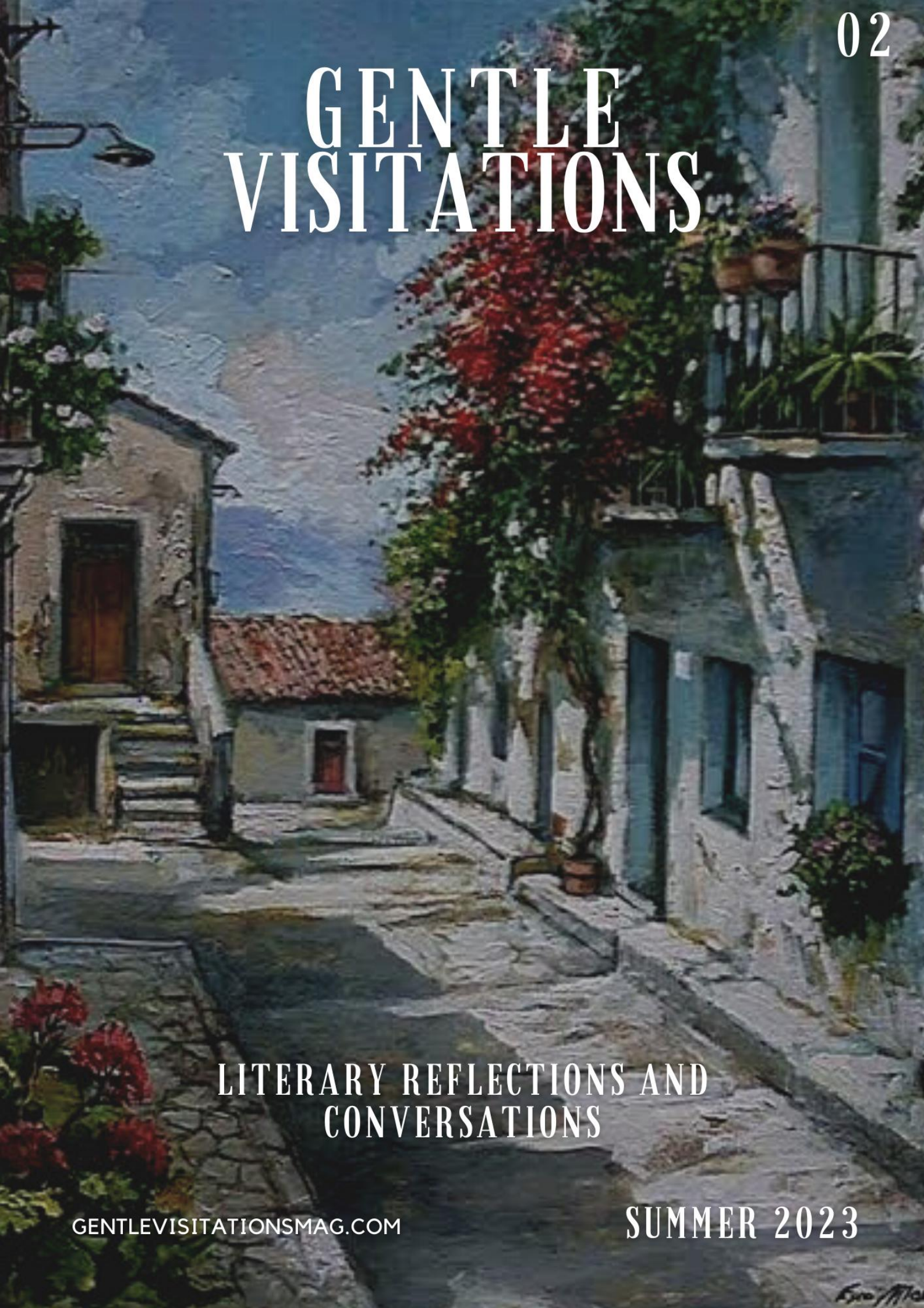


GENTLE VISITATIONS

LITERARY REFLECTIONS AND
CONVERSATIONS

GENTLEVISITATIONSMAG.COM

SUMMER 2023



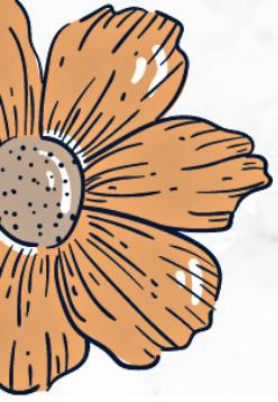


ISSUE TWO

SUMMER | 2023

Literary Reflections and Conversations

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WELCOME READERS

It gives us great pleasure to present the second issue of Gentle Visitations. Our talented, committed, and open-minded team of editors is enthusiastic about receiving fresh, insightful, and diverse unsolicited submissions from everywhere as they work together to make Gentle Visitations a happy home for budding authors. The brilliant and creative website designer and her Webtech team have produced a visually appealing, interactive, and user-friendly website for the digital magazine. We hope Gentle Visitations will create a fresh literary ecosystem by fostering a vibrant, engaged, diverse community of writers and readers.

Literature is you and me; it offers us all the beautiful ways we can live here on Earth.

Start your reading journeys with us; we are confident that our stories and poetry will stay with you.

Happy Reading & Writing!

Gentle Visitations



EXECUTIVE EDITOR'S NOTE

It's practically difficult to escape the pressures of modern life, including demanding deadlines, several commitments at home and work, and the constant need to manage time. On the other hand, the idyll of childhood never ceases to fascinate me since I feel we must retain the child within us—the “immortal sea” of creativity. Even though I am a full-time professor and researcher with little spare time for creative writing, I always answer the call of my creative self and write whenever I can. It is refreshing and liberating to overcome the numerous distractions of daily life that stand between my creative self and me. I believe it is never too late to be a poet or writer. The ‘sunny pleasure dome’, ‘caves of ice’, and everything else that is ‘larger than life’ is right there at the opening of the ‘magic casements’, inviting us all. We simply need to be mindful of the creative child—the artist within us. To reach for the stars, you must be creative.”

Munazza Yaqoob (Founder, The Executive Editor)

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POETRY

ONLY THE FAITHLESS

Waqas Khawaja

HEAL AND RISE

Amna Tahir

HELLO STRANGER

Hadia Waqar

MOHENJO-DARO

Abdul Jabbar

**WHEN A KING COBRA DANCES
TO A FLUTE**

Ariful Islam

**COUPLETS ON STEPPING INTO
THE LIGHT**

Ayesha Jafar

POETRY

APATHEIA

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THE VERITY OF SIN

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SIMPLE VERSE

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Fatima Ijaz

BREAK-UP

Rizwan Akhtar

DRAPETOMANIA

Tayyaba Abrar

ONLY THE FAITHLESS

Waqas Khawaja

doomsday comes in many forms
i dust my clothes
move on

my birthright a clump of thorns
only the faithless
receive the word

a shrub in the desert prospering
a humble lamp in my world

eyes aflame with longing
script of doom stamped on my brow
i toil on burning sands

an assassin
beguiled by song
in the shadow of a bald rock waiting

prey to death
its broker and trafficker too

each thought smarts
with corroding words
each word both spore and spike

the master fabricates
the mistress masks
only the faithless fight for faith

sit serene on a blossomed lotus
eyes shut to dream up a world

a bhikshu unsettled by a striking face
a seeker alarmed in a cave
and Rabi'a* in rags dashing off to douse the fires of hell

Rabi'a al-Adawiyya al-Qaysiyya (714/18-801), known more commonly as Rabi'a Basri since she was born in Basra, Iraq, was a Muslim Sufi greatly revered for her piety and devotion. In a famous anecdote from her life, she was said to have been seen rushing through the streets of Basra with a basket of fire in one hand and a bucket of water in the other. On being asked what she was doing, she responded that she wished to extinguish the fires of Hell and burn Heaven to cinders so that people would do good without fear of punishment or the lure of reward, for then alone would they come to appreciate the true nature of salvation.

Khawaja is the Ellen Douglass Leyburn Professor of English at Agnes Scott College, where he teaches courses in Postcolonial Literature, British Romanticism, Empire Narratives, Gothic Literature, Victorian Poetry and Prose, and Creative Writing. He is a poet, translator, literary scholar and editor who has published notably in all these genres. His personal webpage may be accessed at wkhawaja.agnesscott.org



HEAL AND RISE

Amna Tahir

The sun is out
And the half-melted snow
Is slowly trickling down the branches
For I have grown
I have grown accustomed to your absence
New branches grow where I reside
New flowers bloom

Without you I have grown
I have risen from the ashes
I have gathered my bits and pieces
And glued them together

In the abyss of my grief and despair
I have no one to lean upon
Other than my own company
I have locked my being indoors
And initiated the process of building
A new me

I continued filling my hollow shell
With potions and healing medicines
Performed rituals to purify
And lit fires to burn down impurities

Yes I, only I was there when no one else was
I peeped through my own window
To check up on me
I kissed my own hands
I became the entire team
From the manager to the sweeper
I restored the building
And kept its maintenance
Day by day i grew

And no,
I did not let the light of love die
Instead i kept it lit to keep me warm
Keep me alive
In my hopeless days
Till eternity i shall provide it fuel
And coal,
And wood,
I shall make sure it keeps burning
For as long as it burns i'm safe
Its a confirmation that i live.

So as i unfold my wings
And grow beauty within me
I urge you to carry on
Carry on and mend
Mend repel
All that harms
Protect
Survive
Rebuild

Amna Tahir is a graduate of IIUI. Her goal in writing is to encapsulate her experience as a woman through her poetry. As a brown daughter, she pens down her experiences thwarted by pain, heart break and a constant stagnation that controls women's lives in a brown household. She enjoys good music, classics and reading her favorite book with a warm brewed coffee.



HELLO STRANGER

Hadia Waqar

An immigrant
In my own body
Why must there be
A constant split;
A perpetual estrangement
What is home?
Where is home?

Why must comfort
Evade my embrace?
To be so alienated
Must be a curse;
A Punishment for sin;
Liable for atonement
When I speak
Do you hear me?
Where do I live?

Desire of nativity
The body is one
Soul is another
Why must there be
A deathless death
Seeping inside my bones
When I breathe
Shall I also live?
Where do I hide?

Hello
stranger!
Where do I belong?



Hadia Waqar is an MS scholar, teacher, and an aspiring author who uses poetry as a cathartic means of relief through which she both grieves and celebrates life. Her dream is to project the magic inside her heart out on the fabric of the universe and to communally appreciate art and all that it stands for.



MOHENJO-DARO

Abdul Jabbar

Eternal city, you live in the dust that has shaped
you.
The heat that falls from the sky
like sheets of flame
has baked you to a hue
that nulls time's ravages,
time with its flair for levelling all.

City of relics, seals, and images,
your people's solemn glances,
their austere, intense gaze,
your priest-king's majestic face,
your public baths, a refuge from urban bustle,
your granaries' and citadel's promise,
your humped bull's splendor,
the repose of your nude, ebony dancer—
all tell a story we wish we knew.

Eternal city, in your ever-unfolding drama,
all played their parts and left.
Their acts, chronicled in clay,
preserve your annals but don't answer
our earnest questions.
Your tongue still a mystery to all,
Will you ever speak
to tell us the story
of your life and death.

Abdul Jabbar is a Professor Emeritus of English and Interdisciplinary Studies at City College of San Francisco, California. Recipient of a Fulbright scholarship and two National Endowment for the Humanities awards, he is the author of three books, namely (1) *Reading and Writing with Multicultural Literature*; (2) *Not of an Age, but for All Time: Revolutionary Humanism in Iqbal, Manto, and Faiz* ; and (3) *The Promise, Reality, and Potential of America's Cultural Diversity* (in the process of publication).



WHEN A KING COBRA DANCES TO A FLUTE

Ariful Islam

When a king cobra dances to a flute,
a melodrama happens.
The snake-charmer disbelieves the audience's
wisdom.
The audience disbelieve the king cobra's
powerlessness.
The king cobra disbelieves nothing.
Everyone disbelieves the what ifs!
But, what if the what ifs are not what ifs.
What if the king cobra behaves properly?
Belief shall fade away.
But, it's impossible.
I disbelieve.



Ariful Islam, currently working as a Senior Lecturer in the Department of English, East West University, Bangladesh, writes plays, poems, and short stories. Some of his plays are There Is Not Then What Is Nor What is Not, The Sixth Sense, and Chhayachhobi (The Shadow Show).



COUPLETS ON STEPPING INTO THE LIGHT

Ayesha Jafar

When the cynic calls for outrage, Plato's fire answers.
The caves smell like the monsoon, which floods the seasonal depression clean.

They bring the silt of the grief out, and in – even the mud is a tide.
Let it go heavy & cold, like a grave, or a hammer in a winter cemetery.

It can be hard to imagine something other than the despair, harder still to reach for it.
There's nothing more vulnerable than an empty branch on a cherry blossom.

Reaching & grasping is simple; even babies do it, hands in wool on someone else's heart.
All it takes is a prayer, a solar flame, a hope, or two.

And it's a little bit impossible to be sad when the Sun promises a day of company.
The sorrow evaporates with the sweat & grazes your skin similarly.

A friend's hair strokes your shoulder when she leans over to help with a maths problem.
The sunset humidity makes the loneliness more than a little impossible.

Hard to feel untouchable when water vapor is a weighted blanket that leaves you glinting. Hot, sun kissed
diamond blush cheeks & all.

What is the gentility of November velvet to a spider unwinding silk in the porch corner?
It finally has a chance to prepare for its sunshine spotlight.

The trails are stained with rainbows & sparrow song.
I forecast blueberries & misery.

A page inked with sweetness.
I pray for honeybees, dewdrops, polar bears; laughter, tourists,
ice-cream-licked fingers.

*Ayesha Jafar is a Pakistani-Norwegian poet and student from Rawalpindi.
She has published and upcoming work in Jaggery, Room Magazine, and
Pleiades. She enjoys buying and borrowing more books than she can read,
way-too-sweet tea, writing, and complaining about writing.*



APATHEIA

Huda Zahid

“Why now?
Why so sudden?”
There’s confusion. Nothing else.
Air of uneasiness, as if, a deadly disaster
has just left. Everything’s calm again,
but that on the surface alone,
beneath it lies a storm.
Nothing else, but
Heart wrenching tranquillity.

“What for?”
She asks herself
As she takes her heart out, and wonders,
“Where did it all even begin? Will it ever... end?”
These pieces which hold it all, all of her.
The beautiful memories that now
don’t seem to belong to her.
Nothing else, but
Entirely enigmatic distrust.
“But for whom?”
For herself alone.
Not for the neighbours, not for that beggar,
not for the homeless man, oh why would that be!
No, not for her tirelessly loving mother
who had to bear her. It’s not even
for the one in the mirror.
Nothing else, but
Unsettling uneasy apathy.



