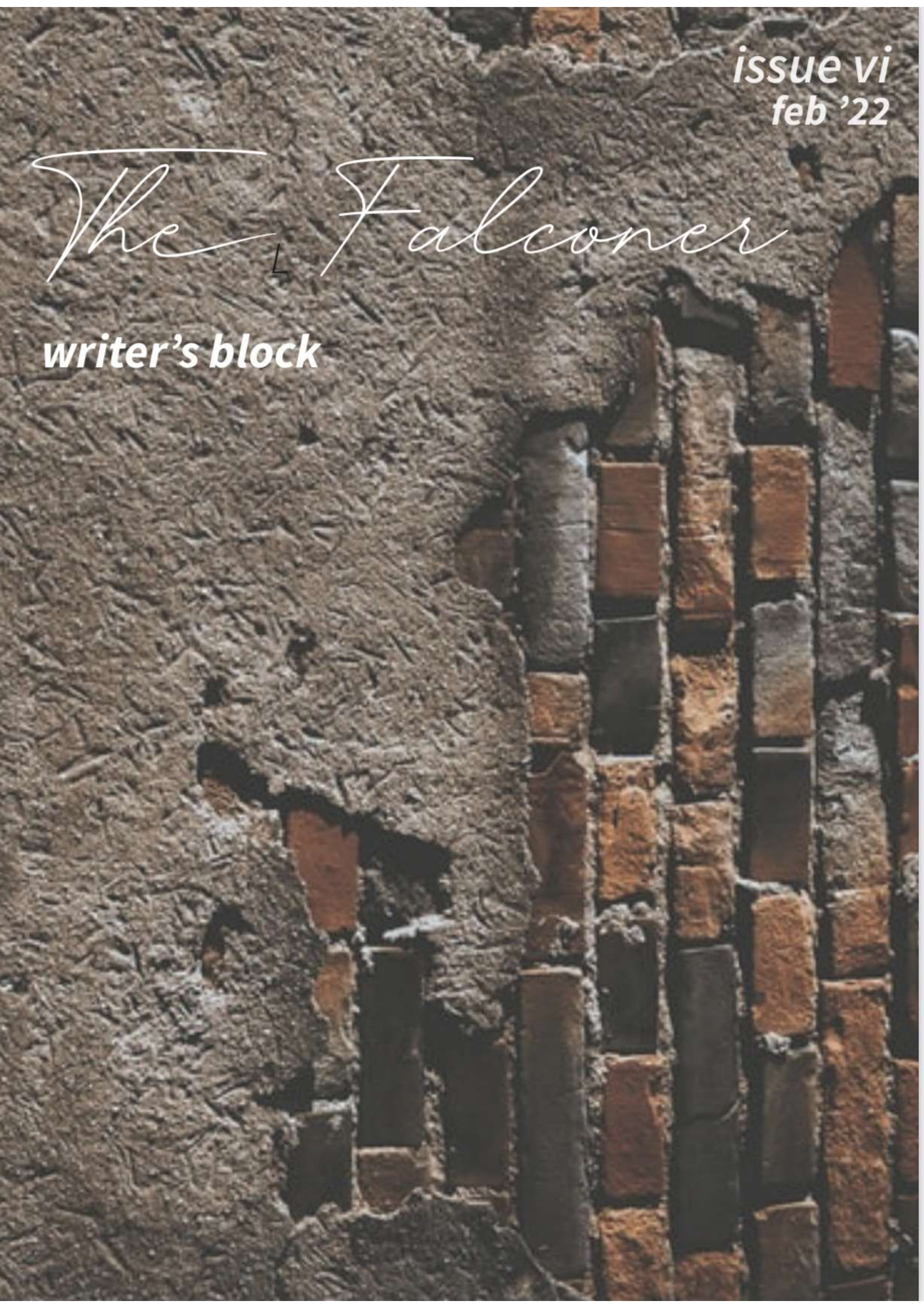


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The L Falconer

writer's block



From the Editor

Thoreau famously said, “Happiness is like a butterfly, the more you chase it, the more it will elude; but if you turn your attention to other things, it will come and sit softly on your shoulder.” The same is true for this issue of *The Falconer*. It took us two months to put it together, and even now we are not entirely sure if it is the most honest realisation of our vision. But it has also allowed us to think long and hard about the theme.

What is writing? Beyond the fetish of creation, the excitement of the process, and the possessed, tamed thing in the end – what is writing? To me, at this moment in time, writing is the culmination of the process of externalising something that had hitherto picked at me from the inside. Tomorrow, it might be the feeling that envelopes the process and not the process itself. But if I cannot define what writing is, how can I ever decide if I am blocked or just confused? That is one obstacle that we have had to overcome these past months – deciding whether the definition was necessary after all. There is one thing that we know, however: whatever writing really is, it will be blocked at some point by some unrecognised, uncharted force. It is a universal ailment, yet it is the most individual experience.

