

# Aporia.

*Issue Five*

September 2026

Ten voices. Eight countries. Poems, essays and fiction — the widest  
map Aporia has yet drawn, and the truest.

[aporialit.com](http://aporialit.com) · [@Aporia.Lit](https://twitter.com/Aporia.Lit)

## CONTENTS

- 01 **What Does A Lie Taste Like?** · *Aaranya Rakhunde*
- 02 **SWAANG (Disguise)** · *Jay Samanta*
- 03 **Unclaimed Body** · *Radouane Arayb*
- 04 **The Saturday We Never Reached JOYLAND** · *Muhammad  
Abdullah Mumtaz*
- 05 **Shelter** · *Sophia Jamali Soufi*
- 06 **The Lyceum Games** · *Liv Gleyzer*
- 07 **Two Poems** · *Esraa Jalal Jawad Al-Gawhari*
- 08 **Trained to Leave** · *Emma Farmer*
- 09 **The Clock Keeps Ticking** · *Anna Orlandi*
- 10 **Hostile Takeover** · *Sumit Chauhan*

FROM THE EDITOR

## **The map keeps widening, and the small true things keep arriving**

Five issues in, the promise we started with has not changed: read everything that arrives with real attention, and say yes whenever a piece tells the truth. What has changed is how far that truth now travels to reach us. Issue Five gathers ten writers from eight countries — India, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, Morocco, Italy, the United Kingdom and the United States — and with them, for the first time, Aporia carries voices from North Africa and the Arab world alongside the ones who have long filled these pages.

It is our widest map yet. But as always, the map is not the thing that moves us. The small, exact, unrepeatable things on it are.

Consider how many of these pieces refuse the comfort of an easy ending. From Morocco, Radouane Arayb writes a letter mourning a friend who died a migrant, reduced by the records to an "Unclaimed Body," and insists on returning him his name. From Pakistan, Muhammad Abdullah Mumtaz remembers a Saturday that never reached the amusement park it was promised, and the mother learning to hide the pieces. From India, Jay Samanta sets a Jatra actor's private life against a town deciding what it will permit, and lets the ending stay open — because the town has not decided either.

And consider how the truest writing here trusts a single image to carry everything. Aaranya Rakhunde serves a lie warm, in a bowl a mother insists you finish. Sophia Jamali Soufi, in Persian and English

both, finds refuge from "the assault of the world" in one other person. Esraa Al-Gawhari, writing from Baghdad in Arabic and English, watches roses drink the moon's reflection until its silver "lives, petal-deep in each one." Anna Orlandi listens to a clock that keeps ticking through a life; Emma Farmer writes of being trained to leave. And the founder's own poem, "Hostile Takeover," turns its gaze on the quiet machinery that sells us the hole our lives are shaped to fill.

Ten pieces, four of them essays, four of them poems, two of them fiction; several in more than one language, laid side by side so the original is never lost. What they share is not a theme. It is a way of paying attention — the willingness to stay with the small true thing until it opens. That is the only map we have ever really been drawing.

CREATIVE NON-FICTION

# What Does A Lie Taste Like?

*Aaranya Rakhunde*

Narayana Vidyalayam, Chinchbhuvan, Nagpur, Maharashtra · India

people think lies taste metallic because they have only ever licked them from knives. they have never eaten one properly.

a well-made lie is served warm.

it arrives in a bowl your mother insists you finish before it gets cold. the steam carries tiny white birds into the kitchen. they settle on the windowsill, folding and unfolding themselves, repeating you'll understand when you're older until the sentence becomes impossible to separate from the smell of ginger. by then, it has already dissolved into the broth.

every household raises a different species of lie.

some keep theirs beneath the floorboards where it grows roots and quietly drinks rainwater. some stitch theirs into quilts, believing the body sleeps more peacefully beneath a blanket that cannot tell the truth. somewhere, a family hangs theirs on the clothesline every sunday. by monday morning, it has dried into something that almost resembles forgiveness.

ours lived in the soup pot.

it floated between carrot slices and coriander, pretending to be nourishment until we loved it enough to swallow. my mother stirred the broth clockwise because that is how her mother taught her. if you

listened carefully, you could hear all the women before them knocking gently against the sides of the saucepan, asking to be let in.

no one tells you the tongue is terribly sentimental.

it remembers every flavour it has ever forgiven. mine still mistakes cinnamon for apologies. honey tastes exactly like promises made in kitchens after midnight. burnt milk reminds it of the evenings my father smiled with his eyes closed, as though happiness were a room he had misplaced the key to.

there are entire orchards where excuses grow instead of fruit.

children are forbidden from climbing the trees because the branches bend low enough to whisper it's not your fault before anyone has decided whose fault it is. in autumn, the lies become heavy and fall on their own. they bruise easily. that's why adults carry them so carefully.

sometimes i think honesty is the stranger thing.

i have seen lies hatch from teacups, molt beneath winter coats, migrate in the hollow bones of swallows. i have watched them curl beside sleeping children like faithful dogs. i have watched them outlive the mouths that first spoke them.

honesty has always arrived shivering.

it stands barefoot on the doorstep, dripping rainwater onto the welcome mat, holding a bouquet of flowers that have forgotten their own names. nobody recognizes it immediately. someone always asks who it is.

the lie, meanwhile, has already taken off its shoes.

it knows where the bowls are kept.

it asks whether you've eaten.

it tastes exactly like the soup your mother makes when you're ill.

that is why people swallow it.

Aaranya Rakhunde is a student at Narayana Vidyalayam in Nagpur, Maharashtra. She writes about devotion, domestic ritual, and the mythologies people build around the things they cannot reach.

SHORT FICTION

# SWAANG (Disguise)

*Jay Samanta*

Panskura Banamali College, West Bengal · India

(Disguise)

A Short Story

PART ONE

The bulb in the rehearsal shed had been dying for a week, and nobody had gotten around to replacing it. It buzzed instead of burned, throwing a jittery yellow light over the tin walls, and Debashish Das had long ago decided this was fitting. Twenty-five years he'd stood under bad light in this shed, half-dressed as somebody else, and the bulb had never once let him forget it.

He stood now in a green sari blouse pulled over his own trousers, one wrist heavy with bangles, the other bare, his wig still sitting on its stand like a patient waiting to be seen. Halder worked the bellows of the harmonium beside him, listening more than playing, the way he always did before a rehearsal properly started.

"You call this justice, Lord? You call this—" Debu broke off, dropped the pitch of the heroine's voice, and looked over. "Halder-da. Is this too much? The 'Lord' part?"

"It's Jatra," Halder said, not looking up. "There's no such thing as too much."

"Bimal-da wants it restrained this year."

"Bimal-da wants a lot of things this year he didn't want last year."

The shed door banged. Partha came in with the dhol slung over one shoulder and his phone lit in his other hand, thumb still going even as he said hello to the room. He was twenty-seven, engaged to a woman he'd met exactly twice, and he had a way of walking into any space like he was already halfway to leaving it.

"Naskar's committee put up a banner outside the temple gate," he said. "Sanskriti Raksha Mancha welcomes all to a sanskari Rath Mela this year. Underlined sanskari twice. In case we might miss it the first time."

"Sanskari," Halder repeated, like the word had gone bad in his mouth. "Since when does a two-hundred-year-old Jatra need a certificate of good conduct."

"Since Utpal Naskar decided his hardware shop wasn't cause enough for one man's life."

"You're late," Debu said, too lightly, not looking at him.

"Traffic," Partha said, matching the lightness exactly, and it was its own kind of language, the two of them speaking in a code built for a room that wasn't empty.

Halder busied himself with the bellows and gave them nothing — no glance, no comment — which was its own kind of mercy. He'd long since decided not to ask.

Debu went back to the script, an old school exercise book with the pages gone soft as cloth. "You call this justice, Lord, or only theatre—"

Partha came close under the excuse of adjusting his dhol strap. "Come to the ghat after," he said, quiet, just for him. "Sohini's family's coming for tea tomorrow. I won't be free for days."

"I have to help Anirban with his forms."

"You always have to help Anirban with his forms."

"He's sitting the railway exam in November."

"Good," Partha said, a little too flat. "Then he'll leave and get to be whoever he wants, somewhere else."

He said it like a small deliberate slap, shouldered the dhol, and walked out before Debu could decide whether to follow. He didn't.

"You should ask Bimal-da to cut the Radha part shorter this year," Halder said, still not looking up from the harmonium. "Less time in the wig. Less time for people to look too long."

"People have looked at me in this wig for twenty years, Halder-da."

"They looked at the character. Lately they've started looking at you."

He went back to playing. Debu caught his own reflection in the cracked mirror propped against the wall — the sari blouse on his own body, the bangles on one wrist — and straightened it without a word, because there wasn't one, not yet, that would have helped.

\* \* \*

Across town, in a hardware shop smelling of coiled wire and stale marigolds, Utpal Naskar counted the day's cash while Anirban Das stood before him with a stack of railway-exam guidebooks under one

arm, looking like a boy who badly wanted to be asked to sit down.

"Das-babu's son," Utpal said, not unkindly. "Sit, sit. What's the count now — how many marks do you need?"

"Cut-off's usually around eighty-two percentile, sir. I'm getting maybe seventy in the mocks."

"You'll get there." Utpal looked up properly now. "You came to the Mancha meeting last week. Didn't say a word the whole time."

"I was listening, sir."

"Good boys listen first." He set the cash down and gave Anirban the smile of a man about to hand over something valuable. "You know why we started the Mancha?"

"For the culture, sir. To protect the traditions."

"To protect the traditions from dilution." Utpal let the word sit a moment before going on. "You know what dilution looks like, in practice? It looks like a two-hundred-year-old Rath Mela deciding, in one generation, that anything goes on a public stage as long as somebody calls it art. That's dilution. Small steps. Nobody notices a small step."