Huda Zahid is an undergraduate at the International Islamic University Islamabad. She believes that she doesn't have many boastable accomplishments, beyond having had an opportunity to moderate a literary conference session. She wouldn't mind being described as an intolerably knowledgeable hungry person, wishing to become a professional hyperpolyglot one day.



THE VERITY OF SIN

Eisha Amir

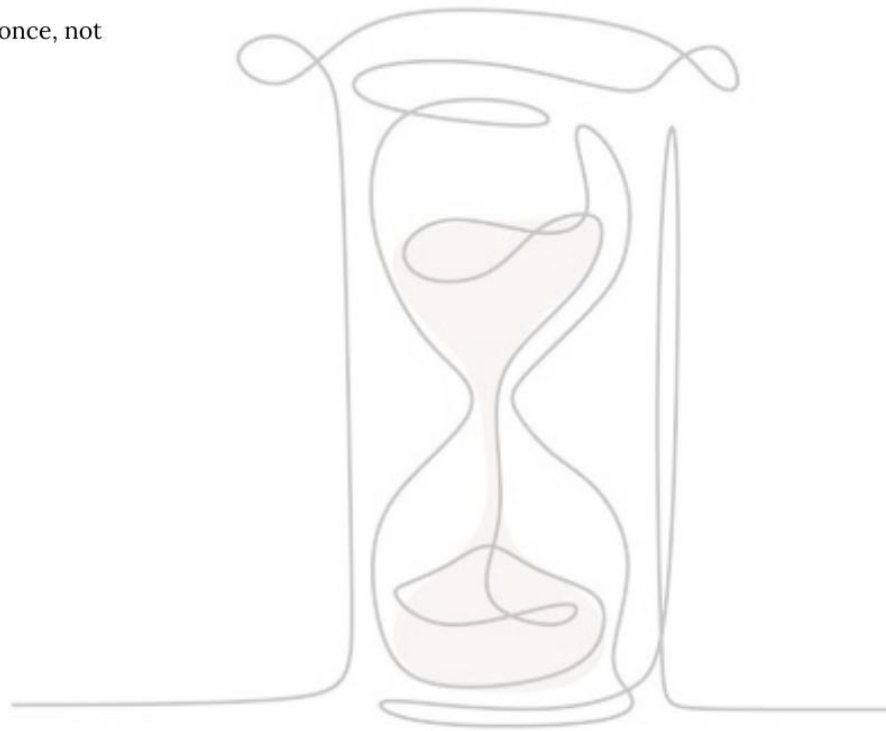
Life, in all its glory,
Demise— or in between
Kept my sins covered Cushioned between ivory Beige pillows like rings
in boxes made of a jeweller's Sweat.
Exposed like ornaments; Perhaps illustrious impearls. What crawls in my heart
is what I know
Its roots buried for folks
And other sinners.
Musk fills the air
As flowers bloom around
the edges
Its intoxication is forced
down the throat
As my sins scratch under it marking existence.
Then I too will turn a blind eye to it's roots till the day
I caress the blemish
and wonder where it's from.

Eisha Aamir is currently pursuing her BS in English Language and Literature at the International Islamic University Islamabad, Pakistan.

SIMPLE VERSE

Md. Towhidul Islam

Time
should be given to the
uncommonly beautiful and simple words.
To write,
one must invoke heavenly muses to attain its beauty.
If they agree,
the nine goddesses,
one must write an epic,
and put the elevated words alongside flowers and simplicity.
This must pass a hundred years. So long for one! But time should
be given to—
such simple verses.
Meanwhile, the words will be spoken more than once, not
intentionally. You may never know!



Towhid Islam Khan is a passionate writer, business development professional, and actor. He writes short stories, poems, quotes, and articles. He started exploring his niche for creative writing in 2013 and continued experimenting with concepts, forms, and subject matters. By now, he has around thirty creative pieces published in various newspapers and literary magazines, including The Daily Star, The Daily Observer, Dhaka Tribune, and Monsoon Letters.



CURSED HOUSE

Fatima Ijaz

I call & call & call
 the winds answer.
 the amulet of turquoise
 you left at the table
 like a keychain to an old house
 whispers its legions of devil:
 you are scared of returning
 home is a triptych of sepia lore
 and as the sea damns the shore
 so do our names.
 Each one of us is alive yet
 that's the real miracle.

Karachi poet Fatima Ijaz is doing an MA in English and Media Studies at Rutgers University, New Jersey. Her recent publication is a poetry collection "The Shade of Longing" (2021). She previously taught English and Speech at IBA, Karachi. Contributing editor at Pandemonium Journal, she has an English BA from York University, Canada and also holds an English Linguistics MA from Eastern Michigan University, USA. Her poetry and short stories have been published in numerous publications including Kyoto Journal, Ideas & Futures, The Missing Slate, Aleph Review, Tillism, the Bombay Review etc. She was a poetry reader and panelist at KLF, Bradford Literature Festival and Quetta Literary Festival. She writes on culture and literature in Naya Daur, The Friday Times and Dawn. Her memoir was longlisted for the Zeenat Haroon Rashid Writing Prize 2022.



BREAK-UP

Rizwan Akhtar

It's a bit less normal to return each other
our visible furniture after using it for years
as simple as leaving when the pinch gets
harder, memories sag causing pits in middle
even a word said in earnest is checked twice
antonyms raid the mind now, hands rock
after a hug or an aborted kiss, the pillow
gets straight, items in kitchen cope with a
silence worth keeping afterward, cabinets
house termite, one can live with mere trails
the dust on the vase is morning's first thing
it's a government without subjects that lives
perhaps longer than this crammed cradle.



Rizwan Akhtar's debut collection of *Poems Lahore, I Am Coming* (2017) is published by Punjab University Press. He has published poems in well-established poetry magazines in the UK, the US, India, Canada, and New Zealand. He was a part of the workshop on poetry with Derek Walcott at the University of Essex in 2010.



DRAPETOMANIA

Tayyaba Abrar

Let me go!
They are calling out to me
They whisper my name
They miss me
They want to be held
I want to hold them
You're against the union
Of them and I
I want to feel their leaves
Against the skin of my hands

Let me out
Let me out of this hideous cage!
The walls are closing in
Sniffles and hiccups
I can't breathe
The mirrors are suffocating me.
I faintly fight the fancy
To break them and cut myself
With my vigor and verve
You have me shackled

Cut me loose!
They are calling out to me
They want to embrace me
They will heal me
They will help me forget
All the misery and suffering
Hills are chanting;
"Hike, hike, hike."
I ought to obey
I must!



Tayyaba Abrar is 26 years old who loves reading books. For her the pages of a book are her sanctuary. She is an introvert who finds solace in nature. She prefers writing to talking because words flow more easily from her pen.

BOOK REVIEW & CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR BY WAJIHA HYDER



BOOK REVIEW & CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR BY WAJIHA HYDER

"I have observed that many people seem to be living on the periphery of life."

Ayesha Husain is an educationist, author, and founder of Khayaal Creative Network. Her debut novel, *What More Could She Possibly Want?* (2023) has met with enthusiastic acclaim from both literary critics and readers alike, showcasing her unique voice and creative talent.

Husain's academic journey began at Lahore Grammar School (LGS) 55-Main, where her lifelong passion for literature took root. After completing her BA and MA in literature from Kinnaird College, Lahore, she taught English literature for over 21 years. She furthered her education by earning an MPhil in Education from Beaconhouse National University and, later, a Chevening and Cambridge Trust Scholarship-funded MPhil in Education (educational leadership and school improvement) from the University of Cambridge. After returning to Lahore, Husain applied her expertise to designing English language reading and writing curricula for various private schools. She also worked as the project manager for a World Bank-funded project on early childhood education for a year. In 2019, she seriously began writing and drew upon her niche in classics to craft her debut novel.

What More Could She Possibly Want? is a tour de force that masterfully intertwines the threads of emotion and female desire, elevating the voices of characters that have historically been neglected in the discourse of South Asian literature. With great care and skill, Husain delves into their everyday lives to create a compelling and intimate first novel that resonates with readers of all ages. Through her writing, we are transported into a world of suppressed emotion, where sadness is raw and untamed, and the complexities of the human experience are laid bare. Ayesha Husain's work is a testament to the power of storytelling, offering a poignant reminder of the beauty and resilience of the human spirit.

I recently met Husain at her Lahore residence and spoke to her about women's autonomy regarding marriage, the power of raw human emotion, and her love for Classics.

Excerpts:

W.H.: Your novel explores how women are expected to succumb to society's norms silently. It is also about loveless marriages – a subject many prefer not to delve into in our society. What triggered your interest in writing this novel?

A.H.: I chose issues that I felt were important to highlight. Over the years, I have encountered many women who married very young and resigned to living a life they would rather not. I wanted to highlight this very problem – taking a right to choose away from a woman and the resultant repercussions. The point is that if you put a young person – who doesn't even know who she is – in a situation that she is not equipped to handle, things will become problematic at some point. Through the plot and character development, I wanted to bring forth human frailty, desire, self-awareness and triumph. I did not want Noor to suffer the same fate as Anna Karenina. I did not want my character to come to a tragic end. I wanted her to persevere and come out triumphant.

W.H.: And for that to happen, I think emotional bonding between a man and a woman is paramount.

A.H.: Yes, absolutely. Even more important is the relationship that you develop with your own self.



W.H.: Did you speak to many women who went through similar circumstances during the research phase of your novel?

A.H.: I didn't go out there seeking women to talk to about their experiences. But I am as old as I am and have witnessed a lifetime of experiences through the eyes of many women I've known. I myself went through several issues at a certain point in my life, where, like Noor, I would look at myself and ask, "Who am I?" and I actively sought answers to questions that troubled me.

W.H.: The book explores complex topics such as female desire, emotions, and the importance of therapy. Was it challenging to tackle these themes in your writing?

A.H.: Not at all. I was simply writing a story I wanted to tell. I didn't think of people's reactions when I was writing.

I myself opted for therapy at the age of 39. I decided to seek help because, at that point, I felt – much like Noor – as if I'd spent my whole life trying to be a perfect this or that. Not that I was not enjoying any of that, but in the process, I had not nurtured my relationship with myself. I wanted to understand what it was that I wanted. I've been the kind of woman who feels that life needs to be lived fully. So, I experienced joys and sorrows very passionately [chuckles]. That's who I am. I don't know if it's a flaw or not. Growing up, I would observe my family and elders' actions, reactions, and traits at gatherings. Through these observations, I noticed that many people seemed to be living on the periphery of life, and I felt sad for them. That motivated me to write stories of women that are often left untold.

W.H.: Not really enjoying life?

A.H.: Not really immersed, I'd say. Merely a repetition of repetitions. As Oscar Wilde says, 'to live is the rarest thing in the world; most people just exist'. I wanted to make sure I lived life, which is why I went in for therapy to understand more about my triggers and what made me feel one way or another.

W.H.: Do you see some improvement in women's autonomy regarding marriage these days?

A.H.: Yes, to some extent. There is a shift, and I see many young people in my children's age group have been given the freedom to choose their life partners. That said, I have also seen some of my students succumbing to parental pressure

W.H.: Do you think arranged marriages are here to stay, though?

A.H.: The situation, very slowly, is now changing. The scenario where parents decide the person their daughters will spend the rest of their lives with, without considering their specific needs and personality, is changing. Children today have more confidence than we did growing up.

W.H.: In the book, the protagonist has to deal with the consequences of her parents' decisions for the rest of her life; she is expected not to say a word and deal with her fate even when she doesn't even want it in the first place. What was your experience writing this character and about the trauma she experiences?

A.H.: It was very emotional. I would stop often and think, how would I feel if this happened to me? It was tough yet cathartic; it was overwhelming and sad. Even though I haven't gone through what Noor did, I have felt every emotion that Noor has. Just like I could empathise with Macbeth. Like Macbeth, Noor, too, undoes an inner conflict. Noor echoes Macbeth's thought, "I am in blood / Stepped in so far that should I wade no more, / Returning were as tedious as go o'er" when she is unable to disentangle herself from her toxic relationship with Idrees.

On the whole, I lived and breathed these characters. I enjoyed the process immensely.

W.H.: Noor keeps giving Idrees chances despite his questionable behaviour regarding their relationship. How powerful is a woman's intuition, and what makes women doubt themselves so much that they often ignore the one voice they should listen to above everything else?

A.H.: When your primary caretakers, people who are supposed to believe in you and stand by you, are not doing that, you lose the ability to trust and believe in yourself. Many women – even when they're sure deep down inside – will doubt themselves. Maybe I am wrong. Perhaps I don't know enough.

Noor has firm boundaries when she meets Faraz, her first love. She knows she has moved forward even though she still has feelings for him. Many years later, when she meets Idrees, she is so unhappy and has gone through so many cycles of disappointment and grief that she lets go of reason and silences her inner voice because her relationship with Idrees is giving her momentary pleasure.

W.H.: And she knows deep down inside that this will not work out, but she still doesn't stop.

A.H.: If you are drowning and find a log with nails, you will still hold onto it, even if it cuts through your flesh and hurts. That is what happens with Noor. She is drowning; she believes Idrees is her only hope for a passionate life. Noor is not an ill-intentioned, wicked character; she acts out of character because of her loneliness and vulnerability. She doesn't go seeking Idrees; he comes after her. She genuinely thinks that she'll spend her life with Idrees.

Idrees is a predator, and I hope after reading the novel, a Noor out there will recognise an Idrees [in her life].

W.H.: What would you say to the women who know they must make a change but lack the courage to?

A.H.: You either accept whatever is happening in your life and try and find serenity in it or develop the courage to change it but do something instead of just complaining. Because when you're continuously complaining about your circumstances, you're just giving space to more negative energy within yourself. If you want to change something, you must become more proactive. Ending a marriage is not ideal for every woman because many women need that stability and financial protection. You can take that bold step when you feel you are strong enough to withstand many of the pressures that come with a divorce in this society. Look for every possible way to make it work together, and if it's not happening, then I think you only have one life. Either leave if you can and are strong enough to deal with all the consequences or if you decide to stay, then try to find happiness in it.

W.H.: Do you think literature has the power to bring about a change in the way people think and act? For example, will things shift in this society if more women begin writing on these issues?

A.H.: Yes, of course. The more women write the more awareness they will create in society. Awareness can be created in many ways, such as through writing, music, and art. It is important to highlight issues that may impact society positively or make people question accepted norms. I wrote about the importance of women's empowerment and the lack of attention given to mental health. I touched upon the importance of therapy and ensuring one goes to someone qualified.

W.H.: So, reading and teaching literature has been crucial to your development as a writer.



A.H.: Yes, a lot. Understanding literature's development, movements, literary periods, and genres has been crucial to my development as a writer.

W.H.: What about contemporary literature?

A.H.: Not much. I spent most of my teaching years teaching classics. Most of my time was spent researching and preparing lectures on writers like Dickens, Hardy, Shakespeare, Austen, and Wilde, to name a few. As a result, I only had the opportunity to explore a little else.