What we have now come to realise is that there is perhaps no single way of seeing or talking about this block. It is the loss of inspiration for one, the dormancy of it for the other, and its total absence for the third. The desire, though, is always there: the desire to create, to externalise, to give shape, to produce. One way of overcoming the block that our writers in this issue have informed us of is by identifying that desire. You can do it in two ways: there is the path of hopelessness which contends that regardless of what you write, the end-product will never be enough – it will always be the thing-in-itself; and there is the path of hope and trust in the creative force of the self, that whatever you produce will ultimately become a part of the process of creating something truly novel and worthwhile. It is *maybe* this identification that ultimately gets us out of the rut. It unblocks us.

Over the course of this issue, we have mapped out different interpretations of what writer’s block (and writing) is; how it has been represented in literature; and some

ways of breaking out of it. In addition, we talked to current and former students of the English department about the different ways of dealing with the occasional writer's block, in hopes that their struggles and insight would help the budding writers of the department today. The cover of this issue supplements a visual form to our collective understanding of the block, but the metaphor unveils itself depending on how one sees it – a necessary foundation, a symmetric pattern of repetitions that never ends, or just part of a thing in the making. As one of our interviewees puts it, writing is a subconscious act. It is also perhaps one way of commenting on how the very act of writing is limited to the fluency with which we can leverage our connection with our two selves – the conscious and the unconscious.

Needless to say, this was a difficult issue to put together. We have had to bargain with many of our biases and beliefs, and put them aside completely at times. We have had to argue, agree, and allay with our individual anxieties in order to overcome them, to settle on some semblance of unanimity. Perhaps that is why writer's block has been such a difficult idea to map for centuries, one that can only be understood in images and metaphors. Yet we hope that by the time you are done with this issue, you can at least sense the fleeting flutter of that butterfly wing in the air.

Moaz Ahmed
M.A. Final (Morning)

Blocking, Unblocking

Moonis Azad, Faculty

At times I cannot write. I have thoughts to write, the incentive to write, the means to write, the will to write, but for some reason I can't bring myself to write.

It isn't always like this. I have been able to write. A lot, at times. What is different then? What is it that makes me write a lot, and in the absence of which I cannot.

This is how I understand it: when we join a group of people at a table involved in a long and serious ongoing discussion, we initially tend to listen. We want to understand what is being said and what has already been said. After having heard all that has been said, at times we feel, if the discussion appeals to us, that there may be something left unsaid, or not said enough, in the right way. We hear a gap in the conversation. If the gap is important to us, we speak. We speak in order to either fill that gap, or to make the gap more prominent. Much like a blank page tempting a writer to fill it up with words; much like innocence tempting experience to corrupt it; to write is to participate in a conversation, not for the sake of participating, but for the sake of contributing to it out of the dissatisfaction that something important is missing from it – that something central has been overlooked.

Perhaps this is why there are themes: the same old topics/ideas that everyone keeps writing about, but the need to talk about them again and again can only arise when there is a dissatisfaction with how they have been talked about the desire to represent them better or more truthfully. Maybe, the way to begin writing again is not to will it, force it, or practice it - but rather to listen to what has been/is being said, to listen closely and find what hasn't been said right; what has remained silent despite its relevance.

We live in a time where everything seems to already have been said from every possible angle. Every joke, every picture, every mode of enjoyment always already exists, and it's suffocating! Every problem, every argument, every creative form appears to have become exhausted and obsolete. Someone still passionately participating seems to be stupid to not see that the road they are on leads nowhere. One can only sit and make jokes. Existence becomes an endless meme. The only

breach in a conversation worth speaking about is when someone doesn't see that their seriousness is laughable, which is ironically not a gap but a *confirmation* that there isn't any.

On one hand, we need a gap in the conversation to write. On the other hand, the very dream of finding this void is the founding joke of the whole conversation. The only way I see out of this dilemma seems to be to listen harder: to find a breach within the joke. What if, behind the ubiquity of the joke, there is a fear that one is unable to laugh at? What if the place from which we participate in the joke is not funny at all? That might be worth laughing/writing about.

Writer's Block - a product of contentment?

Soha Irfan, M.A. Final (Evening)

Social conventions tell us that there must be a greater reason for your writer's block than just your unwillingness to indulge with the words themselves. There has to be a *reason*. Not writing is simply not enough, there has to be an underlying cause – depression, stress, the loss of creativity, or the voice of the inner critic roaring out loud. Amongst all these stupefying forces, the worst of all, emotional frustration is a beast in its own right. Now, as much as it portrays itself as a divine revelation of some sort into that well of the unknown, inhibiting abstractions, emotional frustration – or the inability to figure one's movement of emotions – is, in my opinion, the primary hurdle in one's understanding of writer's block.

