

VOL. II | AUGUST ISSUE

MONOGRAPH

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Editor's Note

Indrayani Bhadra

As July drags herself to the finish line in Calcutta, monsoon has finally set in. And with the relief from the blazing sun of the months past, perhaps, we Bengalis are starting to relax, to fit into the laidback and lackadaisical attitude we're so infamously known for. But it's not just Bengalis. It's all of us. Perhaps, we all deserve to take a step back, and simply just breathe. It's been a rough few months. The world has crashed down on us, and we have lost far, far more than we could ever have gained. But time, like they say, will heal. And it is healing. Things are starting to get better. The new normal, is beginning to de-normalize itself, the world is opening up, and I swear, I hugged a friend last week after a year, with my first vaccine shot, and felt myself almost melt into their embrace. It is getting better. Somehow, we have survived it all, we have made it through it all, and walked out on the other side, broken and dejected perhaps, but still standing tall.





There is so much more left to experience. The good, the bad, and beyond. Perhaps, there is so much worse that will strike in the next few months, there is so much that we have no clue is coming. But for the first time in what seems like forever, we are beginning to feel safe. And that is good enough for now. So as I sit here today, with onion pakodas and a steaming cup of chai, on a rainy evening that is so quintessentially Kolkata, I hope the same for you, like we have for each other, over the past year. As Monograph approaches its first anniversary, and I remember it's been almost a year since the first time I wrote one of these, we're only grateful, and so very thankful, for all the support and help we have received. And thinking back to the people who have kept us going this year, perhaps, the Eagles put it best when they sang,

"Lost and lonely
Now you've given me the will to survive
When we're hungry
Love will keep us alive"





Lost City Symphony & Poems From Sisyphus' Rock

Anuraag Das Sarma

Traditional Poetry has long been proclaimed dead - as dead as a genre could be. With the advent of modern verse, and minimalist poetry in more recent years, traditional verse is often seen as an archaic literary form, hardly practised and that too only by those who wield a certain form of academic merit.

Indrajit Bose's first book of poetry, aptly titled "Lost City Symphony" blows these notions out of the water. I've always held, while reviewing, that a debut should be granted a little bit of leniency when compared to books by more experienced writers. But even if I were to sacrifice those ideals, and subject "Lost City Symphony" to harsh and scrupulous criticism, I'd still come up empty-handed.

When it comes to poetry, I honestly believe that there is but one question to ask- how does it sound when read aloud? You see, first and foremost, a poem must have rhythm. It doesn't need to rhyme or give in to stringent rules of metre and scheme. All it needs is rhythm- not a tune, not a melody. A rhythm.

And this, this factor of rhythm, has been my benchmark for good and bad poetry. Spoken word, in recent years, has done a lot to accentuate and help the pulsating beat (a little pun, a-lá-Kaufman) of poetry and introduce it to modern verse- something I noticed in Aishee Ghoshal's "Poems From Sisyphus' Rock".

Let's take a look at an excerpt from the first poems of both the books. I would like you to read the poem out loud, and note how it sounds and feels. Note the tempo. And if it feels and sounds good, nine times out of ten, you have a good poem.

Who would not wonder?

At the patient solitary flight:

Over the wastes of arid Sahara,

The billowing seas, the lofty minarets

Of Arabian cities, that bring these

Travel-stained wanderers to my native skies.

-Birds of Passage (Indrajit Bose, Lost City Symphony)

For a few years,

You won't write another poem.

You'll try, of course

But nothing will be quite as good as the one on the wall.

You'll try writing about the sad girl again

But you'll find you've run out of things to write about her.

The sad girl's sadness is gone,

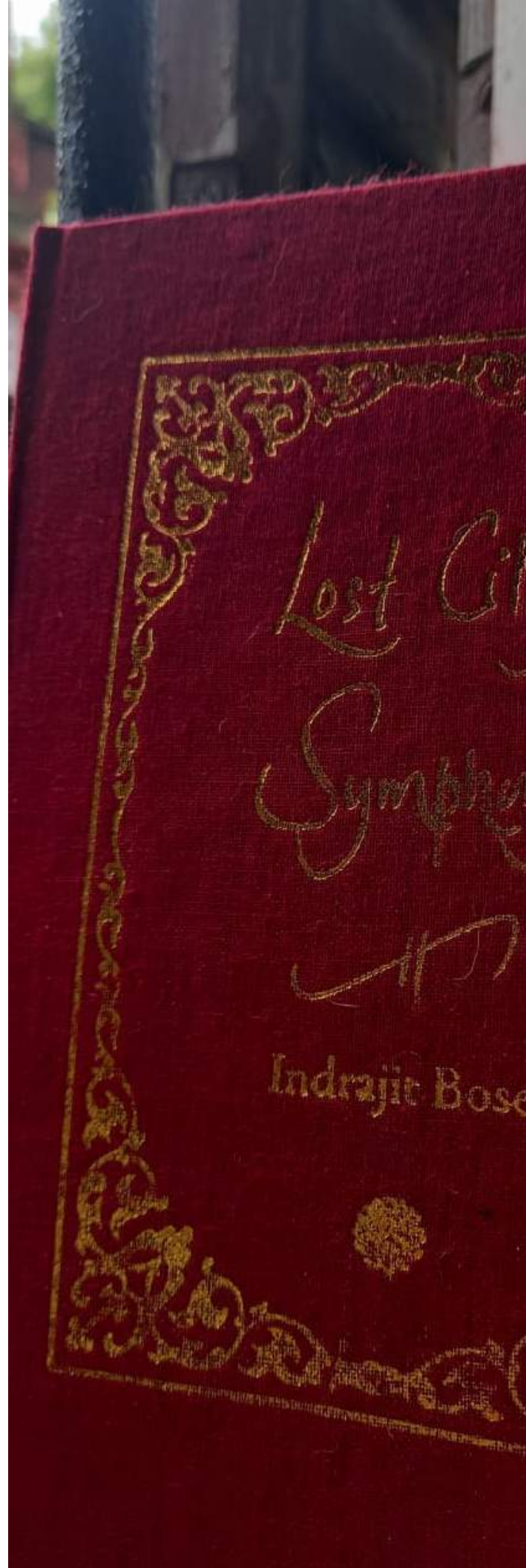
She's not pretty without it.

-A poem, on poems (Aishee Ghoshal, Poems From Sisyphus' Rock)

These poems are vastly different from each other, both in subject and in technicality. Yet, they are both good poems, simply because they can be read aloud with a degree of artistic expression. The poems, so different in structure and style, express striking similarity in their ability to be read out loud, with vastly different beats of course.

You see, modern Verse lacks or rather drops the exhaustive list of rules and procedures that comes with Traditional/Blank verse. Like jazz, it cements its own rules and traditions, and like jazz, there are too many people trying to do it who just aren't that good.

Aishee Ganguly, according to me, is to modern verse poetry, what a young Julian Lage is to jazz. Her poetry experiments while keeping in mind the rules put in place by Sylvia Plath, Ezra Pound, Dylan Thomas and others.



