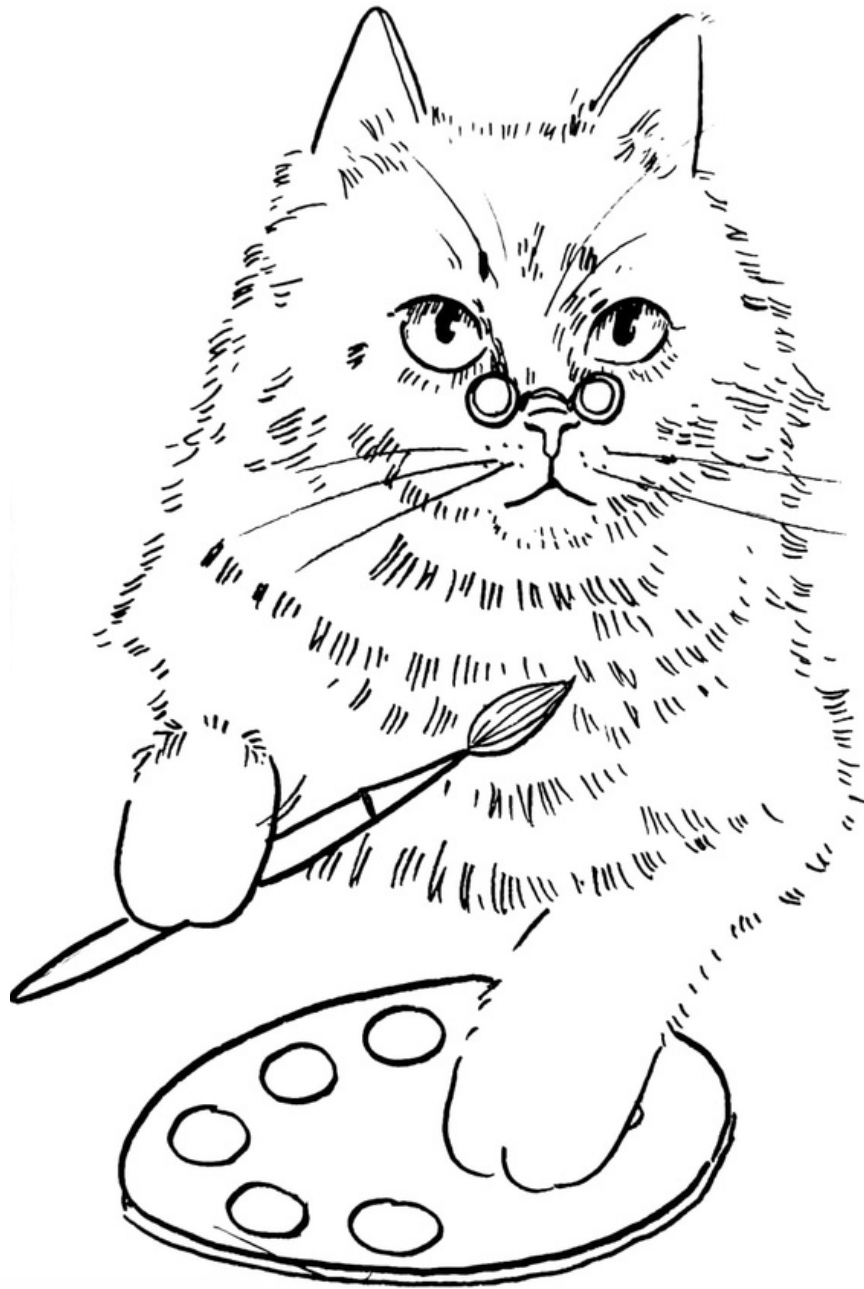
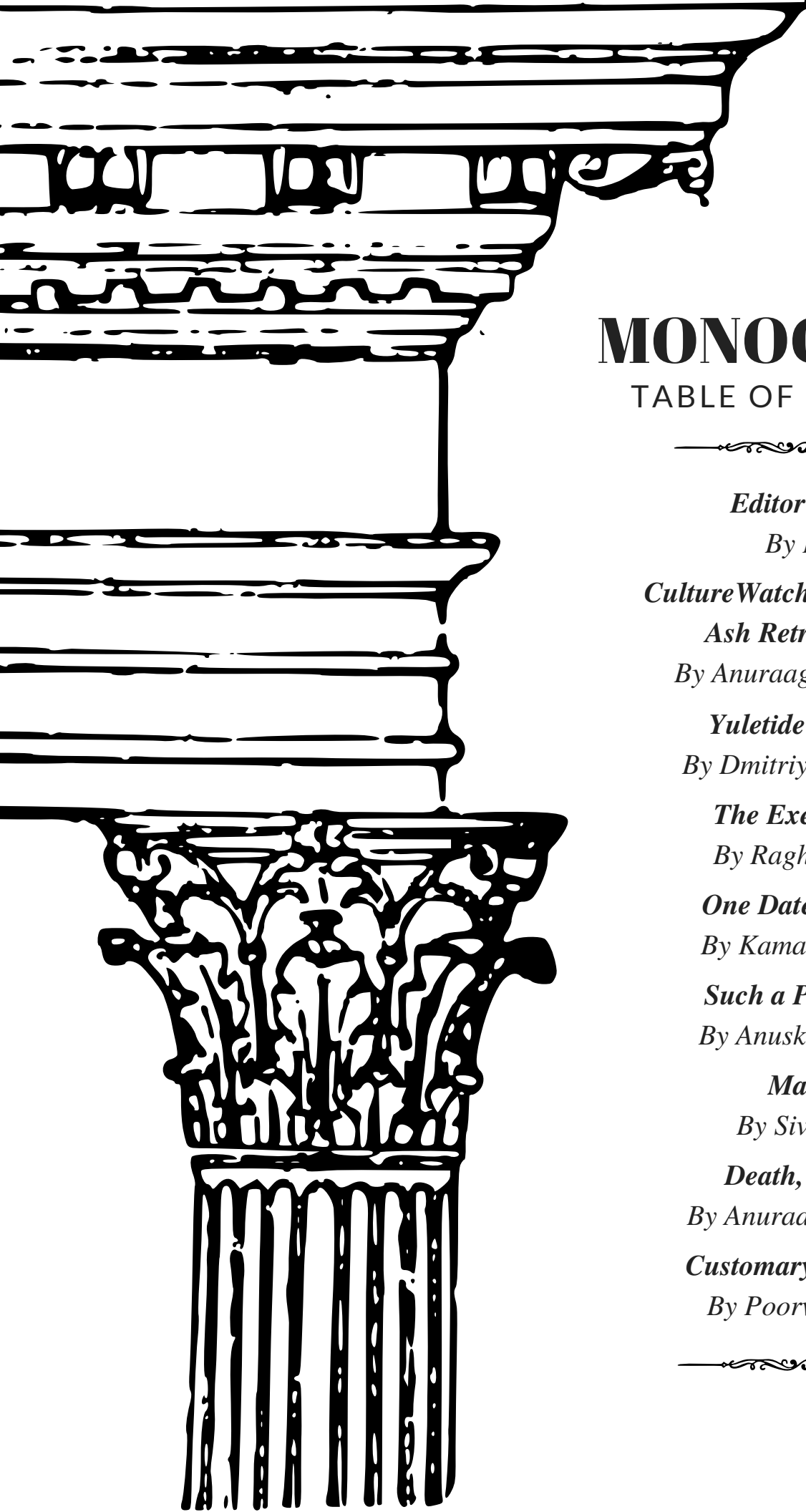


# MONOGRAPH

YEAR 4. VOL.7



A STUDENT LED MAGAZINE FOR THE ARTS



# MONOGRAPH

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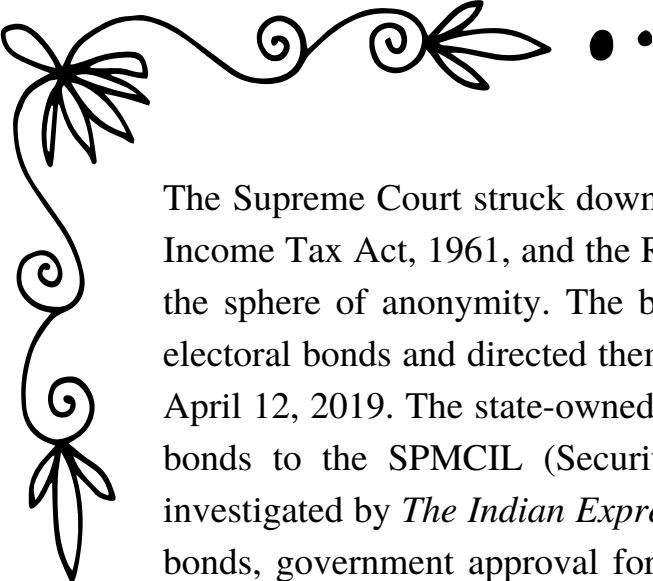


# Editor's Note



The Electoral Bond scheme, as prescribed in The Finance Bill, 2017, now stands unconstitutional after seven years of cashing-in, with a set of petitions challenging its validity. A five-judge bench of the Supreme Court held that the Union Government scheme violated voters' right to information about political funding. While this mechanism allowed for corporate entities and individuals to purchase bonds from the State Bank of India as a means of funding political parties, it allowed them to do so in complete anonymity, only when the public is concerned. Petitions, since the first one filed by the Association for Democratic Reforms in 2017, have challenged this anonymous nature that allowed corporate entities to exercise undue influence in the Indian political landscape. The scheme, which was said to provide transparency to political funding, was operationally opaque and facilitated corruption.

