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# URBAN CONFUSTIONS

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*As urban reality changes in the cities of the world, women bring to the urban scene a whole new meaning as the catalysts of immigration, social-assimilation, politics, poverty, education and urban 'culture'. Urban Confusions Journal is a group of woman writers who are dedicated to bringing out realities, from the chaotic urban agglomerations of the world where they grew up, inhabit and work in. Women who have things to say, and say it best within art, stories, poetry and non-fiction.*

# URBAN CONFUSTIONS JOURNAL

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## **Cover Image**

Kristin Abhalter

*Organized Light: One Trillion Thirty Billion to One Trillion Four Hundred and Fifteen Billion  
Over six ft high, foam, acrylic medium, plaster, resin and over ten pounds of glitter  
The title refers to the United States Military Budget for 2011-2012*

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Yasmine <i>Sharbari Ahmed...</i>	6
Blackbirds <i>Rati Ramdas Girish...</i>	10
The Mannequin Project <i>Priyanka Sacheti...</i>	13
<i>Amanda Gentry...</i>	16
<i>Corinna Button...</i>	18
<i>Dian Sourelis...</i>	20
<i>Haleh Anvari</i> in conversation with <i>Priyanka Sacheti...</i>	22
<i>Mona Kamal</i> in conversation with <i>Priyanka Sacheti...</i>	25
The World Will Come Down Hard on Us <i>Annie Zaidi...</i>	28
Channel V <i>Jane Bhandari...</i>	33
No Sex Please She Might Hear <i>Jane Bhandari...</i>	33
In Naroda Patiya <i>Meena Alexander...</i>	33
Isla Negra Revisited <i>Shikha Malaviya...</i>	34
Which War are You Speaking of My Love <i>Priya Sarukkai Chabria ...</i>	35
Culture Trouble <i>Samhita Nagaraj...</i>	35
Connor <i>Samhita Nagaraj...</i>	35
Life Weaving <i>Samhita Nagaraj...</i>	35
Purdah <i>Rizio Yohannan Raj ...</i>	36
A Prayer For My Unborn Son <i>Rizio Yohannan Raj...</i>	37
See <i>Priya Sarukkai Chabria...</i>	39
Onam <i>Rizio Yohannan Raj...</i>	39
Human <i>Annie Zaidi ...</i>	40
Including One Woman <i>Annie Zaidi...</i>	41
Genocide Gatehouse <i>Shikha Malaviya...</i>	43
Shiva, She will rise <i>Nabina Das...</i>	43
Possibilities <i>Nabina Das...</i>	44

Her Mahabharata	<i>Nabina Das...</i>	44
Smoke & Mirrors	<i>Shikha Malaviya...</i>	45
Skin	<i>Jessu John...</i>	45
A Conversation at a Women's Reservation	<i>Neelima Vinod...</i>	46
Hope	<i>Debadatta Bajpai...</i>	46
I Am Writing This Naked	<i>Ellen Kombiyil...</i>	46
Poem For Steve	<i>Ellen Kombiyil...</i>	47
Minstrelry	<i>Minal Hajratwala...</i>	47
The Thief	<i>Ellen Kombiyil...</i>	48
Every Girl is Dinner	<i>Sumana Roy...</i>	48
Bells	<i>RK Biswas...</i>	49
Oil, water & concrete	<i>Athena Kashyap...</i>	50
Shame	<i>Sonali Deuskar Gurpur...</i>	51
Manipulating Mona	<i>Sonali Deuskar Gurpur ...</i>	51
Mona Lisa Smile	<i>Sonali Deuskar Gurpur...</i>	51
Kiss My Tiara	<i>Sonali Deuskar Gurpur...</i>	51
List of Contributors...		52



## YASMINE

Sharbari Ahmed

*Drink if you like. You should have as good a time here as is commensurate with your duties. Do, however, keep your Indian liquor separated from its two quarrelsome partners, woman and song.*

The Calcutta Key, 1945

Helpful Hints for American Military Personnel In India

Part I

Of All The Gin Joints...

Chapter 1

Akash Alexander Khan '61

Hayden Hall

Mt Hermon School For Boys

Gill, MA

1959

Dear Akash,

I must warn you: this is a love story. I will tell it in my way. In fits and starts because that is the nature of love stories that happen during wars. With delays, disruptions and sudden diversion. I will also keep in mind how much you disliked all that sappy stuff when we used to go to the Lighthouse to watch the picture shows. When Gable kissed Vivien, everyone sighed and you groaned and sunk deeper into your seat. You only pay attention during the war scenes. I know that makes you a normal boy but I am so relieved that you never had to experience war firsthand. I suspect you would not be so enthusiastic about torpedoes if you were staring down the business end of one.

This story, mine, yours, began a long time ago. It actually began before I was even born. Even before my grandmother was born. It began near a small Bengali village called Plassey in 1757 where the British Raj was officially born. We Bengalis consider ourselves the artists and intellectuals of India and pride ourselves on being visionaries. Some enlightened Englishman once said, "What Bengal thinks of first, India realizes later." Or something like that. So, initially we had no problem with the British—by all accounts they were like wide-eyed children let loose in a candy store and they wanted to partake of everything. But since that first battle in Plassey, we have been agitating to get them out as soon as possible. They got greedy you see, and then of course some religious types showed up and demanded they cease and desist feeling good at once and to that end sent them pinched faced English women, who "tamed" them. As soon as the memsahibs alighted the ships in their crinoline and corsets, the party was over.

Two hundred years later, we were still agitating and had pinned all our hopes on one man. He seemed to be the only one who knew how to get under their stiff upper lip. He did it by doing nothing. He sat quietly, received people, peered at them over his too small spectacles and showered them with love, wove cloth, starved himself and irritated Winston Churchill to the point of dementia—an added benefit.

When they first arrived in the 1600's to set up a trading post, the Ingrez embraced everything about India. They donned Indian clothing, ate with their fingers from communal platters and learned to speak the various languages fluently. They seemed to draw no distinction between themselves and the natives and became Indians. Most importantly they married Indian women and didn't just take them as mistresses. Unlike now, of course. It's amazing how backward modern civilization can be. If the opportunists hadn't arrived with their frigid, corseted wives, things might have been very different for us.

I know I told you that this was a love story, but it is through no machination of mine. Even my own father was impervious to my charms. He never came back, did he? Men have to be convinced into loving a woman. I can convince a fishmonger to charge ten annas less for a pound of koi but that's about it. Being pretty is not enough; even being beautiful is not enough. My strength lies in my ability to, as the Americans say, make a buck. I think, in the end, your father admired that. It was also the reason we met.

I am a good businesswoman. In 1942 I became one in earnest. The year the Japanese started bombing Calcutta. I opened a restaurant that I turned into a bit of a night club, called Bombay Duck. That is why I left you every Sunday morning before the sun was even up. That was the hardest thing for me to do. You always insisted that you would see me off but couldn't open your eyes so early and I kissed you while you slept and started counting the hours until Saturday.

Did you know that Bombay Duck is a fish? I thought I was being frightfully clever when I named the club that. It got its name in a rather complicated way—the fish, that is. The way the tale goes is that the lizardfish, bhamholo, in Bangla gives off a pungent odor when dried. You know the one. Cook always crushes it up and mixes chili and cilantro into and tries to get you to sprinkle it on to your rice. You said the smell makes you gag. Well, they transport the stuff by rail across the country and the train compartments smell heavily of the fish, especially the Bombay Mail or Bombay Dak. Some minor official from Surrey started calling it Bombay

Duck in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and that was that.

I had a sign of a fish made up and hung it in front of the night club's small brass plaque that read simply Bombay Duck, est., 1942. The gorah customers found it quirky and exotic. Somehow it summed up India for them. Nothing is what it seems, or maybe things have more than one meaning or that India is a smelly, unappetizing place that must be smothered in spices in order to be palatable. Who knows?

For the first year business went decently, but not very well, thanks in part to the war. We were also competing with well-established restaurants like Firpos -- where they served haute cuisine (as haute as the rationing would allow) and pretended they were located in Piccadilly Circus and Cathay, the only decent Chinese place in town, though they suffered terribly from the rice shortages. The American servicemen loved Cathay and The American Kitchen—another Chinese joint. Oddly, Chinese places reminded them of home. But The Duck offered something that none of these other places did; women, nautch girls if you will, but with a modern twist. My girls were Hollywood glamour all the way. Patience, you know, even looked like Merle Oberon, from that other film you hated, Wuthering Heights. She claimed they were related but I doubt it. I hand picked these girls, sometimes right out of the maw of utter destitution. At least two of them were facing an inevitable demise from disease and botched abortions in some shanty brothel north of Tollygunge somewhere if I had not come along.

After the club opened, we had some difficulties with the Americans stationed here, which threw your father and I together. I have to say they are a most paradoxical and peculiar group of people, the Americans. They are not as stuffy and formal as the British. They treat all the Indians they encounter with warmth and innocent curiosity. I noticed they love to laugh and are generally sentimental and optimistic, yet they segregated their colored soldiers and treated their Jewish soldiers with suspicion and contempt. I guess they are more self-indulgent. Three Negro soldiers were accused of attacking one of my girls, though the situation turned out to be a bit more complicated than we first thought and your father was involved in the case.

Well, this is my legacy to you—among other things, not quite as delightful. Someday, I know you are going to want to know where you came from, where I ran off to every Sunday and what kind of a man your father was. I want to say that he was the best of men. He could have been. I firmly believe that. But fate and the time he was born into conspired against him. Your father, in an ill-conceived effort to rid himself of his feelings for

me, volunteered to fight off the Japanese and re-build a road. He was nearly felled by disease and despair but people were counting on him so he persevered. He came back to me for a short time, a superstitious man believing in ghosts and angels. He claimed that the Japanese were ultimately supernatural and unafraid of death. They had given their souls to their emperor and so had nothing to fear. This made them almost impossible to defeat. As usual he, and his ilk grossly underestimated the Asians. They thought them inferior and expected to trounce them within weeks of arriving in Burma. It cost them thousands of men. The jungle was another enemy, in some ways even more formidable. He told me it swallowed men whole—on both sides, or ate away at them slowly. When your father returned from Burma he came carrying three demons on his back. His life in Connecticut, me, and what he had seen in the jungle. He knew he had failed to live up to his potential. I ended despising him for it. Too many things conspired against us. The war, rules about race and class that were in place for hundreds of years, and our own limitations. This was my karma phal, the fruit of my fate and I cannot say that it was all rotten. It was an adventure, after all.

I want you to know that your karma doesn't have to be tied into your father's or mine. So please try not be burdened by it.

I fear, though, that some of these letters may have suffered from too many nights at The Lighthouse Cinema. I do love a good war-torn love story. Speaking of love: I love you. This is my story. This is your story—but only the bits you choose to claim. Use it; discard it, whatever you want. But please, please don't let it end with me.

Your mother,  
Yasmine

Chapter 2  
June 25<sup>th</sup>, 1942  
Calcutta, India

The girls of Bombay Duck except Yasmine, who was awake well before, arose by noon, washed and hung their precious few silk stockings to dry, hummed, smoked, and gave one another massages. They traded stories about the previous night's events; who got that lecherous British adjutant to deal with, whose wife came with their husband to keep an eye, and glare at Patience, the main girl, who got the low tipper, who felt they sang off key. At 5 pm sharp they took their meal together in the main room, which had been cleared early that morning, aired of the stale smoke, sweat and liquor, tables pushed to the side, chairs neatly stacked, floor swept, and bar wiped down. The staff grumbled

that within a few hours the room would once again be smelly and in some disarray so why did Yasmine insist on sweeping every nook and cranny? Yasmine believed that the club came alive every night, as if for the first time. It was reborn, with new energy, new patrons, new stories. No two nights were the same, and it required a blank slate. She also insisted the evening meal before the doors opened was taken together so everyone could sit down and listen to one another. She felt creating a hierarchy of caste and religion would only cause problems for her later. At the Duck, she said to everyone individually their first day, there was no "India" as they knew it. That, in fact, this was not India. "Yes," Patience would quip, "You have entered Yasministan, where there is no caste, no God is held higher than any other, the sexes are equal, but the Rupee, above all, reigns supreme." Yasmine made sure the lighter skinned girls were not treated better, nor were the men, such as Pharoah and his band mates or Adil Babboo, considered mentally superior. This sat well with everyone and they played along. The youngest performer, Radhika, was a 16 year old Shudra, a low caste, Madhu, another one of the performers, was a strict vegetarian, and possibly a Brahmin, though she never talked about it, but did not object to eating next to anyone consuming meat and did not insist her food be prepared separately. Asma was Parsi, educated and persnickety by nature. She held herself above everyone at the Duck. Even Yasmine. One got the impression she would find fault with King George's table manners if she were dining with him. At this table Muslims broke bread with Hindus, a reformed Catholic and at least one Atheist—Yasmine herself. On the "outside", beyond the Duck's doors, where India sweltered, and grew increasingly restless, this would not be possible.

Yasmine arbitrated who performed on stage first or last. But when it came to meals, even the lowliest peon, who cleaned the latrines and ran errands, was served the same food and the same amount, though they ate after serving the girls and the band.

It was not that Yasmine was making a political or social point. It was that it was impractical to be divisive. It was bad for business. She did not believe in dividing and conquering, though, as she and everyone around her would find out a few years later, the British most certainly did.

The meals were usually a raucous affair, with much arguing and laughter and good natured teasing. It was everyone's way of getting ready for the night's inevitable intensity. Yasmine also used the time to observe how everyone was doing and feeling, to watch the interaction of the girls in case there was simmering resentments or quarrels that needed mending. They worked the club as one entity, trawling the room, and creating the neces-

sary energy needed for the soldiers to keep spending money and if the girls' chemistry was off then Yasmine noticed a substantial dip in the night's take. These men were facing death, or had faced it and they came to Bombay Duck to forget that for a time. Feminine squabbles and malcontent undermined the fantasy.

That evening they sat around lingering over their meager dinner of some watery lentils, a small fistful of previously verminous rice, and two scrawny chickens that Adil Baboo had to trade a bottle of black market whiskey for. He boiled the worms out of the rice but joked they were pure protein and would have been a much welcome delicacy if one were starving in a Burmese jungle. They had not had meat in two weeks because all they received was served to the customers. Worse still, the government had started rationing rice more actively, claiming there was a shortage and it was needed for the troops. This spelled disaster for Calcutta and Bengal but no one was aware of that yet. It was an artificial shortage and the common people did not find that out until it was too late and millions were dead. Yasmine's black market connections had not been able to provide her with anything substantial in a while. What she could find, she had to pay top dollar for, and had barely broken even as there had been several nights when the men did not spend as much as they normally did.

More and more Americans were arriving in the city which was good for business, but meant the war was getting bigger—and closer.

"Did you see the latest they are sending over to Burma?" Yasmine said, referring to the Americans who would be deployed soon. "It is mostly colored men and very young soldiers, with some older engineers who would be building a road between India and China."

"England is the only safe place in Europe," Asma said wistfully. She longed to go live on a stormy moor somewhere in a stone house with a draughty chimney, pining after a chaste love. "It's Germany, France and Poland that are not."

"Not if you live back home. The Germans keep bombing it," Patience said. She always referred to England as "Home" even though she had never been there and had been born in Calcutta. Many Anglo-Indians thought of England as their real home, and felt they had ended up in India by some cruel mistake. "The Japs won't bother bombing Calcutta," she added. This was proven to be untrue as the Japanese would start bombing Calcutta in earnest a mere six months later.

"I heard a terrible thing a few days ago. I am sure it can't be true. It's too evil," Adil Babboo said. "I heard that Hitler has built these camps, these places where there are herding all the Jews in Europe and killing them,



slaughtering them like cattle. They even take them in cattle cars to these places.”

“Children as well?” Asma asked. Adil Babboo nodded. Asma shuddered.

“No, it must be a rumor,” Yasmine said.

“He wants them all out forever,” Madhu said.

Yasmine was truly doubtful. “If Hitler is trying to take over the world, why would he bother with a few Jews?” Madhu shrugged. “Who knows? But if Hitler wins, he will want to rid India of her Jews as well. All five of them.”

Everyone laughed.

“We’re not blonde and blue eyed either,” Asma said.

“He’ll probably rid India of Indians.”

“A few less Indians wouldn’t hurt anybody,” Patience said. She smiled wickedly. “We reproduce like cockroaches. At least there would be more room on the street cars.”