Anirban, wanting the man's approval more than he wanted to actually think it through, said, "My father's troupe has always done the Jatra at Rath Mela. It's the oldest part of the festival."

"For now it is." Utpal leaned in, and something in his voice shifted, went almost gentle. "Tell me something, beta. Does it embarrass you? Your father up there in a sari, in front of the whole bazar?"

The question hung there. It was, Anirban understood somewhere under his ribs, the only question the whole conversation had ever really been circling.

"It's tradition," he said quietly. "Men have always played the women's parts in Jatra."

"That's what they tell you." Utpal stood, moved toward the till to lock up, and let the next line fall almost to himself, an aside he seemed to need to say more than he needed Anirban to hear it. "Traditions are just the lies we've agreed to keep." Then, brisk again: "Come Thursday. We're holding a decency review of this year's script with the temple committee. I want young men from good families standing with us. Visible. You understand."

"Yes, sir," Anirban said, the want plainly written on him.

Utpal clapped him on the shoulder, a touch that went on one second past ordinary, a second Utpal himself didn't seem to register giving. Anirban didn't register it either. He was nineteen and starving for exactly this kind of attention from exactly this kind of man, and he had no idea yet how many different hungers could wear the very same face.

\* \* \*

At home, Malati was hanging washing in the courtyard when Debu came through the gate, still faintly greasepainted, a smudge of red at his hairline he hadn't managed to scrub off.

"You've got kajal at your temple," she said, without turning.

"Rehearsal ran long," he said, wiping at it, too casual by half.

"It usually does, these days."

The silence that followed wasn't empty. It was the particular, practiced silence of two people who had spent years working out exactly how much truth they could afford to trade in a day.

"Anirban asleep?" Debu asked.

"Studying. Or pretending to." She hung the last piece of washing and finally turned to look at him properly. "He went to Naskar's shop again."

Fear crossed Debu's face and was gone almost as fast. "For what."

"For a father, Debu. Since he doesn't feel he has one at home who'll teach him how to be a man in this town."

"I've raised that boy—"

"You've performed raising that boy," Malati said. "There's a difference. And you, of all people, should know it — you do it professionally."

He sat down, suddenly tired in a way that had nothing to do with the day's rehearsal. "You want me to stop."

"Stop what? Being what you are, or being careless about it?"

"Is there a difference, from where you're standing?"

She sat across from him. This was old ground, worn smooth by years of walking it, and her voice, when it came, was almost gentle. "I married a man who I knew, within the first month, loved someone the shape of Partha more than he'd ever love the shape of me. I made my

peace with that a long time ago. I built a good life out of the peace, Debu — don't mistake it for defeat. I have my own arrangements, if you want to know. Shibu at the cloth shop isn't merely fond of my custom."

Despite everything, it startled a laugh out of him. "Malati."

"Don't look so shocked, it's unbecoming in a man wearing yesterday's kajal." Her voice hardened. "What I won't make peace with is our son going to that man's shop to learn what a real man looks like, and that man deciding the answer involves setting fire to something with your name on it. Naskar doesn't care about sanskriti. He cares about being important, and men like that need an enemy the way a lamp needs oil. Don't be his oil, Debu."

"I'm careful," he said quietly.

"You're careful the way a man is careful walking home drunk. You believe it, right up until you don't."

She picked up the empty basin and went inside. Debu sat alone in the courtyard a long while, and then, almost without deciding to, began humming the heroine's lament under his breath — quietly, to no one, the way some men hum just to keep from thinking.

\* \* \*

He went to the ghat that night, after telling several small lies to get there. Partha was already on the steps, the river doing its slow black business below him.

"You came," Partha said.

"I said I would."

"You say a lot of things."

Debu sat beside him, not too close — an old, automatic caution that hadn't loosened even here, even now.

"Anirban went to Naskar's shop," he said.

Partha laughed, short and without humor. "Of course he did. Every boy in this town who doesn't know what to do with his own confusion ends up at Naskar's shop. He hands out certainty like it's free chai."

"Malati thinks he's dangerous."

"Malati's usually right about things like that." Partha paused, and something in his posture changed, the careful arrangement of a man about to say the real reason he'd asked for tonight. "Debu-da. I need to ask you something, and I need you to actually hear it. Not perform hearing it. The way you do."

"Go on," Debu said, wary now.

"Sohini's family. The engagement's more or less settled. Her father's a schoolteacher — respectable, exactly the kind of man who'd walk away from the whole match in a heartbeat if the wrong word reached him about anything to do with this troupe. Or with me. Or with—"

"With me," Debu said, understanding arriving in pieces, cold.

Partha wouldn't look at him. "Naskar's people have been asking around. Not about you exactly — about goings on in the troupe. Whether Bimal-da's script this year is appropriate. Whether the female role should even be played by a man anymore, given the times." He

swallowed hard. "I told them Bimal-da's been rewriting the script without the temple committee's approval. Which is true, by the way — everyone knows he does that. I gave them something true and small and boring, so they'd feel like they'd learned a secret and stop digging for a bigger one."

"Partha—"

"Don't." He turned on him, real anger in it now, the anger of a man who'd rehearsed this defense many times alone. "Don't Partha me in that voice you use on stage when the heroine's being noble about her suffering. You have a house. You have a wife who covers for you. You have twenty-five years of this town calling you artist instead of whatever they'd call me, if this ever came out with my name on it three weeks before my wedding. I gave them a boring truth to protect myself. I didn't ask what they'd do with it next. I needed not to know."

The river kept moving. Neither of them said anything for a while.

"That's how it starts for all of us, isn't it," Debu said finally, quiet, almost to himself. "Deciding not to know."

Partha didn't answer. Debu reached over in the dark and took his hand — the one gesture in the whole evening that carried no performance in it at all, no audience, no cost worked out in advance — and Partha let him, for a moment, before pulling away first.

"Go home, Debu-da," he said. "Help your son with his forms."

He got up and left. Debu stayed at the ghat a long time after, watching the water do what water does, which is nothing, indifferently, forever.

PART TWO

Weeks passed, and the full dress rehearsal found Debu transformed — wig, sari, jewelry, the whole architecture of the bibhaba complete on him, and something in his bearing that hadn't been there in the half-costume of that first evening. He was, briefly, someone else entirely. Bimal watched from a stool with the studied, unimpressed face of a man who understood that boredom, worn well, raises the price of his own praise.

"Slower on the death scene," Bimal called. "The temple committee's people are coming this year. We want them weeping, not writing notes."

"You call this justice, my Lord, or only theatre—" Debu said, half in character, half joking.

"Speaking of theatre." Bimal's voice dropped all its lightness at once. "Sit down. Both of you. Halder, keep playing — we'll talk over it."

Partha, at his dhol, stiffened but kept the rhythm going. Debu sat, still in the sari, the wig suddenly looking less like magic and more like a costume caught mid-transformation, unfinished and exposed.

"Naskar's committee came to see me," Bimal said. "Very polite. Very concerned about unapproved changes to the script." His eyes found Partha and stayed there; Partha didn't meet them. "I know exactly where that concern came from. And I want it understood, right now, in front of everyone, that I know."

"I don't know what you mean, Bimal-da," Partha said, steady, though his hands lost the beat for half a second.

"Of course you don't." Bimal turned to Debu, unhurried, and delivered the line the whole scene had been quietly built around. "And I know other things too, Debu. I've known for years. Since before your wedding, if you want the honest number. You think I gave you the bibhaba role at nineteen because you had the finest voice in the district? I gave it to you because I recognized something in how you wore the sari the first time you tried it on, in this very shed, when you thought no one was watching closely. I've watched closely for twenty-three years. I never said a word. Do you know why?"

"Because it was useful to you," Debu said, very quietly.

"Because it was useful to both of us." Bimal's voice went almost gentle, which somehow made it worse. "You got a stage. I got an actor who would never, ever leave this troupe for a better offer in Kolkata, because a man with your particular arrangement doesn't go looking for bigger stages and brighter lights. Bigger stages ask more questions. I have kept you small, Debu, and safe, for two decades, and called it a favor to myself when it was really a leash." He stood now, and the real threat finally arrived. "So when Naskar's committee comes to me asking about unapproved changes, I have a choice about which story becomes this town's story this festival season. The boring one, about an old man rewriting a script without permission — everyone half-suspects it already, no one will make a scene. Or a much more interesting one. You understand which costs me nothing and which costs you everything."

"Bimal-da." Halder's voice cut in over the harmonium, flat and furious, though his hands didn't stop moving. "Say what you're threatening plainly, or don't say it at all. Don't make him stand there in a widow's wig while you do it."

Bimal was unbothered. "I'm not threatening anyone. I'm explaining the weather." He looked back at Debu, and something close to pity crossed his face, which was its own kind of cruelty. "Give the committee a clean, restrained show, and this stays exactly the quiet arrangement it's always been. Give me any trouble at all, and I'll let the wind blow whichever way it likes."

He left. For a long time nobody spoke. Debu was still in the wig. Partha had stopped playing entirely.

"I didn't know he'd—" Partha's voice was barely audible. "I only told them about the script. I swear to you, Debu-da, I never said your name to anyone."

"You didn't have to say my name." Debu was removing the wig now, and his hands were shaking — the first time in this whole affair that he had let anyone watch him take the performance off on purpose. "You just had to open the door far enough that someone standing behind you could see through it."

"Small steps," Halder said, to no one, packing the harmonium away. "Nobody notices a small step."

\* \* \*

That night Anirban showed up at the hardware shop half-drunk on something — cheap liquor, or pure adrenaline, it was hard to say which. Utpal was closing up, a radio playing devotional songs low behind the counter, when the knock came.