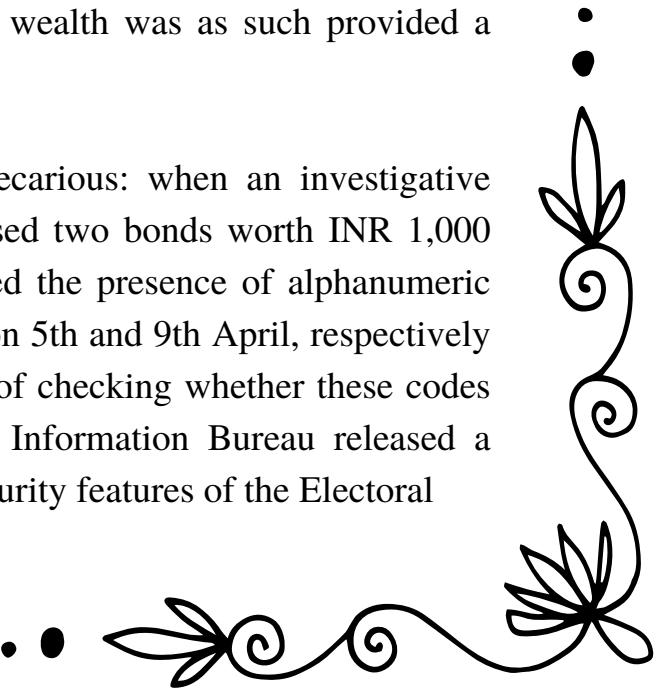
In a landmark judgement two months ago, the Supreme Court ruled the Electoral Bond scheme as “unconstitutional and manifestly arbitrary.” The court stated that non-disclosure of the source of the funding, coupled with the donor's ability to make unlimited contributions, led to a quid pro quo arrangement, wherein big corporations would purchase innumerable denominations in order to sway a policy change in their favour. Although the scheme framed the electoral bonds as ‘donations’, the judgement stated that these contributions were completely transactional in nature. While ordinary citizens, who believed in the ideologies of their political party of choice, made contributions without expecting much in return, corporations with financial power were allowed an advantage over them by influencing the electoral process.



The Supreme Court struck down the scheme, along with the amendments made to the Income Tax Act, 1961, and the Representation of the People Act, 1951, which enabled the sphere of anonymity. The bench ordered the SBI to halt the further issuance of electoral bonds and directed them to furnish all data on such bonds as purchased since April 12, 2019. The state-owned bank continued sending out orders for the printing of bonds to the SPMCIL (Security Printing and Minting Corporation of India). As investigated by *The Indian Express*, SBI sent out an order for 400 booklets and 10,000 bonds, government approval for which was finally given on February 12. While the Supreme Court gave the order to stop three days after, SBI said they only received them on the 28th. The finance ministry has to instruct the bank to formally stop issuing bonds, and it took them around twelve days to do so. By that time, the SBI had already received a combined total of 8350 bonds.

Initially announced as part of then Finance Minister Arun Jaitley's 2017-18 budget in the 2017 Finance Act, the Electoral Bonds scheme had claimed to "cleanse the system of political funding in the country." The assertion of transparency is immediately confusing, for as declared by the press release, the electoral bond would "not carry the name of the payee." Campaigning obfuscation and an absolute denial of providing information as truthful and 'clean' has been a now-characteristic well-honed skill of this government. These bonds could be purchased only from the State Bank of India, every quarter for the first 10 days of the month, in multiples of INR 1,000, 10,000, 1,00,000, 10,00,000 and 1,00,00,000 and were viable for 15 days after issue. Part of what Reuters termed as "a series of measures to tackle illicit wealth" in February 2017, the scheme becomes easier to apprehend when one focuses on the word "illicit," meaning "unlawful." Political parties' acquisition of wealth was as such provided a lawful procedure.

Anonymity within electoral bonds proved to be precarious: when an investigative journalist with *The Quint*, Poonam Agarwal, purchased two bonds worth INR 1,000 each and had them forensically tested, she discovered the presence of alphanumeric codes, invisible to the naked eye. These were issued on 5th and 9th April, respectively (with the second specifically bought for the purpose of checking whether these codes were unique to the bonds); on the 17th, the Press Information Bureau released a statement, titled "Government clarifies the in-built security features of the Electoral



Bonds.” They ‘clarified’ that each bond had a “Random Serial Number,” which could not be linked to any party’s transaction or used for tracking the transactions. Further assurance was provided, since “SBI does not share the serial number with anybody, including the Government and users.” There is a simultaneous protective and affirmative move made here: the voter is told that this number is a “security feature” (although there is no elaboration about whose security and against what this may be), that it cannot be “tracked” (once again, the potential purpose or actor of such tracking is unidentified), and, even though it has no capacity to ‘link’, we are reassured that the number will be revealed neither to the Government nor the buyers.

The government’s ‘clean’ financial process comprises randomly securitising, nameless, bearing no responsibility or connection, its only visible claim being that this is a ‘donation’ from a ‘well-wisher’. These donations were fully exempt from income tax returns, with no necessitation for a party to report/register the worth/frequency/date of any electoral bonds it had encashed. During Poonam Agarwal’s preliminary enquiries, part of an SBI spokesperson’s response stated that only the count of denomination-wise bonds issued and paid would be captured in their records, such that there was “no way to connect which donor has made a donation to which party.” As she points out in a recent interview, this was illogical, for there could be no way of accounting for bonds purchased and encashed without some semblance of information about the payee and receiver being recorded. The concerns that thus ensued had two facets: one concerned with the inadvertent surveillance of political donors, and the other, with the limitations imposed on both voter rights as well as the Electoral Commission’s capacity to keep a check on political parties’ monetary activities.





According to a report from the non-profit ADR, total funds generated through electoral bond sales from March 2018 to January 2024 amounted to INR 16,518.11 crore. These funds are distributed unequally, with the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party having encashed almost INR 6060 crores — more than 47 per cent of the total bonds encashed by parties. The All India Trinamool Congress came second by a mile, earning a share of 12.6 per cent. The first year of electoral bonds saw a massive increase in income across all parties, with BJP's net income doubling from INR 1027 crore, and Congress observing a rise of INR 701 crores. During the fiscal year of 2022-23, INR 1300 crores out of BJP's total income of 2360 crores came from electoral bonds.

With data on political parties made available in March this year after the Supreme Court's directive, we can observe that 22 companies donated more than INR 100 crores from April 2019 to January 2024. Most of these donors display similar patterns of having previously escaped the Enforcement Directorate's radar and/or gained lucrative contracts, etc. Future Gaming and Hotel Services PR topped this list: they donated around INR 1368 crore during this period. It is of note that, in 2022, the ED had attached INR 400 crores worth of property against the company in a money laundering scam. Registered out of Hyderabad, Megha Engineering and Infrastructures Limited stands as the second highest donor, having given out INR 916 crores in electoral bonds. Of that, more than 500 crores has been received by the BJP, making MIEL the ruling party's biggest 'well-wisher'. Between 2019-2024, the company managed to land several government infrastructure projects, and as noted by *The Wire*, it had secured the tender for a 14,000-crore twin tunnel project right after having purchased 120-crore-worth of electoral bonds on April 11, 2023.

Through the series of amendments, schedules, and petitions filed in the duration of electoral bonds being operative, what remains confounding is an absolute lack of logical and factual consistency in the claims made by SBI and the Financial Ministry. In the Supreme Court’s 2019 interim order, for example, political parties were instructed “to submit to the Election Commission of India ... detailed particulars of the donors as against the (sic) each Bond; the amount of each such bond and the full particulars of the credit received against each bond, namely, the particulars of the bank account to which the amount has been credited and the date of each such credit.” Despite Agarwal’s investigation, there had been no public acknowledgement, at this juncture, that political parties had access to particulars of their donors, or that these particulars could be mapped to a specific bond in the first place. What ensued thus was a judicial demand, in service of “the sanctity of the electoral process in the country,” for a transparency that was made known as possible to the public only implicitly.

It is worth noting, to contribute to the unquestioned absurdities of this scheme, that, in the extended notification by the Ministry of Finance, dated January 2, 2018, the definition accorded for a “person” who can purchase the bond has “a Hindu undivided family” as its second meaning, with no elaboration or contextualisation, preceded by “an individual” and followed by several variations of collectives/groups/institutions. That the bonds were valorised for their claim to anonymity is almost insidious — what is the worth of an anonymity that makes unknowable a political party’s funding? What does such anonymity have to do with cohering a Hindu family unit? How does a court demand information that it has prohibited a political organisation from accessing in the first place? It is precisely the indeterminacy of this transaction that the electoral bonds relied upon, and in doing so, it provided a landscape amenable to bias and opaqueness in political funding.





# CULTUREWATCH: GOBARDHAN ASH RETROSPECTIVE



ANURAAG DAS SARMA

Gobardhan Ash is not a name you often hear discussed in art circles. Conversations mostly feature the likes of Abanindranath Tagore, Jamini Roy, Nandalal Basu and others who have come to define Modern Art in Calcutta, and by extension, India. These luminaries of Eastern Art, through no fault of their own, became larger than life, in turn diminishing several artists of the era. Gobardhan Ash was one such artist, though whether he deserved to be one is open to debate.

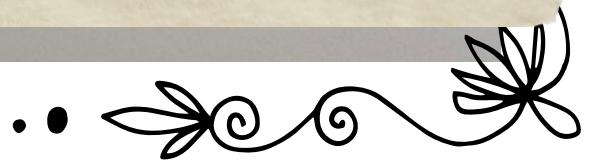
Prinseps, which prides itself on being a research-focused auction house, has carefully curated a wonderful exhibition of Gobardhan Ash's works in collaboration with the Kolkata Centre for Creativity. Open to the public till the 21st of April, the Gobardhan Ash Retrospective showcases paintings made by the artist between 1929-1969, including over 100 original artworks which previously belonged to Ash's family. Such a connection between an artist's family and the curators is one that is expressly needed in the landscape of Bengali art, a viewpoint echoed in the panel discussion that accompanied the exhibition's opening. The exhibition would not have been possible without Nirban Ash's support and his willingness to share the numerous previously-unseen paintings by his father.

Gobardhan Ash's work possesses a quality shared by few other painters — commanding unwavering attention. His active years comprised tumultuous times that saw Bengal torn apart by wars, famines, and the Indian Freedom Struggle — something which reflected deeply in his art. As I sat listening to the panel discussion,





my eyes kept shifting to a painting from his 'Avatar' series, portraying a mother with a child in her arms. Lacking any familiar expression of motherly concern, her face was instead contorted with anger — a sharp contrast to another of Ash's paintings that attended beautifully to a mother's worry.





My mind was crowded with scenes from the 1940s, when the Great Bengal Famine forced mothers to sell off their children to buy food, or how families would have to hasten into hiding as bombs dropped from Japanese bomber planes during WWII. Once the discussion on his patronage concluded, I walked over to the painting in question, reading its title. “After Raid.” To be able to convey the force of a distressed mother’s anger in a painting measuring hardly a few inches in length and breadth, compelling across a distance of well over 50 feet, requires an acute and rarely-found sense of dexterity, style and control. Yet here was Gobardhan Ash, an artist largely forgotten by the intellectual circles of the city, achieving this seemingly effortlessly.