“Actually he must like us,” Madhu said. “He even took a Hindu symbol. It’s the swas tika after all. He only hates Jews.”

“He’s probably just going to get rid of everybody. He’ll be so lonely he’s going to have to kill himself,” Yasmine said.

“Well that’s one way to solve the world’s problems,” Asma said.

“His right hand man, what’s his name?” someone asked.

“Goebbels,” Asma said.

“He looks like an undertaker,” Yasmine said. “Perfect!”

Everyone laughed again, this time a bit more heartily. Rahul, the young peon, started clearing the dishes away. Asma gathered all the silverware together and piled them on to a dish and handed it to him. Everyone watched as Rahul kept adding more dishes and silverware on to his tray.

“Arre Rahul,” Yasmine said, “You do this every time, and every time you break something.

Rahul gave her toothy grin and kept grabbing things off the table. Patience snatched a glass out of his hand before he placed it on the top of the precarious pile of dishes.

“If you break anything, I’m taking it out of your wages,” Yasmine said, shaking her head and stifling a smile.

“I don’t care if he is doing that!” Radhika, suddenly cried out. This startled Rahul, causing him to drop a dish, shattering it. He managed to steady the tray. Everyone stared at Radhika in a confused silence.

“He hates the Ingrez. He wants to destroy them! Anyone who fights the English is my friend,” she continued. It took a second or two before it dawned on people that she was talking about Hitler and not Rahul. Radhika’s was not an unusual sentiment. Many Indians at the time supported Hitler because he was fighting the British. A distant, Chittagongian, relation of Yasmine’s even

named her sons Hitler and, paradoxically the other one, Stalin. After the war, the little boys were known mostly as Hitoo and Staloo, as no one wanted to draw attention to their misguided monikers

The Indians were well tired of the Raj and if Hitler was going to stand up to them, then bully for him was the general mood in the country. Yasmine, on the other hand, never trusted Hitler. He was still European, and appeared more obsessed with class and race than anyone. There was no evidence he would be a just ruler, but she ventured at times, he would be better than Hirohito. Until this outburst Radhika had been quiet all through the meal but that was normal for her. She saved all her energy for her dancing it seemed. No one tried too hard to engage her in small talk anymore. She had picked at her food—that was not normal as she usually gulped it down like it would be snatched from her at any moment. She was moody, however, and unpredictable—and since she was also sixteen Yasmine just assumed she was being her resentful self.

“It’s time to get ready, Radhika,” Yasmine said, firmly taking charge. She clapped her hands twice and ushered the girl up the stairs, ignoring the teenager’s scowl.

“Adil Baboo wants to do a sound check on one of the mikes, Patience. We had a terrible time last Tuesday night with the sound system, so please help him,” Yasmine said.

Radhika’s anti-English rant was worrisome. There was a great deal of paranoia in the air because of the agitation to end the Raj. “The stultifying air in Calcutta,” a drunken, and disgruntled English customer once said to Yasmine, “smells of burning trash, and treason.”

Yasmine herself noticed that more and more posters around town admonished, “Loose Lips Sink Ships” and others showed images of luridly grinning, slant eyed, and oddly fanged Japanese soldiers brandishing bayonets and threatening cherubic, white babies. Yet another one depicted a comely blonde temptress holding court with a gaggle of adoring men. “Keep mum, she’s not so dumb,” it warned.

She remembered this suddenly and it made her anxious. She would have to watch Radhika carefully.

The band-leader, Pharaoh and his musicians wandered in wearing white jackets and loosened black bow ties. They all made their way to the stage to set up. The mike gave off a screech, breaking into Yasmine’s reverie. The club slowly came to life. Lights were switched on, chairs were set upright. The musicians tuned their instruments and laughed amongst themselves and smoked cigarettes.

*(This story is an excerpt from the author’s forthcoming novel ‘Yasmine’)*

## BLACKBIRDS

*Rati Ramadas Girish*

I have often heard my father say, "This is a dog eat dog world."

He would be flipping through the pages of the newspaper, when suddenly his eyes would focus on a particular section. He would stop, squint and lean in closer to read. Then with a shake of his head and the newspaper, he would mutter under his breath to an imaginary audience. "This is a dog eat dog world. There is no hope left here."

That statement, the same one daily, would instantly transport my young, innocent mind to stray dogs on the street, waiting for nightfall and then preying on each other. The weaker ones scurrying under the dirty sewage gutters to hide till daybreak, their tails between their legs, yelping softly, scared. At daybreak, they would slowly crawl out and hide, safely amongst the traffic. The meek ones ended up as carcasses. Picked through, bone for bone, blood smattered as the telltale sign of the kill. Being magnanimous in death, by feeding not only the killer, but also the scavengers. Cawing blackbirds, gnats, flies, maggots and sometimes I imagined, even the wasted, emaciated beggar at the end of the street.

My name is Lakshmi. I lived in a house with two bedrooms, one bathroom, a living room and a kitchen, with my sister, Durga and my parents. We had no dogs, no birds and definitely no cats. Sometimes a rat would come scurrying into the house when we left our precariously balanced mesh screen door open, but then everyone had rat trouble on my street. Catching the rat, killing it and getting rid of the putrid smell that reminded us of its existence, took up an entire week. There was no doubt that the first few seconds after a rat sighting was filled with disgust and even abhorrence. But the game after that required careful planning. The setting up of traps each one more innovative than the last. Days passed in careful anticipation, until Snap! It was time to savor sweet victory. The thrill of watching the rat writhe in pain, after rushing to his death in a moment filled with greed and weakness for that one morsel of food, signified the end of a carefully plotted game in which there could have only been one victor. Appa would then put the dead rat into a plastic bag and walk to the end of the street to the big trash can and throw it there. In

seconds, blackbirds would swoop down from the trees eager to taste this new treat. The next couple of weeks passed by with stories of how the household managed to outwit the twinkle toed rodent and the last few days of the month would involve some neighbor or the other enquiring after our war strategies and our arsenal.

I was named after the Goddess of Wealth. By naming their first born after the Goddess, my god-fearing parents hoped to bring home not just their bundle of joy, but also wealth, grandeur and good fortune. It was their way of greasing the palms of the lords, for a favor. Here they were naming their child after one of the most powerful deities and all they asked in return was some extra money to make sure they didn't have to worry about house loans, motorcycle loans and, when they had two girls, marriage loans. My mother's sister always told the story of how when she and my mother were pregnant and I was born a few days before her own daughter, my mother insisted on naming me Lakshmi, when she knew how much her sister wanted the name for her own daughter. By a matter of a few days we had won the right to bribe the lords. My aunt never let us forget that.

When four years had passed and we still hadn't won the lottery, my parents decided the Gods needed to be placated some more. So they decided to bring home another baby. But this time instead of asking for money, they asked for strength. My sister is named Durga, after the Goddess revered for power, invincibility and strength against evil. The way they saw it, even if they didn't win the lottery, they would have the strength to face reality.

With two powerful goddesses at home, you would think Appa and Amma, would lead a celestial life. Appa was an officer in a government bank and Amma taught mathematics at the local government school. Appa would get up early every morning, offer his prayers to the lord optimistically, read the newspaper while sipping his morning coffee, eat breakfast and get on his scooter to go to work. He would come back home in the evening, wearing the world he had seen on his face, his complexion a few shades darker. Amma would take the bus which would be crowded both ways. But at least she had friends on the bus who she could talk to, gossip and more often than not compare lifestyles with. Every day she would come back with a story a little more malicious than the day before. She would tell it to Appa while they drank their evening cup of coffee. Durga and I would pretend not to listen while doing our homework. But the minute the story session began, our eyes would stay focused on the books but our pens would stop writing.

On Monday she would start with,

“Did you know Geetha’s husband is having an affair with his sister-in-law? Can you believe it? Mala told me she had heard it from Meena who had seen them together at the market. I was shocked.”

Even though we didn’t believe it on Monday, the story on Tuesday would be,

“You will not believe what I heard today. Manisha told me she is going to invest in that chit fund. She and her husband are planning to put two month’s salary in the chit fund and they have been promised double returns. Don’t they watch the news? Everyday so many people lose money in these schemes. I did not tell them anything. It is their money, their fate. But they need to think about their children before they do such foolish things.”

On Wednesday, it was time to hate someone for their good fortune.

“Shobha was wearing another new necklace today. How can she afford it? She is a government school teacher. Her husband has a small business. I am sure it is something illegal. Smuggling and all. How else can they afford to buy new gold jewelry every month? Maybe the jewelry is fake?”

Appa would sip his coffee, flip through his evening newspaper and punctuate her sentences with practiced grunts, nods and sighs. That was the only time in the day Amma became like one of those dramatic heroines she watched on her television shows. These cathartic story sessions would end with her picking up the coffee cups, heading to the kitchen to make dinner whilst saying,

“Thank God we are not like them. We are happy with what we have.”

At home, we learnt that we were better than everyone else. At least Appa was not having an affair or we were not losing our money in some fund. And we knew Amma has not seen any new gold jewelry in quite a few years. It gave Durga and me a false sense of pride in our lower middle-class status. That was until we went to school. Durga and I studied in a small private school that was run by the church. It was so authentic, it even had a chapel, where we would all assemble when a bell was rung, in the morning, and say the Lord’s Prayer. Most of the girls did not say it, because they thought they were cheating on their own gods. They did not pray to Jesus, they prayed to Ganesha. There would be a low rumble of incomprehensible mumbling and then suddenly a loud united, “Amen!” We even had some nuns who were always dressed in long, light-brown frocks and wore a white veil covering their hair. We had to call them Sisters. They loved to publicly humiliate students. Every morning, as we walked in a single line, arm distance apart, to the chapel, they would inspect our shoes, our hair, uniform and nails. Shoes had to be polished, uniform had to be ironed, no nail polish and nails had to be cut and most important of all, if your hair was longer than shoulder length it had to be tied, braided and fastened with black ribbons. Wednesday was white uniform day. A day designated for physical exercise, and by a wise man’s logic, that meant the whole school had to wear white. It was ironic that the purity of white created deep class lines, slotting students into groups according to financial status. Needed funding for a new building on campus? The fundraiser requests would go to the parents of the girls with the whitest uniforms. Their parents were wealthy enough to buy bleach for the uniforms. Most middle class families only bought blue liquid to wash white clothes since it was cheaper. The problem was, one tiny, extra drop and clothes would be cursed to wear a bluish tinge, never to be white again. That one errant drop, gave away the closely, guarded secret, and cursed the poor unsuspecting student to wear her family’s financial status. Girls who would repeat this eyesore of an offense were asked to step out of line and grouped to one side of the auditorium, in full view of the whole assembly, berated from the microphone, while their classmates looked on and giggled mercilessly. Towards the end of the assembly, while students filed out of the auditorium, the offenders were taught a social lesson with a swift blow to their palms with a wooden ruler.

That loud, clap of the ruler on soft skin and the ensuing shriek would always send the cawing blackbirds, pecking at corn in the chapel quad, flying back to the more tolerant skies.

Over the years, Durga and I had both come home with marks on our palms. Even though we were mocked and reproached we never thought to blame our parents. We were brought up to compartmentalize. Painful incidents and memories just slipped into their appropriate boxes. Problems in school was one such burgeoning compartment. More mine than Durga's. She was always more forgiving than I was. She was also so serious, rarely smiling. Like she was mentally making notes about every situation in her head. Notes that she would someday pull out, read from and in doing so, shock all those present. If anyone in the family needed to know when something happened, we all just asked Durga. Her notes always had the answers. So she remembered just how many times both of us were punished at the morning assembly. I think it was after her sixth time, that she decided she had had enough. She was determined to do something about matters that she was too young to even understand. For a whole month, she relentlessly scrounged around the house collecting coins. She would check every nook and corner, pockets and purse, she even stopped Amma from dropping a coin into the beggar's bowl at the temple. That small token of charity went right into her pocket. No coin was too small for her singleminded goal. At the end of thirty-one days Durga had collected a small fortune in small change. She took her fortune to Amma on a Tuesday and threatened to stop going to school the next day if her uniform was not washed with bleach and just as white as the rest of her class. For a while after that life was pretty good, no more punishment and our palms got a well deserved break from the soreness. For a while the blackbirds stopped feeling sorry for us and we only saw them silently, pecking corn steadfastly as we walked past them.

I remember it was an oppressively warm morning. The kind where you wake up drenched, the sheets smelling of stale sweat. It was Saturday. A day that meant an hour of warm coconut oil massage to sooth our warm scalps and condition our long, black hair that would be followed by an extra long bath. It was around ten am. Appa was turning the pages of the newspaper, sighing, shaking his head, clucking his tongue. Durga and I were sitting close to him, forced to do some early morning studying. Amma was busy cleaning and cooking, a dust mop in one hand, a ladle in another. A portly figure, waddling through rooms.

An ominous caw from outside. That was the moment.

Appa stopped turning the page. He leaned in, focused on one section and he let out this loud, guttural sound.

"Jamuna! Jamuna!"

Not understanding the gravity and intensity of the moment, Amma answered from the kitchen. It was not until moments later, when Appa started reading aloud, that she entered the room, pale, holding her weapons in either hand.

"Middle aged couple found dead in their residence in Binnimangala Layout. Manisha and Suraj Talwar were found yesterday evening hanging from the ceiling fan in their house. Neighbors spotted the couple in their living room, hanging from the ceiling fan and alerted the police. By the time the police arrived and broke the door open, it was too late. Upon entering the house, police found documents relating to investment in a local chit fund company that was closed down by authorities a few weeks ago after complaints of fraud and money laundering. Neighbors say the Talwars had invested money in the chit fund and even encouraged neighbors to do so. Police have found brochures detailing the chit fund scheme at the Talwars residence. On Friday morning, Manisha Talwar (35) dropped their two children off at her parents' house in Koramangala and then met with her husband Suraj Talwar (41). Residents of the locality say they spotted them arriving home around 3:00 pm. The Talwars leave behind two children, aged 10 and 8."

From where Durga and I were sitting, we looked up at Amma. Despite all her gossiping we knew Amma had spent a lot of time with Manisha riding the bus to work for close to ten years. We knew they were close and knew Amma was about to cry.

"Serves them right", she said. "I told them chit fund was not for people like us. But did she listen? Serves them right."

With that, she returned to work leaving us with a fleeting caw and a flapping of wings that were in a hurry to get to a more merciful sky.



## MANNEQUINS

Priyanka Sacheti

For several years, I have been photographing mannequins wherever I encountered them. Mannequins are almost-human, our plastic versions; yet, they essentially function as mere clotheshorses, seemingly devoid of any identity or soul of their own. Yet, I often wondered as to what were their back-stories: how did they come into being? How did they see the world, as opposed to being merely seen? What happened to them once off-display? Far from being just objects of looked-at-ness, I wondered if they too possessed thoughts, concerns, and grievances of their own and voices to articulate them...provided someone was willing to listen to them. And so, through this project, I sought to present mannequins as individual, unique personalities in their own right, rather than being lost in a blur of beautiful, collective invisibility. As I photographed mannequins in Pittsburgh, United States, Muscat, Oman, and Jodhpur, India, I made a curious observation: when training the camera lens upon them, their eyes shed their glassiness, their wigs the stuff of artifice. They became alive, so to speak, the lens' attention vivifying them- and they were silent, passive spectators no more. They acquired agency to participate: to speak and to be heard. In conclusion, this photography project took notes while they spoke.