"Is it true?" Anirban said, before Utpal had even gotten the door open all the way.

"Is what true, beta."

"What people are saying. About my father."

Utpal was quiet a moment too long — a man deciding, in real time, how best to use a piece of information rather than how to answer a son's pain.

"I've heard things," he said finally. "I haven't said things. There's a difference, and it's an important one for a young man to learn. You can know a great deal and still be a respectable man, so long as you're careful about which knowledge you make loud."

"Everyone at the tea stall was laughing. They said it in front of me like I wasn't even there. Like I couldn't hear my own name attached to it."

"People laugh at what frightens them. It makes it feel smaller." Utpal's voice softened, went somewhere else for a moment. "It isn't really about your father. It's about this town deciding, right now, this festival, what it's still willing to call tradition and what it wants to start calling something else." He paused, and when he spoke again it was quieter, almost to himself. "I knew a man once. Before your time — before mine, really, if I'm honest about which version of myself I've kept and which one I buried. He also played a woman's part, in a troupe two districts over. I was young. I thought certain things about him that I've spent twenty years, one wife, and this entire Mancha making sure I never think again."

He caught himself and the shop-owner voice came back down over him like a shutter. "That's not your business. I've said too much, and you'll forget I said it. What is your business is this — Thursday, at the decency review, if you want this town to stop laughing at your name,

make sure it's your name they respect instead. Stand with us. Say, publicly, plainly, that a troupe led by such a man has no business representing our tradition at the Mela."

"That's my father," Anirban said, horrified, torn, still wanting.

"That's your choice, beta," Utpal said, flat and final, the mask fully back in place. "Not mine."

He switched off the radio.

\* \* \*

Malati hadn't slept. She was still in the courtyard at dawn when Debu came through the gate in his own clothes, no trace of costume left on him, just a tired, aging man.

"Anirban didn't come home," she said.

Fear hit him at once. "Where—"

"Naskar's people, probably. Word's already gone round the bazar, Debu. Somebody at the tea stall, somebody's cousin, and now it's everyone's mouth." She wasn't crying. She was past that, into something clearer and harder. "I told you the exact shape of this. You told me you were careful."

"I don't know how to be anything other than what I am on that stage, Malati," he said, and for the first time in this whole story he said it without any defense left in him. "Twenty-five years, and I've only felt entirely myself for the two hours a night I'm allowed to be someone else. What does that make me."

"It makes you a man who's spent his whole marriage rehearsing a part for an audience of one boy who was always going to grow up and watch." Her voice wasn't unkind, but it didn't flinch either. "You didn't lie to me, Debu. You were careful with me. It was Anirban you were never honest with, because you were terrified of what his face would do. Well. His face is going to do it now, in front of the whole Mela, whether either of us is ready."

Something shifted between them then — not forgiveness exactly, but a kind of grim alliance, the sort two people build when there's no time left for anything softer.

"What do we do?" he asked.

She was already standing, already practical, already the one holding the household together, as she'd always been. "You go to the shed. You put on the wig. You do the show tonight, exactly as rehearsed, because if you don't, Naskar and Bimal both win without even finishing the fight. I'll find our son. I don't know yet what I'll say to him, but I'll figure it out on the way." At the door she turned back, and her voice went almost gentle. "And Debu — when this is over, however it's over, I think we should stop pretending to each other about the rest of it too. Not for the town. For us. I'm tired of being careful in my own house."

She left. Debu stood alone in the courtyard as the morning came up grey over the tin roofs.

\* \* \*

By evening the maidan was already loud with more than festival noise. The stage for the Jatra had been rigged smaller than usual, hastily

reassembled, as if half the committee had wanted to cancel the whole thing and the other half had simply refused to let them. The decency review that afternoon had run long and ugly — raised voices, a scuffle over a banner, somebody's microphone shrieking feedback into the dusk.

Halder was setting up alone when Partha arrived, dhol in hand, looking like a man who hadn't slept in three days.

"Is he coming?" Partha asked.

"You'd know better than I would, these days," Halder said, not looking up.

"I gave Naskar something to chew on, Halder-da. I won't pretend to you that I didn't."

Halder finally looked at him, and there was no cruelty in it, only a tired kind of honesty. "I know you did. I've watched this town, my whole life, decide every few years that it needs an enemy to feel whole again. And I've watched it always find one among the strangest people first, because the strange ones never have committees of their own. You were three weeks from your wedding and frightened out of your mind. That's not a moral failing, boy. That's just what fear does to a conscience — it rents it out cheap. Doesn't mean it isn't a wound. Just means I understand where the wound came from."

A commotion was building at the edge of the maidan. Anirban came first, pushed slightly ahead by a couple of the Mancha's younger men, Utpal a few steps behind him, and Malati arriving separately, having clearly run the whole way. Debu hadn't appeared yet.

"People of this Mela—" Anirban's voice cracked in front of the gathering crowd, half a speech he'd been coached through, half something else entirely fighting to get out of him. "For years my father's troupe has stood on this stage claiming to represent all of us — claiming this was tradition, purity — and all this time—"

"Say it," Utpal murmured from behind him.

The word caught in Anirban's throat. He couldn't finish it the way he'd been told to. "—and all this time he was — he—" He broke, and suddenly he wasn't a spokesman anymore, just a boy. "He was my father. He's still my father. I don't — I came here to say something and I don't know anymore what it is I came to say."

Malati reached him and took his arm — not scolding, just holding — the first unambiguous, tender gesture in the whole affair, offered without a shred of performance in it.

"You want a scandal," she said to the crowd, loud enough to carry, taking the moment from her son before Naskar could get it back, "here's one for free. This town has known exactly what my husband is for twenty-five years, and clapped for him every single festival, because on that stage he gave your grandmothers and your daughters something to weep for that they couldn't weep for anywhere else in their whole grey lives. You didn't mind the truth when it wore a costume. You only mind it now because Utpal Naskar has told you it's convenient to mind it."

"This isn't about scandal," Utpal said, regaining the crowd, "it's about what belongs on a public stage in front of our children and what doesn't—"

Debu arrived then, already half into the bibhaba costume — wig on, sari on, but his own worn sandals still on his feet, an unfinished transformation, and it looked, somehow, deliberate.

"Utpal-babu is right about one thing," he said to the whole gathered maidan, and it should have sounded like triumph and didn't — it sounded like a tired, frightened man reaching for the only weapon he had left, which was the show itself. "It is about what belongs at the front. So let me stand at the front, and you can all decide for yourselves what I am. Instead of deciding it from a tea stall."

He didn't wait for permission. He climbed onto the small rigged stage. Halder hesitated one beat and then began to play, the opening notes of the lament rising thin into the noise. Partha hesitated longer, more visibly, and then lifted the dhol and joined him — his choice, finally made in public, three weeks before a wedding that might or might not survive it now.

"You call this justice, my Lord, or only theatre," Debu sang, and the line landed entirely differently than it had in any rehearsal, "and if it is only theatre, then let me at least choose which lines are mine to say."

He went on with the lament. The crowd didn't move as one. Some jeered. Some went quiet. Some, almost despite themselves, began to weep, exactly the way Malati had said they always did. Utpal stood rigid, caught, and something crossed his face — brief, unresolved, not redeemed — the same old unfinished thing he'd confessed to Anirban in the shop two nights before. Anirban stood frozen between his mother and the Mancha boys, moving toward neither.

Somewhere off to the side a scuffle broke out among the Mancha men and a few of the temple committee's own younger members, and no one any longer seemed fully sure whose decency was actually being protected. The lights over the maidan flickered — a transformer, maybe, or a deliberate cut, no one could say.

In the confusion Partha's dhol faltered and stopped. When the lights came back half a beat later his place by the stage was empty. Nobody saw him go. He was simply, suddenly, not there.

"Partha—" Debu faltered mid-line, searching the dark for him, the performance and the man behind it starting to come apart from each other in real time.

Halder kept playing alone, filling the gap with what he had. Debu had a choice written plainly on his face — break character and go looking, or finish what he'd started. He finished the lament. Not because the show mattered more than Partha. Because it was, in that moment, the only thing left that he still had any say over.

The decency review's microphone sat dead in its stand at the edge of the maidan; no one had gone back to switch it off. Partha's place by the stage stayed empty. Anirban had not moved toward his mother and had not moved toward the Mancha boys either — he stood exactly where the confusion had left him, in a spot that belonged to neither. Utpal's mouth held the shape of a sentence he had now failed to finish twice. Debu sang on alone, in a costume that had never quite gotten all the way on, to a crowd still deciding, row by row, what to do with its own face.

"And if the curtain never falls, my Lord," he sang, the last line, and by now the heroine's line and his own life's line had become, without anyone planning it, the very same sentence, "then I suppose I am condemned to go on being seen."

The lights didn't fade gently. They cut, all at once, mid-note — as if the transformer had finally failed for good, or as if somebody, somewhere, had simply and decisively pulled the plug.

END

Jay Samanta is an undergraduate student of English literature at Panskura Banamali College (Autonomous), affiliated to Vidyasagar University, West Bengal. His writing explores identity, silence, memory, marginality, and the emotional complexities of contemporary life. His fiction and poetry have appeared in literary journals and magazines, and his academic interests include literary theory, cultural studies, and contemporary literature.

CREATIVE NON-FICTION

# Unclaimed Body

*Radouane Arayb*

Abdelmalek Essaâdi University, Meknes · Morocco

Wednesday, Ayyasha, Larache — March 18, 2025

My dear friend Hamza,

The school break has arrived, stretching out the hours of free time, and with them, the hours of solitude. I have finished all the tasks behind which I used to hide, and now there is nothing left to distract me from myself. My wife and son are asleep. The night is long, followed by an even longer day, asking nothing of me.

