent time in school till midday, spouses were at work till evening, and if one was working, the other had complete control over the house. There were parties and social gatherings to attend, that limited the amount of family time. Now, however, love is not simply about who you carry in mind when you're away, but feelings that emerge in the physical presence of the other. With nowhere to go, we are faced with the permanent people in our everyday, not only in thought, but in visceral, sensorial experience. And the experience isn't only one of relief and stability, as in returning home from a long day to the arms of familiarity and comfort. New facets to the same people are being forced on us - the habits they developed in our absence, their forgotten quirks we can't relate to anymore, their eccentricities that we may find unnerving as we've evolved. They exceed our expectations like they hadn't in so long, overwhelm our senses with their totality that we had merrily forgotten, much like we overload them with our totalities. It is an experience of (re)discovering too much. They are everywhere, in their total existence!

When we live at home all twenty-four hours of a day, every day, we see a lot more. The house no longer operates backstage, and the drama of what makes the house tick unfolds before our eyes. From cooking, cleaning, washing, to billing, repairing, and decision making, all are part of an established smooth running system. With the pandemic, we have had to give up the luxuries of outsourcing housework, and house members have pitched in to run a house together. Those who remain home on a daily basis are as distraught with a house full of people, as those who leave the house

for a few hours everyday. Each one's usual routine looks starkly different now, unfurling within the confines of a single house. We are in each other's way. We all think we know better. There ensues impatience and restlessness and some blunt exchanges. After a showdown with the household members, where do we go to cool off? Where are the distractions of space? The heaviness of the argument and the bitter words exchanged hang in the air, a palpable elephant in the room.

Earlier, we had developed a way of coexisting, together and apart, respecting our individual and collective spaces. We were content with their eternal presence in our life, that gave us our space to be. We could reach out to them when we needed, and not bother about anything beyond that which was necessary for love. We were sometimes kinder by staying out of the way. But the lock down has changed life, and the meaning of coexistence. How does one remain kind while feeling frustrated and trapped?

Real relationships are with real people, with the good and the bad, the beautiful and the ugly, the sorted and the messy, the hidden and the revealed elephants in the room. We are total beings, with flaws and imperfections, kinks and oddities. Conversations we worked hard to avoid through our everyday routines and by surrounding ourselves with validation and positivity, are now exposed. Living with others means having to figure out boundaries between who I am with them, and who I am without them.

Being with real people in the house invites a process of being with our internal realities. Faced with the real, we have to face the real within. The more we embrace our present, the deeper we reflect on ourselves, and the more we face our shadows. And it's these messy, disorganised, unresolved sides that cannot be silenced anymore. In the stillness of current life, the repetition of days, the endlessness of time, our minds are uneasy, and thirsty for stimulation within. There is nowhere to run from our darkness anymore. Those parts invite censure, and strong feelings towards ourselves. We are harsh, inflexible, and punitive about our mistakes. How can we resist being real with ourselves, if we are forced to reckon with the real relationships around us?

And being real is difficult. Sometimes impossible.

Which brings me back to Mr. Brown's precept. While the *right* thing may be to psychically undo the past, to break the pattern, to change the result, it is setting us up

for failure. It happened, and it cannot be unwritten. But can it be acknowledged, remembered, even forgiven? Forgiveness, without necessarily forgetting. Compassion is to acknowledge the non-linearity of our life cycle and engage with the ensuing feelings. It is to take responsibility for change, and begin the process of learning from the experience. You have a choice - to keep pretending like the shadows don't exist, or to engage with the process and change. The lockdown has given us the golden opportunity to stop time and reflect on where we are, and how we would like to move forward. We have the choice to take forward and leave behind.

Coexistence is the coexistence of the paradoxes of life. Hate blooms in the same place as love. Anger comes from disappointment in love. Courage emerges in vulnerability and fear. Strength emerges from weakness. Can utilise this time? Can we take responsibility for what happened, for change? Can we take responsibility for ourselves? The difference between admonishing ourselves and holding ourselves accountable, is kindness. If we can acknowledge our own history and its bearing on our present, we can acknowledge our humanity - that we are not meant to be perfect. Our past is beyond us, and our present is now. How do we want to move into our future: by being right or by being kind?