The sari mannequin shots were photographed in Jodhpur and the others were taken in Allure boutique, Pittsburgh



*Surveying the Ruins*





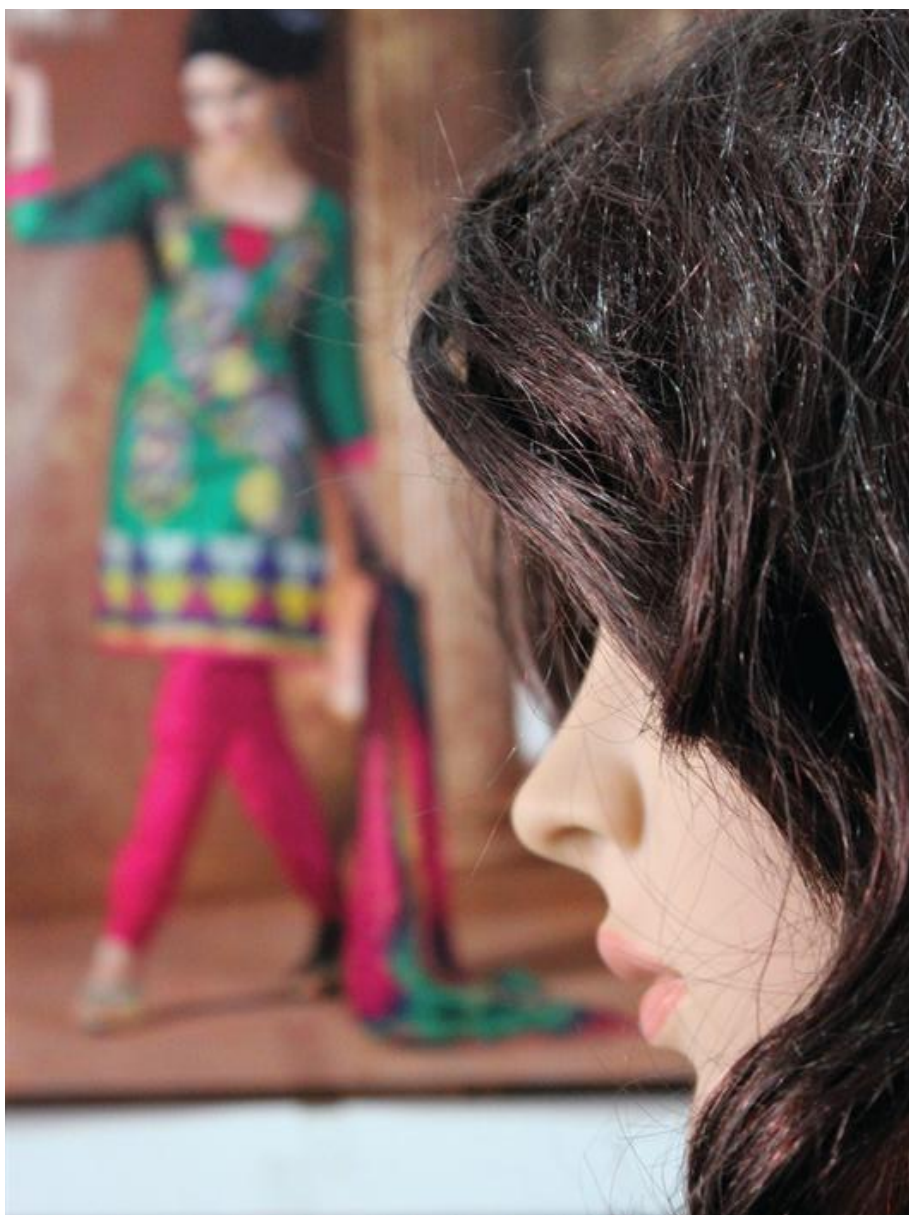
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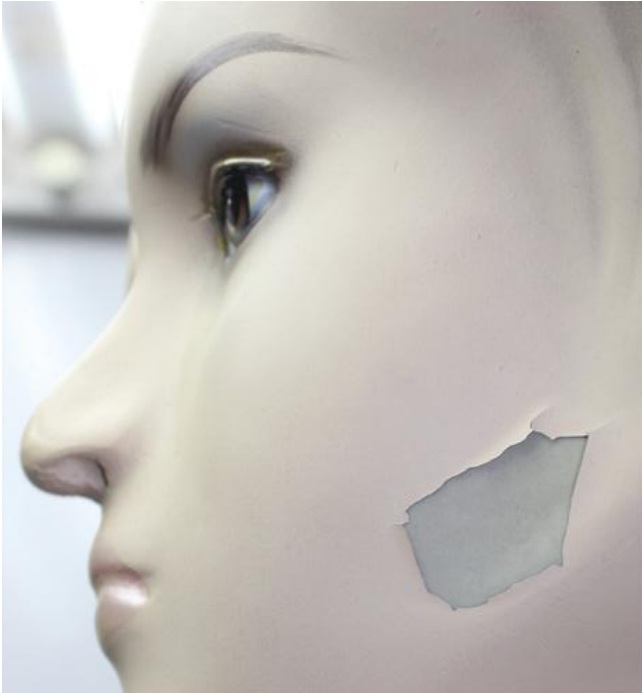
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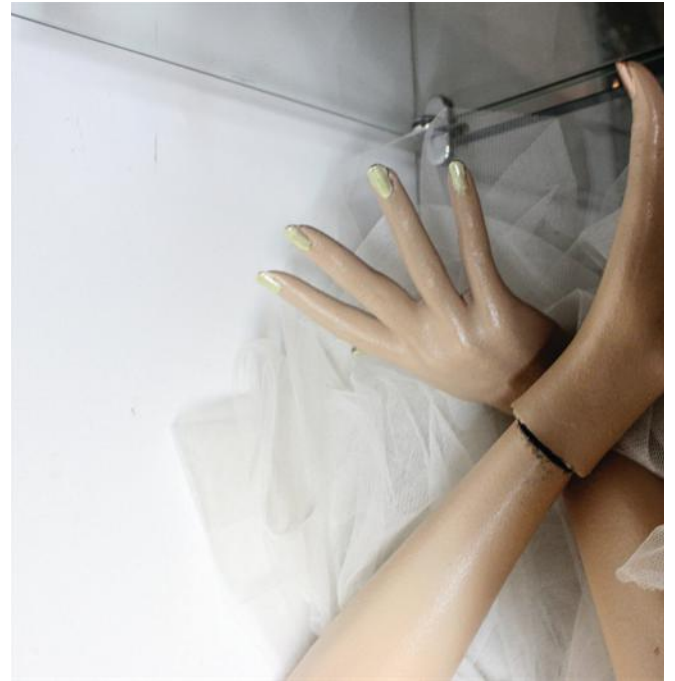
*Commodity*



*Not the Real Thing*



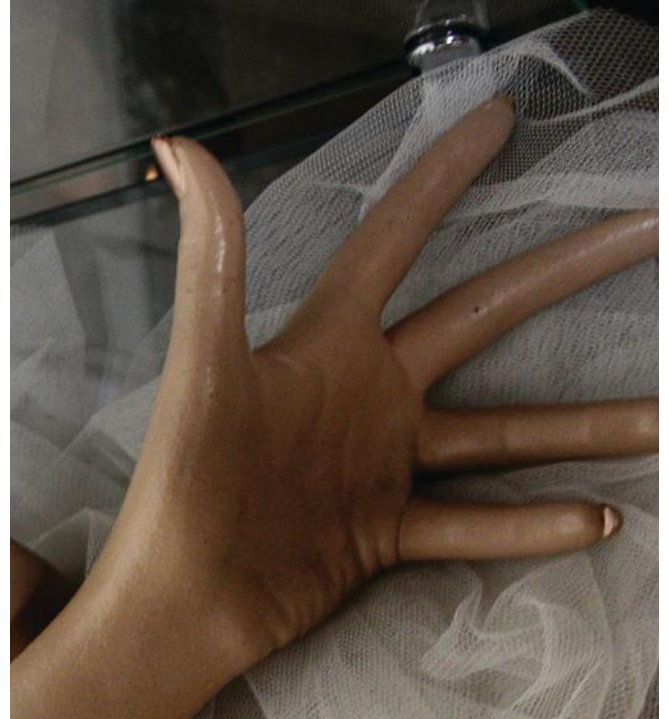
*What Lies Beneath*



*Helpless*



*Outstretched*



*Dismembered*

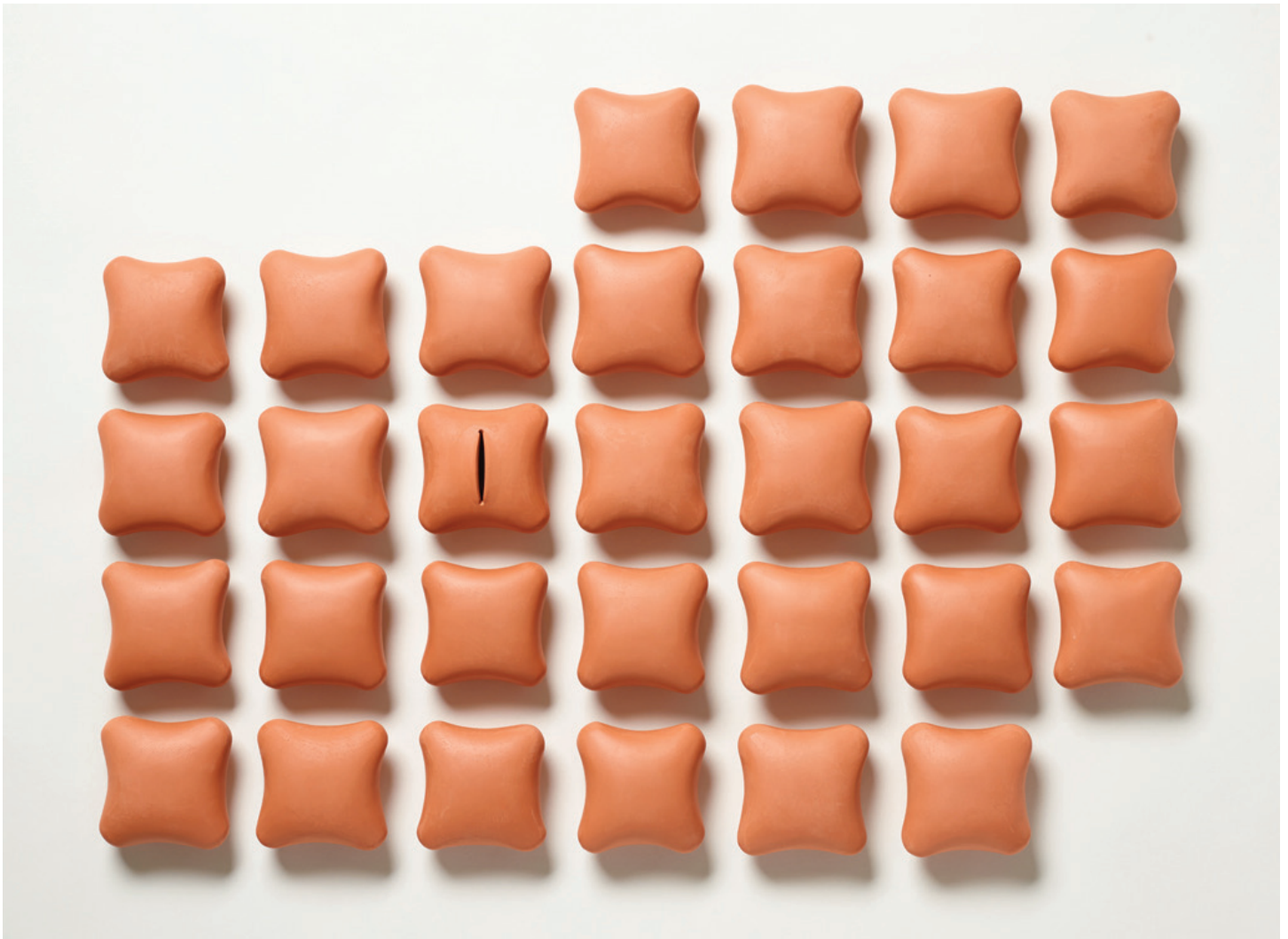


## Amanda Gentry

The work that I create is an outward manifestation of an inner journey taken to still the effects I experience from living in this digital age: stimuli that begs me to be in a constant state of searching for whats next rather than simply being right here, right now. I achieve this state of being as best I can by making with my hands. The process and physicality of creating brings me into my body, requiring my presence and connecting me with the moment. The making of multiples—creating the same thing over and over—rocks me into a meditative state ultimately grounding me in my experience with the present.



Sentiment est Croyant; 19 units each at 6" x 8" x 3"  
install footprint: 158" x 8" x 3"; 2012; raku clay with raku glaze.



Olivia, 31 units each at 2.5" x 2.5" x 1"; install footprint: 20.5" x 14.5"; 2013; unglazed terracotta



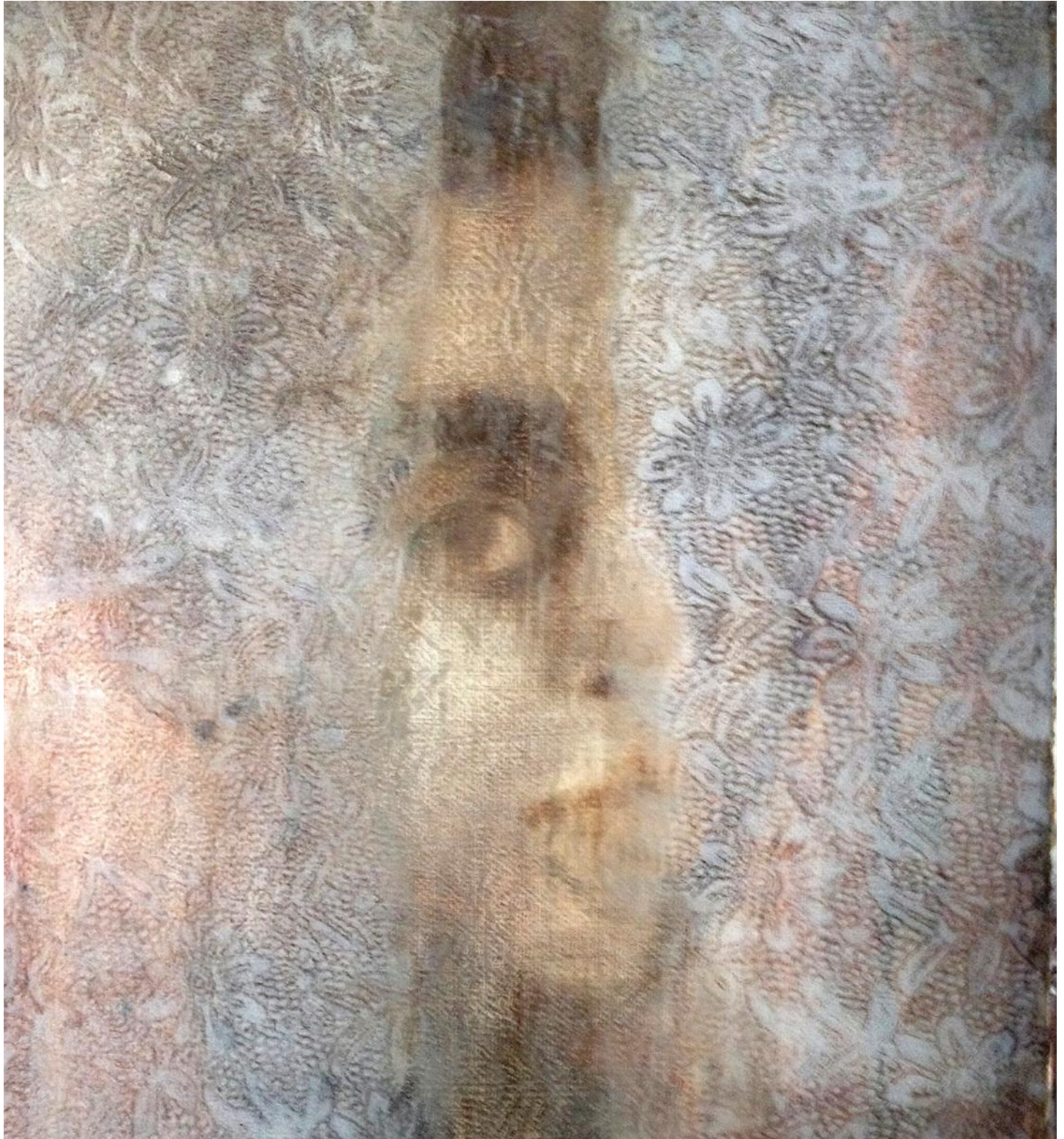
Worthy, 13 units each at 7" x 15.5" x 3"; install footprint: 78" x 75" x 3"; 2012; unglazed white stoneware with porcelain slip skin



## Corinna Button

I borrow images such as sculptural heads of noble women and ancient Icons displayed in museums on pedestals or in glass cases and combine them with elements from fashion magazines.

I see these figures as vehicles to explore and manipulate in my own way to project a new look and feeling. I aim to create archetypal figures whose identities are partly exposed and partly hidden.



