

Needle

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Mirage of Fools

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Editorial

Komal Surana

Life works in mysterious ways. Sometimes it makes us chase rainbows, and sometimes it leaves us stranded in a desert of uncertainty, staring at a horizon that never seems to get any closer. In those moments, the future appears like a mirage, a shimmering vision that seems so very real, but the more you reach out, the more it slips away. It is an illusion born out of confusion, of choices left unmade, and of dreams that feel too big to name.

Lately, I've found myself lost in this very desert. Confusion has been my constant companion, whispering doubts and clouding my vision. It feels like standing in the middle of a vast, empty landscape where every step forward only brings me closer to yet another illusion of purpose.

Just when I was about to surrender to the sandstorms of self-doubt, I stumbled upon a conversation. It wasn't a grand revelation or a life-changing lecture. It was just a simple, heartfelt exchange. Yet in his words, I found a mirror reflecting a version of me I hadn't dared to imagine. Funny how someone talking about their journey can make you question your own. He didn't ask me anything directly, but his stories made me face questions I never had the courage to confront.

He spoke of dreams chased and ambitions nurtured, and suddenly, I realized how little I had thought about my own. For the first time, I found myself wanting to think about things I had always brushed aside, wanting to explore paths I had never considered worth treading. It was as if his words pierced through the mirage, revealing not a ready-made oasis but the potential to create one. It was like a whisper of hope, a nudge to stop chasing shadows and start planting seeds of purpose.

Mind you, I still don't have all the answers, and the confusion hasn't magically disappeared. But now there is a spark, an undeniable urge to do something meaningful not just for the sake of achievement but for the sake of feeling truly alive. To build a life that is not just a pursuit of illusions but a journey towards purpose.

Perhaps, the mirage isn't the enemy. Perhaps, it's just life's way of urging us to look deeper, to search beyond the surface, and to find clarity in the questions we've been too afraid to ask. Sometimes, all it takes is one conversation to ignite that search. In this desert of confusion, I am still walking. But now, I walk with curiosity, with courage, and with the hope that someday, the mirage will give way to reality.

WAHAM-E-WAJUUD

RITESH TOLAMBIYA



In capturing this image, I sought to explore the fragile and often ambiguous nature of our existence. The blurred figure represents the elusive quality of identity, a visual metaphor for how our sense of self can feel fragmented and uncertain. The newspapers piled around the subject symbolize the overwhelming burden of information, memories, and the relentless passage of time that cloud our understanding of who we truly are. The blur was intentional, a way to evoke the feeling of being caught between reality and illusion. It reflects the restlessness and confusion that accompany the search for meaning in a world that often feels unstable. The monochromatic tones were chosen to create a somber, introspective atmosphere, mirroring the inner turmoil and vulnerability that can arise when we question the solidity of our own existence. By titling this piece "वहम-ए-वजूद" (Wahm-e-Wujood), or "illusion of existence," I aim to invite viewers into a space of reflection on their own being. The image is a visual representation of the struggle to find a solid ground amidst the overwhelming external world, highlighting how our existence can sometimes feel like a mere illusion. Through this photograph, I wanted to capture not just a moment in time, but an ongoing internal dialogue about identity, reality, and the nature of life itself.



Lingering Thoughts

Anusha Ghantasala

When days turned to weeks,
Weeks turned to months,
And months turned to years...
It's almost as if the walk
Down my memory lane feels like
A foggy alley with a few ghosts...

It's not that I lack
Happy memories to recall,
But, as they say, the universe
Seeks to achieve equilibrium.
Where happiness exists,
Sadness follows, and vice versa.

Accepting both extremes isn't
Hard — so why does it feel so...?
To forget and move forward
Isn't as easy as it seems.
If it truly were,
Perhaps, for once, I'd live for
myself...

It seems comforting to have people
To seek advice and suggestions
from,
But it's almost as if I've built my
life
On the choices others made for me.

In trying to accommodate
Everyone around me,
I seem to have forgotten
About myself...

For as long as I'd known,
My voice hasn't been let out
And what may be the reason so,
I still ponder at times.
Was it when everyone

Around me stopped talking?
Or when I let them know
I cared, and they didn't?
Perhaps it was when I locked myself away
To the point where I felt trapped.

Or when I stopped talking to people,
Fearing I made them feel obligated to talk
as well.
For all I know,
It's likely all these reasons,
For no one truly knows
Where their deepest fears lie.
To search for them means
Dwelling within oneself.
And dwelling within
Means confronting a part of myself
I've never dared to face.

Perhaps it's time I acknowledge and accept
That this is a journey I must walk alone...

STORIES OF MY TRUTH

POORVANSHI TYAGI

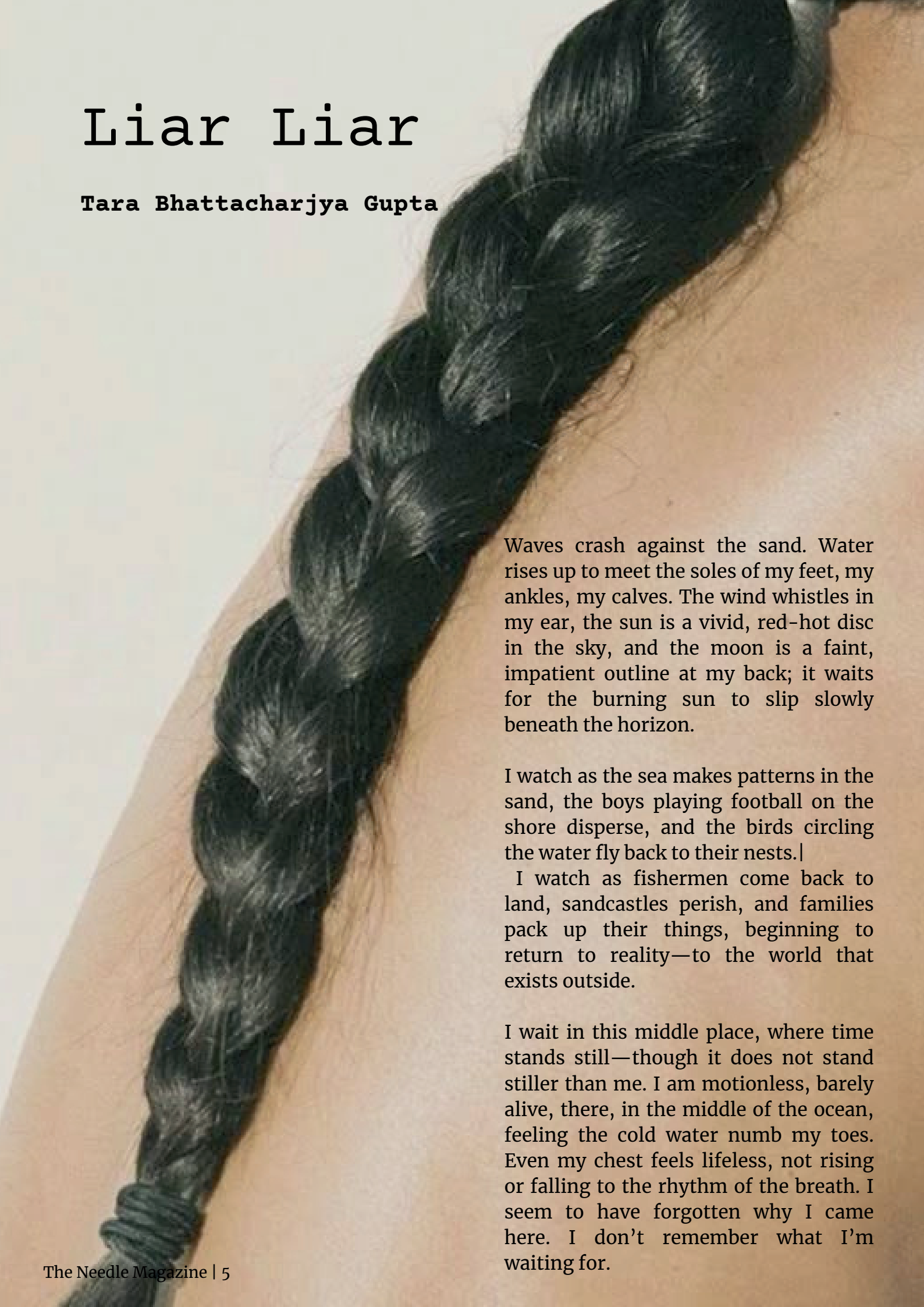
There's a place
where I withhold my bare body
there it lays unwinded
loosening, unburdening,
breathing in and out;
carelessly raging,
breathing in and out.
my dear body in the
absence of scribes,
returns to me
like it belongs to me
Here where I walk pavements
like the walk of all
here where I face the walls
that faze us all