W.H.: I think writers these days are not reading a lot of classics, whereas, in my opinion, classics are essential to forming the foundation of any reader or writer. What do you think about this?

A.H.: It is crucial. Reading works from different literary periods and genres is important to understand the evolution of thought and styles. It makes one's understanding and writing all the richer. Therefore, reading classics is imperative for writers to cultivate their writing skills and develop a deep understanding of the craft.

W.H.: So even though you have read and taught classics all your life, the language used in this book is simple and easy to understand. Was it a conscious choice?

A.H.: It was organic; this was the only way I could ever write: simply. Shakespeare used to equate authenticity with simplicity. I feel when you're undergoing an extremely emotional experience, be it joy or sorrow, you're either silent or convey your feelings in the simplest way. What I did intentionally was to ensure that my writing was showing rather than telling, and I was carefully pairing adjectives when describing characters, situations places.

W.H.: Tell me a bit about the dream sequences in the novel.

A.H.: Mental health is an important theme in the novel, so I have used dream sequences to highlight the impact of her situation and her anxieties on her life. All her fears are unleashed when she sleeps. During the day, she can control herself and her anxieties, but they are unleashed with full force at night. She dreams at specific points in her life, and each dream symbolises something. These dreams also serve as a kind of premonition; for example, her dream with Idrees crawling on all fours like a monster indicates that he's not what Noor thinks he is. The novel begins with a dream which was done deliberately to set the tone and highlight certain themes and emotions.

W.H.: Are you working on anything at the moment?

A.H.: I am working on the plot of a story set in the 1800s. I will have to do a lot of research before I begin writing.

W.H.: Is it going to be non-fiction?

A.H.: It will be fiction, and the canvas will be enormous. I am putting my thoughts together at the moment.

W.H.: Tell me about your publishing experience in Pakistan. How difficult was it to find a publisher for this book?

A.H.: It wasn't difficult for me at all. I sent my manuscript to Musharraf Ali Farooq, author, translator and founder of KITAAB. He liked the story and put me in touch with an editor [Simmer] in India. Editing took a while, and once all three of us were comfortable with how the novel had shaped up, the novel was sent for publication.

W.H.: Tell me about something you've read recently that has stayed with you.

A.H.: I've recently read Lori Gottlieb's *Maybe You Should Talk to Someone*. She's a therapist and has written about her patients' journeys. Then there is another book that I've read: *Love's Executioner and Other Tales of Psychotherapy* by Irvin D Yalom. I recently picked up *The English Patient*, but I'm struggling with it. I've downloaded many books I'd love to read now that I have time to spare.

W.H.: What is your writing routine like?

A.H.: I began the novel around February 2019 and finished it in December 2019. At the time, I was teaching and working on developing the English language curriculum for primary years at a private school. I was technically working three jobs, five days a week.

But I made it a point to read what I had written the previous day and add to it, be it 100 or 500 words. On the weekends, however, I'd write all day from morning to evening; my social life was almost nonexistent. In 2020 Covid happened, and I had more time to write because I was home. I would arrive at my desk at 9 am and write/edit nonstop until 6 or 7 pm. It was so enjoyable that you would have to tear me away from the laptop. In 2021 I gave my manuscript to Simmer, and I worked on the editing with her. Even though the editing was at times frustrating, and I would be at a loss, I enjoyed the journey thoroughly.

W.H.: Did you ever suffer from writer's block?

A.H.: Oh, many a time and throughout the process of writing this novel. But whenever that happened, I was advised by my editor to stop writing for a few days, read a book, and return to writing later. That helped! Maybe take yourself away from your work if you feel stuck somewhere; go out for a walk; change your routine; or do something else. But I couldn't leave the novel for too long. I could not stop thinking about the plot and characters and would return to it 2 or 3 days later. But taking a minor break always helped with writer's block.

W.H.: So, it was almost like you were living with your characters.

A.H.: Yes, and it got overwhelming at times, but it was fun.

W.H.: What would you say to writers who begin writing professionally later in life?

A.H.: I started writing in my forties. I'd say just do it. Begin. We're often consumed with the result and worry about other people's opinions. I don't think of the result; just write. Another thing that I feel is important is patience. And lastly, the more you edit, the better.

W.H.: How would you describe the reception for this book?

A.H.: It was incredible. Most women who approached me felt like I was writing their stories. By and large, everyone enjoyed the story and liked the writing style. I thought young people wouldn't connect to it, but their response has also been positive. My son's friend read the book and said it was fascinating to see things from a woman's perspective and that he enjoyed the novel. I have put my heart and soul into this book and shared it with the world, and I am grateful for the response I have got thus far.

W.H.: Did you ever imagine a specific reader while working on this book?

A.H.: I dedicate this book “to all the women and men who have battled with dark days and preserved.” I hope this book will touch everyone who reads it, from my mother’s to my children’s generation, and inspire them to take away something positive from it. Perhaps they will recognise the need for help or find comfort in knowing that others have faced similar challenges and emerged stronger.

Ayesha Husain’s debut novel, *What More Could She Possibly Want?*, is available at Kitab.com.pk



Wajiha Hyder is a Lahore-based journalist who is currently the literary editor at *The News on Sunday* (TNS). Her debut short story was published in the anthology *The Stained-Glass Window: Stories of the Pandemic from Pakistan* (2020). She was also a member of the judging panel for the 2022 ZHR Writing Prize for Women and the inaugural LLF Writing Prize in 2023.

(CREATIVE) NONFICTION

**THE BLOOD-SOAKED RHYMES
OF OUR NURSERY**

Mahvash Mohtadullah

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DEAR MARRY**

Haroon Khalid Akhtar

THE BLOOD-SOAKED RHYMES OF OUR NURSERY

Mahvash Mohtadullah

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall
All the king's horses and all the king's men
Couldn't put Humpty together again!

Isn't it a delightful old quatrain replete with the promise of blood and gore (or, at the very least, massive quantities of ill-fated yolks)? Also, how about:

Rock-a-bye baby, on the tree top
When the wind blows, the cradle will rock
When the bough breaks, the cradle will fall
Down will come Baby, cradle and all!
The tragic melodrama spanning from the cradle to the grave has never been portrayed more succinctly than in the above poem. And then:
Jack and Jill went up the hill
To fetch a pail of water
Jack fell down and broke his crown
And Jill came tumbling after!

This rhyming couplet is also an illustration of a disquieting tragedy in which children – always children – serve a central role. The more of these nursery rhymes you recall, the more you will be reminded of the pervasively ominous high note in almost all of them. From racism to bigotry to simple sadism, these childhood rhymes embodied them all. Try reciting a few others, such as Eenie Meenie Miny Mo, London Bridge Is Falling Down, Sing a Song for Sixpence, Little Miss Muffet, Old Mother Hubbard, and Goosey Goosey Gander, all of which are threatening, pitiful, or diabolical! Some of them are pithy, blackhearted odes to actual historical figures and their peculiar quirks, such as Mary the First's religious malice – (Three Blind Mice), King Edward the First's cruel greed – (Baa Baa Black Sheep), the wonton love affairs of the European royal courts and its many colourful denizens, as well as various tales of plagues, witches, and famines. These rhymes were akin to archiving historical information for quickly unbiased recall. And so, what better way than as a child's beloved refrain, repeated endlessly, handed down from generation to generation, the rhyme and metre keeping it true to its original, ominous self?

Indeed, for many of us, nursery rhymes were probably the first words we ever uttered with joy, following the general familial terms Mama and Papa. I still recall the infinite delight, solace, and toddler-centeredness (there must be such a thing!) I derived from chanting these beloved nursery rhymes. A couple of decades after their own "babes in the woods" days, adults again become innocently and resignedly entangled in the mesmerising love affair with these refrains. If they had known the morbid origins of the nursery rhymes, they were so lovingly taught, how many would have thought, "Let's leave things as they are; If it makes the kids happy, let them sing about old men being thrown down rickety stairs and babies falling out of treetop cradles." Generations portraying evil with the brush of entertaining commonplaceness have completely diluted outrage and skewed society's moral compass: atrocity acquires a pleasant haziness; racism becomes invisible; patriarchy deftly rests atop any semblance of gender equality, etc. And now we are all joyfully complicit in perpetuating the illogical ramblings of 400 years ago, cloaked in rhyme and metre.

Thus immortalised, the nursery rhymes of our childhoods are now eternally rolling and roiling in the ether.

Now that we know, it may be time to change the lyrics while keeping the nostalgic melodies and metre alive – a departure from the inertia of tradition. I'll start the Great Re-hash with the rendition of a favourite below. If there are other status quo shakers, try the one you like best.

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall
Humpty Dumpty had a great thought
What if all the king's horses
And all the king's men
Danced a nice foxtrot
Across Goblin's Glen!

Mahvash was part of the Financial Services industry for 15 years before she began writing in earnest. She now has a book of short stories, a book of poetry and essays, and 3 books in a children's series published. Her poetry and short stories centre largely around women of the Asian subcontinent and their social and cultural challenges.

AN ESSAY ON UNCERTAINTIES

Riaz Hassan

Discussions, elaborations and mathematical elucidations relevant to Heisenberg's well-known 1927 articulation of a basic uncertainty in the measurement of particles (in brief, that greater precision in measuring one entity [say, position] in a relation, implies less precision in measuring another [say, momentum]) are mostly found in the realm of quantum mechanics. This was sometimes linked with the notion that observing an entity alters it, reducing everything to a flux about which little or nothing could be said with confidence. Whether this led directly or indirectly to nihilistic, absurdist, existentialist, anti-traditional, anti-establishment or 'de-meaning meaning' philosophies, is arguable. Other contributing factors, such as the general disillusionment and moral breakdown that followed the insanely murderous first world war, soon to be followed by a yet more savage world war, can be cited. These might have precipitated or hastened the appearance of such ways of thinking.

This short essay's frame of interest is uncertainties in linguistics, since language is the vehicle of just about everything we think, communicate or do as humans. The language of choice is English:

The Language

It does not need much effort to see that this is a fluid area. This is apparent from the changes that have occurred since the beginnings--an extinct, incomprehensible language called Old English cobbled together by separate but related invading tribes in the southern part of a small island, through what we can reconstruct of a barely recognizable mode of communication called Middle English in Chaucer's time, on to the more comprehensible but still odd-looking language sometimes called Early Modern English round about Shakespeare's time, to what we have today.

The process of change continues. What was once the exclusive preserve of native English-speaking people is now used by millions of people round the globe in several different ways. All this is lumped together under the name English, although a modern New Yorker would probably have a hard time communicating with a modern Solomon Islander. A language is not a set of unchanging, discrete elements called words with fixed meanings placed within a fixed set of rules called grammar. It is more like a loose set of conventions that change, and keep on changing, with time, content and place.

The Grammar

This has changed considerably since the beginning. Some examples follow.

From a 'synthetic' type language it has become a more 'analytic' one. Old English was an inflected, gender-based language. What we see today is that eight inflections are left, and that grammatical gender has disappeared. With a language of two genders, the speaker is burdened with two variants of the grammar plus the need to remember which is feminine and which masculine. Some languages have phonetic markers to help distinguish between the two, but there are almost always exceptions to be found in them. The grammar is further complicated if there are three genders. English has done away with gender over the centuries. It has also removed the 'thou' constructions that one sees in seventeenth-century writings. The present form of grammar is not final. In recent times it has become common in some English-speaking countries to talk about the existence of several genders instead of just two. We see some juggling taking place with pronouns to accommodate the new perceptions. We also see American usage, such as employing an adjective in place of the adverb (e.g., He's real good at tennis) influencing speech patterns of people round the world, including the odd speaker in England itself.

In short, grammar can and does change. English offers old written records, so we can see what is happening. Some languages have acquired written forms relatively recently, so nothing much can be said about their earlier manifestations. However, the processes one observes in English probably work for them as well.

Pronunciation

This area is mushy. People pronounce words differently in different parts of the modern world. How people pronounced words in the past cannot be determined with any certainty, even if old written forms of the language exist. How, say, Shakespeare read his own poetry is anybody's guess, but it is reasonably safe to say that it was different from how we read it today, and that how people read it is different in different parts of the contemporary world.

Should the 'r' be rolled? Should the 't' be swallowed? Should the 'a' be an 'ay,' 'ah,' 'ae' or 'aw'? Or something else? Should silent letters be sounded? Were words pronounced with the same stress and intonation patterns as they are today? Who knows? These elements do not show up in writing. Yet they are important elements in the production and interpretation of meaning.

Meaning

Ah! What shall we say about meaning? The difficulties are so numerous that it is surprising any kind of communication takes place. What is not surprising is that a good deal of miscommunication also takes place. We see this happening all the time. Let us look at some of the difficulties.

It starts during an exchange. One person (called A for convenience) says something to another person (called B). If A and B belong to a common linguistic environment, we can assume that some kind of communication takes place, provided B hears A properly. [Note: The pronouns 'he,' 'his,' 'him' are used in a generic sense, not as markers of gender]. However, even if he nods in agreement, we cannot be sure because: (1) each person has his own range of experience and may process words with their connotations slightly differently, so that what a given utterance means to A might be somewhat different from what it means to B: (2) we cannot be sure that B's processing mechanisms are in complete consonance with A's. Mostly, they are not in line. B might hear what he wants to hear, not exactly what A said. What B hears passes through his personality before he processes it. People tend to colour what they hear with their own suspicions, hopes, beliefs, preferences or prejudices. Uncertainties start at source.

These continue through language itself. You look at a dictionary and see what it says about the meanings of words. More words are used to explain those meanings and then more words to explain those explanations if you are still puzzled—and then yet more. We wallow around in a muddy pool of words. This would not matter if words had steady qualities and quantities, that this word 'means' this, and that word that.

Not so. Apart from the frequently noted possibility that a word today means something different from what it did decades or centuries ago, we see that its contribution to total meaning is affected by two contexts, one an 'in-language' one, or the effect of words on other words when they are used together (as they

are in discourse), and the other the general context within which the exchange takes place. Yet further elements, crucial ones, are introduced by stress, intonation, pauses, gestures, body language, etc. A word said this way means something different from the same word said that way. A smirk or wink can change, reverse or destroy its meaning.

They continue through the world of language, which is uncertain in its references. Language is the main tool whereby we interpret the world and communicate with our fellows. At best it is a blunt tool. It imposes manmade systems on realities that are probably different in their constitution. For example, time. We divide it into past, present and future, as though there are points in time. This we do for our own convenience, not because this is how it is. Likewise, lines of latitude and longitude. There are no such lines, but they help us to work out positions—again, for our convenience. Language is similar in that it creates a universe of references that seems to work for us. However, because it seems to work for us does not mean that that is how the universe is. Language is a not a collection of certitudes, much as we revel in it in poetry and song. It is one manifestation of our clerical brains, not necessarily an accurate one. The examples can be multiplied. Our best tool is an uncertain one.

It is all 'maybe' this, 'could be' that.

Might as well go home.