ABOUT THE WRITER

Sahana Arun Kumar works as a psychotherapist with children, adolescents and young people, in New Delhi. In her spare time she enjoys working out, pursuing classical dance, and singing with her friends. She is hopeful that the pandemic has brought a change for the good in the world, and wishes to be kinder to herself and her world. Instagram: @saha.ha.ha.na

Grey by Zachary Schroeder

"Six weeks ago, I woke up and everything around me was grey. I know it sounds spectacularly made up and like I am, perhaps, hallucinating - and have been for the past weeks. However, I have experienced no decrease in productivity at work, my relationships have improved, and I find myself in tremendous physical shape."

Teresa shifts in her seat next to Trevor; she isn't sure what to think.

Trevor continues. "It was not gradual, if you're wondering. It came all at once. I woke up on November 11 th and all the shades of colours around me had turned to grey. Even now, I cannot tell you the specific colour of anything in this office, only the differences in the shades of grey."

"At first I thought it was a cognitive issue, due to the lack of symptoms of mental sickness, and so I went to the Opticians. They thoroughly tested my eyesight only to find it had actually improved with the new developments. The optician recommended me to get a scan of my head."

"After running my head through every machine they could find; the doctors, having most likely not believed me in the first place- sent me to you. I understand my situation is unique and you, like all of the others before you, do not believe me. I will neither try to convince you of my affliction's existence nor will I expect you to believe it. I only ask that if you do think I am lying, at least humour me. Treat me as you would a child playing a game in his imagination."

Teresa, the psychiatrist sitting in the chair opposite of Trevor, taps her pen against a school bus yellow notepad.

"I do believe you, Trevor," she says, "I believe you fully."

Trevor looks at the ground in front of his feet. "Thank you."

Teresa offers Trevor a tissue. He pats the moisture from his eyes. Both are wearing professional clothing to a deeply personal arrangement.

"I want you to tell me about the day before all of this happened. Everything up until the moment you went to sleep- the night before you saw grey."

Trevor laughs from behind red streaked eyes.

"It was a normal day. Work went well, new clients came into the office and I put on a demonstration of our new product: 'Sightless Headphones-a recently released gadget from the R&D department'. If you are curious, they are tiny Bluetooth headphones small enough to stick in your ear and have no one notice. We think they are going to be a big hit with teens, which, of course, is the most profitable demographic to target. The meeting went spectacularly well; they invested nearly 20 percent more than anticipated."

"Trevor". Teresa interrupts, "Let's move on to what happened after work, your personal life, please."

Trevor grunts and checks his cell phone for the sixth time of the session. "Not much to say in terms of my personal life. In that, nothing has changed that could possibly affect my mental health," Trevor said.

"My marriage is 20 years strong; my daughter is graduating from Cornell in the fall and has many opportunities waiting for her, law school among them."

"Their names?" Teresa asks.

"Jessica is my daughter and Kate is my wife."

"Did you see both of them that night?"

"Yes," Trevor looks at the ceiling in thought, "After work. I said hello and then finished some work upstairs in my office. Later, Kate called me down for dinner. It was a good dinner, salmon with wild rice."

"Did anything memorable happen during dinner?" Teresa prods.

"It was delicious really. Although, I suppose me and my daughter did have a rather passionate disagreement over the course of the meal."

"An argument of what nature?"

"Political. She has her head in the right place, but," Trevor sighs, "The naivety of youth can be astounding."

"She's a radical?" Teresa asks judgment absent from her tone.

"No, far from it." Trevor thinks, "It just upsets me greatly that someone so intelligent can dismiss her father's opinion so easily."

"Easier than you dismiss hers?"

Trevor checks his phone for the seventh time in the session.

"While our time is up, Trevor, I would like to give you some advice."

"Please." The portly man looks over to the therapist with hope in his eyes.

"I ask you to remember that we are not our opinions. Opinions come from a coagulation of the media you consume and the possibility of social acceptance from the people around us. You are not your political positions, and neither is your daughter."

"I'm not quite sure what you're getting at." Trevor's face has turned a slight pink.

"When your daughter insults or diminishes your political points you are taking it as an assault on your very person, your ego is blinding you to the fact that your daughter has become intelligent enough to have a battle of wits with you over dinner. Appreciate that. She is not a little girl anymore." Teresa replies.