I plaster smiles I don't recognise
and wear scents of strangers
who pass my by
yet there is a place
to hold me
perhaps it is in
the solitude of the soul
perhaps it is
the spaces that appear
in between gasps
of my voice,
shambled as I speak
the story of my truths
I haven't quite yet
confronted myself,
what grave can I possibly
unearth to you?



Liar Liar

Tara Bhattacharjya Gupta



Waves crash against the sand. Water rises up to meet the soles of my feet, my ankles, my calves. The wind whistles in my ear, the sun is a vivid, red-hot disc in the sky, and the moon is a faint, impatient outline at my back; it waits for the burning sun to slip slowly beneath the horizon.

I watch as the sea makes patterns in the sand, the boys playing football on the shore disperse, and the birds circling the water fly back to their nests.

I watch as fishermen come back to land, sandcastles perish, and families pack up their things, beginning to return to reality—to the world that exists outside.

I wait in this middle place, where time stands still—though it does not stand stiller than me. I am motionless, barely alive, there, in the middle of the ocean, feeling the cold water numb my toes. Even my chest feels lifeless, not rising or falling to the rhythm of the breath. I seem to have forgotten why I came here. I don't remember what I'm waiting for.

I see a little girl. It's been a long time since I saw someone new, someone that is not the boys, the fishermen, the families, or the birds. She is dressed in a sky-blue skirt and a cloud-white blouse. Her hair is pinned back by two rosebud-pink clips. I know her. I cannot call out to her, but I know her. I wait, but this time with a stark purpose. I wait to see if she recognizes me.

When she sees me, her eyes dim and her fingers begin twisting the curls of her hair. She picks her way past the jagged seashells and electric-blue jellyfish littering the shoreline, past the empty plastic packets and the enormous umbrellas and the skittering, earth-colored crabs. Fear snakes up my back, winds itself around my shoulders. Something is strange; something is wrong.

She wades into the freezing surf, her round face flecked with water that clings to her hair, alighting on her delicate blouse, looking like teardrops. I ache to wipe them away, but I cannot. She looks grave, as if she has come to tell me a secret. I want to tell her to stop, to go back, and to let me be. The sun doesn't set, the moon doesn't rise, the sandcastles are rebuilt and they perish again., These are all truths I have accepted. I don't want my world to be altered again, or to begin afresh. I am tired.

I wish I could move, I wish I could talk. I wish I had someone to move to, to talk to, and someone to love. But I do not, and so I am lethargic .

The girl's eyes are brimming with sorrow, as if she can read my mind. She

is yet to utter a word, as the tears that slip past her lowered lashes mingle with the saltwater spray drying on her face and hair. She leans in, and I recoil internally, wishing that I could take a step back. Her chapped lips come to a stop next to my ear, and she whispers words that causes a ripple of goosebumps to rise on my skin.

The waves stop momentarily, the sun winks out, the moon glows a stunning silver. Then the world resumes, and it is just me and the girl looking at each other. She waits expectantly, and a lightness returns to my limbs—a lightness I haven't felt in centuries. I try to take a step forward, out of the sea. Then another, another, another, and suddenly I can feel the sand beneath my feet, the wind against my face, the feeling of dried saltwater on my calves. Another step ,and suddenly I am at the entrance of this middle place—or, perhaps, it is the exit.

Ahead of me lies a tar-black road, sun-baked and littered with sand. Stray dogs whine mournfully as the sun beats down on them, and vendors hawk their multicolored wares: shaved ice in a variety of flavors, sugarcane juice, pinwheels, fried snacks. Here, time moves forward, in a straight line. However, behind me, time is a circle—unbroken and unrelenting.

I take another step, feeling a slight pressure against my skull, a strange, fleeting sensation. Nausea overwhelms me. The world spins, then rights itself. A dog sniffs at my legs, then wanders off disinterestedly. I look down at my feet. I am barefoot, wearing a blue skirt. I look at my hands. I catch a glimpse of

myself in someone's cell phone camera as they pause on their way out of the beach to take a picture. I see short black hair, a gossamer-white blouse, and two tiny, pink clips. I don't hesitate and turn back.

Past these dogs and people, back on the beach, there is a woman. I have never seen her before, but I know what I have to do. I know who she is. She has the same long, slender fingers hanging limply by her side, the same salt-worn wavy hair that seems to mimic the ocean. The same eyebrows, the same anger set in her mouth. Her lips curl up in a way that is both cruel and curious.

She looks far past the horizon, and she stands motionless. Not even a strand of her knotted, snarled hair moves out of place. Waves break against her form, and she wears nothing except a dripping wet, white shift dress that sticks to her skin, outlining her body in stark detail. Her wrists are stacked with thick gold bangles, and dull gold earrings hang from her ears. I know she is waiting. It breaks my heart to see her waiting. What she is waiting for will never come, in this life or the next.

I make my way back onto the beach, stepping past the debris scattered on the sand. My steps are quick and uncontrolled, my heart pounding in my ears. I walk into the sea, uncaring of how the water ruins my beautiful clothes. The woman in the sea doesn't move, doesn't react.

I would think she didn't care, but I know her. I know she chases the impossible, so she must care. When she looks at me, helplessness laces every

measured blink. Tears rim my eyes. To be loved is a simple wish, and I cannot grant it—but perhaps I can ease the burden for a while.

I lean in, watching as panic flares in her dark brown eyes. Her eyelashes are long, her face smooth, though she looks old in a timeless, ancient sort of way. The way I would imagine deities, nymphs, or goddesses to look. I whisper in her ear, "You're free."

Time's endless circle breaks, refocuses, and realigns—with me at its center this time. She looks bewildered, then angry, then relieved. I know the respite will be temporary, and yet I cannot help but aid her futile cause. I watch her stumble out of the sea, grime coating her lower legs, her shift dress blowing in the wind, hair tumbling into her eyes, shielding them from the intensity of the evening sun.