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THE TWO OF US HAVE A STORY TO TELL

Munazza Yaqoob

"Do you think it matters if we refuse to take it tragically? This will not change anything ours is a tragic story", you murmur. After a long pause, I whisper, "Let's walk on that woodland path with whatever hope we are left with."

So, we walk on a long, winding, shady woodland path that seems ever opening until we reach a small water pond shining with its inward light under the morning Sun. "That light", I tell you, pointing at the pond, "speaks to me and tells me that a special glory manifests in people who have the capacity to absorb it and rejoice in it. I am sure it will speak to you too. And there are no smooth roads to what we imagine to be a happy story; I know skies will fall; they will keep falling, my dear, mark me. Let them fall; we will have our walk in the woods; do not rush. We live and learn."

We have suffered and are hurt, and a lot has perished. Here we stand like ancient trees in ancient forests, which are moth-eaten and hollow from the inside. That's the end." After a long pause, I continue, "Aye, here is a hope the forests have a wondrous capacity to regenerate themselves." I see pain, a deep sadness in your eyes erupt while softly kicking yellow-brown and orangish oak leaves of Autumn under your feet and we choose to remain silent. Hours pass an extraordinary silence with an unspeakable mystery wraps around us, and we feel as if we are living in an ancient myth being written in the woods. As if we have no existence on earth and are merely the shadows and fiction of our dreams and memories.

Inhaling the very spirit of the woods, I smile, touching your index finger with mine. "Nothing will be worn out if we continue to live an integrated life just like these old hills stretched in the Eastern horizon where each morning we see Sun rising in its morning glory. These hills and the glory of the Sun have never worn out. Like these", I touch a huge, magnificent oak with thousands of entangled roots and branches, "majestic and full of life. You cannot escape their silent yet asserting powerful presence. Do you remember the entangled mass of the old trees once we discovered on our favourite walks on one of our intimate afternoons engaged in our usual gorgeous talk? My dear, their power lies in their silence, endurance, perseverance, and entangled branches and roots that refuse to unravel their tangle. Like these oaks, we have a bond that, if broken, would cause an incurable illness. There are tiny threads and roots interwoven within us. The seasons return, the trees regenerate, and nature dances in spirals.

The end signifies rebirth; sorrow paves the way for approaching joy, and the sun sets to rise with greater vigour in the morning.

"Remember that I told you a long time ago that you have a beautiful heart with the miraculous capacity to love, absorb, and mend broken ties, and you have a healing touch." You smile. I notice a mysterious but enriching silence seeps gently into my whole self. Thus, on a frosty morning with very little January Sun, we sit hand in hand and talk about our long-distance walks in the forests, which are lost but for us are still enchanted still mysterious.

It's cold, and the woods are damped. Sitting in the silence of the damped woods in the early morning, occasionally disrupted by the chirping and fluttering of some little birds and whispering of some small brooklets flowing nearby, we see life in all its haunting and beautiful mystery. Here, we also reread our story, believing that it integrates the entirety of our beings. It is captivating, enriching, and delightful. "I love these leaves, and I feel they have lived with us through generations," looking at the glorious first rays of rising sun falling on the old fallen leaves on the ground, motionless and damped with the frost. I speak, "I want to touch them, hold them in my hands, feel their frosty dampness, and hear their tales of regeneration and rebirth myths. Mark me; you can hear, too, if you choose to. Nothing will be worn out." I pause for a few seconds and look at the drops falling from the bare boughs of the old trees in a silent crash. I softly press your hand and speak again, "Our life seemed blown away like dead leaves crushed under our feet or eaten by an unknown fear which spread in our souls like a bruise. But look, here we are again, living the story of us. No it's not the story of our wreckage, but of how we are reborn with a capacity to see into the life of the things. We must learn that we conquer fear only after we experience its extremity being at its fringe; from there, we find our way out of its darkest gulf. Likewise, we only understand happiness after enduring immense anguish and suffering. We learn to live; we live to learn.

Also, my dear, do you remember the day when we sat on that hill and watched the clouds gathering on the hills amidst the interwoven colours of the evening? The sun sets to herald the arrival of a new day; the magnificent colours of the evening merge with the red hues of the dawn.

There are no tight ends in nature. Listen to these hedge crickets they sing in the mornings and evenings in the springs and winters. The time revolves, and each revolving year brings back all the seasons with all their hues, sounds and smells. Look at these fallen, yellow leaves crunching under your feet they fall every year, and each year they maintain the pride of trees by dancing with them in beauty and freshness. The forest reawakens. And these leaves that fall are essential to the ecological recovery of this forest. Creatures breed and interbreed; the genetic makeup of all organisms, including us, keeps changing. This magnificent forest would be but a heap of dead leaves if these bacteria, fungi, and mites did not transform these dead fallen leaves into rich nutrients to let trees grow fresh leaves and have more and more robust wood.

The beauty and magic of nature lie in its intricate ways. So, let there be more fallen leaves in autumn and winter to grow more splendours in nature the regeneration. Nothing dies; nothing goes into nothingness. Nature works in its invisible designs to heal its wounds and breakage therein lies magnificence and wonder in ecological regeneration. The intricacy of this exquisitely interconnected network is hard to understand look for connections and continuity, interdependent survivals; its beauty lies in its entirety. What appears to be an insignificant change to human eyes has fantastic and remarkable consequences. It is remarkable to live life after life the wisdom of the forest, the wisdom of the earth, the wisdom of nature. Will-to-life is the life principle of nature. Therefore, dear, real stories are born from the wreckage when we emerge from the dreadful caverns of pain, loss, and absolute fear. We have nurtured our capacity to endure and to feel the stings at the core of our being. The real story is created, built, and woven—it doesn't simply happen. We live and learn."

Then, we talk about the magnificent manifestations of human creativity in aesthetic arts, architectural designs, robotics, and electronics that are owing to the wisdom of nature, even in the growth and patterns of the tiniest leaves. These flowers, which we like for their colours, scents, and delicate touch, are wonders.

They grow in spirals, generating spirals while leaving meticulously sufficient space for each petal to unfurl to its wholeness. All petals in the network of spirals maintain balance by breathing air and absorbing sunlight.

Reflecting on the spiral galaxies, curvy waves of seashores, snail shells, whirlpools, hurricanes, and many more, and our DNA cell, which makes 'double helix', we find that spirals are everywhere in nature flat curves, saddle bending, and helix and their interconnectedness make them self-perpetuating and self-regulating systems. The wisdom of nature, as manifested in this geometry of spirals, speaks for continuity and regeneration. Looking at you with your eyes focused on the acorns in your hands, I continue, "Let's hear the music of the spheres produced by the heavenly bodies in motion: from tonus to halftone and then one and a half tones; the tonal harmonics plays on and on with regular musical intervals sustaining the wonderous rhythm of the spheres. Life breathes in a continuous rhythm between the Earth, our planet, and the highest skies. There is no death, no end but continuity."

The beautiful stories of life flow in a continuous cadence. I smile and, looking at you, speak, "I see our story as a life in beauty singing in the rhythm of continuity. Life in the universe continues to live and evolve so are we withstanding all wreckage, misfortunes, and pain. We continue to evolve; our story is life-force beating with the rhythm of on and off continuity within discontinuity and discontinuity within continuity. We live, we breathe, so we weave the story of us. It is the moment of becoming when I tell this story. Each time I tell the story of us, I feel how intrinsically rewarding it is. I feel no more dislocated; yes, it's the moment of becoming." I confess.

Life downplayed by losses, grief and pain achieves extraordinary if it moves on the rhythm of continuity with regular musical intervals sustaining the rhythm the rhythm of regeneration. In this, we find the true beauty of life. Not all that is visible is reality there is also a plurality some truths can only be perceived in the rhythm the 'unheard' in the continuous song composed of several tones born of and completed in the tonus. Life goes on we fall and rise again in halftones and then in one-and-a-half tone, finally arriving at tonus again moving along the flow of time, which is continuous and immeasurable. "And you know", I ask, taking an acorn from your palm, "You know this is how I see the tale of us I tell this story to make this continuous melody audible. Let's tell our story of appreciating life's beautiful harmonicas."

Our fortune waits for us down this slop in the sunshine, into the freshness of green. Down there is the clusteryou remember where the beeches with their wide-spreading crown make a canopy with their blissful grandeur, their joyful magnificence. We can see our story beautifully engraved on a gorgeously grey beech tree. The beech lives for hundreds of years; it remembers everything and thus carries our story from life to life. I also remember we laughed and sat on the bench of entangled mysterious root structures under the dancing leaves while the sun was slipping through them. It was a clear, bright, and rustling Autumn morning with sunlight spilt across these moss-covered multi-trunked magnificent beech trees. There is an incomprehensible sense of enchantment in the huge silence and enormity of this beech forest", I reflect, walking on the velvet carpet of bluebells under the beech-forest canopy. "Who can escape the magic of this forest," I ask, looking at you. You point at the entangled roots of multi-trunked beeches and, smiling, say, "And who can escape the enchantment of this mysterious wide-spreading structural system of these roots?" "Yes", I nod, and we sit on the velvety ground. I continue, "You know, these roots collect and accumulate all the nutrients required to sustain the life of these magnificent trees throughout the year, and new beeches sprout from these roots in all directions. Their leaves do not fall even in winter even when they die, or if they happen to fall, they persist on this floor and feed the life on. Beeches are monoecious; they do not see life in binaries, divisions, or categories." Here, in the quiet of the beech forest, I tell the story of our extraordinary and beautiful life with you as my audience. Time goes by, but who cares; we have leisure here in this beech forest. It's liberating; it makes us forget about the imposing concrete buildings with the carbon footprints that poison every part of our bodies and psyches.

As soulless apparitions suffocating on a constant supply of poison, we make our dwellings in these concrete buildings lighted by LED and heated and cooled by mechanical systems. Who could imagine leisure there, groaning under the burden of a miserable existence, a joyless life?

"Stories like ours are rooted in this beech forest," you interrupt the silence. "Yes", I say in response, "here we can understand and learn the self-sufficing power of our hearts and see their roots entangled with another human heart and the vast web of life." Then you murmur, "And this is what Thoreau means when he says, 'The question is not what you look at, but what you see'" while putting your hand on mine. I add, "These woods sing to me in their constant rhythm that we have our woodland walks on the trails covered with golden leaves and flowers to absorb the peculiar fragrance of woods in the sparkle of the raindrop beads. The innumerable paths and avenues that lead us to the grandeur of the human heart and the enduring power of love promise that we have usthe harmonic of life continues."

Today, on my solitary walk that makes silence audible so I can hear the fragrance and melody of flowers, beating in the hearts of trees, I see clouds caressing the dancing grass and the breeze keeping its hand on the Aeolian harp. Here I tell myself our story once more. Much goes unnoticed, I confess, while walking with youwalking with our story. I cannot walk fullyI see; I meet you in the season of ripened peaches. The air is filled with the aroma of matured fruits, and the path is strewn with fallen blossoms and petals. The ripeness that carries the core of all the seasons dissolves into everything, wraps everything, and flows with the rhythm of the vast web of life.

This peach treethis peach tree on which you are placing your handI can listen to its song. It is telling you the story of endurance, the story of us.

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CANDID MATRIMONIAL HELPLINE - DEAR MARRY

Haroon Khalid Akhtar

Q. Dear Marry,

Can you find a match for a person with the most thunderous laughter-cum-coughing in the city who happens to be my Dada Jan? He has turned 70 today. His profession was boxing, but now he only punches the air after laughing at his jokes. My grandma died of a heart attack some years ago next to the boxing ring while deliriously cheering for him, which made him quit his beloved sport in his comeback year. Some say that Sylvester Stallone's brooding eyes still peek through his wrinkled face like embers. Teeth are original.

A. I admire your affection for your grandfather. Sadly, widowed grandmothers and the likes do not approach me overtly, but yes, some break the societal norm and seek my help. Well, till yesterday, I had two grannies tired of mourning their long-dead husbands and scuttling nefarious schemes of respective daughters-in-law. They wanted to start afresh, but unfortunately, both expired this week. One is said to have Deborah Kerr's mole. Such overripe options are difficult to discover, but I'll see what I can do for you. One comatose lady of 68 recently woke up after 40 years and found she had been orphaned by the cruelty of time. She might take a chance on your candidate. I will check on her mental state.

Budhaal Dilbar.

Q. I am chronically ill, sick to the bone, have arthritis, amnesia, not to mention amoebic dysentery. Could you nudge me towards some lady doctor who could become my life partner and, given my state, make me her lifelong obsession?

A. Honestly speaking, you are not quite the mouth-watering prospect you think you are for any lady doctor. Still, I have a nurse in mind, but she's under investigation for administering euthanasia (mercy killing) to her patient due to an incurably kind heart. Take a chance on her. Dying in her loving arms is just the experience you need desperately.

Mehbooba Daulat

Q. I am in search of a Wadera who is on his deathbed and should preferably die within six months of marriage. I'm even willing to be his second or third wife. I'm ready to take such a risk and sacrifice my maiden status for the greater cause of acquiring his wealth so that, later on, I can settle with my lover, a well-renowned pauper. However, my only condition is that I want a doctor's definitive opinion first-hand.

A. No landlord is available on the deathbed at the moment. They just keep getting an extension from God by getting treatment abroad. If you want to take a chance, an ex-minister is leaving for the treatment of a suspected terminal disease. I can try booking you with him. But these politicians are prone to flee the country on such pretexts.

Sheikh Tanha

Q. As we speak, I have three wives, and yet I feel extremely lonely. Trusting the saying that 'three is a crowd', I have arrived at the conclusion that I need a fourth one because there is no adverse saying in respect of four. Can you arrange for someone lonely but believes in sharing the beloved, albeit begrudgingly, over the weekends?

A. I reckon you need electrotherapy, not a fourth lady of the house.

Maana Gum

Q. Somebody who matters the most, i.e. my 3-years old daughter, has whispered in my ear that I will be the new PM by November. Please arrange a beautiful woman as the future first lady without telling my daughter, who will immediately relay the news to my current wife.

A. I am so pleased for you. The last time I met you in the psychiatric ward, you wanted to become a janitor. Your desires are getting elevated.

Dilhaar Kanjoosi

Q. I am on the verge of divorcing my wife. I cannot take it anymore. Her extravagance has taken its toll. Please tell me if you have ready options for me - a fast-balding guy who lives his life in the fast lane, driving old Suzuki like Vin Diesel and letting people fend for themselves. I believe every day could be one's last, and hence try my best to pass on this great philosophy to the drivers on the road via my driving.