Take for example her poem, "A poem that fits":

*Dusty, brittle old pages
The slab of metal and glass
The world at my fingertips
And yet I cannot find
A sadness quite like mine.
An Elizabethan poem that would fit,
Call it despair, desolation,
Romanticize it.*

-A poem that fits (Aishee Ghoshal, Poems From Sisyphus' Rock)

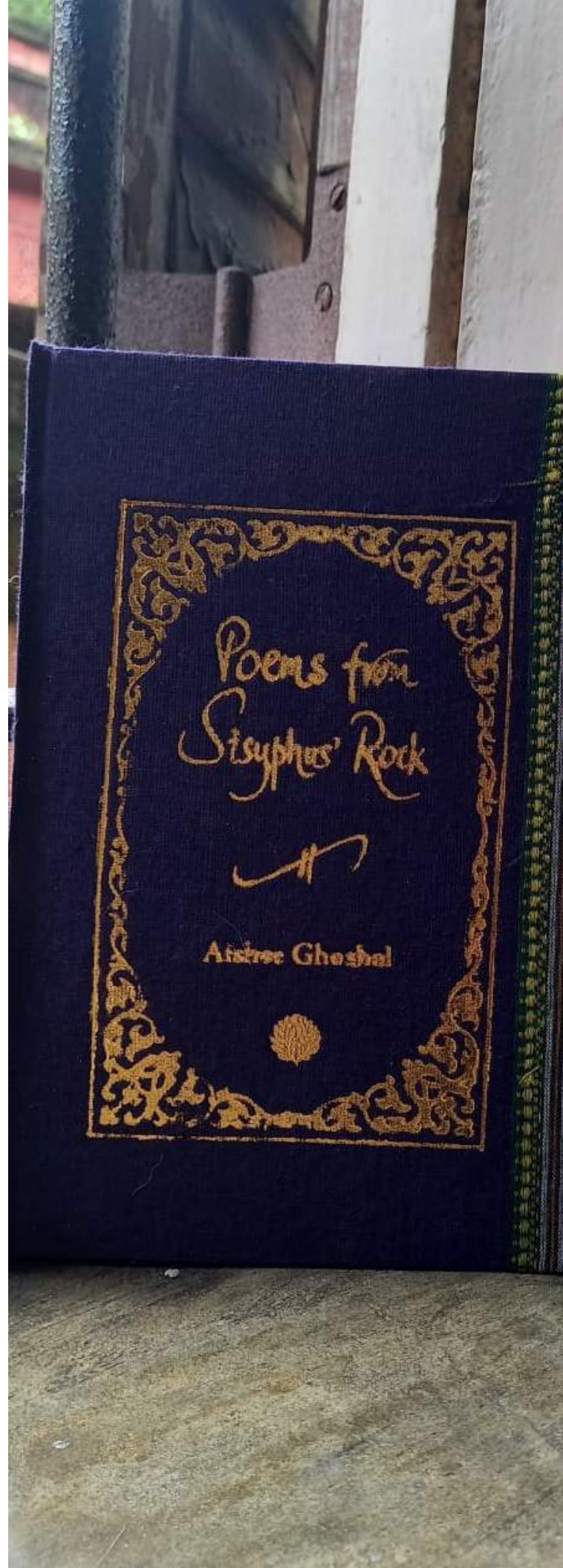
Here one can see a beautiful mixture of two methods- specifically the inclusion of traditional elements in modern verse. Something that would be abundantly more clear if someone were to read it like this:

*Dusty, brittle old pages
The slab of metal and glass
The world at my fingertips
/pause
And yet I cannot find
A sadness quite like mine.
/pause
An Elizabethan poem that would fit,
Call it despair, desolation,
Romanticize it.*



The last part of this first stanza (An Elizabethan... Romanticize it), hits home and hits hard, not because of the subject or the inherent meaning of the verse, but because of the technical mastery shown by Aishee here. This method of ending a poem by speaking directly to the reader, along with something along the lines of an order, is seen in modern verse from time to time, but its implementation is almost always, all over the place. The only person I'd seen do it very well is Leonard Cohen, and now I've seen Aishee. This line, "Call it despair, desolation, Romanticize it." is in many ways, haunting, and stays with you throughout.

Now, while "Poems From Sisyphus' Rock" carefully balances itself between traditional and modern verse, "Lost City Symphony" bridges the gap between times- that of a modern society, spoken about in traditional verse. Let's take a look at his poem "Morning Raga":



*Unseen by all, past the gigantic billboards
And the staccato flashing digital displays,
In the tall eucalyptus trees in the park,
The Koel sings in tireless melody,
Rising higher and higher in fluted octaves;
Its passionate music lingers in the soulless air,
Falling on the unheeding ears of a waking metropolis.*

-Morning Raga (Indrajit Bose, Lost City Symphony)

"Lost City Symphony" is a tale of two cities, that of Dhaka and Calcutta. In his poem, titled "Homeless", we come face to face with the refugee crisis, and the dehumanizing aspect of it all. It is a very grim and haunting poem, destabilizing in a lot of ways, and it should be. The poem "Bus To Dhaka" however truly drives the point home- of two cities, just 150 miles apart, separated by national borders, national borders marked by violence and sorrow. However, through it all, there isn't a hint of jealousy or anger in the poet's words, there is only sadness, a sadness well accounted for.

These two books are must-reads for any fans of poetry. You might've noticed that I hardly spoke of the subject matter of the two books, and there is a reason behind it. You see, what sort of themes emotionally connect with people, depends from person to person. A reviewer, who praises or criticizes the subject matter of a poetry book, is an inherently biased reviewer. It is the reviewers job to talk of the book's artistic merit and technicality, nothing more, nothing less. And I believe that I've done my job.

I'd like to thank Prof. Ananda Lal, Shuktara Lal, and everyone else over at Writers Workshop. Thank you for sending us these review copies and thank you for introducing new poets to the readers and lovers of literature. You can buy the books by mailing Writers Workshop at writersworkshopkolkata@gmail.com .



A Testimony To Monsoon Skies

Swayamsiddha Singhdeo

The month of July was drawing towards an end. The sky was full of heavy clouds with dark bellies, holding back until they could find an escape and turn into a torrential downpour. The water lilies in the pond nearby had woken up from a slumber they never wished to go back to, as they slowly danced to the tune of the rains. This year, summer had been inexplicably long and exhausting. The man in his mid-forties, returning from the vegetable market asked his wife in local dialect to walk fast lest they may get drenched. The birds in the side lane were still busy, humming their favourite tune before retiring for the day.

Shiuli sat by her window, gazing outside with a brush in her hand. A gust of misty wind blew in periodically. Next to her was a canvas, accounting testimonies of dramatic monsoon skies. The clouds with puffed shoulders loitered whimsically-both subtle and mysterious. Behind the clouds hid a streak of light in a dormant state, gathering energy to strike across like a shooting star that once gone, never came back. Shiuli continued painting intermittently with her palette of blue, grey and yellow. Amongst the hues of white and blue, she drew a lone bird wheeling in the sky with its wings spanned to float into the clouds. The little bird seemed unaware of the bursting clouds above. Despite the challenges that might hamper her flight, she hovered with innocence, undaunted.

For Shiuli, the bird was her metaphor for liberation. Gazing out of her window frame, she saw this little bird fly unrestricted, even when pitted against the heaviest odds. Bent with household chores and societal responsibilities, painting was the only part of the day she relished. It was the only time strictly dedicated to her thoughts, her ideas, her will, her creativity. And all of that found its way into her canvas. Art was empowering. Giving figures and shapes to her symbolic thoughts was an act of emancipation. She silently recollected the memories of her last visit to the city. Large graffitis on city walls- complete with messages to end gender bias, to save the environment, to tackle poverty and much more. Visual arts has always been a very powerful tool for passing on messages and the anonymity of artists further added to the graffiti-marked streets. Shiuli often wondered who these artists could be, scaling heights and painting thoughts passionately across open spaces for everybody to see and take note of.





It had started drizzling outside. While her brush painted white across the grey, several nostalgic thoughts raced through her mind. Shiuli was an avid reader, excited to look at the changing world through books and articles and art. She had read about the Guerrilla Girls, a group of anonymous American female artists who had been working to expose racial and sexual discrimination in the art world. The group's members protected their identities by wearing gorilla masks in public and using pseudonyms taken from deceased female figures like the writer Gertrude Stein and the artist Frida Kahlo. They used bold block texts on posters and pasted them across streets in the dead of night. Such performances of breaking stereotypes and reigning freedom always fascinated her. The little bird on her canvas was one of them.

It was getting dark, the last remains of twilight on a rainy day. The visuals on the other side of the pond seemed like the last visible speck of a ship sailing away, right before disappearing from the horizon all at once. Shiuli startled back to reality, as her twelve year daughter ran through the door. She marvelled at Shiuli's perfect, picturesque painting which was at its final stage of completion. The drizzle turned into a heavy downpour with rain drumming on the rooftop and cascading down the gutter. As Shiuli hurriedly ran downstairs to light the hearth, a cacophony produced by the big tree crickets rang through the darkness. They had been waiting for their favourite season- The Monsoon.