I watch her walk out of this place with agonizing slowness, as if she is desperate to feel every grain of sand pressing against her tender, raw skin. I close my eyes, feeling that strange pressure against my scalp, feeling the world tilt and then spin and then slowly come to a stop. When I open my eyes, I cannot move. Centuries press down on me, the feeling of waiting for something that may never arrive. What is it that keeps me here? I close my eyes again, not wanting the answers.

Waves crash against the sand.

NATURE: A MIRAGE?

*pratyaksha
sahapathy
poorva*

It's an illusion of Nature,
Deceptively eluding us from the pain
Inflicted by its dreadful features,
But very much in vain.

We mortals have progressed, nonetheless,
Distanced from Nature's apparent sabotage
We have escaped such phantasmal distress
From Her tormenting Mirage.

Yet are we truly ever free?
By making Nature scarce,
Do we crave it with more intensity?
Perhaps, a yearning that only flares?

We are in lack,
Lack of the ecstasy of an unpredictable rainy evening,
Lack of the joy from a spontaneous trip to hear the sea sing,
Lack of the cheer in waking to birds chirping.

But we have progressed, nonetheless,
Crafted wicked tactics to quench our longing.
We have developed finesse,
Impeccable finesse, in conning.

'Heavy rainfall', 'Ocean Waves'
Have become 'White Noise' bytes.
The rays of the Sun and the Moon
Are replaced by orange and blue lights.

Natural grass, what is that?
But "I absolutely love the [artificial] turf in my hall!"
Falls and Cascades, what are those?
But "Do you wish to see my garden's [faux] waterfall?"

We have coped and conned nous-même,
With starry-ceiling in starry-sky's stead,
With pebbled mats in pebbled paths' stead,
With curated parks in wilderness's stead.

Oh wait!

In evading the mirage by Nature,
Have we neared to self-sabotage?
In fantasising the chimera of its rapture,
Are we not making Nature, a Mirage?

Echoes of Self

Ananya Joshi





“Echoes of Self” is a digital art piece that vividly portrays the "mirage of identity" through intense and evocative imagery. The artwork centers on a face partially obscured by jagged, shattered glass, tinted with deep, fiery red hues. The glass distorts and fractures the reflection of the face, symbolizing the fragmented and chaotic nature of personal identity.

The background is a turbulent swirl of reds, oranges, and dark shadows, evoking a sense of turmoil and emotional intensity. This backdrop enhances the sense of disorientation and internal struggle inherent in the search for one's true self.

The red glass serves as a powerful metaphor for the barriers and illusions that obscure authentic identity. It not only distorts the central figure's reflection but also conveys a heightened emotional weight—suggesting themes of anger, passion, and anguish. Subtle reflections and refractions of light through the glass add depth and complexity, illustrating the multifaceted and elusive nature of selfhood.

MIRAGE OF IDENTITY

By DIVYA
MANTRI



MIRAGE
OF
IDENTITY:
THE
MASK
WE
WEAR
TO
NAVIGATE
SOCIETY

But why do we use masks and personas to traverse society? In my opinion, it arises from a conviction that society is unwilling to confront the true, vulnerable version of ourselves. We've been conditioned to believe that revealing our challenges, fears, and emotional depths will repel others. Society favors people who can maintain an air of calm, appearing to have their lives in order without burdening anyone with their emotions. As a result, we hide behind masks, fearing that nobody wants to deal with unresolved concerns.

These personas enable us to fit into various social contexts. Different groups—whether at work, among friends, or within families—have unwritten norms about how one should behave. To fit in, we adapt, often molding ourselves to meet these expectations. Over time, these personas become so ingrained that we lose touch with our authentic feelings and identities.

I experienced this firsthand during my first year of college. I alternated between numerous friend groups, tailoring myself to each one's culture and dynamics. On the surface, it appeared successful. Yet beneath the masks, I felt exhausted and lonely. The constant need to adapt took its toll, leaving me emotionally drained and isolated despite being surrounded by people. This is a rarely discussed truth of persona-building: the emotional labour of always attempting to fit in can result in feelings of alienation and inner distress.

When we begin to live in these socially constructed masks, the distinction between our true selves and our personas becomes blurred. It's easy to lose sight of who we e

Humans, like coins, have two sides to their personas. One is the external face—the mask we present to the world: energetic, fun, confident, and seemingly unaffected by life's hardships. The other is the hidden self, sensitive and often wrapped in emotions we keep to ourselves. This inner self, while genuine, is rarely revealed and reserved for periods of deep trust or solitude.

truly are and become numb to our authentic emotions. This detachment from our inner selves often leads to emotional paralysis. We may find ourselves unable to process our own emotions, relying on external validation to feel complete, and disconnected from our true values or beliefs. At this point, we become puppets for these personas, performing roles based on others' expectations rather than our own.

The consequences of living in this emotional fragmentation are considerable. Isolation, which was once a refuge offering comfort and security, becomes a trap. Initially, withdrawing into oneself may feel like a haven, providing relief from the stress of playing multiple roles. However, over time, this seclusion can turn into emotional avoidance. Choosing solitude over connection deprives us of meaningful interactions, and the longer we retreat, the harder it becomes to reconnect.

This detachment can also lead to harmful coping behaviours. Without trusting relationships or an authentic self to guide us, many turn to addiction—whether through substance misuse, obsessive behaviours, or mind-numbing distractions. These habits may bring temporary relief but ultimately deepen the cycle of alienation and self-loss.

However, not all masks are harmful. In certain contexts, such as professional environments or tough social situations, personas can serve as protective tools, helping us maintain boundaries. But when the mask becomes the only version of ourselves that we present, it ceases to serve us and begins to erode our sense of identity.

The goal, then, is to strike a balance between the personas we adopt and the genuine selves we suppress. While society may favor those who appear composed, tough, and emotionally aloof, we must resist the urge to fully identify with these masks. The key is to recognize when we are hiding behind a persona and consciously stay connected to our true selves.

Navigating society does not mean forsaking our identities to fit in. Rather, it involves learning to adapt while remaining authentic. The mask can be useful, but it should never replace the person behind it. By embracing both our personas and vulnerabilities, we can cultivate deeper, more meaningful relationships while maintaining a healthier, more balanced sense of self. Ultimately, it is through this delicate balance that we rediscover our identity and learn to navigate life's complexities while staying true to ourselves.

Grey: The metaphor

By Khawahish



It was diving into the deepest of the oceans of my heart, like it would last for an eternity. There was no escape to it, for me to make a last attempt at trying to keep at this unfairly fair and complexly uncomplicated thing which people call 'life'. The entrance: through which I got in this grayscale, empty place like the Bermuda; got swallowed up by hopelessness and despair as if it was sucked into a dark hole. I was lost in this mirror, this labyrinth of glass; magical, in a not so poetic way. And yet, I was not alone here.

Some people accompanied me, but not literal people, just their essence, their voice and their words. Just what they left in me like nails hammered in my soul. Had I been hearing these voices emerge from the same mouths I had previously heard them from, I would have no reason to be scared, or so I like to think. But alas!

The voices were the same, the words were the same, entering my ear with a rope and forming a noose on their way to my heart. No multiple faces, it was just one face. Mine.

It was I alone in those mirrors, laughing, pointing at myself. I had never this form of myself, ugliest of the ugly. I was fearful, as if I was going to come out of those mirrors and kill myself, and if not, the voices would do the necessary.

