

An oil painting of a small, scruffy dog with brown and white fur, seen from behind, standing on a dark wooden floor and looking out of a dark doorway. The room to the left has a light-colored, textured wall. The lighting is dramatic, with strong shadows.

The Falconer

absence

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Maham Owais, Fourth Year, Morning

We are as overwhelmingly defined by lack as we are by abundance, and perhaps more so by lack. It is in that void that, at times, we are forced to confront the actuality of meaninglessness that results from most attempts at linguistic expression.

By possessing the very quality of being absent, an object's lack of presence becomes a focal point. Even beyond literature, this law of binary tension is universal. Darkness is defined by its quality of not possessing photons; it is darkness because it is not light. But the ambiguity of this paradox, the amalgamation of the two, despite existing on separate ends of the spectrum – that's what this issue of *The Falconer* aims to explore.

Can we escape this space of lack; This abundance of nothingness which claims more than it does not, despite resisting bound space? Or is every attempt at creation just a yearning to escape this all-consuming absence? In literature, this lack is often personified by a ghostly figure. Specters, hauntings, and lingerings, both metaphysical and literal, can be found in a range of works in literature, and all serve a very similar purpose: to define the undefined and articulate what evades tangibility. An attempt to define this absence would then, one could argue, become the primary driving force of literature. What is haunting but a manifestation of this absence, a hunger to devour the truths universe willfully deprives us of?

Rebecca's absence-presence in *Rebecca*, as Nimra Saeed explores it, Ayza Malik's analysis of the post-modernist haunting, or even the more contemporary depiction of ghosts in *The Turning of the Screw*, explicated by Abrar Sikandar, all reveal the ardent urge within us to explore this dearth; the intangible yet visceral gap in all lived experiences. This issue, in its entirety, is an effort to search around, and hopefully touch upon, that deficit.

The cover of this issue is a painting titled *Deimos* by *Dragan Babin*, and, I believe, it manages to encapsulate the crux of this issue fairly well. Absence can be a product of many factors, but none more so than space. The amount of empty space in the image, coaxed only by the barest prompts of the dog's existence, makes the entire painting possess an overwhelming sense of presence. The space between the viewer and the painting itself becomes an experience of haunting and being haunted. There arise many questions for why we impose our own definition of absence upon the painting, or if we do at all, which made *Deimos* seem like the best choice for a cover.

As for the stylized nature of the title, *absence*, we went back and forth with exactly how to showcase the overwhelming emptiness that had made a place for itself on every inch of the issue, most prominently on its cover. Alas, a lot of discourse later, it was a conversation with Sir Moonis that prompted the idea of the title fading into nonexistence.

Now, onto more structural orders of business. I am excited to announce a change in the Falconer Core Team structure, the details of which are available to view on the very first page of the issue. I'd also like to highlight the incredible work this team has put into *absence*, and invite them on board as our chosen content team for the magazine moving forward. The final announcement I have to make compels me to highlight our website designer and Managing Editor, Ayza Malik, without whose tireless efforts this next announcement would not be possible at all.

The Falconer proudly announces the launch of its new website, which shall be up to view within the week. This website will carry an archive of every issue of The Falconer ever published, in digital form, alongside keeping our readers up to date with any announcements and alterations that may take place within the magazine. While accessibility is the primary motivation behind the launch of this website, we're excited to explore the possibilities this new platform may have to offer.

Readers, without further ado, let me invite you to read through, experience, and add on to *absence* and all our contributive interpretations of it.

'I return:' the desire to believe in Ghosts

Nimra Saeed, Alumnus

'I return:' the desire to believe in Ghosts

We live our lives imagining ourselves in different realities. We live in the what-ifs, haunted by the memories of our past, paralysed by thoughts of a future. Why? Literature, I think, comes close to representing this feeling of placelessness, the feeling of waking up in an unfamiliar room, of walking down strange, never-ending hallways. Although this haunting evades definition, perhaps it can be understood as the feeling of being overwhelmed by something absent — in the literal sense of the word, yet which can be felt all too well.

In this essay, I try to explore how the figure of the ghost represents the (perhaps unconscious) desire of the subject to be haunted. I borrow the idea from Colin Davis, who, in his book, *Haunted Subjects*, argues that the figure of the ghost in literature, literally, or as other temporal realities (what ifs), represents our desire to believe in something more than ourselves, some grand narrative — Religion, Democracy, Enlightenment, which can fall flat onto its face at times. Belief in something transcendental, from beyond the surface on which you and I exist, I believe, becomes an essential fantasy for most people to live. To know that there is a right order for things to return to.

Slavoj Žižek goes on to suggest that the return of the living dead deserves to be called the “fundamental fantasy of contemporary mass culture.” The dead always return to be put to a second death, to die permanently. There is some unpaid debt that remains, like King Hamlet’s revenge, that becomes the purpose for their temporary return to the world of the living.

Looking at *Rebecca* by Daphne Du Maurier, one notices the overpowering presence of Maxim de Winter’s dead wife Rebecca, which deeply unsettles his newly married unnamed wife. So much so that the novel begins in the present, where she lives in France, but is still consumed by the memories of her past at her previous abode. Although Rebecca is far removed from the surface of Manderley, where they lived, and never appears in the book, she is the central and titular character. The unnamed narrator, who I will refer to as the wife hereafter, is intimidated by the ghostly existence of Rebecca as soon as she enters the estate. She notices the rhododendrons, the flowers that looked like “monsters” to her — their flaming red and tall, overwhelming existence — and appear as a recurring motif to represent Rebecca’s absent presence.

When the wife enters the room, which now belongs to her, she immediately notices how “this was a woman’s room ... the room of someone who had chosen every particle of furniture with great care.” She looks around, noticing the decorations in the room — once again the rhododendrons, envelopes at the writing table with an R on the bottom, without touching anything “as if she might come back into the room and she would see me there, sitting before her open drawer, which I had no right to touch.”

Throughout the book, it is implied that the rightful “owner” of Manderley has been stripped away from what she owned. The house, her own house now, seems to the wife to be “holding something of the same oppression as an empty house does, when the owners have gone away.”

The climactic moment in the novel, which reveals that Rebecca had been killed by Maxim, I argue, manifests the reader’s desire for a karmic return, for justice to be served, for order to return. The discovery of the boat and Rebecca’s dead body reopens the investigation into her death, which had been ruled out as suicide. The boat has a fitting message written on it, “Je Reviens” (I return).

The wife asks the housekeeper, Mrs. Danvers, if she feels “her everywhere” just like her, to which she admits and asks, “Do you think the dead come back and watch the living?” the answer to which is left hanging, for both the characters and the reader.

Towards the end of the novel, when she is out of Rebecca’s home, Manderley, the ghost occupies her dreams — the wife sees herself looking in the mirror to find that it’s Rebecca’s face that stares back.