Saba And Her Cat Named Grey

Kinjal Chandra

I have always had a predilection for the name Saba. Somehow it sounds like an embrace or a gust of fresh wind. Turns out, it is exactly what I thought it means. In Arabic, Saba means breeze, sometimes weltering and vagrant, somewhat chaotic, otherwise soft, and tranquil. In Choudhury's little world, Saba is no different. She is of the ruminant kind, stoic to the external world, but internally a tangle of complex emotions.

Living in the quaint yet strangely contemporary city of Calcutta, Saba is free-spirited, creative, and instinctive. Her personality evinces the situations she has confronted through her lifetime, some experiences scarring, some delicate, mostly indelible. One winter morning, Grey enters her life. Saba's feline friend fills in the shoes of a companion, somewhat withdrawing the solitude from her empty, insipid evenings.

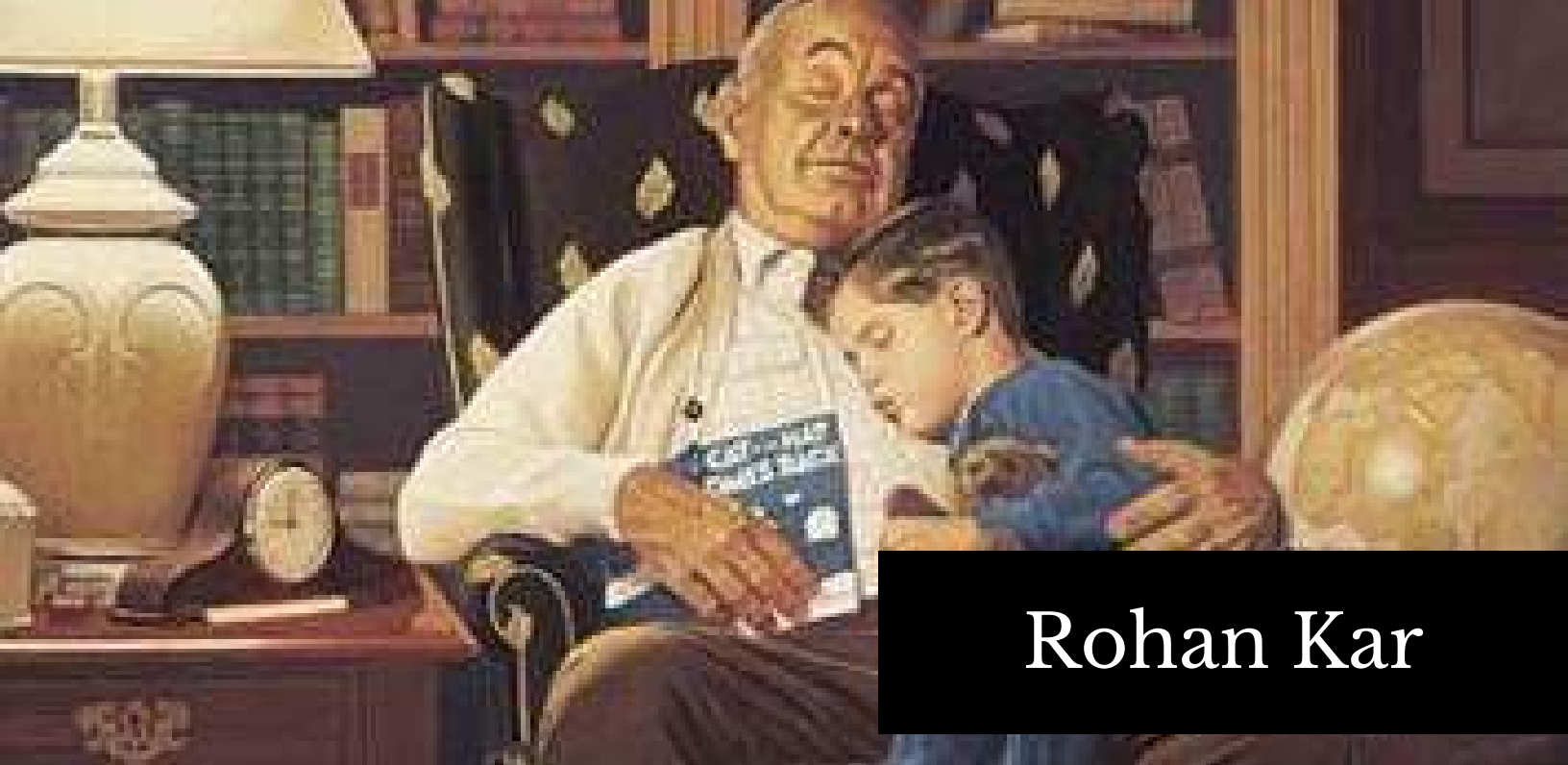




Choudhury subtly touches upon themes of lust, longing, infidelity, consent, companionship, trauma, and so much more in a mere length of 163 pages. Besides being emotionally stimulating, Choudhury pays a great deal of attention to gastronomic details. Good food and drink form the backbone of the narrative. With fragrant Mutton Biryani, steaming hot Tingmos, stuffed bell peppers, slices of walnut cake and exotic meat preparations, Choudhury stays true to the gluttony of the Bangali clan.

With the discussion of food, Choudhury subtly yet cleverly inserts the argument of political and religious interference, thus commenting on the present precarious state of our nation's politics. Its purport lies veiled under its innate simplicity and modesty. *Saba and her cat named Grey* is an insight into Choudhury's maverick mindset, which I want to read and hear more from.

Saba was a breezy read, quite like its name. Not overbearing, never dull. It felt like a comfort meal. Closer to home, soothing and unassuming, yet indispensable in every possible way.



Rohan Kar

Mr. Nichols' Boy

“Hey Bubba, over here!”

“C’mon Doodie. Don’t keep me waiting now. Give your gram-gram a big fat kissy already.”

“Hey, champ. See what I got you! Isn’t it dandy?”

“Very bad pumpkin. Is that what I’ve taught you?”

“Mr. Nichols’ boy is an absolute darling.”

And so he was. Not many people came into the Nichols’ homestead, but those who did would always find him, sitting right there, in the dead center of the living room lobby with a tin can ensconced rebelliously between his chubby fingers.

Every day, for a quarter of a day, he would just sit right there, in that exact spot, as he was now and wrestle away with a rusty old tin can. People said he was up to something. And that he was getting there, gradually. They couldn't care less. All they did was address him with a horde of made-up names, every day with something new. Remarkably enough, he responded to all of them. A most peculiar response at that, in which he'd raise his misshapen head in their directions and then fix them with a critical gaze right over the hill of his crooked nose.

Nobody ever called him by his name. Some said they weren't aware of it while some said that he didn't have one, to begin with. Still, others said that his was a name of highly strange and fickle proportions and one that would take you at least a week to get you to roll your tongue over it. And just as they had been close to scaling this summit, the name had been changed, quite without their consent, seemingly to avoid certain legal consequences. Hence, they weren't at fault for not knowing. And thus, life galloped by the Nichols' household with the case of their lad's name in dramatic suspension.



HE PUT HIS HEAD DOWN ON HIS ARM AND SHUT



Mr. Nichols' boy held no malice. He didn't form that interesting a sight either, what with his aimless eyes and his portly frame, cased in clothes that were in the midst of a skirmish themselves trying to cling onto his pockets and folds. His upper lip was tainted by the appearance of a few bristles of stunted whiskers, which he'd moisten every now and then with a strenuous roll of his tongue. A stream of saliva escaped the nook of his lopsided mouth, evidently unnoticed, and formed a puddle on the floor inches away from the tin can, that made a perpetual mockery of his hard-at-work and chickpea-like muscles. The puddle while stagnant at large, made every attempt possible to beguile the tin can as its frilly edges flailed coquettishly around it. Nobody knew the story behind this ritual of his and visibly enough, nobody bothered as well. He hardly ever uttered a word to anyone, save greet them with that particular half-baked glance of his. Again, nobody knew anything of his quietude, except a certain somebody who claimed to hear his mother say that the last time the boy had made any sound was back among rows and rows of hospital beds and in an unassuming ward, on the day he was born. From the point onwards, the world appeared to have mused him to an incomprehensible humility.