The 'me' in the mirror, said to me, in the grey, "You're not worth it."

"You don't have what it takes."

"You're nothing, but trouble."

"You're going to get nowhere."

"You lost, again."

"You are going to die."

"You have turned so unfit."

"Look at that ugly hair."

"Look at your body; you don't look your age."

"You're not supposed to put forward your views when adults talk; be your age."

There were so many more hideous words overlapping each other that I couldn't even take notice of a few. The creepiest of laughter, shrill howling, cursing abuses, all the humiliation I received in life being projected in front of me, and of course worse, through me.

i found myself, helpless, clutching my ears, falling on a filthy black surface, in slow motion as if it was a movie, screaming for help, hoping someone would hear me, understand me, hold my hand to walk me through this, hoping someone would feel the pain, the aggression, the anxiety that I was going through. But no one did.

No one could hear me in the grey but myself. My screams and my calling for help bounced back from the mirrors and reached me, and me alone.

It was perplexing though, for me to be able to hear myself through all the deafening voices around me. My screams for help were louder than the voices I was hearing, if not louder, at least loud enough, if not stronger, at least strong enough.

I sat there, focusing all my attention on my screams for help, reaching me like an echo, fighting a war with the other voices to keep

reaching me. I sat there, trying to understand the pain behind, trying to contemplate the aggression manifested and the anxiety generated.

Little by little, my focus shifted entirely to my own wailing. I could feel how hard it had been, how many miles I had come, how many times I had smiled and hidden my fears and my tears, how much I have been through, how much life I had left in me, how far I had yet to go and conquer.

The more I understood my lament, the more I wanted to help. It was not self pity encircling me but a tremendous amount of respect to have been holding my end of the bargain against life, all this while. The more I understood my helplessness, the more I wanted to embrace all my flaws, the more I wanted to decorate them.

The more I understood my anxiety, the more I wanted to accept my insecurities and my vulnerabilities, and then, I wanted to face them. The more I understood my anger, the more I wanted to fight back. The more I listened to myself, the more I realized, it was about time I got up. The more I heard my pain, the more diminishing the other voices got.

I did, I got up with the conviction that I was going to battle. I was going to get out of this, I would not let myself be harmed by or pitied by myself. It was me myself who had to be there for me in the end and it's me who must conquer in the end. I looked in my eyes in the mirror and said, "I am worth more than what the world thinks, and

I have no intentions of falling to their level of a nail thick of perception and outlook to make them understand what my worth is. I might not be born with what it takes, but I will do whatever it takes. Life has enough faith in me that I can handle every goddamn trouble it puts in front of me. I am going to get to places hard for these people to imagine.

Yes. I lost again, it's because I had the courage to give it a shot again. I am going to live to fight another day. My body, my hair and all of it is my own and I accept and will always love myself. My word, my voice and my opinion will always be voiced, because it matters, equally. So, I refuse to give up. Not today!"

The typical darkness of the grey started lighting up, the black lost its depth, and just like that it got lost as if was sucked up by resilience and confidence, as if got burnt by the sun. And I was back; to rise again, to fight again, and to fall again, if yet another fall is what it takes, only this time, fearlessly.



FUTURE PAST

TARA BHATTACHARJYA GUPTA

In the future, you cannot find me. I am losing myself in the City- and then I am lost. Or maybe the City has disaffected him and onto me. He runs tired hands through my hair, whispers in my ear, begs me to stay, to never leave. I don't know if I want to leave. I loved the City first, before he loved me, you know. And I loved with such wild abandon- eyes bright, hunger trickling down my teeth, pooling in the basins of my collarbones, slipping past the ledge, my heart, leaving a trail of wet footprints so vivid, every whorl like a letter freshly printed in a storybook.

That's how he found me, finally. Following the clues I left behind. Hushed conversation and wilting flowers tucked into back-alleys; scents of vanilla carried on willful breezes; my fingerprints creased into coins handed to young rickshaw drivers; messages sent out to sea, wearing the guise of prayers, fracturing upon the shore, before disappearing beneath the waves.

He says he loved me straightaway. He says that I reminded him of the ocean, that I smelled like love and success and honeyed arrogance. I was just old enough to have come to life in unflinching colour, and I was ready to take on the world, and yet I was still as sure about him as I had been when I was a young girl. There would be nobody else for me. He saw the question in my eyes, and he answered it with a fierce, unrelenting kiss, and at the time, the taste of his lips surprised me, but now I am wise and I know that the City always tastes the same- like smoke, salt, and sweat.

We live together, in a house that is almost the home of my dreams. I have not yet realized them fully; I am still young. the City is ancient, and he lets me choose the shape of our lives. He lets me put on the music I like, and select my favourite furniture and curtains and tile colours. It feels almost illegal. From the window of our bedroom, we can see the tops of trees, choked with bright yellow flowers, and beyond that, the sea, and beyond that, a pale mosque that reaches up to the purple-pink-blue-yellow of the sky. At night, we watch the sky mirror the sea of lights blooming on land. I feel complete in the knowledge that I am one of those lights, cosmically reflected, before we settle into our bed and turn in for the night, fingers laced together, breaths mingling.

He knows I am not devout, of course. He knows that he is the only thing I have ever prayed for, since I was a little girl. He knows that I don't believe in God, that I feel the weight of religion lie so

heavy on my back, that I have spent years setting that weight down and trying not to pick it up again. He knows praying makes me sick, like something within me is shrivelling up. But he also knows that my mother told me prayers are like wishes- it doesn't matter whether God exists or not.

There is no harm in wishing for something, in setting your dreams free and hoping they come back, like caged birds and stray cats, like the last few seconds before you're awake from deep sleep.

So, I pray for him, visiting temples where thick, sweet fumes clots in the air, and then festive gatherings where I eat and dance to hypnotic music, greeting family and old friends. I do this until I am sick, throwing up with exhaustion. I only do it because when I come home smelling of incense and fried sweets, my face tinged green with nausea, he gathers my hair in his hands as I bend over the toilet bowl. He runs his hands up and down my back as I retch fervently, and he brings me warm water with clove, and candy to suck on.

Sometimes the City cries to me.

When I think of leaving him for something else, someone else, he falls to pieces as if he can read my traitorous mind. He cries cavernous; earth-shaking sobs that fill me with a delicate horror. Perhaps the profound sincerity of his grief is meant to charm me, and yet, in those moments, all I feel is unfathomable repulse. That feeling of mothering returns, of being trapped in a place that does not recognize, that I think, too. I want to tell him that I am not just his salvation. I am a person, a girl, a woman. I never get the chance. He cries without stopping, leaving me to swallow my disgust and bite my tongue sore. Such nights, drowned in despair, are always followed by joyful days. The floods recede, tears run dry and I recollect how with him I never feel lonely, except sometimes, I do, but which never lasts, not really.

The City understands me, and so the sun comes out. My gleaming glass skin allows me to forget, and I bask in the City's attention. A faint memory is all that remains, like tear-stains on unwashed sheets.

On the phone, my parents ask me if I will stay with him forever. They ask concernedly if I wouldn't prefer peace to this, whatever this is. They don't have the words for it, either, an echo that leaves me gravely disappointed.

