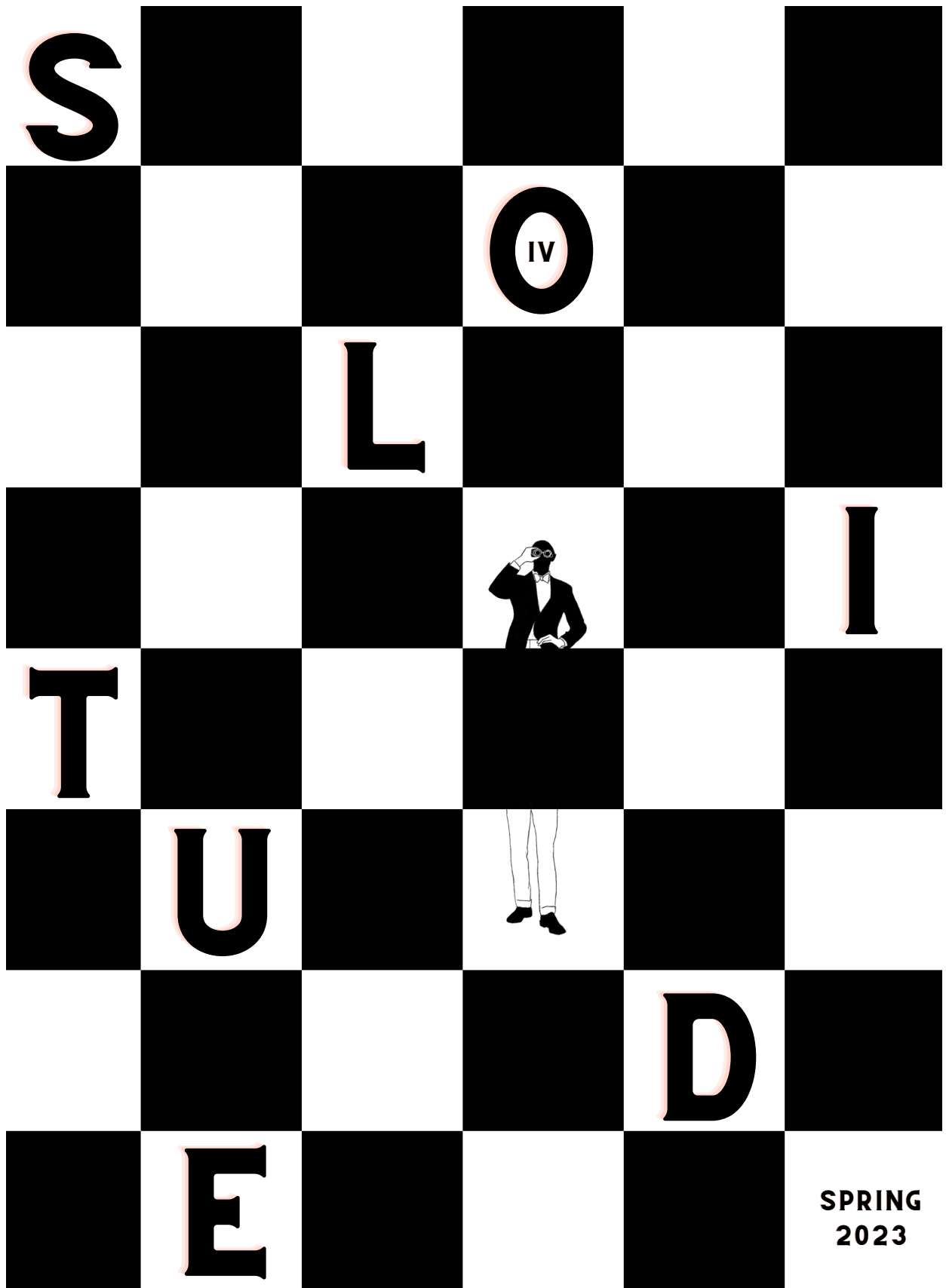


NEEDLE



CONT

01

Going Places

Oshi Aggarwal

04

A Shahzadi's Dream

Srishti Kumar

08

An Emptiness to Vacate

S. G. Sreejith

09

Love: A Vulgar Abuse

Ira Sinha &

Ananyaa Murthy

15

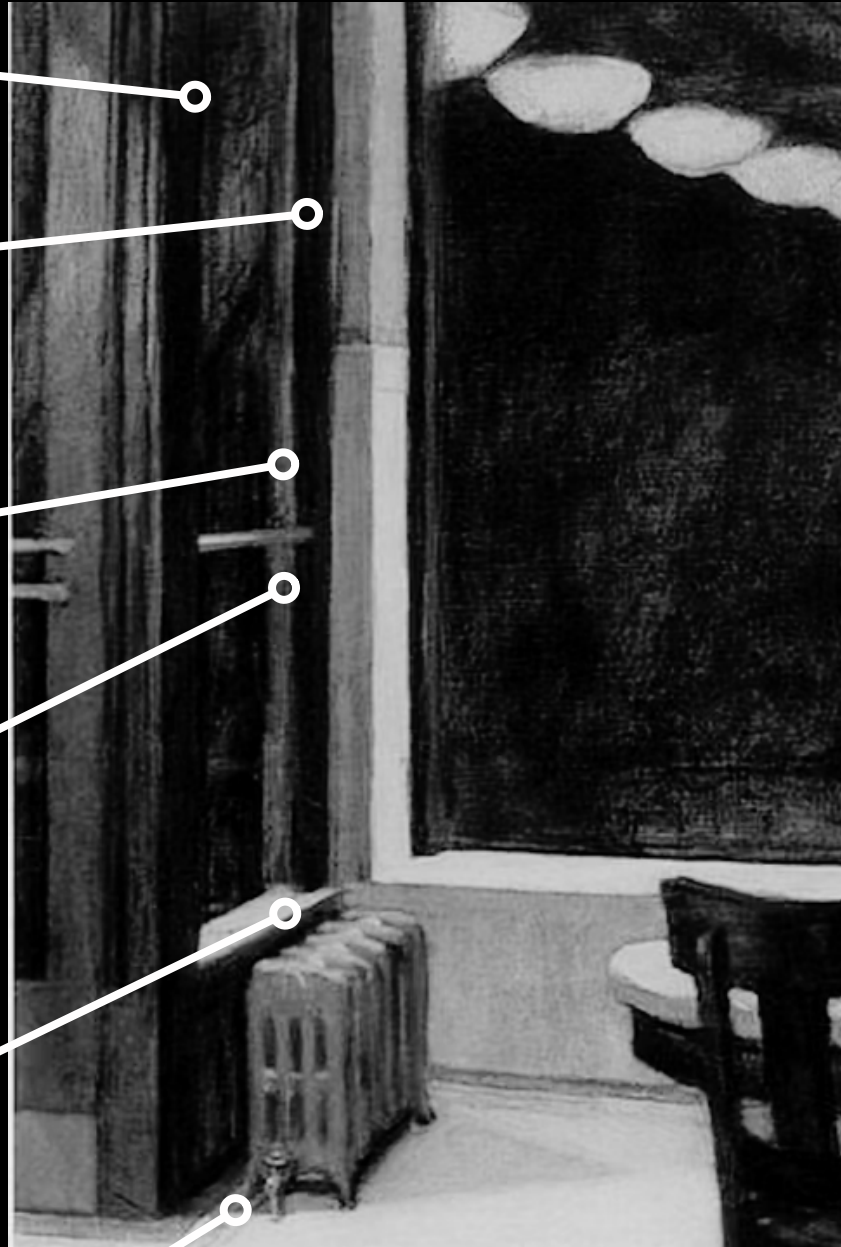
A Fellowship In Solitude

Maaz Bin Bilal

20

Suki's Adventures

Anaaya Patel



EVENTS



21

The Letter I Could Never Write

Meenakshi Nair

23

Stop, Says The Green Light

Avril Dias

25

Discovering Yourself In Solitude

Akash Singh

29

What Once Was

Riya Jain

31

A Coastal Escape

Ananya Joshi

35

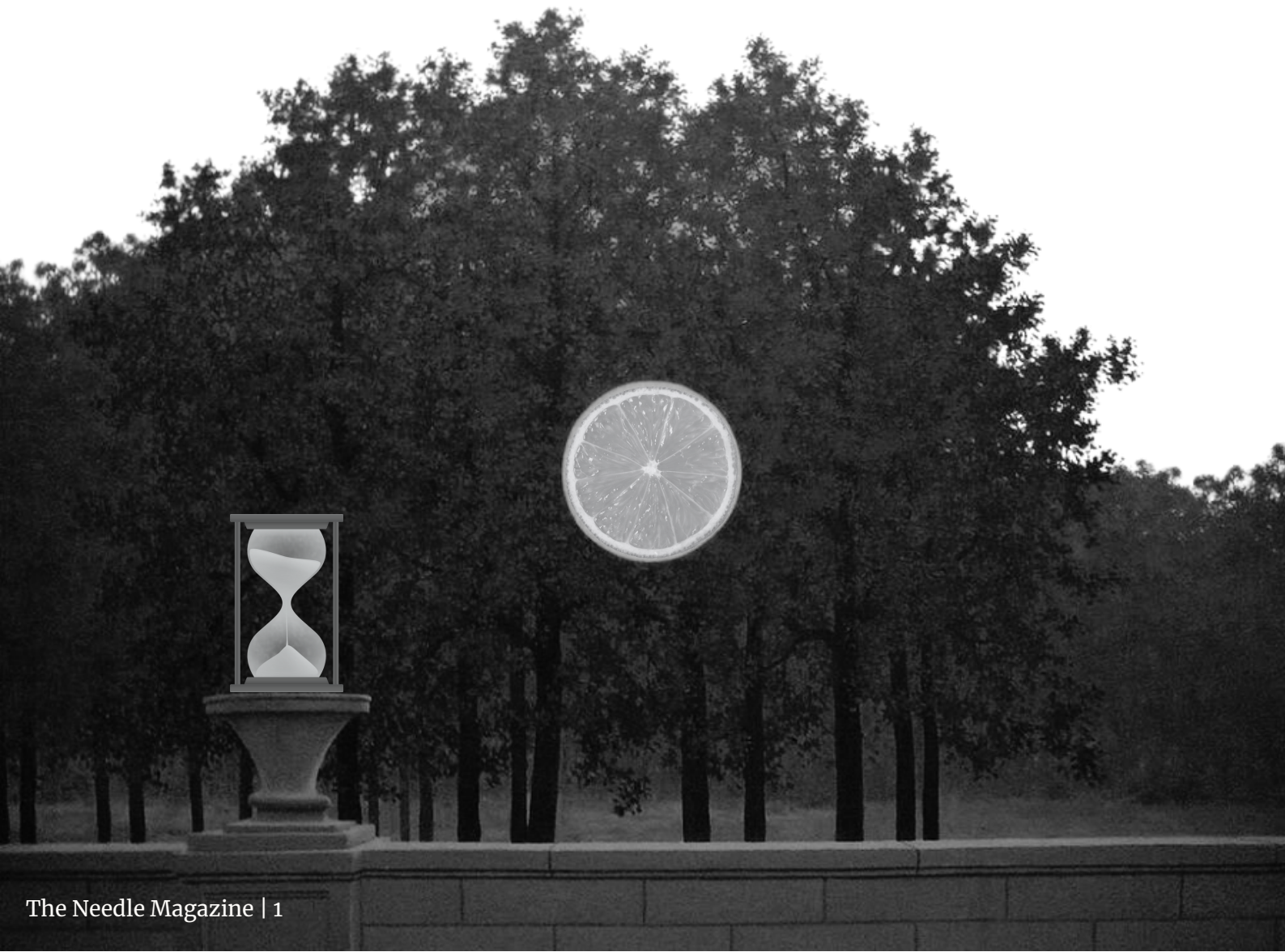
Editorial

Amruthavarshini



GOING PLACES

OSHI AGARWAL



I woke up in a grassland today. I could smell and feel before I could see. The air carried rain's spirit but the hair on my skin felt the blazing sun, one that chose its favourite while setting. The leaves tingled my feet, their waves filling me with the green scent I so love. Pressing my mouth together, I drank the air and it bloomed down my throat, opening my ears. I could hear now, the silence and the rain and the sun.

I wanted to become one with the grass. Though knitted together under the earth, I stood too high up, my mouth too far to press light kisses on the succulent needles. My roots, (too big, too hairy, too selfish) brushed next to those of the gentle leaves unkindly. I, hesitant in retrieving them from the moist soil, wept quietly and the salt settled like raindrops on my rough skin.

It got dark then. No, not the clouds in the sky. The moon never rose and the stars never twinkled. The grassland became a flipped page of a new book, remembered but unreachable.

Nothing changed but there was a smell. A sour smell, slightly sweet like a piece of cake left to the mercy of time after sundown.

I found myself looking over a swamp, the water bubbling with minerals and beings unknown. Something glimmered in the water, perhaps the sun which kept setting in the North in the wrong colours. I wondered if I was closer to the Lights but it was humid and my upper lip was salty, with no trace of ice on my tongue.

The glimmers liquidated to reveal whites and hollows. Not one was ever freed of curiosity but I was told to beware of nature's vility. So, I kept my distance. The whites became clearer, so did the hollows somehow. There were eyes, human eyes, more than what I could count in any language, emerging from the murky greens of the swamp. Of different shapes, sizes and colours, they looked into me. A few had whitened with age or disease or poverty. My mouth went dry and I craved to be in the grassland again, tasting the green chemical.

I made to move away from the shore but as if my toes were sewn to the loose ground, I remained stationary. I stood there to see the eyes grow vacant, the hollows filling with something red and swollen like flesh. Stood there to realise the glimmers in the water came from me, who was laden with gold, sickeningly yellow and sacrilegious. The fear was irrational as the eyes just looked and looked and looked as the gold grew heavier and heavier.

Then there was the smell. Lemons. Cake. Sunset. And time.

It was a room this time. Not big, not small. Not that I could tell the area it cover-