At this point, just as when everyone was on the verge of getting carried away by their surroundings, a man in shabby uniform and a weather-roughed cap announced himself at the Nichols' doorstep.

A mailman by the looks of him.

He had with him a largish parcel, to which he was grabbing onto with great difficulty. The door was open and yet out of courtesy he stationed himself at the threshold. Seconds later he greeted the generous stretch of teak with a staccato of knocks.

Obediently enough, the boy in the center of the room failed to merit his attention in the least. In response to his summons. A frail woman of uncertain features and equally lousy expressions walked hastily into the room, wiping her soaked hands on the border of her faded saree. She looked as if she anticipated a blow to come thundering down on her any instant now.

“Yes?”

“Good morning ma'am. I've come from the National Science Observatory. This is for you. But bef-“

“Where did you say you’re from?”

“The national science observatory, ma’am.”

“Right. It must be for him then.”

She said this while lifting a gingerly finger in the boy’s direction.

“Please come in. Have a seat.”

She was awash with a freshly painted coat of ambiguity upon her now. The mailman, clearly annoyed at getting interrupted before, chose to pay no heed to this. He proceeded to sit himself down on the sofa and continued speaking as if she hadn’t existed.

“Yes, might be. I’m not sure. Actually, that’s what I had to talk to you about.”

Momentarily, the mailman looked over where the boy sat. Admittedly, whatever he saw, did strike him as odd. But he had no time for such musings. He was a busy man. A lot many people were waiting on his deliveries to get about their lives. He cherished this particular gravity that regarded him. So, not batting his eyelid again, he continued looking on in the boy’s direction and resumed speaking.





“I was told, back at the organization that there might be a couple of complications regarding his name. Something about him being renamed a while ago?. So before I can hand this over to you, I’ll need you to sign his real name on this sheet here and show me the documentation for the same, is possible.”

The woman was listening to him with rapt attention. So much so, that it unnerved him. He had never been taken this seriously before. She let a lazy pause sink in with anguish before she spoke again.

“Yes, yes. Absolutely. That’s no problem at all. So you need the signature and then the paperwork, yeah? Alright. Do I dictate the name out or do I have to write it down myself?”

“Anything works.”

“I’d rather you wrote it down. I was in the middle of doing the dishes.”

She raised her arms, palms outstretched, right next to her ears on both sides.

“Yeah, okay. Tell me.”



Yes. So his name is-“

Before she could finish her sentence, a murderous clang filled in the air around them. The utensils seemed to have called a civil war amongst themselves. The woman’s irascible gaze was aimed steadfastly at the bend, presumably beyond which the kitchen lay. Her face was flushed bitterly. She was on the edge of her seat.

“I swear it’s that wretched cat again!” Wait, till I thrash your bones to dust this time! What a disgusting creature!”

She got up and with fast and purposeful steps covered the ground between herself and the kitchen, disappearing around the bend in the process.

An angry shriek, followed by another sickening symphony of the utensils and a ferocious feline purr strived to substitute the woman’s absence. The mailman was unfazed. He was dismayed at the delay all this was bringing about.

To his delight, the woman walked in, shortly after, with a broomstick, in her hands, and was clearly missing a couple of bangles on her right wrist. Panting, she took her seat next to the mailman on the couch and caught up with her breath. A few moments later, she resumed speaking.



“I’m really sorry about that. The neighbor’s cat is such a nuisance, Time and again I’ve asked them to put her on a leash but why should they listen to me. Such a spoilt little thing that creature is,”

The mailman nodded an awkward assent to express his solidarity.

“I’m sorry. Where were we?”

“ The signature. His name.”

“Yes, Of course. It’s spelled as- “

The phone started ringing violently. Two or three insolent rings later, the woman looked across apologetically at the mailman, as if seeking his consent to answer the call.

It took great effort on the mailman’s part to conceal the disapproval on his face. With a stifled gesture, he motioned, signaling that it was all right if she took the call.



Three of them?! Holy Mother. Wait, where did you say you are now?

The station? Yeah, wait. I'll come right away."

She rested the phone back on the dial and seemed lost in a trail of thought. The nerve on her forehead appeared to be throbbing. One of her hands twirled anxiously with the telephone's cord while the other found itself suspended in front of her mouth as she nibbled at her fingernails with great gusto. The mailman could not believe that this woman would be capable of such serious thought. He didn't have a good feeling about the call but it wasn't his place to ask either. He looked in her direction and tried to betray a solemn look upon his face, when all of a sudden, the woman fixed him up with a severe gaze. More severe than she had accorded the cat too. He could swear that his insides did a somersault.

Just as the gaze had castigated him, moments later, it broke into a general flood of sorts. Like a stubborn bud blooming into nobility. The uncertainty about the woman could not have been more prominent.

"I'm sorry. But something has come up. Very urgent at that. I'm afraid I'll have to go. Do you mind waiting here for some time?"

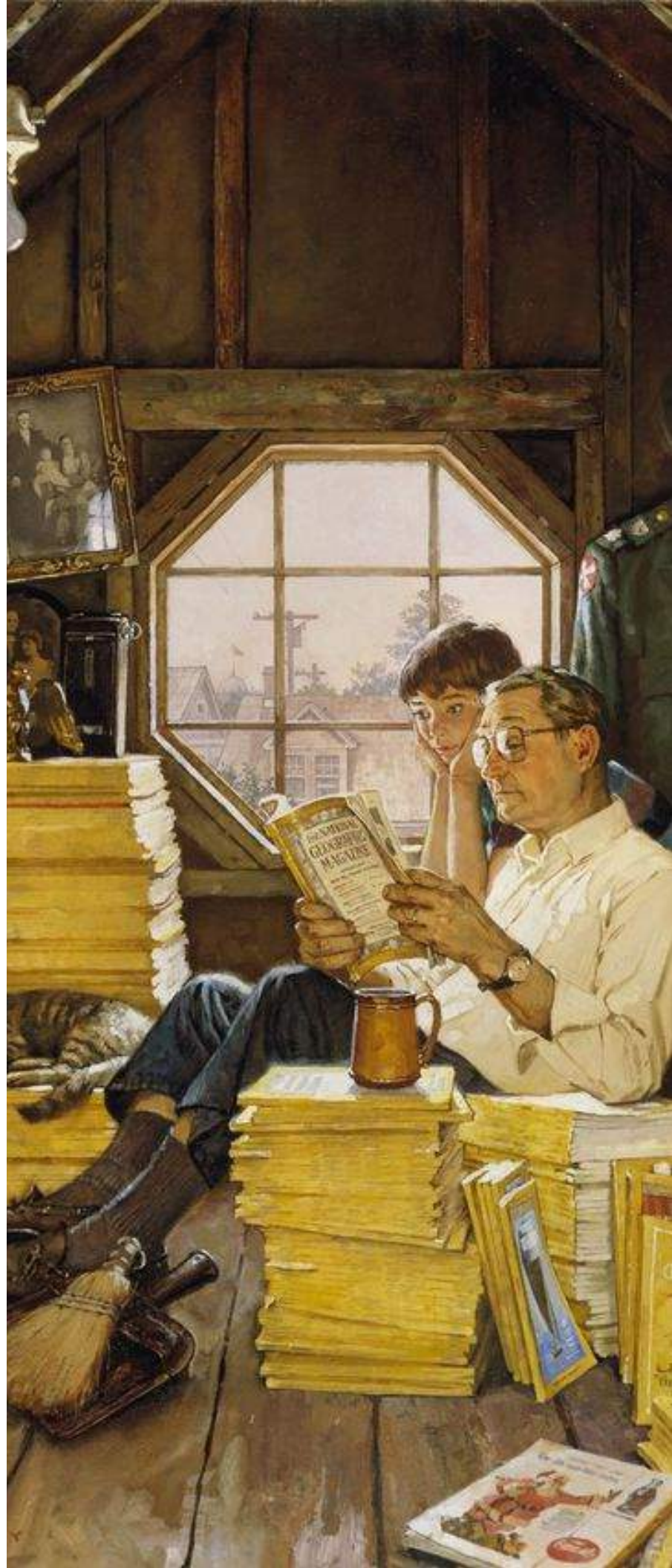
The mailman couldn't think of the right reply straightaway. He tried anyway.