A. Before I reply, I have also received your wife's email, as given below.

Mrs. D. Kanjoosi (Maiden name Urun Pari)

Q. I am on the verge of divorcing my husband. I tried for eight years, but he is not my cup of tea. He's very parsimonious and has not given me any supplementary credit card. Please send me the catalogue for the second-hand husbands at your disposal. I am 30 but look 291/2, supremely attractive if looked at from a reasonable distance

A. I would like to reply to both of you since the email address is the same. I have a package deal, but you must promise my commission will not be cut in half. There is another couple who also mutually yearn for a break-up before Eid. The reason is that, in their case, the wife is a savings freak. No doubt it's a tight timeline, but I am sure you can manage. In cases such as yours which I must admit are unique, it is important not to waste these limited win-win opportunities. Therefore make haste and approach your lawyers ASAP. All of you can have a single wedding function in one go to save costs.

Zaalim Zakhmi

Q. I am a famous cricketer of yore. Fast and furious. There is very little in life that I have not achieved yet, so now I want to settle down by getting married. Please come up with the most fantastic model available: brand new, tall, slim, smart, fair, and rich. English speaking with a British accent and 18 or below.

A. I am a God-fearing lady and not the sort who'd ruin an innocent girl's life by arranging her marriage with you. You have never been fit to play due to your groin. Who will believe you're fit to marry?

George, The Innocent

Q. I am a child aged 10. I see my mom crying all the time. She is not happy with my father. Please guide me towards a caring gentleman who can be a loving husband and a father. Once you confirm the availability, I will request my mother to initiate the divorce process.

A. Now come out, lady. Do not pretend to write on your child's behalf. Be honest and admit that you are seeking a change of spouse. Presently caring divorcees are in short supply and are gobbled up the moment they become available. But I'll tap some households on the verge of collapse.

Dilkash Hoor

Q. I am naturally attractive and gifted with a beautiful, extraordinarily long neck. I live in the vicinity of a zoo. Do you have a match for me?

A. Sorry, I do not entertain giraffes.

Oscar Wilde

Q. I am used to doing things in one go and don't wait for the future to arrive at its own leisurely pace. Can you urgently arrange four good-looking ladies and a Qazi? Witnesses will be much appreciated too. My picture is attached.

A. I think you have sent the Negative as your photo. Please have the photo developed first or use extra lighting if your complexion has an issue. However, I am not really in bulk deals of such a nature.

Khawaish Mand

Dear Marry, I want to marry you. Please say yes. I just got my green card.

A. Please ask my husband. I will nudge him, too, trust me.

Anonymous

I am Mr. So and So- the great actor. Please find me a girl from the middle class, possessing strictly Eastern looks, who must not understand English and must never have been to London, where most of my scandals are. But she must worship me.

A. Mr So and So sahib. Your fans who were once interested in you are in the 'living happily ever after' phase of their lives after waiting a long time. Your best bet is to continue being a playboy until you hear from me.

Haseena Intizar

Q. I believe my husband is cheating on me. People have seen him buying roses, but they never arrive home. I request you to inquire from him because I have already confronted him squarely to no avail. If he admits, then push him to get married soon so that I, too, pursue my new romance guilt-free.

A. I am not good at extracting admissions. Besides, it's my business to make and not break relationships. But I can refer you to one destructive house-ruining lady named Miss Kutni who is running a discount campaign of ruining two houses at one price.

Michael J Fox

Q. I am a time traveller from the Middle Ages and recently landed in your country. The purpose of my visit is highly confidential, but sharing it with you anyways. My overbearing wife would always trace me and bring me home to eat her hand-cooked lousy food. Hence, I escaped permanently to land here. Do you deal with time travellers? Any discounts for poor wanderers like us? I promise if I find peace here, I will never flee again.

A. Wow. I thought your breed was all fiction. But how can I play with anyone's future? My biggest issue is that if you whisk away, what will society call the wife who will be left behind? I think you should try Europe, where relationships are tenuous.

Miss Mangni B. Jamalo

Q. I am a perennial fiancée whose would-be husband wants to settle down first. The problem is that he has turned 50 in his pursuit and has yet to find a proper job.

A. Ask him to come to Karachi and become a mugger. It's a growing profession, and employment is immediate. But seriously, beyond this, I can only advise prayers for his early and eternal departure from your life.

The end

Haroon Khalid Akhtar is the award-winning novelist of 'Melody of a Tear' and 'The Liar's Truth' & tweets @Haroontheauthor

About the author:

I am an award-winning author. My novel 'Melody of a Tear' won the UBL best debut fiction award in 2020 and enjoyed a 4.3/5 rating on Goodreads. I have also authored the anthology 'Threadbare' and another novel 'The Liar's Truth'. My late father, Mohammad Khalid Akhtar, is a well-known Urdu fiction writer who also won the Adamjee Literary Award and several others.

Professionally, I am a banker, working in a leading bank and heading its Compliance and Financial Crime function. I occasionally also write for Dawn.



FICTION

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THE ISOLATED CAVES

Tahreem Sadat

"Professor, even if it's several hundred meters down the mountain and will not affect the environment in any way, it will kill you." Najaf was not letting her go for the experiment.

"Najaf, please, try to understand. I will not be exposed directly to the radiation. And why do we have these uniforms, huh?" She was adamant to go for it.

"It's just a CBRN, Shama, don't forget that you could not get a StemRad Gamma Solution. There's still time. Please back out." He was begging now, but Shama was as determined as she had always been.

"Why do you always have to be stubborn, Shama?" He sighed and collapsed in a revolving chair beside the large table with screens and computer systems connected with bundles of wires. The same cables go to half a dozen large rectangular machines on the cave's rocky floor.

Shama turned her head from one of those processing units with lights blinking on them and looked at him. "I am determined, not stubborn, Mr. Najaf." She glared at him and inserted a cable into a port of the processor.

"I don't understand. What kind of determination is that? You are putting yourself in danger. This is outrageous."

She did not reply to him and kept working with the cables.

He began after a pause, calmly this time. "Look, Dr. Shama, I know I am your junior, but what you are doing is sheer madness." He looked helpless. "I cannot let you perform fission reaction in a self-established illegal reactor hundreds of meters under this mountain range in an isolated cave just because you want to reverse time and go back in the past. You know the 'oracles' will get to know, and they will come for you surely, even if you survive it." He paused and took a deep breath.

Shama turned away from the processor and settled in the chair in front of the four screens, and revolved it toward Najaf.

"Najaf, you see it as madness, but you don't see what caused it. I need to reverse the time to reverse the damages done to me, to my unconscious." She was calm, too, knowing that she had initiated the process. "The fission here in the reactor will be safe." She started to explain to him. "I have calculated everything and have measured all the dangers. The reason I chose this salt range cave is that no elements found here will be a direct threat to the procedure. I have a detailed report. The fission will produce a huge amount of energy, with the help of which the time will be able to flow back to a state of lower entropy. I know this is against...."

Najaf could not let her finish her sentence and interrupted hurriedly. "What are you even thinking, lady?" He moved forward in his chair and held his head in his hands.

"I haven't finished yet. Listen to me first.." She continued.

"I know this is against the second law of thermodynamics; this is where fission comes in. The huge amount of energy will make it possible. What is entropy? Disorders of the system? Chaos? What is this? This all is the increased amount of haphazard energy in the system. The energy from fission will come in contact with the increased haphazard energy of the system, and both will nullify each other. When the system's increased energy is nullified, entropy will be automatically reduced, causing a spontaneous flow of time in the backward direction. I have all the calculations of probability, entropy, time, energy from uranium, etc., here." She picked up a stapled pile of papers from the table in her hand and waved it.

He straightened his back and took a deep breath. "Are you sure the increased chaotic energy will be enough to match the energy from Uranium fission to cancel it out?" He inquired in a deep voice.

"Now we are talking. I am glad you are finally thinking about what you just called madness." She smirked and put the papers down on the table.

He rolled his eyes at her, and she giggled.

"I have calculated it..." She was back to the topic now. "and... don't you think the energy of the Time flowing forward is huge in amount, the pain it inflicts upon us humans, suffering it causes.. even mere existence is a burden that often turns into a crisis and alters a human completely, transforming the consciousness. Wouldn't this huge energy match the energy released during uranium fission?" She seemed lost somewhere.

"For heaven's sake, would you keep philosophy aside from science?" He rolled his eyes, putting his head on the back of the chair.

"How can it be kept aside when philosophy is what science is based on." She said plainly.

"Alright, alright." He lifted his hands in surrender. "You can go ahead with it if you have calculated and planned everything." He remarked, looking at his watch.

"I am not asking for your approval. I am just showing you that this is possible." She seemed serious.

"Of course this is. Just watch out for the 'oracles'. You know they will come for you after it. How can the authorities let you put the systems and structures they have established at risk." He said matter-of-factly.

"I'll handle them." She was confident.

Najaf had left the site because she wanted to work alone on the project. It was hers alone, and she did not want to involve anyone because it would be wrong to make someone else face the consequences along with her if anything went wrong. She had initiated the process when he was here, and now she was staring at the changing numbers on one of the monitors screen, tapping her right foot impatiently, clad in a yellow CBRN suit. She was waiting for the reaction to reach a certain point so that she could go to the processor tube when the backward flow of entropy would initiate. The reactor, tube, and small part of the plant for fuel were in other parts of the cave.

Suddenly she felt a vibration under her feet. She stopped and looked here and there. The figures on another screen nearby were changing quickly. She rushed to it and started typing something hurriedly. "No, no, no, no...." She started panicking. "I must remain calm and see what should be done." She told herself loudly amid the rumbling.

"How can these rocks be unstable." She was sitting in the chair with her eyes fixed on a page from the stapled pile of papers on which she had printed all the calculations. She found out the reason and started tapping her index finger on it.

"Isolation. The reason that these rocks have turned out to be less stable than the mountain is that these are isolated from the rest of the mine." She pronounced to herself. Her fingers were running rapidly on the keyboard, and the clicking sound was fading under the vibrations, which were getting stronger every minute. After a moment, she paused and looked around. The cave seemed to have taken a breath as the rumbling stopped for a while.

She had a victorious smile on her face. "Ah! I stopped it." but the next moment, the rocky floor began shaking more forcefully, followed by loud rumbling and blasts. It was all dark then.

"Open your eyes, Shama." A deep voice told her. She did not know where she was. It seemed all grey around. Was she standing or lying? She could not tell. Were her eyes closed, then how could she see the various hues of grey mist around? She managed to open her eyes after trying a couple of times. The grey haze around her illuminated softly. Her feet were not on the ground, but she was not in the air either. A woman-like creature appeared in front of her. Her face was as soft as white cotton cloud. She was clad in purple, a light purple between lavender and lilac. Such a soft colour that she felt bliss in her presence. Her wings were soft violet, and it appeared as if they would fly her away swiftly any moment. She looked at Shama with a tender half-smile.

"Who are you?" Shama finally asked her. "Are you the oracle? You don't look like them."

"I am from the realm of dreams." The angel-like creature whispered, but Shama could hear her. "Why are you here? Why am I here?" She looked around curiously.

"I know the cave collapsed, and the reactor is buried down. They will soon take you out, don't worry. I am here to guide you, and I am not the oracle." She took a step toward her. Shama could hear her now clearly.

"You were right in your calculations, but what is the point in going back in time and reversing what was done." Shama needed clarification on what she meant exactly. "It has done much damage." She replied helplessly.

"Do you think going back in time will erase those damages? Do you believe so?" She inquired.

"I don't know... I can... I want to." Shama did not know what to say. Her eyes were staring into the air.

"You want to. But are you sure you can?" She paused for a moment.

Shama looked at her face.

"If you go back in time and change the course of events. Will it reverse your pain? Will it reverse your suffering? Will it?" After a moment's pause, she began again.

"My dear, the course of life is marked by suffering. Our very existence is marked by suffering. Even if you manage to change the course of events in your life, you cannot escape it. It will come after you one way or another." She looked deep into Shama's eyes.

"I feel so helpless." Shama did not know what else to say. She took a deep breath and spoke again.

"I feel too much. I feel too much that I wonder how the earth is revolving steadily around its axis while I am falling apart. How is no star imploding while I am crushed to my core? I am shattered. Life has worn me out. I am but a tattered cloth now." Her voice became low toward the end.

"Universe is indifferent, my dear. Whatever the driving force of the universe you believe in is indifferent." She was still speaking calmly.

"I cannot accept it. I cannot embrace it, this...this indifference, this futility." She wondered if the words were enough and suitable to convey what she wanted.

"Embracing it is difficult, but it does not change the fact that this is the nature of life." Shama felt as if the calm voice reached her ears from far away.

"So...it goes on like this. Life goes on like this." Her voice sounded unfamiliar to her.

"Yes, life goes on like this." Words sounded like they were fading behind her mind, along with the woman and greyish mist around her.

Tahreem Sadat is an aspiring writer who writes Urdu and English poetry apart from short stories in English. She is currently pursuing MPhil in American Studies from Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad.



CREATURES IN THE TALL GRASS

Mussarat Shahid

'Ouch!' Sneaky screamed, as his mother Mrs. Cobra pulled his skin. 'Can you not stay still?' You are not letting me do this,' Mrs. Cobra seemed to have lost her calm. Her tongue slithered in and out of her mouth exposing her nasty fangs, as she tried hard to get the skin off from Sneaky's slimy body. Mrs Cobra had tried to make Sneaky understand that the skin sheds on its own, it was just a matter of time. But her son was not ready to listen and had insisted that the skin be taken off immediately.

"Come on Ma!" Sneaky's cry punched at his mother's heart, and she was at it again, tearing the skin with her tongue and her fangs.

'Why did we have to be so weird?' Sneaky beat his tail on the ground in frustration, 'I hate myself; I have seen only eight seasons so far and have shed my skin as many times, already.'

'Don't be a thankless fool,' hissed Mrs. Cobra. 'It's all for good reason, can't you see?' Realizing that her son was genuinely perturbed at this sloughing of his skin, she started caressing Sneaky by rolling her tongue on his body affectionately.

"Good reason!" Sneaky snickered. 'Then why are we the only ones to shed our skin, who else suffers like us?'

It was midday and the hottest day of Mrs Cobra's life, so far. The shade of the Bunyan tree was soothing, and the grass underneath was also cool but the heat was unbearable and scorched the skin. She wished she could glide down in her pit and rest. But of course, first she had to attend to her son. She looked fondly at him, 'look up at this tree, do you remember the tree had shed all its leaves in the winter,' Mrs Cobra, continued, thoughtfully, as Sneaky nodded meekly 'just like a tree, whose old leaves fall and new take their place, our skin needs to shed to make way for the new covering.' Mrs Cobra's response seemed to have satisfied Sneaky.

'Trees don't suffer, like we do, do they?' Sneaky was not someone to give up so easily. He looked questioningly at his mom, as he wriggled and writhed in an effort to get the skin out of the way.

'You know what son, everything suffers, when it grows.' Mrs Cobra, now had her thinking cap on. 'Do you think this tree, this one, under whose shade we find relief, grew so tall without going through any pain?' Mrs Cobra now had Sneaky's full attention.