I don't tell them that last night I bound myself to the City, slicing my palm open, blood down his chest, smearing onto his chin and tracing the divots on his back. Instead, I laugh. I tell them of tall buildings like imposturous trees, of glass that glimmers almost sensually, of the sea that talks back, of bumping into strangers and friends in crowded rooms, of rediscovering prayer and crisp notes and new clothes and the unparalleled feeling of being a piece in a puzzle divined by the universe.

My father asks me if it's easy, surviving the City. I don't laugh this time. I tell him, "No, it's not. But where else is there for me to go?" There is silence on the other end. He can sense the unfettered truth in my voice. He asks me, "are you happy, then?" I look at the City, reclining in the balcony, ventrally lit by the setting sun.

"Yes", I sigh into the phone, "Yes, I am".



IT TAKES A VILLAGE

INDRANI BHATTACHARJEE

“I see that the key to your tractor is in its keyhole.”

“Ji, madam. That is right.”

I must have been silent for a bit because he goes on to say:

“No one is going to steal it. Here,” he demonstrates, hanging the keys to the garage door on the external wall of the house, “I’ll put these here so that my daughter can bring out her scooter in the morning, without waking us up.”

His daughter is eleven, but she rides

her Scooty on the dirt tracks by the fields. As I trudge up the stairs to their home, I see little heads and shoulders appearing and disappearing from view. The little boy is already narrating the wondrous happenings of the day for my benefit. “Mummy has made kees (cooked, sweetened colostrum from a bovine creature with a new calf) but won’t give me any. She says the mehmaan (guest) must have some first.”

Children have no use for prefaces or backstories, bless them.

I tell the boy, “Please tell mummy that this *mehmaan* is too old to sample colostrum.”

Adult laughter all around. The children chatter excitedly while I greet their mum and settle down for a chat, rolling my eyes at the impossibly large glass of buttermilk that has been handed to me by the little girl. I have suddenly been thrown into a pool of domestic bliss, easy generosity and goodwill.

The children’s father continued our conversation from before. Their neighbours, he said, had lived next door for six generations. His own family had known several generations of the neighbours’ family. Hence, they had a mutual insurance of sorts—an unspoken immunity from personal harm. He spoke of the village as a safe place for his children to grow up in. They would come to no harm from anyone they knew. I looked at his pretty daughter and resolved to say nothing. But then I felt a different resolution bubbling to the surface: my mind was helpfully offering options. What, I ask, would happen if the girl came to be romantically involved with a neighbour’s son when she came of age? Is that sort of thing permitted in their village? The man laughs.

“She knows better than to fall in love with a brother.”

“A village full of brothers!” I exclaim, taking a sip of the buttermilk. I think I hear my hostess laugh, or at least allow herself to express low-key feminine scepticism.

“She is fortunate,” says her husband, smiling. “They will always look after her.”

So that was the serpent in this Eden. For the remainder of the evening, I marvelled at how the assurance of comfort born of familiarity existed side-by-side with the promise of violent retribution if a single, very specific line was crossed. After dinner, I read to the children and was dropped home in my usual taxicab—one of several owned by my host. Much later, a question began to take shape in the mind: what was more real or valuable? The comfortable, habitual bonds of community, or the bonds that one chooses to enter into? Suppose that by “stepping out,” one walks into a mess that did not look like a mess from afar. Call this one of life’s mistakes. In some cases, “one must lie in the bed that one has made,” because one is out of alternative options. But in so far as a mistake is something that one can walk back from, it would seem that it ought to lose the momentous character (or the same significance) that it had at the time that it was made—that it would be demoted as a choice and therefore lose its value. After all, is this not what makes the exercise of choices as an adult valuable in itself? Isn’t this what it is to learn at the school of life?

Perhaps the elders of this north Indian village think that such things as romantic love lack value altogether, or at any rate lack real value because eventually young people come to “see” their mistakes. They see where their interests lie and mould their hearts and minds to fit the norms laid down

by a community that offers them everything that they could possibly need. They wise up.

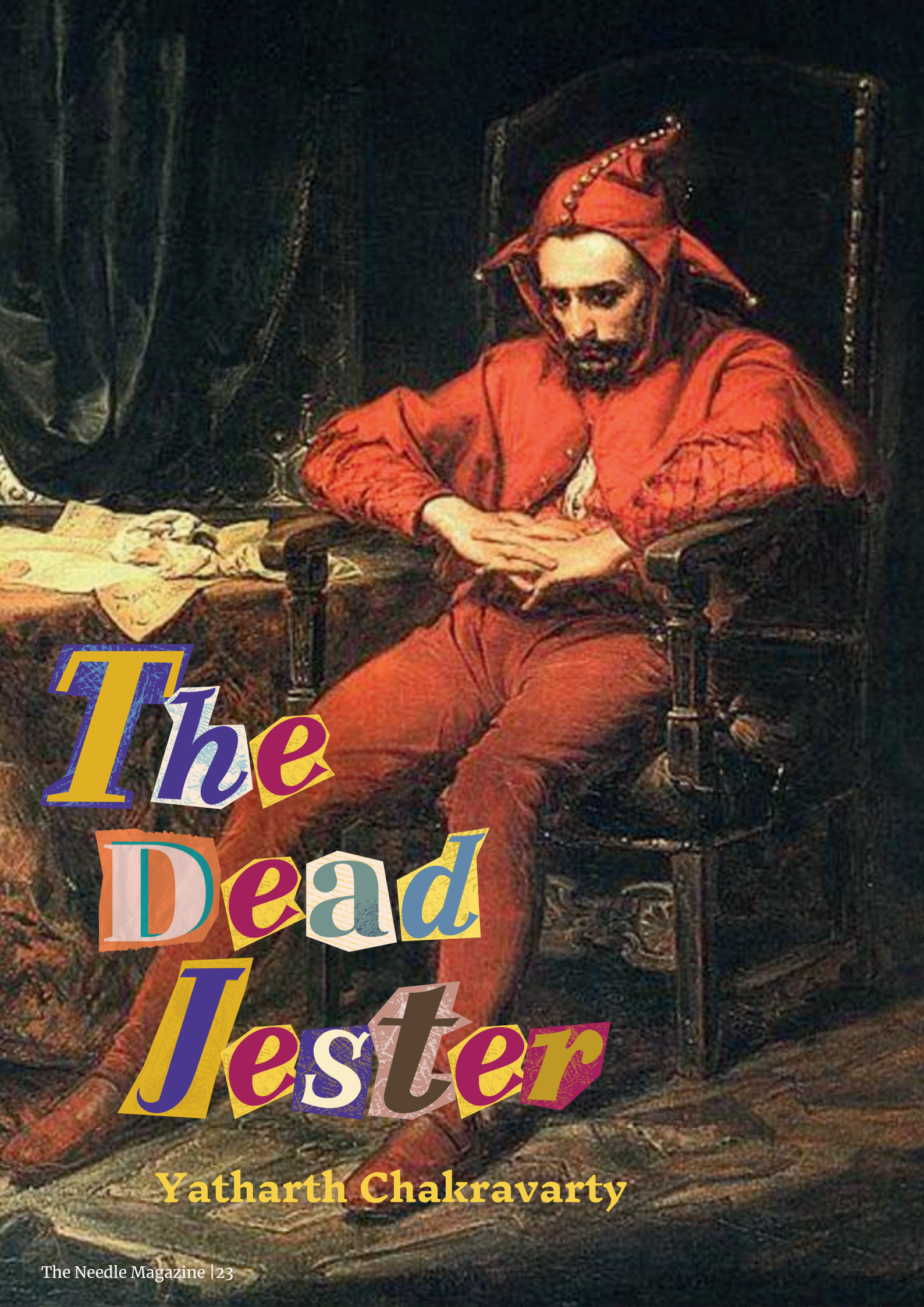
Does this mean that the scales drop from their eyes, and they finally see (and come to attach value to) the truth? Stock examples of erroneous cognition abound: classical Indian thought: one can take a shiny seashell to contain silver, or a piece of clear crystal beside a red flower to be red.