Until a few days ago, I had not given much thought to the very notion of writer's block. As a writer, the idea, or rather the threat, had lurked in the murky waters in some depraved corner of my mind; but for the time being, I have yet to personally experience the perils of the beast. If, by chance, there were times when I was unable to pen down my thoughts or feelings, I had always blamed it on my own unwillingness to write rather than finding a greater cause behind it. The more that I thought, the clearer the discrepancies became. What bothered me the most, however, was the “negative” idea that is usually associated with the phenomenon.

This idea that writer's block shall always sprout from the negative is unclear to me. How do we know if the essence of writer's block is not the very absence of that negativity? The absence of frustration – be it sexual or emotional – the absence of dissatisfaction, the absence of lack of contentment, the absence of the very act of unacceptance. To contend that the reason for writer's block is pure satisfaction and contentment would be to say that its very presence inhibits one to sit with their words long enough to pen them down. What if that “*intense overflow of powerful emotions*” is no more an intense turmoil, bleeding out from the edges of your fingertips? Perhaps it is the calm in itself that we call writer's block.

Take *1984* for instance. In the novel, we are introduced to Winston, a character who, regardless of acquiring the knowledge that writing a diary is considered a “thought crime” in his world, keeps a well-maintained diary. He writes in it almost

every day, and throughout his entries, there is a heavy sense of disgust, regret and dissatisfaction. However, as the story progresses, we see the relationship between Winston's writing and his frustration go through changes that are inversely related. This is to say that as soon as Winston starts experiencing contentment and lesser dissatisfaction, there is a significant decline in his *act* of writing. At one point, he even mentions that he "felt too happy to write about anything."

Set against the relationship between sexual satisfaction, sexuality, and writing in *1984*, the act of sex is a symbol of freedom from everything – including writing. This freedom is evident in Julia's famous dialogue; "When you make love, you're using up energy; and afterwards you feel happy and don't give a damn for anything." It is probably this act of not *giving a damn* about anything that is closely related to the decline in writing that Winston experiences – his 'writer's block'. Perhaps a writer's block isn't some sort of descent into the poisoned chambers of turmoil, but an ascent towards empty fulfilment, that we are not ready to embrace as yet.

It does not even have to be sexual frustration alone. Political dissatisfaction can inspire a writer just as well. Wajida Tabassum, the great Indian fiction writer, was one of the most controversial female authors of Urdu fiction. The relationship between the availability and accessibility of sexuality, desire, and resistance is the driving force in her writings. Her prolific repertoire is not just a product of her never-ending emotional frustrations and dissatisfactions towards life. Writing was a political act for her. In her story, *Meri Kahani*, she explains the glimpses of her life and boldly quotes: "I want to tell my tale because you (the world/culture/society) questioned my writing." To her, writing was not merely an escape; it had become an act of rebellion against culture, state, and her society.

If anything, writer's block, then, thrives in positivity and wilts in negativity. Once the curtain of frustration lifts, once the violence ends, *writer's block* sets in.

Gating Inspiration

Duaa Azim, 2nd year (Morning)

Inside the very depths of his mind, Writer wanders down paths upon paths of quotes and dialogues. The concrete is paper under his feet, his surroundings towering hardcovers.

Writer: Hello?

His voice echoes across valleys of his own poems, bouncing off well-rounded prose, before eventually washing away alongside a river flowing with drunken bits of scribbles and drabbles.

Writer: Inspiration! Inspiration, do you hear me?

Overhead, the sun has started its descent. Writer passes several piles of his casual reads — the daily papers, Sunday magazines, as well as pamphlets, hurriedly skimmed during early morning commutes — scattered about all over.

Writer: *(musing)* Some of these I scarcely recall. Others, I believe, I carry around everywhere; forever a component of each sentence I've ever read, then myself tried to emulate. If nothing else, I hope this trip serves as a reminder of my mastery. Although, seeking Inspiration remains my goal.

A couple miles in and he stands facing heavy iron bars stretching long into the purplish sky. Writer glances around and beyond to see them fencing around all blocks of land. His path is cut short by a small gate at the bottom. Banging upon it proves unsuccessful.

Writer: *(cupping his mouth)* Inspiration, are you lurking here?

A sudden gust of wind picks up, a loose paper cyclone spinning right at him. Writer narrowly dodges bookmarks and paperclips. He's hurrying in his retreat to his own block, shielding his face with a single arm.

Writer: It is you, isn't it? Show yourself!

Once the sky starts to clear and dusty winds begin to settle, an unmistakably familiar thud of footsteps follows. Rubbing at his eyes, still driven in his cause, Writer makes out a middle-aged woman, clad in sombre grey, standing before him on the other side of the storm.

Writer: Inspiration! Have you forsaken me?

Inspiration: Indeed, I have not. I'm merely on a break.

Writer: A 'break'? Is that how you term this abandonment? I keep you fresh and fed with civics, alive with literature and articulate with language! Why, then, should you need breaks? Have you any idea how lost I've become in your absence?

Inspiration: *(rolling her eyes heavenward)* Now enough with the dramatics! Being 'lost' is the job!

Writer: And being dramatic isn't?

Inspiration: Fair enough, I suppose. What brings you here to the borders?

