

mint

lounge

SATURDAY, JANUARY 4 2025

**WHAT WE WANT
TO READ IN 2025**

The Lounge team shares the books they are looking forward to this year. From revisiting classics and re-reading old favourites to awaiting R.F. Kuang's newest novel, the list of books to read is a long one.

SEE PAGE 2

**NEW ANGELS RUSH TO PROP EARLY-STAGE FUNDING SLACK | PAGE 16**

WAR & PEACE

THIS YEAR'S LOUNGE FICTION SPECIAL ON THE THEME OF 'WAR AND PEACE' FEATURES SOME OF THE MOST EXCITING NAMES IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN WRITING



TANUJ SOLANKI
A lone mule becomes an object of myth

SHANTA GOKHALE

A human and an animal ramble on

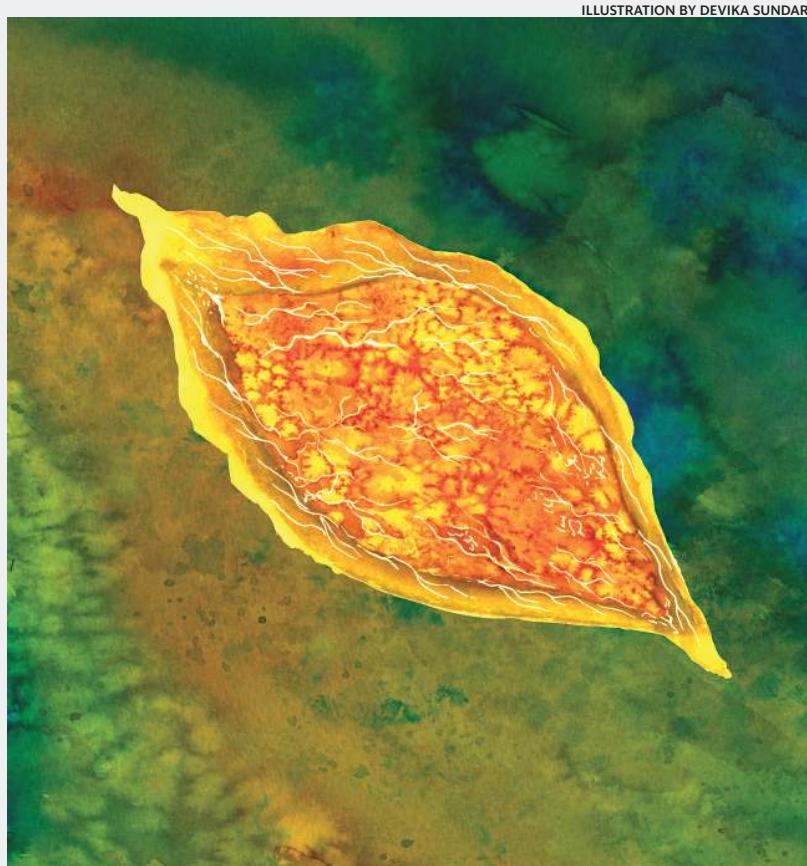
GOGU SHYAMALA
Is war a dilemma, or can it be a poem?

ABHISHEK KHEDEKAR

Losing and finding home

A NOTE FROM
THE EDITOR

SHALINI UMACHANDRAN



Storytelling, or re-creating worlds that readers may not always find their way into, is what we do at *Lounge* week after week. "The best stories proceed from a mysterious truth-seeking impulse," George Saunders wrote in an essay in 2007, which I think applies to fiction, non-fiction, journalism and other forms of art. We tell stories to understand the world we live in and well-told stories help us empathise with others, seeing their lives through our lens and the larger world through theirs. And so, for the first week of the year, we hand the job of storytelling to some of the country's most interesting writers of fiction, inviting them to look ahead and tell us how they see the world or what they imagine it to be.

As we do every year, we shared a simple prompt with authors—usually one that reflects the mood of the year gone by—and requested them to re-interpret it for the year ahead. This year's prompt is "War and Peace", part literary, part philosophical and very real in the world

we inhabit right now. We have wars, both physical and metaphorical, raging around us—the conflicts in different regions that stream on to our screens, the climate events caused by habitat destruction and human activity, the continued erosion of human rights, apprehensions about Artificial Intelligence replacing humans, and the anxieties that all these as well as the routine business of everyday living fan within us. And yet, there is also hope, in the many pockets of peace and decency hidden in plain sight. We left it to the writers and artists to interpret as they liked. Our only condition was that the story be previously unpublished and written specially for *Lounge*. It resulted in the stories in the pages that follow, stories that are thought-provoking, moving and timeless.