Is she there? Is she not? What does she want? All the questions that seem unanswerable unless the ghost speaks. We never get a dialogue from her, but perhaps we need the fantasy of a dialogue with the dead, more than having it realised. Perhaps we need the belief that there exists a realm beyond knowledge?

As Davis writes, watching the dead arise is anxiety-inducing, so to speak, but the anxiety might be doubly charged — not only for if the dead might speak, but also if the dead might not speak at all. Such a narrative carries a distress in the form of this implicit “knowledge that its endeavor to let the dead speak will inevitably fail and that the idiom in which it might occur is rooted in the surviving subject’s desire rather than the dead object’s continuing agency.” A fear that the secret, the dead other died with, might be, that there is no secret at all.

Haunting, as it were, presents itself as an existential condition — we live haunted by multiple realities to come, realities we have had in the past — this persistent

haunting, it can be argued, points towards a placelessness that we feel in the present time. We conjure up other narratives from beyond to escape the condition of being here. Perhaps because we cannot bear to accept that underneath all these narratives, what exists, is pure nothingness, or non-existence.

The thought of being completely eradicated from the face of earth is unbearable to us which is why, the presence of ghosts and a ghostly realm beyond the reach of knowledge continues to be a part of the popular culture at all times. These fictions allow us to believe in our own existence beyond death, presenting perhaps, a vague image of an ever-lasting future, instead of coming face to face with the unknown, or worse, to learn that there is no unknown realm to be afraid of.

Ghost Whispers have Retired

Ayza Malik, Fourth Year

Neither ghosts, nor skeletons, nor attics haunt the 21st century reader. There's a different sort of haunting, an oblique one, which predominantly manifests in this century. There is an uncanny horror in the endless scroll of social media, the ceaseless loop of bad news, the infinite distractions that leave one paradoxically more hollow than before. The existential dread and disorientation that arises from the overwhelming banality, repetition, and meaninglessness of contemporary existence; an ontological nausea that creeps in through digital overload and cracks of postmodern fragmentation. It's the unsettlement we feel with excessive negative space in a picture; everything appears connected, yet nothing is whole. This is what I call the Absurdist Haunting.

In Don De Lillo's "White Noise," we see the protagonist Jack Gladney and his wife Babette share this all-consuming terror of the white noise, which they presume is what death feels like. Noises, hums, murmurs; all at a frequency where nothing stands out. The omnipresence of such clatter makes it impossible to escape this dull yet inescapable background noise of the modern life, where meaning is evaporated completely. Babette becomes obsessed with Dylar, a drug proposed to eradicate the fear of death, drowning out the white noise only to prove the gravity of baseless coping mechanisms, a placebo echo in a vacuum. Death being the ultimate absurdity as Camus says, is not approached with grandeur or reverence and smothered beneath static and superficiality. This is not the traditional haunting of bad omens but rather a life so mediated and distracted that even mortality becomes ambient. The white noise symbolizes the flattening of experience, where even the most primal fear — death — is commodified, anesthetized and looped endlessly within the hum of consumerism. The contemporary individual who is dealt this hand, finds themselves in a state of hyper-awareness and simultaneously utter detachment, encapsulating this modern haunting.

To understand such a haunting, one might imagine a black-hole in a well-lit room, defined not by what it contains, but by what it erases, or as Jean Paul Sartre proclaims in *Nausea*, it is like staring at an object so long that it loses all meaning, warping from something familiar into something alien. The more the contemporary reader stares at the apparent prospects shoved down their throat, careers, social constructs, the more this inherent absurdity reveals itself.

The haunting that haunts the contemporary reader, then, is the spectre of failure. Byung-Chul Han, in *The Burnout Society*, speaks about individuals being haunted by the pressure to self-optimize; an endless loop of exhaustion and productivity that exists meaninglessly in a void.

The absurdist haunting, as such, operates through inertia, circularity, and a perpetual doom with an unbearable sameness of being, the awareness that no resolution is coming. In *Waiting for Godot*, it's the meaningless, seemingly fragmented conversation that disturbs us, but as the play reaches its intermission, there's the knowledge of the limbo, the deferred denouement that manifests more terror. Thus, what creeps in and affects us is not a spectre of the past or the future, but the present refusing to end. Not only are Estragon and Vladimir waiting for Godot, but we too are waiting for a meaning that never arrives.

The hollowness of contemporary existence, thus, becomes the real haunting; the noisy gong from the clatter of meaning in the hollowed body of the contemporary individual. A cyclical haunting like Sisyphus rolling up the boulder; not in the act itself, but the fact that it keeps happening. This is the haunting of the eternal return or a cruel parody – an echo chamber of deflecting attempts at being. Ghost whispers have retired, and notification pings accompany the modern individual. We no longer fear what is coming, instead, we fear nothing is; “the slow cancellation of the future” like Mark Fisher states. Culture loops on nostalgia, productivity mimics progress, and haunting becomes a mode of experience, not a disruption of it.

The contemporary presence itself becomes a perpetual haunting. What, then is the alternative? Rebellion? Not in the neglect but the acceptance. As Camus says, “One must imagine Sisyphus happy,” not because he is free but aware. One must coexist with the haunting, hand in hand, because the only freedom one can get from it today is by imagining it.

Fear made Flesh

Abrar Sikandar, Third Year

Ghosts in literature do not simply haunt; they demand reckoning. They are echoes of the past, unresolved guilt, and the weight of memory. They creep into the mind, whisper in the dark, and refuse to be ignored. In *Macbeth*, Banquo's ghost is not merely a specter—it is *Macbeth's* guilt incarnate, a chilling reminder that bloodshed begets bloodshed. *Beloved* presents a ghost that is more than a memory—she is loss, love, and a wound that refuses to heal, consuming Sethe in her grief. In *Hamlet*, the ghost of King Hamlet does not just call for vengeance; he shatters his son's reality, setting him on a path where action and paralysis blur.

In *The Turn of the Screw*, the ghosts of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel haunt the Bly estate—or do they? Are they real, or are they figments of the governess's unraveling mind? She sees shadows where others see nothing. She believes in dangers no one else can imagine. Her fear grows, spreads, consumes even the innocent... or are they really guilty?

When the young governess first arrives at Bly to care for the orphaned Miles and Flora, an unsettling feeling fills the air—something about the place feels strange. Her first encounter with the strange man, later known as Peter Quint, happens by chance. She sees a solitary figure standing alone on a tower and describes:

"The man who met my eyes was not the person I had quickly thought he was."

This unexpected meeting, a fleeting glance that unsettles the very fabric of her reality, marks the beginning of a haunting that will stretch far beyond the confines of Bly. It is here, in this instant, that we begin to see how the governess's perception is shaped—how it is distorted by her background, her sudden elevation into authority, and her isolation from the world she knew. Raised in modest circumstances, she finds herself now in a place where power is hers to wield, but so too is the weight of expectation. This sudden shift, compounded by the unspoken tension between herself and the children's uncle, stirs the cauldron of anxiety in her heart. Quint, though nothing more than a strange man in the distance, becomes for her a projection—a shadow cast by her own insecurities and the pressures she cannot escape.