Writer: *(holding onto the iron bars)* Dear old Inspiration, I have come for you. Wasn't it merely a month ago that we came up with that brilliant story? We work better in alliance; always have. My partner, you must return to me.

Inspiration: Not yet, boy! I need to stay on this side a while longer.

Writer: But it's been over a week!

Inspiration: Yes and yet, I'm still unable to choose the alternative.

Writer: Alternative to bars? Are you being kept by force?

Inspiration: On the contrary, I find myself rather free. In fact, more so than you.

Writer pulls at the rusty gate. It doesn't budge.

Writer: Have you lost your wits like I my words? I can't let you keep doing this!

Inspiration: *(hand to her heart)* What, devote time to myself? God forbid an old lady practice some self-care around here!

Writer: (*wildly pacing around*) Why does your self-care always happen to fall on days I need you the most?

Inspiration: Or, ask yourself, do you need me most when I happen to be caring for myself?

Writer: Look, all I know is that when I sit to write, I just about go blank as unused parchment, and I'm growing increasingly tired of living one day after another, kept apart from my one purpose of creating art. Don't turn me away, for I have no one else to turn to.

Inspiration: (*sighing*) Tell me, Writer, what makes you think I could assist you? Going by your present situation, I'm unsure as to what change of fortune you expect from my presence.

Writer: I'm not sure, but I do know that you'd bring me the perspective I'm evidently lacking. At present, words and ideas, both of them elude me. My half-done novel bears the brunt; my back suffers the consequences of sleepless nights and restless days.

Inspiration: Oh, you poor picture of desperation! At the sixteenth chapter, are we not? (*upon his nod*) Well, you know what they say: when in doubt, bring a plot twist about! That ought to help.

Writer: Not when I cannot physically write!

Inspiration: Not a worry in this day and age; use text-to-speech. A brilliant tool, I say.

Writer: Do you deliberately brush me off? When I say I cannot write, is it not obvious that I've exhausted myself trying to form coherent sentences?

Inspiration: You know, there are certain websites—

Writer: Inspiration! Stop! Accepting the internet's ever-ready assistance in this regard is just socially acceptable plagiarism. It wouldn't be the same. (*sighing*) It's no use — each second, I drown deeper in a pool of despair. If only I had some words stored with me, I would scream them to the world!

Inspiration: (*now holding the railings herself*) Got yourself into a bit of a situation here, there's no denying that.

Writer: And I need your help. Gee, now you comprehend!

Inspiration: For someone who claims to have lost words, you sure use hefty ones.

Writer: Remind me, friend, how did I ever pen them down?

Inspiration: Why, by the power vested in your right wrist, of course.

Writer: If only it were that simple. Lately, it's a genuine wonder whether all this (*vaguely gesturing around*) has been a work of decades-long fluke that now wears off. Maybe I never could write!

Inspiration: There comes the old imposter syndrome.

Writer: Suppose it's true, where would I go? What would I do? Who am I if not my words? A disgrace! Useless!

Inspiration: Look, boy! This isn't the first time something as such has occurred and, knowing you, it shall certainly not be the last. You do what you've always done — keep at it until the disease wears off.

Writer: (*shaking his head*) You don't understand. I don't need your pick-me-ups — I've fed myself loose talk plenty! I need you.

Inspiration: No, *you* don't understand — all one can do is wait. Besides, I couldn't be with you, even if I wanted to!

Writer: (*impatiently*) Woman, just step right out — it's not that hard!

Inspiration: So well-read and for what? It really is, for I cannot!

Writer: Why must you say so? Just break the lock!

Inspiration: Ah, Writer. How deluded you are! You think *I'm* the one confined by this lock? Look around and see for yourself — *you're* the one that's stuck in a block!

Writer's face pales, eyes frantically jumping fence to fence. Inspiration's voice now reducing to background noise, he starts to pull harder than ever. Whether it's embarrassment or the perspiration beads forming on his brow, he doesn't know, but his face is now crimson, that's for sure. Maybe he ought to say something, perhaps even apologise, but words don't come by easily these days; and for the very first time, Writer doesn't mind.

On Writer's Block

Fatima Ijaz, Alum

A few years ago I was so caught up with the notion of ‘writer’s block’ that I penned a 5-page prose-poem based on it. A friend read it and remarked, “you’re writing! You’re obviously not suffering from writer’s block!” So I raise the same question here as I had raised to him back then – does merely the act of writing release you from writer’s block? Or is it somewhat of a deeper ailment?

I wrote that prose-poem when something had shattered inside of me, and I had lost faith in human relationships. This kind of a deep loss affects your relationship with language, I think. If you are a writer, suffering is bound to impact your association with words. I found it impossible to write on themes that were my trademark till then and found myself in a new kind of hollow state. This was ‘writer’s block’ to me. In that spell of time, I found it very difficult to write something close to my heart, not because I had lost the ability, but because I did not wish to express myself anymore.