One can mistake a rope for a snake, or like the love-mad poet, climb up a snake hanging out of a window to visit his beloved in her quarters. There are a number of reasons why such errors occur; they typically involve neurobiological and/or psychological as well as environmental factors. Minus these factors, one enjoys valid cognition. Thus, telling the real apart from the unreal is a special achievement for the knowing subject.

Would our hypothetical adventuress be making an error concerning the reality of things if she stepped out? It would seem not. It would not be very pragmatic to fall in love with a brother-from-the-village/*gotra* (or just 'brother'), but a pragmatic failure is not the same as a failure to see what is real or more valuable because it is real. There may be an element of unreality to the alternative romantic scenario that one chooses, but that is to be expected since one must value what one prefers over what one is choosing to forego. I guess that is why it is called romantic love. The imagination is in on the job of building up a scenario that involves a departure from the usual, norm-bound modes of being.

Even so, the choice that our girl makes is not a headlong rush towards the oasis that isn't. It is something, though perhaps not the thing that one hoped it would be. In fact, if it weren't something that one took to be an alternative to the usual course of life, one's disappointment with it would have no basis. Now suppose that our girl is disappointed in love. She learns her lesson and walks back from her pragmatic error. If this lesson is to have any value, then it had better be the case that her experience of stepping out did too; only, she was forced to recompute its value in the end.

I guess I would like to see this bright little girl that I know, get a chance to evaluate her life and make such choices. She must, in order to learn from it. Safe, comfortable villages are wonderful places to be in, but human beings find that comfort is a small price to pay for growth. I would also like to see this young person own her mistakes, instead of having someone cover for them, because to do so is to avow their very real value.



The Dead Jester

Yatharth Chakravarty

Did you hear about the Jester? I wonder why she killed herself.

The mask of Jester became a part of her face. Yes, it did help her to cope with events otherwise difficult, but simultaneously, it made her immensely dependent. As each day passed, the grip of the mask on her face grew stronger, arriving at a point where there was no difference between the mask and the face, that it was one. But why did the Jester need a mask? Was her face not good enough? Maybe yes, one can as a spectator merely assume.

I wonder why she killed herself. The mask suited her, it brought her fame and money, which might not have been the case otherwise. Maybe the thought of losing it all if the mask was taken off had scared her. She liked to please others, making them laugh, smile, as if it brought some validation to her, gave some kind of meaning to her life. The people at the funeral were missing her humor, or if I should say—her mask.

She seemed so lively, always full of energy, entertaining everyone around. Couldn't she do that for herself? Only she could know. The mask did give her some confidence after all. I'd say that she was more fun when she wasn't herself. Was fun for the audience but must have been bad for herself. Her neighbors told me she lived alone, had no one around her. Well, who would like to live with a mask, after all?

She did take her mask off once, I remember. At a speech she gave at some event, I recall people in the audience being disappointed as they expected some humor out of it, ignoring what she had to say.

I won't lie, even I didn't bother to hear at that time. I mean, one can't blame me for that matter, after all who wants to see what's behind the mask. Whatever it was, it was not beautiful to look at is what I can be certain of.

At the funeral, her mask was supposed to be taken off, but the people were left with a shock, when they saw another mask, under the original one, which we saw. I wonder how many masks can one wear. What was she even thinking? Was she trying to hide a part of her from another part of her, which she herself created? It all sounded so confusing. She could have taken help, although I do agree, no one would take the jester seriously. It's not their fault, but it's their profession which makes it difficult, or maybe it was the person, I wasn't sure. Why shall I know, it doesn't concern me after all, I wonder why am I even thinking about this at all. Sure, what happened was bad, but it doesn't affect me, except for the fact that I won't be entertained for the weekend, but the circus just announced that a new jester will be joining from next week—a new mask, so I suppose it will go back to normal.

I almost forgot I had to get ready for work, I hate my work, I hate my boss, the people there, everyone, and everything about it, but I need to fit in for those hours, please the boss, have those fake small talks with the colleagues, as my promotion and bonuses all depends upon it, and also, I don't want to spend the entire day alone in my cubicle, a talk does help passing time. I'll get back to you later. I must leave now. All this mess because of that jester.

I wonder why she killed herself.

The Mirage of Utopia

SHASHANK PANDEY



The utopian desire within humans envisions a society where everything is perfect, peace and equality supposedly dominate, and harmony takes precedence. This aspiration has been central to philosophical discussions for thousands of years. Rising from Plato's Republic, Thomas More's Utopia, and now the novels of dystopia, the ideal world notion always pulls in the interest and captivation of minds through the ages. However, nearing this vision of utopia, one crucial problem arises: what is real, and what exists merely in our thoughts? In the search for utopia, does it stand on the solid ground of reality, or is it just a figment from within our minds, our imagination creating it? This essay explores the complexity of how dreams, perception, reality, and imagination interplay and how teaching us about ourselves shapes how we pursue our utopia.

The word “utopia,” coined by Thomas More in 1516, is derived from the Greek words *ou* (not) and *topos* (place), meaning “no place.” It signifies an ideal society that exists only in the imagination, a place where the flaws of human nature, social structures, and political systems have been eradicated. Utopian visions have evolved throughout history, reflecting the socio-political contexts in which they were conceived. For example, Plato's Republic imagined a society governed by philosopher-kings, while Marx and Engels envisioned a classless, stateless society where the means of production were communally owned.

Utopian notions take shape through dreams, a significant aspect of the dis-

-cussion. Dreams, both in their literal and figurative sense, transcend the limitations of the material world. They allow the mind to explore alternatives that go beyond reality. In the words of Sigmund Freud, dreams serve as the ‘royal road to the unconscious,’ providing insights into our desires, anxieties, and unfulfilled aspirations. In this context, we can view dreams as a mental realm where visions of utopia are born, free from societal norms and material constraints.

Utopia pursuit goes hand in hand with erasing dream elusiveness; this brings about a dilemma. Dreams, which are intangible and often far from reality, fuel the creation of an improved world. Their elusiveness is a tackle, so much so that trying to make concrete those dreams into reality sends us face to face with human condition flaws, societal restrictions, and external challenges. The abode of utopian dreams is a sword with two edges; it carries the capacity for fueling our progress, yet, at the same time, it can lead us into disillusionment—an outcome when we discover the ideal we imagined is out of reach. This highlights its dangerous nature, the capacity to deceive by the promise of perfection, possibility, and, ultimately, failure.

Perception of reality is inherently subjective; indeed, individual experiences, geography, cultural significance, and psychological frameworks influence it. Like Immanuel Kant, this philosopher proposed that we perceive the world through our mind's filters, as it doesn't exist in how we interpret it.

Reality, which we thus interpret, isn't an objective and fixed entity; it is, in essence, a perception-shaped construct.