“Yes, I understand. But could you maybe place the signature first and then leave? We can worry about the paperwork later.”

But she wasn't listening anymore. She had already made her way towards the front door and half of her frame was well outside the room's reach now. As an afterthought, she added-

“I promise I'll try and be back soon. This shouldn't take that long. Thank you so much for waiting!”

He saw her mumbling her way out incoherently before he could voice his protest against it. Sometimes he felt greatly troubled at how lightly people took him just because he was a mailman. It almost nullified those times when he cherished his gravity.





And so, out of nowhere, he found himself being stuck in this house now, with an uncomfortable package on him, and the boy in the center of the room as his sole company. He tried to amuse himself for a while by looking at the boy but the boy was very pedantic in what he did. He just kept going at the tin can so as to either squash it or peel its top off. But marvelously enough, he failed at both. He would punctuate this by trying to get rid of his ridiculous mustache of some imaginary debris while the puddle originating from his mouth seemed to be gaining ground incessantly. He didn't seem like the kind of person who'd receive any mail. And yet he had. The mailman was grudging proof of that.

The mailman had no choice but to resign himself to his fate. The boy didn't appear to be in a condition to utter or sign his own name and the woman of the house was out of reach. He had but only the choice of waiting thrust upon him, willingly or otherwise. Moments later, a stodgy old woman strutted comfortably inside the house, only to stop herself at the sight of the mailman.

“Is Mrs. Nichols home?”

“No. She got a call. She left a while ago.”

“Hmph. Strange woman. Leaves her guests unattended and all. Always suspected her to be a little cuckoo in the head you know.”

“I’m not her guest. I’m the mailman. I was to deliver this to her.”

“Oh. I see. Mail. Interesting. Could I see what’s in there or do you have policies and all against that?”

“Yes. I’m afraid I can’t allow that.”

“Of course you can’t. All these government hacks. Well, anyway, I should get going.”

The mailman seemed to be struck by a sudden epiphany of sorts. The rustic gleam in his eyes confirmed it.

“Well, erm, Ma’am... if you’re here... can you please tell me the name of this boy? I really need to get this thing done and move on to other deliveries. I asked his mother but-“

“SHHH! What do you think you’re doing?”

The expression on the chubby woman’s face had shifted abruptly. All of a sudden, she found herself cornering the poor mailman, consuming him in her torso’s stride, very much in an effort to hide him from the walls that surrounded him.

“Do you even know what you are talking about?”





The mailman conveyed his ignorance with a timid shake of his head. It seemed right on cue with the look of smug admonishment on her face. She peeked over her shoulders on either side. As you're wont to do before disclosing classified information. Having made sure that the coast was, in fact, clear, she went ahead.

"Of course, I wouldn't expect you to either. You don't look from around here. You wouldn't know. You see that boy? Does he seem normal to you? No? I'll tell you why not. There's an entire story to it.

Then, without even waiting for the poor mailman's consent, she launched headlong into her narrative.

"The Nichols couple was childless for an unbearable period of time. Both of them were medically clean, and still, they couldn't bear children. Having tried out every doctor and every other technique in the book, they decided to invest their faith in things that lie beyond our realms. A friend fixed them up with this man, who, you know, dealt with those side of things. Miraculously enough, he promised them the exact date and the specific alignment of stars under which they would conceive their firstborn. But this, carried with it certain compromises."



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The ears of the mailman were now perking up in tandem. As for his uninvited guest, she seemed to be very much in her elements presently.



All he wanted was a simple signature and a couple of sheets of paperwork. Heck, at this time he was ready to do away with the red tape part of it as well. So long as he had the signature.

But he had none and on top of that, he was now privy to some dubious history of this family which he was pretty sure that he couldn't share with anyone, although there were no specific instructions regarding that.

All of this made him highly uneasy. He wanted nothing more than to get away from this place.

Just at that moment, a neat gentleman with a suede jacket and pair of pompous loafers rounded off with a porkpie hat, ambled along the threshold. Upon his entry, he feigned to peer around the unguarded room in an extremely standoffish manner as if looking for something long lost. As the sight of the mailman caught his regard, he shifted weights nervously between his feet, making a conscious effort to approach him.

“Excuse me, Sir. Could you please tell me if Mr. Nichols lives here?”

“He does. But he isn't home now.”

The stuffy little lady's warning was still ringing loud in his ears but he was too jaded to give it any more merit. He decided to take the risk.

“Actually... Sir?”

“Yes?”

“Are you from this neighborhood?”

“Oh, no, no. I live around Ernie's. A couple of blocks away from here.”

“How do you know Mr. Nichols?”

“I'm an old colleague of his from work.”

This was definitely an opening. The mailman had to act on it.

“How well do you know him?”

“As a matter of fact, we're quite close. Mind you, Mr. Nichols is a very guarded individual. But over these long years, he has somewhat managed to warm up to me.”

The mailman was in luck. He could finally get out of here. He went for the kill.

“Does he talk about his son?”



“Truth be told, he discloses very little about his family. But on occasion, when he does, he does speak very lovingly of him.”

“Has he ever mentioned his name to you?”

Upon this question, the gentleman’s eyebrows found themselves upended, almost resembling that of two angry cats hissing and confronting one another.

“Erm. Not quite often. But I think he has. If I’m not wrong, it’s John. After John Donne.”

The machinations of the world were aligning themselves towards the mailman’s cause finally.

Good things come to those who wait.

He was starting to realise the sweet essence behind this adage now.

However, just as he was about to jot down the newfound name of his addressee, he was stopped short in his tracks.

“No, no, wait. I think it was Christopher.

Actually, no. It was Edmund.

Or was it?





No, no. I quite think it was either Ben or William.”

The clockwork mechanism of the universe had come to a rude halt, yet again.

The mailman tried his best to desist this familiar sensation that was now sinking in hard.

“If you don’t mind sir, could you be a bit more specific please? I’m answerable to a pretty highly placed organisation and I don’t think they would tolerate any inaccuracies on my part.”

“Yes, yes. I do understand. But you must pardon my memory. You see, Mr Nichols was a brilliant enthusiast of Renaissance literature. He had always maintained that if he ever begot a son, he would definitely name him after one of those authors. I was quite not sure which one he alluded to then.

This was a long time back, and most of this is hazy and I can’t also particularly vouch for when his son was born but all that I remember him telling me, is that he had stayed true to his word. I never bothered much to follow up. I beg your forgiveness for that.”

All of a sudden, his gaze was found to be fixed on the boy in the middle of the room.



“Mr Nichols is not very sociable. In all these years, he has not for once taken the pains of inviting anyone over for a casual dinner or anything of the kind. And of course, we wouldn’t push it. If anything, I remember him being cross at his wife, complaining as to how she grants way too much leeway to their neighbours around their place, despite his constant admonitions.

In fact, I wouldn’t be here now had I not happened to be strolling around this neighbourhood today. I take these long walks on Sundays, you see. Much needed solitude for the working man! Anyway, I could only remember vaguely that he lived somewhere around here. It was my good fortune that my speculation played out positively.

This is for the very first time that I’m seeing his son as well. I’ve got to admit. I did picture him far quite differently.”

A look of urgent realisation held the gentleman in its grip now. He looked absurdly evasive.

“I guess I’ll come back some time later. Thank you so much for your time.”

With a final look at the boy, mostly fleeting and out of the corner of his eye, the gentleman flipped around promptly, on his toes, and steadily made his way back.