'Between You and Me' 2013, Mixed media monotype on paper., 36 x 24 in





'Myth' 2012, Acrylic, oil & mixed media on canvas , 36 x 24 in

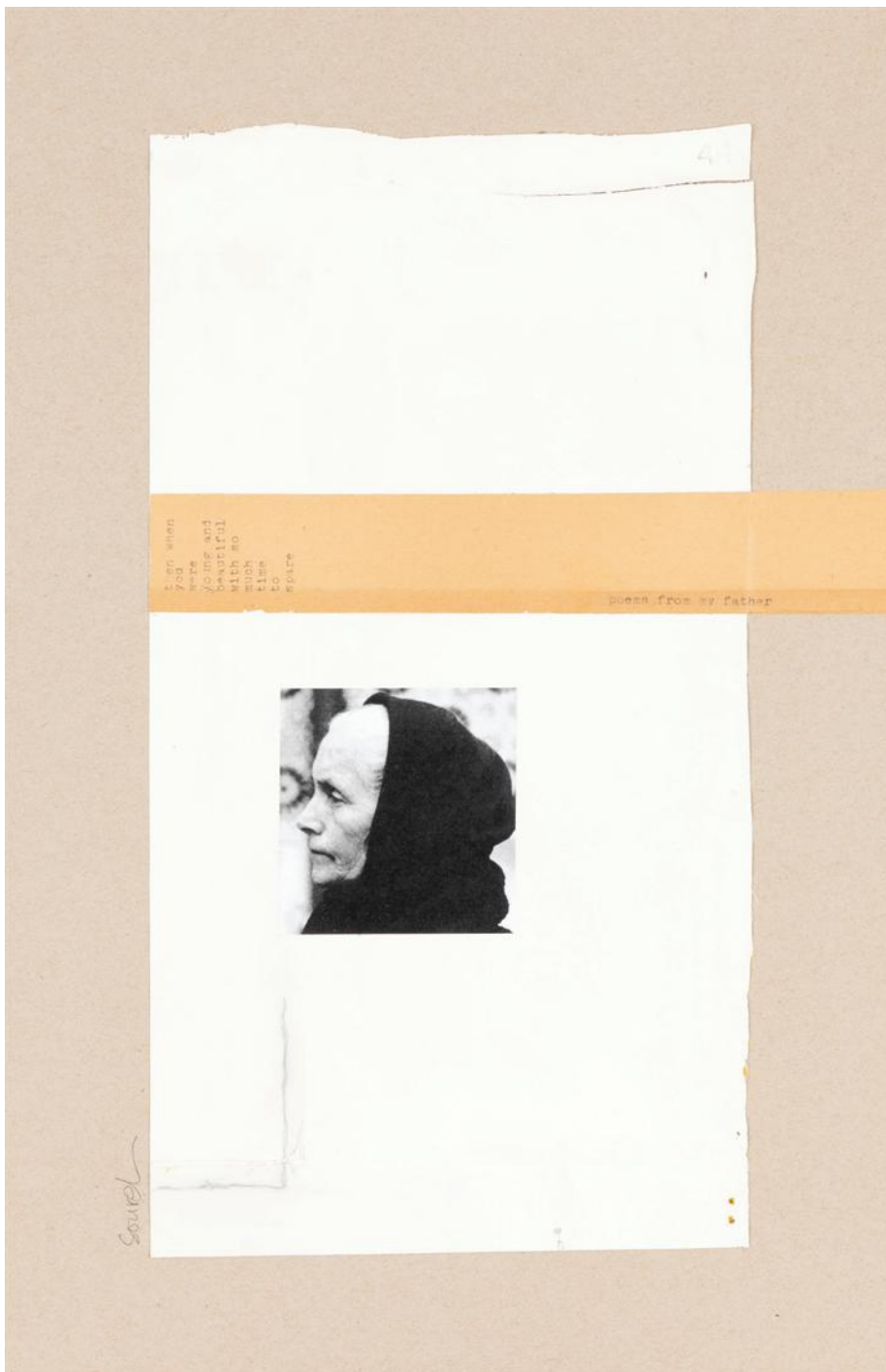


## Dian Sourelis

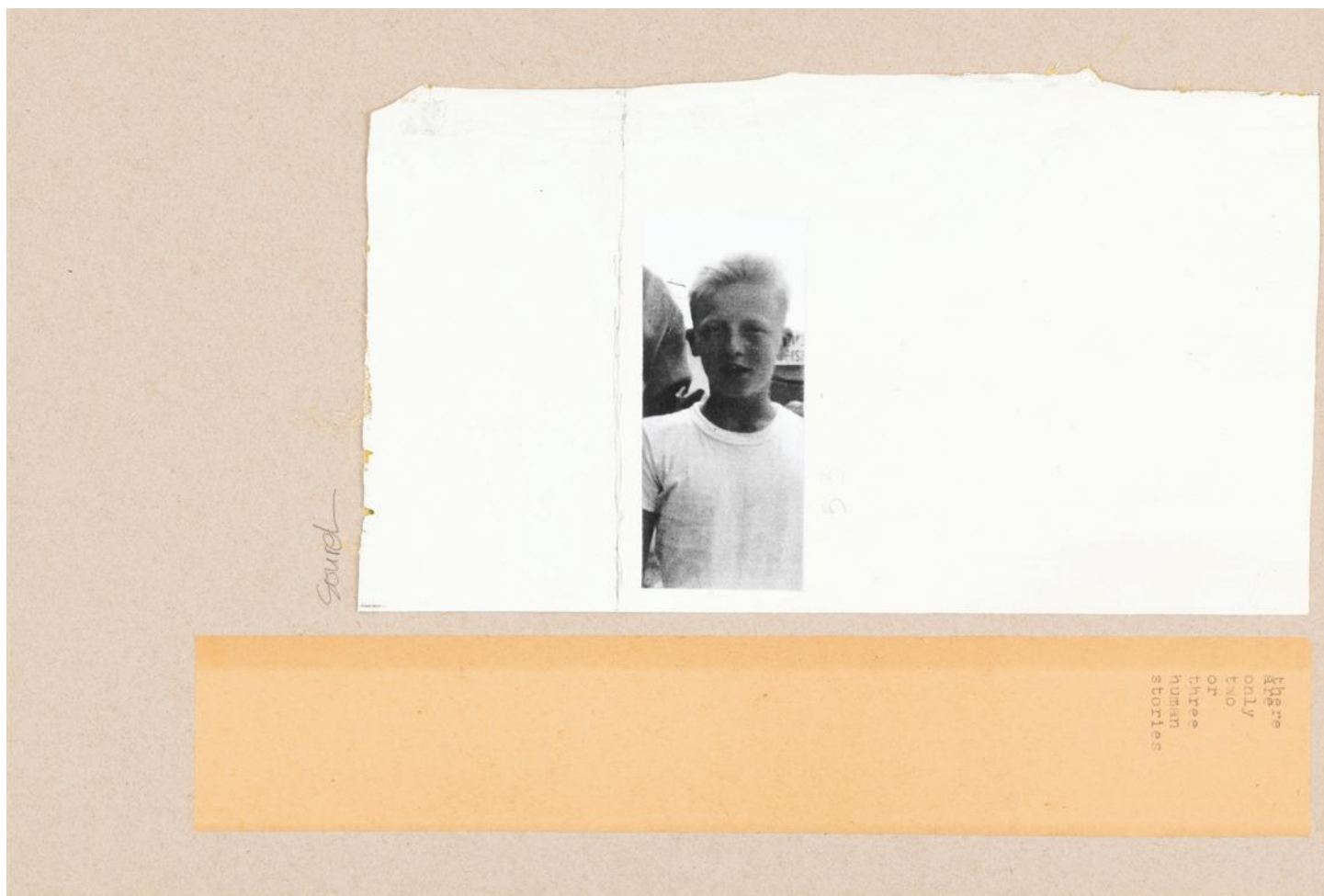
“There are only two or three human stories, and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before.” Willa Cather

My work shares the common theme of figure—incorporating anonymous black and white images—and while they also share “found” backgrounds. I gather odd, but beautiful objects and combine them for a body of work that is peaceful, yet strong, like the everyday people in the images and the sturdy, well-worn materials that support them. Inspired by writer Willa Cather’s quote, this work incorporates images that seek to tell universal human stories—of relationships, family gatherings, holidays, vacations—that allow the viewer to add their own memories of childhood and beyond.

The use of repetitive imagery, linear and graphic forms, and often, the written word, have produced an ethereal, peaceful body of work that explores the themes of gender, family, memory and purpose.



then when you were young, 2013, mixed media—found photos on silk screen. gesso. type. paper, 17” x 11”



there are only (53), 2013 mixed media—found photos on reclaimed silk screen. gesso. type. paper. 9" x 12"



pitfalls. 2013 mixed media—found photos on reclaimed silk screen. paper. gesso. type. 16" x 20"

## HALEH ANVARI: DECONSTRUCTING STEREOTYPES

By Priyanka Sacheti

The black chador has irrevocably become what Iranian photographer and writer, Haleh Anvari describes as Iran's visual shorthand, its unregistered trademark. Haleh's quest to deconstruct and liberate the chador from reductionist stereotype occurred as a byproduct of her relationship with the foreign press reporting in Iran and that of the chador itself. Her determination to re-present the chador has resulted in the photographic projects, *Chador-nama*, *Chador-dadar*, and *Peace Chador*, and the performance-work, *Power of Cliche*.

Having studied politics and philosophy at university in UK, Haleh returned to Iran and worked as a local translator/producer for foreign journalists covering Iran. "I was a product of two cultures and it subsequently gave me license to see both sides of the coin, so to speak," she remarks. One thing that she consistently observed while working with foreign press was that the black chador had become synonymous with Iran; regardless of the issue being reported on hand, it was the sole image transmitted of Iran. "I was unhappy that they would see my country exclusively through that lens and I was always trying to make them see Iran differently," she says.

"After six years of working as a 'sidekick', I started writing for myself but the Iranian authorities were not happy and subsequently, banned and threatened me," she reminisces. "I got stuck in the house with lot of bitter and depressive thoughts...and it was around that time that I received a digital camera as a birthday present."

A definitive encounter with the chador also deeply impacted her. "I was driving down a street when I saw a woman in a chador rush to me, there was so much swagger in her walk - and it made me angry! It made me think at that point how the Iranian system had somehow made me feel separate from them the way I was dressed," she says. Coming from a chadori family, Anvari mentions that as a child, she perceived it an aspirational garment, describing it as "cuddly and a safe harbor." So where did the alienation and disconnection to the chador spring up from? "Wearing the chador was no more about a personal choice of modesty; it had become a political statement instead," she says.

Her engagement with the chador then occurred on a more emotional level, including and highlighting all that had been omitted from the chador's current avatar: color, light and movement in *Chador-nama*, significantly situating the chadors in the Iranian country-side. The



chador then saw itself on a global journey in *Chador-dadar*. "If the chador had become an Irani icon, I thought of taking it to other global icons and photographing it in their midst," she says; the project became a live installation and her journey took her to Jaipur and Agra in India, Istanbul, and Dubai [Dubai's landmark Burj al Khalifa in the background above]. "I learnt so much about the environment that I was photographing in," she mentions, elaborating that while onlookers engaged with the chador at Amber fort, Jaipur, for instance, she had had to model the chador herself in Turkey, where the chosen model declined to do due to her secular beliefs.

While *Chador-nama* and *Chador-dadar* were photographic explorations of the chador, 'Power of A Cliché' was a spoken performance about the 'why' behind the projects. "It all started out when the Women's University of Bahrain invited me to give a talk...their brief was very open-ended and the talk metamorphosed into 'Power of A Cliché,'" she says. The 30 minute presentation consisting of 220 slides of the chador sourced from internet and family archives, Haleh describes what is essentially an addendum to the photographs as "a rant and a whine"; she has since then performed in United States and United Kingdom.

*Peace Chador* witnessed her presenting the chador in an entirely novel, unprecedented context: internet spam posters. During a trip to United States in 2007, when Iran feared being bombed, she photographed a peace chador embroidered with the Persian poet, Saadi's verse about the essentiality of human condition in various American war memorials, such as the Arlington Cemetery. Upon returning to Iran, she sent saturated versions of the photos as spam-art to her mailing list over four weeks as reminders of the loss of life in each famous war the USA has been involved with. "If I was in London, I would have gone out and pasted them on walls...here, I



chose to 'bombard' people with spam instead," she mentions.

Anvari says that at a point, she felt the "chadors were in the past" and felt the desire to engage with, rather than merely provide a commentary upon the issue, which was primarily of deconstructing stereotypes. She began AKSbazi.com, an online photo-sharing platform, a crowd-sourcing initiative encouraging Iranians to upload their photographic interpretations of Iran; in translation, 'Aks' means photo and 'Bazi' means game, translating into playing with photos. Her objective was to showcase the ordinariness of Iranian life by looking beyond the tall walls of stereotype and cliché that obscure it. With already over 2500 photographs uploaded, Haleh mentions that the initiative is fulfilling her aims as well as nourishing the growth of a community of young Iranian photographers.

Her last solo exhibition, *Zibadasht* – Beautiful Plateau took place at Tehran's Aaran Gallery in February 2012. "The exhibition was a natural continuation of my work with the chadors as a political shorthand and AKSbazi.com which tried through a digital installation to create a space where Iranians themselves possessed the agency to create their own personal narratives and image through their own lens, rather than being constantly being subjected to misrepresentation and stereotype," she says.

Viewing her work as in terms of looking at the use of propaganda, in this particular exhibition, she touched upon another visible sphere of Iranian life: walls. "If the chador is the first thing you get to know/see about Iran if you're an outsider, the wall paintings and wall writings are the first things that strike a visitor when they enter Iran," she mentions, elaborating that there has been a tradition of wall writings in Iran dating back to the constitutional revolution 100 years ago. "During the 1979 revolution, citizens used the expanses of the walls surrounding private spaces to as canvases to register

their political positions and voices. Wall writings really came into their own at that time," she mentions. However, following the establishment of the Islamic republic, the practice was turned into an official activity instead. "Citizens could no longer write on the walls; rather, the authorities turned them into an official domain to spread their messages," she says, adding that the only writing which citizens were permitted to place on the walls was that of commercial advertising, which in turn was hand-written by specialist wall-writers living in the Iranian countryside. "These ads have their unique typography, advertising everything from pasta to taxi services to water pump repair shops. They are the sole remaining examples of wall writing from the yore as the government does not regulate them," she states.

Following the 2009 elections, though, citizen wall writing once again flourished although it was only able to do so in the back alleys of neighborhoods. "The Green Movement [political movement that arose after the 2009 Iranian presidential election, in which protesters demanded the removal of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad from office]'s slogans and motifs were wiped out by government and municipality staff or doodled on by opposing factions armed with a black spray can. The signature method was to turn the Green's slogans and motifs into cartoons," she notes. Previously, the walls had witnessed a transition from revolutionary paintings to absurd decorative paintings commissioned by the municipality who thought they were decorating the walls to make them pretty. "The walls became that space reflecting the strange juxtaposition of strict ideology with vapidly absurd, childish paintings," she says.

Preoccupied with the notion of walls becoming official canvases, Haleh focused on two strands of thought in the exhibition; the first dealt with the Iranian idiom of 'painting someone' which means to trick someone while the second explored a curious kind of infantilisation of the nation, as reflected in the content, style, and nature





of the wall-paintings. "It was as if we were a nation of children requiring entertainment and instruction in bright colors and easy messages," she says. Zibadasht meanwhile referred to a village located 40km outside Tehran; it's name meant 'beautiful plain' and every inch of it is covered in commercial citizen writing.

Combining toys used as installation figures, video art, postcards, and slideshow of photographs of slogans written and wiped out, she looked at the walls and the course that the wall paintings have taken over the past 30 years, creating several visual modes through which to engage with the multiple notions of walls and their resonance in Iran. One example of her video art was a plain record of the actual walls of Zibadasht with the camera pointed squarely at the walls giving it a giant 'news ticker' feel. "I wanted the visitors to feel how I have been looking at the walls head on. I chose to do this only with the non-political writings. Something about reading all the commercial ads as opposed to the obvious political slogans was very appealing," she says. Meanwhile, the slideshow of photographs projected on multiple screens displayed the wiped out and destroyed slogans that she had photographed over a period of two years to the beat of a pop song that came out at the time of the unrest where the singer croons, 'Everything is calm, I am so fortunate!'