As the story unfolds, the governess becomes more and more certain that Peter Quint, the former servant, and Miss Jessel, the former governess, are reaching across death to influence the children—corrupting them. These ghosts, in her mind, are not simply lingering spirits—they are forces at work, pulling the children under their spell. Yet, no one else at Bly sees these figures, hears these voices, or feels the same dread. It raises the unnerving possibility that these apparitions are not real at all, but the products of the governess's own troubled mind.

In the essay *The Ambiguity of Henry James*, Edmund Wilson offers a vision that blurs the boundary between the supernatural and the inner workings of the mind. He suggests that the apparitions troubling the governess may not be otherworldly specters at all but rather subtle hallucinations born from repressed desires and hidden turmoil. Wilson captures this idea with the striking observation:

“The young governess who tells the story is a neurotic case of sex repression, and the ghosts are not real ghosts at all but merely the governess’s hallucinations.”

In this light, the phantoms of Quint and Jessel emerge as manifestations of her deepest fears—echoes of unspoken guilt, longings kept secret, and a moral disquiet that lingers in the quiet corners of her mind.

Her past and the lonely tapestry of her circumstances weave the very fabric of her perception. Within the secluded walls of Bly, the embers of an unspoken desire for the children’s uncle smolder—a yearning both tender and forbidden. This delicate, unresolved passion births spectral figures, such as Miss Jessel, whose ephemeral presence becomes a mirror for her own repressed emotions. In that solitude, hidden desires sublimates into an overwhelming dread of abandonment, twisting her once-protective instincts into a force as dangerous as it is poignant, endangering not only her fragile soul but also the innocence she is sworn to defend.

Miss Jessel’s ghost emerges as a haunting emblem of the governess’s deepest anxieties—a shimmering reflection of her dread of losing both moral fortitude and social grace. When this haunting figure appears to sway little Flora with a silent, beguiling influence, the governess clings to a fragile sense of justification, murmuring,

“She was there, and I was justified; she was there, and I was neither cruel nor mad.”

This desperate incantation, woven from threads of uncertainty and inner turmoil, betrays the tumult within—a ceaseless battle fought in the dim recesses of her mind as she strives to hush the ever-mounting doubts about her own sanity.

From the very moment the governess arrives at Bly, she assumes the mantle of guardian. Her unwavering conviction that the ghosts of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel are insidiously influencing the children, however, is built upon little more than an intuitive sense—an intuition that, over time, spirals into a near-obsessive certainty.

Her suspicions are first aroused by the children’s unnaturally composed behavior; their over-politeness becomes a source of discomfort. When a letter arrives, informing her of Miles’ expulsion from school under mysterious circumstances, she immediately associates this with malevolent forces at work. Her paranoia only

deepens when she observes Flora singing by the lake or hears Miles speak in an unsettlingly cryptic manner, as though exerting influence over others.

Rather than interpreting these behaviors as harmless signs of pre-adolescence, the governess perceives them as dark, ominous manifestations of possession and corruption. Yet, despite her mounting convictions, there remains no undeniable evidence to support her beliefs. The children deny seeing the apparitions, and even Mrs. Grose only acknowledges their existence after the governess has already described them in vivid detail. With each new vision, the governess becomes more certain of her sole responsibility in rescuing the children, steadfast in her belief that no cost is too high.

The ghosts in *The Turn of the Screw* defy traditional depictions. They are not floating, transparent figures with a glow, nor are they deformed and decomposed; rather, they are disturbingly solid, described in precise detail. When the governess first sees Peter Quint, she notes:

“He has red hair, very red, close curling, and a pale face, long in shape, with straight features and extraordinary eyes.”

Quint’s vivid presence is unsettling. Unlike typical ghosts, he does not haunt aimlessly; rather, he is intrusive, watchful. His history is equally troubling—a man of lower status who exercised dangerous influence, particularly over Jessel. Even in death, his power lingers.

Miss Jessel’s ghost is even more elusive. The governess sees her by the lake, watching Flora, overcome with sorrow. But why would a ghost feel sorrow? In life, Miss Jessel was ruined by her association with Quint—discarded and forgotten. To the governess, she becomes a cautionary figure, a grim warning of what happens to women who transgress societal boundaries.

Yet, when the governess accuses young Flora of witnessing the elusive Miss Jessel, the child’s response is a bewildered murmur rather than a quiver of fear:

“I don’t know what you mean. I see nobody. I see nothing. I never have. I think you’re cruel. I don’t like you!”

In that fragile moment, the governess’s consuming fixation on the phantoms of Quint and Jessel transforms Flora’s innocent denial into a poignant turning point. Had the spectral Miss Jessel truly woven herself into the child’s vision, a different, more trembling reaction might have emerged. Instead, Flora’s unnerved rejection illuminates a chilling truth—the true terror is not borne of supernatural visitations, but of the governess’s own spiraling descent into fevered delusion. The governess’s belief in supernatural corruption reaches its tragic zenith with Miles.

Convinced that Peter Quint possesses him, she demands that he confess.

She pressures him relentlessly,
refusing to let go,
until—

He dies in her arms.

Did she vanquish a ghost? Or did she terrify a vulnerable child to death?

James withholds an answer. What remains is a governess clutching the lifeless body of a boy she swore to protect, caught up in a reality she can no longer trust.

Ghosts in literature are rarely mere haunting figures; they seep into the minds of those who see them, warping perception, twisting reality. They are the weight of memory, the echo of the past, the fears that refuse to be buried. In *Macbeth*, Banquo's ghost is not simply a specter—it is guilt given form, an accusation that bleeds through Banquo's revelry. In *Beloved*, the ghost is loss, love, and a wound that will not heal. *The Turn of the Screw* is no different. The governess's ghosts do not float; they do not moan. They stand, they watch, they demand belief. Whether they are real or not matters less than the destruction they leave behind. The governess, convinced that she alone can see the truth, tightens her grip until the thing she fears most—corruption—becomes her own doing. She fights shadows; in doing so, she creates them. Ghosts haunt because they are remembered; they linger because they are fed by fear. And in the end, it is not the dead who unravel the living, but the living who unravel themselves.

The pigeon laid her eggs
in the narrow space
between the window and the AC router.
She knew it to be a safe space
beyond the reach of predators.

Patiently she sat on her eggs
the chicks hatched
she watched them grow.

One day, a day like any other day,
she flew away to forage for her young
only to return
to an empty nest.

A kite, being a kite,
had swooped down
and with one swift, precise strike
(that left one stunned yet awed)
snatched her young.