For the first time this year, we had an open call, which we circulated on social media, inviting readers to write for us. The cascade of responses made for an overflowing inbox of joyful reading. More than 100 of you sent us original

short stories, creatively interpreting the prompt "War and Peace" to fictionalise everything from private battles with health and memory, and struggles for personal liberty to larger tussles for social justice.

We were to pick just one, but ended up being unable to choose, and thus we have two stories. The one that stood out for all of us with its strong writing and humour is *Gas* by Nikhita Thomas, in which she tackles the idea of the temporary truces we strike everyday through silences and simple gestures. The other we picked is Prashanth Srivatsa's *Ocean of Spines*, again an inventive take on the prompt. Devika Sundar and Asage bring more layers to each story with their art. Some of these stories are grim, others are wistful, but all of them, I think, push us towards imagining the possible other worlds we could live in—whether in war or in peace.

*Write to the editor at
shalini.umachandran@htlive.com
x@shalinimb*

What we want to read in 2025

The Lounge team's list of unread books has only grown longer, while we also revisit and re-read old favourites

Team Lounge

A GLIMMERING SPELL

One of my favourite reading experiences in 2023 was picking up Chilean writer Benjamin Labatut's *When We Cease To Understand the World*, on a friend's recommendation, soon after watching Christopher Nolan's film *Oppenheimer*. Labatut's 2021 book, a fictionalised look at a handful of legendary scientists in the early 20th century, featured characters from Nolan's film, but it was the tonal similarity between the two works that struck me: science as a glorious vision, a fever dream, and as sickness. Labatut's next book, *The MANIAC* (2023), is along similar lines, a fictionalised biography of John von Neumann, the Hungarian who did pioneering work in mathematics, physics, computing and other fields. This is Labatut's first book in English (the previous ones were in Spanish). I'm hoping for a repeat of the dark, glimmering spell *When We Cease To Understand The World* cast on me.

—Uday Bhattacharya

MY MCEWAN YEAR

I discovered Ian McEwan—yes, rather late in life—on a holiday in October. At an Airbnb in Marseille, someone had left behind their copy of *Amsterdam*. I chucked it at newspaper editor Vernon Halliday's observations on grammar, meetings and story pitches—things haven't changed that much in the newsroom since the Booker-winning novel that deals with moral hypocrisy was published in 1998. I thought to myself, I next read his *Black Dogs*, purely judging it by the cover. In December, I amazoned *Lessons* and *Atonement*, with the good intention of finishing at least one of them before the end of the year. But the whirlwind that was the last month of the year, I have managed only 80 pages of *Lessons*, which opens in 1986 right after the Chernobyl disaster—400 pages and a book await me in the new year. It's probably going to be my McEwan year.

—Nipa Charagi

CULINARY PHANTASM

It has been a long time since I read a book on horror. Last year, while working on a story about what chefs read, I was told about *Hungry Ghosts*, an illustrated book with acclaimed chef Anthony Bourdain as one of the authors. It has ghosts, chefs and recipes by Bourdain. The plot is loosely



Vincent van Gogh, 'Piles of French Novels', October-November 1887, oil on canvas.

When I re-read old ones, it's a spur-of-the-moment decision. I'm looking forward to some cracking horror novels. As to what they are, I have absolutely no clue. I'm certainly going to read more John Langan, because he mixes weird and mainstream horror tropes so well.

—Bibek Bhattacharya

RE-RUN FOR FUN

In the course of work, I read varied books on art, but often approach them with a rather clinical eye—in pursuit of information and details that would validate a strand of thought or something to take me in a completely different direction with a refreshingly new perspective. In the coming year, I would like to take up B.N. Goswamy and Eberhard Fischer's *Pahari Masters: Court Painters of North India* once again, and read it solely for pleasure. To me, the book is a behind-the-scenes guide to Goswamy's mind about how and why he decided to undertake the mammoth task of identifying distinctive styles of artist-families in the royal courts. There is something journalistic—the old school kind—in his research style, and Goswamy's writing makes this aspect of art history so accessible and enjoyable. The other publication I would like to take up again is *Bhumiyan: Artists of the Earth* about the indigenous artists whose works are part of the Mitchell Crites collection to read again about Jodhai Bai Baiga, an inspiring artist who died recently.

—Avantika Bhuyan

LOOKING FOR AN ANSWER

I discovered *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, a book on sorrow, consolation and the windstorms of life, by American rabbi-lecturer Harold S. Kushner, during a random online search in 2021. It was a time when I was reporting on how covid was affecting the lives of people, and the ground realities were making me question a long-held personal belief, "bad things don't happen to good people". I bought the book but couldn't get past the first few pages; its positive-yet-melancholic tone was too overwhelming to bear. I picked it up again

mid-2024 when a close friend was diagnosed with a terminal disease, trying to find an answer to why a young, god-fearing and do-gooder has to go through so much pain. I'm yet to finish the book, but somewhere in the initial pages, I found something comforting: "Pain is the price we pay for being alive. Dead cells—our hair, our fingernails—can't feel pain; they cannot feel anything...." I am hoping to find an answer this year.