*For a more in-depth coverage of the exhibition, stay tuned and follow us on Instagram.*





# YULETIDE FABLE #1



DMITRIY GALKOVSKIY

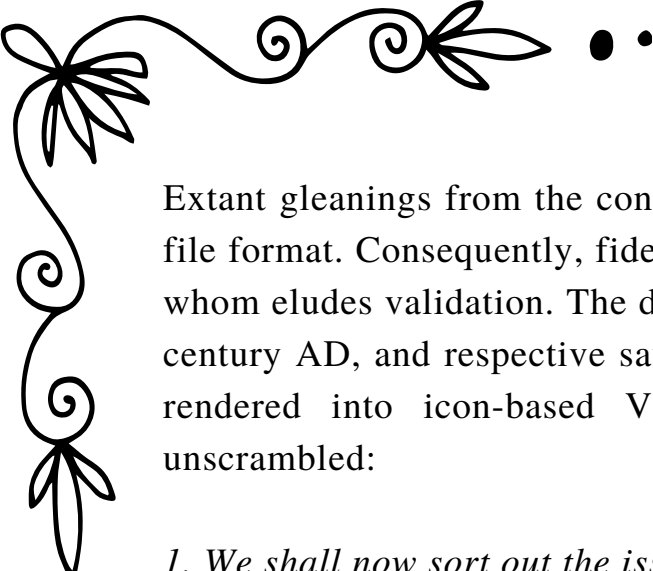


*Translated from Russian by Alexander Sharov*

A certain classical rat distinguished by avid inquisitiveness was once prowling around in the winery when it collapsed into an urn and precipitately choked to death on wine. On the ensuing day the urn was expedited to the quayside where it was loaded onto a vessel. A bolt of lightning arced into the vessel during the tempest, conflagration erupted and the argosy sank midway en route from Jaffa to Piraeus. In 3694 the amphora with mummified crystallized ullage was hoisted and the embalmed rat was whittled out of it. The architectonics of the gnawer's volatile memory was successfully reproduced through algebraic mapping, and by proxy of the 16-dimensional mainframe emulating lower mammalian sensorial susceptibility, relevant output was visualized. It transpired that the rat which so (in) felicitously floundered into the amphora, six hours heretofore had witnessed the interrogation of Christ by Pontius Pilate.

In 5118 a retro-computing mission fortuitously lucked upon clandestine findings on that matter. Sadly, the then retrieved data chip of the iconic grid NN-4 was almost utterly damaged and, in the ultimate reckoning, a swath of the spreadsheet of contents, disparate odds and ends of the dialogue and two video snapshots (from amongst the total of two millions) were displayed. The former (least corrupted) snapshot featured a sessile gentleman having the panoply of the Roman viceroy on. The optics is extraordinarily abortive: worm's-eye and lateral-side views. An enormous sandaled foot is conspicuous; a disproportionately dwarfish head with a comparatively hypertrophied mandible, a forearm with a sigil ring rests on the knee. Opposite stands Christ – an approximately quadragenarian, swarthy Semite, luxuriously gowned, aquiline hooked nose, wispy beard, bloated cheeks. The focalization of the snapshot (chromatic splotch) is the ring, ostentatiously flamboyant one, supposedly, the artifact riveting the rodent's alertness this particular second. The latter snapshot is severely blurred. Pilate is scarcely discernible. Christ pleads for something gesticulating with his hand straight at the rat. A hexapod (conjecturally, *Blatta orientalis*) is zigzagging across the foreground. The snapshot lacks semantic cynosure. Ostensibly, the instant of shifting attention from the insect on the background is videoed. In all likelihood, the rat yearned to gorge on Blattoptera but was momentarily deterred by an outcry.





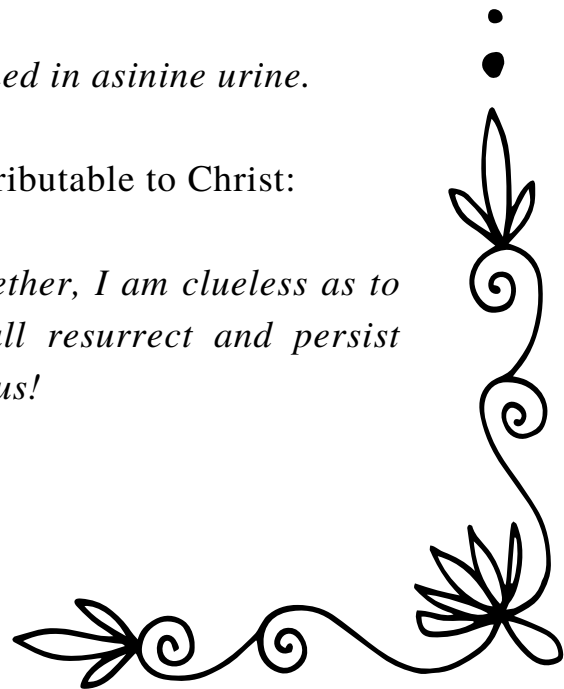
Extant gleanings from the conversation were exportable solely into plain textual file format. Consequently, fidelity of disambiguation between who apostrophized whom eludes validation. The duologue was held in Latin bureaucratese of the 1st century AD, and respective sayings were, with a certain degree of tentativeness, rendered into icon-based Vision English. Altogether, 19 utterances were unscrambled:

1. *We shall now sort out the issue of funding.*
2. *Let us arrange things thus.*
3. *It is opined that thy folks ought to be disposed of.*
4. *Where is your acolyteship?*
5. *Thou wilt become shorter by the head.*
6. *Where is the baksheesh?*
7. *We shall now sort out the issue of casting.*
8. *Hands will be struck upon (\*).*
9. *To badmouth and mudsling.*
10. *To tweak the issue.*
11. *Incentivizing and streamlining the modus operandi.*
12. *To provincialize it to the Collegium? The Sun is surer to prostrate down onto the Earth!*
13. *In a wrongful light.*
14. *When the time is ripe, we shall moot this suggestion likewise.*
15. *From the rightful perspective, delight for sore eyes.*
16. *A ratty chicaner.*
17. *Wring the neck off the grubby bourgeois rat.*
18. *The sycophant must be hung on a rope's end moistened in asinine urine.*

The last nineteenth piece was identified as positively attributable to Christ:

19. *I beseech thee not to intimidate me anymore. Altogether, I am clueless as to what Your August Lordship is speaking about. I shall resurrect and persist everlastingly. My father, Lord, my God hath behested thus!*

(\* ) It is obfuscated whether literally or figuratively.





## THE EXECUTIONER



RAGHU PRATAP

This was told to me in person, when it was safe to assume that we were sufficiently intoxicated, by the boyfriend of my girlfriend. She wasn't my girlfriend then, and she hadn't been for a while. We had parted ways almost two years ago, in what was not an ugly breakup but neither a pretty one – it must be said: there are no pretty breakups; there is no prettiness when feelings are involved wherever, whenever. That is the nature of feelings. It was the winter before last winter; it is summer now. In the nouveau city of Guwahati, summer becomes an umbrella term. Unlike the Europeans, we are never conscious about spring and fall. They pass, without us knowing.

We had been together for almost a year, though the cracks had formed much earlier. We hardly crossed paths, ever since she had moved to Delhi, which was when she met her boyfriend of the right now. When we last met in the December of 2021, she suddenly observed that I had become too young for her. She pointed out that I hadn't been young for her up until that moment, but right then I had become unattractively young for her. She was six years older to me, after all, but it seemed improbable that we would break up over that.

When I met him, her boyfriend of the *right now*, he was alone. Alone in the bar, alone at the counter. My acquaintance with him was old. We were in school together, and over the years we saw little of each other here and there: in weddings, married friends' anniversaries, parties hosted by a few of the infidel lot from school. Most importantly, we frequented the bar.



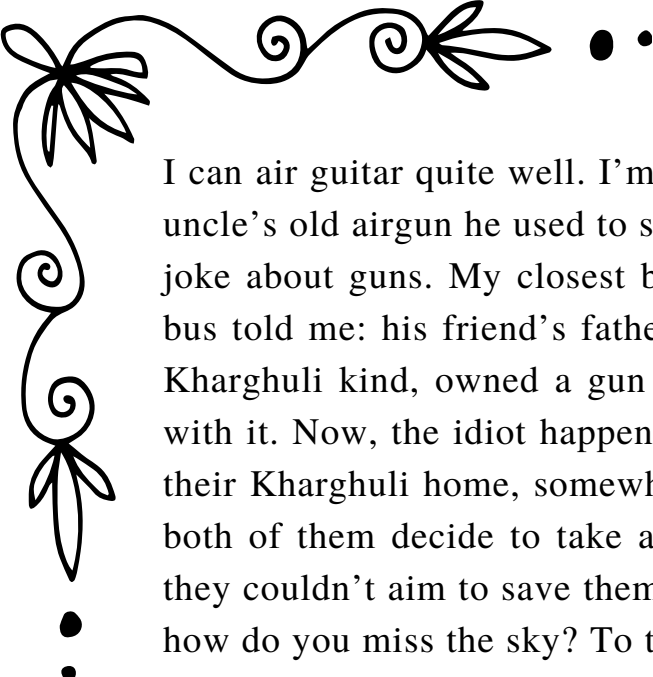
We drank together. I went slow, I usually died early. He'd received a call from her; he was telling her that he was with me, he said that she was saying hello to me. I smiled in return, as if expecting her to see my smile with her own eyes and confirm my acknowledgement. I let things be, most feelings passed without ever being recorded. Although, I assure you, there was no rancour between us. I was feeling fresh, about to move to a new city.

They were going strong, he told me. I always wish the *right now* well. He said he had been in and out of jobs, and that he would like to hold on to his current one for a while. When things dried up, he would fall back on his father's business. I remembered him being a sports journalist, but couldn't be sure about the fact.

He had legally changed his name from Sourav to Saurav but it didn't matter, he said, people still misspelled his name all the time. I told him I would write it down the correct way, if the chance ever came along. Later, when he insisted on paying the bill, I insisted that I'd write his name down on the bill, the way he preferred.

I did ask him about his job. He skirted the question, and began to project a serious expression towards the bartender who looked comfortable with his own drink, at the blind spot where the cameras couldn't come onto him.