The mailman now sat, more confused than ever. He was glad he hadn't been audience to yet another bout of secret family history but whatever he had been made wise of, didn't help his cause in the slightest.

In fact, it seemed to make it worse.

The woman of the house had been out for a long time as well. He wanted to believe that she was Mrs. Nichols, but the events of the day had rather kept him from doing that. His patience was wearing thin now. His thoughts were spiralling.

At that moment, the deafening sound of a tin can top getting peeled off, conjured itself within the room. The endeavours of the boy seemed to have come to fruition at last. He sat very still, the can still in his hands, and was staring intently into the contents of the can.



Suddenly, the boy broke into a rich cackle, very similar to that of an infant. The symphony of it carried itself deftly to the mailman's ears and condensed just there. The boy had finally been successful in accruing the mailman's attention. As the last waves of his cackle died out, the boy looked dead straight into the mailman's eyes and locked gazes with him. The boy wasn't wearing his usual brand of that peculiar expression anymore. If at all, it seemed to be one of irrevocable acceptance.

Probably for the first time in the day, the mailman allowed himself a gentle smile. The boy inched closer to the mailman, and once near him, he held the can close to his face. An imploring look seemed to hold his face hostage. The mailman, as if on cue, regarded the boy's face for a couple of seconds before looking right into the tin can's insides.

His smile now took the liberty of changing into a beam. Oddly enough, the weariness of the day appeared to have been lost on him. He looked once more at the boy's face and back inside the tin can and his grin could hardly be contained anymore.

A hearty laugh was just around the corner.

He gripped his pen carefully and jotted something down, quite fastidiously, on the sheets that he had been carrying all along. He kept the parcel carefully next to the boy, who, as if on a schedule, had promptly transitioned into another stupor already, and got up to leave. No sooner had he gathered his things and gotten up, than Mrs. Nichols made her way back into the house. He was sure now, that she was Mrs. Nichols. It couldn't have been anybody else. She was dabbing at the sweat on her forehead with her saree and seemed immensely contrite.

“I'm sorry for keeping you waiting this long. Maddy had brewed up quite a fix. You wouldn't believe me if I told you.”

“It's all right. I understand. In fact, I was just about to leave.”

“Were you? Didn't you need a signature and a proof of my son's name and all?”

“Yes. I did. And I do have it on me now. It took me quite some time but I got it, eventually. Thank you very much.”



A Marwari Cultural Conundrum

Sandhini Goyal

My mother had dinner at 12.30 pm last night. She was waiting for the moon to show up so she could look at it and break her fast for the day. I had slept by then, I meant to give her company, but I just dozed off. I doze off most of the time. I had once cursed the moon on one of these fasting days and I remember her scolding me “you may curse it tomorrow, not today!”

Since the time I can remember, she has been celebrating this, draped in the same red saree with the red auspicious dupatta, part of the shagun at most Marwari weddings. Fasting on Chauth is a tradition only a few women of the family follow as they are here in Ajmer, which is not a metropolis. I often wonder if she expects me to follow these traditions as and when I grow up or even her daughter-in-law to do the same? There are times when she asks me to sit in the pooja where few women gather (only women) and read stories of the significance of this tradition from a book that was passed on to my grandmother from her mother-in-law.





I reluctantly sit, feeling out of place in my loose shorts and a discoloured t-shirt; unknown to the language, Marwari and the emotional value she associates with the transitory Saathiya drawn on the wall with vermilion. As I look at her, an unsettling knot binds me, one end tied to my revulsion and incredulity in the process, and the other tied to my regard for my mother's beliefs.

There are countless things that I don't believe in, but she does and so after my rebellious phase, I have submitted a silent resignation. When you don't understand the passion of the people you love, you just retract yourself and follow their trace.

The dust settles on the books and laptop screens, maybe it is the dust of the desert and it is also lost in the winds that blow here. This desert might house fewer mirages for people who seek water than for the people who happened to run out of it by chance.

My college magazine runs a language column. I was approached to write something in my mother-tongue, Marwari. How could I tell them that it is not my mother tongue even if my ancestors belonged to Rajasthan and my Nani is most comfortable in communicating in this language or the fact that my Dadi sometimes curses in this language? How could I explain to them that even if this city is not metropolitan enough for my mother, it has become that for me. Although, I did tell them, with a pang of embarrassment, "Sorry, I was never taught this language, so I never learnt".



The state I was born in, Rajasthan, is known for women in vibrant dresses of yellow and red along with colourful stone embedded bangles called the chudala, pictured to bring water from a far-off well, and men with big turbans and wrinkles around eyes and lips, folding the dark wheatish skin at almost perfect proportions. When I was able to adjust the exposure and saturation perfectly after clicking a photo of such a man selling souvenirs, squatting in front of a bright orange wall at the Amber Fort, it did create a buzz on my aesthetic Instagram feed. An “activist” friend accused me of poverty porn, not in my comment section obviously; she messaged me personally. I googled it and made up my mind “I am just relishing my culture and his as well”.

But would it be about relishing the culture when someone clicks the man playing Ektara instrument outside our city’s only mall?

How are these two situations different and yet the same?





Cenotaphs of great men tower in the blazing heat shadowing the people from the sun that was never merciful to them. Theirs is a place where the rumbling sound of an airplane is seldom heard, just rustling leaves, short circuits and scratching of woks. How great are men here now, how great is the sun, how they don't search for cenotaphs to stand under, they just find them.

On a still evening, when we were playing badminton, I told my parents about my interest in Sufism and how I wish to pursue research on it. They didn't look surprised as it was seemingly one of the many ideas I get in my distracted head. Dad asked me if it has something to do with the city we live in? Ajmer. Only marked on Indian maps for the Dargah Sharif of Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti. I thought about it that night and realized that it might be related to the place I was born in. Certainly, we develop our interests from the niches of our belongings. But have I really experienced the culture of my homeland? Will it ever inspire me the way it inspires my mother to not curse the moon?



I asked her, whether she would pass on that book of stories to me. She looked at me and said, “I might do that, even if you don’t understand this, you will keep it safe.”

If this cultural conundrum rakes my mind, I try to remember that one doesn’t have to be born somewhere to belong ‘somewhere’, they just belong if they want to.





Nimrat Kaur Chahal

I Did it for the Money

There is nothing to cover up. No truth to be told more than that I did it for the money. I did love the task once, but then there were others to love it with me. Those who did not wipe away their “eyes glistening with ghosts of the past”. That one who lounged on the sofa stroking the ginger cat and narrating the simple woes of my eyes. That same shell which shook my hand and read me “Jelly” by Manto made deft strokes with a HB pencil, adding tails to all the letter “s”. HB pencils were their magic wands, and then they were gone.

And then I lost interest. Then I craved wealth. So I left the pens and the journals and filled in google documents with vague ideas. But interpretation was so craved, they devoured them all. They believed there was single right answer for every word, and that the answer was theirs. There is always chaos when everyone believes they are correct, and chaos reigned under my rule. There was glory and power and more to that there was paint in my blood and my tongue painted rich tapestries. In a way I did kiss my subjects, all of them, as they feasted.

I went on a pilgrimage, leaving my heart in the sea and my lungs in the forest, and the salt and the moss courses through me as I take one step towards my past which loved the craft, but it is always three steps into the future from there. You ask me for advice and wish I would endorse you, but there is life beyond political campaigns and beyond pilgrimage and penance. That is my advice, go live that life before the webs of wealth entrap your heart and trade it for the love you have nowhere to store.

Go before you too, cease to believe that I did it for the money. Before you too, do it for the money.



Lockdown Diary: Plight of the Indian woman

Caiityya Pillai

‘With a mace in one hand and a key tucked in the middle of my knuckles, i felt more unsafe walking the streets at night than I ever have before.’

The midnight streets of India have never been safe for women. With the pandemic, the streets appear more deserted than ever before and the eerie silence makes the footsteps following you even louder.