"And this will help me with my eyesight in what way?" Trevor asks, indignant.

"It is only advice."

The two adults stand as Teresa walks Trevor to the elevator.

"Thank you," Trevor says as the doors close and the elevator dings, sending him to the ground floor.

Trevor exits the marble floored lobby into the bustling street outside, grey cars pass grey people. He hears a little girl crying.

Trevor looks over to see a child in absolute dismay, tears flowing down the child's face as the mother next to her pleads her to be quiet.

In this midst of the chaos- this loud storm in the ocean of people surrounding them, Trevor notices the girl's tear-filled eyes are the most vivid blue he has ever seen.

ABOUT THE WRITER

Zachary Schroeder is a freelance writer out of Austin, Texas. He recently graduated from Texas Tech University and is working on his first novel along with an anthology of short stories. Twitter: <https://twitter.com/zschroeder342> Website: <https://writtenbyzach.wordpress.com/>

The Pleasure of Angst for a Modern Teenager by Kunal Panda

"People understand me so poorly that they don't even understand my complaint about them not understanding me."

- Soren Kierkegaard

Existential angst surrounds us all as weary teenagers that manifests itself in the form of hard earned soliloquies and monologues whispered into ears after a socially accepted attempt at (chugged) beer pong, culminating in scorning the hustle of selling productive worth for free as unpaid interns in the quest of being a money making machine to finally afford that one bottle of Tanqueray. We start each Term with bright determination, only for it to flatten faster than a Fruit Chill on a summer day. Unaccounted lectures pass with a memory that spans till that one Beethoven sonata that everyone knows how to hum, and venting out the seeping cracks of monotonous boredom and irrelevant cultural affixes over patties as energy bars.

What must be the point of life if it is supposed to end somewhat tragically in a funeral wake clad in white muslin, devoid of all your efforts to brave this world and achieve self-indulgent wealth? Such was the thought tormenting Soren Kierkegaard, who accepted unhappiness as a vocation. Losing his parents and siblings to disease and himself staring into a prophesized demise, he reacted to his disposition with a subtle smile and produced a dense oeuvre now regarded with the birth of Existentialism, a famous term for the modern teenager doused with quotes of Kafka and a copy of Orwell's *1984*. Survived by over seven thousand pages of journals and personal recollections, his philosophy was one marked by despair and guilt. He broke ties with a woman he was about to marry, citing his inability to love someone. He gave up his career to tie himself in a room, writing through the night at a frantic pace. The modern world would expose his behavior to psychiatric help, although such a personality is not so alien for the current age, where depression and anxiety are romanticized for the successfully troubled young adult and wild emotion is the sign of true genius. His parables live on as a reminder of Man as the only creature unwilling to know himself.

Now termed as a Christian Existentialist, he is named so because of his unusual position on faith. He presented some of the most striking criticisms, and simultaneously, a visually pious sympathy for Christianity. The parable of *The Men*

of Gotham throws light on fundamental beliefs where a group of men hold on to the branch of a "thirsty" tree close to a river by forming a chain from the ground up, holding each other's waists - under the presupposition that the first man held fast. If the first man loosens his grip, all Gothamites fall into the water as the presupposition is broken. This metaphor explains the present, where fundamental beliefs about God who reincarnates as human for us to love him, challenges the notion of objective and subjective truths and politicians force-feed obvious lies that gives rise to totalitarian propaganda. Truth for this world is a byproduct of positional warfare. The party with more influence owns reality, and the line between natural and posited law is blurred. An escapist fantasy demands the eccentric idea of the fallen Gothamites to surrender to the river and discover new worlds, for every idea read in textbooks was eccentric at its origin.