-ed as it was filled to the ceiling with what appeared to be bubbles. Different from the ones you can make from soap, bringing your fist together and blowing through it as your mother's fingers caressed the foam on your scalp. Ah, the wonders of childhood! I digress, but the room felt like it was made of digressions; the air was thick with half-spoken sentences and half-thought thoughts.

A small window pooled in the only light and the greens and yellows told me the sun was still setting. The bubbles refracted the light, revealing themselves to be made of glass. Crystal balls, which were slowly filling with white smoke. The smoke shaped itself into figures and images. I could recognise some resembling my past, some filled with laughter, others with tears from first falls. The balls farthest from the window had my recent years capsuled in them. Was it the low light which made them so grey? I could tell they were identical, like the film of a movie, moving from one frame to another, a difference of much less than seconds.

Cake. Eyes. Roots.

Book. Time.

Moon.

The room transformed into a building. It looked old and important and had a huge number of steps to a door. What was I to do but enter the building. It appeared to be a temple, it felt like one. But there was no idol, no shrine, no object that was shiny and appeared lovely but an empty space for one on the opposite side of the hall. There were no pews or carpets, no prayers, candles, or tears.

There was no ceiling and the sky was not yellow or green or blue or black. It was a pink moving into purples and there it was. The moon. The sun was nowhere to be found and I felt something heavy sitting at the bottom of my throat.

Grass. cAKE. lEmON. roots.

Moon



A SHAHZADI'S DREAM

SRISHTI KUMAR

The day broke like a dream. The sun peered through the muslin curtains, ever so gently, as the ladies-in-waiting scrambled about preparing for the shahzadi to awake from her nap. Try as she might, Jahanara wasn't able to catch a wink of sleep throughout the night. Deliberating on the farmans which were to be signed and sealed, her father's constant demand for her presence around him, the growing tension between her brothers, and her sister's spite towards her – had all driven Jahanara towards complete exhaustion, yet no moment to sleep. Rising from the bed, she put on her soft sandals and made her way towards the washing area, as Faiza, her chief lady-in-waiting followed with a tray in her hand. On it, lay a velvet napkin, a mirror and the shahzadi's favourite gold plated nose-ring, with a soft black pearl in the centre. Jahanara splashed water on her face and then reached out for the towel, gently dabbing her face while Faiza held up the mirror,. Staring at her reflection, Jahanara began to trace the soft, yet growingly prominent wrinkles that had begun to dawn the bags under her eyes and her constantly creased forehead. It was 1649, she would be 35 years old in a matter of a few weeks. Her age to marry had long passed. Although her grandfather, the great Emperor Jahangir, too had married his last, and undoubtedly, most powerful and gorgeous wife, Empress Nur Jahan, not long after he had lived for three decades, it was different for a Royal Mughal woman. The rules were always different for a woman. Jahanara was now seen as the older, more responsible Lady of the Empire.

