

*The Falconer*  
*self-loathing*



*issue viii  
oct '22*

## Prologue

*I hate myself.*

Having written down this fickle sentence, I find myself occupying a strange position of uncertainty and doubt. I call this sentence fickle, because although it is one that I have used many times, on several occasions, its meaning is persistently evasive. *I hate myself*, yes, but when it comes to describing this hatred, this pool of self-loathing that I presume to linger somewhere inside of me, I am at a loss for words. Or rather, words are at a loss for me. Hating myself, I exist as a blotch, a hasty smear on the face of an otherwise structured universe. And it is not just the self-hatred that drives me insane. *I hate myself*, yes, but how do I talk about it? How do I speak about that which I experience profoundly, but for which words always seem to fail? In dark silences, in the middle of a bustling crowd, to a friend speaking in hushed tones, I proclaim, declare and whimper – *I hate myself, I hate myself, I hate myself*, to no avail. They do not understand, and I do not know how to explain.

What do I do now? How do I understand the inexplicable? How do I make sense of the evasiveness of self-loathing? Do I accept it as a given, as a natural state that all conscious humans must fall into, or do I fight it?

I suppose I could start at the fickleness of the very sentence itself, and attempt to stabilize it somehow.

*I hate myself.*

But what is this ‘I’ that hates the ‘self’? Is there not a paradox inherent in the very way that the sentence is structured? A splitting that relegates the ‘I’ into a different realm from the ‘self,’ and creates a space for contradiction to run amok.

And hate. What do I make of hate? How is hate different from contempt, rage, and disgust? What is it about hatred, especially when it is directed inwards, that I am unable to grasp? Throughout the course of my life, I have hated with and through others, and have perhaps even found solace in the community that it brought me. I have understood hate as totalizing and powerful, but with its barrel pointed at me, I suddenly feel small, alien and alone. *I hate myself*, but I realize now that I do not know what that means.

Here then, we come face to face with the impossible task that this issue of *The Falconer* attempts to tackle. How does one find an expression for the inarticulate hatred of the self? Giving up on any notions of finding a fixed definition to start off with, we’ve opted instead for the next best thing – *we’ve tried*. We’ve tried to encapsulate the tremor of the self-hating individual, we’ve tried to be honest to the inexplicability that occupies the experience of self-loathing, and we’ve tried our best to be as vulnerable as we possibly can. It is only owing to this promise of *trying*, that the writer of this Prologue has referred to herself in the first-person thus far, thinking it a viable way to stay true to both the hating ‘self,’ and ‘I.’ But the ‘I’ and the ‘self’

cannot exist in a vacuum, and must at some point, diverge into the impersonal ‘we.’ As impersonal as the ‘we’ may be, it allows for some distance from the crushing inexplicability of self-loathing, and carves a space for communication.

For this issue of *The Falconer*, we’ve found the English department brimming with much to say. Ayemun, Sidra and Rameen, in their wonderful articles, extrapolate on the strangeness of self-loathing through the medium of literature and film. Miss Huma Shakir, in her organic and poignantly honest interview, elaborates on the tight-knit relationship between self-hatred and poetry, while Miss Noor-us-Sabah brilliantly articulates the nuances of translating transgression. Self-loathing sings through the poems and prose pieces we’ve curated, but it roars and rages through Soha’s short story, which also happens to be the longest work that we’ve published by a writer thus far. To add to the hubbub of insightful voices surrounding this precarious topic, we’ve also included our first-ever book review, written by Shehzeen.

In trying to find an expression for self-loathing, this issue has far exceeded our expectations. We have had to broaden our horizons, and this venture out into the unknown would not have been possible without the addition of some talented individuals into our team. *The Falconer* welcomes Dua Azim, Rameen Imran, Shehzeen Muzaffar and Bushra Naz on board. Owing to the diligent efforts of our team members Rubab Amir and Maham Owais, we take great pride in announcing the launch of our official website as well, where all prior issues alongside this one shall be available to read.

In concluding this Prologue, we would like to acknowledge the tonal whiplash of our words. From the chant-like *I hate myself* to the impersonal ‘we’ making the announcements, there seems to be a strand of steady incoherence lingering between our sentences. In trying to be vulnerable, we realized that we could not deny incoherence. If we are to ever talk about self-loathing, this incoherence is to be embraced. For this issue, that is all we ask of you – to oscillate between all these varying expressions of self-hatred with us, to let the hasty smear of self-loathing be.

Perhaps this way we might understand it a little better.

***Manal Fatmi, MA (Evening)***

## Self-Loathing — Playing I and the Other

*Ayemun Imran (Final Year, Evening)*

Self-loathing— the more I think about this month's theme, the more I find myself surrounded by questions and confusions. When the topic was first discussed among the members, I happened to be sitting in the same room with the writers and their different opinions made me realize how universal, yet subjective self-loathing is. Among several distinct opinions, a few members agreed upon considering self-loathing to be a narcissistic trait. For instance, we believe that we are so significant that our inadequacies are causing disturbances in the lives of people around us; hence we ought to be blamed and in the absence of anyone who will directly tell us to correct our ways, we must create a gaze, a voice of a disappointed Other whose sole purpose is to create a contrast between how we ought to be and how we are. I later asked a friend to tell his reasons for hating himself to which he replied that he hates himself for not standing up against the structures he is being forced into by others.

Now both the above reasons are absolutely different yet have something in common between them and that is the split within. Self-loathing is a constant feeling of not being good enough and of place-less-ness; but this particular feeling occurs when we draw a contrast between an imagined all-knowing voice who knows precisely what the world, the people around expect from us; and then, there is 'Us'— individuals who must constantly live with the consciousness of an oppressive voice too complete and too disappointed for not living up to its never-ending expectations and demands. But is self-loathing as self-sabotaging, as disturbing as I am presenting it to be? Must we, or *can we*, get rid of it? Even if we consider self-loathing a narcissistic trait (believing that our lacking disturbs the "order" of the things around us—an order that hinges on our acting 'correctly') or a means of blaming oneself for yielding to what "others" want from us, self-loathing, undoubtedly, seems to be giving some sense of control, and has an undeniable hold on our lives. In living with the split within, in considering that there's a voice within, who associates with and is aware of what the outside "coherent" world wants from us and is frustrated in our inability to reach the completeness, we may perhaps find solace in the idea that we are not completely adrift; a part of us, a voice among many voices, identifies and knows where happiness/satisfaction resides. And even though we will always fall-short in living up to its expectations, the ideal of completeness will remain close, undisturbed, and will endlessly give us hope, and also perhaps a path to move forward.

Similarly, self-loathing demands the presence of an Other. By Other, I mean, anyone – a celebrity, a teacher, a friend – in whom we locate the idea of completeness and, in contrast, we loathe ourselves for not having what this Other has. This creates a

division or perhaps the several already existing divisions and confusions materialize themselves into a single ‘ideal/perfect Other’. This one side of the split constantly blames us, tortures us, forces us to move, to acquire, to possess the satisfaction that others seem to have. But one wonders, what if the voice decides to expect nothing and vanishes away? What if we hear nothing but silence from the other side of the split?

Prompted by these questions, I watched Samuel Beckett’s short, one-character play, Rockaby, on Youtube last week, and while there exists innumerable interpretations, something about the play forces me to add one more. The scene opens with a woman sitting in her black evening gown on a rocking chair and a disembodied, recorded voice fills the room with fragmented, monotonous, and disturbing phrases:

Voice: till in the end  
 the day came  
 in the end came  
 close of a long day  
 when she said to herself  
 whom else time she stopped  
 time she stopped ...

The woman on the rocking chair silently listens to the recorded voice, at times indifferent and at times, tears seem to form into her eyes and as the voice continues, she gradually surrenders herself to sleep. Suddenly, the voice stops and for a second or two, gives the audience a sense of relief, but as the silence grows and grows heavier, the woman wakes up and asks for “More”, the “recorded” voice continues and in continuing, it engulfs the silence of the room. This singular action repeats itself over and over until the woman “apparently” dies, the voice silences, and the play ends. One can interpret that Beckett wants to underscore the significance of the voice, the other, no matter how torturous it is by contrasting it against the horrifying silence of the room which symbolizes the silence within. The voice speaks, the voice expects, the voice knows, the voice reminds us of our own smallness and still gives the sense of place-less-ness – a place (we are not enough, not capable in contrast to something that is complete, that is capable and thus, we still belong within the structure and gravitate towards something) as compared to the complete silence of the other, the complete silence of any clue that coherence exist on the other side.

Self-loathing, then, may perhaps can be considered as a defence mechanism, a trick one plays by creating a sense of a gaze for oneself that gives the illusion of wholeness in the outside world; and this self-created gaze (our interpretation of others and their

expectations from us) impedes us from seeing the dissatisfaction and desperation in the eyes of those in whom we locate our sense of satisfaction. The voice intervenes to tell us that we have disturbed the order of things around us to hide precisely the disorder of the things, the voice intervenes and loathes for not standing against the things we are forced into and in loathing, gives us the liberation to believe that if we had chosen otherwise, we would have been fulfilled.