Anxiety deeply roots itself around the expectation of our image in public. It reflects the inability to know what others desire of you. Modern dating presents a myriad of lovelorn singles who have "commodified" themselves like varieties of jam in a grocery store. Such mass produced individuality, isolated into labor and consumption. A false identity leads us into the troubled waters of hatred, self-loathing, boredom, egotism, and to refuse to engage in the only certainty of life - death. We live in unusual times marked by irrelevant wars, bigotry, suspicion, and economic upheavals. Increase in feelings of alienation without any plausible belief systems have led to an increase in suicide and mental illnesses. It seems that we have not only lost the taste of life but also the taste for life, as we allow our lives to be dominated by ideals, norms, and values defined by others. Scientific and rational inquiry has provided one last blow to canonical and divine intervention. It is a severe blow to the idea of an immortal soul and God. In this evolution of the Superstructure into a world of artificial sentience, the mind alone is the cause of this contemporary angst, the source of experience. In death thus, lies the inexistence of the soul, nothingness prevails. *Neuroexistentialism*, as a form of third wave existential philosophical thought maps neural networks of the body with a "unified theory of being".

It is the desire for freedom that finds the appeal of a disbelief in existing social structures and old prescribed habits quite tempting. Existential thought opens a chasm of eccentricity and an infinite space for individuality. We all have a duty to recognize one's own freedom, ability to change, malleability and vulnerability. By default, then, we must also acknowledge the same in others. This is

where *faith* enters as a result of the intersection of Kierkegaard in everyday life. *Faith*, not just as a State sponsored apparatus of power pushed into a box of Religion, but a belief in the weakness of the human mind to perceive good and bad. The nature of man is unique to experience, although one cannot experience that which cannot be mediated by language. The constraint of all expression limited to metaphors and symbolism should prompt the relativist, practical, and everyday philosopher to have a *leap of faith* into the dire conditions of uncertainty. Despair and dogmatism are easy, but *hope* is hard.

Our anxiety, while painful, is evidence that we're struggling to be true to ourselves. Rather than distract ourselves with every shiny new thing, surrender to societies' standards, or cling desperately to some objective, "knowable" truth, Kierkegaard challenges us to remain open as we engage with the world, searching for that noble ideal we'd be willing to sacrifice everything for. The dizziness of freedom is the condition that life is viewed backwards, but can only be lived forwards. This position implies that future is no one's responsibility but one of its maker. To face an inevitable demise with defiance instead of distraction is to live a life.

ABOUT THE WRITER

Kunal Panda is an Economics undergraduate from Hindu College, University of Delhi. An admirer of Pune skies, He giggles at Homeric puns and finds respite in the terrible aftertaste of soulful conversations, and writing odes to that effervescent amber promise. He wishes to become an educator one day. Instagram: [_kunalpanda](#) (Calvin, Klein, and Hobbes)

Spring in Isolation by Bidisha Mahapatra

This is a letter to the season we lost, the wisdom we gained and the alienation we defied trying to make sense of the world around us. This is a letter to a spring spent in isolation.

Dear Spring,

I moved to my mother's house while you were in early bloom during the month of March. The suffocating heat from the coast of Mumbai, my city of dreams was one where the dust and soot made all the seasons alike except monsoon, which was vivid, endless. I packed a suitcase full of clothes, left my job and flew to my coastal home town in Odisha. The beginnings of a deadly virus was floating in the air. But I was blissfully unfettered and said my goodbyes without any thought. The moment I stepped into my old childhood home, you welcomed me with a gush of bougainvillaea, summer air, muddy flowers and humidity. I couldn't breathe, flooded with the memories of earth and wet rain. I wanted to go back to the city, bright lights, endless days and blissful ignorance. I felt trapped. I wanted to leave the minute I stepped inside, crossed the threshold. You were glorious in full bloom waiting to embrace me and I had forgotten all about you like every other faint memory from my childhood.

Our house is very old and my mother is a gardener with shears and tools, small ceramic bugs and exotic seeds. She works like an alchemist, day and night propagating roots, mixing flowers, feeding worms. And as I watched her go through this endless cycle I felt caged indoors. Caged inside a season that I couldn't quite reconcile with.

Meanwhile painful memories of the people I left behind, the goodbyes I hadn't said and the freedom I had taken for granted haunted me for days. I wanted to tear through the walls and run. This home was but a testimony to a season I didn't want to experience. I would sit outside for hours surrounded by blooming flowers and I would run wild during the night with nowhere to go, only four corners of a small garden. A garden that held the secrets of the world but gave only a taste of bitter nostalgia. I wanted to be free, to go atop a mountain or run in a valley of yellow

flowers and make love. I was confronted with the cruelty of a spring in isolation, a spring to be lived indoors, a spring that will go by.