“Your face still shines like the moon, Begum sahiba,” Faiza's gentle voice cut through her spiralling thoughts. Giving her a soft smile, Jahanara shook her head and went towards the clothes and jewellery that had been laid out for her for the day. There was to be a special mehfil in the evening today, hosted by her father and a few meetings with the architects in charge of the construction of her vision for her father's city of Shahjahanabad. She was yet to decide upon a name for her project, but what she was sure of was that it would radiate the beauty of the moon. Maybe 'Chandni Chowk'. She was also to meet Raza today. The thought brought a wide smile to her face. Raza came from a long line of nobles from Persia, and had been a part of Emperor Shah Jahan's court for a few years now. Not much older than her, Raza and Jahanara had developed a close bond over the past year. But it wasn't possible for a Mughal Shahzadi and a court minister to meet in public. Which is why the only people who knew of their frequent meetings were the two who Jahanara trusted with her life, Faiza and Sati un-Nissa, previously her mother Mumtaz Mahal's lady-in-waiting and the two princess' tutor, and now Jahanara's most trusted confidant.

After approving the attire for the day, Jahanara shed her nightly clothes and walked into the Shahi Hammam, a Turki bathing chamber, built especially for her. As the attendants scrubbed haldi over her arms and legs in one corner of the hammam, the other ladies began to wash her clean with rose scented water. She then wrapped herself in a thin muslin outfit and sat in the centre, perched upon a large, circular marble slab as the steam in the room cleansed her pores. After spending around an hour in the Shahi Hammam, Jahanara got dressed, decked with simple, yet glittering necklaces, earrings, bangles and her gold-plated nose ring, as the attendants rubbed a red, pastel-coloured beetroot dye on her lips and cheeks. By the time Jahanara stepped out of her chambers, it was already evening, and she w-

as expected at her father's mehfil, alongside her siblings. She had managed to complete most of her tasks from her room itself, including the signing of the farmans and various other official documents. The mornings were the only time in the day that Jahanara truly got to herself. While on her way to her father's chambers in the zenana (since the women of the royal zenana were not allowed inside the mardana), Jahanara encountered her younger sister, Roshanara Begum.

Greeting her with a stiff smile, Roshanara said, "Good evening Aapa", emphasising on the time of the day. "I see you have finally had the time to step out of your royal chambers. Where to now? A meeting with your secretive man?" Upon noticing her sister's reaction at her words, Roshanara continued with a renewed confidence, "Oh come on aapa! We live in the Mughal harem. Word gets around very, very quickly here."

"I'm actually on my way to Father's chambers now. The mehfil is to start soon and I hope you'll be there too. Would you excuse me Roshanara? You know how irritated Father gets when I'm not on time," Jahanara slyly shot insult after insult towards her sister and strutted off in the opposite direction. Everyone was well aware of Roshanara's insecurity when it came to her eldest sister. Side-lined not long after their mother's death, Roshanara had since spent her life aligning her interests with their third brother, Aurungzeb. Knowing how special and close a relationship their eldest brother Dara Shikoh and Jahanara held, Roshanara sensed an opportunity in favouring Aurungzeb. The rivalry between the brothers and the tension between the sisters had for long now stretched a divide across the royal family. Despite their differences, Jahanara was sympathetic towards Roshanara since both of them were, much as they would hate to admit, in the same boat – stuck between royal frictions, taking care of the men of the royal house, with little to no time for themselves and their personal lives.

Her father greeted her with enthusiastic shouts, slurring while he spoke, "*Salaam* beti! I've been waiting for you for a long while now. My sons should be on their way very soon, but I thought the mehfil could begin. The wine is exquisite, you must try some too!" Knowing her father's love for expensive wine, Jahanara expected this scene upon her arrival.

Bending perpendicular to the floor, Jahanara brought her right arm to her head and greeted her father the royal way, with the taslim, "*Salaam* Abu. You look well." She gave him a soft smile and settled down on the cushions beside him. Picking up the wine from the tray set in front of her by the attendants, Jahanara watched the evening pass by in a blur. As her six siblings arrived and sat in an uncomfortable silence, Jahanara tried her best to ease the situation. Sadly, that was not to be. Fights broke out and harsh words were exchanged, before everyone stomped out of the chamber in a drunken stupor. Roshanara followed Aurungzeb out, while Jahanara first put her father to bed and then visited Dara to pacify him.

A few hours later, a tired Jahanara returned to her chambers under the bright moonlight, made even prettier by the large candles lit by her ladies-in-waiting. She was greeted by a

pleasant surprise. Raza sat on her balcony, looking towards the gardens.

“How long have you been waiting?”, smiling she took the dupatta off her head and placed it near her dressing table. Walking towards her, Raza put his hands around her waist and smiled down at her. “It’s been a while now, but there is still some time before the Sun rises again.” The two gave each other a huge smile and made their way towards her draped bed. This was the only time they had to themselves. Daytime was far too risky because there are too many people constantly hovering around the shahzadi. Rumours could be dealt with, but if someone were to catch them together, it wouldn’t just mean a tarnished reputation – for Raza it also meant the destruction of his family. His wife knew of his affair with the Shahzadi, but it wasn’t a real relationship until someone caught them red-handed. And so, they managed to extract as much happiness as they could out of these few, stolen moments.

It wasn’t long before Raza picked up his clothes, gave her a kiss goodbye and walked out in the darkness of the morning. Jahanara stared towards the horizon and watched the Sun come up on a fresh day. This was all her life would ever be. Yes, she had the riches, luxury and status that everyone craved, but she still wasn’t in control of her life. Taking care of her father, brothers, sisters and the mighty Mughal Empire was something that she had been doing since she was seventeen years old. Now at thirty-five, her time for settling down and starting a family was long gone. There was no time to be spent only on her. Loneliness surrounded her during the day, and the only time she felt free was in the darkened hours of the night when she entered a dream. Raza’s company and their talks during the night was Jahanara’s escape route from this tiring, secluded world. But Raza’s arms around her too would loosen themselves not long after, when he made his way back home. She would still have one thing to hold onto – a Shahzadi’s Dream.



An Emptiness to Vacate

by S.G. Sreejith


The memory of you blazing in the pyre—
in the purity of fire, burning all that was yours,
on your way back to that which is truly yours,
—had my vacant heart fresh in it.

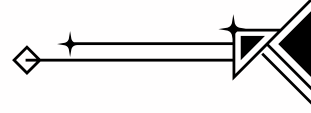
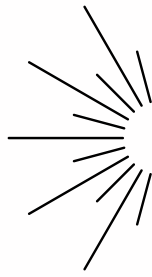
That retold your absence, my father, which
did often break the numbness of mind
that your loss had on me and that
did help me forget your many smiles.

As passing time did nurse the pain,
lifting the numbness to your absence,
letting a coldness to become my part—
I am the lonely son who had your warmth.

I realize the truth eternal,
a son's heart has the father, the boarder,
destined to leave and vacate the core.
My lonely self and unlively mind.

Empty—it will last forever,
a vacancy that is never to fill.
But the emptiness is ordained to go
for my life to expire, to get me to you.





LOVE: A VUI

Ira Sinha

Marriage in Wodeh

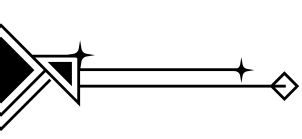
“I worship the very ground she treads on”, commences Bingo Little’s declaration of love for Honoria Glossop to his friend Bertie Wooster. It’s followed by the sloppy execution of a grand though ill-organized scheme to secure room for Little in Glossop’s heart, before, in an unexpected turn, his own dart then lands on her friend, Daphne Braythwayt. “She’s so wonderful, so sympathetic. Like a tender goddess.”