Writing, however, is also a compulsive and cathartic act for me – so I still wrote, but the writing was black, struggling, hollow. The image would be of trees at the end of autumn, when all their leaves have been shed, and some kind of bizarre skeleton remains. Thus, the act itself never stopped for me and the form that is my chosen instinct – is poetry. I still wrote, just that it was meaningless and the real flow of the writer was ‘blocked.’

This was many years ago. I have evolved since then, and so has my writing. It’s just that in that time I had such a close encounter with the roots of ‘writer’s block’ that I can’t forget it. In fact, I can recall it with the quickness of a bird’s breath. How I defeated it over the years has been a journey. However, since the condition was philosophical to me, its undoing also had to do with finding belief again. Once lost, this is very difficult to do. I think even today, I am more of a sceptic than any other identity. In my story, here’s how to defeat writer’s block: be persistent, relentless, never give up, keep trying to use your torn wings – keep up the practice of writing. Write each time you find yourself at a loss of spoken words – take that very moment and try to describe it. Write, even if the images seem bizarre, or the

connections seem preposterous. Write in disjointed words, scribbles, two-word poems. Write every day.

External circumstances will affect you, of course. However, it is up to you to choose your battles, to decide what has the power to harm or hurt you and to what extent. I am a believer in individual willpower and I feel even the most trying circumstances must at some point bow down to the persistence of a strong drive. In other words, if you decide that ‘writer’s block’ won’t get to you, in the long run you’ll be surprised how often this will be true.

Current times are fast-paced and writing is evolving in the digital world. It has turned to the forms of chat, emails, status updates, instagram captions. I think this too is an exciting time for writing, and all these are valid forms. I tell my students who are afraid of the word ‘writer’ that they are all in fact, already involved in this practice. Social media asks us to write in the short form with the most impact. You want to have ‘just the right caption’ for a picture – this too is a training in the practice of writing. The idea is, you have to be in love with the act, and if this is the case, you will always find your way out of every kind of writer’s block just to glance at your love again, reach out to her hands, or gaze into her dark eyes again.

I’d like to end with a poem (*continued on the next page*) that I wrote once about ‘writer’s block’, while in the state of it. This is definitely one way to go about it - write about the very situation you are caught up in, start from describing how you feel. Truth is, there can be external writing exercises you do, but it’s when you identify the root cause of your block that you will not just start the process of being released from it, but also begin to understand yourself in a deeper way.

Sentenced

When emptiness reaches

It becomes the sound of water,
 reaching
 or the swallow of a word, choking.
 Or the bird of a callous hand
 sketching from its beak
 its own version
 of reality -
 this is, burning.
 Not too long ago, a verse
 was a vase,
 kept like a porcelain panther on glass.

To be away from it.

Essential halo. gaping wide
 from the centre of eyes, blank space.
 An inability to make sense of it;
 the sun, the chemistry,
 the golden daffodil.
 Realising in seconds, anything
 like the form had been exchanged
 at a toy-store,
 you are left with plastic,
 & the real world outsmarts you
 with watches.

In exchange of words.

In exchange of words I got gardens
 to walk into and lose myself
 till I became a ghost
 sitting next to the white flower, idly.
 This, and also local stories about
 madness hiding in the wilderness.

A Scientific Take on Writer's Block

Yusra Altaf, 3rd Year (Morning)

Constantly hearing and reading about writers like Shakespeare who have produced masterpieces all their lives, it's difficult to imagine a life where writer's block does not have a grip on a writer's consciousness, and in turn, their pen. Writer's block, or creative block, is possibly as old as the art of writing itself. And it doesn't just happen to writers. Creatives from all walks of life—artists, musicians, poets—can suffer from it. Sometimes inspiration just doesn't strike. But is lack of this 'divine' inspiration the only explanation?

Webster's dictionary defines writer's block as "a psychological inhibition preventing a writer from proceeding with a piece." Writing itself can be seen as an external representation of the interaction between the conscious and the unconscious – with the writer's own inner conflicts and repressions seeping into the text without them being essentially aware of it. In the psychoanalytic tradition, writer's block was usually viewed as an unconscious defence mechanism or as the consequence of trying to exert too much conscious control over the writing process. It's a psychological phenomenon that often lies outside of conscious control, and when you try to control an animal that is meant for the wild, chances are you're going to face repercussions. The "anal" and "phallic" interpretations offered by psychoanalysts in the 1930s used different terminology but described how perfectionism could be detrimental to writing in a similar way that cognitive scientists would later propose that fixating on rules and structure could contribute to writer's block by resulting in inflexible thinking (Bergler, 1950). In other words, you try too hard to produce something "worthwhile" and blow your systems out of whack.

Writer's block may also have an inversely proportional connection with unusually high or low levels of arousal; which means that stress, anxiety, intense moods (such as ecstasy or grief) and burnout may be contributing factors to the formation of the block. Because the writing process requires the use of memory to retrieve the right words to describe a scene or convey an argument, and executive functioning for making decisions about what to write or which idea to pursue, it would make sense that any major increase or decrease in arousal level deviating from the optimal point could potentially trigger an episode of writer's block - by pushing a writer over that threshold or back past the minimal threshold required to begin writing (Flaherty, 2015).