—Pooja Singh

OLD FINDS

I first discovered Amy Tan's powerful essay *Mother Tongue* in college, which explores the complexities of speaking different kinds of English as an immigrant in America. Her nuanced narrative challenges societal biases towards non-standard English speakers and the notion of a single "correct" way to speak English. This sparked my interest in her work, leading me to read her first novel, *The Joy Luck Club* soon after. Recently, I stumbled upon a weathered 1992 copy of Tan's novel *The Kitchen God's Wife* at home in a loft. It seems I'm not the only family member who's a fan of her work—I suspect it belonged to my grandmother. The book's yellowed pages and remarkably intact cover make it a treasured find. In *The Kitchen God's Wife* Tan tells the story of a Chinese immigrant who escaped the communist regime and her complex relationship with her Chinese-American daughter. My copy has the original cover art reminiscent of classical Chinese art, with bold lines and a rich colour palette. This chance discovery has inspired me to explore more books published before my time, rather than focusing on new releases.

—Ghazal Chengappa

LAING STORIES

A few years ago, a friend introduced me to Olivia Laing, with *Everybody* as a new year's gift, and since then, every year has started with her writing whether I plan it or not. This time last year, I learnt she was to publish *The Garden Against Time*, an exquisite tribute to gardening (and an odd read for someone who has killed many cacti). A few days before 2025 began, a package arrived with a gift of Laing's 2020 book of essays, *Funny Weather: Art in an Emergency*, her deft reminder that art can change the way we see anything. The year's off to a good start.

—Shalini Umachandran



based on the Japanese supernatural game *Hyakumogatari Kaidankai*, played after dusk in a room filled with candles. After each participant narrates a ghost story, a candle is extinguished until the room is dark. In the book, the participants are chefs who narrate culinary phantoms. There's food, blood and gore. I am sufficiently intrigued.

—Jahnabee Borah

CLASSIC ADVENTURES
Every year I read a classic or a doorstopper from the numerous volumes gathering dust on my bookshelves. It's a small gesture of lightening the guilt of a lifelong *tsundoku*. For 2025, I've picked *Don Quixote* by Cervantes in Edith Grossman's masterful translation of 2003, introduced by Harold Bloom. At nearly 1,000 pages, this work, widely regarded as the precursor of the modern European novel, ticks both the boxes of being a classic and one with a sizeable girth. Like many great works, *Don Quixote* has assumed a mystical aura over time—it is

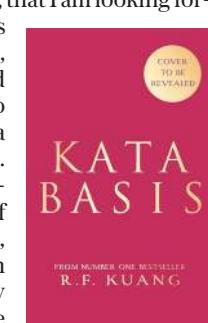
more name-dropped than read and admired. Most of us remember the bare bones of the story—the Quixotic adventures in the framework of its rambling plot—but not the twists and turns that make it a timeless treasure. A perfect adventure for the new year.

—Somak Ghoshal

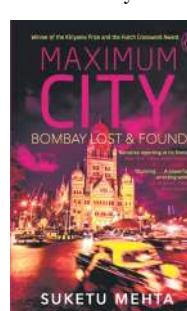
STUDYING THE DARKNESS
R.F. Kuang's *Babel* and *Yellowface*, set in the worlds of academia and publishing, respectively, have been favourite reads over the past two years. One an inventive fantasy about a school of magic and the other a satire on modern publishing, both are sharp and full of charm and whimsy. No surprises, then, that I am looking forward to Kuang's third, *Katabasis*, which is described as "Dante's Inferno meets Susanna Clarke's *Piranesi*". The "dark academia" subgenre of fantasy writing, which I have been exploring recently through reads like Leigh Bardugo's *Ninth House*, fascinates me, and from what I've read of *Katabasis* (short excerpts released by Kuang on her Insta) both the plotline and the writing promise to keep me reading till 2am. Bring it on!

—Shrabonti Bagchi

CATCHING UP
My reading during 2024 lagged woefully.



ETERNAL WAIT
If I were absolutely truthful, then, much like last year, I would say that the book I'm looking forward to this year is George R.R. Martin's *The Winds of Winter*. But then again, I've been waiting for it for 13 years, and it is highly possible that the *A Song of Ice and Fire* saga may never be finished. While I've made my peace with that eventuality (well, not entirely), every January I send out a silent prayer that this would be the year. Other than that, I don't really look forward to new books, reading new books just sort of happens.