Have you ever fired a gun? He asked me



I can air guitar quite well. I'm assuming I could air fire well. I once handled my uncle's old airgun he used to shoot birds with, but that would hardly count. It's a joke about guns. My closest brush with a gun was a tale an idiot in my school bus told me: his friend's father, a shady character but also cultured, of the rich Kharghuli kind, owned a gun – and he was happy to have his son play around with it. Now, the idiot happens to be with his friend – the son, on the terrace of their Kharghuli home, somewhere in the hills, they have the gun with them, and both of them decide to take a shot. So, they fire a couple bullets into the sky; they couldn't aim to save themselves even if it meant aiming at the sky – tell me how do you miss the sky? To their good luck, the Brahmaputra is always there to smoothen things out. As he says, the bullet took to the direction of the river, all the way from their higher altitude, it takes a parabolic turn midair and bolted off into the river. Now, obviously they couldn't see anything as a 'midair turn' – they simply had their gun pointed upwards, yet they heard the sound come from the direction of the river. They could make it out, he says.

Not yet. I told him this. But I wouldn't mind trying. Would he give me an opportunity to do it?

What about knives? He asked.

In which sense? The functional sense, or as a synonym of the gun?

Even when it is a synonym of the gun, it is still in the functional sense.

I agreed. But listen, your family owns a livestock farm, and you must have good use for knives there.

You need to know knives before you handle guns. He carefully restated this, and ignored what I'd said. And I'll tell you this, he went on.

Then he declared: I am an executioner. I mean it. I don't hesitate telling you this. I don't fear telling you this, for even if you go around talking about it, there'll be few to take you for your word.

What do you execute?





It used to be the pork you buy. All the pork you've loved has originated from my blade. My farm's the best-selling farm in Guwahati, let's face it. But I don't do it anymore; it no longer feels creative.

He coughed a little, and he struggled with his words, but the resolve of his speech remained. Which is why I transitioned to the gun.

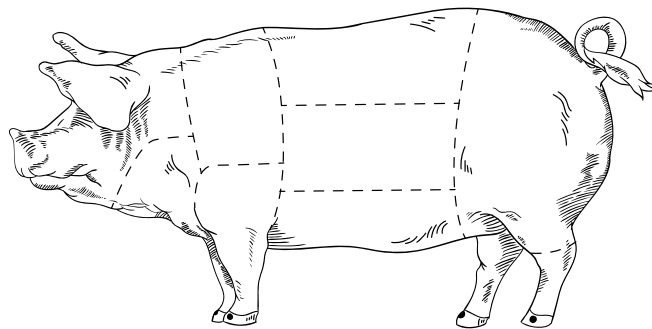
Can you slaughter a pig with a gun?

That would be pointless.

Transitioning to guns from knives would mean transitioning to humans from pigs. Wait, are you telling me you're a hitman now?

Like I said, I'm an executioner. There is a fundamental difference, he said slowly, between a hitman and an executioner.

Eh, one's just a silkier term for the other, there is no finesse in using executioner. Makes you barbaric, brutal, and boorish.



Yes. But a hitman is somebody who is supposed to pursue things, who is meant to carry out the chase. What they show in films, in John Wick for example, is exactly how a hitman operates in reality. Don't believe all the criticism you read of reality not being shown on screen. Those writers don't have a fucking clue about hitmen. What a hitman does is this, assuming it's me: He approaches his target; he makes his way to the end. An executioner, on the other hand, does nothing of that sort. There is nothing elaborate in what he does. It is straight to

the point. He is already up there on the stage, and he does nothing but wait. He is essentially the guy who hands you the keys to your car once the money has gone through, he is not the one who has made the sale. I do the same, I do my deed, and hand over the body right then and there.

Saurav balled his palm into a fist, and attempted to execute the air, slitting it. This is how it is done, he said.

It did not appear much like an execution. Not that I was an expert in the matter.

I continued:

I'm guessing there's a good amount of money in it.

The best money. For not doing a lot. I listen to the order, pick up my weapon which is my gun, and I do what is needed of me. It's short. My supervisor does not linger, he checks the body and leaves.

A supervisor? So, that means you have a shadow.

Not really. There are different supervisors. But I tend to operate mostly in Guwahati – what better to place to dump bodies than in the Brahmaputra? By the time the police get any wind of it, the body will have floated across the Bangladesh border.

Ever execute anyone you know? I asked him.

Mostly; what's the point in executing someone you don't know?

The thing is, he went on, my supervisor is right outside. He'll be coming in to check soon.

I wasn't expecting it, but at that very moment, it struck me that I might have missed out on a few things about my relationship. People never say things they mean.

It would be ill-thought of to execute me here Saurav, I said, without fear.

You're right, let's go to Chandrapur. The riverbank is quiet there. We are not any less drunk, we'll get a taxi.

This is when Saurav paid the bill, and I wrote his name down on the bill – exactly the way he wanted it spelled.

\*\*\*

He connected his phone to the car's Bluetooth and played Enigma. There's a nice hike up there, he said, poking his head out of the window, looking at the dark outline of hills rising beyond the paddy fields. It was past midnight.

I do not have much more to say after this. But I do know a few things:

When he returned alone after having dumped my body in the river, he realised he did not have any change with him and the driver did not accept online payment. He approached a shop that had not yet shuttered to barter a few notes.

He walked up the steps to his flat; it was on the fifth floor. A person opened the door. It's been lonely, she said.

The thesis is eating me up, maybe I shouldn't have gone for a PhD. I don't know when I'll get to writing my thesis, let alone do my fieldwork, he said as he entered.

I was a raft on the river, meanwhile, crossing the border.





# ONE DATE ONE NIGHT



KAMALINI NATESAN

“What did he say his name was?”

“He didn’t. I didn’t ask either.”

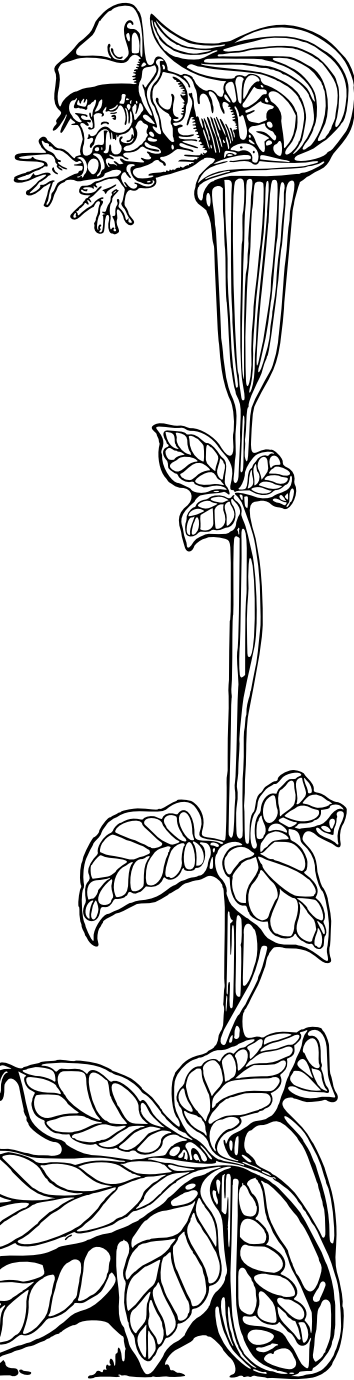
Honestly, I forget how old you are sometimes, and my own age- thank you!”

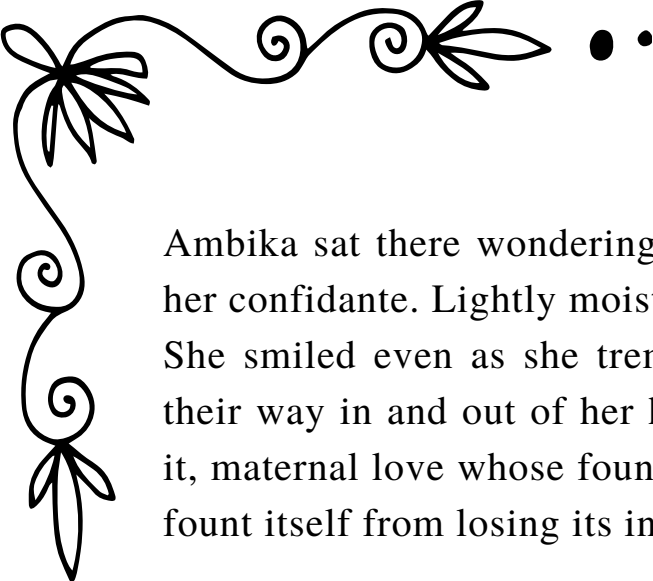
“That has been known to happen.”

“My turn to forget who I’m talking to, come here.”

In the mellowest of tones, Ambika held out her arms to her favourite young person in all the world.

Wati’s soft face burrowed itself in her mother’s bosom. They stayed like that for a long minute, till the elfin figure shook herself free from her mother’s stranglehold. Kissing Ambika on both cheeks, she scurried back to her room without looking her mother in the eye. It was as if she had remembered a forgotten errand. The moment of tenderness had passed all too soon, both feeling the weight of age on their relationship- one that both separated and bound them inextricably.





Ambika sat there wondering how and when her little Wati had turned into her confidante. Lightly moistening her cheeks were tears.

She smiled even as she trembled at the intensity of emotions that wound their way in and out of her heart with practiced ease. Love, one might call it, maternal love whose fount pours freely onto anyone in need. It keeps the fount itself from losing its inherent raison d'être.

His last name was Manot. The initial contact had gone off so well; intimate and comfortable. Yet the quivers and tremors of a first date left the woman in Ambika, feeling drained. When was the last time she had permitted herself to feel for a man? Too long, too far back to find again.