Perception and reality create quite a rift, especially when we, as individuals, are trying to put those utopian ideals into action. There's this thing about perceptions, though: they're affected by biases and emotions. You throw external forces into the mix and get a "perfect" picture that's just wrong. However, what we think is a conflict-riddled reality may have its peaceful sides, you know? Even if perceptions point somewhere else, attempting to "fix" can be misguided. Such interactions between perception and reality can inspire and meddle with our quest for utopian ideals.

The force of imagination is the dissolver, or connector, between the realms of dreams and the actualities of existence. If we think of dreams as fanciful visions of what could be and perception as that which forms reality, we are bound by reality in our current state. However, the imagination beckons us to travel beyond to envisioned lands unknown to us. An application of imagination in thought allows the construction of non-existent notions, even as it dares us to question what we know as usual. Not a lattice of flighty whims is imagination, but I dare say it is a formidable device employed in transforming societal norms.

Ironically, imagination's strength also constructs barriers. Potentially dangerous, dogmatic pursuits of utopia, born from the fire of the imagi-

-nation, lack respect for human nature's complexities. History is replete with failed revolutions and totalitarian regimes, showcasing supposedly utopian projects that turned into dystopias. Dystopias sometimes sprout when practical realities seem far from imagination, an unintended consequence of pursuing utopia. In the tapestry woven by man, misguided social experiments signify a disconnection between guesswork and reality.

Fluidity exists between dreams and imagination, perception and reality, and we all journey to seek perfection in worlds not so far away. Dreams are the architects of our utopia of thought, building visions of "what could be." We find ourselves grasping at such dreams. Our grasp on reality is tethered by our perceptions, shaping what is present and matching it with future possibilities. They are like birds in a cage; they can fly, yet they don't. Desirable and feasible things are born out of this understanding. Limitations enforced by reality melt away with the brilliance of imagination. Present-day constraints cut nothing but a feeble figure. Envisioning tomorrow on imagination's canvas, a future untethered, is what we do.

Indeed, challenges arise from the tension residing between these various elements. Romantic ideas, contradictions, and limitations are inherently revealed in the mind via actual realities and perceptions, dreams, and imagination. They do motivate us, pushing us in the direction of a more fulfilling existence. The chase for a perfect world gets

complicated by perpetual oscillation between hopefulness and the stark reality of disillusionment. One often faces setbacks despite progress made. Reality and imagination, it seems, are awkward to swap between these two concepts in the pursuit of an impossible dream.

Philosopher Ernst Bloch's *The Principle of Hope* posits utopia not as a static destination but a dynamic process, a perpetual "not-yet." Motivation to enhance our existing reality stems from it. Better societal creation through persistent efforts, rather than attaining a flawless one, defines utopia in this context; it can be said. Thus, yearning for utopia doesn't equate to manifesting an unachievable ideal; instead, it involves reconstructing reality to be more congruent with our values, what we wish for, and aspirations closely aligning its meaning to ours.

Chasing after perhaps unreachable or illusory utopias' timeless enigmas, they burst with contradicting ideas and elements. Ideas like our dreams, possibly, are the facts that shape our surroundings and our mind's workings. Each plays its part. Utopia, oh maybe, is just an illusion of conceived perfection nestled snugly in the thought remnants of humanity and is questionably meaningful. Never mind, it's a symbolic guiding light: humanity's eternal push toward something resembling an ideal existence, constructing bits by bits, possibly faltering, imperfect yet in motion. Identifying, though not without its challenges, the different

aspects of these packages and the contradictions that don't seem to want to blend in. Striding through the maze of human behavior limitations and community formats to grasp them and be at peace, "It's not flawless, but it's something." One must keep reminding oneself and pressing on with the wishful envisioning of future progress, albeit imperfect in quality or nature.



Roopak

Jahanavi Ahuja

I forgot to cut my toenails the last time I was downstairs. Now, they are overgrown into my skin, pus oozing out the side. Infected, dirty, yellow, brittle. The last remnants of my French tip manicure are threatening to escape the calluses engulfing my feet. The absence of sunlight and dryness tends to do that to you. What's worse is I cannot even reach out to clean them with whatever energy I have left. This aspect of being tied up in the attic is almost worse than being captive itself. Maybe I should give in. Let him have his way. But there is no winning.

Ding.

Sound?

Light. My old laptop. My old laptop from college. How is this on? How does it have any charge? Maybe I'm going insane.

Ding. Another flash of light. The rim is ever so slightly broken from overuse. I'm almost blinded by the repeated ding-and-flash. If only I could move my hands. It is a weird feeling, something gnawing at my fingertips. Bucky. My mouse friend visits me every time I'm stuck up here. This time he came to let my hands free.

"Thanks, Buck. Next time I will get you some seeds." He ran over my callused foot, off into the darkness. "Let's see what we have here." My laptop sat atop my thighs, raised from under the old cartons and blankets.

daisytezi wants to chat

My old MSN ID? Reminds me of college. He and I would hang around Tapriwala, ignoring deadlines, eating vada pav. Mumma-Papa always disapproved. Not because he wasn't Muslim, maybe that too, but mainly because he didn't speak Bangla. In fact, he would comment that he is ekla-cholo-ing his way through uni.

daisytezi: hi bful stranger! Ping me for a vada pav date at Tapriwala near MC College. Lovya <3

This cannot be real. Who has my account? Is it another one of his ways to test my love for him? What bullsh*t. Maybe I will break this time. F*ck it, we ball.

Create an account to proceed

Crap.

Lillybilly69

I like lillies now. Daisies are a bit too precocious. Like me.

username unavailable

Ugh.

LillyBuckshi

Success. I glance at my automated message again. 'Bful stranger,' I miss my naivety. Buck. I named myself Buck. I think this will give me away. But I cannot back out now; it's too late.

LillyBuckshi: Stop it. Stop doing this.

daisytezi: Im sorry im confused?

LillyBuckshi: Roop

LillyBuckshi: Free me

daisytezi: Bro idk even know who you are

LillyBuckshi: quit playing Roop

daisytezi: The only thing *I* play is volleyball *with* Roop.

daisytezi: How do you even know Roop?

Is this not him? Am I dreaming? Has someone hacked into my account?

daisytezi: listen, whoever you are

daisytezi: idc what your equation is with my bf Roop, but imma need you to back off.

daisytezi: we will get married once we graduate

daisytezi: so please, just don't you dare

Could it be...? No, stuff like that only happens in movies, that too not even good ones.

LillyBuckshi: im Roop's cousin Lilly

LillyBuckshi: I thought he was using this ID to mock me

LillyBuckshi: he has locked me in a closet

LillyBuckshi: you must be Mariam

LillyBuckshi: he can be childish, no one knows better than you

daisytezi: he has no cousin named Lilly?

F*ck.

LillyBuckshi: Sneha. Lilly is my ghar ka naam.

daisytezi: right, Sneha di! We met at pujo last year

LillyBuckshi: can you ask him to get me out?

daisytezi: I will call him

LillyBuckshi: Nvm, I got it, thanks!

It is definitely him. The jokester, the class clown. I should have seen it coming. I feel that gnawing again. Buck is chewing at my calluses. I think he enjoys playing with me. Mariam. Buck's favorite plaything.

daisytezi logged out.