The latter doesn’t stick, either.

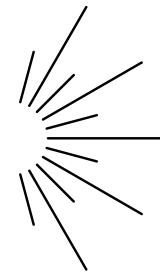
Throughout much of P.G. Wodehouse’s chronicles involving Little, one encounters him frog-hopping from one object of love to another. Amidst such adventures, the nature and intensity of his desire remain consistent, his plans woven within a future tense that sees him (and the paramour of the moment) happily put together in marital union. The humour of it is easy to notice – here is a privileged, extremely wealthy and thoroughly unintelligent man in the 1920s who can’t possibly find anything substantial to do with his time apart from attempting to effectively serenade the women he so easily comes to love. He strides through the countryside, hands in po-

-ckets, a hopeful, bright, almost painful grin across his face. He’s a fool, but surely the inability to remain still in the quest for love is prompted by something deeper than merely having more time than can be put to good use. However, not all rich men are quite as fantastically stupid as Bingo Little, and not all rich, stupid men care so little for their own sentiments that they have so carefully nurtured, for whatever duration. So what, apart from classic Wodehousian humour, fuels the interest in what might just be a cliché of a certain time? Of all wandering bachelors in the Drones Club and the Jeeves and Wooster series who look for permanent warmth and companionship, Little is, perhaps, despite new paramours every other day, the only one really committed to finding the companion. Bertie Wooster would attest to that were it only possible to scoop him out of the world of words and fiction. Given metaphysical limitations, for now, the readers will do.

Bingo Little works hard for romantic acquisitions. He moans, pines, lays his heart bare with pride before a fellow gentleman, asks relentlessly for advice. Once advised, he obeys. Carries



LEGARD ABUSE



harmless plots out with great dedication until taking it too far by lying needlessly and even lands a friend in legal trouble in the process. Each step is guided by an awareness of convention and established norms. In failing to top his romance with the waitresses Myrtle...and Mabel, and...um also Rosemary with a marriage proposal, he is literally acknowledging the presence of an issue: a class difference.



One is tempted to question why a man of such an elite and wealthy family devotes all of his time to think up methods to marry one waitress or another in peace. A reasonable suggestion would be that his is a love that knows no class. Perhaps in scrutinizing his motives, the writers of this essay commit the astonishing sin of buying into social constructs,

conforming to oppressive norms. Though, it isn't lost on them that his romantic musings and pursuit of "lower class" women are, in fact, accompanied by a silently paranoid reluctance to be on his own. This is not to say that inter-class love can only be justified either by loneliness or lack of better options. The current reflection has more to do with the lengths he's willing to travel in order to convince his uncle of marital authenticity – he also needs his uncle to increase his allowance. Little, by virtue of being born into wealth, does not engage in honest toil.

When Little's dear friend Wooster's butler Jeeves is requested to lend the old bean to the cause of Bingo's marriage, it looks like this: Bingo Little's uncle has his own butler read to him every evening, so if Bingo were to replace him and read, instead, to his uncle novels by one Rosie M Banks, writer of "narratives in which marriage with young persons of an inferior social status was held up as both feasible and admirable", it may soften his uncle's heart by the time Bingo discloses news of his betrothal to such a young person of such an inferior social status.



The question of larger allowance is possibly the sole determinant of the fate of his relationships. He's aware that his uncle will disapprove of his waitress-lover, and he knows also that he's in need of financial assistance. There is no other factor that keeps him from 'popping the question', if you will.

Bingo hasn't remained romantically immobile long enough to register a solitary existence. His continued efforts at bizarrely persuading the patriarch are a calculated system focussing on completely erasing the scope for alone-ness – not even the reader, the closest confidant, is fortunate enough to know a Bingo independent of an other.

At this point, it is interesting to wonder whether he has a sense of self – what his dilemmas additionally expose is his unconscious belief that a partner, a wife, is an essential requirement for happiness. Happiness, for him, can only come about if marriage does. Really, the only time one sees him happy is when he drones on about a woman. He is, certainly, a romantic, and sincere in the period of courtship – regularly visits his lovers, adorns himself with ties they gift him, introduces his “upper-class” friends to them. Perhaps this only goes to show how insubstantial the concept of class is to him. We know from Stendhal that those who are “moved” purely by money are at a loss for awareness of otherwise inaccessible pleasures known only to the most sensitive and passionate of people. Bingo Little doesn't, unlike many bachelors in the series, harbour a sense of superiority, and, in fact, cherishes the company of every woman he's ever loved. Didn't Michael Hardt say that love makes one abandon existing attachments to the world “in the hope of creating another better one”? This does not mean to suggest that Bingo Little is the ideal rich romancer of the working class since, indeed, his dismissal of class as a political factor stems from a privilege unaffected by its reality and implications.

There is no question that his love is true – for every single woman – but there is the expectation that in entering matrimony, he will depart from a lonely life.

This is a rich, tiny-brained man in the 1920s who has nothing to do – but he is also a dreamer who fears being alone rather intensely. Indeed, when he finally does marry a waitress (in reality, the writer Rosie M Banks posing as a waitress for research) it is done in secret, in a sort of haste so as to prevent his uncle from determining the direction his relationship goes in. In doing this, we may conclude from the rush and desperation, he has successfully averted the threat of momentary loneliness and insecurity – he will never be not-married again.

This makes him an interesting study against the nerdy Augustus Spinkbottle, er, Fink-Nottle.

Gussie, as he is known to his friends, loves newts. He wishes, not unreasonably, that the world was a newt. Unfortunately for him, society was inexplicably infatuated with matrimony and producing progeny. He also wishes he were a male newt, that way he could just stand “in front of the female newt vibrating his tail and bending his body in a semi-circle”. So, instead of a joyous existence in a country house surrounded by his newts, he has to dutifully uphold the antediluvian hierarchy and find himself a suitable mate. He falls in love, by chance, with Madeline Basset, a magistrate’s daughter. Only, he doesn’t know how to act on it. His crippling anxiety is not helping either as it renders him literally speechless on matters of the heart. When they later meet at a prize-giving ceremony (for which he, a teet-

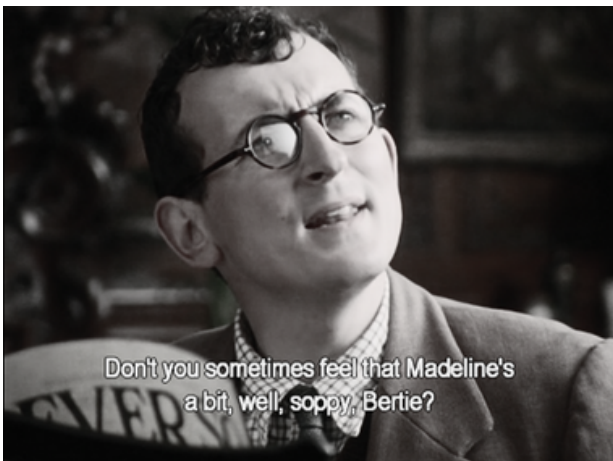
-otaller, gets much too drunk to calm his nerves), he accidentally gets engaged to the wrong girl. Yet, he perseveres through burn-books and brawls, to uphold his sense of duty. An acute awareness of social conventions and the weight they carry becomes a significant motivator for Gussie. Despite his inhibitions and his contentment with a solitary life dedicated to studying newts, Gussie feels compelled to pursue marriage. This inclination likely stems from his desire to conform to societal (or, auntly) expectations, particularly those associated with his position in society.

Gussie’s attempt at romance, however, becomes an exercise in character building. The current politicization of Gussie’s love for Madeline occurs because his affections transcend his personal preferences and become entangled with social expectations. Although he struggles to express his affections to his paramour, he seems aware of his position in broader society and the obligations he has to fulfil. Both parties seem to view their love as a means to their end, as a celebration of their similarities and strengthening of their social positions. The concept of having a spouse is more attractive for them both rather than loving for love’s sake. But their demands for each other are too onerous to sustain this fiction.