The artist says that she takes time to see project to its fruition. "At the essence, I consider myself a translator of culture and mannerisms: a bridge of sorts," she concludes and her body of work is certainly testimony



to her determination to peel away the stereotypical facades surrounding Iran – and allowing a honest, nuanced look at what exists and thrives beneath.

If black denotes the absence of color, Anvari not only restores the color in the chador but rejuvenates and depicts it in alternate contexts - and compels us to look beyond the surface of stereotype.

Artist webpage: [www.halehanvari.com](http://www.halehanvari.com)

This interview originally appeared in International Museum of Women/Global Fund for Women's blog, Her Blueprint at <http://imowblog.blogspot.com/2013/05/haleh-anvari-beyond-cliche.html>

Artwork images courtesy the artist.



## MONA KAMAL: TRACING JOURNEYS

*Priyanka Sacheti*

A visual artist, whose origins are rooted in the Indian subcontinent, raised in Canada and currently residing in New York, Mona Kamal engages with photography, video, and installation to create contemporary multi-media narratives about migration, journeys, and identities. As she mentions, she creates fictitious exotic spaces that spark a feeling of nostalgia that tell a story of a lost culture due to immigration. These spaces function as both means to conduct dialogue as well as functioning as dialogues about leaving and recreating home.

What inspires you to create: a thought, image, concept or -ism?

The most basic way of answering this question is that my life inspires me to create. I get my ideas for my artworks from what surrounds me. A lot of it is from reading (literature, non-fiction and newspapers) and the Western perspective of my culture and religion. I feel that I often get ideas for my work based on responses/judgments that I receive in America about identifying myself as a Muslim Pakistani woman. My parents' history additionally also has been a great inspiration as they, like most Muslims, were greatly affected by the partition of India in 1947 as not only was their country divided... but their family was also split between two countries.

My inspiration most recently comes from the rise of Islamism in South Asia and particularly Pakistan. I feel my art is a voice of resistance against religious fundamentalism and western stereotypes of Islam and South Asian culture and therefore, a manner in which I can preserve a specific history and culture.

You have worked in a variety of media such as installa-



Fallen Wall

tion art and video projects. What compels and attracts you towards each? Do the subject and content of your work influence your decision as to which particular medium you will use?

I remember when I was doing my BFA at NSCAD in Halifax, Nova Scotia, a graduate student told me that once you are confident in your practice and the concepts behind your work, you will feel comfortable about working in different media. I always felt that was a very strong statement: I do feel that an artist should work in different mediums depending on the meaning they are attempting to convey.

Both my video projects and installations are process based so that definitely has compelled me towards both mediums. I find video a unique medium because it captures movement whereas within my installations I am creating a space for the viewer to move about in.

Furthermore, my videos have a performative aspect and many times I am in the videos whereas my installations allow me to play with materials and construct structures. I am telling a story within both, creating spaces that are both physical as well as allowing for a dialogue about identity and migration.

The 'Hot Mess' video series interrogates the expectations placed upon women of a certain color and not choosing to conform to societal expectations. Does gender play a crucial role in determining the trajectories of your artistic and personal lives? Gender and race are both very significant components of my personal and artistic life (I don't think my artistic and personal lives are separate).

I have mostly recently gained an interest in feminist writing written by women of colour; these readings have demonstrated the challenges that the 70s feminist movement faced due to their difficulties in perceiving



Fallen Wall 2



Reflections on Memory - 2011

the perspectives of women from the developing world and even visible women minorities in the West.

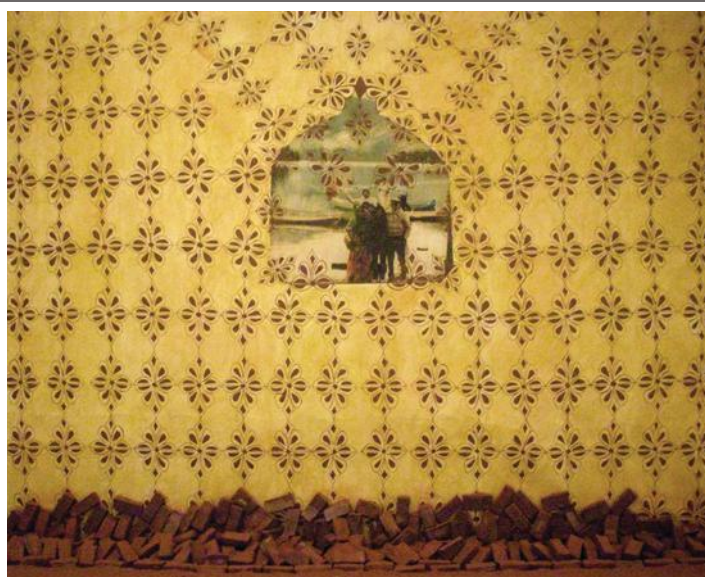
You mention that your work deals with the complexity of your migratory history. How has that shaped you as an individual? Does it continuously inform your work?

As I previously mentioned, my family's and my own migrations are a strong influence in my work, way of thinking and my notion of home, culture and identity; I feel that culture, language and traditions transcend borders and that we strongly relate and put ourselves in contexts to our own and family's histories.

The notion of migration is a continuous theme in my work; I currently find that I am defending myself living in the United States and the misconceived Western notion that Pakistan is part of the Middle East and has Arab roots. I feel that I am attempting to remind American society that Pakistan was once part of India and we are culturally similar to North India. I find in the United States when I say this, the answer is, "How can you say this when they are enemies?" I find this point of view very black and white; I suppose I am attempting to add some gray to the western way of thinking. I can only conclude that having a history of multi-generational migrations only adds gray to one's concept of home, culture and identity.

The installation, 'Fallen Wall' uses your great-grandfather's letters and found bricks. What made you choose to intertwine these two disparate elements together to create your narrative about loss of identity?

"Fallen Wall" is about migration and in particular, Partition. My great-grandfather wrote these letters to his son living in Pakistan during the 1950s; he had remained



I Stand on Guard - 2008

in India post-Partition. The bricks strongly embody this notion of loss: loss of a home. Furthermore, the fact that I just happened to find these bricks symbolises me attempting to locate and define this loss. I also feel that the notion of a lost home and culture also emerges from this work as the letters are written in Urdu, a language that I cannot read. I think that these two disparate elements being put together represents a loss that will not be found or "put back together."

Vintage photographs frequently dominate and form the axis of your work. How do you perceive these photographs? What do you seek to achieve through their re-presentation and insertion into the fabric of your particular narratives?

I have used both family photographs that my father took when I was a child growing up in Calgary, Canada and also photographs of my family prior to my birth taken in British India and contemporary Pakistan and India. I see it as a means of documenting a time past as well as helping in telling my story.

The photographs that my father took document my childhood. Many times these photos look confusing to viewers in the West as they attempt to make sense of a South-Asian family in the mountainous landscapes, often wearing traditional Indian and Pakistani garments. A Western viewer attempts to exoticise these photos, perceiving them to belong to a faraway land. Whereas when the images are shown to people of my culture, they see them as family childhood photos that are a means to preserve memories of family trips. This documentation also tells a story of an immigrant family – how we were and are perceived in the West and how we held on to our culture, language and traditions while attempting to live and conform to a Western culture. You have also played around with a variety of materials:



fabric, rice-paper, sand, and rose-petals in your work. What role does texture and tangibility play in your works?

The first thing that comes to my mind is that I am South Asian and texture is part of my everyday life. I live here in United States, which I feel lacks texture and tangibility. I attempt to keep alive the vibrant smells, colours and textures from Pakistan and India while living in North America through the materials I choose in my artwork.

Please tell us more about your recent installation, '1001 Prayers'. What inspired you to create it?

"Taveezes" or amulets have always fascinated me. The fact that prayers are wrapped in fabric and worn on the body makes them so precious. This specific installation was inspired during my recent trip to Pakistan in January 2013. Being there reminded me of the beauty that exists in everyday objects in South Asia.

Texture and tangibility are very significant for you; what role did they play in this particular work?

When creating this work I did not consciously think of how to incorporate texture and tangibility into it as they exist in all of my work. I did consciously use materials that were special for me, such as the metallic thread originally purchased in Pakistan in 1999 and blue satin silk fabric that I had had for years but never used it because I didn't know what to do with it.

'Alluring Friction' consists of a charpoy abstracted from barbed wire as opposed to rope. How did you choose the charpoy as the basis of this installation? What drew you towards working with and using metal as your medium of message?

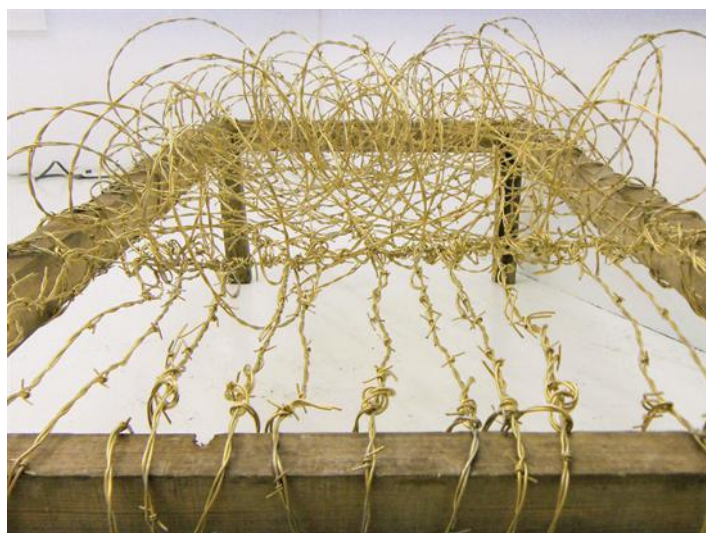
This piece was also inspired by my recent trip to Pakistan and India. The Charpoy is an object [bed] that is seen in both India and Pakistan. The bed is used to focus on the shared culture between the two counties. It has been woven with barbed wire to speak about the conflict.

Artist website: <http://monakamal.com/home.html>

This interview originally appeared in International Museum of Women/Global Fund for Women's blog, Her Blueprint at <http://imowblog.blogspot.com/2013/03/mona-kamal-tracing-journeys.html>



1001 Prayers - detail



Alluring Friction - 2013 - detail



Alluring Friction - 2013

## THE WORLD WILL COME DOWN HARD ON US

Annie Zaidi

i

One morning like a yellow crane with a brown reed  
in the driver's seat, his eyes of tar seeing only  
what must be done, a boy of ten in a turquoise shirt  
will grin as the yellow fork of the city jabs at your mouth.

Plates and spoons and bread rolls and oil that never stopped smelling of monsoon – swept into a black bag with one blue strap (fixed for free by the woman with a drunk husband and a son in convent school who disappeared this morning leaving behind the sewing machine with a foot pedal).

The yellow prong with singing teeth will lift the slow iron of your soul, crumple it.

Our morning will bend, turn upon itself, grow into a skeleton  
like an umbrella in a wind-storm. Rusty shelves will squat  
on the street, exposed. Our welded years of unvarnished truth  
will fold.

Your mind will flap about in the rain like a young woman's shirt. The cute yellow car will retreat  
then charge like a war elephant, a giant toy on battery. Your iron will, folding smaller and smaller,  
will turn into metal pins in the body of this voodoo city.

When the yellow crane retreats, the neighbour's stolen heap of brick will lie sniffing at our feet.  
Two dozen black umbrellas will prop us up on the street. Your eyes will latch onto municipal eyes  
of tar.

The reed of a boy driving the car will struggle with his task, his forearm flexing with a strength  
he does not really have. The turquoise boy will crouch like a spare foldable arm behind the crane.  
His eyes will be crumpled and muddy like this giant, roaring morning.

You will want to bare your teeth at him. You will try but  
his smile will run down your face like nails on a blackboard.  
The rain will linger on your hair like chalk-dust.

The cobbler's roof next – a web of abandoned pipes sheltered by a vinyl poster girl  
in diamond necklaces and a giant clock that meant something once. A member of parliament  
had promised: this clock would turn time around for us.

We will watch the drippy face of the clock, its twisted arms hanging at its sides  
as the yellow crane works works works.

I will be weeping, saying it took four years, fifty thousand trips to steal bricks, one by one,  
and pipes and torn-down posters. You will ask me to shut up.

A bus will go by. Heads will gently tilt, nod at our loss. Minutes will pass.

Someone will laugh. People will speak.  
I will turn to look one last time  
at what I thought was our own.



---

Across the street you will turn to look at me. As if to say: How do we go on?

This will happen to us sometimes. The world will come down hard on us.  
On some such day, I will remind you how you started out counting on just one thing – the globe of my womb; the cinch of my arms; the lever and jack of my left eye and right tilted against the weight of this world.

ii

The world will be gray candy floss, my lips sticky with nervousness. The crowd swelling and spilling, spilling and swelling, nothing will stop long enough for me to slip past hop on cry out the pleasures in my plastic box.

Earring-earring! Bracelet-bangle-buckle! Earring-ring-a-ring!  
Always some cow with beady eyes and a large front will want to try on a glittering pair. A piece will fall and not be found.

I will scan feet, benches, feet, but nothing.  
Nothing but muddy feet for mile after rattling mile.  
Trains are never empty enough for small lost things.  
I will give up. Balanced on the tips of my fingers  
I will carry the box from aisle to aisle.

If I cannot sell earrings, I will sell hair-bands.  
If I cannot sell hair-clips, I will sell underwear.  
Hankies. Samosas. Anything.

The masala sting of late afternoon will fill up our room.  
Your eyes will suffer with smoke and heartburn – to think of what we had, how settled we were until the morning of the yellow crane driven by a robot with tar eyes.  
That boy in turquoise blue.

I will give up the competitive vada-pao-samosa line.  
I will sell chocolate, homemade puran-poli, aloo-puri.  
Anything.

Crinkling notes between my breasts, diving out and in of moving boxes, sometimes time will grow still.

My heart will beat like the crescendo of an approaching train when I return to our room.  
My heart will whistle, hammer as I push open a door you no longer bother to lock.  
You will tilt your head but not look at me. You will not smile or stand up.  
I will lock the room as if it was an embrace.

At night, I will tell your cold eyes to hold a little less. It is just time; time passes.  
I will remember not to say that this is not new. We have always sold things to the city.  
Now I just sell in a different venue.

iii

There will be singing, sweet ear.

Sweet lips sweet throat sweet eyes.

There will be singing, stay awake tonight.

iv

The city will be rent in two, split clean – Them. Us.

A screechy warring loudspeaker in the middle.

Like nylon splitting up a leg, I will ride up and down, up and down the city, my heart like a whupped wind-chime, marking time – night, noon, monsoon.

I will walk past the shop that never keeps the things we need. I will walk out into the dripping silence of asbestos sheets. I will cross riverine streets that reflect the shadows buried inside my skin. I will stand under a yellow light and wait for the man on the signal to blink red.

While I wait, I will dream like a silver ghost who sleeps at the traffic island, laughing sore, laughing blue.

I will dream of you. A stove, a bowl, a surprise of turmeric, kadi, fine floats of potato on a blue flame.

I will dream that you wait for me. You grin at the pelting insult of rain, the taunt of asbestos. Shaking a fist at the cracked laughter overhead, you laugh like a demon's little brother on stage. You laugh at the gods' mean tricks, their celibate Ramlila of too much power. You laugh at the unfairness of it all and like a blue flame you lick the edges of holy texts, like an eternal doubt in the minds of moral men. Like a fallen god, you laugh.

Digits will doggedly shift on the red face of time, minutes chugging past like whistling train engines.

I will wait for the train, like a virus buried in the wings of a mosquito. Alert, shifty-eyed, soaked in hope, I will wait for the gleaming eye drumbling up the platform without a blinking doubt. On my homeward haul on wet aching feet, somewhere someone will sing – no place is so far that you cannot come back home.

I will come home.

Like a crumpled fish bowl, like a shard waiting for a toe, you will be waiting for me  
with a float of potatoes in turmeric.  
The flame on the stove will be blue.

v

I will go to loha mandi  
to see the scrap dealer,  
to see his face – was it long?

What was in his face? What magic  
makes his eyes kinder than mine?  
What made you weep, squatting  
in front of his shop after lying all night  
in my arms like a stone?

I remember the way you straightened the crumple out of our roof,  
now a piece of tin sniping at your hands like a vicious street dog.