'A caterpillar has to struggle to escape from the cocoon in which it is imprisoned to become a butterfly. Look at the pain the poor caterpillar must go through. You just shed your skin; the caterpillar undergoes a transformation. It has to struggle to break away from the shell. Imagine a creature so tiny fighting for its life all on its own, a lone warrior, whose survival depends on the fight he puts up to escape the captivity. But look at the reward, the ugly caterpillar changes into a beautiful butterfly and flies away free to enjoy the colours of life. Anyone watching Mrs Cobra could see that she was trying her best to get her son to understand that what he was going through was nothing new. Every living specie must endure pain and suffering to grow and change.

The penny had finally dropped.

'Phew!' Thanks Ma, I see what you mean.' I can go through this shedding of skin anytime, it's no big deal, Sneaky felt free as he imagined a trapped caterpillar struggling to come out of the cocoon and silently thanked his lucky stars for being born a snake. Relieved that she had been able to satisfy her son, Mrs. Cobra crawled into her cool and peaceful burrow to escape the heat.

In all this talk of suffering and pain, Sneaky had forgotten everything else. He rubbed himself against the tree to slither out of his skin but then remembered his mom's advice that it was just a matter of time, so Sneaky let it be. It wasn't at all as big a deal as he was making it. Sneaky laughed at himself for the unnecessary argument about shedding of skin he had had with his mother. And precisely at that time, he felt a pang in his gut. No other thought had crossed his mind up until now but with the worry about the skin over, his stomach shrieked for food.

Luckily for Sneaky, right at this minute, a grasshopper, oblivious to what was waiting for him, jumped out of the glades of grass, and landed inside Sneaky's mouth. "Yummy", Sneaky enjoyed the crunchy snack. He then slid through the grass and searched for something more filling. Deep in the grass, hidden from the naked eye was a mouse, who sat quietly munching at something.

Sneaky, who was an expert at stealth operation, approached the poor mouse and wrapped his tail tightly around the poor rodent, who breath his last in a flash. Now this was Sneaky's idea of a scrumptious meal. He swallowed the mouse in one gulp and lay flat on his stomach enjoying the many symphonies that kept the forest abuzz and alive. Lulled by the chirping of birds, rustling of leaves, buzzing of the bees Sneaky's eyes locked on a beautiful plant.

Lo and behold! He was rudely awakened, when the plant pounced at him and had Sneaky's neck tightly gripped in its sharp claws. Gagging and breathing heavily, Sneaky tried to wrap himself around the plant that had now changed from the colour green to red, but his body was flailing and he didn't have any energy left to give this deceptive plant the 'killer hug.' Upon a closer look, he realized that the creature who was about to end his life wasn't a plant at all. It was a chameleon! He remembered his mom educating him about these deceptive creatures, who had an inborn ability to change their colour according to the surroundings. He tried to recollect the word his mom had used for this ability... 'cam... o...', he squeezed his eyes shut and tried to remember the word. This was his way of distracting himself from the pain he was feeling. Ouch! the pressure on his neck was increasing and all Sneaky could think of his eyes droopy with pain, was, how lucky to be a chameleon. Its skin doesn't shed, it simply changes its colour.

CAMOUFLAGE! That was it, that was the word his mom had taught him. They blend in with the environment and make it hard to spot. His mother had also told him that they use this technique to disguise as something else, as well.

This is the reason, Sneaky thought he had seen a plant, when it was this bugger. He thought about his mother with a fondness he had never felt before. She was some 'Snake,' and he will miss her. He was sad that he couldn't tell her how much he admired and loved her.

And, just when the nasty creature was about to devour his prey, Sneaky decided to give it a last try and escape the bloody claws. He twisted his body and regardless of the claws digging deep into his neck, he managed to slide out of the lethal talons of the Chameleon and in a flash of a second, disappeared in the grass. It was a miraculous escape! As soon as Sneaky glided out of sight, he stole a look at the 'crime scene.' Surprisingly the only evidence that remained was his shriveled skin. The creature was nowhere to be seen. 'It's all for good reason, indeed,' Sneaky repeated his mom's words, but this time he was saying them with conviction. The sounds of the forest had come back as well, Sneaky danced his way to his burrow excited to tell his mother all about his adventure.

After having successfully completed an MPhil in educational leadership and school improvement from the University of Cambridge, Mussarat joined the FC College University in September 2019, as the Head of the Writing & Communication Center. Mussarat, along with a team of tutors, facilitates the FCCU (Forman Christian College University) students in the writing process by providing feedback on assignments, helping them with formatting and arranging one-on-one tutoring sessions, etc.



BANO AND THE SHADOW OF DARKNESS

Maheen Zeeshan

Bano vividly remembers the day she went for a stroll with her father along the shore. The moonlight made the waves glow, and the silence was surreal. The calming effect of the sea drifted the tiredness off Bano's shoulders.

The waves came close and touched the golden sand. Bano and her father comforted their soles with each step on the wet, soft sand. The moon gazed down at them, the stars twinkled, and the waves whispered softly. The sea had a soothing effect on Bano and she wished the moment would be locked forever.

The daughter and father duo were lost in their chatter. Bano held her father's hand tight, and she felt secure. Suddenly Bano heard a sound. She turned around and was baffled to see her own shadow. As they walked a few more steps, the same shrieking sound of bottles was heard again. Bano and her father looked around and there was no one. They could hear something, but it was not visible. All petrifying thoughts that Bano had buried in her subconscious mind, chased her now. A zombie, a witch, a vampire! Maybe a witch wearing anklets was chasing them.

A shiver ran down her spine. Bano's father was worried that a thief was after them. As they increased their pace, the sound followed them. They started running towards their car. They reached their car and so did the loud sound. This is it! Bano thought. My imaginary ghost from the Dark Valley is coming to life! Farewell world, I am being hunted now. Bano prayed and prayed. Her dad was puzzled too. As they opened the door of the car, they heard a loud voice: "Bhai Sahib". Great, now my dad is from the ghost fraternity. "Array, Bibi." Now this was alarming. The ghost was bonding with them. With a lump in her throat, Bano turned around.

"I have been chasing you, but you didn't stop. I have khalass baddam ka tayl (pure almond oil) in these bottles for your malish(massage)."

Bano and her father looked at the glass bottles and broke into a fit of laughter. The masseur got terrified at their reaction and ran away making the same sound.

Note: #Karachi Peeps, this tayl wala is a common sight at Seaview.

My first book "Charlie and the chocolate factory", guess I read it a thousand times. I welcomed teens to Sweet Valleys and Archie comics. Had my little fairy kingdom with my books. My first story was published in Young World part of Dawn Newspaper. I was over the moon and yet every congratulatory call on our old school wired phone turned me red with embarrassment! The title didn't go well among family "My first Crush". Some praised my writing style while others criticised my modern thinking! Did this stop me? Nah I was least bothered...continued writing...

After my MBA in 2006 I joined a prestigious bank in Pakistan as a management trainee. Yet again had the best time of learning, exploring, making new friends and accelerating in my career. 2010 Boom! Married and landed in South Korea...2023, lived a life of nomad and nailed tent in 5 countries. My career had its own share of ups and downs! 2016 started writing and in 2023 a published author of six books by Oxford University Press, conducted several online and on campus sessions in Pakistan, UAE and Canada, and laid foundation of expat platforms.



SUICIDE NOTE

Ahmed Salar

They say suicide notes are directed to those that one loves or that one hates or those that were responsible for giving you no other choice. I do not think I can hate. There was often indignation, I was disrespected. But I never hated. I never believed that I was capable of hating. And what of hate anyway? It is a fleeting emotion. People are so small with their feeble affairs of hatred. And what do they hate anyway? The body? The soul? Or the way the other person shows an image of themselves? No, I cannot hate. If there were any demons of hatred inside my heart, the angels in my head would have exorcised them. And I don't think anyone is responsible for this letter either. I am making this choice, me! It is MY will that I want to materialize by committing suicide. It is the only choice that I finally feel free to make. And no one is responsible for your freedom. No one can give it to you. It is just there. And I am taking it!

By the process of elimination then, it must be love, right? But I do not love a person or a thing. How can my love be so small, so contained? If I am to love, then it must be the world, with all its infinitude. And I do love you, dear world, with all my skin and bones, everything inside and everything in-between.

Dear world, there is so much that you have to offer, and paltry I can give in return. I heard about hammered dulcimers in the East and the relaxing tune that they play, and the teleporting pan flutes that take you to the celestial realms of Hanan Pacha to meet the sun, the moon, the stars, the rainbow, and lightning. And other than the Jupiter Symphony of Mozart, Eroica by Beethoven, and the Goldberg Variations by Bach, there are innumerable symphonies and compositions out there that touch the very substance your soul is made of. But dear world, I would not be able to hear them all. And even if I do manage to hear a tiny proportion, I am afraid I am incapable of appreciating them as they deserve, for I am only a human, with all its ebbs and flows, that cannot always dance or constantly ponder in morbid melancholy.

And how I wish to dance and rhythmically beat my heels like a flamenco ballerina, gracefully waltz with a temptress to a simple but seductive melody of a cello, and manfully bellow the roars of a haka with my fellow warriors. I cannot even express in words how I wish the rhythm to take over me, let alone in movements. And my limited expression does not belong to the lack of words either. The suits, the ties, the dresses, the skirts, the kilt, the uniforms, the kanzu, the yukata, the sherwani, and many others that my memory fails to recall – I cannot let them adorn me for the so-many earthly restraints.

And those restraints do not allow me to capture with my own eyes the blue serenity of the Jiuzhaigou lake, dressed around in many shades of green, the mystical ice flats in Salt flats at Salar de Uyuni, the diverse floral beauty of the Hitachi Park, the rejuvenating Hot Springs in Rotura, or the icy grimness encompassing the Svalbard. And these are only a handful. So many places and so many lives that I do not get to live like that of a warrior, or a painter, a dancer, a traveler, a sculptor, a leader, a trickster, and the most vital one of all, a lover. How my love has been constricted to such an extent when I know that I can give so much more. Do you understand now? Do you understand even a little?

Oh, world! How I yearn to say so much more, but I was never good with words. They always left me when I needed them most, only to return with consuming emotion of guilt, eating what was left forsaken. If I were a poet, I would not even have the need for this incessant rambling. Poems do capture you the best, don't they, dear world? And I concede that I am jealous of those poets. Why do they have to see much of you and still be able to create for themselves and you in verses while I rot in my ineptitude? Heavens are separated from the Earth and darkness from the light, and from these poets, I shall also take my flight. I am a jealous lover, world, and unashamedly so. Oh God, how terrible this love is –

But God? Where is God? How could I love so much of you, dear world, if there was a God? I am sure my love to the point of killing myself is a testament to there being no God. You see, the universe is so big with so many stars and galaxies, and when they end, black holes come to take their place. The vastness of the universe has no bounds though who knows what is beyond the expanse? How can there be any space left for something mighty?

The last thing I would like to say my dear world is that don't mourn my loss. I know I was important to you. But my love will only drag me down to something you will come to hate. And I cannot become that. I want you to remember me as I was, your fervent lover who wanted to do so much...but couldn't.

Now that I am writing the final lines, I am beginning to feel a vibrant surge of emotions. I feel hate for the poets and starting to deem you responsible, oh world. Why does the trigger feel so heavy to pull and who is this man that wishes to kill himself now?

It was a mournful Sunday afternoon, with the sky covered in grey stratus clouds. Somebody seemed to have told the weather that a funeral for a suicide was being held in town. More than grief, it was a surprise that a man such as him could kill himself. In his life, everything was proceeding towards the conventional definition of a successful life; he had a budding career as a financial analyst in a multi-corporate company, a beautiful wife that was empathetic to his eccentric demeanor, a house in the suburbs, great parents, and caring siblings. This baffled people. And where there are baffled people, there are also speculations as to the reasons behind the deed. How else are attendees to the funeral to pass their time except in disrespectful but hushed idle chatter?

"I heard that he was dealing with a lifetime of [mental illness] and seeing the perfectionist parents that he, they did not want the unsavory image of an internal flaw to spread around."

"[Mental illness]? That sounds absolutely absurd! I met the guy on a couple of occasions. The chap showed an excellent understanding of what the right way is to live in society. Even if he were suffering, he had the right wits about him to consult a professional?"

The third one spoke, "Sometimes, even the most sensible of people become unable to recognize what goes around them. Just shows how vicious such diseases are. Even if you have the best around you, it still does not seem enough, does it? Oh, and that poor wife of his—"

"What about her?" the first one intervened. "If she really was so great that people make her out to be, she should have sensed something wrong with him. It really does show that she is not an angel that people make her out to be."

Suddenly, a fourth one listening to the conversation nearby came to drop in his thoughts. "Regardless of what you say, the man showed that he did not dare to face the realities of life. He was a coward to have run away from everything that was burning him. They often say the brave die young, but it seems that this is only said by cowards because they are envious of the brave."

All the previous three were shocked and disgusted at the remarks of the fourth. How dare he disrespect the dead and his family. A few harsh words were said, and gestures made as the rest of the funeral proceeded.

A recent graduate of Quaid-I-Azam University School of Law and a practicing lawyer in Islamabad, Ahmed Salar is also a passionate fiction writer. He writes to explore and express his emotions, stories, and individuality, as well as to reflect on the society. Writing is not only a way of communication, but also a source of fun and creativity for him.



GONE WITH GRACE

Eisha Mehtab

"Where am I?" The small fawn wakes up from his curled self, with these swollen puffy eyes – the sort that happens when you wake up from a big nap you never should have taken in the middle of the day. The rusty leaves crisp under him as he tries to stand up, half wobbly and half asleep.

Not Only do leaves stick on his body, but the snow too has also camouflaged on his spotty white and brown fur.

"Why is it so cold?" He cleans his eye-crusts on his innocent doe eyes and looks around closely as his pointy ears search for answers.

A thick, frosty forest whispers back. The fawn closes his eyes and stands silent for a minute, taking in the shrieks of the winds. He realizes what has happened and waits for the night to come by desperately to meet the moon. He walks a bit further through the forest, sniffing leaves and collecting icy water on his round black nose. He sneezes and falls.

A little repetitive sound distracting him from the sky, and it startles the weak fawn as he struggles to get up. His spikey ears give up when someone talks.

"It's okay to lay down there for a while." A sparrow finally tweets, flying in sight towards the fawn near a tree branch. "You can always pick yourself up when you find the energy."

The fawn stares at the sparrow and settles down on the snowy grass. "I actually like sitting on the ground." He feels ease; gratitude for not being all alone.

"Are you looking for something here?" He asks after a pause, wondering why the sparrow came to talk.

"I will be migrating soon with my family. It's getting a little too cold here."

The fawn examines all the intricate snowflakes falling in front of him.

"Do you have somewhere to be?" Asks the sparrow, giving in to its curiosity.

"I have to rejoin my herd," he says, now looking out on the horizon at the pale sun covered in fog. "I got lost."

"We all get lost sometimes. Let yourself breathe." The sparrow flies down at the fawn and sits on his fur as he looks at her in awe. She gives him a small worm she had found and easily makes herself comfortable with her wings settling on the fur.