One of the more conscious and well-known motivational components to a writer's block is evaluation anxiety (or fear of criticism or rejection) and the consequent loss of enjoyment. A writer fears that others will judge their work poorly and freezes up (Murray, 1985). Sometimes, this "freezing" has been described as being accompanied by a lack of ideas or knowledge of how to express ideas fluently, and other times, writers have indicated that besides being paralyzed with fear over how they would be evaluated on a particular project, they did not feel blocked in any other way (Boice, 1985).

Unlike the factors described earlier, which are thought to lead to blocking indirectly, behavioural factors such as procrastinating or having an irregular schedule, can be more direct means of blocking. A writer may be capable of writing, but choose to put off writing until a later time, stop following their regular routine due to changes in their schedule, environment, or social circle, resulting in a substantial decrease in writing output, or simply write too infrequently or erratically to finish a project (Smeets, 2008).

Whatever the reason may be (and we may never be sure of the accuracy of our guess), every writer is testament to the fact that going through writer's block is a frustrating process. It is not as if you cannot think in the frustrating confinement it puts you in, it is as if you are in a clear glass box, and you can see all hell break loose on the outside, only you can't write about it. A change of perspective is sometimes all you need, and if you were to think about *why* the block is in your path rather than *what* it's doing to you - as an intersection and not a dead end - you may just find Ariadne's thread in your back pocket, unconsciously guiding you towards inspiration in a way you never saw coming.

In Conversation With Writers

For this issue, we sat down with a few of our department's own writers to talk about their struggles, beliefs, and ways of writing. In keeping with the theme, some of the questions were planned in advance, and others were asked spontaneously.

Noor us Sabah Tauqeer

What is writer's block to you; is there an image that corresponds to your understanding of it? How often do you find yourself blocked?

Writer's block is *hell* to me. It's a very painful time, which is a rather strange way of describing time, but equally important, because writer's block is a phenomenon that we most commonly associate with time. Writer's block is not a time that we inhabit, but a place - and not a good one. Oftentimes, I find myself stuck in that terrible place, with no way to get out.

For me, there are bouts when writing comes organically. These are the phases in which I am genuinely inclined to write, and find my head bursting with thoughts that I must put to the page. But then there are long periods of drought; autumns of thought, where one loses the leaves of expression. Perhaps we need these seasons, but for now, there is some solace in the fact that the writing always comes back.

Having said that, I dread the day when the sleep of writer's block becomes perpetual. In that sleep of death, I dread not waking up to realise, and put to ink, all the dreams that might have come. The image of King Arthur's sword jutting out of a rock comes to mind, and the defiance of the sword can be taken as the pen that won't move. Much like the rock from which the sword of expression juts out, the mind becomes obsolete, and falls into a period of cruel dormancy.

In your opinion, is it upto the writer to unblock themselves, or is it an external force that gives when it gives?

I do not think that it is upto the writer to unblock. Whenever I find myself stuck in a writer's block, I try to force myself to write, especially when I see other writers write. In moments such as these, where I find everyone accomplishing greatness

and myself doing nothing, I try to force myself to write, and end up with poor results, which is obviously reflected in what I write as it is contrived, basic and platitudinal.

If there were an external force at play, I think the result would be the same. When I write, I feel as though something has filled me up with light. At that moment, I feel light and heavy, filled with the weight of the thought that I *must* get out, and in all its unpredictability, I find the experience to be filled with uncertainties. There is no key, then, to unblocking yourself, and writing will come when it does.

Do you think that the times that we live in have exacerbated the influence of this force that blocks, or has it always been just as intense?

Going by the sheer volume of work that writers have produced in the past, perhaps it is true that the times that we live *do* exacerbate a writer's inability to write. The lives that we lead are perpetually entangled with texts, and since we spend so much of our energies on social media, text messages and the internet, perhaps it does take some time to refuel the part of ourselves that writes. I, for one, cannot say this with absolute certainty, but this might have something to do with writer's block.

What advice would you give to the writers of the department?

Instead of writing more, I'd recommend that you read more. Read more, and read better. When I'm in writer's block, the one activity that I make sure to engage with is reading. Personally, reading helps because it makes me feel less guilty for not writing. The words may not be pouring out of me, but there is some sustenance to be found in their pouring through me.

Fasiha Irfan

What is writer's block to you; is there an image that corresponds to your understanding of it? How often do you find yourself blocked?

Writer's block to me is something which goes hand in hand with my ever-imposing imposter syndrome; a voice from within tells me I'm not a good enough writer, and sure enough, as I sit in front of a white blank page, unable to write down even a single word, all my fears are actualized. It's something that fuels my deepest insecurities and makes me question all that I am. If I were to associate an image with my writer's block, I would say, I view it as an ever-looming shadow that hangs above my head. It's impossible to shake it off, or escape it. It's like a dark fog that severely distorts not only my perception of myself but also everything around me. If I can't write, the world loses all its beauty.