I remain as I am, living in the loose-fitting garment of the simple man, burying every attempt by the complicated man within me to take shape in my image—to fill my head with questions that have no easy answers, and with thoughts about the kind of life I live, and the kind of life lived by rational and irrational beings on this planet.

I throw myself into reality with all my strength, and lock the beast of my anxieties in a dark corner of my being, like a loathsome jailer holding its breath and allowing it no right to exist except for a single moment: when I stand on the rooftop in the darkness of night, a moment worth no more than a burning cigarette.

But if you were to ask me now: What has changed?

I would tell you that the prisoner's torment has passed to the jailer, and that I have allowed regret and profound sorrow to overrun me.

I thought I had healed the pain of losing my brother—my childhood friend, Mohsen—after that hysterical fit of weeping in front of his mother, when she confirmed to me that he was gone, that the news of his death was real.

I had taken comfort in the words of Dhu al-Rumma:

Perhaps the falling of tears will bring relief  
from longing, or heal the secrets of a heart in turmoil.

I thought that involuntary outburst of tears was the final physical expression of my grief for my friend, and that I would fold the pain of his loss into the wounds of my chest, a medal of loyalty. Then I would once again tread, with indifference, upon human suffering—or perhaps I should say: contain it within my heart as part of the human experience on this earth.

But the strange plot of his story loosened the knot of my tears and battered down the walls of my patience. It was a story whose complications had been moving toward resolution, whose hero had been only a step or two away from a happy ending.

Ever since my friend left the classrooms of middle school, he had thrown himself into the embrace of unemployment. Bad luck followed him down every road he took and stood waiting at every door he knocked upon.

He wanted to serve society by learning a trade, but his meager certificate did him no good in the eyes of employers. He wanted to serve his country and enlisted for military service, but his poverty—and his father's lack of connections—did him no good with the brokers who controlled recruitment.

He lost hope in the country and its people. He turned his back on a homeland that had given him nothing but disappointments and attempted to cross secretly to the other shore. But the frailty of his body did him no good with the coast guards. They descended upon him like hyenas upon prey, tearing his back with batons and kicks.

When the winds of migration from the north failed to carry him away, and he found the sea's door firmly shut, he turned his compass eastward. The only passage still open to him toward the Arab world was to buy a work visa. A visa, after all, is not for those who need it, but for those who can pay for it.

He stayed among them for three years, claiming that life was easy, that he was living "like a king." But fate arranged for me to follow him there, and I discovered the lie behind his claim: life under the mercy of a sponsor was "a goat's life."

His Arabness did not save him. His sponsor accused him of assaulting him, and the Arabs imprisoned him without evidence, then forcibly deported him back to his country.

How terrible silent sorrow can be.

My friend never spoke openly of his pain. He hid it inside his heart and drank coffee and cigarettes over it. I would long to see him after returning from the sea, and I would find him in his usual place, in a café that received few customers, spending his time browsing Google Maps, searching for some place in this vast world to which he might escape from himself.

Those maps were a promise of freedom.

His immersion in that dream led him to meet a Chilean woman, a foreigner old enough to have been his mother. She fell in love with him. She believed in his dream—or perhaps she pitied his condition—and decided to finance his new beginning.

He traveled to Turkey, attempting to cross into Europe through Greece. But the Syrian refugee crisis did him no good. In the eyes of the border guards, he was a man without a cause; being Moroccan did not grant him the right to asylum. They did not ask him why he had come. To them, he was merely a black sheep among a white flock, a routine task, another number added to the deportation lists.

He watched others cross the borders while the doors of his own dreams closed behind him.

He came to see each deportation as another failed adventure to add to his long record of failed adventures, a ridiculous joke whose details he would turn into something to laugh about.

We never sensed despair or helplessness when he spoke of them. By then, we had long since moved beyond the age of fragility: I, after becoming accustomed to the madness of the sea; he, after being tossed from one deportation prison to another.

His relationship with the Chilean woman encouraged him to turn his compass toward the New World, to become Columbus—a latter-day Columbus without colonial ambitions or hunger for fame and wealth. He was driven by the desperate hope of finding a land that would embrace him, a land capable of embracing his hunger for dignity and social justice.

He set out for Brazil, for the vast land of samba.

There, he began working as a delivery rider, cycling through the crowded streets of the capital with neither the language nor any real cultural understanding of the world around him. But his courage, his eagerness to make up for lost time, and his determination to achieve some stability and save enough money to continue his journey northward became his way forward.

My friend was a courageous man, the kind of man whose likes are becoming rare in the postmodern age—an age in which human beings fear the unknown and wage war against anything that disturbs their comfort.

He was not one of those who, the moment their feet touch the first circle of safety, reach for bricks and cement to build towering walls without doors.

His previous disappointments did not stop him. Nor did his bad luck. Not even his small victory in making it this far.

He gathered whatever money and information he could—though neither was nearly enough—to begin his overland journey from Brazil to the United States of America, one of the longest and most dangerous irregular migration routes in the world.

I tried to dissuade him. I tried to plant hesitation in his heart. In my voice messages, I raised my voice, warning him about bandits and human traffickers who knew no mercy; about losing his way in the forests, the cold of the nights, and the thirst and hunger of the days.

But it was useless.

My friend had already made up his mind, and to him my voice lacked the proper texture of manhood.

He said mockingly:

“You’ve become soft from spending too much time around women and children.”

If I had tried then to give voice to his convictions, the following verses by the Mamluk poet Safi al-Din al-Hilli would have expressed them best:

No one mounts the heights of glory  
who has not mounted the back of danger,  
and no one attains the highest station  
who has placed caution before courage.  
Whoever seeks the heights without effort,  
will die without ever reaching what he sought.

From the heart of Brazil, my friend cut his way northward. He crossed Ecuador, slipping through mountains and forests, heading toward Colombia, where he spent long days in the perilous Darién jungle—with its brutal terrain, raging rivers, wild animals, armed gangs, and vast, disorienting wilderness.

Without so much as batting an eyelid, he continued toward Costa Rica, where the journey grew even harder.

We heard nothing from him throughout that stretch of his journey. Then he crossed Nicaragua, followed by Honduras, and finally stopped for a while to catch his breath and reassure me that he was alive and well.

He asked me to lend him some money.

I told him to give me some time to find a way to send it, since my bank card did not support international transfers. I contacted my brother, who lives in Qatar, hoping he might find a quick solution.

But my friend disappeared again after that conversation.

I reassured myself that he must have found a solution. He always found a way forward.

I was certain he would not stop, that he would never allow an obstacle to stand in his way.

My friend reappeared once again, this time from Mexico.

On his overland journey, he was folding distances into himself, moving through the geography of the world on his own feet, just as he had once moved through it virtually with his fingertips. It was a real-life version of the same journey, propelled by a determination that seemed capable of piercing borders, and by the mind-set of a soldier moving through enemy territory: advancing according to carefully considered strategies, avoiding roads controlled by gangs and gatherings that might arouse suspicion.

Even after reaching Tijuana, the final border city, where the lights of the New World shimmer on the horizon, teasing the imagination of dreamers, he remained calm and patient, waiting for the right moment to cross.

From the very beginning, my friend had chosen to be a lone wolf, unwilling to fall into the mouse trap set by patrols for crowds attempting to cross together.

Under cover of darkness, he slipped through a small opening and moved as though walking along the edge of a blade through the border zone, until he reached the urban outskirts of San Diego.

After that, he decided to proceed through legal channels. He requested to appear before a court and opened an immigration case in his name.

They gave him a distant court date, in November of that year, and temporary shelter: a cheap hotel paid for by the state.

There, he met some Moroccans who offered to take him with them to New York. He refused.

He told me that he wanted somewhere that resembled him, somewhere different, where life moved more slowly and people were less noisy.

He chose Chicago as his first destination, so that he could shake off the exhaustion of his arduous journey, settle his financial and social affairs, and search for a small, safe, stable town—a place with a low cost of living and suitable work opportunities for someone of his modest means and limited qualifications.

And so, in the end, our communication gradually slowed.

I had reassured myself that he was safe, and I thought he had reached the destination he had spent so many years pursuing. I, too, became absorbed in my daily life: my move to Ayyasha, my wife's pregnancy, and my attempts to adjust to my new working environment.

Our last voice message exchange took place in August 2024.

I asked him whether he had found some Moroccan company to ease the loneliness of being a stranger in a foreign land.

He answered me sarcastically:

“Moroccans are everywhere. But I’m not looking for another Morocco. Every Moroccan in whom I smell the scent of patriotism arouses my hatred. I came here to learn, to integrate, to open myself to the world. Most of the people I know are from South American countries...”

I wished him well.

And so my message remained suspended somewhere between waiting and forgetting, and I did not press him for news afterward.

Between my companions and me, there had always been something like an unspoken agreement: to love without making love conditional upon presence or absence; to remain absolutely loyal and blindly trusting; an agreement upon what we called “honorable friendship,” much like the friendship I have with you.

But this time, the matter was not one of absence and presence.

Bad luck—or perhaps inevitable fate—had played the final card in my friend’s story.

I learned of his death after I returned home to Meknes. We were gathered around the lunch table when my father said to me, in a dry voice:

“Your friend Mohsen died. He was burned.”

I could not put the food into my mouth.

I tried to deny the news. I told my father that Mohsen had moved to Chicago, far from the wildfires that had recently swept through some

American states.

I left the table and rushed, almost like a madman, to his home. With every step, I prayed to God that the news might be a lie, a rumor, anything but the truth.

But the truth, as I would discover later, was harsher than his mother's mere confirmation of his death.

He had been riding a trotinette, quietly traveling along the roadside, when a massive truck struck him.

My mind could not comprehend such an ending.

Doubt entered me—doubt about the story of his death, doubt about everything.