Drip. Drip. Trickling down my forehead, gutter water. It feels strangely colder than usual. Or maybe my cheeks have warmed up. Is it hope? Hope that this is him? Hope that he is coming to get me out? Hope that it is me? Hope that maybe I can prevent this? I don't know for sure.

Maybe I have gone insane.

Knock. Knock.

It was him!

“Mariam, are you hungry? Do you need water?”

I look at my laptop screen in a subdued panic. But then, I see the time. Twelve-o-five. Like clockwork, he had just come to feed me my day's kibble. Like I am his cat. “My favorite p*ssy,” as he likes to say. Twelve-o-six, 16th February 2024. 16th February 2024.

“16th February 2024!”

The date of the day before our elopement, five years ago.

“Haan Mariam, today is the sixteenth. Now come get your food.”

He opens the door; the light blinds me. He sees the laptop on my thighs. He gives me the look—the same look I fell for. The same I fear now. He is undressing me with his eyes. I know it. He wants to peel my skin and make love to me all night. It is in moments like these that I think his name fits him well. Roop. Roop Bakshi. Buck. My Buck. Placing the thali next to my feet, Buck hands me some ointment. Was he always this beautiful?

Buck left again; he closed the door as he ventured into the faraway darkness. The gnawing sounds return. Soft chews. Buck was here again. He can never leave me alone; he loves me too much. A gray little body, chewing at my food. My foot feels better now. The ointment has helped the pus.

Sh*t. I need to talk to daisytezi. Mariam.

LillyBuckshi: hey listen

LillyBuckshi: I know it isn't my place to say

LillyBuckshi: but don't elope with Roop.

daisytezi is typing...

daisytezi: Di...

daisytezi: Papa has kicked me out

LillyBuckshi: I know. Go to Bhadra women's hostel.
LillyBuckshi: isn't it near where you live? Chitra Colony?
daisytezi: I knew it.
daisytezi: none of you approve of me
daisytezi: but unlucky for you, im pregnant with his child
LillyBuckshi: Gira do
daisytezi is typing...
daisytezi is typing...
daisytezi is typing...
daisytezi has logged out.
LillyBuckshi: Roop is cheating on you

Frenzy. I don't believe it to be true. This was a gamble, nay, a mistake. Can I get out of this? My food is getting cold; eh, it is half eaten anyway. The water now looks like amniotic fluid.

"Gira do"

Drop it. Drop the baby. How could I say that? The gamble I took is one of hope. I hope it is Mariam. I hope it is the twenty-year-old Mariam on the other end. I hope this is some miracle orchestrated by Allah. I hope Mumma-Papa save me. I hope they forgive me. I should've gone to the Bhadra women's hostel when Papa kicked me out. He would've taken his only daughter back. But I was madly in love. I am madly in love.

Buck knocks over the amniotic fluid-looking water. Some of it spills on my thigh, some of it spills on my laptop, and some on my belly. The weight of my words strikes me again.

daisytezi is typing...
daisytezi: Roop would never cheat on me. He loves me.
daisytezi: Di i know you disapprove. But i love him and our baby.
daisytezi: we will keep it, just like we will keep our bond.
daisytezi: we will come back one day, forgive us.
daisytezi has logged out.

But you won't keep it. Roop will not let you, if it is you. He wants no burden on his relationship with his 'favorite p*ssy.' Like a rat, he will gnaw out the life from you, Mariam.

LillyBuckshi: don't do this Mariam
LillyBuckshi: It is me from the future, listen to me
LillyBuckshi: I am you...
daisytezi has blocked you.

Panic, then frenzy, then hurt. The realization that there is no way for me to prevent my fate. I should have tried harder.

“Mariam, get up.” His voice is shriller than usual. The face, chummier. He doesn’t look as beautiful.

Warmth and weight engulf me. And my laptop? Broken? Taken away? Either way, it is no longer on my thighs. The sun is up again, and the cannulas itch. The gutter water is no longer dripping down my forehead, yet it is on a drip anyway. I miss Buck. He had gnawed out most of my calluses by the time I was found.

Found? Yes, found. Papa took back his only daughter. He said the nurses are here to care for me, but I don’t trust him. I only trust Buck. Apparently, there is no man named Roop Bakshi, and there is no woman named Mariam. Roopanshi is my name, and I pop pills to survive in this cold attic with my overgrown toenails.

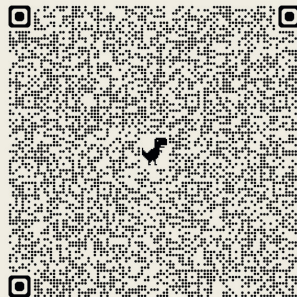
SARAAB

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How does one communicate absence of something
or someone? How is the invisible visualized?

Saraab goes beyond physicality and talks about
feelings, observations and emotional attachments
to the departed, to the beloved one.







Dreams
Fleetwood Mac



False Confidence
Noah Kahan



Chasing Pirates
Norah Jones



Runaway
Aurora



Visions of Gideon
Sufjan Stevens



Tea In The Sahara
The Police

NEEDLE'S PLAYLIST



Mirage
Chris Brown



Emotional Rescue
The Rolling Stones



Fake Plastic Trees
Radiohead



Nights In White
Satin
The Moody Blues



MIRAGE OF FOOLS

Sukriti Dubey



nature is often cruel
to a land of fools.
the regal retinue, in vain, looks yonder,
the sight of hope in an aimless wander,
an oasis glittering with blue and green
with flora of field and life marine
the glutton sultan on his camel hops in joy
the jester jests, musicians melodise, and the noblemen cry
but joy suddenly turns to jostle;
who was to take an oasis so colossal?

“my subjects must obey me,”
the sultan could not hold his greed,
“water glistening like stars in the night,
and the desert idyll is an emperors right!”

“our needs outweigh even you!” someone shrieked,
it was one of the noblemen, his limit had been reached,
“we are many but hold the same belief,
the oasis belongs to the ministers, not the chief.”

the musicians think in great distress,
for singing their woes would make their throats intense
“we want water for our melody,
or be cursed by gods of rhyme and rhapsody!”

the jester in his jubilant voice dared to intrude
“how about a game, if I may be so crude
one that decides who triumphs the water
and who before him, must falter.”

the debate ended with their consent
trickery and lies would be condemned
the man who wins a game of cards
would own the oasis across all yards
history forgot who won the game
but not the jester with an anonymous name
while men battled hard with cards of gold;
the jester made a beeline for the water with a bolt
yet to his astonishment, found nothing except sand and rubble:
the mirage of hope achieved with treachery
does nothing but burst one’s bubble.



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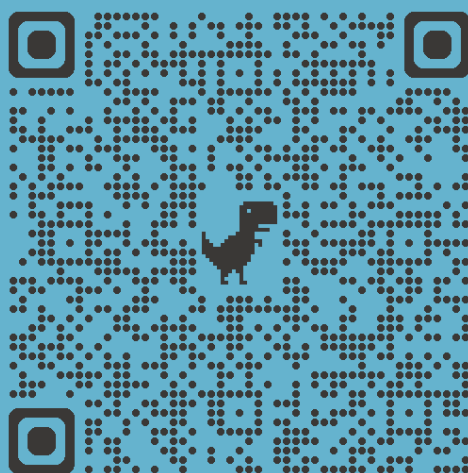


The Creative Arts Magazine of JGU
From JSLH



ACCEPTING SUBMISSIONS!

memory



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