How often do you find yourself blocked?

I think I'm blocked almost all year round. I think writing comes to me in unprecedented, unpredictable flashes. I can't ever anticipate when I'll be able to write again. I just casually pick up my pen after not writing for God knows how long, and suddenly the words just flow through me.

In your opinion, is it upto the writer to unblock themselves, or is it an external force that gives when it gives?

I definitely think it's an external force, but I also believe that if the writer doesn't actively try their luck at writing, then they might never be able to write anything at all.

Do you think that the times that we live in have exacerbated the influence of this force that blocks, or has it always been just as intense?

I think the times we live in do intensify this 'block' because technology allows us easy access to other people's writing and their success. Thus, we're always comparing our work with other people's and coming to the conclusion that what we're writing isn't as good as what other people are producing. I think the frequency of writer's block is also amplified by the fact that almost everything that can be said about a certain topic has already been said a million different ways.

Those who aim to be original often find themselves striving to contrive something new and wholly theirs, and if they can't (which is often), they fall into slumps.

What advice would you give to the writers of the department?

I think the best advice I can give other writer's echoes what Emerson said in *Self-reliance*: You need to strive for originality and be confident in what you create. If an idea comes to you, recognize the gleam of light that it embodies and grasp it as quickly as you can. Never let words die without being spoken; you owe it to the muses to weave your ideas into poetry. But on a separate note, if words do not come to you, no matter how much you want them to, be patient with yourself. It's okay to take breaks and prioritise your mental health. If you can't write, it's fine. Pick up your pen the next day, without thinking too much of your previous failed attempt, and begin anew.

Aamna Motala

In your opinion, is it upto the writer to unblock themselves, or is it an external force that gives when it gives?

I don't think writing can be forced; to me, it always seems to arrive suddenly, regardless of the time or place. But maybe there is something in that time or that place which unblocks it, I don't know for certain. Keats liked to imagine heights when troubled with writer's block, and it worked for him. Having said that, I guess no amount of external stimuli can help if imagination isn't there to sustain it.

Do you think that the times that we live in have exacerbated the influence of this force that blocks, or has it always been just as intense?

A writer's block is a writer's block, so it really does not matter how intense it is. At the end of the day, it blocks the writer all the same.

Academic writing is different from creative writing, that is the general understanding. Do you think the factors that block one are exclusive to just

that type of writing, or is that block general to all kinds of writing whatsoever?

I think the kind of writer's block that accompanies academic writing has more to do with procrastination and academia-related anxieties in general, whereas the block that stifles creative expression is just there, *inside*, not because of a lack of energy or increased amounts of stress. The difference is there, I believe. The effect, however, is the same.

Wishaal Khalid

How do you move past writer's block?

I've been writing for as long as I can remember, but the last two years have been incredibly productive in terms of how consistent my writing has been. For me, the key to prioritising consistency over everything else is to tap into my subconscious mind. I genuinely believe that if you engage your unconscious mind in a conversation with the conscious mind, not only will they entertain the ideas, thoughts, and unstructured plans that you throw at them, they will also engage in an active dialogue, finding an expression hitherto unknown to you. My angle towards this was spirituality and buddhism in the early days, but I now find the Jungian concept of Individuation a much more effective way of tapping into the territory of the beyond.

Do you think writing is one of the ways in which we can reconcile the conscious and the subconscious parts of our brain?

Absolutely. Art is one of the ways in which we can tap back into our subconscious mind and bridge the gap between the two sides of our brain. According to Jung, the artist plays a significant role in a culture and the world in general, because when they create art, unlocking their unconscious potential, they are giving a substantial form to the abstract images and ideas of the unconscious mind, which are perhaps shared by many people of the same culture. In creating art, the artist is not only

letting their true, unsplit self come to the surface, but also allowing many people, who share their ideology and sentiments, to do the same.

Do you think that the inability to write can, in some instances, be a response to something, perhaps a piece of art, that has touched us - that is to say unconscious part of our brain – in so profound a manner that instead of tapping into our creative self, we find ourselves grappling with a sort of anxiety that blocks the creative mind?

We feel anxious when, in the visible world, we cannot see a way out. And, I believe anxiety disorders also play a role in blocking the creative mind because when you are so caught up with what's right in front of you, there is no way you can reach back into the unconscious mind and look at the bigger picture. But coming back to your question, I don't think the influence of a good piece of art can ever be so negative as to take the form of the notorious and much-dreaded block. On the contrary, when I am feeling blocked and I expose myself to good art, I feel as if the creative side of my being has been cracked open.

But don't you at times feel like you will never be able to write anything as good as that of your predecessors; doesn't that induce anxiety that stops you from writing?