But everyday that I spent wallowing in your embrace, I realised that there is an underlying frustration, a need to bloom and break free that lives within the happiness of your arrival. It's not a facade but a mirror that reflected my deep sense of isolation followed by a prolonged period of longing. You called for shameless desires slipping into my bones and I had nowhere else to go. So I dreamt of body and mouth, fingertips, all the while waiting for you to become something else. And I learnt to let go. To exist with you till you became me, flesh and bone.

We all live in pools of harmonious existence with nature. And vast periods of avoiding our true self or being uncomfortable in our natural habitat makes us feel alienated. I know deep within, that you have morphed, transformed into the the pandemic itself or maybe the virus taken on some of your colours and agility. The smell of earth and decay. I now live with an abstract sense of time, and the transient feeling of you leaving. The flowers outside are still blooming and so is the virus. Everything is spreading despite itself, growing and syncing with the smell of spring.

Your seasonal friend,
lost and found.

ABOUT THE WRITER

Bidisha Mahapatra is a writer, visualiser and artist. She designs meaningful narratives by blending words, images and silences. She has worked in field of advocacy communication as a copywriter for CSR-led initiatives. She uses her background in politics, art, film and theatre to raise awareness and political consciousness about social inequalities and human welfare. Currently, she is using her skills as a visualiser and writer to explore the dimensions of persuasive storytelling in the changing post-pandemic world.

A letter of apology to my body by Sarah Loverock

Dear Body,

It has come to my attention you have now decided everything is painful.

A blanket that is too bobbly or heavy feels like glass against our skin. Resting our legs on top of each other while trying to sleep is too painful. Every food makes us nauseous, even tofu and strawberries.

You want to go back to the days of binge eating chocolate in bed. I sympathise with your dream but not every day can be spent in bed, unfortunately we live in a society that values work over all else-even health-so I'm going to have to ask you to start pulling your weight.

There is no need for the ache in my hips, the pressure on my chest and neck, the stiffness in my back and shoulders. Every couple of seconds it's *pop pop pop* squeezing out the tension like I'm a human accordion. Then there's the burning pain, like being scolded by a kettle or the hot needles jabbed into my joints.

I would like one more night without a racing, anxious mind, the constant tugging need to roll over and check my phone. (Has he replied? Will I ever find love?) Being so exhausted and unable to fall asleep is just unfair, let's not mention the muscle spasms that jerk my hands and feet, the electric shocks buzz through us, the echo of my heart palpitations, reminding me that I'm alive, I'm awake and yes, still in pain.

I am sorry I despised you for a decade. You have to understand, girls like me are supposed to be a myth. They won't let you be tall and broad as a girl, they won't let you take up space. You've got to be thin and quiet and beautiful. They don't have any use for girls with big noses, big hands and big hearts.

Are you punishing me for all the binge eating? For all the times I looked in the mirror and started crying at the cystic acne and oily skin? How about my teenage years when I wanted nothing more than to carve off the layers of fat on my stomach like strips of butcher's meat?

I remember the crippling period cramps you gave me, when I'd scream on the bathroom floor and punch my own abdomen, trying to make them stop. I'd give

anything for my uterus to be ripped out and flushed down the toilet. It should have been an omen, then, that there'd be some kind of retribution for rejecting you.

You're the only body I'll ever have. And I've hid you behind oversized hoodies and sweatshirts, trying to bury the dark hairs, the stretchmarks and cellulite. I let my head of hair grow long and unkempt, down to my shoulders. I let the bangs sweep away half my face because of the asymmetry few people noticed. But I noticed and I hated it. I hated myself.

Then when I finally decided I was beautiful, when I looked in the mirror and thought, 'Gods, someone will love me one day,' and when I felt you out, ran my hands over my breasts, traced my nails against my skin with a delightful shiver and let my hands linger further south, you turned on me.

I remember the night before the hospital-the horrible searing pain from the lower back down, running down my legs and turning my muscles to stone. The cramps were excruciating, the pain lasted even when I'd numbed both legs with ice and I was sobbing on the bed. I couldn't put weight on them for days afterwards. I didn't sleep for a week, kept awake by agony and nausea and dread.

This is it, I thought. No one will love us now.