Used to his solitary life in Lincolnshire with his newts, Gussie is thrust into a new reality where he finds himself catering to Madeline’s every whim

and is bereft of all free will. Perhaps he feels he must do as she says to be with her, otherwise all his efforts to woo her will have been in vain. This, paradoxically, forces him to break free from his self-imposed shell of seclusion, and also assuages his anxiety (though in a roundabout way). He's forced to communicate with those around Madeline as it's a necessity to be with her. Their relationship presupposes that Gussie has to be with Madeline and not the other way around; he makes all the sacrifices and conforms to her desires until he reaches his breaking point (viz. vegetarianism). Unintentionally and perhaps innocently, he's systematically being stripped of individuality and is losing his sense of being.

Hardt, speaking about private property, says love is set free not by abolishing it but by actively constructing anew. However, Gussie and Madeline's relationship takes a different course. Madeline seeks to realise this notion by erasing Gussie's individuality and integrating him into her own life, home and happiness.



Sadly, their relationship lacks the reciprocity with which they could have given up some attachments to forge a better future together. Madeline can't share Gussie's love for newts and Gussie can't endure Madeline hypocritically forcing vegetarianism on him. Yet this non-compatibility is inconsequential. Madeline always has Bertie to fall back on.



Gussie, who has now overcome his anxiety, will have his newts for company until he finds another lover (or two). Their idea of love leans into absurdity as they seek acceptance and self-fulfilment from another human who, though tangible, is a figment of their imagination. "Life is such a muddle, isn't it?"

Gussie's internalisation of this need for a spouse slowly strips him of his individuality. A man who once sought solitude in the country with his newts ends up running circles around Madeline. He takes up drinking to cope with this social anxiety, is constantly bullied by a dictator who is secretly in love with his fiancée and, resents Madeline. He's lost the solace of solitude as he pursues Madeline and eventually comes to realise (after he finds another girl who hasn't attracted him more, but before he finds the next one) that he needs to balance his need for a quiet, newt-filled life with his need for a wife. This he finds in the companionship of Emerald Stoker, who supports his love for meat and shares his love for newts. Yet, money, status and power remain at the heart of Gussie and Madeline's future relationships. He falls for the daughter of an American millionaire, and she (much to Wooster's relief) gets engaged to an Earl.

References:

- [1] Michael Hardt, 'For Love or Money' (2011) 26 *Cultural Anthropology* 676.
- [2] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays: First Series* (MA Donoghue 1890) ch 2.
- [3] Stendhal, *On Love*, Penguin Classics (1975).
- [4] PG Wodehouse, *The Inimitable Jeeves*, Herbert Jenkins (1923).
- [5] PG Wodehouse, *Right Ho, Jeeves* (Random House UK 2018).

A FELLOWSHIP

B
MAAZ BI

I spent the last nine months on a writing fellowship at Akademie Schloss Solitude, Stuttgart, Germany. It was a welcome break away from teaching—my first non-academic semester since I was 3 years old—to give vent to many pent-up creative energies, but also to find spiritual succour, new inspiration, and synergies. Schloss means castle in German. The fellowship was situated in an erstwhile pleasure (literally ‘lust’) palace cum hunting lodge commissioned by Charles Eugene, Duke of Württemberg in the 18th century. It is located on a hill overlooking the city. The grounds have fruit trees and pastures for horses. Behind the schloss lie acres of forestland filled with red deer, wild boar, sometimes their human hunters, squirrels, and birds of many different species, a couple of man-made lakes that the duke used to ply gondolas upon, and streams and rivulets, and of course lots and lots of redwood, birch, pine and other trees. Ample space for meandering long walks, getting lost in nature.

The Akademie Schloss Solitude is probably unlike any other fellowship on earth, and I do not say this lightly. Many fellowships give you a place to stay and work individually and there really is no one else around as part of the programme except for a few contact persons and organizers. I spent three months on one such Charles Wallace Trust fellowship in Wales in 2018–19. What one experiences on such fellowships is, yes, solitude, but also loneliness. The fellowship could be in a city or an isolated property, but there is no guarantee that such fellowships ensure constructive discoveries of the self. It is challenging and hard on most people, who, however desirous of solitude, are habituated to have some human connections around, to be part of a workspace, if not family or a social group. Insecure selfhood is not easy to handle.

There are other creative fellowships that put you together with fellows from your area of work, or mix up a few, say artists (of various kinds) and writers (of different types). Such fellowships could be constructive, even collaborative, but may also be competitive, and are often limited in their scope. Akademie Schloss Solitude is perhaps unique in providing cohabited space, two low-rise apartment buildings where visual, performance, and digital artists, live with curators, musicians, architects, writers, and academic researchers. There is of course your private studio and the forest in your backyard for your solitude. But when you require com-

PAIN IN SOLITUDE

Y
N BILAL

-pany, you don't need to go out looking for random strangers in a pub (or biergarten, I should say), but you have some of the most creative peers possible in your own castle. [And, yes, strangers used to seem amazed when we would get off the bus late in the evening at the castle, sometimes getting into conversation and telling them that yes, indeed, we did live at the castle.]

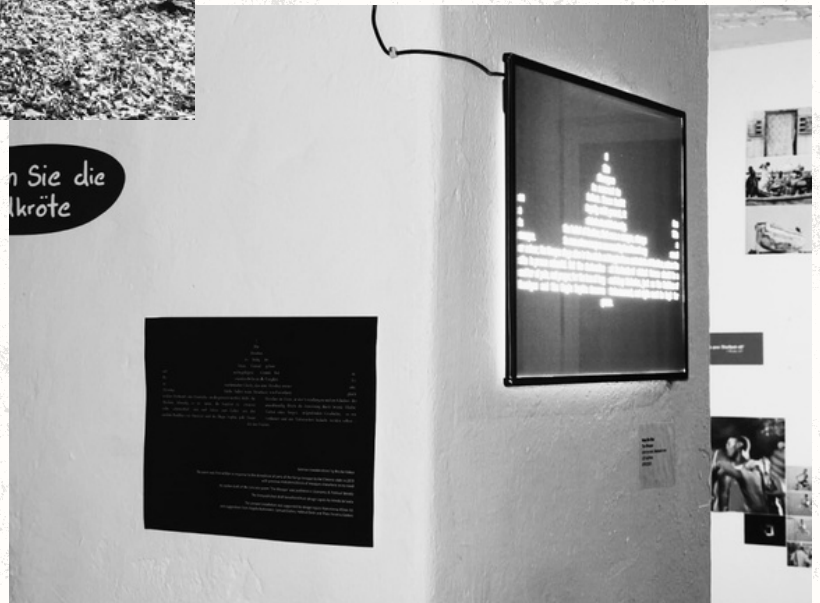
Together these incredible peers and the solitude of the forest, the quiet of a society free of auto-horns, an isolated ex-royal neighbourhood free of industry, and traffic sounds, led to experiences and wide-ranging yet focussed thoughts in a manner I had not hitherto experienced. The first impulse was to rest, and I slept my deepest sleep in years, especially in my first month. The fellowship director had generously indicated in our first meeting that they do not expect a product. There are few places one encounters in life that facilitate and fund your work and life without expecting something concrete in return. I was told I was at liberty to treat this fellowship as I may—to rest if I so desire, to travel if I so choose, to work if I want, or to network if I like. I ended up doing all of this in phases, and there were enough creative products at the end, and the seeds sown for many more to come. I am sure when the director said that they do not expect a product, they also said it with the quiet confidence that the creative/intellectual cohort selected from a pool of talented people from across the world from a 1:100 selection ratio wouldn't not produce work on an extended fellowship. Yet the kindness to say that no work output is necessarily expected freed me and all of us fellows in real terms, leaving us without the pressure and disgust of compulsory publishing or production.

The wonderful cohort made me feel at times that I was in some magical place, a Hogwarts, a Xavier Institute, or some such. In some ways it was magical as you'd serendipitously encounter a permanent art installation in the castle or something more ephemeral that a fellow had just created. I was part of a dramatized reading of fellow American playwright Peter Gray's play of a camp Harry Potter. The British musician Neil Luck invited other musicians to the Schloss (including the music director from Mumbai, Benedict Taylor) and led a night-time walk through the forest in peak winter, introducing novel sensory experiences, walking in the pitch dark where, with our eyes shut, the blind led the blind, making weird music from leaves in the quiet of the forest, hearing the silences and sounds of the forest.