I believe the point is *not* to create anything good. That is not to say that I do not feel this anxiety. As an artist, you can say that it is a companion we learn to live with, but according to Carl Jung, art is neither good nor bad. It is either true or untrue, and true is what flows out of you. If it is contrived, then it is neither true nor good.

But then can we ever create anything truly original?

I do not think any idea is ever original. Everything under the sun has been done at least once, so the idea, at least in my opinion, is not to create something that has never been done before. We naturally create from what we happen to have inherited, and studying art is the way of increasing the repertoire of images and stories that you already have contained within you. That is the reason why I believe that becoming an artist is not as important as the process of studying what has already been done in order to create our own unconscious version of it. T.S Eliot,

for example, did not just one day wake up and write *The Waste Land*. He did not contrive it. It simply flowed out of him. Human beings may be an infinite, beautiful collection of things, but the cognitive mind makes sure these things stay as suppressed as possible.

Would you like to give the students of the English Department any advice?

I would suggest you to not take anything at its face-value. Take the things that the English Department is teaching you, of course, but remember that good art takes time and the canonical writers that we study here did not just one day wake up and become so good at what they were passionate about. Give art the time it deserves.

NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD

Hareem Masabat Saleem, 3rd Year (Morning)

When he is rich enough to afford whiskey, life is the colour of dull amber, the taste of malt, sweet and smoky together. Sometimes it's syrup-sweet, sometimes sour; indeterminate days call for indeterminate beer. Occasionally life is bitter, earthy, like wine. Once it was the crisp pop of champagne bubbles on his tongue, the day they pinned the medal on his chest and called him a man. *(It's only champagne if it comes from the Champagne region of France, otherwise it's just sparkling water. "Cal, you pretentious ass.")* Most days though, life is the clear, nauseating burn of cheap, thin vodka in its cheap, thin bottle.

Sometimes he cries – *("I don't run an outfit of pansies, private, so don't think you can wail on the government's dime, now ten-HUT!" I heard the sergeant yelled loud enough to give 'imself a hernia once. "Cal, you really believe everything you hear?" No, honest, I heard...)* – sometimes he sobs on the grimy bathroom floor; when the guns in his head don't stop, he jams his knuckles between his teeth and bites down and screams, and he hears his old drill sergeant chewing him out for being a pansy.

At midnight when the booze runs out, Cal and Jamie and Michael and the rest of the boys from the platoon *(A few good men. The thin red line.)* come visit him. They all sit with him in silence as he hurls into the toilet *(it burns worse coming up than it does going down, Cal, you want to take it easy on that bottle?)* bloody faces blank.

Cal – what a stripling Cal was, had himself a brand new wife who was probably going around behind his back – Cal with the IED that blew off his legs, Cal died holding his hand and weeping for his mother. *(Mamá, Mamá, no quiero morir...)*

Jamie – now Jamie was gunned down right in front of him, sniper attack that was, and he'd never really seen a man die before that. Jamie with the little red dot on one temple that hadn't been there a moment ago, pitching into the dirt at his feet,

and he'd have stayed staring at him for hours if Mike hadn't pulled him down in the nick of time.

Mike... Mike had stood next to him when they'd given him the medal – (*One of our boys*) – Mike had gotten roaring drunk with him, slapping him on the back, laughing uproariously (*I ain't that drunk, man, this is just sparklin' water! Cal's sparklin'... sparklin' water, in't fit to get drunk offa'...*) Mike had gone home, tucked his daughter into bed, kissed his wife, gone down to the basement and wrapped the curtain cord around his neck. They'd found him the next morning, medal still pinned to his chest.

Cal and Jamie and Michael, dragging legless torsos, with neat little holes in the temples, with swollen tongues hanging out of their mouths, they sit beside him and comfort him, and they keep away the ghosts.

The real ghosts.

Because when three a.m. strikes and there's not even enough booze left to throw up anymore, that's when the real nightmares start. Then they come for him.

The little girl, five years old maybe, (*Ya Allah! Ya Allah!*) frilly brown scarf wrapped around her head, chest gaping open from the Browning machine gun he'd held in his hands. A woman, (*Her name is Noura, she's my wife, just my wife, please, I beg you, I beg you*) her green headscarf askew, shirt torn, there are bruises on her neck (*it's not rape because they're bloody savages, they ain't humans. It's not rape.*) The young man they'd thought was hiding militant rebels in his house, (*I don't know where they are, I swear! I swear, wallahi, I swear!*) shoulder hanging at an odd angle, his face an indescribable mass of swollen flesh, nose smashed with the butt of a rifle, shattered cheekbones, one eye weeping blood onto his cheek.

There are more, crowding the empty spaces of the bathroom, just beyond his field of view. He hears the guns again, he tastes the liquor, he holds his medal tight in his hand so the little ridges dent his palm and he screams to drown them out, because he is one of the few good men, he is the thin red line – but it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter.

Because when it's night and life tastes like cheap whiskey, the ghosts wail, the guns fire, and the dead live again.