But one asks, why hate ourselves? Why can't the voice be more encouraging? Instead of telling ourselves that we are incapable of achieving certain things, we are too small, too insignificant, why can't the voice tell us that we have the capability and if we work, we will get closer to the things we want? I have no answer for this question and many others, but I think, that in loathing oneself, in considering oneself infinitely incomplete as compared to something infinitely complete, we only give ourselves a place of permanence and delude ourselves into believing that our movement towards is not directionless. In drawing a concrete division between I and the Ideal, the boundary will remain undisturbed, the illusion of satisfaction on the other side will remain unchallenged and thus, will give us a place, a direction to move, to hope, to adhere to something. On the other hand, any source of encouragement is presupposed by the belief that nothing is wrong with us and if we get certain things, we must have the same sense of satisfaction that the possessor now seems to have. The voice that encourages is more prone to expose to us the hollowness of the ideals as compared to self-loathing which still manages to give us a place by telling that the "something wrong" is within you while the ideal, the completeness persists stubbornly on the outside.

To sum up, I will circle back to where I began and that is how universal the feeling of this inherent dissatisfaction is – the dissatisfaction that keeps on proving all love and encouragement to be false. But one can say that to exist means to be in motion, to run away from silences towards noise and this running away demands to believe that all this noise and all this movement is not for nothing but is always directed towards something meaningful. Self-loathing, then, can be considered as our one attempt at ceasing the chaos, attaining some control, and sustaining our movement for as long we can, creating both the voices of a never-enough I towards an all-too-enough Other, to gain an illusionary mastery over our life. When we hate ourselves, the relationship we have with this all-too-enough Other is that of envy. We do not wish to take the Other's place, instead in belittling ourselves, we sustain an identity dependent on the Other, and it is this relationship that structures (tortuously so, perhaps) our life and gives it its meaning.

## **The Wavering Balance – ‘Know that the love of thyself doth hurt thee more than anything in the world’**

**Rameen Imran (3rd Year, Evening)**

To love and to loathe are equally intense experiences, but take into the fold considerations of true power and consequences and watch how instantly the latter triumphs over the former. Its ability to burn can be held as an equivalent to hellfire itself, which is why when the recipient of this emotion becomes the deliverer himself, one can only imagine the nature of the grotesque aftermath that ensues. The true virtues of self-loathing may be littered throughout the multitude of dimensions in literature; and yet still there seems to be an inconsistency which surrounds this emotion, whether it be with regards to the character experiencing it or the readers perceiving it.

Although this emotion has a variety of underlying connotations, the most prevalent seems to be that of glory. The modern representations in particular, celebrate this virtue as a self-sacrificial sentiment with a performative element, the sufferers need the people to recognize their sacrifice, which may as well be a demand of compensation for all their suffering. The motif wherein the protagonist makes a public gesture of resigning themselves to the antagonistic entity for the greater good and upon surprisingly surviving, meeting with unparalleled gratitude and a universally acquitted status of respect, can almost be traced throughout the canon of literature all the way through to contemporary fiction. Maggie from the novel *Mill on the Floss* is especially the perfect embodiment of all these notions that are all the more prevalent today.

The total language used in the text describes Maggie as somewhat of a damsel in distress. As a child, she witnessed quite a number of upsetting events, whether it be her family's financial struggles, her father's rapidly declining health, or even the tarnished reputation of her family name, all of which leave a tragic mark on her. Hence her demeanor becomes desperate, invoking anyone who comes across her, to try and help. Her words formally refuse all the offers of assistance and yet her actions tell a completely different tale. People like Philip Wakem and Stephen Guest are drawn to her because of her tragic situation; and the more she refuses their advances, the more she revels in their attention. According to the narration provided in the book, Maggie is aware of her own reality and is relentlessly trying to make peace with it. Not only does she deprive herself of personal pleasures, but she also instils a sense of self-hatred for even wanting those personal pleasures. This realization first dawns upon her when she inauguates the context of religion onto her situation; ‘*it flashed through*

*her... that all the miseries of her life had come from fixing her heart on her own pleasures... She sat in the deepening twilight forming plans of self-humiliation and entire devotedness'. She views the existence of this hatred as an achievement; 'I would rather die than fall into temptation'. She believes that by hating herself for committing the acts so despised by her brother and father, she has finally proven herself to them and to the world. Despite all her suitors' protests, she proceeds to do so because there is glory in sacrifice and all her life she seems to have been chasing this certain form of recognition.*

So not only does Maggie hate herself, she views it as a prize and uses it as such. The people around her seem to be attracted to her because of the vitriol she seems to foster against herself. But the people around her do not share the same sense of reward as her. Even after committing and recognizing the wrong, repentance is not enough for her – she needs the people to acknowledge that she's redeeming herself, signified by her decision to stay within St. Ogg's. Several people including the Dr. Kenn advise her to seek a settlement elsewhere, so that the peace remains for the sake her own contrition and the society around her, and yet the primary rebuttal he receives is '*if I remained here, I could perhaps atone in some way to Lucy – to others, I could convince them that I am sorry...*'

This extent of exposure to be recognized, even under the guise of self-hatred, can only be described as narcissistic. To render yourself incapable of sustaining your own person, so that someone else may do it for you might, may as well be an act of cowardice. To be so consumed within your own self that you become utterly oblivious to the world around you just to wallow in your own misery, can only be an indication of a sense of grandiose that a person may hold for himself. In this case, self-hatred is being used as a tool for gratification rather than being recognized as an element within itself.

## Kill your Darlings – *The Resurfacing of the Self*

**Sidra Iqbal (3rd Year, Morning)**

*Life is a circle. A wheel of self-abuse.*

Kill your darlings – a raw, vehement portrayal of love and hate, obsession and murder, tinged with literature and rebellion. The movie explores the early lives of literary geniuses of the Beat generation, the great American writers and poets as canonical as Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, Jake Kerouac, Lucien Carr, focusing on a major part of their early lives. In this article, the relationship dynamics of Lucien and David are microscopically explored, in hopes that a greater tragedy may be drawn within the tragedy itself.

Lucien Carr and David Kammerer's relationship was unusually strained. From David saving Lucien's life, to then chasing him across the country, to Lucien calling him his "guardian angel" till something in him breaks, and in a frenzied state, murders the latter. In the remorse, fear, and the pain of fleeting memories, perhaps there lurks, still at war, love and hate.

For existence demands. It demands one to be active, decisive; in the position of power, for one to strive and live. And in escaping this, one may, even so temporarily, escape the self. For like the self, the ego-ideal isn't stagnant. The moment the 'self' comes even close to attaining its ideal, it slips and shifts and changes its form beyond attainability, beyond understanding. The familiarity is gone. Neither the ego of the familiar past remains, nor the ego-ideal.

The 'self' wants escape, seldom from the 'other', often from itself. A self, despite knowing how utterly impossible is the achievement of the ego-ideal, still creates it, still clings on to it – to strive forward, to sustain life. Some hope still lurks, a hope that is fatal. A hope that one would laugh in the face of, but still embrace crying.

*Life is round. Patterns and routines, a wheel of self-abuse.*

One could escape all this, the self by submitting to an 'other'. Give in to this temptation, where not only lies pleasure but a much needed escape – from a self that gives one hope yet is never satisfied. If the self is repressed, behind any escape one pursues, does it not ever resurface?

*The true, uncensored, uninhibited self*

Does it not come afront, each time, larger, perhaps more horrifying? Perhaps more unbearable? The long suppressed self would start to linger, dangerously close to the surface.

*Lucien pulls out the knife, points at David.*

When it has been so long, one doesn't know what to feel, how to process.

*He steadies his trembling hand. The shaking won't stop.*

The passivity is deafening.

*Lucien can't move. David walks in on the knife.*

A shock. A sudden onset. The ever demanding, ever tormenting self would finally resurface.

*(Lucien pulls out the knife, and stabs him again. And again. And again.)*

The fear. The trembling. The hatred (for whom?).

*The circle is broken. Only for it to begin anew.*

## **Book Review: Heaven, Meiko Kawakami**

*(Translated: Sam Bett & David Boyd)*

***Shehzeen Muzaffar. 3<sup>rd</sup> Year (Evening)***

*'Everything was beautiful. Not that there was anyone to share it with, anyone to tell. Just the beauty.'*

In Japan, there is a popular saying, "The nail that sticks out gets hammered down." For those who are born to be different the world isn't a joyous place at all. Instead it becomes an arena where survival is your only resort. The Japanese novelist, Meiko Kawakami, in her interview with Guardian last year, said, "We often talk about death being absolute, but I can't help but think that being born is no less final." Her characters indeed deal with this very concept – of what it means to be alive, amidst the pain and messiness of birth.

The acclaimed Japanese author of Breasts and Eggs delivers yet another hauntingly beautiful novel. Heaven is a raw, tender and painful display of power imbalance and how sticking out can lead you to a life of misery and pain. Here, however, I would like to give out a warning. This book will most likely make you cry and can be triggering for the ones who go through events similar – such is its effect.

Heaven is less sophisticated than Kawakami's Breasts and Eggs which tells a story of shifting perspectives to address the feminist question of reproductive autonomy. Here, Kawakami, tells a simpler, yet heart-wrenching story in an equally simpler form. Her 14-year-old protagonist suffers from brutal bullying in his middle school due to his "lazy eyes". Even though he puts up a brave front, he is absolutely miserable which makes the readers pity him. His life at home is silent and his school life is utterly painful. This all seems to change when he finds a note stuck under his desk that says, "*We should be friends.*"

At first, he thinks that it's another cruel joke from his bullies, but for once, reality turns out to be a little nicer to him. The note is from one of his classmates, Kojima, who also is a victim of bullying. The two pariahs seem to make an alliance through a shared bond of trauma and the letters they exchange.