Aderemi Adegbite from Nigeria combined the madrassa tablet with motherboards in his art. Monika Czyżyk, Polish artist based in Finland, created an immersive VR of the Schloss and the forest that I didn't feel like leaving. And this is but to name four of over 60 fellows I met during my nine-month stay.

Every week we would have an internal presentation from a fellow exposing us to a new form and discipline of work. We went to openings, readings, and performances every few days. I travelled away from Stuttgart to different countries and cities in Europe, visited some of the world's best art and literature museums and galleries.



To mention but two of the lesser-known but most impactful ones: Sammlung Prinzhorn in Heidelberg displayed a collection of art made by mental health patients in the 1920s, housed at the Heidelberg University Hospital. Works of exquisite quality, deeply exploratory of the subconscious, made me question notions of sanity yet again. ZKM, Karlsruhe, is the largest gallery space I have personally visited, and it focuses on digital art and media. An erstwhile ammunition factory, it had on display robotic arms making precision sketches of the moon landing, archives of the passage of audio and film recording technologies that we managed to get privileged access through our Akademie, bioart made with bacteria that was eating away sculpture, and room-sized spider web that the viewer could twang and make their own music from, while feeling like a fly caught in the net and so on. Previously it has housed a cloud as an exhibit, in one of its cavernous spaces.

In this rich environment I read privately with the luxury of time I hadn't known awhile. I continued with my ongoing translation projects, but also wrote English ghazals after a gap of many years, and more ghazals than I had written ever before, even revising all the ones I had written in the past. I wrote some short fiction which is not my regular writing genre. I embarked on a longer work of fiction too.

I created word-art installations and exhibited them. The first, a mixed-media installation “Mosque” exhibited at the “Currently Available” exhibition co-organised by the State Art Academy of Stuttgart was something that had been on my mind for years, and I was able to finally realise due to the conducive conditions and support of the curatorial fellows. It was based on my concrete poem written in response to mosque demolitions by mobs and states and was a plea for the continuation of multiculturalism.

The second “Birds” was based on a poem I wrote at the schloss and was made in collaboration with the London-based Towards Species Citizenship Collective, Samuel Collins and Mo Langmuir. I gave them this poem with its line “Attār wrote of the Parliament of Birds” as it felt most appropriate to their work, and they riffed on the line “would you paint my world in chalk with birds” to produce the poem in chalk on a tree of the Stuttgart Forest as a land art installation.

I read some of my poems to a packed house at Haus für Poesie in Berlin on UNESCO World Poetry Day with the German poet and translator Katharina Schultens reading their German translations. I gave a talk for the South-Asian Institute at University of Heidelberg based on my work on translating Ghalib and another at the EASAS Conference in Turin on the Ghalib’s Banaras and his religious-urbanity. I wrote academic essays and contemplated upon longer research projects as well. I am still collaborating with a Zimbabwean digital artist Kombo Chapfika with my poetry to be part of his VR installation. Some of my writing work from the fellowship will also result in books in the coming years.

All of this was possible in the splendid solitude provided by the fellowship, tempered as it was by the friendship of brilliant peers from across the world. Retreating from the busy monotony of everyday life to an inward gaze combined with the exposure to new media, modes, and techniques has emerged in newness for me.

I’d recommend solitude wholeheartedly to all who are on such a path, but also to mix it with a fellowship of kindred creative and intellectual souls. Food played a great bond in this and perhaps deserves a separate essay. During my fellowship I saw seasons change up close in nature, arriving at the Schloss with the yellowed tree leaves of early autumn and seeing the remarkable fall in a huge forest laid barren, then covered with snow to eventually give way to cherry blossoms, and finally a glorious summer. One experienced a plethora of emotions and thoughts over this time. I left Akademie Schloss Solitude content and brimming with further plans. I leave you with a ghazal that perhaps focuses on the lonelier aspects of solitude, but that is also an emotion I examined in this time as I was reading the collection *The Poetry of Solitude: A Tribute to Edward Hopper*.

Everyone's birthed in solitude
But I ended in solitude

The sun shines equally on all
Yet light bended in solitude

Loneliness—the mark of the West
Apprehended in solitude

The winter forest lies barren
Leaves descended in solitude

I call as I drown, but who hears?
My cry blended in solitude

I am social in virtual life
My truth trended in solitude

Birdsong to keep me going now
Cries appended in solitude

And lines to remember Maaz by
Words befriended in solitude



ANAAYA PATEL



SUKI'S

ADVENTURES

Sometimes we stumble upon paths where we have to walk alone. Solitude comes with loneliness and companionship comes with a test of patience. If you are reading this I hope your year is filled with new joys and new lessons. And no old lessons repeated.

THE LETTER I COULD NEVER WRITE

THE LETTER I COULD NEVER WRITE

THE LETTER I COULD NEVER WRITE

THE LETTER I COULD NEVER WRITE


THE LETTER I COULD NEVER WRITE

THE LETTER I COULD NEVER WRITE

THE LETTER I COULD NEVER WRITE

THE LETTER I COULD NEVER WRITE

BY MEENAKSHI NAIR



I am a broken soul, I have been torn inside out,
I lost my sense of decisiveness sometime in the past,
The world is spinning and so are my brain and heart,
I have struggled where there is no conflict or crisis,
I have entangled myself with twines of my own heart,
I know not where I am heading, I know what I am heading into,
Let me know, I beg you, let me know,
Where have I gone wrong, what have I done wrong,
To have been left hanging knowing not what is there left,

My days and nights seemed so distant to live,
My heart had cycled down to the next street,
My mind seemed to push me forward convincing me that I am alive,
I realized the strong will for self-respect is as vicious as oneself,
One fine day I saw light and gradually another and another,
The numbness seemed to uncover, and my emotions flew back,
If my words were futile, so are your ears,
If my emotions were non-concerning, so are your thoughts,
If my heartache was dreadful, so are your eyes,
If my ambiguity caused annoyance so did your presence,

My voice aches you or so you say,
My silence makes it worse, so you state,
My mind lives in a labyrinth, growing day by day,
Is it wrong for me to speak or rather reply,
I believe not sooner that late my voice had begun to rust,
My faith had begun to die, my trust had flown away,
Am I not free to sing, are you open to hearing,

My days and nights seemed so distant to live,
My heart had cycled down to the next street,
My mind seemed to push me forward convincing me that I am alive,
I realized the strong will for self-respect is as vicious as oneself,
One fine day I saw light and gradually another and another,
The numbness seemed to uncover, and my emotions flew back,
If my words were futile, so are your ears,
If my emotions were non-concerning, so are your thoughts,
If my heartache was dreadful, so are your eyes,
If my ambiguity caused annoyance so did your presence,

My simplicity is my strength, my ignorance is my gift,
My world is vast and so is my life,
Perhaps I feel, things could have been much better,
Had we both ears, to hear and not listen,
The world is not a pot of rights and wrongs,
Rather a pot that takes in all that it can.

Avril Dias

STOP, S GREE



AYS THE N LIGHT



Every once in a while, people find themselves in a period of waiting. They haven't stopped; they've merely stalled temporarily, waiting and recharging. I once heard someone say that nature is always in a state of waiting. For instance, bare trees wait for spring to bloom, while cloudy skies wait for rays of light. Waiting is beautiful. Recharging is beautiful. Just because we stall doesn't mean we're not in motion; we continue to grow, learn, and reform.

In my work with long exposure light photography, I use laser beams drawn across, back and forth, to symbolize the back-and-forth motion of waiting - the hesitation, the unknown. However, the individual remains strong and still amid the movement, moulding the pattern of the lasers and changing their path - reforming. Thus, a weary body and mind are be signs of strength. When we need solitude to introspect, reflect, and reform, we become stronger than before.

DISCOVERING YOURSELF IN SOLITUDE



Akash Singh

Being alone may have an influence on the creative process, both positively and negatively. On the one hand, solitude may give space for profound meditation and reflection, allowing creative people to focus on their ideas without distractions. It can also allow individuals to explore their feelings, thoughts, and experiences without feeling criticised or self-conscious. On the other hand, prolonged isolation can lead to feelings of loneliness, which can harm mental health and creativity. Collaboration and input from others may be extremely beneficial in defining and refining creative ideas.