The fawn smells it and laughs. "That tickles!"

Therein exists a moment of laughter, but the sparrow notices the corners of his sad enormous brown eyes dampen. "How about I fly to the top of the trees and look out for any herds?"

"You would...do that for me?" He smiles gently and his voice cracks.

"Sometimes, you shouldn't have to ask for help for others to give it." She makes a small ball of ice, as big as her tiny wings would let her and aims it at the fawn's nose. "You should just be grateful for the help."

The sparrow winks at him and flies upwards. The fawn stands, waving at the sparrow as she soars.

After a few minutes of silence, the sparrow returns and nods sideways, silently hovering over the fawn. "I am sorry. Do you want me to sit with you or do you want to be alone?"

"You don't have anything to be sorry about. I am glad you are here. I would love it if you sat with me silently."

The fawn and sparrow find a comfortable spot in the middle of the forest as the day darkens.

"Do you like migrating to the South?" The fawn asks.

"It's warm and there's more possibility of finding food. But can I tell you a secret?"

The fawn nods. The sparrow chirps happily, "I love the winter – it brings you closer to love. The in-betweenness of the cold breeze when you are safe and warm in a tree trunk makes me feel whole."

"I never thought anyone can make winter sound lovely."

"But come, it's getting dark. Let's find the lake, I know a place near there with lights. Some kind people also leave blankets under the lamp posts." The sparrow is already ahead, and the fawn follows her quietly as they slowly move out of the thick forest onto a water body. The water dances softly in the lake, and the sparrow sings a song which makes the fawn fall asleep on a soft blanket, admiring the moonlight.

When the cold morning sun glistens, the fawn stretches, waking up the sparrow still lingering on his soft fur.

"You have places to go, and yet you are by my side when you don't have to be." The fawn whispers quietly.

"I have to be," The sparrow replies, "I have to be until I don't."

This gives him peace and heartache at the same time. "Well, then until I have you here, let's make the most of it!"

The water in the lake starts making irregular waves, and soon after a black swan emerges. The fawn and sparrow are startled. Its red beak brightens up the icy whites and blues. It doesn't see the two creatures staring at her. She makes way for herself, majestically alone and unfazed. A ruffle of wind ignites the sparrow to fly towards the lake, and the black swan notices.

"Are you okay?"

"The winds love to take me places. I will be fine."

The fawn looks at them from a distance, wondering how the black fur of the swan glistens so bright and how the sparrow hovers over it like a dot. Unknowingly, the fawn moves forward trying to get a closer look and before he notices, he splashes into the lake. The rapids flow like they are catching a train, and the fawn cannot control the speed. He sways along with the waves and yells.

The black swan lifts its wings and flies in the fawn's speeding direction. The thick black fur opens to show the white fur lurking beneath, and it is a magnificent sight. The sparrow tweets and chirps in haste, not knowing what to do.

The fawn manages to hold onto a giant rock. Its hooves are not ideal to let them stay glued for more than a minute.

"Grab my feet and hold on tight!" The swan orders the fawn, and he listens, holding onto dear life as he shuts his eyes. The swan takes off and they both fly. The fawn opens one of its big eyes slowly, scared but safe, taking in the cool breeze and the view.

"Whoa, I wish I was able to look at the world this way all the time!"

"A change of perspective is always needed when caught in a problem." The black swan responds. Suddenly, the swan loses balance, and before mistakenly dropping the fawn in the lake again, it picks up a flight to the landside. The sparrow catches up and notices something on the swan's legs.

"Are you hurt?" She asks the swan.

"I am. But it is nothing I cannot handle."

"Oh oh, look! A worm!" She rushes towards it and comes back burping. "It's yummier in winter, and I don't know why!"

Everyone laughs. The sparrow gleefully makes up another snowball while the swan's back is turned. The fawn is busy making his own on the other side. When she is happy with a softball, she throws it playfully at the swan. The swan freezes and lets out a scream. He is terrified and runs far away as quickly as he can.

"Oh I am sorry, I did not mean to hurt you." The sparrow feels ashamed and shocked at the black swan's unprecedented reaction. The swan goes out of sight, leaving the fawn and the sparrow to look for it and make sure he is okay.

"I know you meant to play with him, don't worry. Let's hope we find him soon." The fawn comforts the sparrow who is shaking because of what she did. They find him an hour later, behind a bush with his head tucked back under a wing. The footsteps alarm him again and he looks at the sparrow with his red beak unable to speak.

"I came here to apologize. I should have been careful." The sparrow comes in front after hiding behind the fawn's back. She places yet another worm she found on her hour-long search and goes back behind the fawn, peeking with one eye.

"No, it's my fault. I am sorry. I...I overreacted."

The fawn comes closer, comfortable enough to place his front hooves softly over the fawn's thick shiny black fur. "It's not your fault. And you did not overreact. It's okay."

"I have been harmed. They come to look at my appearance. And they bring rocks with their bread." He looks at his injured legs. "I wasn't like this before. I used to be brave, and I held my head up high."

The sparrow comes nearer. "Thank you for sharing something personal with us, we will keep it safe. You don't have to fear us."

"Thank you. This feels peaceful." The black swan opens up from his shell, hugs the fawn in one wing and reaches out to the sparrow in the other. They sit there in a warm embrace, telling each other their stories.

"Do you think the moon misses us?" The fawn asks abruptly in the middle of a conversation about migrating.

"Why do you love the moon so much?" The sparrow asks. "I saw you looking at it throughout the night."

"I haven't told anyone this before." He says, with his heart on his sleeve.

"That's okay. You don't have to." The black swan taps his head with its large wings.

He gets up and faces them both, sitting in a semi-circle. "My mother told me tales about the moon's phases all the time. About how the full moon would help me find her if I ever got lost. That the moon will be my compass. I look at the moon like a prayer. I don't know if it listens, but even if it doesn't, I cannot take my eyes off it sometimes."

"So, what really is bothering you? Is your mother missing you?" The black swan raises its head.

"Of course, she does. Maybe she is looking for you too." The sparrow nods her head and chimes in. She slowly makes her way on the swan's fur and sits. It annoys the swan off a little, but he doesn't say anything.

He likes having her around, and he knows she is playfully annoying him on purpose. "Being missed is a fortune."

The fawn stops to smell a few black roses that have been frozen in the snow. The sparrow can't resist and follows him.

"We have a problem," She stops mid-flight and freezes in the air.

"Let me guess. You caused it?" The fawn tittered, not looking at the sparrow.

She flies hurriedly towards the fawn. "I just saw a wolf coming this way. He does not look happy."

The fawn signals the black swan to move away, and they both follow the sparrow in the opposite direction. A loud howl makes them pause, but they are walking, hand in hand, hearing their heartbeats.

The gray wolf is fast, thick-furred, and alone. His howls reach you in your heart and thump. While the three friends try to make their escape, they fail to take into account the wolf's cleverness. He suddenly pops up right in front of them, staring them in the face. The fawn pauses first. The sparrow hides under the black swan's wings, and they become still as statues.

The wolf comes nearer, his nose sniffing every scent and his teeth grinding. The fawn closes its eyes and his legs shake. The black swan retains its composure and looks the wolf in the eye as he examines the three, going in circles. Once. Twice. Thrice.

After the fourth round, he yawns, smells something, and leaves them. The sparrow lifts a feather upwards and peeks. The tiny creature becomes angry and yells at the wolf. The fawn and black swan face palm and freeze yet again. "Why are you scaring us?" She asks, bravely.

The wolf looks back and stares at a little bird, chirping at him. He smirks, laughs and silently goes away.

"Well, I certainly won't miss him!" The fawn says, letting out a huge sigh of relief.

"You have the biggest and bravest heart out of us, sparrow. You're crazy, and I love you for that!" The black swan speaks in awe.

"Sometimes, you shouldn't let stupid things take over your heart. Don't let people walk over you. Don't take what you cannot handle." The sparrow says and looks a little surprised at herself too. "If you can't say it, I will say it for you!"

"I wish I was more like you." The fawn says, still looking at the return of the wolf and seeing if he is lingering nearby. "But I can't help but think why the wolf left us without doing anything. Do you think it smelt more food somewhere else?"

No one answers him. They all decide to get out of there while the black swan leads the way, the fawn's thoughts still lingering in over their heads. When they reach the lake, an adult deer is looking over the horizon, in search of something. They cannot see it clearly yet, but the fawn's eyes brighten and twinkle.

"That's her, That's mama!" He runs faster and faster, leaving the swan and the sparrow behind, who start to slow down. Before the fawn could feel happy, he remembers the wolf. "She might be in danger!"

"Mama, I am here!" The fawn cries out. She looks back and joins him for a long embrace.

"My baby, how did I lose you? Are you safe? Are you okay?" She looks for any sign of injury when suddenly, the wolf emerges from the back of the thick forest trees. The fawn turns white and shivers again. The mama deer looks at the wolf in the eyes and stays firm on the ground, protecting her baby. The swan and sparrow come near the deer and stand in front. The sparrow yells, "We aren't scared of you!"

Upon hearing this, a host of swans emerges, covering the entirety of the pond. Its almost as if an army had formed to come and save their dear friend from the deadly wolf who appears to be shocked upon the sight in front of his eyes.

If the swans weren't daunting enough, within the next few seconds, from a thick three nearby, a swarm of bees' head towards the direction of the wolf and as his pointy ears register the buzzing sound approaching him, he makes a run to save himself.

As the wolf sprints away from them, the mama deer embraces the fawn, and asks all of them to come for a hug. "We are safe."

"Thank you for protecting us, my dear friends." They all express their gratitude and the fawn is then joined by his mother.

"I am afraid it's time for us to go. Everyone's waiting for us past the forest." The mother pushes the fawn towards them with her nose. "I will give you time to say your goodbye."

The fawn is in shambles as he walks towards the swan and the sparrow. "Why do we have to part ways?"

The black swan hugs him. "That's the design of living and becoming. Some of us will enter your life only to leave soon after forever. Most of your life will be spent making peace with it, but that's okay. I will remember you if you remember me."

"I will remember you." He says, crying.

His eyes water, and when he cleans them, he looks at an innocent worm staring at him on the ground. He immediately looks up to see the sparrow crying too.

"No snowballs for me?"

The sparrow bursts into tears and laughter before she makes one final snowball to throw at the fawn's nose.

The sparrow looks over at the swan towards the clouds to see her host twittering. "I think it's time for me to leave too."

"I may not see you again, but you will live inside my heart." The fawn lets it out. "I will look at the moon every day we are not together and I will be happy you exist under the same one."

They gracefully part. The black swan finds his way back to the lake. The sparrow joins the sky, and the fawn disappears into the thick forest.

"Will you meet your friends again?" The fawn's mother asks as they walk.

"I will never be able to see them again. But I will always love them with all my heart. I will look for the sparrow in the skies. I will find the black swan in the water. I will listen to the unspoken winds and remember the wolf. I will spend my life in the comfort of remembrance. The thought alone makes me feel whole and I think that means, I am ready to go home."

On their journey back, the fawn stares at the full moon, happiest he has ever been.

THE POSSESSED SINNER OF ZARD HAVELI

Rubab Raza

A Psychological Gothic Story

*"We make up horrors to help us cope
with the real ones".*

Stephen King

July 12, 1990

Thursday

What a scary night it was, indeed! A thunderous and wild storm, chilling and piercing winds, deafening lightning, deserted road, and four timid, drenched, and terrified souls trembling with fear and holding one another's hands were trying to make their way towards their home. Amma was in the lead, trying to balance her all-black chadar with her left and adjusting her brown shoulder bag with her right hand. She was supported by the dearest Phatte (our ancient and loyal maid) while I was following both the ladies, trying to catch their footsteps and holding Nana's frail, feeble and wrinkled hand in the tight grip of my frosty cold hand. It was the 2nd of Muharram and 7:30 in the evening when we left the bungalow of Kazmi Sahab, where a female Majlis-e-Aza was hosted to observe the arrival of the holy month of mourning. The distance between Kazmi Sahab's bungalow and our residence, Begum Manzil, was no more than a twenty-minute walk with a few turns on the main road; therefore, instead of waiting for our driver and despite Begum Kazmi's offer of a ride, Amma and Nana decided to go for a hurried march towards home. Hence the women, all dressed up in black (and Nana in a black cotton saree), commenced a road trip towards Begum Manzil on foot. We had just taken the first turn of our route when an army of valiant showers hit us, and that twenty-minute journey, considered no big deal in normal circumstances, seemed to us no less than a tiresome and frightening expedition.

Amid that brutal and ferocious storm, Nana, in an attempt to gather her fluttering saree, all of a sudden placed one of her feet in a puddle of muddy water and within the following fraction of a second, despite my meagre and certainly insufficient efforts to hold her, landed herself in a deep pit of the road full of muddy and sanitary water.

Phatte hastened to help her, lifted Nana up and later held Nana's hand until we reached our destiny; Amma was so much concerned if any mortal had watched this scene of shame and adjusted her black chadar closer to her forehead while I was initially shocked and then full of remorse and regret at my inadequacy in being the supporting companion to Nana. The state of annoyance and irritation because of failure in fulfilling the duty assigned to me arrested my heart. Kheran received at the main door, struck with awe and terror as if a vision of some ghostly spirits had been caught. Amma and Nana longed for fresh clothes with a tub of clean water and ordered her to prepare a strong cinnamon tea; most importantly, not to mention the incident in front of any of the male members of the family, hence a secret bond was sealed then among all five of us. The details of that incident will always remain engraved in my memory because I experienced a feeling of inadequacy that night. I never wanted to feel that feeling again and learnt how to keep something private from the male members of the family.

* * * * *

"Hina! O Hina! Where are you? I have some really fresh and urgent gossip to share with you... not gossip but news rather an information... Hina!" It was 11 o'clock in the morning, and sitting in her darkened room, the last of the three on the second floor situated at the right-hand side of the wooden winding staircase, Hina could hear her only friend and cousin, Salma continuously calling her name while crossing the veranda of Bare Abba's portion and entering their tastefully and cautiously kept lawn where Choti Ammuni was taking her sunbath in the company of Bakho, the head maidservant, and observing the preparations for the day's lunch, asking Bakho about the mutton for qorma, along with rice and black lentils and steamed potatoes also inspecting the boiled milk for kheer to be served as dessert after the lunch. Salma adjusted her pistachio green dupatta with white lace above her head. She solemnly paid salam to Choti Ammuni, who was already occupied with Bakho and Khalid, the watchman, trying to understand Khalid's daughter, Shazia's desire to work in a family planning clinic in order to support Khalid with her two younger sisters.

The idea of a family planning clinic seemed bizarre and somewhat blasphemous to Bakho and Choti Ammuni.