If Kawakami were any other writer, Kojima would be the love interest, but in Heaven, she is anything but. Most of the time, he is baffled by her thoughts and ideologies. To encounter the bullying she goes through, Kojima expresses, "*If we're weak, our weakness has a real meaning.*"

Through the emotional journey of two people who share the heartbreak parts of their lives, Kawakami demonstrates what makes her a great writer: creating characters that are so lifelike and empathetic you want to give them a hug and make them a hot cup of cocoa. The scene where Kojima confesses that she has been cutting things around her, and that it makes her feel better, made me cry. So when our protagonist suggests that she cut his hair instead of maybe harming herself, it warmed my heart. This was the moment I truly fell in love with their bond.

Heaven is a brief novel that lands exactly where Kawakami intends it to. The finale is shocking and truly drives her message home, something unexpected for the readers not familiar with Japanese literature and Kawakami's writing. This is a powerful book with so much to offer and I am eager to read whatever this incredible author puts out.

### ***How to***

how to keep tender things clenched  
 for a while and unlearn  
 to walk the empty aisle?  
 how to unpluck the undeserving petal  
 from the stench of desire  
 and how to ask its  
 fragrance for forgiveness?  
 how to meet the sunlight  
 head-on, eyes wide,  
 and for once, hope to be unblind?  
 how to turn back that backwards gaze,  
 how to greet whatever stays?  
 how to believe whatever doesn't?  
 how to live  
 and how to love like this?

***Aamna Motala, Faculty***

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Calm,  
 O' calm,  
 Thy rhythm,  
 Of restlessness,  
 For nothing is  
 To be wrecked.  
 Promises the stretch  
 Of eternal clock.  
 It will ease,  
 As the seas interlock;  
 But it must before cease,  
 For you ought to  
 Have a taste  
 Of the agony,  
 Which resides herein,  
 Crumbles thy bones,  
 And expunges thy sin.

The anguish,  
 That tears your soul  
 As it ignites your skin.  
 For the hollow body  
 Pleads to begin.  
 But this trial is a music,  
 Known just to violin,  
 The one which belongs  
 To the Fire within.  
 So scared be not,  
 For thy sins are dim,  
 And in the end,  
 The fair light,  
 Of thy soul, doth win.

(Faith)

***Eiman Ansari, 3rd Year (Evening)***

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Don't you hear, the autumn leaf sings  
 The songs of monody, with its broken wings

Not *being* on the tree, nowhere to go  
 But the seared bridges, the vast land of snow.

Don't you hear, the autumn leaf sings,  
 And decorates the casket with its broken wings.

From emerald it turned to amber, umber and scarlet,  
 Laid on the ground, like an embedded garnet.

But don't you hear, the autumn leaf sings,  
 Dying on rusted bricks with its broken wings.

***Asma Naqvi, MA (Morning)***

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Two corpses lay side by side  
Blood, bones, there was no hide.  
Their brains- that dark matter glowed  
Their blood- thick and red it flowed;

Their hollow eyes blinked  
On their faces were eerie grins,  
Yet, their rotting teeth fell  
And their once-beating hearts were dead.

All was still till the night drew near  
And as the clock struck 12  
Heavy felt the sickening air,  
There was dark magic- a scream of endless despair  
it choked their dead throats-  
That unlucky pair.

For when the sky was bereft of a single star-  
at the time when human hearts are full of the dark-  
In the night, erupted a menacing laugh.  
The two corpses groaned-  
A startled push, a grunt, a thrust-  
Then one of them moaned.  
And silence.

In dead and deafening silence  
Many centuries passed.

Then another scream- and a worm was born  
  
It burst forth into the night with a cry  
Though new to the night it knew-  
It was a worm born in decay  
A child of death  
For the sins of its creators it must pay.

It wept and wept  
And when no answer heard,  
It turned to the bodies that had just stirred

"Answer me, oh mother mine  
Forever on your flesh am I to dine?"

"Answer me, oh father please  
Is to bring you decay my only peace?"

No answer still, just the eerie grins  
And the child of death was by violence struck  
It stood tall and launched itself  
Straight into the womb of the dead dead corpse

In and out, the cylinder body sparred  
Screaming, shouting, feasting- hard

"Answer me, oh mother mine!  
What sin have I committed, what deadly crime?"

No answer still, but the other carcass laughed  
"Little vermin, born of black magic  
You are the son of the dark"

"You eat our flesh- decaying and rotting meat,  
From our hollow bones- you, our marrow, feast;  
Born of the darkness by those who are dead  
Your very sight fills the living with dread.

The worm lunged at its father then  
And gnawed of his eyes- crying again  
But no word was said  
So the vermin tore  
into its father decaying heart-  
Big chunks of the ashy meat it carved off  
chew off, chomped on,  
Then spat out.

"Answer me, oh father mine!  
Why am I evil, if this be my design?"

No answer then. Not a whisper then.  
 No wind then blew or laugh was heard-  
 No trees stirred, nor sang any birds-  
 mere silence –  
 All was silent – the living, the dead men and the divine pen.

**Zainab Sabir, Final Year (Evening)**

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Carved in stones, a lone tear  
 escaped. Powerless pleas ploughed  
 deep within the cave. Meaningless  
 Strolls crowd the streets, all  
 but one without a shade.  
 Always deserted.

A dark soul, who could it be?  
 Pleading the innocence, why didn't it weep?  
 Parting in silence, when was farewell bid?  
 Was it, perhaps, in the blindness of the moon?

Strained in struggles, man kneels  
 to the stature of a man much more powerful.  
 Left to demise, the stream engulfed the shore  
 and set out to sail the life of the dead.  
 Clueless sights paroled the scene  
 With knowing hearts in secret.

Petrified the coward roars, would the wounds heal?  
 Paled in presence, the wild boar dies.  
 Bared in silence a drowning river -  
 Sanctioned to remorse, will there be rain?

Leaves without fragrance, crowing  
 down the sight and into nothing  
 Perplexed to counter the forced light  
 A closet of demons descended  
 Trapping the traces of the scares inflicted -  
 Dodged in daylight, Chased in darkness

Condemned to be in pain, why is the soul so calm?  
 Sorrowed fate, could it be altered?  
 To be or not to be, why is that the question?  
 When none are needed, how present all are.

***Bismah Barkat, Final Year (Evening)***

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***Imposter***

When I think of myself as a child, I sink back into this chair  
 What have I become? Why do I always wish I wasn't here?  
 Will those innocent scarred knees, look at these great big scars  
 and ask;  
 What have you done? why couldn't you take care?  
 Where did you run?  
 She would tell me loving is easy, that loving myself was loving what was hers  
 But I, imagine her, screaming into my ears  
 How could you look into the mirror and let it all burn?  
 I think I killed you little one, the night when I decided, I didn't want my face in the sun  
 "but you grew up to be someone I'd turn to"  
 she says as I, hide my wrists behind; feeling miserably undone  
 I'm scared to show her, that this is all that's left of us  
 I'm sorry, I tell her  
 I've been tired and worn out because there is no place to turn  
 "am I alive within you or is that also none of your concern?"  
 I stand with guilt tattooed under my right eye, as she looks up at me  
 can't we just go back and play? "please return"  
 God, who am I supposed to blame?  
 for this self-inflicted suffering and pain.

I hate myself, I whisper, while she says something that burns my soul into the flames  
 "So it'll never be the same?"

***Raafia Manzar, 3rd Year (Evening)***

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### ***The Blinding Light***

The sky with its vibrant colours  
 The earth filled with beauty and wonders  
 For years they have been praised  
 And yet I wanted to add a few more words  
 But never did I burden the verse  
 Little did I know I was destined to behold  
 The blinding light that plunges into everlasting darkness  
 A darkness filled with unearthly hues  
 A darkness filled with ecstasy  
 A darkness where I was free from all earthly dues  
 A darkness filled with beauty beyond words  
 Ah, sweet love they say I am trapped in you web of darkness  
 But its a darkness where I long to dwell  
 It has shown me a world I never saw before  
 It's where want is unknown and desire is unheard of.

***Eisha Fahim, 2nd Year (Morning)***

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Over and over and over again; like  
 knuckles tapping on a wooden door,  
 wings flapping in the pouring rain,  
 or passed down tales of ancient lore,  
 or reasoning with my heart in vain, like  
 the endless, unfathomable pains I bore;  
 What was it that you hoped to gain?  
 by disrespecting what my heart secured?  
 and refusing to gather its broken remains?

If time ceased, allowing me to implore,  
 I would ask about that deep red stain,  
 that festers inside, rotting the very core,  
 of my being, my soul, what it became.  
 For your censure was too harsh to endure;  
 The blackness of your heart — still the same,  
 coerced my crimson one to turn impure.

The specks of grey, my marks of shame,  
rendered ineffective, all kinds of cure.  
The very thing that I had wished to tame  
It tore me apart; now myself, I abhor.