I remember the blood you would not let me wash off, that wound you would not let me dress.  
You took that bloody scrap of tin to the scrap dealer and came back to slap my face with  
that dirty bandage he put on you. You let him.

What healing, what enormous pain has he?

---

I will go to see the old man who lets you weep.

But he will have nothing! Not even full pants.  
My face has more scar to show, and yet

I will be glad I went. Now I know the place  
you men trade in the warm pink coal of your eyes.  
Black iron for gray skin.

vi

When the women are washing yellow oil off their fingertips at the railway tap, the pain will return.  
It will hang low on my spine like a kindergartener's school bag.

I will try to tell the nurse. That tendril of slippery pain slobbering down my back, a poison spider crawl.  
A rabid dog afraid to sink his teeth, afraid to go to sleep. And I will be afraid to let go of this pain.

Some night I will shrug too much or curl into a ball too tight.  
Your probing fingers will touch the guilty thorny tree on my back.  
Your butter fingers will scrape away new tendrils, round off the edge,  
twist off twig on twig until pain is a fossil memory in my bones.  
We will wait for that night.  
My spine and I.

vii

My man of little faith will drive a yellow (and black) car.  
The yellow crane is stuck in his graw, he will not leave it be.  
So I will say – so be it, then ride in it, drive in it, stew in it. Do something!

So he will drive a yellow (and black) cab with a round head like an old woman's bottom.  
He will wander the city, jowls stuffed with loss, teeth set on lime.  
At the back he will get a painter to paint a line:

“You have all been unfaithful”

I will burn the yellow (and black) car with glaring.  
He knows I can read and write.  
He knows I have read that line.  
He knows I am angling for a fight.

I will pluck the dagger from my back, confront him – All?

All? All?

I will follow him about, whisper my protest. His meal on a plate in my hands, his ironed shirt  
in my hands, his fresh bottle of water in my hands.

All?

viii

Some streets will shimmer like golden mirrors.  
Golden lamp-posts will twist their necks about  
like hungry peacocks. A tall suburb will lean forward to look  
at the mascara of monsoon running down her cheek.



Home stacked on home, each home shining, reflected  
in the overflowing gutter like a thousand paper boats  
on fire.

I will feel sordid sometimes.

Why can our home not be on this preening street?  
Why could our love not climb the ladder of time with grace?  
Why do our nights not lean out of a balcony, serenaded by the wet-lipped sky?  
Why does my head not swim when I see – our home is a mirage at the first drizzle?

I will want to run home and ask – My love  
what is the point of a home that cannot hope to be?

Our room bleached of all vanity and ruse – must it only hope  
for yellow-toothed cranes, boys in turquoise t-shirts,  
grinning to cleave the city in two?  
Is it to be only a store for the smashed?

But when I lie in bed, this is what I will say –  
Listen to the rain. It was made for a roof of asbestos.  
It was made for fury, a nod to dry eyes, an ode  
to those who are afloat, ablaze like paper boats  
on fire.

**CHANNEL V***Jane Bhandari*

At first one sees the 'V'  
 White on red ground  
 Which becomes 'M'other  
 With a heavy middle.

Inside, the red triangle  
 Of family planning.

Then I see a bikini  
 A woman's triangle  
 Caught between her thighs,  
 Boldly displayed  
 Above the word  
 VALUABLE.

**NO SEX PLEASE, SHE MIGHT HEAR***Jane Bhandari*

My cell-phone is my darling  
 Till it rings at half-past midnight  
 And I miss the call, and sleepily  
 Thinking, it might be an emergency,  
 Ring back, and get this woman saying  
 Hey yaar, you hussy, who you  
 Calling on my husband's cell-phone  
 And in the background the sound  
 Of a man being hammered  
 With a shoe, it sounds like,  
 And I say, but this number called me  
 And I hear her say between blows,  
 So you have another girlfriend  
 And I switch off and go to sleep.

Next day I get a call from hubby,  
 Whispering, hullo darling,  
 How about a little phone sex...  
 No darling, I say, your wife might hear,  
 And he says, she's out, c'm on,  
 And I cut him off and delete the number  
 Before I get tempted, thinking, shit,  
 Good girls just don't have fun.

**IN NARODA PATIYA***Meena Alexander*

Dark eyes  
 the color of burnt  
 almonds, face  
 slashed, lower  
 down where her belly  
 shone  
 a wet gash.  
 Three armed men.  
 Out they plucked  
 a tiny heart  
 beating with her own  
 No cries  
 were heard  
 in the city.  
 Even the sparrows  
 by the temple gate  
 swallowed their song

*From \*Raw Silk\* (TriQuarterly Books/  
 Northwestern University Press, 2004)*

## ISLA NEGRA REVISITED

*Shikha Malaviya*

*In honor of Pablo Neruda's centenary, July 12, 2004*

Yesterday they walked  
around your house  
clockwise  
a hundred times  
like Hindus circling  
a shrine  
first softly  
then louder and louder  
footsteps and words like rain  
as you listened  
chin in hand  
at the edge of your grave  
*el futuro es espacio*  
you said so yourself  
terra cotta colored, cumulus covered  
space

I don't have to tell you  
what the world is now  
it is just as you left it  
each collar has a bloody  
fingerprint  
each label in our jackets  
a poem waiting  
*Made in India*  
*Made in Pakistan*

Strawberries still explode on our tongues  
bombs still tick in our hearts  
how cruel how beautiful how sweet  
that nothing changes

*El futuro es espacio*

*\*El futuro es espacio* – Spanish for *The future is space*, taken from Pablo Neruda's poem '*El Futuro es Espacio*, in **The Essential Neruda**, edited by Mark Eisner, City Light Books, 2004.



**WHICH WAR ARE YOU SPEAKING OF, MY LOVE?***Priya Sarukkai Chabria*

Come on, tell me.

Which bloody Kurukshetra do you wish to speak of? The war against the earth? This psalm? This taking without giving, defenses up: Think only of today. Not the red rot of mines, of tree sap and coral, or dragonfly wings sizzling. Who's to win this round? It's everywhere, you say. No one wins this round. Ok.

Come on, my love, tell me.

Which war are you speaking of, my love? Which glittering playground? The one in Hiroshima, New York, Afghanistan? These naked wars were brains leak as slush on the path of ascendancy. (*Storks shriek noiselessly lifting white on red.*) This Mahabharata is remote, muted and televised you say. Come closer home, then.

Come on, my love, tell me.

I'm wrong? You mean the tribals' Kurukshetra? Or the blind beggars' footpath war? (*But it's indecent to speak of the unfortunate.*) We're speaking war, high stakes.

We are speaking of the seeping of consciousness through cracks in the soul as we walk forward. We are speaking of atrocities, my love, feathered gladiator, golden weapons studding your core. Come home.

Come on, my love, tell me.

I understand: You were speaking of the slaughtering on homeground we've done for 14 days amid Gandhari's wails. Your liturgy: our meager giving and taking with frontiers draw, our ancient trench warfare, our guts draining into the trench that is you and me, sweet beloved, my home.

Come on, my love, tell me.

I'm mistaken again, am I? You're speaking of the red rot oozing from your brain. You're speaking of your hatred, your hopeless maneuvers against death and your helpless defeat. Your war against life with battle lines drawn against the enemy:

Yourself.

Come on, my love, tell me.

Confess as I confess: Sing the hymn to the Mahabharata you wreak along with me, with him and her and this and that and the other too, with all that moves and does not, with the dead red butterfly, and within yourself; all of us under the vast vault of stars.

Come on, dear love, join me.

**CULTURE TROUBLE***Samhita Nagaraj*

I will remain silent  
When asked where home is.  
To which side do I turn?  
*For which side do I play?*  
*Is that your question?*

**CONNOR***Samhita Nagaraj*

He keeps it in his wallet,  
I realized, with mild shock  
As he rummaged around, pulling out the scrappy, worn piece of paper, that was  
Overrun with Sanskrit hope  
That was all my love in written form  
Disguised under a prayer, a good luck charm

**LIFEWAVING***Samhita Nagaraj*

Each time, there's another thread in my lap  
That careful fingers pick up; weave into the fabric of  
That tapestry that grows in detail at the close of each day  
I just can't decide whether this looks like a dog or a god

## PURDAH (For Mukhtar Mai)

*Rizio Yohannan Raj*

When you have begun to think  
a woman's body is no longer the Chorus  
in any Drama of Vivisection,  
it reappears: a voice  
expressing triumph and fear  
from outside a new plot.

It hardly shocks us now:  
we have a legacy of go-betweens  
from *devdasi* to female spy,  
serving outside the court.  
Intact to this day  
are the veils on their faces,  
the unnerving silence  
shrouding their voices.

When you have almost stopped imagining  
a woman's body as a piece of land,  
a people go and divide themselves,  
and motherlands are formed,  
waiting to be tilled and sown,  
ready to bear the crop of pain.

We have learnt it well –  
women are apt witnesses  
to the baffling birth of nations.  
Nothing equals women's bodies  
as sanctums of a nation's dignity:  
easy to expunge in symbolic acts of revenge.  
In lands that have seen  
the birth and exile of their people,  
we accept strange gazes  
over women's bodies  
defiled by the enemy,  
no longer worthy of pure domains:  
home, hearth, drinking water.

And when you have begun to believe  
a woman's body is no longer forfeited  
in any game of honour,  
another pawn is moved.

Our epics have sung about it,  
every childhood festival has fed us  
on the ballet of Draupati's sari,  
preparing us to give and take,  
to endure partitions with faith.  
One comes to accept it:  
Virtue craves for sacrifices  
before revealing itself.

Mukhtar Mai,  
Chosen lamb of Meerwala  
Cinder from the fiery game of good and evil,  
Everyone knew you did not deserve your fate.  
Your brother Shakoor was too young  
to outrage a Mastoi woman's modesty[1].  
Perhaps they thought you would  
wear the purdah of fear, and flee  
to the collective Sitas  
in the dark womb of earth.

You  
turned into fire again,  
brought our sun back.

But, the windless sky  
and the rainless earth tell me  
enormous heaps of charcoal and ash  
are formed in the furnaces of honour  
before every dawn.  
While still looking at your sunrise  
I know, elsewhere,  
another woman's body  
has become a nameless messenger  
running among nations, tribes and men.

Suns, Suns, Suns  
lift our veil of myth!

---

[1] Pakistani Mukhtar Mai was gang-raped allegedly on the orders of a village council after her brother was found in the company of a woman from the powerful Mastoi tribe. In challenging the tribal code of 'honor' Mai went to court and won her case. She now campaigns for women's rights.

---

**A PRAYER FOR MY UNBORN SON/ DECEMBER 16** told and retold—each one for itself. Stories.

*Rizio Yohannan Raj*

*Once more the storm is howling, and half hid  
Under this cradle-hood and coverlid  
My child sleeps on.*

Like a mellowed revolutionary, I too wait  
  
patiently for blood. On the night of retribution,  
  
I teach my ink how to live its viscous possibilities,  
  
subtly, to make a perfect design, a verbal artifact.  
  
I reserve irony for calamities, and dole it out well  
  
with memory and smirks: 'The poet begins deftly,  
  
but my own feverish time offers me no leisure  
  
to rhyme things thus or force life upon the unborn.'

I savour the rage of the young at India Gate:  
  
instant reckoning for all patriarchal sins;  
  
I grin at the moderating editors onscreen who  
  
lose it when their panelists outclamour them.  
  
I survey the vendors dubbed as quasi-criminals;  
  
types of ugly politicians, numb policemen.  
  
Amid the uprising, I hungrily listen to stories,

Like a keen humanist, I season my voice:

For so long, I have prayed that this wind  
  
may never know its desire—for so long—  
  
but now that it has bared its fury, perhaps,  
  
we could seek the cover of enlightenment,  
  
though I have not known of a storm stopping  
  
before spending itself on the unwary earth.  
  
My words thus return me to my furtive way—  
  
my road of shame resounding with approbation.

The storm studies me as it gathers itself,  
  
and vows to expose the finest of my wiles;  
  
it coerces my doubts to take wing like ghosts,  
  
chases me out of my sanctuaries of ease,  
  
it tempts me with the distant poetic device  
  
of imagined blood, dazzles me sightless,  
  
unlocks my mouth: In these cruel times,  
  
what might make my appeals ring true?



The storm demands that I walk back in time,  
  
with nothing but a prayer untainted by irony,  
  
and, Child Unborn, I choose to pray on your behalf:  
  
If at all you are made to come on earth, may  
  
you be granted anger but not such fuming rage  
  
that might blind you; may you not hit out  
  
at anyone before looking into your own want;  
  
may you not deem retribution a sufficient end.  
  
Son of my dreams, this storm is at once  
  
the bare woman of my desire and the outlaw  
  
who strips me of my cover of sarcasm;  
  
it hurtles between my subliminal fear and  
  
mandatory anger, connects my elemental sense  
  
of isolation and my need for metropolitan solidarity,  
  
fuses my spite and insouciance. It inspires  
  
my revenge and my heavenward plea for you.  
  
The wind and I—connecting us now  
  
is a strange knowing of entrapment.  
  
We are besieged by ideas—extreme city,  
  
protestant middle class, night, woman.

We are encircled by images: dark home,  
  
desolate subway, crowded street, woman.  
  
We are delimited within time's segments:  
  
exclusion, protection, aggression, woman.  
  
I seem to have no strength anymore to forge,  
  
but I must tell you some of the old anti-stories,  
  
so that you may mark your future options astutely,  
  
try and recover in your time, the many fair voices  
  
long lost among the debris of history, and beneath  
  
the colours of enlightenment; find the absent chapter  
  
in the famed God-humanity treaty; unearth the link  
  
missing from the chain of leaders, followers and selves.  
  
May you be guarded from the lure of crazy salads  
  
that blur one's sight and make one see false visions  
  
of the earth fighting the skies, the day quelling the night;  
  
let you not possess any horn of plenty that separates  
you  
  
from the knowledge of want; may you not create  
  
any obstinate symbols of immortality. Child Unborn,  
  
*quest* seems to me the only other name for the limitless,

and experience, the sole cure for all maladies of custom.

Darling of my future, instead of coming to my home,

I suggest you wander out in time, and seek your lessons

in openness from Theodora, Helena, Lalla, Mira.

They will help you resolve the well-kept mysteries

of the spiritual, the transcendental and the natural;

and if it comes to that, help you invert yourself into

a lady nirvana, a christ queen, a desert prophetess,

or, if you like, the true mistress of lila.

May you be blessed, my not-yet-born son.

### SEE:

*Priya Sarukkai Chabria*

Till the horizon the body of the earth curves like a leap-  
ing cod's  
shimmering  
with scales of grain.

See its harvesting. Cut pound winnow:  
seeds small as a cod's eyes fall fall fall fall.

See:

This body is still curved as the earth.

See through the swimming gloaming: see  
its hills and valleys and furrows. Harvest it.

Cut veins pound hair winnow breath.

See what falls --

if it renews itself.

### ONAM

*Rizio Yohannan Raj*

I never renounced  
my wide-eyed girlhood:

the blue festival tents  
in the church square

the big *Onam* swing<sup>4</sup> that lifted me from  
a sedge-fragrant courtyard to the high  
lavender heavens

the long red veranda where granny  
spread out her stories

the nights Papa came home late

Like silver anklets  
lost in hay fields,  
they abandoned me  
to a strange sting  
of losing home, and  
marched  
nonchalantly

into my past,  
my nostalgia.

But in revenge,

I have learnt the art

of creating from leftovers –

festivals from bitter-sweet gooseberries,

loves upon bangle shards –

---

4 A secular festival of Kerala. Big swings are put up in the courtyard during this time.

## HUMAN

Annie Zaidi

*human not animal.  
no claws. no fangs.*

*spine. nails. wrists.  
short hair. collar. shoes!*

Warn me when they bring them in.  
I shall not look at newspapers  
that whole week. I shall squeeze my eyes  
shut for fear they will sink into my

*spine nails wrists.  
human not animal  
no fur. no snout.*

They poison my stream of knowing  
right/wrong. lynch/forgive. human/animal.  
Those eyes like eyes,  
those feet like feet.