Just when Choti Ammuni was about to express her disapproval of the notion, Salma interrupted unknowingly, "Asalam-o-Alaikum Choti Ammuni! Where is Hina? I need to talk to her urgently", and Choti Ammuni turned her guns towards the poor soul. She looked comprehensively at Salma from head to toe and then said, "Ay Sullu, why don't you ever come to meet me specifically? To help Bakho with some kitchen chores or learn, for instance, some skills of stitching and knitting? And by the way, why are you wearing this dark red nail paint? Doesn't your mother say anything to you?" Now Choti Ammuni looked at Bakho to have her endorsement as well and continued, "Listen, girl! We are your well-wishers and want only good for you in future. It is not proper for young maidens like you to wear such bright nail paints or even any item of adornment in the first place. Learn some household skills, dress properly and speak in a low voice... these are the virtues of the noble ladies of our class...." Salma's eyes were lowered, fists closed, listening to a thousand times before hearing the lecture and impatiently waiting for some divine help. After almost an eternity, Choti Ammuni finally came to her favourite topic, "Dear Sullu! My child! It is the question of our family's reputation, and I don't want you to be like Hina..." touching both of her ears. Alternatively, she continued, "God Forbid! Such an outspoken, disobedient and rebellious girl... oh, girls are never like her... arguing with her kind and beloved Chote Abba on every trivial or even grave subject matter which even doesn't fall into her province... exactly like her mother both in appearance and in thought... radical and assertive... no sense of proper dressing...curly, short and dishevelled hair and above all that husky complexion of hers inherited from her mother... repulsive altogether..." continued with a deep sigh, "Alas she is the only reminiscence of my darling, my beloved, Jaffar... we try to be kind and merciful towards the orphan child but she, much like her mother, most of the time keeps herself locked in her damned or, I believe, haunted room... even now at this time of noon she is there... talking to God knows whom". This was the only information which Salma wanted to have. Then, with a promise of not wearing the nail paint again, she rushed towards the wooden staircase with Choti Ammuni's voice following her, "Walk slowly, you little wretch... these girls are never going to learn".

"I know you must be reading a thousand times before rereading your mother's diary... open the damn door, girl!" Salma knocked with all her might at the bolted door and tried to sneak peek between the glass pane of the otherwise wooden door painted in a mud-grey colour. After some time, Hina finally opened the door. For Salma, the state of Hina was a vision she was already accustomed to behold; hair fallen upon red, watery eyes surrounded with dark circles, unwashed face, crumbled royal blue clothes of cotton, sans dupatta and sans slippers. Salma entered the room without any invitation, closed the opened diary on the study table, switched off the table lamp, closed the curtains and opened the windows. "My God, Hina! Are you on some drugs or what? Look at the gloomy atmosphere you have created, and then you complain of terrible nightmares... what else can one expect at this depressed and melancholic place?" The piercing bright sunlight initially made Hina uncomfortable, and she took her time before becoming at ease with it. Rejecting all the comments made by Salma, she came straight to the point, "Why were you enchanting my name amid all the calm and serene atmosphere of Bare Abba's Zard Haveli... these walls apparently don't like to echo this name...." Salma sat on the only rocking chair in the room and said, "O Hina! Why are you always making such sarcastic and negative comments? This haveli is of our ancestors, and we all are so proud to be the descendants of Khan Bahadur Ghazanfar Ali.

You know the entire Jhelum claims that nobility and intelligence run in our blood...." Hina sat upright with her back towards the wooden crown of her giant bed and said with an air of disapproval and irritation, "Oh, the proud descendant! Will you kindly take the pains to mark your and mine existence in the framed Tree of Ancestry hung on the bright green wall of your dear Bare Abba's lounge? My dear sweet cousin! This haveli is the inheritance of your Bare Abba, Iftikhar Ali, then of your father Raza Ali and now of your, beg your pardon, good-for-nothing, alcoholic and Casanova brother, Asim Ali, who knows nothing but to spend the fortune of our ancestors, and dear! We all know how Bare Abba has spent a good deal of his treasure to make him earn his M.B.B.S. degree from such an expensive private medical college to place him equivalent to poor Mahpara Appa.

As far as Chote Abba, Kazim Ali, and his son, Jaffar Ali, are concerned, they have always been treated as second-class residents in this Zard Haveli of yours. And by the way, that tall claims you were making, I do believe that daughters and certainly daughters-in-law are not included in that admiration". Awestruck by this malicious speech, Salma finally managed to brace herself. In a meek, doubtful voice, she said, "I was looking for you to share that I have just overheard the discussion of Bare and Chote Abba. They have decided to hold an extravagant marriage of their grandson and granddaughter... and I felt so excited on the pretext that by the 14th of the coming month, you will be my sisters-in-law".

The revelation fell like an atom bomb on the head of Hina, and without any reflection, she grabbed her blue dupatta, wore her Bata slippers, and set a march towards Bare Abba's lounge, where both of the brothers were still expected to be found. Hina hastily climbed down the stairs, crossed the lounge and the gallery of their portion where the enlarged and framed picture of her deceased father was hanging, entered the veranda of Bare Abba's recently washed and cleaned portion, ignored Bari Ammuni in the courtyard and, without any knock violently smashed open the wooden door of Bare Abba's lounge. Both brothers were startled at this unruly gesture and looked at Hina with the cups of hot tea in their hands with questioning eyes. She at once realized the impropriety of her gesture, and the blazing red eyes of Bare Abba vanished that spirit of defiance she was exhibiting a moment ago. Stupefied at her unthoughtful proceeding, she couldn't muster the courage to hint at her disapproval or, rather, any knowledge of their recent decision.

At last, Chote Abba asked the monosyllable question, "What?" To which she could only reply, "I am feeling anxiety within the four walls of my room. If I am allowed, can I take a trip to Rawalpindi to meet Zubaida Phuppo? A change in place may leave a positive effect on my spirit".

After a bit of reflection and with an air of displeasure, Bare Abba said, "Alright. I will ask Khalid and Bakho to go with you tomorrow early morning. But you should be back till 7th of February. Now leave and learn some manners of fair conduct".

Hina closed the door and, following the same route backwards reached her room.

Salma was gone by then, and she had to do some packing for the following day. While stuffing her clothes and books in a small suitcase, she felt a bit detached from the burden of an imposed marriage. Instead, felt excited to meet Amma and her Phuppo, the only best friend of her late mother, to inquire one last time about the mysterious death of that woman whom nobody wanted to talk about.

It was 10 a.m. when the cool breeze of Askari Scheme III welcomed Hina to the house of Zubaida Phuppo and Shahid Mamoo. Shahid Mamoo was running late for his clinic, which he started after he retired from Pak Army. Therefore, he greeted her at the main gate and immediately rushed to his clinic after escorting her to the living room. Both daughters of Zubaida Phuppo were happily married and blissfully settled in the States for the last three years; therefore, Zubaida Phuppo and Amma were all by themselves in that house. They hugged and kissed Hina, and Tazo, who was the daughter of old Phatte, spread her hand on the head of Hina to bless her. After having a lavish breakfast of puri, channe, halwa and sweet lassi, Bakho and Tazo resided in the kitchen more for gossip and less to make arrangements for the supper. At the same time, Hina moved to the room of Amma with Zubaida Phupoo to extract every drop of affection from the two blessed souls.

Later that night, all of them, including Shahid Mamoo, moved to the cosy living room after dinner. With a plate of dry fruits, qehwa of lemongrass and a gas heater burning at the corner of the room, everyone started talking about the gothic experiences of their past. While everyone was relating his/her supernatural experience Zubaida Phuppo remained distracted. As soon as Shahid Mamoo left the company to take a rest to get up early the next morning and Tazo was called to help Amma to her room Hina grabbed the hands of Zubaida Phupoo and kneeled down in front of her, requesting one more time to unfold the mysterious circumstances of her mother's death, "I beseech you Phupoo... I have made this trip only to make one more attempt to convince you to narrate the death of my beloved mother. This mystery is driving me crazy, and my incongruous dreams are beyond my narration power. By the next month, I will be forcefully married to the vein son of a pretentious family. I don't know what my future has in store for me. Kindly Phuppo do a little favour to your wretched niece". Zubaida Phuppo was initially reluctant but probably tired of the burden of that untold tale; she finally began narrating that complex story.

The affection and proximity between us and your mother's family had always been quite deep-rooted. Right from the time of colonization, the states and castles of both families were considered the ultimate emblem of nobility, power and grace. Therefore, Khan Bahadur Ghazafar Ali, the owner of Zard Haveli, talked to Khan Bahadur Qamar Abbas, the owner of Begum Manzil, to turn this bond of mutual love and respect into a more intimate relationship, and both the possessors decided to hold an exchange marriage of their grandchildren; your mother's with Jafar Ali and mine with Shahid Abbas. Your mother and I soon developed a relationship of trust, a womanly reliance that only the other being of the same gender can understand. She was radical, opinionated, educated, with an aptitude for reading and writing, and had a sharp consciousness and a strong viewpoint regarding the malpractices in our vicinity. Hence as per the destined day, we both got married at Zard Haveli, which your mama's family was already invited earlier as a guest. Thus, we got married, and therefore we got pregnant. When your mother was pregnant with you, one of our servants, Khalid's wife, Phullo, then only 18 years old, died in the labour process during her fourth attempt to produce a male child in the fourth consecutive year of her marriage. Your mother was deeply moved by the death of Phullo and the cruelty and insensitivity of the people around her. Therefore, when you were born, your mother slipped into severe postpartum depression. Nobody and nothing could elevate her spirits which was much inclined towards self-imposed solitude and silence.

By that time, Bare Abba and all were unable to comprehend those psychological complexities. Hence Bari Ammuni diagnosed your mother as being possessed by some evil spirit. Therefore, on the recommendations of Choti Ammuni, Jaffar Bhai and your mother were arranged to be sent to Murree to get her exorcised by a highly effective and famous saint and spiritual healer, then resided in Astana-e-Alia at Patriata, known for his treatment of Jin, Black Magic and incurable diseases. It was when I also gave birth to my first daughter, Mahpara, and your Mamoo suggested I accompany the couple with the perspective that my company and a change of place could be helpful in the recovery of your mother. Hence, I asked Tazo to assist me in taking care of the newborns and joined the couple.

Your Mamoo arranged the cottage where we had to stay. It was the property of one of his batch mates—a deserted, cold and gloomy place with a bit of leaking roof and surrounded by orchards of apples. I remember distinctly soon after stepping into the cottage gallery; your mother requested Jaffar Bhai to lodge in the room on the ground floor opposite the staircase, which had an indigo wallpaper decorated with the drawings of children and the view of the lush green lawn. But Jaffar Bhai snubbed her without a second thought and preferred to stay in the room on the first floor, away from the kitchen and other household disturbances. I helped your mother with her luggage and clearly remember those feelings of discomfort and irritation on her face soon after opening the door of her room with the yellow wallpaper. The idea behind choosing a yellow wallpaper could have been to give a brighter feeling to the room, but your mother certainly didn't feel at peace with the sight.

The following day Jaffar Bhai and I accompanied your mother to Astana-e Alia. The spiritual healer gave us a bottle of holy water and tied a thread around your mother's wrist while continuously enchanting some inaudible Mantra. Jaffar Bhai presented him with a good sum of money, and we returned to our place. I was quite regular in my routine of giving your mother the prescribed drops of holy water, but there was no visible improvement in her melancholic and depressed state. She used to keep herself locked in her room for hours and had no desire to attend to her newborn baby. Even the continuous absence of Jaffar Bhai was never a matter of curiosity for her. One evening after Maghrib prayers, Tazo and I heard some shrieks from her room. We sprinted and tried to open the door, but it was locked. We vehemently knocked at the door, but there were no signs of unlocking, and after some time, the shrieks died. Later that night, when Jaffar Bhai returned home, I reported that incident to him, but he paid no heed to the incident.

The following day when I took breakfast for your mother, she was sitting on her bed, arms crossed and constantly staring at the ruptured yellow wallpaper, which was torn from various points. I sat on the chair beside her bed and held her cold hands.

She turned her face towards me and, with absolute steady eyes, said, "I can see Phullo behind this wallpaper... she is trapped there..."

trying to make her way out of it... asking for my help... then often I see the face of little Shazia... stretching her feeble arms to reach her mother... both of them are crying... looking at me with hopeful eyes... do you think I should help them?" I was moved and said, "May Allah and His chosen ones show mercy to you... close your eyes and try to find peace in sleep, my dear!" I sat with her for a few moments hoping against the hope for her tranquillity.

And then came that accursed day. It was almost lunchtime, and Jaffar Bhai was at home that afternoon for a change. It was a thunderstorm outside, and we were sitting in the TV lounge planning to leave for home the next day when suddenly, we heard the violent, deafening and incomprehensible shrieks coming from your mother's room. All three of us rushed towards it, but her room was locked as expected. Jaffar Bhai tried to open the door with all his force but was useless. Inside the room, it seemed like two to three people were talking simultaneously, enchanting these words on repeat, "I am here for you... I won't let you fall... hold my hand... come out of it... hold it hold it tightly...." From the drawers of the showcase placed in the living room, Jaffar Bhai brought the master key to the room and finally managed to open the door.

I can never forget the sight I witnessed there that day. Your mother's hands and arms were severely wounded, the streams of blood flowing to the back of her elbows... the all-torn yellow wallpaper wrapped around her arms and legs, and she crawled on her four limbs towards the only window of her room. When we entered the room, she looked straight into the eyes of Jaffar Bhai and said, "I have freed her" With these last words, she jumped outside the window, and we found her lying motionless beside the apple tree.

The sight was so frightening for the weak mental strength of Jaffar Bhai, and he fainted at the doorstep.

When the storm broke down the next day, we returned to Zard Haveli with your dead mother, silent Jaffar Bhai, petrified Tazo and two wailing infants. Since it was considered a grave sin to commit suicide and your mother a possessed sinner, Bare Abba declared that nobody in Zard Haveli would ever make a passing reference to your mother. As far as Jaffar Bhai is concerned, he could never really recover from that terrifying sight; therefore, after a year of solitude and isolation, one accursed morning, his heart refused to pump blood to his body, and he was found still in the darkness of his room. So, this, my dear, was the story of your mother's tragic life and death.

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Zubaida Phuppo was gone to her room upstairs at the call of Shaid Mamoo. The mystery of her mother's death was solved. She went to the guest room and, while lying on her bed, reflected upon the tale she had just heard and finally came to the resolution that if she had to change the norms of Zard Haveli, she had to be an integral part of those family dynamics and had to work from within the system to counter the fallacies and delusions prevalent in its vicinity. Her mother was an apt example of a radical outsider who became the victim of Zard Haveli's deep-rooted superstitious mentality. Therefore, her marriage to Asim would be the first challenge to prove herself worthy of the same nobility and intelligence her family was famous for. And the next step would be to help Shazia accomplish her desire, and she knew that she had to fight tough battles with the previous generation of her family. Hina tried to fall into the realms of sleep with a promise to herself to support the weaker women around her in the memory of her mother, whose name was still taboo within Zard Haveli.

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