Nature's laws are cruel,
true.
Yet
man has become what he was not
a predator by choice
feeding on the young and innocent

Miss Nishat Wasim

The Supermarket

To be sad and sorry in the supermarket
With cash and cards in the leather wallet
 With a cartload of imported goods
 Glamour, groceries, exotic foods
 If this isn't the heaven you sought
Having bought all that could be bought
 Where else can you ever hope to find
Enduring happiness for your restless mind?

 The insatiable fire into which I throw
 Boxes and cartons that I buy or borrow
 With every dear thing I let it consume
Clothes, bags, gadgets, shoes and perfumes
 I ask if its hellish appetite is cured
The fire asks back if there isn't any more
The heaven is where all desires will be met
In the meantime I visit the supermarket.

Dr Faisal Nazir

How do I describe this overbearing closeness of myself to myself?
Closeness which you - limping, frail, beside yourself with yourself - seem to have permeated
seem to have jumbled
seem to have provoked
seemed to have silenced into a great scatter
you. me.
close, bereft, alone.
what now do I say to myself?
my self - limping, frail, entranced -
what now do I do with my self?
the rogue air rustles the hair on the nape of my neck
hair which once knew your touch
skin which once knew your brittle bite-
what now do I do without you?

Miss Manal Fatmi

Like a heap of scattered leaves,
Displaced, littered in a corner.

I have lost my place, my structure
Yet I stand in between
At the forlorn center
In odd shapes
Redefined by words;
Heaps, piles, a flood of yellow.

I can ride the breeze
Yet I am squeezed under
The odd misshapen structure;
My new place, my new definition.

I fail to breathe
Under the weight of
These fallen, dead bodies;
Disgruntled and disconnected.

I fail –
I fail to become one with the new words,
New spaces that latch onto me.

I am the pile at the corner
Carefully collected into a place
Having lost its own

Miss Zonera Asim

The Banyan Tree

Near the banyan tree,
our home stood still,
on an empty place.

No neighbors,
no footsteps,
no watching eyes,
no souls to judge its dust or grace.

Yet every day,
with tender hands,
you chased the leaves,
the wayward dust,
as if the wind, a spiteful guest,
might whisper shame where love had brushed.

And oh, dear heart,
how firm you stood,
with weary hands and fingers blue,
as if the world would care to cast its gaze,
though only I remained to rue.

I made the lunch,
while you cursed the banyan tree,
“too gloomy”, you’d say,
“even for the birds.”

But it was still a home,
so you let them be.

Now I’m cleaning the yard, dear,
the birds keep bringing their offerings—
cracked twigs, dead leaves,
things the wind abandoned.

“Go away”, I whisper,
“No nest can stay alive forever”.

But they come anyway,
clinging, dragging,
stitching the wreckage together.

I didn't get their empty labor, dear,
until I became one of them.
Until you were gone,
and your body chose to rest.

I gathered our pieces, dear—
your breath in the walls,
your hair in the sink,
your warmth in the sheets,
all too perfect for a nest.

The banyan tree still stands, dear,
rooted deep, watching, waiting.
A place for a nest,
a house for things that never left.

There will be new people here soon.
They will dust away our shadows,
wipe our names from the windows.

But don't worry, dear.
If you ever come by,
you will find me at the banyan tree,
hanging with our pieces,
feet swaying like the leaves you swept away.

The wind will rattle the branches.
The home will hold its breath.

And if you look up—
you'll see, dear,
that I never really left.

Hamna siraj

I'm cursed by a curse,
So ominous, so weary,
Unwanted, unwavering,
Upon a midnight dreary.

I look at the walls,
And they look back,
They're in on the joke,
The eternal lack—

I call upon my Sisyphus,
He's happy there,
But the rock sighs,
Needlessly bare.

I'm cursed by a curse,
A heavy jest,
No start no end,
A captive rest.

Ayza Malik

of mice and martyrs

the weight of my mother's bones
"I am atlas" I say
Throwing your head back
Your laugh floats through the air
"what bruised knees you must have"
You say, and I think "no, not a bruised knee, but a knuckle"
My broken teeth clatter
You laugh some more
My jaw goes too.
"I'm atlas" I insist
and you keep laughing
While I come apart
You wipe the spit from your mouth
"you're a mouse"
I nod
"yes"
It is the same thing

Holding up a house
Too big
For a body too unambitious
And your legs turned to dust
But you're still holding up
The bones
The house
The sky
While nibbling on your own flesh

Rubab Amir

All That Is Lost

Can't you see how the mighty have fallen?
They aimed for their heads, and now they have gotten

The folklore reimagined,
The massacre redefined,
The originality beheaded.

The folks are sublime,
The hearts have ached,
The lovers are blind,
The crows have feasted
On whatever they could find.
The heart menders have been chosen

To deflower the mind.
The masses have forgotten
The rhythm of the kind.
The bodies have begun to rot,
The birds have rhymed the song.
All seem to enunciate the rhythm of this crowd
Which always falls prey to the sound

Of the melodious and ferocious deeds of the disavowed.
The thumping of chests, and the crowning of the false,

Oh, how the mighty have fallen!

Ana Inam Khan

a moment of your time,
my crime's perfected to your design,
is that an eroded sign, i ask,
am I your wilted divine, still?

gold encased rust i possess,
my chest, a transparent pest that i sent
as a greeting at my behest.
wishing you my best, still.

your delight damningly coated in tar,
nectar of deceit, your plight does mar
my desolate dreams that wish you afar,
holding me scarred, still

kin of mine, no longer in harmony,
decisively decimated, no more bartering,
whilst breathing in that delicate irony,
I cough up forgiveness, still.

Maham Owais

let the world press its teeth to your throat.
do not flinch.
misery is better when it moves.
better when it heaves and thrashes,
when it sinks its claws in and drags,
kicking and cursing,
through the shattered jaw of the living.
the dead do not weep.
the dead are dull things,
like buttons lost in the lining of a coat,
ivory yellowing under fluorescent light.
they are clocks with missing hands,
like pennies at the bottom of a fountain,
wishes drained from them long ago.
they are rooms where no one knocks,
paintings with the eyes scratched out,
like hands reaching but never touching,
like moths in the spider's web, waiting, waiting.
no one stays to hear.
but the living –
The living have teeth.

i have bitten down on grief
until my gums bled.
i have felt pain with its full weight,
its nails sinking into my scalp,
and still,
I walked out of its mouth.
not whole, never whole.
i have stood in the ash of my own undoing,
barefoot, trembling,
and called it ground.
i have crawled from the wreckage of myself,
ribs cracked open like a shipwreck,
lungs still wet with salt and ruin.
i have been stripped raw,
peeled open like fruit split and rotting in the sun.
i have held despair in both hands,
let it gnash at my fingers,
and still, i would not let it take me.

i have wanted to be still.
to fold myself into the quiet,
to let the world move on without me.