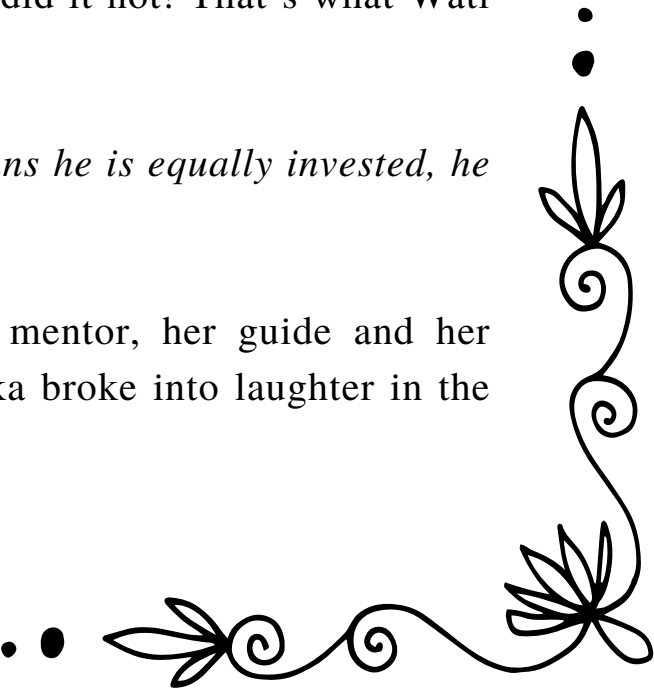
She fixed her eyes on the space between his shoulders, almost on his chin, looking up every once in a while, at his insistence. He had managed to awaken a desire to address her own needs. His eyes were kind. She wished she had the courage to keep looking at them, because in his gaze there lay a wish to recognize herself as a whole person, again. She liked him. Did he like her too?

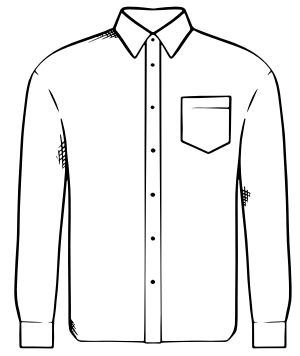
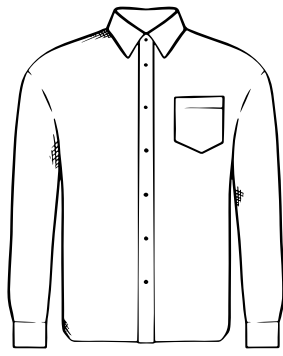
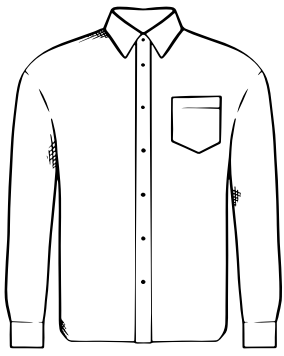
But surely, he did, otherwise how did she feel what felt tangible and within reach?

It was an exchange, was it not, driven by mutual companionship? She had been mistaken before, but she was so much older now, yet remained inexperienced. Living itself matured a person, did it not! That's what Wati would say- little, wise Wati.

*“Mom, if you feel good in his company, it means he is equally invested, he is obviously in a good place with you. Duh.”*

The eleven-year-old was her counsellor, her mentor, her guide and her trainer. It was such a funny notion that Ambika broke into laughter in the dark balcony of their two-bedroom apartment.





It wasn't late, but the night held fast onto her secrets, a co-conspirator. There were no walkers on the street below, and the moon serenely looked down at creation, lending enough light upon the slim and tall trees in the opposite park, glinting watchmen-reminding Ambika that she was looked after, even guided. It was time to turn in with the novel she had been feeding her imagination with- 'The Tall Man with a Lantern' by Suhim Mavale.

The forty-year-old woman had been carrying the protagonist around in her mind when she met Manot. He was unlike the protagonist, who was not handsome, and was anything but rational. Manot seemed to carry a head about his shoulders, with a curly mop even if a receding hairline. His voice was sonorous and his white shirt was tucked tightly into a well-fitted pair of trousers. Ambika had dared stare after him, when he left the table to visit the washroom. He ordered a set dosa, while she ordered a cucumber sandwich. He ordered a coke while she ordered a Latte, as told to by daughter Wati. An obedient mother.

You're thinking about him, aren't you mom? Wati's voice resounded in Ambika's head, and she blushed.

Yes, my child, she responded to her mind's Wati.

I do like him, my child, I do.

But he's only one man. You need to meet many before you begin sinking your heart in this manner mom, echoed Ambika's mind-Wati.

Really, must I? Isn't one enough?

No.

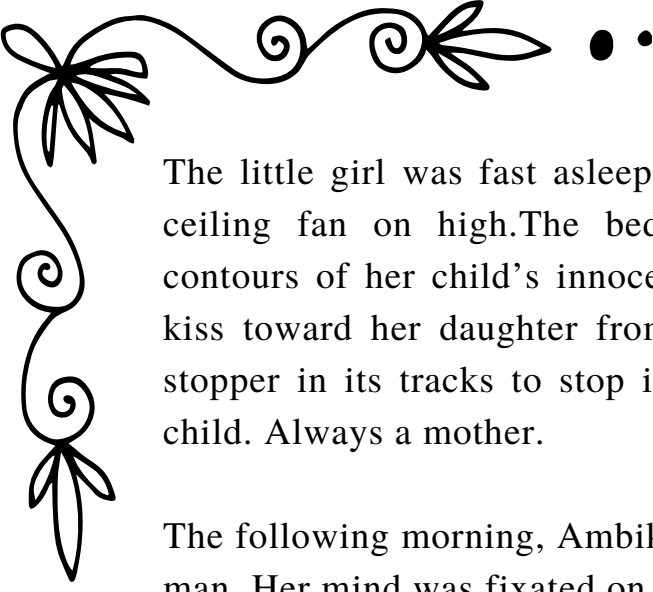
Then how many?

Let's stop at seven- the days of the week, said Mind-Wati brusquely, not to be argued with.

Okay then.

Ambika pushed her face into the pillow, and fell asleep soon thereafter.

But only after checking on Wati in the flesh.



The little girl was fast asleep, an open textbook, pages flapping, on her chest, ceiling fan on high. The bed-lamp was beaming, lighting up the chiselled contours of her child's innocent face. Ambika sighed deeply, throwing a quiet kiss toward her daughter from the door, which she left ajar, fixing the doorstopper in its tracks to stop it from shutting in a sudden gust, frightening her child. Always a mother.

The following morning, Ambika received a request for another date from another man. Her mind was fixated on Manot and the protagonist of the novel, in unequal measure.

That evening, on arrival at the café, she found herself disinterested. The man, in his fifties she reckoned, was good-looking and insisted on ordering food for both. It was a lot of food and Ambika stuffed her face, even as her ears blotted the man's voice. He was moneyed, she could tell; his watch glinted, a slim gold band- subtly shone, and the leather wallet he swung out to pay, spelt class and bulged with notes, unusual for the day. Black money thought Ambika, and gulped uneasily. As for the man himself, he had lost before he had a chance; Ambika was in another world- besotted by a stranger she had met on one date, and one night.

The stilted quality of the conversation irritated her. This one was keen to impress Ambika, and was clearly nervous and over-eager. She felt powerful, watching the rich man stutter, even as she conjured up Manot in her mind. She wasn't quite there.

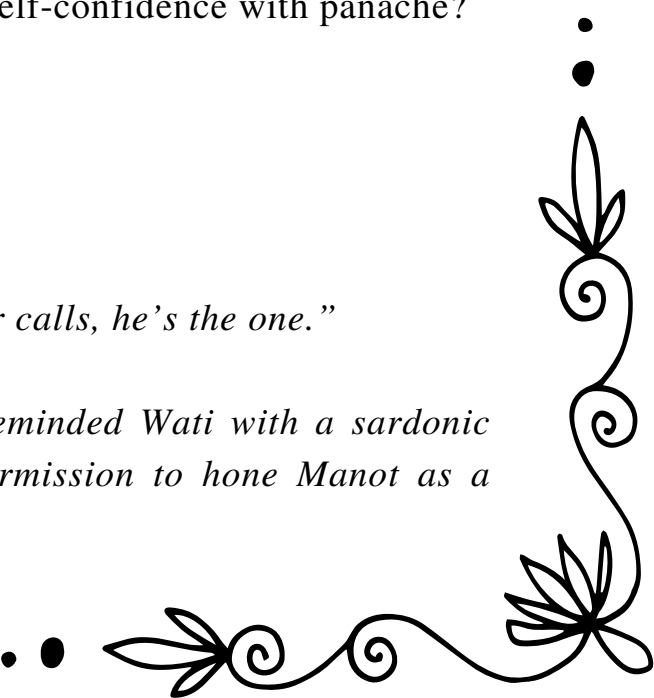
What had ensued between last night and this evening? How had a demure Ambika suddenly turned into a woman who wore self-confidence with panache? She left soon after the bill was paid.

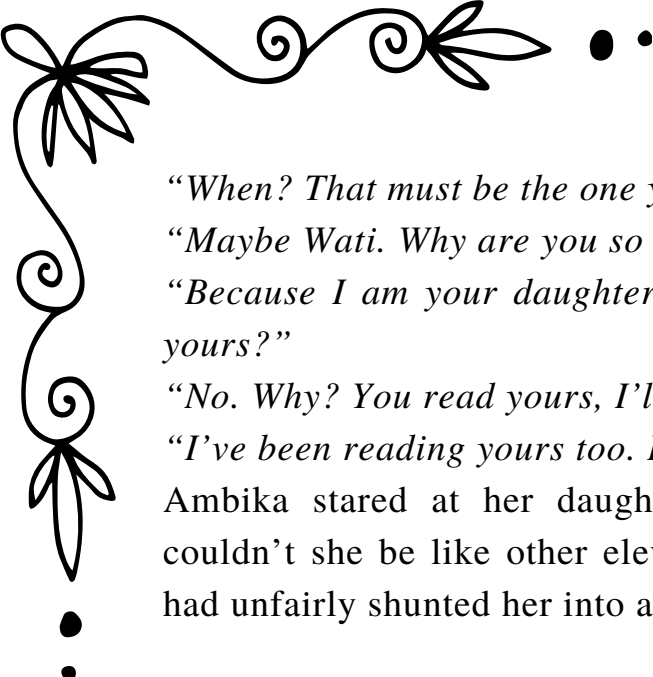
\*()()\*

*"No Wati, there's nothing to report."*

*"Then tomorrow, we'll see what happens. Whoever calls, he's the one."*

*"But you said seven days, seven men!" Ambika reminded Wati with a sardonic smile, while joy seized her on being granted permission to hone Manot as a possible suitor.*





*“When? That must be the one you talk to you in your head mom. I know you.”*

*“Maybe Wati. Why are you so clever?”*

*“Because I am your daughter. Will you read to me tonight- from that book of yours?”*

*“No. Why? You read yours, I’ll read mine.”*

*“I’ve been reading yours too. I follow it. It’s interesting and exciting.”*

Ambika stared at her daughter. Why was Wati reading adult books? Why couldn’t she be like other eleven-year-olds? And what if she was, and Ambika had unfairly shunted her into adulthood? What a horrendous thought!