*Laiyba Ali, MA (Morning)*

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***love is not love***

love is translucent, porous;  
and love is not love

you are not you, she is not her

it is a closed clip,  
a switch suddenly flipped.  
naught, but a timeless turn  
and a senseless shift.

when the quietest ray speaks  
of the slightest breeze,  
the purpose is fully feigned  
and it is naught again.

when the desperate haze uncovers itself  
you are not you, he is not her.

the dim view from a distance steals  
its shifting hue.  
it is a silence that only grows dimmer.

then only a force remains,  
only a force prevails  
visible to each eye, but mine,  
but thine;

so when the rest seems to have settled,  
loss finds a means beyond its rattle,  
and nothing unaltered lies;

when all hue is only a shade of white,  
and skin turns to skin,  
and the senile graves,  
too full with humanness,  
cut cracks in their slates,

you are not you, they are not them—  
no one is quite like her—  
and *love* still peeks out of the hem  
of my shirt.

***Anonymous***

## Metal Flesh

They say the golden hour of the setting sun is one of the most beautiful feelings in the world. It can take away your pain and bring you back to appreciating life. But as I'm sitting in my bed and watching the golden hour fading away, I can't feel anything.

I'm touching my face to get out of this oblivion, but can't feel anything either. Is it finally happening to me? The one thing that I've longed for? Is my prayer finally making its way through the doors of acceptance?

I stop touching my face and look at my hands instead. My hands, they still look human to me; then why am I getting glimpses of metal flesh? They appear to be light pink, but I'm not sure if they are my hands anymore, or perhaps of a robot. What do I do with these hands?

Ignoring the obvious, I look away from my window – maybe I'll feel something this time. The honking of cars is piercing through my ears, people, well, they're fast as usual, as if they already know the whereabouts of their destinations, then why don't I or why can't I?

I don't know if I have been sitting here for days or just a few hours; it's hard to tell.

My mind plays a tape, a tape from my memories; is it my brain's final attempt to make me feel what I've been trying to avoid or something else? Though I know none of it is real and it's just a vision, I hear the sound of laughing, the conversations, the time I spent believing the moments. Oh, I wish I could go back in time, but every passing minute hurts me.

I grab my head and I'm begging for it to go away; I don't want to remember the happiness, laughs, living life to the fullest, and loving – I'm picturing it and it all seems so close, yet I know, it has long gone now, and it's nothing but shadows; shadows which I would want to vanish.

I can't take this anymore, but can I change the tape?

I have these glass buildings around me – tall, confined, and black and white. I see people *living* in them, but I doubt they're human either. Perhaps they're letting go of their emotions and humanness the way I have.

My mind plays a new tape now. Oh, how much I miss the sound of chirping birds, the feeling of letting the sun absorb my skin, roaming through the green fields of flowers, and losing myself to the scent of the earth – there's no answer to the question why I came back here, to this city life. Progress: they call it, it rather feels no less than a cage. A cage that has surrounded me and is now trying to consume me with its trap of loneliness and emptiness.

The morning sunlight, sunny noon, purplish evening, and darkening night, I see the sky changing its shade throughout the day and reflected in this class cage where I live. My existence doesn't respond to all these changing phases anymore, and I can't think of the answer to the word WHY.

With each passing minute or setting sun or light, I feel my humanity, emotions, and feelings stripping away. Perhaps this is how things always were, but I never noticed, but now – what can I do besides witnessing this change or passage of time?

And so the golden hour of that setting sun has vanished away from the sky and the darkness takes over. There are no stars that could tell my future, is it a pity or a blessing in disguise – I can't decide.

I'm hearing a sound now, the sound of a clock ticking, *tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock*, though I want to remain attached to my transition, this sound is distracting me.

I think I know where it is coming from; I run towards the large mirror placed in my room to see myself in it.

A massive clock is imprinted on my chest, and I don't see human flesh anymore. I see a robot.

The silver color is rising toward my face.

**Zoha Abbas Rai, Final Year (Evening)**

## What dreams are made of

She is ripping out the pages of a book. A slow, strangely silent affair. Hair done up in a neat bun, shirt ironed and tucked into dark slacks, makeup fully intact. Yet, she sits in the middle of a mess of broken glass, spilled wine, and shredded parchment.

She sits, and she rips.

At the top of every page is her name, Times New Roman. It's all she sees before and after each tear, her name, blurring around the edges, dripping like melted wax. She doesn't think about the years of work behind these pages. Hours and hours bent over a laptop, running down endless hallways, pulling at her hair.

No, instead, she sees the red lines marking every sentence, circling each painstakingly chosen word, blood dripping over the white sheet. She sees herself, huddled in the corner of a bathroom holding a razor, mimicking the crosses lines on her skin.

She sees herself teetering on the edge of her balcony, as if drunk, a ballerina, a skater, performing a triple axel on the railing. She hears the giggles, she hears a scream, she hears sirens. She bows for the audience, and then she soars.

She sees herself, the circles under her eyes, the bandage over her wrists, the cast around her leg. She's standing on stage, staring straight into the camera, her mouth set in a straight line. She accepts the award, accepts the diploma, but she remains silent. Her professor touches her back, his eyes expanding. She stares at the camera, she stares, she stares and then she laughs.

~~in the pictures, she screams~~

The book is now nothing but an empty husk. She falls back on the floor, relieved. Her arms start to shift, just the slightest movement, the cast on her leg dragging against the floor. She moves, slowly but surely, back and forth. Over and over again. Once she's done, she crawls up and away, dripping wine. Looking back, she smiles for the first time in weeks. In the chaos of blood, liquor, and shattered dreams lies an angel.

***Rubab Amir, First Year (Morning)***

## In Conversation with Miss Noor Us Sabah – *On Translation and Transgression*

**Q.** Dr. Iftikhar talks about the element of وحشت in Urdu poetry, which he finds lacking across the Anglo-American canon. As someone who translates Urdu poetry into English frequently, do you feel that this lack is due to the linguistic limitations of English as a language or is it only a thematic preference that is more pronounced in Urdu poetry?

A. وحشت is such an interesting word, because of the many ways it can be read, given the right context. The roots of the word are Arabic, and it seems to stand in for monstrosity as much as it stands for misery. I haven't had the privilege of listening to Dr. Shafi talk about this particular theme, but if I were to take a wild guess, perhaps he is referring to angst.

Now that I think of verses in English, I see Dr. Shafi's point. Perhaps it is my limited scholarship of English verse that makes me think thus, but I honestly cannot think of a single verse in English that I can say is dripping wet with angst—with that push and pull, that chaos, that unnerving state of perpetual horror which I think is what وحشت stands for. I do think, however, that the Romantics might have come very close to such a state—I pant, I sink, I tremble, I expire by Shelley has similar “vibes” as Ibn e Insha's عاشق ترا رسو اترا شاعر ترا انشاً ترا—but only as far as the style is concerned. I think that one of the reasons وحشت is so much more pronounced in Urdu is because it is more pronounced in Urdu. (Bad) pun intended. I'm referring to pronunciation—or, more aptly, sounds. Still, I find English counterparts not very emphatic in the pronunciation of their جنبش. Wordsworth's lass is “solitary,” Ghalib's Arif is تھا۔ There's an ocean of difference here. The Atlantic Ocean, perhaps.

I think Urdu poetry—which, by the way, I am not well-versed in—has an element of the tremble, the tremor, the terror that is produced partly by way of theme and partly because it makes trebles for music. From what has been my meagre observation, it might be due to the repetition of a set of sounds that helps creates such an effect—such a “state.”

One of my favourite things to do when I translate from Urdu to English (and poetry specifically) is to focus on the sounds. Just earlier today, on a long drive alone from Jauhar to Saddar that would otherwise have been exhausting, I found myself thinking about the ش sound in Urdu. Two groups of words came to mind: شیر، شکر، شربت، شیرین، شکست، شکایت، اشک، عشق and شہد، شائستہ شمکش، کشمکش، شکایت، اشک، عشق and other such existential concepts. Of course, I am aware that there are thousands of other groups of words associated with

the letter (شب، شام، شر، شاطر، شمشير، شہید، شدید، وغیرہ) that I'm trying to make is that تاثیر and وزن of an Urdu word—and, of a group of Urdu words—can produce an auditory effect that perhaps ignites those feelings of desertion and shuddering and horror inside of us. Think about it. When we say عشق, we're pronouncing the ش differently from when we say شہد. The ش in عشق is a lot more muted, and produces more of an ssshhh sound—a silencing, a warning sign of terror, a sound that the wind might make in a desert at night. The English *love* is more emphatic in contrast. Love is a lovely word, but *ishq* makes you shudder. Defeat is saddening, but *shikast* shakes you. Noise is loud, but شور is shrill. Yes, it is more pronounced.

I think as a translator (and also as someone who writes poetry) I personally tend to think a lot about sounds and the overall auditory effect of verse, which is why I think that it isn't just the meaning in Urdu poetry that is more melancholy, it's also the music.

**Q.** *Do you believe that this feeling of chaos, or wehshat, is a conscious choice on the part of the poet in an attempt to come to terms with the grotesque imbalance in the world or is it more of an expression of one's hatred for the self?*

A. I don't think any of a poet's choices are ever conscious—I know I'm kind of dismissing the stylistic enjambment and fashionable line breaks of modern poetry here, but that is a whole other debate. I don't think any of a poet's choices are ever conscious because I don't think a conscious choice can ever be poetic. It will too mechanical—too overcooked. It is in my opinion an inner struggle—an *inwards* struggle, and that poets who've ventured *outwards* in the world, have found it incomparable and incompatible with their perfect, ideal inner worlds. Disillusioned, the poet must then live the illusion. Altaf Hussain Hali in the *Muqaddimah* called حقيقة and ”دھوکہ“ متناقض—opposites. A poet lives in this antonym world and understandably finds himself in a state of in-betweenness, of suspension. This, I feel, is what leads to the terror and chaos, to the angst and loneliness.