*sinew fingernails entrails  
like sinew fingernails entrails.  
human not animal.*

I will not bleed and bay like some half-and-half creature  
born of bad memories. I will not look at their mothers.  
At daughters with diminutive names that have slid  
off my family tongue for a hundred years.  
I will not read faces to check if they understand.  
I will not be drawn into the shame of seeing  
what they eat what they want

*jobs. diplomas. loans.  
no forked tail. no hooves.*

I will not scream death to the beasts.  
Do not ask me to rise in the name of humanity.  
I will sleep until it ends. I will keep going back to sleep.  
But tell me when you hear a dull thump on a tin box.  
It will be babies beating out a tune for the moon or a lamp  
in the community centre with dirty metal spoons.  
I will stop by to look at their animal eyes.



## INCLUDING ONE WOMAN

Annie Zaidi

Last night there was a great storm  
but the sky stood there - upright,  
almost a hard white.

Last night, she'd gone  
to the state capital; we'd had a fight.  
But they said, she's waiting, come.  
Now is not the time.

So I went and there she was.  
White sheets, like we've never crept into.  
Her, like I'd never seen her before.  
Red saree, yellow flowers  
like I've never seen grow.  
Hair wild.

On the bus, I'd borrowed a newspaper.  
Five, it said, including one woman  
(I hadn't let her take the child).

There was a photo but  
you could hardly tell.  
That wild hair.  
Yellow flowers, red saree  
and her smell. A new smell.

This new smell I did not know.  
It came from her. I touched her and thought:  
why does she need to go  
to these places? These new places  
of noise and smell  
and run run run.  
Red. Red. Red.

Wild saree, riding up her legs. Bare feet.  
On the street she lay on concrete.  
The sheet was so white.  
They said, they'd help me  
take her home. I said, thank you.  
I lifted my hands and said, sir,  
*raam-raam*. I said, I kept the child.

And they said, this is no place for children;  
you were right. But, I said, but  
we had a fight. We had a fight.  
They said, you were right. I said,  
she wanted the child at her side.

Beside her, I squatted and cried:  
I should have been at your side.

She had looked up at the sky and said: Listen.  
The sky is rumbling.  
There will be a great storm.  
Keep the child warm.  
And I had sworn not to see her face again  
if she went to the city. But she went.  
And here I am.

I'll take her back. I'll take her back.  
Let me please take her back, I said.  
They said, we will help.  
They said, it wasn't supposed to be  
like this.

I said, sir, yes.  
They said, be strong; stay calm.  
I said, sir, yes.

At the fire I told the child:  
Last night, there was  
a terrible storm.  
And the sky stayed  
right where it was.

*[First published in The Little Magazine]*





## POSSIBILITIES

*Nabina Das*

i can  
jump over the bleak  
continent of your back  
rock-still till you forget what it is to move  
i can  
wrap you up in my fiery rebel flames  
i can  
  
what you can't is break  
my mind in splinters                      you can  
throw my body-dust around  
and again i can fall  
on you like rising embers  
i can  
flower before your eyes                      i can pump  
my blood in river-hearts of pen  
i can  
  
what you can't is ever learn our tune  
you can  
tear the words and scatter them around  
then again  
the word-birds of our fight                      i can catch  
i can  
paint all your windows red  
i can  
make the sun rise for another woman-day ahead  
  
i can

## HER MAHABHARATA

*Nabina Das*

*(From the one begotten from a dark fire)*

They say she could have behaved  
Could have protested but she didn't.  
Well, why say no to five husbands

Five's good, when boredom bugged.  
She quickly said yes when asked  
& not coy. She was evil smart, they say

(Why prevent life's good things  
that taste spicy like the emotions  
Draupadi knew what is best for her)

Go bring her to the manly forum, they said.  
Oh my brother, we'll see her naked  
the wife of five men, see how lusty she is

She must be, the one of the nimbus skin  
& in the coal lies the fire after all  
go drag out the dark heart, for us to leer

Draupadi my daughter, Draupadi my mother  
Draupadi my peddled girlfriend, not Aryaputri  
what did you wear in front of them?

Books of rhymes and old wise scripts tell  
of your blue shoulders smooth, only a sari  
around your bust, waist & a long – dark fire,

The long long dazzling shy gauzy sheath  
while pulled away, dragged slowly at first  
& then fast, became longer. Long and longer.

*Oh fast, my brother, the men yelled*

They grumble she could have stood naked for  
once and all, the sheer sari all pulled out  
for all to see her berry-nippled breasts

Warm heliotrope thighs of sighing nights  
the buttocks that invited moon marks  
teeth, claws & muted groans, oh dear

What did she do then, the woman of many men  
the shared wife of kohl-smitten flesh? She just let  
her sari spin yard after yard, cascading from

A friendly god's hands (perhaps a paramour?)  
who hoodwinked the five husbands & never  
let the pious books talk of her frontal nudity

She could have folded up the sari, left ashamed  
 she could have cried buckets & gone cold  
 to the bad man calling her to nestle on his thighs

Instead she called even the good men names  
 husbands, molesters, onlookers, no one spared.  
 Her wrath stung them hard with lampoons & cusses

*she had to end it with them warring, the tease*

## SMOKE & MIRRORS

*Shikha Malaviya*

A tarnished voice admonishes  
 through the brass-lined mirror  
*We never wore chemicals*

Beauty came from smoke  
 literally  
 we lit an almond  
 and some camphor  
 catching its smoke  
 in an inverted silver bowl  
 before bending our pinky  
 into a crooked hook  
 to line the almond edges  
 of our own eyes

Now you have pencils and brushes  
 to feel like artists  
 the almonds are dipped  
 in chocolate or honey  
 before going straight to your hips  
 And the smoke?  
 It rolls through your tongue  
 then out your nostrils  
 in flagrant protest  
 of you  
 who has come  
 a long way

## SKIN

*Jessu John*

I must have been five  
 When someone significant  
 called me 'African'.  
 'Your sister is fair. You need to stay out  
 of the sun' - somehow that pronounced  
 how bleak a future I would have.  
 But I did not know what black was.

I grew up to have white fall in love with me,  
 I still felt black, inadequate and snuck out  
 of fine possibility.  
 See, I'm not merely speaking of men outside,  
 some of them were white like my sister  
 was white in a brown way.  
 But black is not acceptable in few corners,  
 Even hues far from it like brown  
 Don't fit in some places.

My best friend from school swore  
 by fairness creams all her life - cream,  
 too much of it, makes my skin break out,  
 I avoid potions.  
 She grew up, protected by vanity,  
 remained dark, found a fair husband,  
 and I was left just the way I was.

What I understood at the age of five  
 Only got demolished  
 On those lonely commutes by British Rail  
 Some twenty years on.  
 As I read magazines, watched people get on  
 and off them trains, so many of them black  
 and beautiful, men, women, children,  
 In ebony, mahogany, rosewood and acacia,  
 I came to know that sandalwood  
 had a splendour of its own,  
 and black had some gorgeous tones.

I like the sun, it has done me no harm,  
 though sometimes I alter in its light.  
 I often always return to who I am,  
 I like the skin of me.

But the market and my country  
 Take in a deluge of jars that promise  
 to change our colour, selling defective  
 dreams without end.

## A CONVERSATION AT A WOMEN'S RESERVATION

Neelima Vinod

### What happened to the rest of them?

*They disappeared one by one.*

*Some of them escaped, they thought the real world better.*

She rolled her eyes at that one. **Really?**

*Some like the bungee jump*

*Even if it kills, even if it means*

*Heartbeats negated, limbs desecrated,*

*They can't do without it.*

### Nothing happens here,

A slow rebellion says.

*We are free, can't you see?*

*Do we care what we wear?*

*What is scared? Tell me now.*

She looks around.

**Is it an animal?**

**Or a plant, what kind?**

*It is a jolt in the veins*

*Or daggers called eyes.*

*It is being a thing.*

*It is being buried alive.*

That's when the seer gets up and leaves the grove, isn't it?

When she goes out to see the world  
Because it is hers.

## HOPE

Debadatta Bajpai

Between the changed and the unchanged  
Is a horizon unseen,  
Where you reach for the un-felt.

Someday I will meet you there.  
To un-live myself in you.

## I AM WRITING THIS POEM NAKED

Ellen Kombiyil

I string words like the clothes-trail

I leave behind on my way

to the shower. The hibiscus waits

to be watered, yesterday's blooms almost  
fallen on the terrace tiles. This poem  
is a girl who sits side-saddle

on a ledge in Brooklyn, watches Chinese  
crackers explode the street like a carpet  
of fire. It's the Fourth of July.

The room is white, the light always summer,  
the curtains spun lace, tatted with stars.  
What I need to tell you is

the ceiling is pressed tin, painted white.  
This detail is important because the hours  
I lie in bed, how the ceiling

makes me feel like I've walked into  
the past and how I'm living there right now,  
far away inside. The ceiling

is a shell game and this poem is, too.  
It will never be finished, nor the petals  
folded and withered onto the tiles.



**POEM FOR STEVE***Ellen Kombiyil*

He jingles as he walks, thumbing loose  
change in his pocket on his way to Brillbecks

for a case of Bud. He doesn't see me  
he sees jungle, as others now see desert,

press backs to walls lest sand shift  
on them again, he sees ferns in places

so thick he has to machete-slice  
with his army-issued knife, better yet

bellyslide through the muck, rub mud on face  
and hide, crouch still as catatonic.

If he can see sky he remembers it  
blue, and that blue is where he sits

in his living room, feet pooling to fill  
his shoes, the swamp thick in here, breathing

among potted ferns, thick as it ever was,  
thoughts heavier than silt easy settles

until he *has* to move and when he does  
jingle as he walks to the keep-safe tune.

**MINSTRELRY***Minal Hajratwala*

My sisters & I write all day & night about silk  
its delicate weft golden peacocks & parrots  
rush of wind through dark hair      waiting.      Just the word

chanted like a sutra *silk silk silk silk*  
brings the poetry buyers to their knees  
stoned on musks of exotic suffering.      Whatever

we say love war race hate  
if we wrap it in silk they will take it  
home, unminding.      It will live in their rooms amid demons

of jade throw pillows Chinese funeral papers  
marble dust from the Taj Mahal.      At night  
we will wriggle out in ribbons of soft meat      like worms

feasting.

## THE THIEF

*Ellen Kombiyil*

How I hated your lips  
wet with saliva

cat-calling from the benches  
a flurry-burst of song.

You're no better than the thief  
who waits in the park

for the women to lift  
their blouses, draw-in

the hungry infants.  
He imagines breadcrumbs

growing from his hands  
to feed the peacocks.

He wants to pluck a feather  
use it as a pen

dip the small point  
into their milk.

Fancy the writing across the page,  
the invisible milk-ink

used like piss to spell  
your name in the grass.

## 'EVERY GIRL IS DINNER'

*Sumana Roy*

*(From Swati Moitra's photograph of Vishwavidyalaya  
metro station at North Campus, Delhi University)*

I passed through daughterhood  
like a young goat crossing a highway –  
one wrong step and I could be dead.  
(Men, Baba said, were automobiles,  
lust an accident, my body rush hour traffic.)

Before school hour, I sat like a sparrow  
on a cow horn – destiny's bisexual perch,  
waiting for a companion  
with whom I could take flight.  
For that is the moral of sparrow life:  
*One for sorrow, Two for joy,  
Three for letter, Four for boy.*  
(‘Walk in groups, always’;  
‘*Aekla chalo re* is for men alone’.)

Sometimes I am chicken –  
my legs, swollen from captivity, a delicacy.  
I am a kilometre virgin,  
never having tested the speed of my soul.  
In neighbour's curries, my feet cast no shadow.  
I am a ‘good girl’, ‘nutritious’ when stewed.

All my life, I've always been meat –  
goat, sparrow, poultry;  
my tongue eaten raw, like a bull's;  
my fingers giving a vegetable its name;  
my body chopped into pieces for temple retail –  
Puri, Kamamkhya, franchises of barbecue religion.  
Ma Shakti: ‘Shakti Peeth’ to ‘Shakti Mills’.

I hear the phrases tune their strings  
in the fibrous appetite between teeth,  
in the butcher's bleeding blades.  
The alliterations in a pair: rape and rage,  
cannibal lust, carnivorous anger,  
words, the world as slaughter house,  
violence as scansion, violation as eating.  
Woman as kebab, woman in a tandoor.

And I wait, a living carcass,  
my life bullied into cold storage,  
to surrender my meathood.

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**BELLS***RK Biswas*

There were bells attached  
to his name. One for each  
whim. Bells she heard  
beneath her tongue every time  
it ran over her bruises.  
Hand made bells. Shaped  
to capture every step, every turn  
and pirouette that he taught her.

Was it the beginning of monsoon?  
Or was it just after?  
She remembered how wet it was  
that day. Staccato of rain  
on asbestos. And her childish  
licking  
at the salt of her wounds, savoring  
the tang of her pain.

Chimes struck spells. Each bell pulled.  
Each string making her  
do different things. Her wounds  
shaped maps, secret paths.  
The rituals  
of his worship were as routine  
as the days that rolled. Time  
struck no notes.

Until one day when she  
scattered the bells into a cascade  
of charms. She began to dance  
away a childhood that forever  
was a shadow puppet show  
against a backdrop of lime  
washed walls. She danced  
a mad rain dance. A frenzied totem  
dance. Until she became  
the marionette cut loose. A voodoo  
doll with its own mind. Embracing  
wild wind. Wild will. And love  
was just blood flowing.  
Tooth for bloody tooth.



## **OIL, WATER & CONCRETE**

*Athena Kashyap*

I.  
oil and water

*a reinterpretation of Tirandukalyanam,  
a Kerala ritual celebrating the onset of menstruation*

The first drip of blood  
is golden. The heat  
in the chamber deep within  
the house is as terrible  
as the heat in her body,  
purging blood. For three days,  
she swelters alone, aunts  
and her mother hovering  
close by. The gorging streaks  
the walls of her thighs  
red. The room is a womb,  
where she molts from  
girl to woman, dying  
and being reborn, possessed  
by Kali in all her destruction,  
the bloodbath that follows,  
laying waste the origins  
of a universe.

Her face is full and soft  
as the baby coconuts  
hanging from flowers  
in the single vase  
placed in the corner  
of the room. The room  
is dark, lit by the glow  
from an oil lamp.  
She is intoxicated by  
the thick aroma, heated  
coconut oil wafting  
over the ruins  
in her uterus, smoke  
mingled with smoke,  
extinguishing the pain,  
infusing her belly  
with the promise of Spring.

Afterwards, she will eat  
sweet rice cooked  
by an aunt, other mother,  
adding fresh soil to grow  
sweet-faced babies. Then,  
she will swim in the pond  
with lotus flowers, along  
with older women in her family:

mother, sister, grandmother, aunts,  
breasts gently bobbing,  
draped by the glistening  
water sheen.

II.  
7th grade, Bombay  
for Meena and Gayatri

concrete

I shrink behind my desk to hide my shame, a red smear  
on my white school uniform. A flurry of whispers among  
the girls and it is decided that my two best friends  
would walk me, sandwiched between them, to the  
bathroom. The corridor closes in on both sides as I walk  
down, and when we reach the bathroom floor is cold.  
“You have your chums, silly,” the more experienced of  
the two tells me as she gives me a sanitary napkin and  
a painkiller to stop the pain that has begun to spread  
from my stomach to the inside of my thighs. They help  
me wash out the stain, giggling about which of the boys  
might have seen it .

My friends leave for basketball practice outside in the  
concrete courtyard. I stay on in the bathroom, waiting  
for my dress to dry. Later, after I returned home, my  
mother will give me more sanitary napkins and pain-  
killers before turning away, embarrassed, not knowing  
what to say. I hear cheers and shouts of laughter out-  
side. I cannot wait to join them, to giggle and play, forget  
this ever happened.

**SHAME***Sonali Deuskar Gurpur*

Shame on you you Jezebel you  
 Serves you right Lot's wife  
 Scheherezade you've been bad  
 ☐ Roxxane you don't care if it's wrong  
 or if it's right☐  
 Bathsheba weren't you married  
 to Uriah the Hittite  
 Sara wore pink with red  
 And did not even cover her head  
 When she went to the grocery store  
 Sita irked our ire  
 After she had walked through fire

**MANIPULATING MONA***Sonali Deuskar Gurpur*

There's something about Mona  
 She's a fox  
 She's a stupid cow  
 An old tart  
 She's of royal of lineage  
 Sfumato Chiaroscuro et al  
 Smiling at  
 Tolerating the  
 Beholder

She's tired  
 She's elated  
 She's celebrating the birth of her third baby  
 She' nuts  
 She's savant  
 She speaks in riddles like the Sphinx  
 She's dead fish on ice  
 She's Mt Fuji capped with ice  
 A pickaxe wouldn't hurt her, would it?