I searched obsessively through social media for the Chilean woman's account until I found her.

She, in turn, told me the story of her search for my friend after his disappearance.

She said she had searched for him by every means available, until intuition led her to search his name on NamUs, the American National Missing and Unidentified Persons System.

A page appeared before her, written in English, bearing the title:

“Unclaimed Body.”

She suffered a nervous breakdown and wept bitterly for him.

Even now, whenever I ask about her, she shares with me the grief and depression that have tightened their grip around her since his departure.

But at the time, she gathered whatever remained of her strength.

She contacted them, and they reassured her that they would retrieve him from the cemetery and keep his body at the medical examiner's office for a year, until someone claimed it.

But she smelled lies in their words.

So she continued searching.

She knocked on door after door and pressured them in her own way, until they finally gave in and showed her the updated final report.

The report bore the case number: ME 2024-04378.

We had returned to numbers once again.

That was how life had reduced him from beginning to end: numbers in prison and deportation records, numbers in missing-person databases, numbers in the records of the dead.

In their dry report, my friend was nothing more than an expendable body, a piece of flesh crushed onto the pavement by a speeding vehicle:

He had been accompanied by two other men, but they fled because they, too, were undocumented immigrants.

They took his phone and documents.

The only thing found with him was a church slip—the paper from the church where he received food—with his name written on it: Mohsen Mounir.

Alejandra continued her account:

“They kept his body at the morgue for only one month. Then they disposed of it.”

How deeply the manner in which they disposed of him wounded me, my friend.

They did not bury him as we do in Muslim lands, in accordance with the famous saying, “The honor due to the dead is burial.”

Instead, they burned his body, for what they claimed were technical and practical reasons.

If only they had burned his body for a human reason—for a religious belief, as the Hindus do.

What hurt me was his fear of fire.

Thus, the “law of nature” was innocent of his blood.

It was the “law of man” that turned death into an administrative matter.

As for the “law of heaven,” every night I look silently toward the sky.

Questions about justice, and about the meaning of evil and suffering in this world, have become an exercise in absurdity.

If Alejandra sees in that church slip a sign of God's mercy, I can see no meaning in my friend's death.

After defeating monsters, he was finally defeated by the absolute absurdity of existence itself.

Not even his faith could secure for him a shroud or a patch of earth in which to rest.

Love and peace to all the wounded of this earth—to my friend, to all of us.

Radouane Arayb is a writer from Meknes, Morocco, and a student at Abdelmalek Essaâdi University. He writes, often in Arabic, about migration, dignity, and memory — and about the human lives that borders, numbers, and official records try to erase.

# The Saturday We Never Reached JOYLAND

*Muhammad Abdullah Mumtaz*

Pakistan College of Law, Lahore · Pakistan

It was a beautiful Saturday morning. The specific kind of morning that seemed to have been made especially for children. Birds were chirping somewhere beyond our windows or maybe sitting on a wire, the sunlight spilled lazily across the curtains, and the sky was a mix of light and dark blue that it looked almost unreal. The whole house felt warm with happiness. There was laughter coming from every room, doors opening and closing, slippers dragging across the floor, and the occasional argument over who was going to sit in the front seat of the car.

We all were going to JOYLAND.

My younger brother had been talking about it for days. He had memorized the names of the rides and had already decided which one he was going to take first. My sisters were standing in front of the mirror, arguing over what to wear as if the entire park was going to stop and judge them. I had already imagined each and everything. The screaming on the rides. The cold drinks. The smell of fried food. The ridiculous amount of food we would somehow convince our mother to buy us. The photographs we would take. The tiredness on the way home. The kind of tiredness that only comes after a perfect day. At breakfast, everyone was happy.

I remember that. God, I wish I remembered less. My father's phone began ringing. He was in the washroom, so my mother picked it up.

"Hello?"

A woman's voice came from the other side.

"You haven't come today."

My mother stopped moving.

There was something in her face that I had never ever seen before. Suddenly, her fingers tightened around the phone.

"Who are you?"

The woman hung up. No explanation. No goodbye. Nothing. The call ended, but something else had begun. My mother slowly placed the phone back on the table. The rest of us continued eating.

At least, we tried.

I was too young to understand what had happened, but old enough to notice that my mother was no longer really sitting with us. Her body was at the table. The rest of her seemed to have gone somewhere else. When my father returned, she asked him about the call. His face changed. For a moment, neither of them spoke.

Then he said,

"She is my maternal uncle's daughter."

My mother stared at him. She already knew. Years ago, before our family had become what it was, my father had wanted to marry his

cousin. My mother had lived with that knowledge for many years. Perhaps she had convinced herself that the past was where the past belonged. Perhaps she had believed that some doors, once closed, might stay closed. She was wrong. Some things do not die. They wait.

My mother began to cry. At first, it was quiet. A few tears. Then more. Then suddenly she was crying so hard that it seemed as though years of silence had found a way out through her eyes. We could not see her like that. My sisters stopped eating. My brother looked at me. I looked at him. Neither of us knew what to say or what to do. The food was still there on the table. The sunlight was still coming through the window. The birds were still singing outside. But somehow, the morning had changed. My mother called the woman's mother.

“Do you know about this?”

The answer came calmly. Too calmly.

“They are cousins. It is very common.”

My mother was silent. Then, in a voice that I still remember, she said,

“What should have been common was telling me before.”

She hung up.

And then our house exploded. Voices collided. My father shouted. My mother screamed. Words flew across the room like broken glass. And then came the sound I wish I could erase. My father hit her. I remember freezing. I remember my sisters crying. I remember my younger brother looking terrified. Then my father picked up a hammer. And suddenly, we were no longer children. We rushed between them. I don't remember any word at that time. I don't

remember who grabbed whose arm. I don't remember how we managed to pull them apart. I only remember one thought.

Something is going to happen to Mama.

That thought has never completely left me. Relatives came. People talked. People shouted. People tried to calm everyone down. My father denied everything. But still somehow everything was sorted out. He said my mother was just imagining things, she is mistaken.

Eventually, everything was cooled down for a moment. He went back to Dubai, where he worked. And for a little while, we allowed ourselves to believe that perhaps the storm had passed. We were wrong.

One day, the phone rang again. My father was on the other end.

“Go to my uncle's house and ask for forgiveness.”

My mother frowned.

“Forgiveness for what?”

“Go.”

She said nothing.

“Or I won't send you any money.”

That was the moment money stopped being money. Until then, it had been something adults worried about. Something that bought groceries and paid bills. Something that came and went. We had never understood its real power. Now we did. Money was food. Money was school. Money was electricity. Money was the roof above our heads.

Money was the difference between eating dinner and pretending we weren't hungry. Between sitting in a classroom and staying home. Between light and darkness. Between having a house and wondering where we would sleep.

My mother sat with us that night. She cried. We cried too. I remember looking at my sisters. One was in tenth grade. Another was in twelfth. My younger brother was still a child. I was a child too.

Yet somehow, that night, we were all discussing things children should never know how to discuss. How would we eat? How would we pay the bills? How would we stay in school? Who would look after Mama? The questions kept coming. The answers never did.

So, we ate potatoes. Potato curry. Again. And again. And again. Eventually, potatoes became our family joke. My brother would look at his plate. Then at my mother.

“Again?”

My mother would smile. It was a tiny smile. A tired smile. The kind mothers give when they are trying to convince their children that everything is fine while quietly calculating how many days the remaining money has to last.

“Eat,” she would say.

So, we ate. Because children can survive almost anything when someone tells them dinner is ready. But sleep was harder. At night, the house became unbearably quiet. Like Dead Quiet. Sometimes I would wake up and see my mother sitting alone. She thought we were asleep. I pretended to be. She would sit there with her hands folded in her lap,

staring at nothing. Sometimes tears would fall silently. She would wipe them away. Then another would come. And another. There is something cruel about watching your mother cry when she thinks nobody is looking. Because that is when you realize that mothers are not the invincible creatures children imagine them to be. They get tired. They get frightened. They get hurt. They break. They simply learn how to hide the pieces.

Two weeks later, my father called again. The message had not changed.

“Go there and ask for forgiveness.”

My mother said nothing.

“Or leave the house and starve.”

After going through the same pain again and again, she made up her mind. We begged her not to go. She went anyway. She went because of us. Not because she had done anything wrong. Not because she believed she owed anyone an apology. She went because four children were waiting for her at home.

When she returned, she did not speak immediately. She walked into the room. Sat down. Looked at us. And then she cried. She told us what had happened. The insults. The threats. The humiliation. She had stood there and listened to every word. For us.

I remember looking at her that night. Her face looked older. Not older in years. Older in a way that only suffering can make a person. And I remember thinking that there are some things a human being should never have to endure for their children. But mothers do. They endure

them anyway.

After that, my father became a stranger. Not suddenly. Slowly. That was almost worse. He would still call. He would still come home sometimes. He would still sit among relatives and smile as though nothing had happened. And he was so good at it. He could laugh. He could tell stories. He could put his hand on someone's shoulder and make everyone believe he was the most kind-hearted man in the room. He could become a wonderful father the moment someone else entered the house.

But we knew. We knew what happened when the door closed. The shouting. The insults. The arguments. The fear. Sometimes he tried to hit my mother. Once, he threw all of us out of the house. And somehow, unbelievably, morning still came the next day. The sun rose. The birds sang. People went to work. Children went to school. The world continued as if nothing had happened. That is one of the strangest things about suffering. You can feel as though your entire world has ended, and somewhere outside your window, someone is buying bread.

My eldest sister got into medical school. He resisted.

My other sister got into one of the best business schools in the country. He resisted that too.

Then I got into one of the finest law schools in the country. He resisted that as well.

It was strange. The man who told people his children were useless kept trying to stop them from becoming something. He would visit relatives alone and laugh about us.