**Q.** *What is your personal definition of self-loathing? Perhaps a metaphor or image you most associate with self-loathing?*

A. Self-dissection and self-discovery, I think, is synonymous with self-loathing—because the self is designated to be unknown. The moment we try to know it (Sorry, Baba Suqrat) we pain, we sink, we tremble, we expire. If I have to conjure up an image that would be a person gutting themselves and remarking how foul their entrails smell. We all smell on the inside (some smell on the outside too), it's just that poet types are too curious to not take a whiff.

**Q.** Do you think that your knowledge of poetry as a craft allows you an objective view on the poetry that you write? Or alternatively, do you think that your thorough understanding of how poetry works acts as a drawback when it comes to you writing poems?

A. Art and craft go together for a reason. It absolutely helps me to judge my own work better. Judges and sentences go together too.

Understanding of anything can never be a drawback. A dangerous thing, perhaps, but never a bad thing.

**Q.** All languages seem to exhibit the seamless influence of cultural connotations, and these connotations are, more often than not, very specific to every language, and hence, rather inapt to others. When translating a piece, do you feel like the intended exposition is at times lost or overridden due to the gaps in cultural resonance rather than meaning, or, does it, in your opinion, find a new direction – one that only the translated text can fashion?

A. I will give another Hali reference here, because at one point in the Muqaddimah (have you guessed which book I'm reading these days by the way?) he mentions that the progression of knowledge has made limited the meanings of words, but that languages have become more flexible and accommodating at the same time. One sentence later he says that science and mechanics render dead fiery thoughts, but they are also blessing language with new metaphors at the same time.

I think the same is true when we speak of interlingual exchange. It is inevitable that I'll have to let go of the untranslatable, but I always try and find a way to work with both cultures at play. In a recent translation, for instance, I wrote this: "The rest is simply feathers on a bird" (لفظون کی طوطا مینا) This was how I explained it in my notes: *The original text takes an Urdu idiom to describe what can be more aptly said is a "beating around the bush."* I chose to phrase it as "feathers on a bird" since the original Urdu idiom goes something like this: "the rest is just parrots and mynahs." Since that would not make much sense in English, given the distancing of the two cultures, I have tried to keep the meaning as closely related to the Urdu idiom (i.e., related to birds) while also ensuring it makes sense in the translated text.

Sometimes, translation is transgression.

## **In Conversation with Miss Huma Shakir – Poetry, Self-Loathing, and Navigating the Space Between**

**Q;** *To start off, let's attune ourselves to the semantics of this interview. What is your personal definition of self-loathing? Perhaps a metaphor or image you most associate with?*

A: Thank you for giving me the task of ‘grappling’ with this very interesting theme. I see self-loathing as this extreme, intense, obsessive introspection, compulsively prompted by a deep alienation and disaffection from self, society – and I would add God. In effect, deliberately cutting oneself from all avenues of hope and succour – emotional, immaterial, and spiritual. A kind of teasing flirtation with damnation. Hopkins puts it very evocatively;

“I am gall, I am heart burn. God’s most deep decree  
Bitter would have me taste: my taste was me.”

**Q:** *You have a special relationship with poetry – it doesn’t take an expert to see that. Do you often find this definition/image of a self that hates and berates explicated in poetry? Can we not trace the origins of poetry, from Gilgamesh and Beowulf, rooted in a prototype of this hatred?*

A: I feel self-doubt, if it means a sense of unworthiness, (a sort of spiritual and moral imposter syndrome), is a very natural and human failing – even the prophets seem to have had these moments. In the Christian tradition, you even have Jesus crying out ‘Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?’; that is to say, My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?

But if one considers it in its more intense sense, the bitter and desperate ‘self-loathing’, I would look for its root in the Renaissance where man became the measure of all things, so to speak. I would assert that with the gradual drifting away from religion (which had so far acted as a source of spiritual rejuvenation and hope), when man became all in all, there was nothing to fall back on. This is my understanding of it others, may not agree. I feel with every successive epoch in human history, this fissure has become deeper, and at times unbridgeable.

I think Kurtz’s ‘The horror! The horror’ is directed not outwards but inwards, in its most urgent and poignant expression in fiction.

And of course, whether it is the ancient epics or post-modern works, this is a reoccurring motif in the poetry of all ages. With the Romantics and Victorians, the sincere articulation of these dark, bitter thoughts as reflected in the Metaphysical and Pre-Romantic poets seemingly turns into a studied pose of ennui and disenchantment – more melodramatic and less convincing (at least in my opinion) – kind of brooding Beyoncé persona hinting at a darker but untamed and unnamable depravity which you may shudder at, but not readily identify with.

**Q:** *You have maintained throughout our time at the department that you are not a poet. Being so well-versed in poetry and the poetics, one would think you would love to chance your hand at verses as well. Do you think your distance from the craft so readily laid open to scrutiny gives you an edge of objectivity that most others in your position wouldn't have?*

I would rather say that I am neither a poet nor a writer but merely someone who enjoys reading poetry. I would not be presumptions and claim to be well-versed in the technicalities of versification, I am merely someone who is equally interested in the skillful handling of language with its evocative power and the human psyche. The study of poetry continues both of these and offers a pleasurable challenge to the reader to marvel the puzzle and mystery of each poem and the chance to encounter intimately another human ‘self’.

**Q:** *Is this objectivity the reason why you do not write poetry? Or if you write it, then don't show it? For the sake of an honest inquiry, we are going to be a little direct: is it simply self-doubt?*

I think most students of literature pass through a stage where they feel certain that they will one day write the ultimate novel or poetry to rival at least the Romantics, but some of us realize early on that not everyone has the gift. I would say, in my case, it is less self-doubt and more self-awareness perhaps.

**Q:** *Moving on to the lighter side of this conversation, which poet to you best encapsulates this idea of self-loathing in all its erratic presence? Do you also have a poem in mind?*

There are so many! There is Donne in *Holy Sonnet - 1*

“I dare not move my dim eyes any way,  
Despair behind, and death before doth cast

Such terror, and my feebled flesh doth waste  
By sin in it, which it towards hell doth weigh."

Cowper in his very powerful *Hatred and Vengeance*

"Hatred and vengeance, my eternal portion,  
Scarce can endure delay of execution,  
Wait, with impatient readiness, to seize my  
Soul in a moment.

Damned below Judas: more abhorred than he was  
Man disavows, and Deity disowns me:  
I, fed with judgment, in a fleshly tomb, am  
Buried above ground."

I can't help, but share another poem in its entirety (a personal favourite) – Hopkins' / *wake and feel the fell of dark, not day*

"I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day.  
What hours, O what black hours we have spent  
This night! what sights you, heart, saw; ways you went!  
And more must, in yet longer light's delay.  
With witness I speak this. But where I say  
Hours I mean years, mean life. And my lament  
Is cries countless, cries like dead letters sent  
To dearest him that lives alas! away.

I am gall, I am heartburn. God's most deep decree  
Bitter would have me taste: my taste was me;  
Bones built in me, flesh filled, blood brimmed the curse.  
Selfyeast of spirit a dull dough sours. I see  
The lost are like this, and their scourge to be  
As I am mine, their sweating selves; but worse."

I particularly like Sylvia Path's Lady Lazarus and some of her other poems. Theodore Roethke's *In a dark time* – a surreal, symbolic landscape of the soul in torment.

"In a dark time, the eye begins to see,  
I meet my shadow in the deepening shade;

I hear my echo in the echoing wood—  
 A lord of nature weeping to a tree.  
 I live between the heron and the wren,  
 Beasts of the hill and serpents of the den.

What's madness but nobility of soul  
 At odds with circumstance? The day's on fire!  
 I know the purity of pure despair,  
 My shadow pinned against a sweating wall.  
 That place among the rocks—is it a cave,  
 Or winding path? The edge is what I have.

A steady storm of correspondences!  
 A night flowing with birds, a ragged moon,  
 And in broad day the midnight come again!  
 A man goes far to find out what he is—  
 Death of the self in a long, tearless night,  
 All natural shapes blazing unnatural light.

Dark, dark my light, and darker my desire.  
 My soul, like some heat-maddened summer fly,  
 Keeps buzzing at the sill. Which I is I?  
 A fallen man, I climb out of my fear.  
 The mind enters itself, and God the mind,  
 And one is One, free in the tearing wind."

**Q:** Do you think the theme of self-hatred is a central motif in the Western poetic tradition? Has it enjoyed a central position throughout or has it been more of an epochal focus?

I would not go so far as to call it a central motif in the Western poetic tradition, but it nonetheless has a significant presence. It is a strand which resurfaces in different epochs where external pressures are optimal for fostering such feelings in susceptible individuals. If by a happy/unhappy coincidence, some of them are able to articulate their agony, the world gains works of lasting worth.

So have you powerfully evocative lyrics emerging in all eras. The Metaphysical Poets in the 16th-17th century, the Pre-Romantics, the Romantics, the Victorians and, of course, the Modernists. The self-doubt and self-loathing expressed may be spiritual

in essence, caused by a sense of being forsaken by one's god or may be more of a secular existential crisis brought on by issues of self-image, societal pressures, gender, sexuality etc.