Lisa Gherardini Giocondo?  
 It's really Leo in drag  
 No she's his chick  
 She's only famous for having been in Napoleon's bed-  
 room  
 She's overrated  
 She's underrated  
 She belongs to France  
 No to Italy  
 She looks on the world with love anyhow

**MONA LISA SMILE***Sonali Deuskar Gurpur*

Smile Mona Lisa  
 You're on camera  
 You're the subject  
 The object  
 Of microscopic study

Your eyes your lips  
 Your unspoken words  
 Are inkblots to us  
 Can't see you whole  
 Plain and human

**KISS MY TIARA***Sonali Deuskar Gurpur*

I am not  
 The titular head  
 Of a banana republic  
 I am the republic

## LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

**Kristin Abhalter** is inspired by micro and macro consciousness, the intersection of imagination and reality, and the experience of the individual within designed environments. She is a multi-media artist, working as a scenic artist and designer for theatre.

She finds the dazzling quality of craft glitter uniquely compelling. "I began working with this irresistible material because of its association with joy and optimism and its reflective colored light. Observance of the 10-year anniversary of the war in Afghanistan in September 2011 provided inspiration to complete these larger-than-life-size figures, juxtaposing material with meaning."

**Sharbari Ahmed** received an MA in creative writing from New York University. Her fiction has appeared in the Gettysburg Review, Caravan Magazine, Catamaran, and the Asian Pacific American Journal, among other magazines. Her short stories have been published in the anthologies, *The New Anthem: A Subcontinent in its Own Words*, (Tranquebar, 2009), and *Lifelines* (Zubaan, New Delhi, 2012). In 2003, she won the First Words Literary Award for South Asian American writers. Her screenplay, *Raisins Not Virgins* was selected for the 2008 Tribeca Film Festival All Access Program. It was also presented as a stage play and produced in New York, Boston, Dhaka, and Los Angeles. She is a regular columnist for the Daily Star Weekend Magazine—the largest English language daily in Bangladesh, and teaches English 101 at Norwalk Community College. Her collection of short fiction, *The Ocean of Mrs. Nagai: Stories*, was published in 2013 by Daily Star Books in Bangladesh. It is also available on Kindle. She lives in Connecticut with her son, and a host of anarchic wildlife in her back yard.

**Meena Alexander** is an award winning author and scholar. Her new book of poetry *Birthplace with Buried Stones* (TriQuarterly Books/ Northwestern University Press) is forthcoming in Fall 2013. Her volumes of poetry include *Illiterate Heart* (winner of the PEN Open Book Award), *Raw Silk and Quickly Changing River*. Her poetry has been translated into several languages and set to music. She has written the acclaimed autobiography, *Fault Lines* as well as two novels and is the author of the academic study *Women in Romanticism* and the book of essays *Poetics of Dislocation*. She is Distinguished Professor of English at the City University of New York and teaches at Hunter College and the Graduate Center, City University of New York

**Debaddatta Bajpai's** poetry is a gush of uninterrupted narration from the gut - tad exaggerated by the chemical reactions that make the heart beat and the mind wonder. The mantra that guides her words was stated simply in her blog Unkaheen.wordpress.com, "Poetry, if I love, it is to love you". Her words are characterized by candidness, a childlike honesty and all the other characteristics that define her.

**Jane Bhandari** was born in Edinburgh in 1944. She has lived in India for 45 years and is a poet, writer and interior designer. She co-ordinates 'Loquations', a Mumbai poetry reading group. Jane has published two volumes of poetry, *Single Bed* and *Aquarius*. Her poems have also appeared in the Sahitya Akademi Anthology of Women's Poetry, Rattapallax, Fulcrum, The Little Magazine, and various newspapers and magazines. Two collections of short stories for children, *The Round Square Chapatti* and *The Long Thin Jungle* were published in the seventies.

**RK Biswas** is the author of "*Culling Mynahs and Crows*" published by Lifi Publications, New Delhi. Two short story collections by her are forthcoming later in 2014 and early 2015, by Authorspress India, and Lifi Publications respectively. Her short fiction and poetry have been widely published across the globe, in print and online, in both journals and anthologies. Notably in *Per Contra*, *Eclectica*, *The Paumanok Review*, *Markings*, *Etchings*, *Mascara Literary Review*, *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal*, *Pratilipi*, *Nth Position*, *Stony Thursday*, *Crannog*, *Mobius*, *Reading Hour*, to name a few. Her poetry has also been featured in an anthology - *Ten* - published by Nirala Publications and edited by Jayant Mahapatra. In 2012 she won first prize in the Anam Cara Writers' Retreat Short Story Competition, Ireland. In 2006 her poem "*Cleavage*" was long listed in the Bridport Poetry Prize and was also a finalist in the 2010 Aesthetica Creative Arts Contest. Her poem "*Bones*" was nominated for a Pushcart as well as a Best of the Net by *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal* in 2010. Her story "Ahalya's Valhalla" was among Story South's Million Writer's Notable Stories of 2007. She has participated in poetry and literary festivals in India and abroad, and being a past member of theatre groups, she enjoys performing her poetry on stage. An erstwhile ad person, she prefers to spend



a quiet life focussed on her fiction and poetry, and is working on her second and third novels concurrently. She blogs at Writers & Writerisms- <http://rumjhumkbiswas.wordpress.com/>

**Corinna Button** (from UK) completed a BA Honors Fine Art degree at Leeds Metropolitan University followed by a Post Graduate Advanced Printmaking at Croydon School of art. She was elected into the Royal society of Painters and Printmakers and has exhibited in both solo and mixed shows across Europe, New Zealand, Korea and the USA. Corinna works in mixed media; Printmaking, painting, and sculpture. Her work can be found in many private collections internationally.

Work in public collections includes the BBC, The University of Aberystwyth Wales and the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. Corinna currently lives and works in Chicago, USA.

**Priya Sarukkai Chabria** is a poet, novelist, essayist and translator with five published books. Awarded by the Indian Government for her Outstanding Contribution to Literature her works' translated into six languages & is published or forthcoming in *Adelphiana*, *Asymptote*, *The Literary Review (USA)*, *South Asian Review*, *Caravan*, *Cha*, *Post Road*, *The British Journal of Literary Translation*, *Drunken Boat*, *Pratilipi*, *Language for a New Century*, *The Literary Review*, *IQ*, *Another English: Anglophone Poems from Around the World* among others. Forthcoming in 2015 are translations of Tamil mystic poet Aandaal (Zubaan) and a short story collection (Niyogi Book). She edits Poetry at Sangam ([www.sangamhouse.org](http://www.sangamhouse.org)) . [www.priyawriting.com](http://www.priyawriting.com)

**Nabina Das**, a 2012 Charles Wallace Fellow in Creative Writing, University of Stirling, UK, and a 2012 Sangam House Lavanya Sankaran Fiction Fellow, India, is the author of a poetry collection *Into the Migrant City* (Writers Workshop, 2013) and a short fiction collection *The House of Twining Roses: Stories of the Mapped and the Unmapped* (LiFi Publications, 2013-14). Of her debut poetry collection *Blue Vessel* (Zaporogue Press, Denmark) and a novel *Footprints in the Bajra* (Cedar Books, 2010), the former was listed as one of the best of 2012. Nabina's poetry and prose have been published in several international journals and anthologies. A 2011 MFA from Rutgers University, US, a 2007 Joan Jakobson (Wesleyan University) and Julio Lobo fiction scholarship winner (Lesley University), and a journalist and mediaperson for about 10 years in India and the US, Nabina teaches Creative Writing in classrooms and workshops.

**Amanda Gentry** received her BFA in Design from Boston University, College of Fine Arts, where she minored in Sculpture and Art History. Forays with a myriad of media ultimately revealed an affinity for clay, resulting in both functional and nonfunctional work within this medium. Currently based in Chicago, Illinois, her work has taken her abroad for study and residencies in both Italy and France, respectively. [www.amandagentry.com](http://www.amandagentry.com)

**Rati Ramadas Girish** has always been intrigued by immigrant stories having been an expatriate for most of her life. She loves reading and listening to people talk about their experiences and struggles of blending into a new world completely different from their own. She started her career as a television journalist giving that up a few years later to try and write down all the stories in her head and chronicle her travels. Her stories and articles have appeared in Pothiz, Pratham Books, Muse India and Travelmag. Her short story for children was published as part of an anthology by Puffin India. She lives in Houston, TX with her husband, their one-year old son and two-year old puppy. She blogs at [atoddsandmi.blogspot.com](http://atoddsandmi.blogspot.com)

**Sonali Deuskar Gulpur** writes poetry and fiction. Her work is inspired by her many interests and the many roles she plays in life. She was born and raised in India and now lives in the U.S. Her poems "*An Alphaby For My Beautiful Dreamer*" and "*The Awful Simplicity Of Ten*" were picked for the 'Commended' and 'Highly Commended' categories of the Margaret Reid Prize for Traditional Verse. Her work was selected for the citywide reading at the Austin International Poetry Festival, 2011. Her short story "*See With Your Eyes Not Just Your Heart*" was finalist at Glimmertrain. Her poem "*They Say The Skies Of Lebanon Are Burning*," about her experience with the Bhopal gas tragedy, came out in "Courageous Creativity." Her poem "*Ode To A New Song*" is in "Calliope," issue #132, "*The Chumpion Of Lost Causes*" is in "Burning Word" issue #59, and "*Roses That Grow By The River Juliette*" is in "Punk Soul Poet," September 2011 issue.

**Minal Hajratwala** is the author of the award-winning epic *Leaving India: My Family's Journey from Five Villages to Five Continents* and editor of *Out! Stories from the New Queer India*. Born in the US and educated at Stanford and Columbia universities, she came to India in 2010 as a Fulbright Senior Scholar. As a writing coach and editor, she helps people give voice to untold stories. She is a founding member of The (Great) Indian Poetry Collective, a publisher based in Bangalore. Her poetry collection *Bountiful Instructions for Enlightenment* is forthcoming in 2014. [www.minalhajratwala.com](http://www.minalhajratwala.com)

**Jessu John** is a writer, long distance runner and journalist. Her features for The Hindu Business Line cover business, entrepreneurship, arts, impact, technology and emerging businesses. When she is not chasing a story or training for a 10k, half marathon or 26.2 miler she works on finalizing her first collection of poetry, which is due to reach completion soon. Her writing and running “feed off each other and interfere with each other. To have both go smoothly on most days is a blessing”

**Athena Kashyap** was born in India, where she spent her childhood in the then idyllic small town of Bangalore among frogs and trees, and her adolescence and young adult years in Bombay. She received her BA from Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts, her MA from the University of California at Davis, and her MFA from San Francisco State University. She currently makes her home in Bangalore along with her husband and two girls, after living twenty-two years in the U.S. She is the author of two collections of poetry: *Crossing Black Waters* (SFA Press, 2012), *Sita of the Earth and Forests* (SFA Press, 2014). She has been invited to read at numerous literary festivals and organizations both in the U.S. and India.

**Ellen Kombiyil** is a poet, writer, and writing teacher. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in Beloit Poetry Journal, Cider Press Review, Cordite Poetry Review, Hobble Creek Review, Poemeleon, Silk Road Review, Spillway and Spry, among others. Honors include a nomination this year for the Pushcart Prize, and in 2012 she was nominated for Best of the Net. Over the years, her poetry has placed First, Second, Third and Honorable Mention in the Inter Board Poetry Competition (IBPC) hosted by Web Del Sol. She is a Founding Poet of The (Great) Indian Poetry Collective, which publishes first and second books showcasing the new poetic voices from India. Her first book of poetry, “*Histories of the Future Perfect*,” is forthcoming in 2014. Originally from Syracuse, New York and a graduate of the University of Chicago, for the past 10 years she has lived in Bangalore, India, where in addition to all things writing, she also teaches yoga.

**Shikha Malaviya** considers herself a morpher, having been born in the U.K. and raised in the U.S. and India. She is founder of The (Great) Indian Poetry Project, an initiative to document, preserve and promote the legacy of modern Indian poetry. Her book of poems, *Geography of Tongues*, was launched in December 2013. Shikha is deeply involved in the poetry community through events/initiatives such as organizing ‘100 Thousand Poets for Change—Bangalore’ in 2012 and 2013; co-founding ‘Poetry in Public India,’ a movement to bring powerful verse by Indian women to public places across India; and giving a TEDx talk on ‘Poetry in Daily Life’ at TEDx Golf Links Park, Bangalore, 2013. Shikha’s poetry has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize. She also founded Monsoon Magazine, the first South Asian literary magazine on the web. Shikha graduated from the University of Minnesota with BA and MA degrees in creative writing, mass communications and liberal studies. She lives in Bangalore, India, with her husband and two children.

**Priyanka Sacheti** is an independent writer based in Pittsburgh. Having earned a BA in English Literature and Creative Writing and MSt in Women’s Studies from Universities of Warwick and Oxford, UK respectively, Priyanka grew up and previously lived in Muscat, Sultanate of Oman. She has published numerous articles in various publications such as Gulf News, Brownbook, and Khaleejessque, with a special focus on art and gender. She’s author of three poetry volumes, co-authored an English-language instruction publication and two of her short stories have been published in international anthologies celebrating Indian immigrant writing. She was also the co-founder of a Muscat-based grassroots art initiative, Khayaali. She curates her visual world at her blog, [www.iamjustavisualperson.blogspot.com](http://www.iamjustavisualperson.blogspot.com).

**Samhita Nagaraj** is a rising junior at Lawrence University. She enjoys writing and is considering majoring in Psychology and English. Here is her official blog: <http://samhitanagaraj.tumblr.com/>.

**Rizio Yohannan Raj** is a bilingual writer, translator and educationist. Her works include two collections of poetry in English *Eunuch, Naked by the Sabarmati* and *Other Guna Poems*, and two novels in Malayalam *Avinasom, Yatrikom*, the first of which is translated into English as *A Tale of Things Timeless* (HarperCollins 2012). She has translated major 20th century Malayalam writers into English, and introduced seminal works from other languages in Malayalam. Her academic works include a pioneering volume on Comparative Literature, *Quest of a Discipline: New Academic Directions for Comparative Literature*. She has also been a journalist, a books editor and a publisher. Her last assignment in publishing was at Katha, New Delhi, as Head of Publishing. She is the founder-director of a trust dedicated to the cause of education and life appreciation, Lila Foundation for Translocal Initiatives and presently works towards developing Lila as a cultural think-tank, action platform and a dynamic conservation space.

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**Dian Sourelis** is a lifelong resident of Chicago. Dian's interest in large, mixed media constructions led her to the Philadelphia College of Art in 1976. While she enjoyed the discipline and rigor of the School's foundation program, she missed the freedom she had enjoyed in the studio. She left the Philadelphia program after several years and returned to Chicago, where she raised a family, and continued to experiment with painting and mixed media. For the past 25 years Dian has shown in a variety of Chicago galleries and venues, developing a strong group of collectors and continuing to experiment with mixed media—working with found wood and metal, and, more recently, reclaimed silk screens. Her use of repetitive imagery, linear and graphic forms, and often, the written word, have produced an ethereal, peaceful body of work that explores the themes of gender, family, memory and purpose.

**Annie Zaidi** is the author of 'Love Stories # 1 to 14', and the new e-single, 'Sleep Tight'. Her first collection of essays 'Known Turf: Bantering with Bandits and Other True Tales' was shortlisted for the Vodafone Crossword book awards (non-fiction, 2011). She is also the co-author of 'The Bad Boy's Guide to the Good Indian Girl', and a book of illustrated poems 'Crush'. Her work has appeared in various anthologies including 'Mumbai Noir', 'Dharavi', 'Women Changing India', 'India Shining, India Changing'; and literary journals like *Pratilipi*, *Out of Print* and *Desilit*."

**Neelima Vinod** is a writer in Bangalore, India. She writes poetry and talks to poets at <http://neelthemuse.wordpress.com>. Her debut ebook '*Unsettled*' is out at Indireads. Visit her facebook page for more: <http://facebook.com/neelimavinodauthor>



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