But –
i have also felt the after.

the second birth of it.
i have seen the dawn crawl back on its hands and knees,
seen light spill, desperate but tender.
like a lung remembering air after nearly drowning.
i have felt my body stretch beyond its breaking point,
only for something unnamed to stitch me back together.
i have been hollowed and filled again.
i have stood at the mouth of nothing,
burned to the bone,
only to rise with a heart still beating.
because to be here,
to feel even the worst of it,
is still to be.
to rise from it,

even once, even barely –
is to be born again.

Hania Afridi

Revolution

Rest within your gilded cages
Tinted in the sunlit rays of gold
Your rulers turn tail with your wages
Look at them, how they are so bold

March in the endless desert with a shackled foot
Waste away your sand in the mud
While the golden sages feed you the false truths
Atop their heaven built on flesh and blood

Or defy the fake rulers, and rise
And let them eat cake
This is the revolution that we will televise
Heads will roll, into a bloody lake

Eat the rich, burn the rich
Grind them into paste
Feed them to the pigs
And send them to the rigs

Cut the rich, Meld the rich
Into the bronze coin
That we will bury deep in a ditch
Let us together now join.

Nameer Zia

So I think why the sky bleeds red,
Puddles pot-holes consume all day,
And then I feel - to my dismay -
The bonds I made are all but dead.

So I ponder how life doth fall,
These bonds these ties are all so weak,
Torn up battered they left me bleak,
They lived they breathed and I still bawl,

How my days came to sudden ends,
Abrupt aghast experiences,
Death's filled with bare mysteriousness,
No more, no time to make amends.

To face the grim fatality,
Appalled by one's mortality

Muhammad Sajjad

Darkness, That Waits!

Darkness creeps in the dead of night
A velvet shroud, devoid of light.
Shadows whisper, their voices thin,
Echoing the sins we hold within.

The ghosts we keep, in chambers deep,
Awakened when the world's asleep.
They claw and cling, through every tear,
Their breath a frost, their touch a spear.

They hide in corners, patient, sly,
With empty grins and hollow cry.
They wait to pounce, to claim their due,
And drag us where the lost ones stew.

The shadows stir when we're alone,
A mirror to the seeds we've sown.
Horrors creep, not from the street,
But from the hearts they can't unseat.

Umm e Habiba

In Conversation with Sir Muhammad Yousha

To what extent do you believe the concept of a haunting or an absence can be stretched in literature?

I feel like you can be haunted by something that is present, and you can also be haunted by something that is absent. At least in great literature that I have read, there is always some semblance of an absence of something that a character maybe—or the author, a poet specifically themselves—might be haunted by, and they want to bring that absence into some sort of presence by way of their words and by writing, so I don't think there can be literature without any idea of absence. I think it just stretches through everything.

What do you think is the relationship between absence and writing?

There is writing that comes from absence, but I also think there is writing that does come from some sort of presence in your life. I have—maybe it's because I read a lot of Emily Dickinson— sort of unconsciously stopped trying to view the world in these binaries.

Because I think absence is a presence of something, and vice versa. Like in Dickinson's poem "I dwell in possibility"

*I dwell in Possibility –
A fairer House than Prose –
More numerous of Windows –
Superior – for Doors –*

...

It's a manor with all of these windows, infinite possibilities; implies that when something is present, there are a lot of possibilities that are suddenly not there.

As per your question, I think writers are not solely writing from a place of absence. It's the presence of an absence that they write about.

Do you think ambiguity is essential to the power of literary hauntings?

I think haunting is inherently ambiguous to an extent. One is always haunted by something that is unclear, only apparent in fragments, incomplete.

Wuthering Heights, to me, cannot be categorized as either a novel of presence or absence. Heathcliff and Catherine are so intensely present in each other's lives, yet they're also profoundly absent.

It reminds me of W.B. Yeats' line from his poem "Presences"

...
*All I had rhymed of that monstrous thing
Returned and yet unrequited love,*
...

Their love is returned through friendship, but it's still unrequited.

Why do you think readers are so intrigued by the figure of the ghost?

What else is the most readily available, most relatable, ambiguous thing that even the layman can attest to or relate to or identify with, but the supernatural.

I think this figure of the ghost becomes a great driving force in any work. Take Hamlet for example, It is the one giving motivation for Hamlet to act or the order for Hamlet to act, right?

The Ghost becomes a vehicle for all the hopes and dreams and fears and anxieties of a character.

In Story of an Hour, though there is no ghost, the husband haunts Mrs. Mallard's mind. His absence then becomes a driving force for renewed life within her. But with the revelation of his presence, the ambiguity, and all its subsequent possibilities, vanish. And that, in particular, is interesting, because though we say we want the truth, we can't often handle the certainty of it. This ambiguity—or ghost, or haunting, or absence— becomes a great vehicle for you to slip in a semblance of truth without it becoming too real.

As Dickinson writes, "the truth must dazzle gradually or every man be blind."

Can there ever be a union between the present and the absent. Would you say this union, if awarded, elevates the concept, or devalues it?

I think it definitely elevates it because, as I mentioned, I have stopped thinking in these binaries. I think there are instances in literature where it becomes impossible to separate absence and presence. You're left wondering whether the absence is driving the presence, or vice versa. It's very symbiotic. So I think it definitely elevates any work.

In Ode to a Nightingale, the knowledge of the bird's foreboding absence, that it will fly away, is what makes it beautiful. You cannot separate absence from presence or vice versa, because even when it has flown away, its chirping is still heard and felt. Its absence then becomes a presence.

In your experience, would you say that for all its intangibility, absence still manages to find a way to leech into all literature unconsciously?

Yes. Definitely. I think, one cannot write unless there is an urge to reach towards something that is missing. All literature, I feel, tries to reach outside of the self, towards something. I don't think I've read anything that does not contain an aspect of absence within itself, it always makes itself shown

What advice would you give to someone writing of absence?

I think, to feel the absence, before writing about it is very important. To all amateur writers, especially of poetry, I always recommend reading Rilke's 'Letters to a Young Poet.' I think, personally, they have helped me in multiple ways throughout my life, whenever I revisit them.

Rilke talks about love, pain, memory, and loss, and I feel that you cannot talk about those things without talking about absence. Rilke, in one of the letters, says that you have to let the pain pass through you completely, and it is only when it becomes a part of the blood flowing in your veins, that it fully leaves you. If you try to not let it pass, it crystallizes within you, and becomes something that will always haunt you. Once it passes, you can do your writing justice. The point being, feel it before writing about it.

Apartment 253

Nameer Zia

I am trapped inside the paper-thin apartment wall, unable to speak or move. Right in front of me is a small draft, a tiny hole just big enough to peek through. From there, I see a familiar living room, I can hear the faint whirring of the fan outside. Eventually, a blurry figure appears before me.

As the figure comes into shape, it forms a familiar-looking silhouette of a man. Suddenly, as if sensing my presence, he walks towards me and peers into the hole. His eyes are blood red, frothing with demonic hatred. He rushes away, I can hear the loud thuds as he moves further into the kitchen. A drawer opens, followed by the *clinks* of various metal cutlery.