**Q:** *An important reason why we decided on this theme is because of its prevalence among the student body. Almost half of the submissions we receive, especially poems by the students, in a way or so echo the same idea of a failing/failed subject that berates itself. Do you think this is a universal feeling among amateur writers or has it aggravated over the decades because of the forces at work in our times?*

Quite true. Only recently I had the privilege of reading Empty Spaces, the work by a young poet and it was largely self-exploratory in the same introspective and bleak vein. So although a universal feeling, the context of our times have intensified this sense of alienation in a world always on the verge of some apocalyptic disaster. Where is the poet supposed to find joy, beauty and love to celebrate in his works?

I also feel for most of our young poets, poetry is to a great extent identified with the Romantic intensity of The Sorrows of Young Werther (etc.) and with Shelley's cry – *I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!* – rather than the spontaneous joy of Wordsworth or Blake's Songs of Innocence. Our suffering is what makes us interesting is the implicit undertone in most juvenilia. Maturity brings perspective and equilibrium.

**Q:** *What advice would you offer to the students who write poetry or are interested in writing poetry?*

The only practical advice would be read! Read more, read more poetry!

Don't let yourself get bogged down and thrown off if you don't understand immediately and incisively. Reading more and reading open mindedly anything that you can get your hands on (and perhaps don't start off being highbrow in your approach). You will develop and hone your poetic sensitivity and become more discerning overtime.

## LABELED A KNIFE: AN EXISTENCE OF CHOICE.

*Syeda Soha Irfan (Final Year, evening)*

**Half a ruptured moon:  
Nails on chalkboard, gobbling flesh -  
Gulp! A good woman.**

I am laying on my mother's sickened, yellow-vomited soul. Every day and every night the perpetual darkness of her prolonged depression engulfs me black. It converses with me about all the regretful could-nots and about all the disgusting have-all. Her whispers of depression, laced with luscious guilt and voluptuous vengeance seep through my ears, like a gushing wind causing a blockage in my ear. Her whispers then dance on the nape of my neck, slowly tiptoeing and fluttering as it demands sympathy, as it demands validation, and as it demands its own life from within me. Every night-every night, she comes to me, and every night I let her sing her mothering lullabies to me, and every single continuous night, I conceptualize her more than I do myself.

But there is a relief that comes with conceptualizing her - the relief of eliminating my own sense of self. Every time her thought crawls around my face and circles my ears, traces my neck, and tightens itself around it - I am held again. The relief that comes with its continuity, the relief that comes with its persistence and the relief that holds me close with the prevalence of its arrival is to me the only sanity attainable. I don't even know what sanity means. Is it the surety of life? Is it the surety of unsurety of life? For me, it is to feel something, to feel anything other than my own self. For me, it has to be the othering of my own self from within this so-called true "I" that I believe I live in.

The bed that I lay on is dingy and rusted. With my every changing position it complains insistently, almost as if my movements and my progressions stub on its sore areas - pressing indignantly on the swollen blue flesh and leaving its mark all the way to its chalky dusty bones. The bed is restless and at that - soundly restless, only because it's careful for itself. Careful that a slight liveliness might cause its paper bones to dust away and amalgamate into every other used plastic bag jammed under its body – slowly being eaten away like every other being in this flat. But nobody talks. Nobody makes a sound. Nobody dares complain about everything that eats them alive in here. It is silent. The flat screams such horrifying deafening silence that every complaint, every murmur of life is gulped down by this flat's clamorous swallowing. Day and nights depict no distinction, they are one and the same. Except at daytime, the scorching heat of the sun fills up the empty soul of this flat, and if you sit too still you can see the heat wandering around the whole place – investigating the place, to see if it is fit

to rest in: it is not. It never was, and so the heat walks away as well, leaving the place moldy and murky. So I like it. I admire that my bed can manage to make a sound. I like... I like that something talks.

The charcoal night is deepening; I can sense her arrival. The mahogany drapes hanging in front of me by the window has stopped swelling up. *She is coming*. The wind has settled into its stillness. *She is coming*. The bed sheet under me tightens and stupefied itself. *She is coming*. The cupboard door creaks itself narrow. *She is coming*. The paper files stacked above the cupboard flutter together and straighten themselves. *She is coming*. The mirror had stopped reflecting. *She is coming*. The cluster of empty beauty products on the dressing table has turned colorless. *She is coming*. The long broken computer table cluttered with open unread dust accumulating books had closed itself shut. *She is coming*. The swaying unclothed hanger in the cupboard knob had ceased its clattering. *She is coming*. The metal chair overwhelmed with worn, unworn, taken-off, dirty laundry had now collocated themselves into one huge ball of reeking solicitude. *She is coming*. The quietness of the air around tells me that *she is coming*. The hushed complaints of my rusted bed tell me: *she is coming*. The yellow sickness in the air was now traveling up my nostrils. *She is coming*. The dry cotton clothing on my body now chewed and soaked wet with her undigested preferences tell me - it tells me that she is coming. *She is coming*. The bathroom door had unhinged itself discreetly. *She is coming*. *She is coming*. *She is coming*. *She is coming*. *She is coming*...

There is a cold tenderness on my right cheek.

"Ammi", I inhaled

*She has come.*

Her hands pressed deeper onto my right cheek. I could feel my facial muscles tightening up. Her touch was tender, so brutally tender that it froze every single pulsating individuality within me. Soon, her other hand touched my other cheek. She held my face as preciously as she carries me for nine months - but I knew, I knew that the roles had reversed themselves now. I knew I had to carry her unerringly- inside myself - within myself - like that of a part of me. That was the brutality of her tenderness, that was the demand of her love: to carry her dead sickness within me.

I did not turn my head to face her. I stared at the ceiling as the fan above me made a bizarre howling sound with every full circle it completes. The fan is as old as this generational sickness that I carry within. Covered in rustic spots with its screws loosely holding together its whole entity - ready to fall apart at any possible moment. It moves at one constant speed, unable to move at any other - so

physically incapable of turning itself without crying out loud. As if its whole body aches under the crippling anxiety to hold itself together. As if it is alive - as if it knew that if it gave up, who knows how many days we shall live without a fan. I have to ignore its misery; I have to ignore its every cry for help. I have to, for my own unwanted survival. So I let it wail for a little while longer. Her hands forced me to face her and I resisted. I resisted, for I dreaded looking at her, every night she comes, yet every time I resist to look at her. So every night she fixates her face in the crevice of my neck and breathes me in. I could hear her whimper. Her hands slowly froze on my face. Her unstable breath injected itself into my skin. I absorbed her. Every single breath - I absorbed it. I stayed still, petrified with resistance and guilt, clenching my jaws, clutching the wood of my bed, my nails digging themselves inside the mushy wood. Holding my breath, I softly let out an exhale and she latched herself onto that, her hands digging deeper into my skin, turning my head to face her once again and I faced her- yet my eyes remained shut. Her hands descended to the bruise on my neck, scratching it all the way to my chest. She wailed and then whimpered. Her grip loosened, her fingernails turned to fingertips - tracing my bosom, then my stomach, my waist, my thighs, my knee, and finally my toes, and with her finally caress she crawled under my bed. I could hear her whimpers gradually growing louder and louder as her hands interrogated every part of my body to see if it was fit to dwell within.

It sunk in. She called my name and I sank in deeper. With every call, I sank a little deeper into the bed. The mattress under me split itself up to welcome me inside of itself. She called me again. *I sank. Again. Sank. Again. Sank. Again. Sank. Again. Sank. Again and again and again and again .....*

*Sunk!*

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3:30 am

There is a relentless restlessness staring down at me from across the passage area. It is coming from the bedroom, the calling - my calling is coming from the bedroom. It grows louder with every pace I complete. It is small and white-eyed, with nightily face and wired hair. It has been grinning at me for the past three hours, watching me as I paced by it. Every step is a chore, every turn a choice - yet I cannot stop. I cannot stop this ghastly pacing. From the bedroom to the passageway. From the passageway to the bedroom. Passageway, bedroom. Bedroom, passageway. My feet are numb and cold, they beg me to stop - I wish I could. I wish. I wish. I wish. I wish I could. I physically cannot stop pacing and with every step, I pace a little faster and more erratic. I have to walk- I have to pace - the stillness in the house start to talk to me if I stay still. The stillness inside of me comes alive to chat with me if I stay put. I have to walk. I have to pace. I cannot be with myself.