*“No Wati, read your own.”*

*“I know what happens to Vamshi, that weird character. He....”*

*“Stop Wati! I don’t want to know. Go to your room!”*

Ambika was fuming. Had she given Wati too long a rope? The little girl slunk away, although triumphant in the knowledge that she had read ahead of her mother.

Ambika did want to know what would happen, but not to Vamshi in the novel, but to Manot and her. She couldn’t stop thinking about him and his hands on the table, his gaze upon her. Desire had reared its head somehow and she wanted this craving to stay even if she never gave in. It would be enough.

*You’re thinking about him, aren’t you mom?* Mind-Wati asked her mom, appearing at the appointed hour.

*I am. But you don’t have to worry. I’ll never leave you to be with someone else.*

*I’m not worried. I know you won’t. I don’t want you to either.*

*But you’ve got to get a life girl!*

*Do I? I’m already forty years old.*

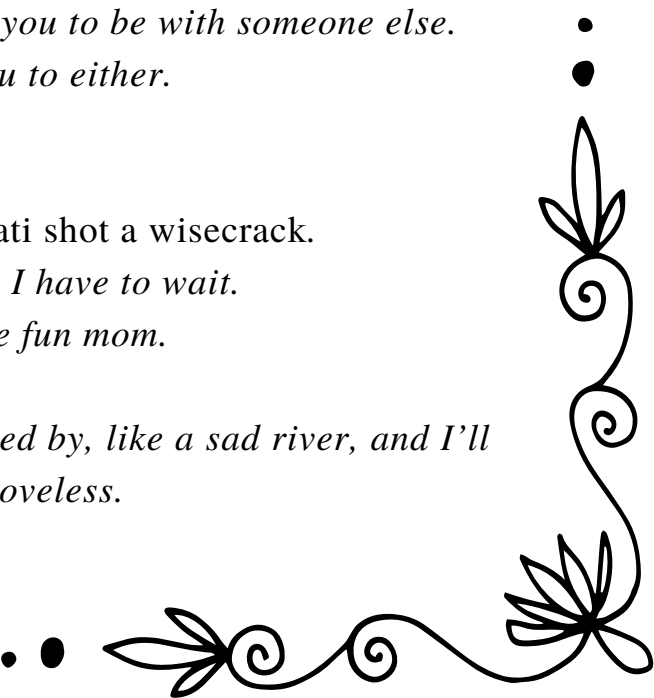
*That’s when life begins, I hear,* Ambika’s mind-Wati shot a wisecrack.

*Yep, so I hear too. But your life hasn’t even begun. I have to wait.*

*No, you don’t. Go ahead, have an affair, have some fun mom.*

*I shan’t!*

*I dare you! If not now then your life will have flowed by, like a sad river, and I’ll be off to college with you floundering- lonely and loveless.*





*Mind-Wati was persistent tonight.*

*Okay then, I'll call Manot.*

There was a message waiting from the man, already.

*"May we meet again?"*

Ambika's heart fluttered: he liked her. He wanted her.

*"Yes!"*

*"Wait on your balcony, I'll come by at 9. Will I get an invitation for a night cap?"*

Ambika was flustered. Mind-Wati was quiet. There was no guidance forthcoming. What should she do? A yes would mean a clear invitation for physical interaction, and a no might push him away.

Mind-Wati where are you? Tell me what to do. Ambika begged.

But Mind-Wati's silence should've been answer enough.

Ambika plunged.

*"Yeah, come along, I'll be waiting."*

Manot never came.

The following morning Ambika confessed to Wati, whose prompt response to her mother was to move on from a person who was unreliable.

*On Day 6, Roshni, their downstairs neighbour, accosted Ambika handing over a number of dried bouquets.*

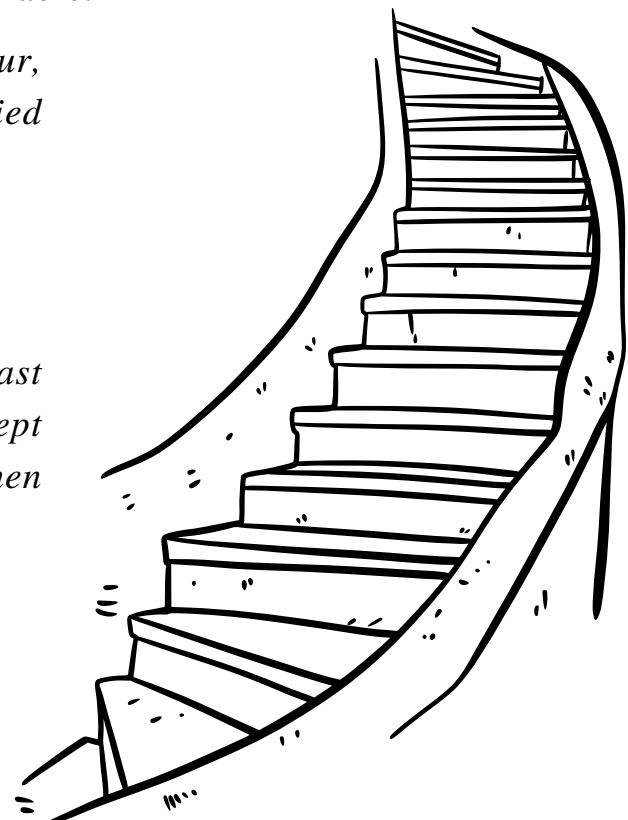
*"Oye Ambika! Secret admirer and all ey!"*

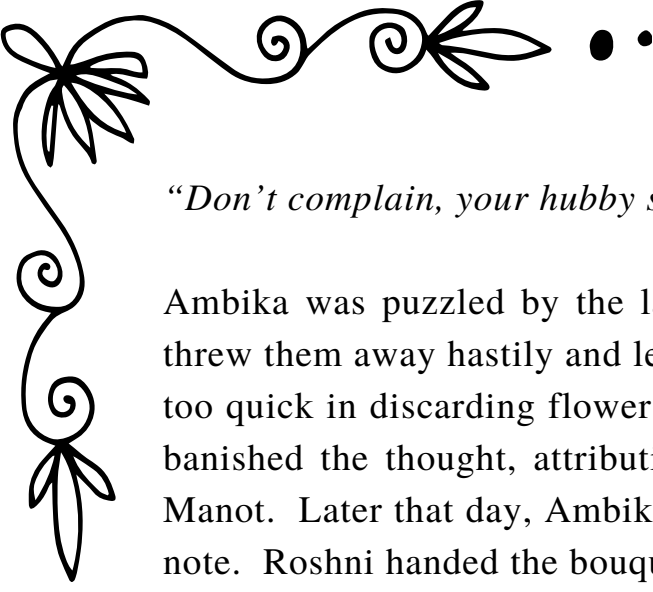
*"What rubbish! What's all this?"*

*"Someone's been having these dropped for the past few days. Please take them off my hands. I kept missing you- you're either off early, or returning when I'm out."*

*"Oh! Okay!"*

*"Enjoy! Wish I had your luck yaar!"*





*“Don’t complain, your hubby spoils you, Roshni. Thanks for these!”*

Ambika was puzzled by the lack of any note attached to the dying stems. She threw them away hastily and left for work. Later she wondered if she hadn’t been too quick in discarding flowers that might’ve carried a secret message. She soon banished the thought, attributing it to an arising need to be openly desired by Manot. Later that day, Ambika received a fresh bouquet of red roses with a long note. Roshni handed the bouquet over with a wicked grin.

“I was so embarrassed that night dear Ambika. I pushed my luck. I shouldn’t have asked to come over. These bouquets are to make up for my misdemeanor, if possible. I’m just a man who found a woman he fell for. I wish I had the patience and discretion to wait. I hope you are still willing to build a friendship with this man?”

Ambika’s heart raced, and bloomed all at once.

*“You’re thinking of Manot. These roses- from him, right?”*

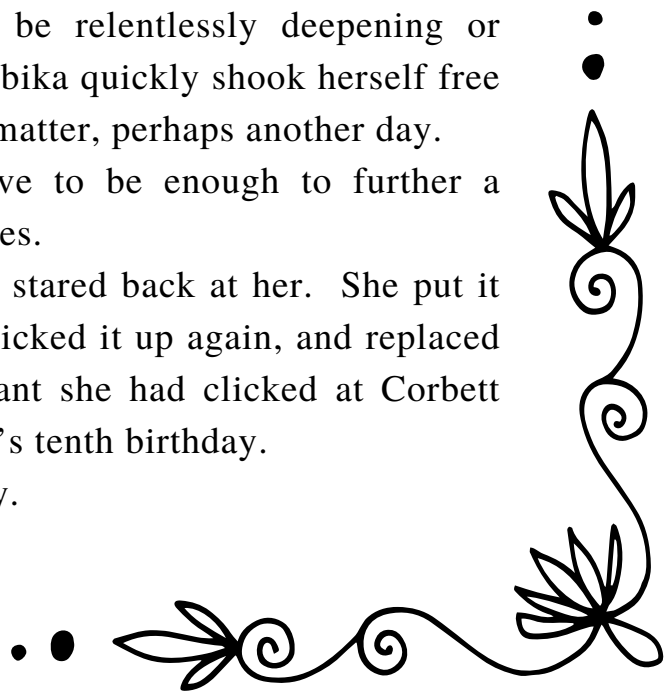
The rising euphoria was broken by Wati’s query. She turned to find her little girl grinning conspiratorially. She held her mother tightly around the waist and peered into her eyes, all-knowing.

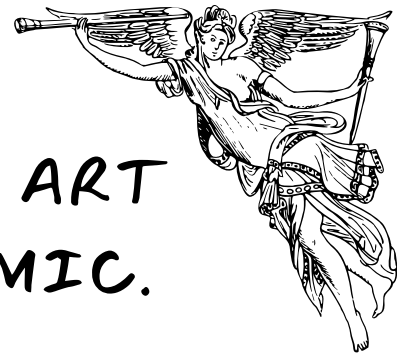
For a brief moment, Ambika wondered how a child could express so much joy for her mother’s life, when her own young life had barely seen any. Her father had abandoned them when Wati turned seven, yet the little girl had hardly exhibited any remorse, or regret. What might be relentlessly deepening or intensifying in this little girl, who was to tell. Ambika quickly shook herself free – she would need time and space to dwell on this matter, perhaps another day.