Within moments, a coldness takes over my body, I look down and see a sharp kitchen knife plunged into my gut. He pulls the knife out, tearing my abdomen apart. I feel my guts spilling out, the blood that sustained me drains out steadily, painting the wall crimson in broad, violent brush strokes. He stabs me again, relentlessly. I can feel the taste of iron in my mouth. Peeling off the plasters of the wall, he takes the knife to my throat, I can now feel his warm breath upon me, his curled-up smile is the last thing I see before he makes the final slash, as the steel pierces through bone and flesh, my eyes flare up.

I am awake again.

Only a day after I bought this apartment, I woke up to the sound of a man screaming in agony. I soon realized that the entrance to my apartment had been sealed, dolled up in rusted iron chains, a padlock without a keyhole tying it all together. The windows wouldn't budge either, as I found out when I tried to hurl a chair at it in a fit of desperate rage.

I tried calling for help but that hope too was quickly slashed away. The telephone cord was cut, and there was no other way to call for help. This was isolation in the truest sense: a world on its own, devoid of all other life.

It has been 3 days since then. I've been stuck here ever since. When I got to this apartment, it almost felt like an opportunity for a fresh start, a place for me to abandon my past. Yeah right, like people like me deserve a fresh start. I would try to shout and scream for help, but the days have gradually worn me down, body and spirit. I stare at the half empty Jack Daniels lying on the kitchen table. I know I shouldn't, but I needed it to stop the constant shaking. The broken ceiling fan whirred incessantly, slowly. A fly boring its way deep into my mind, implanting its signature upon me, it was the most horrible thing I could think of. I need to

drown out the sound in liquid fire. I get up from the sofa, accidentally hitting the table and knocking down the ashtray, spilling the ashes all over the already dirty carpet.

As soon as I make my way to the kitchen counter, I hear a violent ring blaring out from my room, like a bedside alarm clock at the break of day. It was the telephone! The anxiety in my chest rises up as I make my way towards the object. It rings...and rings, like a phone call from the devil's private office.

But how can that be? Wasn't the cord cut? I pick the phone up. "Who is this!?" I shout.

All I hear on the other end of the call is the sound of heavy breathing, like an animal getting ready to pounce on its prey. "Who in the hell are you?" I ask again. I still don't get a response. The call continues, I feel the breathing getting faster and louder, like whoever it was on the other end was physically approaching me, and fast. Each moment passes by in a flash, each second more intense than the last, and as the sound reaches its apex, the creature on the other end makes a horrifying noise, a painful groan, like the screams of a goat as it is being sacrificed. A primal instinct takes over me—a sudden urge to defend myself from immediate danger. I slam the phone down and recoil back towards the bed, almost falling back on it. What the hell was that? I could feel my body shaking, every inch of hair on me stood on end. I needed to get out of here, badly.

My eyes glance again at the bottle on the kitchen counter. My body needed to feel warm, and it needed that fast. The fiery tonic stopped the shaking, just barely enough for me to pass out again. In this dazed state, I stare at the portrait of the Virgin Mary right in front of my bed. There's something off about it, but my mind is too overwhelmed by the one-two punch of the alcohol and the phone call to actually think.

I close my eyes.

The days keep going by. I don't know if it's the paranoia or all the alcohol, but I feel that there is something underneath these walls. There are times when I can make out odd sounds coming from within, groaning, of metal grinding against metal. They never completely go away, always in the back of my ear digging into my mind. I down another glass of liquid courage like it's nothing. The aching anxiety gradually gets worse as the dark envelops my apartment.

I'm in the bathroom, standing shirtless at the edge of my sink, arms stretched out over its sides, gun in my right hand and a lit cigarette in the other, staring at the creature in front of me. The cold blue ceiling light casts a shadow over the creature's silhouette. It is a misshapen, revolting mass of flesh, its only human

quality, its pale face covered in signs of the decay inherited from the rest of its body. Dark, heavy bags form under its eyes, the sunken face looks back at me with furrowed brows and teeth clenched. I spit at its face, yet it continues to stare at me.

I raise my right arm and cycle the cylinder of the revolver to the loaded round and point it straight at the creature, lining up the stubby iron sight up to the forehead before pulling the trigger, hoping that it takes me down with it. The seconds that follow linger for a lifetime.

A click echoes through the room. The gun jammed.

With a deep sigh I drop the revolver on the bathroom floor. The cigarette continues to sizzle in my left hand, I toss it into the toilet bowl and flush it down. As the cigarette sinks into the abyssal deluge, my heart and mind slowly accept the morbid realization that came with the events of the past thirty seconds. There was truly no way out. I was doomed to this place for as long as my body would sustain me. I fell down on my knees right there on the cold wood of the bathroom floor. Tears rolled down my face, and eventually, I wept. Bile rose up to my throat as I cursed my life, and everything that led me here. I cursed and screamed until my voice gave away, breaking apart under the relentless skirmishes of nicotine and liquid poison. Eventually, I passed out right there on the bathroom floor.

In my sleep I experience another dream. I am falling, sinking into an endless abyss. Eventually, I crash land into a deep, dark ocean with no end in sight. I see familiar looking objects passing past the corner of my eye, in an unrelenting current. Ordinary things like a TV set and a torn up sofa.

Suddenly, I feel an icy grip on my leg. A hand reaches out. It looks slender and weak, yet its grip is surprisingly firm. The hand now begins to speak.

"Come join us. It's cozy down here." It speaks in a deep, yet gentle voice. I can't tell if the voice belongs to a man or a woman, but it's oddly comforting.

"But what will become of me?"

"You will exist within us. An unconscious, collective mass, resting in the sea beneath the wood."

"That sounds scary."

"It is, but it is better than what awaits you up there. I promise you, there is comfort here, and company too. It is bliss. Neverending, pure, intoxicating bliss."

"Sounds...nice."

“It is.”

I think for a moment. Comfort and company sounds nice; I’d like to spend some time with other people too... but no. I shouldn’t get distracted! There are far more important matters at hand, like getting out of this apartment.

“That sounds enticing, but I still want to go back,” I respond.

“No good awaits you there, you know that.”

“I do, but it is important that I go back.”

“Very well.”

I wake up on my bed. My body feels heavy, as if it is tied down by a large anchor. How long have I been lying down here?

Before I can try to come up with an answer to this question, a shrill scream rages out from the outside of my room. I jolt up from the bed, and my blood runs cold at what I see. It’s the painting of the Virgin Mary, but it looks different now. It’s as if someone has plucked her very image away from the painting into some far-off distance, leaving behind only a trail of golden light falling on empty leaves. The emptiness of the painting hangs over my mind like a death sentence.

A trail of blood runs on the floor below the painting, leading into the living room. From the living room I see the trail continuing into the entrance of the apartment. As I turn the corner of the hallway, I see that the door to my apartment has swung wide open. For a moment, relief overcomes my body.