Having said that, isolation may be a crucial component of artistic expression for many artists and creatives. Writers, for example, frequently seek quiet time to focus on their work and find inspiration. Visual artists may require alone time in their studios to experiment and refine their methods. The effect of isolation on the creative process is determined by the individual and their own tastes and demands. Some artists thrive on the energy and interactivity of cooperation and connection with others, while others enjoy the solitude of working alone.

It is critical to set boundaries around your alone time to avoid isolation from becoming lonely. For example, you can schedule time alone and prepare to engage with people outside of those times. Even if you like to work alone, it is critical to maintain contact with people. Schedule frequent social activities, such as coffee dates with friends or joining a club or group that shares your interests. When you're alone, prioritise self-care activities like exercise, meditation, or creative hobbies that offer you joy and help you relax. If you are experiencing symptoms of loneliness or sadness, consider getting the assistance of a mental health professional. It is imperative to understand that solitude and isolation are not synonymous. Isolation can lead to unpleasant moods and mental health struggles, yet being alone can offer calm and insight. One may strike a balance between healthy solitude and dangerous isolation by setting boundaries, remaining connected, exercising self-care and getting professional help when required.

Technology has made it increasingly difficult to find periods of isolation and think alone. We are continually linked to the world around us, thanks to constant access to social media, email, and other kinds of digital communication, making it difficult to turn off and find quiet time. However, there are methods to establish purposeful moments of isolation in an always-connected environment. For example, set aside time during the day to disconnect from technology and engage in things that help you disengage, such as going for a walk or reading a book. Mindfulness meditation may also assist you in becoming more aware of your thoughts and feelings, as well as in developing a stronger sense of self-awareness. Make it a priority to discover calm places where you can escape the cacophony of the outside world. This might be as easy as finding a peaceful space in your house or going for a walk in

the woods. Reduce the number of messages and alerts you receive on your devices, and instead of endlessly checking email and social media, designate times to check them.

Despite the prevalence of technology and its impact on our ability to find solitude, we can still incorporate intentional periods of quiet reflection into our daily routines. We may develop the benefits of isolation and discover better clarity and calm in our lives by creating boundaries, practising mindfulness, locating quiet locations, and reducing digital distractions.

Intentional times of isolation and introspection are frequently included in spiritual practices such as meditation, prayer, and contemplation. Solitude promotes concentrated attention and awareness, which can aid in becoming more aware of one's thoughts, feelings, and sensations. This can lead to a more in-depth understanding of oneself and one's relationship with the rest of the world. Spending time alone in nature can help one connect with the natural world and the greater power that is frequently linked with it. Nature may also create a sense of calm and quiet that encourages spiritual meditation. Being alone also permits one to reduce extraneous distractions and stimulation that might interfere with spiritual practises. This might help one focus on connecting with a higher power or engage in introspection and self-reflection. Solitude may give space for calm thinking and introspection, allowing one to achieve clarity about their spiritual beliefs, values, and purpose.

Changing social views regarding isolation can be difficult. It is critical that we educate, exchange knowledge, and do research on the benefits of isolation, including its good impact on mental health, creativity, and productivity. We must challenge negative perceptions of solitude, such as the notion that being alone is lonely or antisocial. Instead, highlight the benefits of isolation, such as the chance for introspection and personal growth. We must urge others to take time for themselves and normalise the concept of alone time. For example, recommend to coworkers that they take a break alone throughout the workday, or create plans with friends that include alone hobbies like reading or hiking. Stressing the significance of self-care and encouraging people to prioritise their emotional and mental well-being by taking time for themselves and engaging in activities that promote relaxation and contemplation.

Solitude has both beneficial and harmful effects on the ageing process. On the one hand, isolation may give chances for self-reflection and personal growth in older individuals, which can be especially beneficial when they negotiate big life transitions such as retirement or the death of loved ones. Prolonged social isolation and loneliness, on the other hand, can have detrimental consequences for physical and mental health, including an increased risk of depression, anxiety, and cognitive impairment. We should encourage older folks to particip-

-ate in social activities such as clubs, volunteering, and community events. These activities can help individuals stay connected with others and preserve a feeling of purpose and belonging. Many older individuals are apprehensive to utilise technology, yet it may be a great tool for remaining connected with loved ones, especially those who live far away. Encourage older individuals to learn how to utilise video conferencing, social networking, and other internet platforms to remain in touch with family and friends.

While socialisation is crucial, it is also necessary to respect older individual's desire for solitude. Allow elderly persons to participate in alone pursuits such as reading, meditation, or nature hikes. Elders may be more sensitive to mental health concerns including sadness and anxiety, especially if they are socially isolated. Offering mental health care, such as counselling, therapy, and medication, will help them for good. Spending time in natural settings may foster feelings of isolation and connectedness to oneself and the environment. It gives a respite from contemporary life's continual stimulus, such as technology and urban environments. This creates a stronger sensation of peace and silence, allowing for deeper contemplation and connection with oneself. The natural environment may be awe-inspiring, which can aid in the development of mindfulness and the present. Being attentive helps us to connect more profoundly with our own thoughts and feelings as well as our surroundings. Being surrounded by nature may foster a sense of connectivity, fostering a sense of unity with the environment. This can contribute to a stronger sense of purpose and belonging. Natural places may offer a serene and calming environment for contemplation and thought. This can provide us with more clarity and insight into our own thoughts and feelings. Spending time in nature frequently includes physical activity, such as hiking or walking, which has been found to improve mental health and well-being.

It might be difficult to cultivate love in solitude. Learning to love oneself is a necessary part of cultivating love in isolation. This entails cultivating self-compassion, embracing oneself for who one is and treating oneself with kindness and care. Even when we are alone, engaging in creative pursuits such as writing, painting, or music may help us explore and express our sentiments of love. Meditation or visualisation practises can help us connect with sentiments of love and compassion. We may develop our connection to these sentiments and build a stronger sense of love by concentrating our attention on them.

What Once

B

RIYA

Under the torchlight of our phones,
you sit and talk about everything.
But you don't notice my hazy eyes
and how they only seek shadows to hide.

I listen to you, I swear I do but-
I don't know if I can hear you that well.
The static, so loud in my ears
Making me question if I'm really there

It was my sin to fall in love with you.
"You exist in love, not fall in it," my friend told me.
But I brushed her aside, as I do to you now,
and believe myself to still be in love.

Why in Heaven's name don't we part ways?
Why do I still grasp onto what once was?
Because even when I'm holding your hand,
I feel like holding my own hand would be bliss.

Do you see me? Do you hear me?
Or am I just a backdrop to your narrative?
Maybe I let my love sit too long, bare for your eyes;
maybe it has finally fermented into loneliness.



ce Was

y

FAIN



But I can't ever call it your error.
You cannot mend empty minds, empty lives;
you couldn't have ventured behind my closed doors,
because no one can really exist in vacuum.

Because if you went behind the closed doors,
it will only destroy and break your heart.
I sit there every day, broken and numb,
feeling nothing but the bitter fruits of loneliness.

I am used to being the second choice:
second child, second friend, second thought.
And I've become used to being wrapped in solitude.
So why do I grow bitter now?

Perhaps it was how you came into my life;
perhaps you gave me hope that I can be a first;
perhaps you let me paint a picture of us;
perhaps that's why I still clutch your heart.

So, I apologise;
I apologise for stranding you in the dark,
I apologise for turning into a shadow in front of you.
But I need to close the curtains to my soul;
no light, no peeking, no me, no you.

A C O O S T A L E S C A P E



Ananya Joshi

Tranquillity and peace are some of the first emotions that come to mind when I look at this photograph I took at Cherating Beach in Malaysia back in 2020. I truly believe that the peace derived from nature is unique to each individual. In my case, when I think of 'solitude', I imagine being near the ocean.

For me, the ocean represents more than just a beautiful scenery, it's a state of mind. Just as the ocean seems endless, so are our thoughts, and the way we approach and navigate them, whether good or bad, depends solely on us. Whenever I need to escape from everything going on in my life, I think of the ocean.