For the moment that one date night would have to be enough to further a semblance of normalcy, hopefully in both their lives.

She picked up her mobile, and Wati’s sweet face stared back at her. She put it face down, fingers trembling, and then speedily picked it up again, and replaced the screen saver with a picture of a baby elephant she had clicked at Corbett National Park the previous year, to celebrate Wati’s tenth birthday.

“That’s me!” Wati had announced, laughing madly.





# 'SUCH A PREDICAMENT' - ART IN THE TIME OF PANDEMIC.



ANUSKA CHATTERJEE

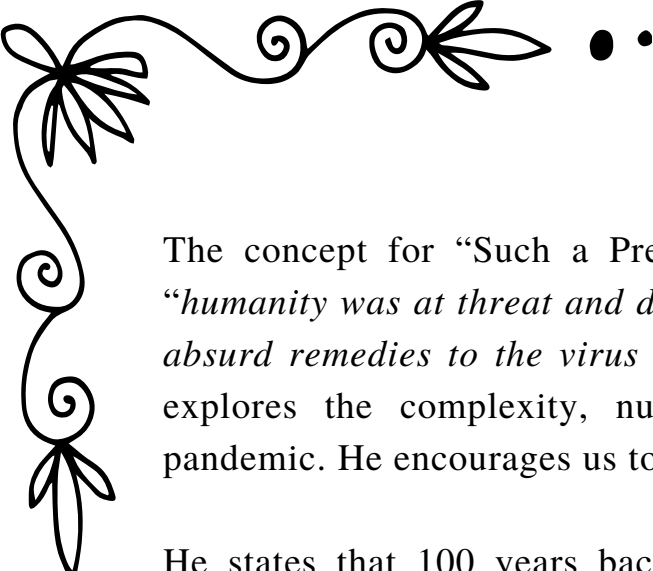


*Artwork: The Baby  
Boomer  
Generation, 2023.*

***“I deliberately create nonsense”***

Jayanta Roy is an avant-garde Kolkata-based artist whose work poignantly captures the duplicity of the 21st century, an amalgamation of fiction and reality through apparently disjointed juxtaposed compositions.

The artist’s collection “Such a Predicament” on the Covid-19 pandemic was on display at Nature Morte in Vasant Vihar from 16th February till 23rd March. Roy’s work has also previously been on display at Nature Morte in the year 2008, 2009 and 2010.



The concept for “Such a Predicament” emerged at a juncture of time when *“humanity was at threat and death when so many people were dying. When even absurd remedies to the virus seemed logical”* says Roy. “Such a Predicament” explores the complexity, nuances and existential crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic. He encourages us to “rethink about the global pandemic”.

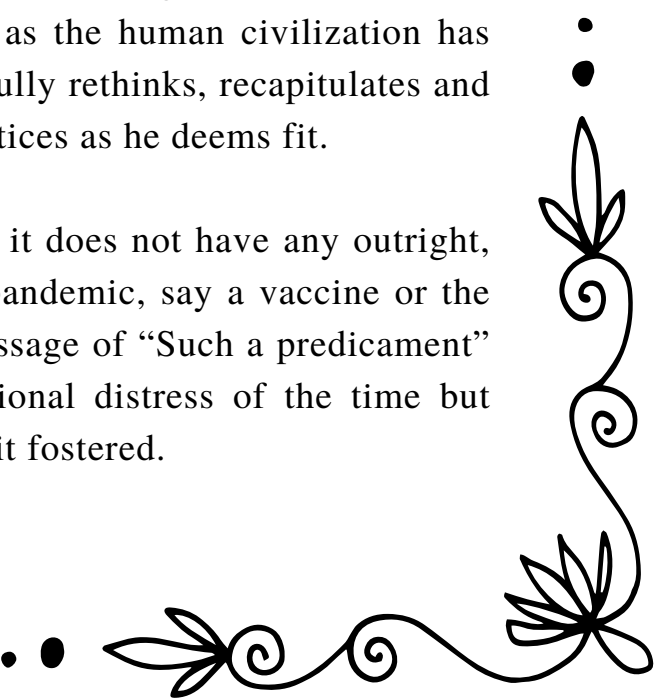
He states that 100 years back, the human race was burdened with a similar experience- the Spanish flu of 1919 and the first world war in 1914. Amidst this, the Dadaist movement developed that is known for its deliberate meaninglessness. He quotes the artist Jean Arp “Dada is senseless but not nonsense.”

**“Nonsense itself is a sense. I deliberately create nonsense”- Jayanta Roy**

Roy through his art portrays the “helplessness” of the human race at a chaotic and vulnerable time. Although his art bears similarity to the genre of Surrealism and Dadaism, his work is rooted in the reality of the 21st century and its issues. He is “rethinking and recapitulating the ideas of these movements.” His work is a “pastiche”, an “ appropriation” of different styles and art movements like Dadaism and Surrealism which he incorporates according to his conceptual and artistic needs.

Roy is a realist not a surrealist. He expresses that he cannot go back to the world of earlier art movements and he doesn’t wish to as the human civilization has irrevocably changed since then. Thus, he purposefully rethinks, recapitulates and deliberately appropriates such movements, its practices as he deems fit.

A notable feature of “Such a Predicament” is that it does not have any outright, overt imagery to portray the predicament of the pandemic, say a vaccine or the virus itself. As he expresses, the intention and message of “Such a predicament” Roy is not to make his viewers relive the emotional distress of the time but simply to rethink its absurdity, the conditions that it fostered.





***“Such a Predicament” by Jayanta Roy on display at Nature Morte, Vasant Vihar.***

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***“Even though our experiences differ, there still exists a commonness in it amidst its differences”***

Along with juxtaposed whimsical images, “Such a Predicament” is smeared with paradoxical humour, wit and irony. “The names of my artworks are based on the experience of the lockdown period” he states. These names prompt the viewer to rethink the conditions of the pandemic. “Quarantine”, “Vaccination”, “Sanitation”, “Red Zone” and “Orange Zones” are some of such artworks.



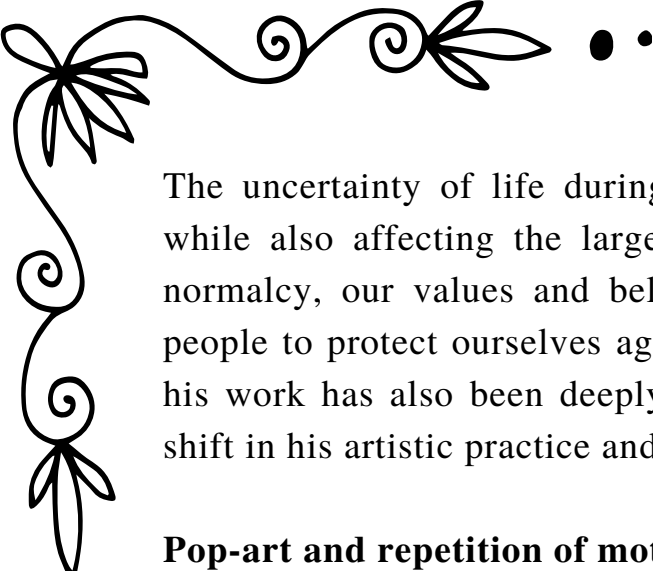
*(Left) Orange Zone, 2022. ; (Right) Ventilation, 2022.*

### **Experience of 5 generations.**

Roy's canvas works are named after the five generations (from 1910-2010s) which have experienced such a global crisis and those who have learned from their ancestors the stories of these times. "The Baby Boomer Generation", "The Greatest Generation", "Generation X", "The Silent Generation" and "Generation Z" are the names of his Canvas works.

*Artwork:  
Gen Z,  
2024*





The uncertainty of life during the pandemic made us think in different ways while also affecting the larger socio-political milieu. It affected our ideas of normalcy, our values and beliefs, when even the most absurd solutions from people to protect ourselves against the virus seemed logical. Roy expresses that his work has also been deeply impacted by the pandemic, has brought about a shift in his artistic practice and helped him think in different ways.

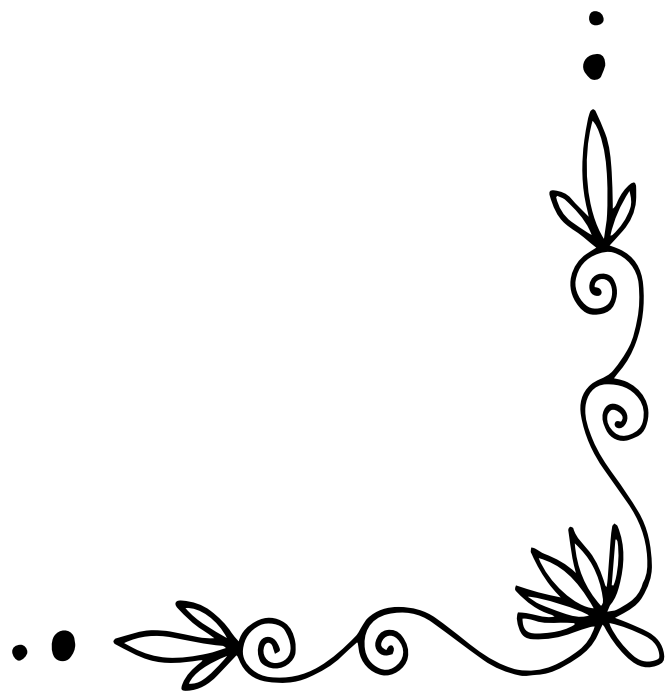
### **Pop-art and repetition of motifs**

Roy's repetition of motifs such as freefloating images, fighter planes and birds are metaphors narrating the complexities of the politics of representation. Juxtaposition of the mundane and secondhand images layered with his nonsensical whims invigorates meaning to its apparent meaninglessness. It is the **sense in the nonsense** that makes it all too momentous.

Jayanta Roy's "nonsense" art through its juxtaposition of secondhand images carries heavy meaning and sense. It reminds us of Sukumar Roy's Abol Tabol. If we speak of the 21st century, there is oversaturation and an abundance of images, a senseless overproduction of images. Roy's work is the epitome of the conditions of the 21st century where all of these images and information may seem disoriented or disjointed but have meaning despite its facade of meaninglessness.