“My children are full of shit,” he would say.

“They haven't done anything.”

Sometimes people laughed with him. I remember that laugh. Really well. For years, I hated it with the depth of my heart. Now I mostly feel tired when I remember it. Because we had done something. We had survived. My sisters had survived. My brother had survived. My mother had survived. And somehow, I had survived too.

He wanted us to forget. We couldn't. There are things children forget. The names of teachers. The toys they once begged their parents to buy. The games they played until dinner. The birthdays that seemed so important at the time. But children do not forget the sound of their mother crying. They do not forget hunger. They do not forget the fear of losing their home. They do not forget standing between two adults because nobody else was there to stop them. And they certainly do not forget the morning they were supposed to go to JOYLAND.

Sometimes I wonder what would have happened if that phone had never rung.

Maybe we would have gone. Maybe my brother would have screamed on the rides. Maybe my sisters would have laughed at him. Maybe my mother would have bought us something she couldn't really afford. Maybe my father would have watched us from a distance and smiled. Maybe we would have eaten too much. Maybe we would have taken terrible photographs. Maybe we would have come home exhausted, sunburnt and complaining about the heat. Maybe that Saturday would have become nothing more than an ordinary childhood memory. Maybe, years later, I would have forgotten what I wore. Maybe I

would have forgotten what we ate. Maybe I would have forgotten which ride my brother was most excited about. Maybe.

But that is not what happened. Instead, JOYLAND became something else. A place I never visited that day. A place that exists in my memory like a door. A bright, colorful door. A door we were supposed to walk through. But we never did. Sometimes I think that is what childhood really is. Not only the things you remember. But the things you were supposed to experience and never got the chance to. My mother gave that family everything she had. Her youth. Her patience. Her sleep. Her dignity. Her tears. Her hunger. Her silence. And when she had nothing left to give, she still had us.

I cannot give those years back to her. I cannot erase the mornings she cried. I cannot make those potatoes taste like anything other than survival. I cannot return the childhood we lost. I cannot turn that Saturday into the happy day it was supposed to be. But I can remember.

Perhaps that is what remains when everything else has been taken away. We remember the people who stayed. We remember the hands that fed us when there was barely enough food. We remember the mother who walked into a house where she was humiliated because four children were waiting for her at home. We remember the nights she cried quietly so we would not hear. We remember the small smiles she gave us when there was nothing left to smile about.

And sometimes, when I think about her, I don't remember the shouting. I don't remember the hammer. I don't remember the threats. I remember a woman sitting at a dinner table, pushing potatoes onto four plates and saying,

“Eat.”

As if feeding us could keep the world from falling apart. As if four full stomachs could somehow make everything all right. And perhaps, for that one night, it did. Because she had given us dinner. She had given us another morning. She had given us herself. And that was enough.

For a long time, I wondered why I remembered that Saturday so clearly. Now I know. It was the last ordinary morning. The morning before we learned that fathers can leave a house without leaving it. The morning before my mother stopped smiling the same way. The morning before four children became older than they were supposed to be. The morning before happiness became something we remembered instead of something we expected.

It was a beautiful Saturday morning. The birds were singing. The sun was shining. My brother was excited. My sisters were choosing what to wear. My mother was smiling. And somewhere beyond the windows, the world was waiting for us. We were supposed to go to JOYLAND. We never made it.

Muhammad Abdullah Mumtaz is a writer and law student at Pakistan College of Law, in Lahore. He writes about family, memory, and endurance — the ordinary mornings that turn out to be the last of their kind, and the people who hold a household together when everything else gives way.

POETRY

# Shelter

*Sophia Jamali Soufi*

Rasht · Iran

■■■■■■■■■

■■■■■ ■■■■■■■■

■■■■■ ■■ ■■ ■■■■ ...

■■■■ ■■■■■■

■■■■■ ■■ ■■

■■ ■■■■■■■■ ■■ ■■■■■■

■■■■■■■■■

■■■■■ ■■■■■■■■■■

■■ ■■■■■■■■ ...

■■■■ ■■ ■■■■■■

■■■■■ ■■ ■■■■■■

■■■■

■■■■■■■■■ ■■ ■■■■■■

■■■■ !

■ ■ ■ ■

■■■ ■■■■ ■■■

■ ■ ■ ■ ■

■ ■ ■ ■ ■

■ ■ ■ ■ ■■■■■■■■

■ ■ ■ ■■■■ ■■■■

■ ■ ■■■■ ■■

■■■■ ■■■■■■ ...

Your eyes

an unknown realm

where the sun rises

in the shyness of its own dawn...

You comb your hair

and a storm of night

loses itself

within your tresses

My fingers

are the flight of butterflies

upon your forehead...

There

where your smile

creates a crack

in loneliness

Your name

the simplest prayer

upon my lips

Stay!

I have planted you

like a dawn song

within my throat

within my blood

within my soul

And from the assault

of the world

in the shelter of you

I have found

my own refuge...

Translated from the Persian by the poet.

## SHORT FICTION

# The Lyceum Games

*Liv Gleyzer*

Council Rock High School North, Pennsylvania · United States

### Part I: Arch■ — Beginning

I don't exactly remember arriving. I remember the field and the emerald green grass that felt soft beneath my feet. It was pressed down in some areas, like someone had sat exactly where I was not too long ago. As I walked, some flowers in the grass brushed against my leg. I could see tents lined neatly in rows with baskets of food set right outside. The doors were slightly open, enough to glance in. There were pillows, blankets, and stuffed animals crowding the small spaces. I knew which tent was mine without being told – I felt it.

There were children everywhere – plucking blades of grass and passing toys back and forth. As I moved across the field, a light breeze carried the steady song of a bird. A distant bell rang, and all of the children huddled into a large circle around a small platform. I joined in and sat next to a young boy who looked to be around my age. An older man walked onto the platform and introduced himself, "Good day young children – welcome to Arch■. You may refer to me as Didáskalos." There were a few murmurs, followed by giggles. He looked at the boy beside me and winked, "some of you may already know me, and some of you might not. Either way, get some rest and eat a good meal. Tomorrow, some of you will play your first game." Didáskalos walked off the platform and into a small hut near the camp.

By bedtime, everyone had discussed their guesses for the game multiple times. Some kids argued it would require athleticism, while others insisted it would be a game that required more strategy than stamina. The empty, deep blue sky put me to sleep faster than a lullaby – the crickets chirped, and though the stars were nowhere to be seen, I was out in a blink. Despite the crowd of kids, the field – Ch■ra – felt like a sort of loneliness I couldn't quite place my finger on.

I woke up to the same familiar bell and the calm voice of Didáskalos calling us into the field. He stood on the platform again, hands folded, watching us with the same still expression as before. "Didáskalos says," he began. Some of us moved immediately. Others waited, feeling unsure. When he spoke again, a few children spun around, then stopped, tittering when they realized their mistake. No one was told they were wrong. No one was sent away. Didáskalos only waited until we were ready before continuing. We tried again – and again. When someone forgot, they smiled and fixed it. When someone hesitated, they weren't rushed. The game went on until everyone understood.

After Didáskalos returned to his hut, the boy from the previous day approached me and introduced himself. He had big brown eyes and curls that never seemed to sit still. He looked a few years older than me – he looked like he knew what he was doing. He went by Kouros. We strolled around the Ch■ra – there were flowers of every sort and tall trees surrounding the camp. Some kids were playing, others eating, and some were just soaking in the warmth of the sun.

From that day on, Kouros was always there. During every game, Kouros stayed by my side. As time went on, I became fairly good at the games and didn't need his help anymore – but even then, Kouros still stayed at my same speed and offered me his aid whenever I

needed it. One day before another game, the bell rang, and like clockwork, we all gathered around the platform to see what Didáskalos had to say. Before he could even speak, five kids walked out from the small forest behind Didáskalos' hut. They all looked confused and didn't seem to know where they were going. Kouros glanced at me and pointed to a younger girl that looked more alarmed than the others.

Didáskalos gestured for the kids to sit with the rest of us, then called out a small group to stand near the platform. "You'll be moving on to M■sos," Didáskalos said. Between the loud whispers and silent pressure, I didn't notice that Kouros disappeared until the next game had begun.

The young girl approached me – the same one from the night Kouros left. She had a fake smile plastered onto her face. I could tell she was frightened by the surroundings and the talk of the upcoming games. "Kor■", she said, implying her name. I nodded and gestured to her to sit beside me. I explained Arch■ the way Kouros once did for me – although the words felt thinner without him next to me.

Over the next few days, Kor■ started sitting next to me without asking. We learned each other's habits – like how she twirled the loose threads at the ends of her blanket when she was stressed, and how I'd talk to myself before falling asleep. She asked questions constantly, not because she wanted answers, but because she didn't like the silence. I didn't mind the quiet, though. In the Ch■ra, time felt wide enough for the both of us.

When I woke up the next day, I felt a shift. It wasn't just the extra pressure or the way the others talked more about M■sos. Some kids

theorized it was a "paradise" for those who had won every challenge in Arch■; others thought it was a second "level" of the games. I ignored their chatter and focused. Over time, the trials became so easy that effort itself felt unnecessary. Even so, I stayed with Kor■.

The bell rang that morning just like any other day, except that day, it felt heavier. The routine was the same – everyone gathered around the platform as Didáskalos explained the game for the day. But as we got up to prepare for the challenge, Didáskalos stopped us. He called a few names, then mine, then Kor■'s. "You'll be moving on to M■sos," he said.

## Part II: M■sos — Middle

The children erupted with hollers and cheers for us. Beside me, Kor■ nervously gripped my hand. Didáskalos led the way toward the forest, and we followed. As we moved through the trees, the vibrant grass faded to a dull, dusty tint, and the air grew sharp and cool. When we reached the edge of the Ch■ra, Didáskalos pointed toward a narrow stone path. We stepped onto it, the stones cold beneath our feet. One by one, we made our way through the path and into M■sos.