Having been under strict quarantine since March 2020, on a quiet night of February 2021, I decided to go on my first walk outside after months. Longing for the feeling of the wind hitting my face and to enjoy the silence of the night, I decided to walk around my building's compound, in Chandigarh, India.





I found the streets to be quieter than ever, welcoming and quaint. Enjoying the starry night and the cool breeze, I decided to begin what I thought then was the end of the pandemic, with this memory.

I did not know then that this night would not remind me of an end to something stifling, the quarantine, but make me feel more stifled than ever. The foreboding nature of this night reveals itself to me now, as we sit through this pandemic with no end in sight.

The welcoming and quaint cloud that initially enveloped me, no longer did. It soon transformed into a cold and eerie feeling. The empty roads suddenly felt threatening and a sense of perturbation engulfed me. I started walking faster while gripping the mace in my pocket, but could not seem to shake the feeling off.

I felt alone and unprepared, exactly how the sudden lockdown had made me initially feel.

After a short while, like a pin dropping in a silent room, I heard faint footsteps behind me but they were magnified to my already high strung nerves. In the next two seconds I went over all the self-defense protocols a girl is taught; my hand was firmly clutching my mace, my key was tightly jabbed in between the knuckles of my other hand and I confirmed that my hair was open and not in a ponytail which would be easier to pull.



On not finding any well lit path, I decided to hide behind a small bush.

A few seconds later, a group of drunk male workers passed by. They were shouting insults at each other and occupying the entire width of the road.

While I arrived home safely that night, not every woman does. In my lockdown diary I would like to include the general experience of the 'Indian woman' as well.

While not all men mean harm to women, every woman is apprehensive when isolated with a group of men. The roads of India have always posed a danger to the women of this country and this danger grows rapidly with the pandemic.

Crowds in areas that are statistically female-dominated; malls, religious places and restaurants have seen a decline. The distorted sex ratio among commuters has always existed, but with the night curfew the roads are even more unsafe, for everyone in general and for women in particular.



USTIC

A skewed ratio existed in reference to the comparison of females and males in the workforce, with women forming a mere 18% of the urban workforce, according to the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), 2017-2018 report.

According to Aishwani Deshpande, economics professor at Ashoka University, who has deeply studied social disparities and gender discrimination, a sharp decline is noticed in female employment due to the pandemic.

Male employment dropped by 29%, while female employment dropped by 39%.

This has reflected itself in the male-to-female ratio of commuters on roads, thus making roads more unsafe for women than ever before.

According to the National Commission of Women (NCW), the beginning of the lockdown caused a surge in reported cases of sexual assault. In June 2020 alone, 194 cases of sexual harassment and molestation were reported, the highest monthly figures noticed in 2020.

The lockdown reveals itself to be a coin, with positive efforts to eradicate Covid-19 but on the flip side has also caused an increase in gender-based crime.

The Global Women's Mental Health section of Frontiers, an academic publication, reveals that an alarming rise is always noticed in gender-based violence in pandemics and epidemics as is seen in Covid-19 pandemic as well.

Social norms begin to dismantle with the onset of crisis situations. While these situations threaten the well-being of the entire population, this incident will always be a reminder that the women are not only threatened but also further marginalised.

Tobacco Suckle

Kishan Gusani

Colour. Too much colour. Do you see?
The palette tongue ash off your fingers
tonight.

There maroon: a petunia, an areola rose
Nether my teeth. My baby, don't bottle

Your sleep tonight. Then grey: a
canvas,
A tombstone, my forehead. Hand static
over

Boozed in monochrome tonight. Hear /
my father /
Drenched—red. Tape silence not a
graveyard tonight



lulled awake

with a piece of glass stuck in his
throat,
he spits out letters
on the ground,
upon which, millions walk.
the bitter taste of bile,
lingering in his mouth,
like the drugged compulsions,
of which dead men talk.
i wonder how long it will take him,
to realise that Fate
has decided for him to let Her
woodpeckers-
make dents on his heart
and serve it fresh on a plate,
stocked
with raw paintings
of what could be.

A vertical, textured background image, possibly a close-up of a wooden surface or a similar material, showing a dark circular hole or indentation. A black rectangular box is overlaid on the right side of the image, containing the text 'Ev' in white serif font.

Ev

The Anatomy Of Poetry

Anwasha Dey

Gladiolus.

A crimson hardbound notebook that
stinks

Of stale memories, rotten germanium
leaves,

The photographs case a vignette tune
On which there are white spots, as if a
cockroach has made its way on freshly
Painted water colour.

Vibrance but the gladiolus has no
nectar.

The cockroaches move round and round
And round and round in circles
Till each little trace of colour is
removed.

A white cockroach with improper
pigmentation

Antanenea like fish bones which get
stuck

In the throat. Beautiful.





Green eyes.
Of a black cat. Jet black fur.
Black nails, scratches on the ochre wall.
Ink spills on the faded pages on the
faces
Old photographs without heads,
The Mcluskigunj winter afternoons
Neatly laid lace covers for garden
lunches
The evening cicadas, the terrycot
trousers
Woollen sweaters,- vermilion, lemon
Scarves and monkey caps but no faces.
The black claws scratches there and
cries in an ugly drool. Now sits on the
torn velvet divan.
Scratches it. Vanishes.

Grey dawn.

Before the sun rises. Before the night
stops curling up. Amongst the pines,
Walk a pair of feet. Black heels. Lace
stockings

A macabre memory with a torn bra. A
dried rose stealing away to a graveyard
in desolation

Winds blow tearing apart a synthetic
scarf

Atop the pines in frost, needles that
prick blood, and pus, a little of
memories.

On the marble grave sits a monster in a
torn rag. A hound with blood on the
canines.

Chains manacled the feet. Yearning.
The high heels trod in. Black nails light
a candle and touches the hem of the rag
with the dried rose.

Rekindles a fire once lit, somewhere in
the kash fields of Shantiniketan, on a
full moon night. In mud, cold water and
flesh.



Sylvia

Smriti Choudhary

Sylvia.
I've been writing for eleven years,
Known you for eight, but
Loved you beyond the womb.
I wrote for you, about you
Remembering you
Around you, tried writing like you
But never wrote to you.
I cannot write to you.

Are my words worthy enough
To be read by the
Queen of revelations
Of dirty secrets of
The human mind herself?
Definitely not.

Do I know
You enough, to tell you
That I, like yourself, cannot
Stop looking at poetry
Like a confessional box
The world standing behind
The curtain, listening ardently
But never pulling me
To the other side?
Definitely not.





Do I despise
You enough, to curse you
With the knowledge
That your melancholy
Did not leave
This world when you did
That all your ache was
Packed into boxes, and shipped off
For the rest of us to carry on.
Definitely not.

Sylvia.
You don't know me
And maybe, I will never
Never know you.
But sometime between 1963
And 1999, a little box was
Shipped to me, and I
Still don't know what to do with it.
So I just carry it around
Everywhere I go with my words.

Crops

I did not cry at birth
Professional, covered in salt
Crystallised skin, breakable
Dead lungs
They only cried when mother's grief
Pumped itself into my blood
Melting away the salt
Her skin itched for days after

I cried a lot as a child,
Silent, undisruptive
Quiet crying from mother's madness
Grief from mother's grief
She is the happiest woman on earth

No more crying in the
Straight second decade
Unbreakable and professional
death in birth
grief was a false thing
I did not need it to survive into adulthood

Until adulthood brought a
Basketful of grief, rage, beauty, pain
Dropped it at my feet
Taste the beautiful fruit of madness



Semanti Debray

Negative Space

Saman Jawaid

I see his orange-coloured toothbrush
in the washroom and it reminds me
of his toothy grin.

How he always left the tap on for minutes
while I shouted from the bedroom,
'Don't waste water, it's precious.'

Sometimes people leave but their stuff creates
a negative space.

The hanger where he used to hang his shirts is
empty now and it feels like it can never support
anything in the future.

Anything which I put on it falls down
eventually, like it doesn't want to be there,
like the hanger is refusing its presence.

I saw his medicines in the dustbin, today.
I threw them myself.