“Is this it?” I think to myself. “Am I finally free?”

I feel my heart racing as I step outside the apartment. The hallway outside feels different, it’s long and winding, extending through space and time into infinity. I immediately notice how heavy each step feels, like I’m dragging my feet through quicksand. I follow the trail of blood through the infinite corridor, passing door after door of apartments that seem to stretch to an unrealistic degree. Eventually, the blood trail leads into another apartment.

A mix of confusion and shock hits me as I approach the end of the blood trail. I am right back facing the entrance of Apartment 253. The door is now closed and I feel a cold draft coming from the bottom. Every limb in my body is screaming at me to run away, to not go back in, but I feel there is something important inside. Something I can’t afford to run away from. There is a key in my pocket, a giant “253” was etched into its silver marbling. I insert the key in the lock, and the moment I turn it, I feel another tug on my leg. Soon, the tug turns into a pull, and

before I know it, I am being dragged under the apartment floor, like a thousand dead souls dragging me into the river Styx. At the very bottom of the floor, I start falling again, but this time I can clearly see the wooden floor beneath me.

A loud crash pierces through the eerie stillness of the apartment, I am lying face-down on a fuzzy carpet. The scenery here looks familiar; I am back in my apartment...but how? I sit down on the sofa, my fiery tonic waiting for me already poured into a glass next to a cigarette on the table. As I drink the whiskey, my eyes land on something, a bizarre hole in the wall, someone peering at me through the plaster. I walk over to it and see two red holes staring back at me. This is it, the source of my misery, my tormentor, my panopticon. I can feel the blood rush through my veins, my vision turning red at the sight.

I rush into the kitchen, opening one of the drawers to take out a razor-sharp kitchen knife. I hurry back to the wall, and stab it deep. With strong force, I pull back the knife, bloody and covered in guts, and drive it back in – again and again. I can hear the sound of metal piercing flesh, over and over, painting the knife a deep crimson, ripping apart the plastered wall. I take the knife to his throat and close my eyes as I make the final cut. It is smooth, quick, the metal cutting through skin like butter. I can feel the geyser of blood spilling out, leaving his neck dangling on his body by a thread of flesh. When my senses come back to me, I see myself looking back at me in horror. In those red eyes I see my own sins and my hatred reflected back at me. My eyes flare up. I am lying down in some place I do not recognize.

I am awake again.

Maheen Khalid, Third Year

I feel the heat coming out of my ears. Shame seems to paint my cheeks with blood. I can hear the loud thumping in my chest, or do I hear it coming from the ceiling? The curtain sways effortlessly with the winds as if the curtain were born to be good at it. "Breathe. Just breathe." I tell myself, it'll all be over soon. Gasping for air, I reassure myself that the numbness craves me back.

"But it'll never be over, you know." I could feel it slither up my back and toy with the hair on the nape of my neck. A cold, unyielding but familiar embrace – like an absent father trying to make amends. The nails dig in my throat as I try to break free – *"let me go. Please."* Subtle pleas for my deliverance well up at the bottom of my throat yet my throat harbors it all.

Searing pain shoots through my scalp, the hold tightens on my hair. *"Look! Look at yourself."* In a blurry haze, I look up to meet own eyes staring back at accompanied by an iridescent smile. She looks so young, so hopeful, with her whole life ahead of her. I want to be her decalcomania. I see it shatter before me. Blood as warm as the shame of my incompetence drips like wine from a chalice. The absurd desire of being a selfsame image of the piece itself, makes the maimed portrait laugh.

I pick up shards of myself. I'll fix it somehow. I know I will. The cackling laughter echoes all around me. *"But does it matter? Had you been good enough the first time, would there even be a need for fixing?"* But I didn't break her! *"If not you, then who did?"* I don't know. The ringing seems to get louder and louder each second. *"Who else, but you?"* Like a broken record player, the question repeats for what seems to be eternity.

The people around me? No, they definitely love me. They paint me with affection, love, and adoration. *"Why are you still bleak, then?"* An obligation, paired with an irredeemable loss of hope. *"And is there not a fair reason for that?"* I will not falter. *"Would you ever be able to come through? Who are you kidding?"* The voices muddle into the depths of an abysmal convulsion, their pangs dig into me, and drag me to face myself.

If it was not me, then who was it? If I didn't break her, then who did? *"Look at the ones who came before you. Nothing makes you better than them. Nothing!"* But I don't wish to be better. *"And you think you can, my love?"* No, I don't want to. I choose not to. I am in content with everything that I cannot be. *"So you chose*

this? As if you had options. You were never given a choice. You were destined to be at the bottom of the chain picking up shards like you always have.”

The cry for help never makes its way out of my mouth. The joints in my leg creak like the floorboards beneath my back as it drags me away. The fight leaves my body with every jostle of my bruised and battered self. It finally stops and pulls me up. I feel its weight on me, perched on my shoulders like a vulture. Cold, lifeless hands entwined with the wisps clinging to my forehead.

“I’ll sit and watch you wither away like the ripened figs falling off of the tree – Just like your potential.” Darkness clouds my vision as I give into the numbness. I let myself fall, *like a ripened fig from a tree.*

Dead lives.

Eisha Fahim

Tap, tap, tap...

The juice spills out.

What once was whole is now divided.

The tight bright red skin now loses lustre.

So close is the blue vein, so strong is my desire... to glide... smoothly against that tight skin and soft flesh underneath.

I have done it before, but it wasn't enough. I want it again. The sweaty grip of her fingers, alternating sensation of heat and cold, the throbbing pulse of my cool surface, then... *schluck*... I was flooded with warmth, the gush of life. Then the running of cold water and her icy fingers rubbing me clean—and I, drunk with sensation, winked at her. Now, once again, the desire for that sensation arose in me. I don't know why. For nothing resembled the event of that day: the fingers wrapped around me were dry, neither strikingly cold nor hot. In front of me was a tomato split open.

But why this maddening desire to burst open that blue vein and bathe in life once again?

To feel the warmth over me and the chillness entering the body in which I slit an opening for the restless soul to escape. I know I wasn't supposed to do it, but I could not stop myself and moved away from the directed course. I could not bite into the vein, but I scraped the skin off her finger. Startled, she drew back her hand. Our eyes met. I winked at her like I did that day and flashed a smile. I think she shuddered. Her blood dried on my sleek body. She left me to clutch her bleeding finger, but now I felt her fingers wrapping around me once again and the cold water running over us.

She left.

I wanted her to stay, to gaze at that blue vein longer, but another man entered. I didn't like his coarse brown hands. He didn't let me enjoy the sweetness and softness of the things around me. I love what I do.

It is a delicate yet dangerous art.