Whenever I want to break the monotony of my day-to-day work, I think of the ocean. Whenever I want to take a break from the world, I think of the ocean.

NEEDLE'S READING LIST

BRITT-MARIE WAS HERE	FREDERIK BACKMAN
AN UNKINDNESS OF GHOSTS	RIVERS SOLOMON
SAVE ME THE WALTZ	ZELDA FITZGERALD
TO THE FRIEND WHO DID NOT SAVE MY LIFE	HERVE GUIBERT
GOOD MORNING, MIDNIGHT	JEAN RHYS
THE BAUDELAIRE FRACTAL	LISA ROBERTSON
ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF SOLITUDE	GABRIEL GARCIA MARQUEZ
THE BOOK OF DISQUIET	FERNANDO PESSOA
THE REMAINS OF THE DAY	KAZUO ISHIGURO
JANE EYRE	CHARLOTTE BRONTE
TO THE LIGHTHOUSE	VIRGINIA WOOLF
HAPPENING	ANNIE ERNAUX
CONTEMPT	ALBERTO MORAVIA

**ALL
APOLOGIES**

NIRVANA

**MY SWEET
LORD**

*GEORGE
HARRISON*

**ABUSE MYSELF, I
WANNA DIE**

GG ALLIN

LOST AT SEA

*ROB GRANT, LANA
DEL REY*



**P
L
A
Y
L
I
S
T**

**WISH YOU
WERE HERE**

PINK FLOYD

PATHETIQUE

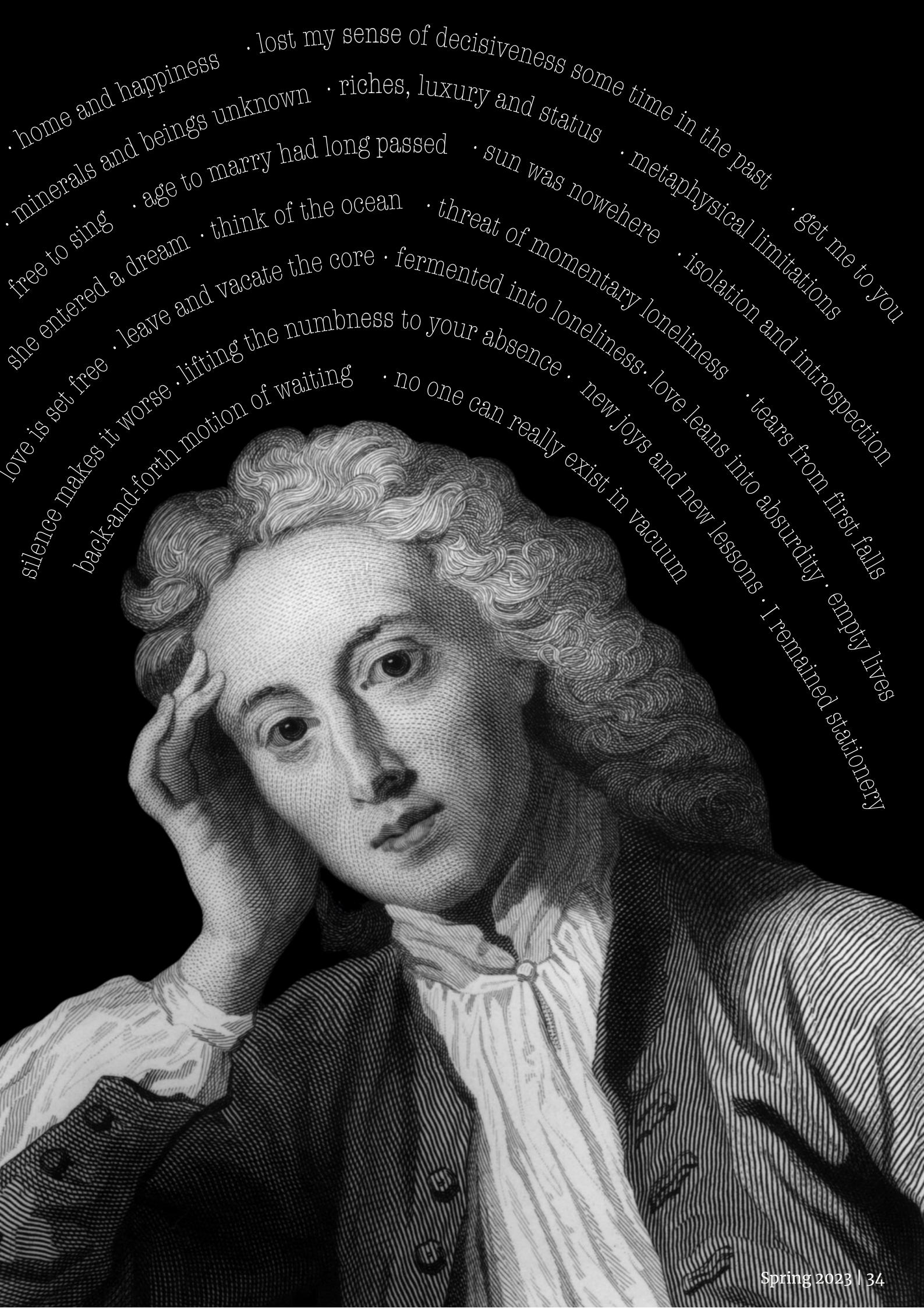
*LUDWIG VAN
BEETHOVEN*

**MY
MELANCHOLY
BLUES**

QUEEN

**FOLLOW THE
SOUND**

The Backseat Lovers



· home and happiness · lost my sense of decisiveness some time in the past · get me to you
· minerals and beings unknown · riches, luxury and status · metaphysical limitations
free to sing · age to marry had long passed · sun was nowhere · isolation and introspection
she entered a dream · think of the ocean · threat of momentary loneliness · tears from first falls
love is set free · leave and vacate the core · fermented into loneliness · love leans into absurdity · empty lives
silence makes it worse · lifting the numbness to your absence · new joys and new lessons · I remained stationary
back-and-forth motion of waiting · no one can really exist in vacuum

EDITORIAL

The poet Alexander Pope made the case for the solitary life in his Ode to Solitude, part of which goes:

*“Blest, who can unconcernedly find
Hours, days, and years slide soft away,
In health of body, peace of mind,
Quiet by day”*

These words resonate deeply, and function as a reminder of the ways in which solitude can empower us to cultivate an unshakeable sense of self-worth, independent of external validation. It is a journey of finding solace within ourselves, embracing our authenticity and reconciling with the occasional – for some, perpetual – solitary state.

Needle’s fourth issue is an exploration of solitude amidst the relentless demands of a world brimming with constant activity. May the artistry within these pages become trusted companions on your journey of self-discovery and healing and inspire you to cherish the genuine connections that enrich your life. We aspire to ignite your imagination and inspire deep reflection upon the transformative experiences that unfold within the solitude of our minds.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to the talented contributors who have graciously shared their insights and creative endeavours. Their diverse voices present a captivating exploration of solitude in all its forms. It is our fervent hope that their stories, ideas, and art succeed in inspiring you to embrace solitude as a potent catalyst for personal growth and creative expression, while fostering a deeper understanding of the world that surrounds us.

– Amruthavarshini, Editor

CONTRIBUTORS

Akash Singh	Meenakshi Nair
Anaaya Patel	Oshi Agarwal
Ananya Joshi	Riya Jain
Avril Dias	S. G. Sreejith
Maaz Bin Bilal	Srishti Kumar

FACULTY ADVISOR

Dr Maaz Bin Bilal

EDITORIAL TEAM

Aditya Kalyan
Ambika Menon
Amruthavarshini
Ananyaa Murthy
Ira Sinha
Parijata Thakur
Sukeerthi Bachu
Svarsha Karthikeyan

ART WORKS USED

The Banquet by Rene Magritte

The Farewell of Telemachus and

Eucharis by Jaques-Louis David

Automat by Edward Hopper

Nighthawks by Edward Hopper

Alexander Pope engraving by G T

Doo (after a portrait by Richardson)

ACCEPTING
SUBMISSIONS
FOR ISSUE V



Desire