In all these months I've learned that you're just as beautiful as before, if unreliable. I wish I didn't have to fight with you. I wish we could do things together, go on long walks and museum trips and go to craft fairs without getting exhausted and achy. I really hope you won't hold me back from life and intimacy, that this won't be a *thing* that turns into a complex. Gods know I've got enough body image issues to boot.

But you're still the one I want. You're the only body I'll ever have-the only one for me. And I know you're tired and that you're in pain. And that you're angry with me, for all those able years wasted, crying by the side of a bathtub or gaslighted by our parents but we're still valuable. We're still worthy of love.

We can get through this together. We can learn to co-exist.

With love,

Your most gracious consciousness,

Sarah Loverock.

ABOUT THE WRITER

Sarah Loverock (she/her) is a writer, poet, and MA Creative Writing student. She has been previously published in *Streetcake*, *ang(st) zine*, *Perhappened* and *Pussy Magic*. She loves all things witchy and spiritual, history and mythology, and cute animals. She is available on Twitter @asoftblueending.

Beginnings by Surina Venkat

We skirted around one another at first. Strained glances over meals, stilted conversations where you'd start off with eager questions and I'd give you short, one-word answers just to see your smile falter. When you weren't home, I'd read wherever I pleased, but when you were, I'd make sure we were in different rooms. You'd find packed lunches set out on the counter before you went to work, return home to cleaned rooms and warm dinners of *chapati*, *thakali chutney*, whatever I was in the mood for. (You never had a preference on what I should make - you seemed uncomfortable when I asked, so I learned not to.) Sometimes I'd grit my teeth as I moved around the kitchen, resentful my Astrophysics degree had led to a life where I took care of my husband as I would a child. I'd known my life would look like this after marriage, accepted it even, but I could not stop the simmering disquiet from making a home in my skin.

I didn't last two months into our marriage. Your face relaxed as I talked, no traces of surprise. You told me I didn't have to ask your permission to pursue a career, I only needed my own. I looked at you differently after that. I remembered thinking when you and your parents first came to my family's house, *I could do worse*. I think it now, with less bitterness and more acceptance. My dissatisfaction had made a comfortable home out of me, so don't warm to you immediately, but I promise myself I will give you a chance.

You don't do all the heavy-lifting in our conversations anymore. I ask after you, about work, family. Exchanging words is hard, at first. But you try, so I try. You join me in the kitchen in the mornings to help cook and start reading some of my books so we can discuss them. I get a job at a physics lab and you drive me to work every day. Talking becomes easier and more natural, until some days, we don't finish our chai in the morning because we talk for far too long and realize we have to hurry or we'll be late for work.

We have our first big argument when you won't stop mentioning moving to the U.S. and I sink my heels into the ground and refuse to budge. I go to a friend's, relish my freedom, but by the turn of the week I realize I miss your lopsided smile. When I walk through our front door, you jump to your feet. Neither of us know where to start. You begin rambling and somewhere in that mass of words, you agree not to

leave our home. I say *thank you* because we both know if you decided you wanted to move, there would've been little I could do to stop you. You just nod, smile in relief, and ask if I want to join you in throwing breadcrumbs outside for the crows that crowd our windows.

We learn that day we can survive a bad fight and become closer because of it. I still hesitate sometimes when I criticize you, and you still hesitate when proposing some of your grand plans, but we learn to work through it. We instate a nightly tradition of winding down with Netflix and store-bought snacks. After all the talking we've done, we learn to appreciate the companionable silence. I finally go to get my own license and you wait for me outside the DMV, a huge smile on your face because you already know I'll pass.

When I tell you I'm expecting, you wrap your arms around my waist, a gesture that's become second-nature over the years. You ask me if I want to have the baby and I say yes, yes, of course, and you weep, damping my shoulders with your tears. I think of how I was so scared of having an arranged marriage, scared we would end up like my parents, with nothing but years of bitten tongues and lost trust between us. I thank every deity I know that you've become my best friend, that we talked and you listened and supported me all those years ago, and I hold you close.

ABOUT THE WRITER

Surina Venkat spent most of her childhood sneaking books into her room so she could read when she was supposed to be sleeping. If she isn't on a run with her dog or writing a post for [In the Margins](#), you can probably find her on [Twitter](#) or [Instagram](#).