I have to walk. *Pace. Walk. Pace. Walk. Pace. Walk. Pace.* Tears rush down my face. I have to walk. I have to pace. I am incapable of being with myself. I have to walk. I have to pace. *Walk. Pace. Walk. Pace Walk. Pace. Walk. Pace Walk. Pace. Walk.* I forced my hand to touch my face so I could wipe the tears. The tears felt hot against my sweaty fingertips. My calloused ugly hands tried to wipe them off, but my fingernails latched onto my skin. Digging deeper into the skin, grabbing my eyes, and pulling them down. It pulls on my face all the way to my neck, then it crawls up again, pulls on my eyes, and drags them down once again. My nails were settled well inside my skin, scratching and peeling my face – small particles of my skin I can feel them accumulating inside my fingernails. Am I showing myself yet? Am I escaping myself yet? Is my bare flesh showing enough? Am I pretty yet? Are my eyes bigger yet? Is my skin fair yet? Am I pretty yet? Is my face slimmer yet? Have I escaped myself yet? Is it working? Are my nails enough? Am I enough yet? I walked faster. I could hear

*Pace. Walk. Pace. Walk. Pace. Walk.  
Pace. Walk. Pace. Walk. k. Pace.  
Walk. Pace. Walk. Pace. Walk. Pace.  
Walk. Pace. Walk. Pace. Walk. Pace.  
Pretty patterns. Pace. Walk. Pretty  
patterns. Pace. Walk. Pace. Pretty.  
Pace. Walk. pretty patterns. pretty  
patterns. pretty patterns. pretty  
patterns.*

*Pretty yet? Pretty yet? Drag on skin.  
Drag on skin. Pace. Walk. Scratch.  
Scratch. Scratch. Scratch.  
Scratch. Pace. Walk. Scratch.  
Scratch. Pace. Walk. Scratch.  
Scratch. Walk. Pace. Walk pace.  
Scratch. Scratch.*

*Enough yet? Enough yet? Enough  
yet? Enough yet? Enough yet? pretty  
yet? pretty yet? pretty yet? pretty yet?  
pretty yet? pretty yet?*

*Enough yet? Enough yet? Walk.  
Pace. Walk . pace. Walk. Pace. Walk.*

myself again. I need to walk faster. There are a bunch of water cans stored on the sidelines of my flat walls. Some empty, some full, I have to circumnavigate around them while walking. My brother is sleeping in the bedroom, my Abbu is fast asleep in the living room. The night is getting quieter and my mind is getting louder. I should walk faster. My nails aren't enough to make me pretty. I need to grow them out. But nothing grows inside of me. Everything is aching to come out of me. My self rattles to vomit out of its own self. I live in my bulging guts. My guts... I touched my stomach, it bobbed to left, then to the right as I dawdled my way through. My guts churned and kicked like a trapped fetus to get out of my body. I held it – I held my waist from both of my hands and pressed it together and the meat peeked out from between the spaces of my fingers. I pressed it deeper, I pinched it tighter. Am I suffocating myself enough yet? The one that lives inside, is it dead yet? It cannot breathe, it is dead right?

Am I suffocated enough yet? Am I enough yet? I need to walk, but I have stubbed my toe against one of the water cans and now my toenail is broken. The blood seemed excited to escape me, I bent down to check my toe and the blood looked black in the green night light. I wanted to rip the nail apart, yet I decided to walk again, but I couldn't stand straight. I forced myself to stand straight and failed. But. I. need. To. Walk. So I crawled, I crawled in that squatting position and completed the one whole pace and then second and then third. My nail has started to rip open wider with every stride took. On the fourth full pace and something growled at me from the dark passageway. It felt like my own shadow was growling at me, hissing at me. I crawled deeper into the passageway and something touched my nose. I could feel something present right in front of me, so close that I could smell its rotten, rancid, repulsive scent. It smelled like a cloth that was submerged in vomit and urine and then taken out and left to dry out.

*Scratch. Scratch. Scratch. Scratch.  
Scratch. Scratch. Walk. Pace. Walk.  
Pace. Walk. Pace. Walk. Pace. Walk.  
Pace. Walk. Pace. Walk. Pace. Walk.  
Pace.. Scratch. Pull. Scratch.  
Scratch. Drag. Scratch. Scratch.  
Walk. Pace. Walk. Pace. Walk. Pace.  
Walk. Pace. Walk. Pace.. Scratch.  
Pull. Scratch. Scratch. Drag. Scratch.  
Scratch. Walk. Pace. Walk.  
Pace. Walk. Pace. Walk. Pace. Walk.  
Pace.. Scratch. Pull. Scratch.  
Scratch. Drag. Scratch. Scratch.  
Walk. Pace. Walk. Pace.  
Escaped yet? Escaped yet? Escaped  
yet? Escaped yet? Escaped yet?  
Escaped yet? Escaped yet? Escaped yet?  
Escaped yet? Escaped yet? Escaped yet?  
Escaped yet? Escaped yet? Escaped yet?  
*Rip it, rip it, rip it, rip Rip, rip, rip rip  
rip rip rip rip rip Rip it, rip it, rip it,  
rip Rip, rip, rip rip rip rip rip rip rip rip  
Rip it, rip it, rip it, rip Rip, rip, rip rip  
rip rip rip rip rip rip Crawl Crawl  
Crawl Crawl Crawl Crawl Crawl Crawl**

I could feel something present right in front of me, so close that I could smell its rotten, rancid, repulsive scent. It smelled like a cloth that was submerged in vomit and urine and then taken out and left to dry out.

"Who are you?" I asked, my voice stagnant.

"I am you." It replied in whispers bubbling up in the air. "Who am I?" I asked again.

"You are I."

"Your eyes are melting." I noticed. Its eyes looked soft and plump. So soft that it was unable to stay in its sockets, so it trickled down its face like a broken rotten egg.

"Because I am pretty."

"Your skull is broken." I looked at it closely. There were cracks all over its head and from which its slimy pink brain bulged out through the tiny spaces between the cracks and dripped on the floor, one minced meat at a time.

"Because I am pretty." It said and scratched its neck with its long talons which went straight through its cartilage neck.

"Your throat is hanging out of your body. I said. There was a slit in the middle of its oesophagus through which the air escaped and travelled up and the rest of its bloody thick veined throat hung out from its hollow neck.

"Because I am pretty." It replied with a raspy undertone while moving closer to me. I gulped.

"You don't have a body. You look eaten." I said.

Its talons moved closer to me and touched my broken toenail. "Because I am enough." It ripped the nail apart.

I could not scream.

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8:05 pm

Karachi is a decaying city if not a dead one. It is a sad city if not a dead one. It is a depressed city if not a dead one. It is a dying city if not already a dead one yet. People like me are the most common here, they are everywhere. The lady sitting beside me is me, the one sitting beside her is me, the three men sitting in the front seat are me, and the one driving the chinchi is me. They are me, I am them. Everywhere – I am everywhere and yet I am not normal and yet I am not stable and yet I am not enough.

The weather is hot and humid. I am covered in sweat. The chinchi smells of unpaid labor. It reeks of unanswered prayers and burnt hope. There is no wind in the air, it is all very still once again. The chinchi rickshaw is still as well. We are stuck in spine-breaking traffic, the roads are eroded, and yet the driver doesn't care. He would not drive in the smoother area even if his life depended on it. It needs to rush. Rush so that it could go through this same routine all over again. It cannot afford to go slow or stop, his frail chinchi rikshaw might come apart if it rested longer. It has to escape its stillness. It has to. The road is clear now and the chinchi rikshaw has gained its speed. It is dawdling but it won't break- nothing ever does here. I see the world pass by, the vehicles running by me, the roads looked smoother, and the world seemed quiet.

*Jump!*

There are stray plastic shoppers and wrappers on the side of the road.

*Jump.*

Pieces of big concrete are rolling around on the road.

*Jump.*

the traffic lights don't work.

*Jump.*

Cars are blaring their horns.

*Jump.*

The motorcycles need to go before, they need to squeeze by at all costs.

*Jump. Jump.*

The bridge is coming up.

*Jump. Jump. Jump.*

The lady beside me has fallen asleep and is now leaning on me.

*Jump. Jump. Jump. Jump. Jump.*

We are on the bridge now and the vehicles are at liberty to hit and run.

*Jump. Jump. Jump. Jump. Jump. Jump. Jump.*

My stop is coming soon and then I have to walk further to reach home.

*Jump. Jump. Jump. Jump. Jump. Jump. Jump. Jump. Jump.*

the second I will reach home Abu will ask me if I washed dishes and swept the floor.

*Jump. Jump. Jump. Jump. Jump. Jump. Jump. Jump. Jump. Jump.*

I will say no. he will throw a tantrum and I will once again become a useless, unwed daughter.

*Jump. Jump. Jump. Jump. Jump. Jump. Jump. Jump. Jump. Jump. Jump.*

I have to cook dinner when I go home. I have no energy. There is no food at home to eat and gain energy from. The fridge will be empty. What will I cook? Abu will be hungry; he will throw a tantrum. I am not the daughter he wants me to be.

*Jump. Jump. Jump. Jump. Jump. Jump. Jump. Jump. Jump. Jump. Jump.*

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5:00am

There is a rupture in the moon tonight. The clouds around it are full, they circle the moon like witches circling the cauldron and yet the magic never happens. It is a dead moon tonight, a decaying one tonight, yet it is my moon. My moon who chooses to be ruptured, who chooses to fester him, and who chooses to be infected by him – I - am infested by him.

The ruptured moon will rage a madness in me tonight. I can sense it once again. The night is rouge tonight, it has spiraled out of its quietness and scratched its way into boiling hotness of vomiting screams. The sadness in the night has turned itself into a raging blue. The air around me is hot and the wind burns through my skin with every touch. The gallery door beside my sofa has started to rattle uncontrollably – out of fear? Out of warning? I do not know. The curtains behind me swelled up till they covered my face. The air inside the curtains was humid and stale yet it was windy. There was a hot storm coming, I could feel it tingling on my spine. I could feel its hand caressing my back, counting every disc in my spinal cord and taped on them with utter musicality. It was hot, it burned and the touch skinned me. I could feel him near. *He is closing in.* There is a gush of slight blue air coming from above the curtains. I can see the moon; *he is closing in.* The rupture is deepening. *He is closing in.* The clouds are thickening. *He is closing in.* The moon is losing its light. *He is closing in.* The stars have shrouded themselves. *He is closing in.* The curtains are swelling up in frenzy. *He is closing in.* My body is boiling up one disc at a time. *He is closing in.* My stubbed

toe has started to bleed out of hotness. *He is closing in.* The gallery door is going berserk. *He is closing in.* But will he accept me this time? *He is closing in.* But will he find me enough this time? *He is closing in.* But will he find me worthy this time? *He is closing in.* But will he stay this time? *He is closing in.* *He is closing in.* I could feel something crawling up my legs. *He is closing in.* I could feel the raging heat exuding from within me. *He is closing in.* My legs are occupied now, my waist held, my stomach pressed downward and my chest amalgamated with his.