The once light blue sky had faded into a pale, misty grey. Fog circled M■sos, grasping the sides like a barrier and engulfing the vibrant memory of Arch■. Instead of tents, sleeping bags lay scattered across the colorless grass. This time, I didn't know which belonged to me – Kor■ and I quickly claimed the last two and set them side by side. A man who looked identical to the one we had left behind walked toward us. "This is M■sos. I am Didáskalos," he said simply, then turned and disappeared into a small shack near the forest's edge.

That night, I could barely sleep. Everyone back in Arch■ had envisioned this place as a utopia, but the reality was jarring. There were only a handful of kids here – some barely spoke, while others huddled together, practicing their own small challenges. Unlike in Arch■, the games here were a stern priority. Kids spent their free time drilling and practicing instead of relaxing or letting themselves breathe. The only food we were given was bread and water.

Instead of the lulling bell, we were woken by a sharp, piercing ring followed by racing footsteps. I got up and shook Kor■ awake. We made our way to the platform where everyone stood in a rigid line. Didáskalos led us into a clearing wrapped in fog and paired us off randomly. The only thing we were given was one tarnished bell. All Didáskalos said was, "You will find your way back."

The fog instantly thickened, making it hard to see anything beyond a few feet. My partner seemed familiar with the trial and made it clear we had to stay together. At first, everyone clung to one another – then the voices began to echo strangely. Some kids called out, and I heard replies that weren't quite right. Paths forked, and partners began to argue quietly about which way felt right. We were only allowed to ring our bells once, following the echo to find our way back. My partner guided me through the fog and into the clearing.

Didáskalos stood there with his hands in his pockets. As we approached, he reached out and handed us each a thick, heavy, circular token. A set of pillars was engraved on the front, and on the back, an intricate "S" had been carefully chiseled into the cold metal. "It's a s■meion. You can trade it in for a warm blanket, a real meal, or a hint for the next game", my partner told me. Right as Didáskalos retreated back to the camp, other kids started to emerge from the fog. I had

counted fourteen of us earlier – seven pairs. Now, as sweaty, unfamiliar faces broke through the constricting haze, I realized only two pairs remained. Kor█ still wasn't back.

Two figures appeared in the mist. A boy stepped out first, and following close behind him was Kor█. I let out a breath I hadn't realized I was holding. She looked feeble, her hair damp and clinging to her face – but she was out. Her eyes searched the clearing until they found mine, and the tension in her shoulders finally snapped. I looked back at the wall of grey, realizing there was still one pair left in the game. I turned to my partner, a question forming on my lips, but she spoke before I could even ask. She didn't look at me. She only stared into the fog and whispered, "The last ones left never come back." Her eyes were pink and glossy as she turned and walked toward the camp. The realization felt like a sudden plunge into ice – I needed to win.

I searched the field for Didáskalos. His silhouette stood near the forest's edge, tall and unmoving outside his shack. His cold eyes were already locked on mine. I ran toward him and held out the s█meion – "I want a hint for the next game," I asked, my voice steadier than I felt. He took the token, his gaze never wavering as he closed his fist over the metal. All he said was, "The key is independence".

The next morning, the same piercing ring woke everyone up—except for me. I was already awake, stretching and bracing myself for whatever came next. I had the hint, though I still didn't know how I would have to use it. I hurriedly woke Kor█, and we rushed to the clearing. There were only twelve of us now, standing in a jagged line before Didáskalos. The air was crisp, and the fog had finally retreated, leaving the landscape exposed and cold. We waited until Didáskalos spoke a single word: "Run."

Everyone bolted. We ran in straight lines – back and forth, back and forth across the colorless grass. Kor■ followed close behind me at first, but she quickly began to hinder. As my pace intensified, she faltered. Then, she collapsed, her hands gripping her ankle as she hit the ground. I started to slow, my instinct screaming at me to turn back, but the hint held me in place. I kept running, knowing the consequences of stopping. Kor■'s shriek of pain echoed across the field, but I didn't look back. I just kept running.

We ran for hours until Didáskalos finally signaled for us to stop. Nine of us remained. Kor■ was still on the ground clutching her swollen ankle as tears covered her cheeks. Didáskalos did not offer to help, he only ushered her and the two others into the forest behind his shack. I watched Kor■ until the forest swallowed her whole. Something broke inside of me that day. I wasn't sure whether it was because she was taken, or because I had stood by and let it happen – but the warmth I had carried from Arch■ was gone. I had followed the hint. I was independent. And I was completely alone.

I won every single game after that, trying to outrun Kor■'s fate. S■meion after s■meion, I traded my victories for what was supposed to be warmth, comfort, and hints. Slowly, I grew used to the shallowness of M■sos. I discovered that if I didn't eat for days and saved my meager rations of bread, I could create a feast like the ones back in Arch■. Every night, I thought of Kouros and Kor■. I tried to imagine them in a different place – back in a version of the Ch■ra where they were snug and happy. Sometimes, when the silence grew too heavy, I'd catch myself playing with the loose threads of my blanket, just as Kor■ once had.

The next morning, I was woken by a shadow looming over my sleeping bag. The sun peaked through the trees, sharpening the silhouette until it became solid, revealing the figure of Didáskalos. "You'll be moving on to T■los," he said.

### Part III: T■los — End

Just as before, I followed Didáskalos into the woods past his shack and onto a frigid stone path that numbed my toes. This time, the uncertainty was heavier. I didn't know that there was a level beyond M■sos. As I followed the path, the air grew dry and the grass evanesced into stone. Above, the sky grew into a bruised, heavy, dark – not the dark of the night, but a hollow void.

When I entered T■los, it was silent. I looked around and saw only three people around me. They weren't practicing games, they weren't eating, and they weren't speaking. There were no tents and no sleeping bags, only the stone ground. The fog was like a solid wall here, a cage enclosing the camp. As I walked past the others, my heart stopped. I noticed a boy. He looked to be in his late teens, like me. He had brown, curly hair – matted with dirt and debris. I recognized the way his head tilted and the way he fidgeted with his nails. It was Kouros.

Just as I stepped towards him, the group lined up in front of Didáskalos without a word. I quickly stepped into place, my eyes still burning into the back of Kouros's head. Didáskalos said nothing – only watched the rest as they stared lifelessly at the mist. He pointed toward the thick wall of haze at the edge of the stone floor. "Walk. Drop a s■meion, do not come back." I looked down at my pile of s■meions. I had won so many. I had traded Kor■ for them. Now, Didáskalos demanded that I wear them.

I strung each heavy token onto a sharp metal cord. My fingers were numb and my vision blurred because of the thick fog surrounding me and the dim light of T■los. Beside me, Kouros was already moving. He didn't look like the young boy that had been my only friend in Arch■ anymore. His skinny spine curved under the weight of a hundred tokens. "Walk", Didáskalos hissed.

We stepped into the mist. Every step was calculated – if I stepped too fast, the heavy weights would swing and clash onto my chest. If I moved too slow, the weight pulled me backwards. I was terrified of dropping one – not because I wanted the token, but because I realized that without them, I was nothing to this place. Slowly but steadily, I made my way through the mist – where Kouros was sitting on the same spot as earlier. I thought about going up to him, but he wasn't Kouros anymore. He didn't look up as I passed. He was just a shape in the fog, a monument to the games he had won, and the person he had lost to win them. He was just another part of T■los.

That night I slept on the course stones instead of a warm blanket. For dinner, we foraged for scarce amounts of weeds around Didáskalos's shack. They were thin and flavorless, but it was better than starving. Around the center of the camp, there was a patch of land that had been scooped out by some of the kids there – it was beneath the stone, containing dirt that was closer to a brick than loam. We used sticks to coax small flames, heating the solid until it was soft enough to eat. It wasn't good, or nutritious, but it was better than nothing. As the grit crunched between my teeth, I realized how far I had fallen from the emerald grass of the Ch■ra. I looked at the heated dirt in my palms and then at the heavy, shining tokens around my neck. These metals once offered me solace, and now here I was, lying in a bed of stone.

When morning came, there was no bell, there was no ring – there was only silence. I only woke up when the pain in my joints was too much to sleep through. I sat up on the cold stone, the necklace of s■meions feeling heavier than before. I looked at the others – they were still staring into the mist, or perhaps they were sleeping with their eyes open. I didn't wait for Didáskalos to appear and wake us, or for a sign that the day had begun. I merely just stood up.

Liv Gleyzer is a high school student based in Pennsylvania with a passion for creative writing and law. Her writing often returns to questions of identity, ambition, and the ways people change as they move through the world. Outside of writing, she runs L.A.W., an educational platform focused on making law more accessible and engaging for young people.

POETRY

## Two Poems

*Esraa Jalal Jawad Al-Gawhari*

College of Arts, University of Baghdad, Baghdad · Iraq

“Beyond the Echo” and “Closer in Absence” are presented alongside their Arabic originals. The first poem, “Beyond the Echo,” draws on the imagery of the Arabic ghazal as a metaphor for our attachment to what we love and hold dear in life, as well as loss and the journey of finding ourselves again. The second, “Closer in Absence,” explores the paradoxical relationship between memory, distance, and healing.

Why did I deceive my own heart  
into believing she was mine,  
when my heart stayed asleep  
as she departed?  
Had I known the road that led to her,  
I would have followed her path,  
like a lone rider crossing the night,  
counting every step  
toward the trace she left behind.

Perhaps the horses' distant call  
might have reached her ears,  
and she might turn with mercy  
toward the heart she once held close.