The artist is currently working on sculptures for the opening of Nature Morte's new gallery and upcoming exhibition in Mumbai.

**Image credits: Nature Morte Gallery**





# MAD GOD



S I V A W R I G H T

our world destroyed  
mountains crumbled  
and continents torn asunder  
the seas  
washing every scarlet street  
clogged with brains and thighs

no eyes to plead  
no mouth for mercy  
this is the apocalypse of apathy

what god would destroy his world?  
a mad god

*no*  
*a true god*

what is a god without his creation?

*what is a god without his destruction?*







# DEATH, BY WATER



ANURAAG DAS SARMA

Do not go gentle into that good night, Dylan Said.

Dylan's dead. Sunk.

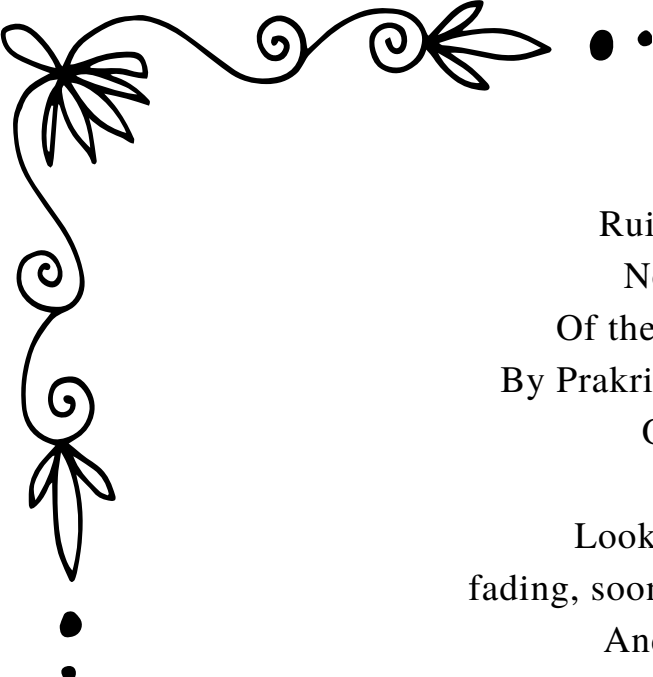
Under the flowing river. Look,  
The Postmaster General's house  
Has paint, peeling off the columns.

Windows, in disrepair have seen  
Better days. A reference to a reference-  
Caught in the annals of history this city,  
Of Dreadful Night, As Kipling said  
Is caught under the stars.

Kipling's dead. Stuck.

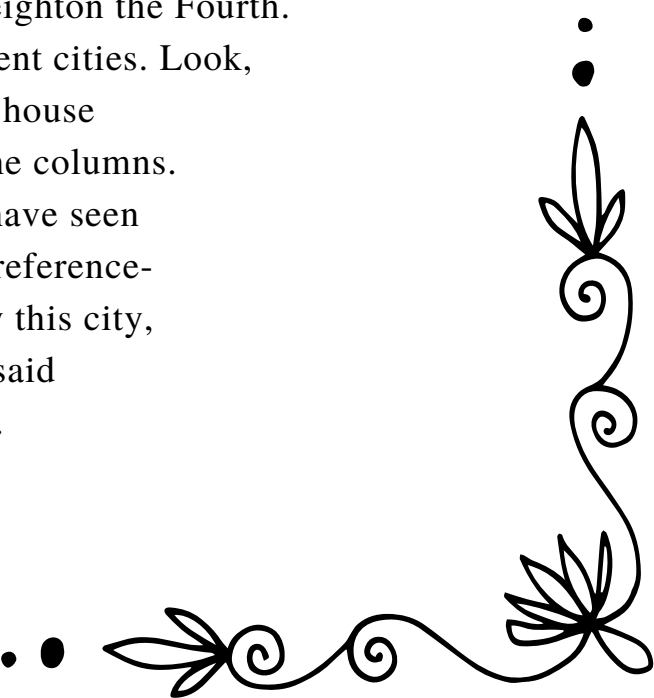
In the intersection of twisting roads-  
That is North proper. Older  
By years, yet microscopic  
When viewed from the capitals  
Found on the banks of dried up riverbeds.





Ruins of a city. once lived-  
Now forgotten. Slaying  
Of the Gauda King, miscredited  
By Prakrit scholars, who knew so little,  
Of how rivers dictate  
The clutch of luck.  
Look at the enamelled bricks,  
fading, soon conjured in a distant memory.  
And the bridge that defies  
a muddy field- no canal,  
No tide of the river. The five arches  
Are re-used by village children  
Who tell stories of other children,  
Caught in the arms of medieval spirits-  
Seven centuries, have they haunted,  
Searching for their bones in the water bed.

The cantilever will see traffic underneath,  
As men desert the city, following  
The river. Farrakah cannot contain  
The multitudes of the Bengal delta.  
Wetlands, reclaim. Like the jungles that caught  
Hold of the royal palace in Gauda. Ancient  
Ruins of Calcutta, as painted by H. Creighton the Fourth.  
To be published in a journal of ancient cities. Look,  
The Postmaster General's house  
Has creepers, twisting around the columns.  
Cement cracks, and breaks, have seen  
Better days. A reference to a reference-  
Caught in the annals of history this city,  
Of Palaces, As the Raj said  
Is overrun by weeds.  
The city is dead.





# CUSTOMARY CLOSET RAIDS



## POORVI AMMANAGI

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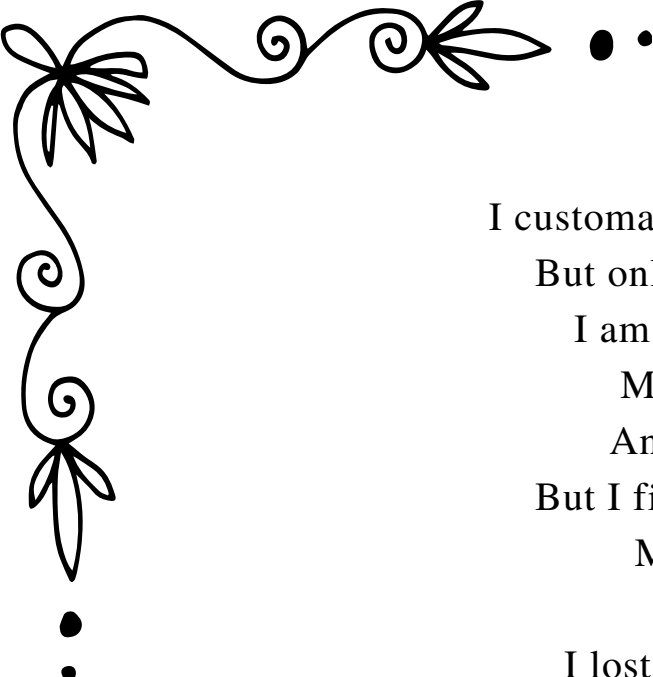
This is not the first time,  
My clothes have made a choice.  
They communicate regularly,  
In their disappearance and resurfacing.

I know they can talk and—  
I know you won't believe me.  
But hear me out:

I borrowed an old jacket,  
From my dead grandad's closet.  
Silver-gray, square cut and collared,  
It worked well with everything.

But the only sad part,  
It really liked to go missing,  
Then my grandma would infallibly call,  
You left it again at my house.  
Again, cause this isn't the first time,  
It won't be the last.

The thing is, my dead grandad's jacket:  
Is in love with my grandma's shawl.

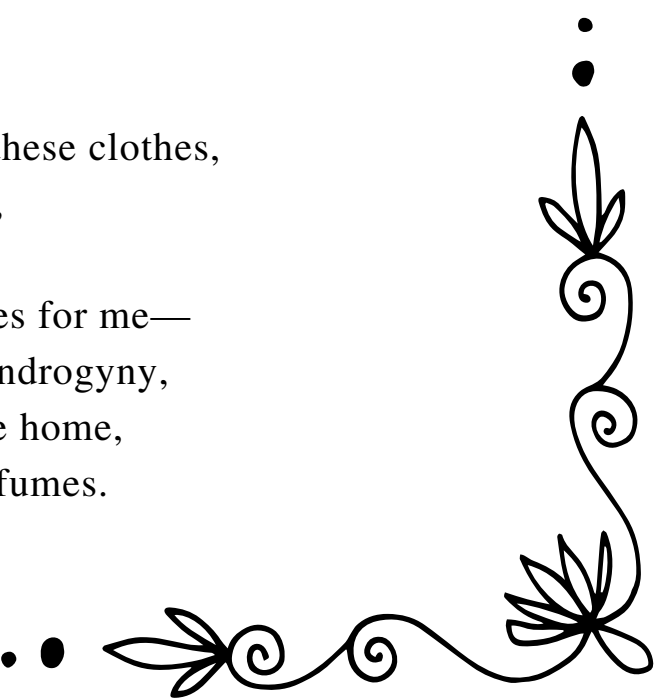


I customarily raid the closets of men,  
But only the ones I deem family.  
I am looking for androgyny:  
Maybe it is misguided,  
And maybe I am wrong,  
But I find what I am looking for,  
More often than not.

I lost my dad's blue sweater.  
The one I dearly loved.  
The one I claimed mine.  
I wished I hadn't.  
I wished I had returned it,  
Only so I could borrow it again,  
It wouldn't have been in mint condition,  
It's not easy to care for it but—  
At least it would have been safe.

Maybe it will turn up again,  
And all this would be in vain,  
Still, I don't often write about:  
Father figures—  
Alive or dead.

I need to believe that someday these clothes,  
Will choose me too,  
Like I did them.  
I need to know that God wishes for me—  
Only the most comfortable androgyny,  
Something that smells like home,  
Summer fruits and old perfumes.



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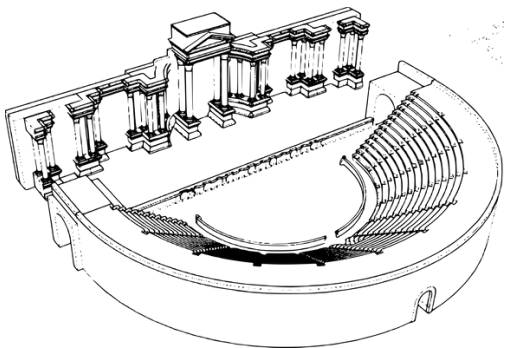
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