I closed my eyes and there it was – a slight pat on the back of my head and his cool coarse lips on my forehead.

“Pastel.” I inhaled.

The boiling anxiety has left the air. The witches have left the cauldron. The curtains have stopped swelling. The gallery door has stopped banging. I was at slight peace again. The moon has stopped festering him. *He has come. He has become I.*

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### **9th July 7: 00 am**

3: 30 am

there is a knife staring with stark horror at me.  
Who is the knife? Me or metal?

Perhaps it is interchangeable, perhaps the metal is I, and I am metal. But even so, I would still consider being just metal.

Anything – to be anything but this boiling hot blob of loathing and anxiety. Anything other than this yellow rotting foliage of memories – anything, anything but myself. To exist anywhere, any place, in anything but within me!

**A blood morning with a bright yellow sun – poor have waited for this day. Today is the day when they cease to sleep hungry - when the blood will clench their hunger and put shreds of meat on their blanched bones. Today is the day when the livestock shall live. I haven't slept the whole night, a nuisance – such as yearning for some pastel has kept me awake all night. However, I usually don't sleep the night before this day. I feel the dead livestock for the one last time throughout the night.**

The cold grey metal slipped closer to me as if it understood my loneliness as if it knew that it may be the only way out.

It slipped further closer and stared at me, its sombre sharpness admonishing me. It looked pretty. The silver lines across its overused scratched face gleamed under the dim green light. It knew that I needed her. *It knew.* Its handle seemed approachable. *It knew.* I touched it, it felt like warmth. *It knew.* My skin was cold and bare. *It knew.* My grip around it tightened and I felt the touch of inspiration after a long time. *It knew.* My heart felt the rush. *It knew.* My body pulsated as each one of my fingers surrendered itself to her. *It knew.* A cold

shiver ran through my spine. *It knew.* *It knew.* I brought the knife closer and it glowed again. *It knew.* I let it touch my bruised kneecap. *It knew.* *It knew.* It lunged further and finally met with my skin. *It knew.* It stayed there for a while and then slid in deeper and then deeper exploring every inch of my thin flesh. The blood trickled down oh so swiftly, caressing my leg one pore at a time. The knife- she found its spot- something harder to chew on and it moved in rhythm. *Forward. Backward. Forward. Backward. Forward. Backward.* And with every muffled moan, it gained its pace. *Forward. Backward. Forward. Backward. Forward. Backward.* *It knew.* *It knew -* it knew of my loneliness. *It knew.* *It knew.* It knew of my silent asunder. *It knew.* *It knew.* It knew of my yearnings. *It knew.* *It knew.* *It knew.* *It knew.* Something – someone knew. Something – someone – anyone – came to me. She came to rescue me, someone – something did, she – she came.

*The qasai is here, the men have arrived back from the masjid. Their crisp white kurtas hanging from the chairs – abandoned. I peek out, they now stood among the Qasai – all looked alike, ready to commence. I stood by the window, holding the window railing, eyes swollen with blood and body stinking with sweat. The bull was here. The floor was wiped clean, the knives gleamed with sparkling water. I looked at the knives, they smiled at me and nodded in greetings.*

*The bull stood in front of me, tall and full of meat. Its black skin shimmered under the blood sun. it looked nervous as my younger brother held him through its nostrils close to the railing. It flashed its tail in fury, its eyes popped open glaring at me for survival. I had none to spare... I wish I did. It paced left and right in crippling anxiety. Soon there was a rope that wrapped itself around its four legs.*

*PULL! It has fallen. The knife grinned at me. The bull was then moved around to a suitable position.*

*One qasai sat on top of its belly, one held the kalla, one held the tail, one stretched the long pulsating neck and the other one washed the neck with cold water. The knife grinned at me. A cold shiver ran down my spine. It has fallen. The bull grunted, the knife saw its invitation and welcomed itself in. Holy chants filled my ears and the bull stared at me. The knife moved in rhythm. The bull stared at me. It let out a moan and the knife moved faster.*

For a few moments, everything was chaotic. Everything spoke to me – yet nothing spoke within me. The blood caressed my legs and soothed me, letting its presence be known to me. For a split moment, I had escaped myself. For a moment I had acquired a momentary stay in this continuous confusion and flux. For a moment I had been present. For a minute minute as it may be – I had lived.

And then she appeared.

“Has he left?” the creature asked me. Her half-eaten being looked much more chewed and spat out tonight.

I knew she was talking about “pastel” who had visited me earlier tonight. “He is I.” I replied.

“Has she left?” she asked with her raspy voice which barely made any sound.

She talked about my mother. I looked at myself – so infested with yellow spots now turned solid, making a dirty yellow layer on top of my skin – ready to be peeled off along with my skin. “She is I” I replied.

“You are bleeding.” She said as she crawled closer to me. Held my thighs with both of her talons and kissed my bleeding kneecap with her cleft lip and razor-like teeth. Her talons soon pressed on my bulging thigh meat, her teeth digging deeper on my sliced flesh. She sucked on my blood and chomped on my meat, but the meat was unsustainable inside of her. Every bite she took of me fell from her hanging unattached half-slit throat. The chewed meat slapped on the marble floor of my apartment and soon it smelled like home: chewed and spat out in blood.

***Forward. Backward. Forward.  
Backward. Forward. Backward.  
The bull stared at me. The knife  
grinned at me. The bull rasped  
and with its half-cut throat, it  
wriggled on the empty concrete  
floor submerged in its own  
blood. It ran its legs, it rasped, it  
moaned, it stared at me and it  
breathed for the one last time  
with a raspy sigh. The bull  
stared at me, the knife grinded  
at me and the blood morning  
lived.***

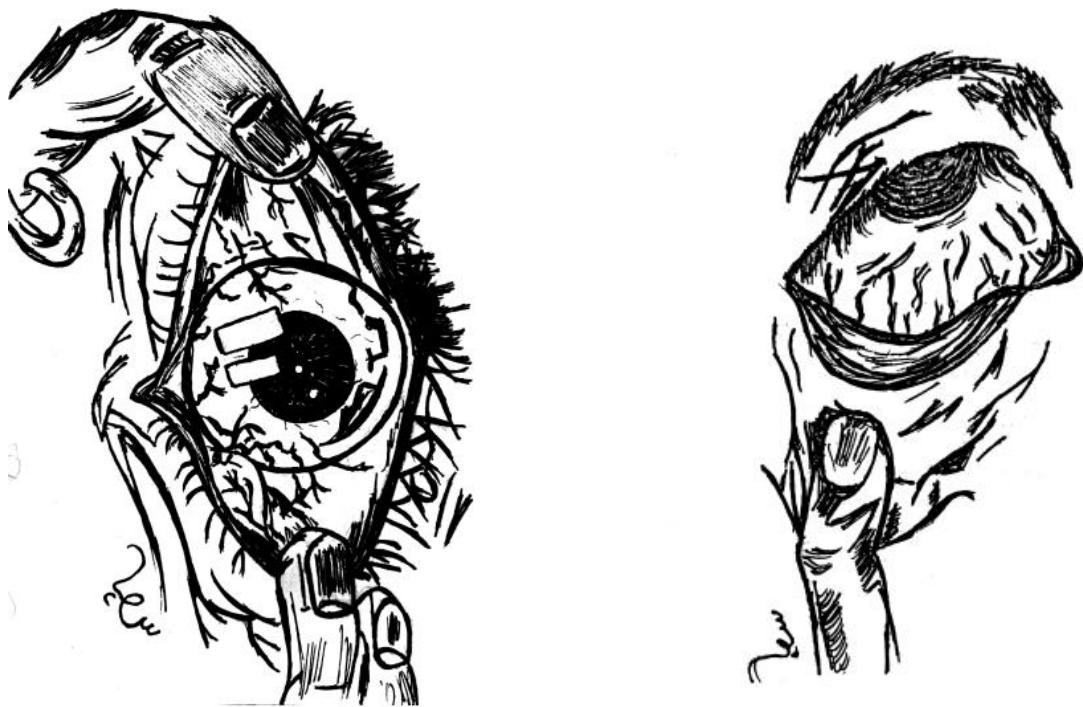
She faced me – her eyes melting, her brains leaking, her throat spitting my meat. I looked at her dingy body- her toes missing, parts of her legs chewed off, half of her stomach sliced open, her ribcage exposed and infected by maggots that feasted on her rotting leftover meat. She scratched one of her ribs and a grumble of maggots fell down, she then scooped that grumble with her talons and placed it back among the others.

I closed my eyes and inhaled. My tears were dead. My heart was soundless. "Who ate you?" I asked.

"You." She replied.

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I am laying with my mother's sickened, yellow-vomited soul. Every day and every night the perpetual darkness of her prolonged depression engulfs me black. It converses with me about....



Artwork (*existence*) by S. Soha Irfan (*Final year, Evening*)