It requires precision, understanding, and consequences, but he ruined my mood by completely ignoring my aesthetic desires and involving me in work I would term “mechanical butchery.” At last, he put me under the shower and washed the stains off my body. I liked how he sharpened me. I flashed a smile. Clean and happy in the dark, I had nothing to do. So, I decided to take a walk down memory lane. You are welcome to come along. It was a night exactly like this. I wasn’t thinking about anything particular—and if I was, I don’t remember. Then suddenly the lights switched on. I was startled. I don’t think it ever happened before. She came and looked at me as if trying to convey a message through her eyes. Then he came, and she hurriedly turned away.

“Hey, you look beautiful, but why out of all the places did you want me to come here?”

“Because no one can ever guess we’re here,” she said with a smile. *“Is it true you’re planning to get married?”* She bit her lip and closed her fingers around me.

I felt her sweat on her palms...

The tomato was divided into equal halves.

“Yes... Well, I haven’t proposed to her yet, but I’ve decided I won’t delay it anymore—”

She turned with sudden emotion, and then...

The bursting of veins, the cutting of flesh, a gush of warm blood.

He fell down without a word. The ring he held between his fingers fell with a tinkle, and the letter in his breast pocket was dyed a deep red—the color of love. She dropped to her knees and snatched the letter from his pocket.

“It was me, it was me. What have I done!”

I was still lying in the soft warm flesh. She pulled me out, her fingers cold. She checked his pulse, but he was gone.

“I’ll stick to the plan.”

She emptied his pockets, took off his clothes, and burned them. Then, with a daftness I’d never seen in her before, she started to peel the skin off him—just like she’d seen butchers do in the next department. Neither of us had ever done this before. It took us four hours to prepare the body for the mincer. After that, the job was easy. She placed the flesh in the patty machine with the usual

ingredients and voilà! A fresh batch of man-patties was ready and refrigerated. She cleaned the kitchen and scrubbed all traces of murder from me and her hands. The lights turned on, and another workday began. Her finger is bandaged, the blue vein in my sight again. My desire must have been contagious, for she left the veggies and stared at the blue vein in her arm, throbbing with life, then looked at me.

“Yes,” I flashed. Do it.

“Am I going mad? No one knows about him. Even if they find out, they’ve no reason to suspect me. Then why this urge?”

She resumed her work, but I wouldn’t let her. I reflected light into her eyes, drawing her attention to the possibilities... to me. Finally, she gave up.

“Why do I feel it’s you urging me to take my own life?”

This was the first time she addressed me directly.

I gleamed to show she was right. Perhaps it’s true, humans near death see things otherwise hidden.

“Oh God, I can’t take it anymore. Everything accuses me, shouting what I’ve done. I can’t live like this.”

I felt the sweat on her fingers, the alternating hot and cold. Only this time, there was a rhythmic tremble. She took a deep breath—and a gush of life, warm blood, flooded me. She fell, her hand sliding over the white napkins meant for tables.

They began to turn deep red...

She dropped me. I heard myself make a tinkling noise, like the ring.

Time passed. Nothing changed.

The pool of warm blood around me dried. Then the door was flung open violently, the manager shouting, *“Where’s the damn sal— Oh no! Why here? Why my restaurant? This’ll ruin our reputation!!! What’ll I tell customers waiting outside? Oh God, damn that girl. Choosing my restaurant, of all places, to commit suicide. Oh no! Somebody remove her bloody hand from the napkins!”*

No one washed the bloodstains from me. The police arrived. I was examined, taken from the place where I’d seen—and participated in—so many things. I yearned for retirement and soon got it. I was discarded in days. I was relieved. We’re meant to hold our peace, no matter what we witness.

But I bathed in the blood of a lover's heart; I was intoxicated. Yet he was a lover of the modern world. Even his flesh wasn't used in a feast—just turned into cheap burger patties.

I wanted to honor him.

I couldn't make his name immortal, nor allow such degradation of love, so I broke the rules.

Did I suffer?

Was I punished for my boldness?

Maybe a little; I rusted in my prime. But I led an adventurous life—I'd have hated mundanity even undiscarded.

I had a clear conscience. The chef considered me her best, for she used me to commit two murders. I stood out among my fellows. People outside our kitchen came to examine me. But most importantly, I feared I was developing a lust for human blood. I didn't want to stain my spotless life.

I embraced an early death. No minstrels will sing for me or the man I gave myself for. No bard will compose odes to my beauty.

Yet I did it.

I played my small part to bring justice to a world where humans have lost humanity, no longer guilty for hideous crimes.

Where, upon seeing a person bleeding on the floor, the first reaction is: Why here? What about my restaurant's reputation...

تیرا چہرہ میں نظروں میں لے کے اٹھتا ہوں
سہانے خواب سے میں ہڑبڑا کے اٹھتا ہوں
بارا گھنٹوں کی دو طرفہ دوڑ ایک طرف
بتاؤ مجھکو یہ روز میں کیوں اٹھتا ہوں

اب تو بھول گئے کان تیری آواز کا سر
پوشیدہ کنارے کا کیا خانہ پر کسی
گھل گئیں میری تمنائیں کسی اور فکر میں
اب نہیں دیتا ذہن دل کو اس غفلت کا عذر

بتاؤ مجھکو پھر یہ روز میں کیوں اٹھتا ہوں
اب بھی تیرا چہرہ میں نظروں میں لے کے اٹھتا ہوں
سہانے خواب سے کیوں ہڑبڑا کے اٹھتا ہوں

بشریٰ ارشاد

درد کے عوض کوئی ترکیب ہاتھ نہ آئی
رات گزری، دن گزرا، یاد نہ آئی؟

کہتے تھے خیال میں رہوں گی میں
کوشش کی، سمجھ میں بات نہ آئی

ساخہ تھاپیش آیا یا ٹھہرا اتفاق
کہ تُو میرے اور میں تیرے ہاتھ نہ آئی

نادان تھی میں یا تم تھے بے چارے
گزر چکے سال، حسرت باز نہ آئی

کیا بتاؤں وزن بات کا جب پوچھیں اجباب
چھو کے گزری تھی ہوا بس، پاس نہ آئی

اس عمر میں کیا کام کرتے پھرتے ہو؟
محبت ٹھہری مگر شرم ساتھ نہ آئی

آرزو کے انگارے کو میں نے بجھتا پایا
لاکھ ماری پھونکیں، آگ نہ آئی

اس دشت میں گم ہو تم بھی لیکن
لاکھ پکارا میں نے، آواز نہ آئی

عربیہ جاوید

اب جب کوئی اندیشہء انجام نہیں ہے
اے رنج ہمیں تجھ سے کوئی کام نہیں ہے

غم ہے نہ خوشی ہے نہ جنوں ہے نہ ہے وحشت
اس حالتِ مضطر کا کوئی نام نہیں ہے

اب کیا ہے اگر کوئی نظر بھی نہیں مشتاق
اب کیا ہے اگر کوئی لبِ بام نہیں ہے

کیا اور سوا اس کے ہو جنت کی تمنا
سنتے ہیں وہاں گردشِ ایام نہیں ہے

افتخار شفیع