No need to check the expiry date now,
because it's useless.

Sometimes I wake up and feel his presence.
Like he is sleeping in the room next to mine,
snoring deeply.

I remember I could sense his footsteps.
His gait was way too familiar for me,
I've never heard it for days.





Monograph Interviews: Writers Workshop

Writers Workshop is a Kolkata-based literary publisher founded by the Indian poet and scholar Purushottama Lal in 1958. It has published many new Indian authors of post-independence urban literature. Many of these authors later became widely known.

The following interview was conducted over e-mail. We'd like to thank Prof. Ananda Lal, Shuktara Lal and the entire Writers Workshop team for this wonderful opportunity.



Writers Workshop

Q1. Could you tell our readers a bit about Writers Workshop and the importance of Indie Publishing?

Born in 1958, WW is the oldest extant publisher of Indian creative writing in English. All the publishers in this field who exist now entered the scene later. WW discovered a large number of authors who became famous names afterwards. It continues to do so, because only independent publishers can take the risk of printing unknown or young writers, especially poets. Mainstream publishers consider such books as loss-making propositions, and so don't accept them. Most indies die out for the same reason, but WW has managed to live. Worldwide, indies are where experimentation, challenging alternatives and non-popular genres can survive -- instead, the commercial players must compromise because they depend on the marketplace, and therefore sales driven by popularity ("bestsellers"), for their existence.



Q.2. What prompted Professor P. Lal to start Writers Workshop?
Could you guide us through its journey?

As he put it very simply, because no one was ready to publish what he and his small group of young friends wrote in the 1950s. His Credo (on the website) traces the journey, too long to summarize here. (www.writersworkshop.com)

Q.3. What makes an independent outfit like Writers Workshop keep going on in a scene ruled by commercial publishing houses?

Dedication to a vision, without any eye on profits. It's a labour of love. Also, our "workshop" model (before the new meaning of "workshop" became current) meant that the authors collaborated by sharing the costs, agreeing to buy back a certain number of books. But of course, if the big publishers in India accepted other writing, we would no longer have a reason to continue.

Q.4. What do you look for in a book of poetry or prose? What differentiates a good writer from an average one?

The spark of true inspiration transformed into the promise of literary talent. Originality in thought, content and form. In poetry, awareness of poetic craft and skills. And in general, knowledge of and dexterity in the English language.



Q.5. With the advent of Self-Publishing in recent years, a lot of writers choose to go their own way. But, in a sea of self-published writers, is that route still viable?

Who are we to prescribe anything? But most self-publishing fails the last two criteria in my answer above. In other words, they should never have got published because the books prove that they haven't yet got the basic skill set. Can you sing classical music without the know-how? Like any art, writing is not an easy job. Secondly, self-publishing removes the editor from the picture, without realizing that even the greatest authors have gone through the hands of a good editor. Often, the editor's fine touch makes a masterpiece - - to cite a famous example, *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

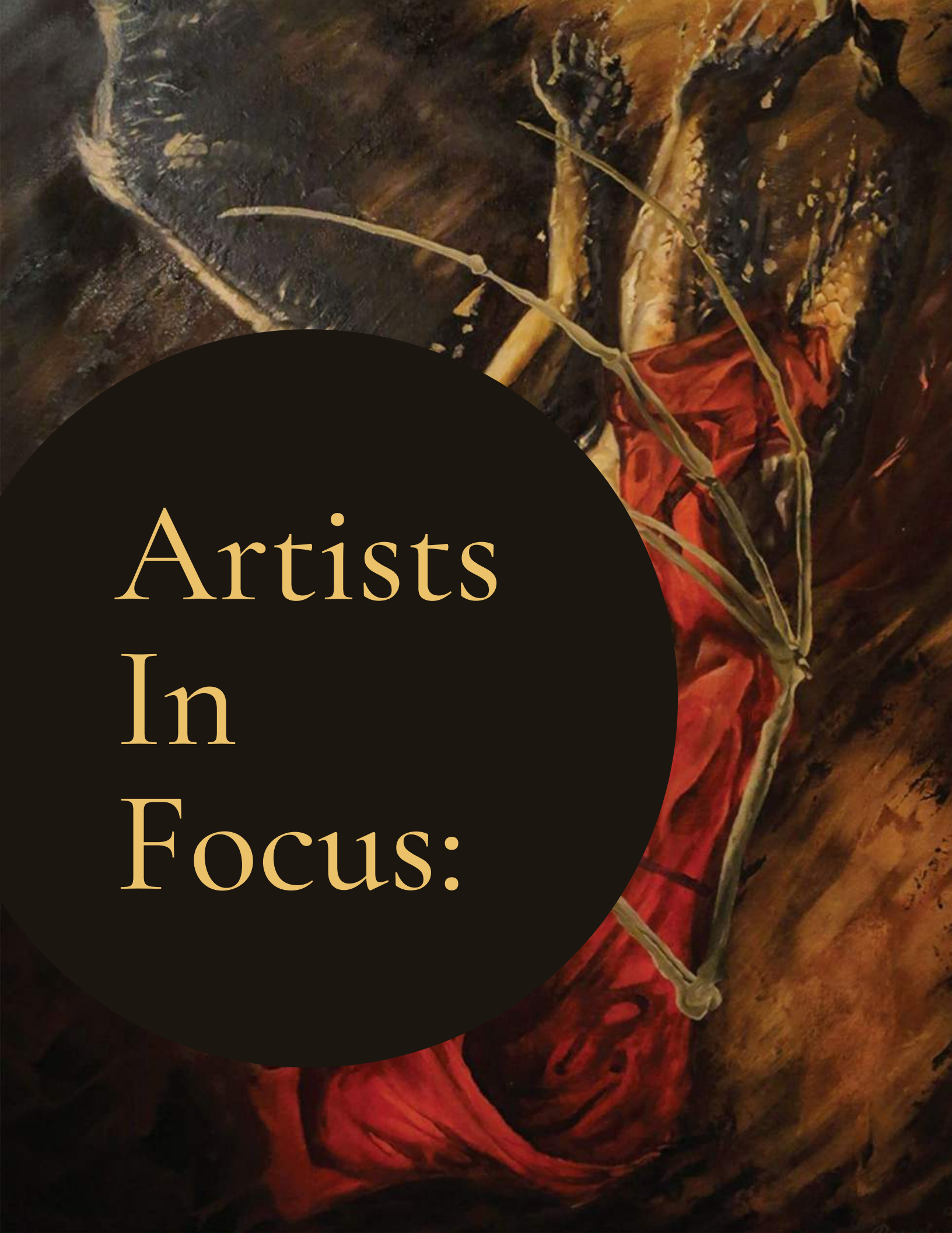




Q.7. What is the reason behind the handloom sari bound on every book? It must cost a fortune considering the amount of books being published (including the elaborate calligraphy) whereas commercial publishing houses mostly sell paperbacks.

My father innovated this design, which underwent modifications through the decades, though the family who bind the books remain the same. He said he didn't want to hide their art under a paper jacket, but display the beauty of indigenous binding openly. My rationale is slightly different: in a world where book production has become standardized, mechanized and homogeneous, why should I follow the uniformity that the West dictates? Can no alternative exist that reflects India's diversity? Can we not show off the colours, borders and textures of our saris on books? Can we not use calligraphy in a century when handwriting has become another lost art? Can we not take pride in the handcrafted processes of traditional Indian binders and tell the world -- this is one way of making books in India? In which every copy of the same book effectively becomes unique and doesn't have to conform to one template?



The background is a painting with a dark, textured, brownish-black background. A figure is depicted, wearing a vibrant red garment that is draped and folded. The figure's limbs are visible, and they appear to be in a state of distress or death. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the red and the textures of the fabric and the background.

Artists
In
Focus:



Arrushi Chakraborty



Ahvanya Mandhyan

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Artists: Arrushi Chakraborty & Ahvanya Mitra

Special Thanks To:

Prof. Ananda Lal

Shuktara Lal

Durjoy Choudhury

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