The clouds above  
would pour their rain,  
carrying the rubies  
of tears that once shimmered.

Yet halfway down that road,

I understood:

I had not lost her.

I was the one who wandered  
within the echo of her voice.

And when the echo finally faded,

I drew nearer to myself,  
gathering the scattered pieces  
of my own becoming.

■■■■■ ■■■■■■■ ■■■■ ■■■■ ■■ ■■■■■■■■■■

■■■ ■■■■■■■ ■■■■ ■■■■ ■■■■■■■■

■■■ ■■■■■ ■■■■■■■■ ■■■■■■

■■■■■■■■ ■■■■■■■ ■■■■■■

■■■■■■■ ■■■■■ ■■■■■■■ ■■ ■■■■■■■■

■■■■■■ ■■■■■ ■■■■■■■ ■■■■■.

■■■■■■ ■■■■■ ■■■■■■■ ■■■■■■■ ■■■■■■

■■■■■■ ■■■ ■■■■ ■■■■■ ■■■■■■■■

■■■■■■■ ■■■■■■■ ■■■■■ ■■■■■■■■

■■■■■■■■ ■■■■ ■■■■■.

■■■■■■■ ■■ ■■■■ ■■■■■■■■

■■■■■■■ ■■■■ ■■ ■■■■■■■■

■■ ■■■■ ■■■■ ■■ ■■■■ ■■ ■■■■ ■■■■■■.

■■■■■ ■■■■■■ ■■■■■■

■■■■■ ■■ ■■■■ ■■■■■■ ■■■■■■.

\* \* \*

A memory that dwelt within my being

has disappeared,

yet whenever I withdraw

from where it lingers,

it vividly manifests again.

It makes me weep,

flooding my heart with tears,

overwhelming its frail pulses

that labor to heal.

Yet, how strange —

the nearer you are to a memory,

the closer you are

to healing the wound that bleeds.

And the farther you move away,

the more fiercely it clings

to your imprisoned heart.

■■■■■ ■■ ■■■■■ ■■■■ ■■■■■

■■■■ ■■■■■ ■■ ■■■■■ ■■■■

■■ ■■■■ ■■■■■

■■■■ ■■■■■■ ■■ ■■■■■

■■■■■

■■■ ■■■■■■ ■■■■

■■ ■■■ ■■■■■

■■■■■■ ■■ ■■■■■■ ■■■■.

■■■■ ■■■■

■■■■ ■■■■ ■■■■ ■■■■

**■■■■■ ■■■■■ ■■■■■ ■■■■■**

**■■■ ■■■ ■■■ ■■■ ■■■ ■■■ ■■■ ■■■**

□ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □

**■■■■ ■■■■ ■■■■ ■■■■ ■■■■ ■■■■**

**■■■■ ■■■■ ■■■■ ■■■■**

Translated from the Arabic by the poet.

Esraa Jalal Jawad Al-Gawhari is an emerging poet writing in both Arabic and English, based in Baghdad, Iraq, where she teaches English literature, with a focus on Modern Drama, in the Department of English at the College of Arts, University of Baghdad. Her poems attend closely to quiet things — negative space, the turn of a season, the light on water — and find in them whole worlds. Her work explores memory, absence, and the quiet transformations of the everyday.

POETRY

# Trained to Leave

*Emma Farmer*

Birkenhead School, Liverpool · United Kingdom

Emma Farmer is a writer at Birkenhead School, in Liverpool, United Kingdom. Her poems turn on identity and memory — the way a name, a shared history, or someone else's past can shape whether we're seen as ourselves at all.

# The Clock Keeps Ticking

*Anna Orlandi*

Southbank International School, Brescia · Italy

People often say I am impatient. They notice the way I tap my foot while waiting, how I urge people to hurry, or how I check the time more than anyone else in the room. To them, it is just a habit, maybe even an annoying one. What they do not see is where it comes from. For me, impatience was not born out of nothing. It came from a single day, a single failure of timing that left me standing in an empty trampoline park at seven years old, realizing for the first time that once time slips away, there is no getting it back.

Second grade feels like an endless blur of spelling tests, simple math, and playground games, but March 25, 2018, still stands out to me in vivid color. It was the day of my classmate Olivia's birthday party at Sky Zone Trampoline Park. This was not just a regular birthday party. Even the boys were invited, which was rare, especially since second-grade boys were known for having cooties.

I had been looking forward to the party all week. I kept imagining everyone bouncing on the trampolines, jumping into foam pits, laughing, and eating the big pizza we would inevitably get afterward. Living in the U.S., you could pretty much expect pizza at any birthday party.

I was ready early. I wore my favorite outfit: black leggings and a light blue shirt with a glittery silver star on it. I wore that shirt all the time because I loved the way the glitter reflected in the sun. In my hand was

a gift bag from Claire's with a makeup kit inside that I had spent forever choosing, hoping Olivia would love it. My sneakers were tied tight for jumping, and I waited by the door.

Every minute felt heavier than the last.

My dad was nowhere near ready.

"Dad, where are you? We're going to be late!" I yelled.

"Relax, Anna, we'll get there," he called from the kitchen.

"But the party starts at two. Everyone's going to be there already!"

"Hold on," he answered. "We have to stop for gas. And I just need to finish one quick call for work."

"One quick call" always meant forever, and even at seven, I knew it. I crossed my arms and stared at the clock.

"You always say that," I muttered.

I waited, but one call turned into two, and a stop at the gas station became another delay. My excitement slowly turned into frustration. Every time I looked at the clock, another few minutes had disappeared. Even at seven, I understood that every minute we lost was a piece of the party I would never get back.

The car ride felt endless. I stared at the numbers on the dashboard clock, almost as if watching them closely enough could make them stop moving. My dad hummed along to the radio like nothing was wrong, which somehow made it worse. I leaned my head against the window and watched everything outside rush past us, wishing we could rush with it.

The moment the car stopped at Sky Zone, I jumped out. I ran inside with the gift bag swinging from my hand, still hoping I had not missed too much.

The man at the counter looked up as I rushed toward him. For a moment, I was confused. I could not hear anyone. No laughter. No bouncing. Nothing.

I figured everyone must have been in another room.

"Hey, where is everyone?" I asked.

He looked at me and shook his head slightly.

"The party ended about thirty minutes ago."

I froze.

The gift bag suddenly felt heavy in my hand. Useless.

The sounds I had imagined all week were nowhere to be heard. The trampolines were empty. The balloons were still there, but the people were gone. My classmates had already laughed, eaten pizza, jumped into the foam pits, and said their goodbyes. The memories I had spent all week imagining had happened exactly as I pictured them, except I was not in any of them.

I turned around and saw my dad, who had finally caught up to me. For a second, I think I was still hoping he could somehow fix it. Parents were supposed to be able to fix things. But his face held only quiet guilt. He put his hand on my shoulder, and neither of us said anything.

There was nothing to say.

The party was over.

For a long time, I thought that day simply taught me not to be late. But as I have gotten older, I have realized that it gave me something more complicated: an awareness of time that I have never really been able to turn off.

I hate watching minutes disappear when I know they could have been spent somewhere else. I hate arriving late because, to me, lateness has never felt like losing only a few minutes. It feels like losing pieces of an experience that continues happening without you. Maybe that is why I rush people. Maybe that is why I check the clock so often. Somewhere along the way, being on time stopped being just about punctuality and became my way of making sure I never arrive after something important has already ended.

But there is an irony in that. I became so afraid of wasting time that sometimes I spend too much of it thinking about time itself. I watch the clock instead of the moment. I worry about what I might miss next instead of noticing what is happening now. At seven, I learned that time does not wait for me. I am still learning that I cannot control it either.

So when people see me tapping my foot or telling them to hurry, they see impatience. What they do not see is the little girl in the glittery blue shirt, standing in an empty trampoline park with an untouched gift bag hanging from her hand.

Sometimes, I think a part of me is still standing there, staring at a clock I cannot turn back.

Anna Orlandi is an Italian-born student writer at Southbank International School. She writes personal essays that begin with a single remembered moment and follow it outward, exploring how small childhood experiences quietly shape the people we become.

POETRY

# Hostile Takeover

*Sumit Chauhan*

Princeton, New Jersey · United States

Have a gun, rob a bank. Have a bank, rob the world. Have the world, and there's one thing left to take: the half-second between a thing and the wanting of it. They took that too. They call it load time.

They don't sell you the shoe. They sell the hole in your life the shoe is shaped to fill, then drill the hole a little wider every time you scroll. Four seconds till the skip button lights — four seconds, a thousand tiny surgeons working on your want without anaesthetic, without consent, until you sign the form yourself and call it taste.

Upstairs, the carpet eats the footsteps. Nobody raises a voice; the room was built to carry it. Lunch is a draft. Dessert is a clause. They don't need to convince you. They only need to have been in the room the afternoon the word was chosen — the one you'll spend your life obeying and never learn to spell. Lobby: a room you wait in. Lobby: a verb they do to you.

The gun is loud. The bank is quiet. The world just hums. The fridge at three a.m., lit like a chapel. The yoghurt with a cartoon face, expiring at you. The ad you can't see anymore because it's wearing your eyes — until the thing you own is the thing that owns you, and the hum is coming from inside.

Have a gun, rob a bank: twenty years and a number on your chest. Have a bank, rob the world: your name above a door that people are wheeled through bleeding, your face on the wrapper of what they eat

instead of dinner, your story sold back to them at the checkout as proof that anyone can make it. Make it: to build a thing. Make it: to get away.

Sumit Chauhan is a writer from Princeton, New Jersey. He is drawn to thresholds — doorways, dusk, the sentence just before the one that matters — and to everything a person keeps but never uses. He owns more travel tidbits than books, and more books than he could ever hope to read, and remains unbothered and mildly satisfied by both.