MAHALAKSHMI PRABHAKARAN
Maximum City: Bombay Lost & Found by Suketu Mehta is another book gathering dust. I will get to it, I promise. But if there's one book I will definitely be reading—re-reading rather—it's Suketu Mehta's *Maximum City* in hardbound that I received from a dear friend as a keepsake.

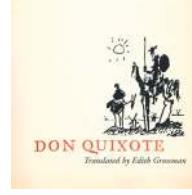
—Mahalakshmi Prabhakaran

WHEN BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE

When Bad Things Happen to Good People by Harold S. Kushner is a book on sorrow, consolation and the windstorms of life, by American rabbi-lecturer Harold S. Kushner, during a random online search in 2021. It was a time when I was reporting on how covid was affecting the lives of people, and the ground realities were making me question a long-held personal belief, "bad things don't happen to good people". I bought the book but couldn't get past the first few pages; its positive-yet-melancholic tone was too overwhelming to bear. I picked it up again

WHEN BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE
A few years ago, a friend introduced me to Olivia Laing, with *Everybody* as a new year's gift, and since then, every year has started with her writing whether I plan it or not. This time last year, I learnt she was to publish *The Garden Against Time*, an exquisite tribute to gardening (and an odd read for someone who has killed many cacti). A few days before 2025 began, a package arrived with a gift of Laing's 2020 book of essays, *Funny Weather: Art in an Emergency*, her deft reminder that art can change the way we see anything. The year's off to a good start.

—Shalini Umachandran



CULINARY PHANTASM
It has been a long time since I read a book on horror. Last year, while working on a story about what chefs read, I was told about *Hungry Ghosts*, an illustrated book with acclaimed chef Anthony Bourdain as one of the authors. It has ghosts, chefs and recipes by Bourdain. The plot is loosely

Ocean of Spines

Trying to conjure a sliver of the past, and remember to whom a story belonged

Prashanth Srivatsa

Anand lowers the carton boxes from the loft. They find space on the crowded floor, littered with books and diaries pulled from the shelf. The spare bedroom, once housing his grandfather, now decays in the dust-gobbed appearance of a public records office. There is no place to walk, but Anand clears a spot to sit with his legs folded, like a towering ship in an ocean of binding and parchment.

Sushmita throws him a grim look from the doorway.

"Are you going to make coffee today or what?"

"Not today."

It is a ritual he has forsaken in order to sail the ocean. Every morning, it is he who prepares coffee for the family. Not a gracious act, but it is a tradition that has turned into an instinct. To the point where even the filter disobeys the touch of another.

For the next four hours, he rifles through the books. At first, it is a passionate and nostalgic dive into his past. He chuckles at the middle-grade fantasies he'd devoured as an adolescent; smells the spines of the old classics his grandfather had handed him down in an act of inheritance. Some books he is surprised to find, like crumpled hundred-rupee notes in old pant pockets. But soon, the task assumes the shape of labour. He slows down with stories he does not fully recall. The characters are silhouettes and shadows, their names like billboards on a highway he'd driven through a long time ago. He reads entire pages before he can confidently mutter, *this is not the one*.

At lunch, it is not Sushmita who announces her presence at the door, but Amma. His stomach grumbles.

"We need to go to Shankar's in the evening," she says at the table. Sushmita quietly gets up after her first bite, and returns from the kitchen with the jar of salt. She sprinkles a pinch on the *sambhar* and gives it a stir. Amma does not pronounce her guilt.

"Provided I find what I'm looking for," says Anand.

"You've been acting *edho* very strange since morning," says Amma. "I have not even had my coffee yet, the filter is not working again. And what is with all the books on the floor? What are you looking for?"

Anand plants a sliced drumstick between his teeth and sucks the sap. "A story. I suddenly remembered a scene from a story a couple of days ago. It sounds so familiar in my head, but I just can't place it. It has to be from a book I read."

"If it is important, it will come to you," says Amma. "If it is not, stop wasting your time."

"It's not important. But I just want to know which book it was from before it eats me alive."

"Have you considered searching on the internet?" asks Sushmita. "You could just google the scene, you know."

"Where would I be without you?" Anand snarls. "Of course, I googled the scene. I have asked about it on some of my WhatsApp reading groups as well. No answer."

"Then maybe you've just imagined it," says Amma.

Anand stands up, morsels of rice dropping from his fingers. "I did not imagine it, okay? I swear I have read it somewhere, and I am going to find out where."

"God, what has gotten into you today? Fine, at least tell me the scene. Maybe I will know."

"No, leave it." He storms to the wash basin, ignoring Amma's pleas to return and finish the lunch. The ocean swirls. The ship beckons. The captain obliges.

They drive to Shankar Mama's in the evening. At the door, Amma holds Anand back. "Give me the box."

"What box? I don't have any box."

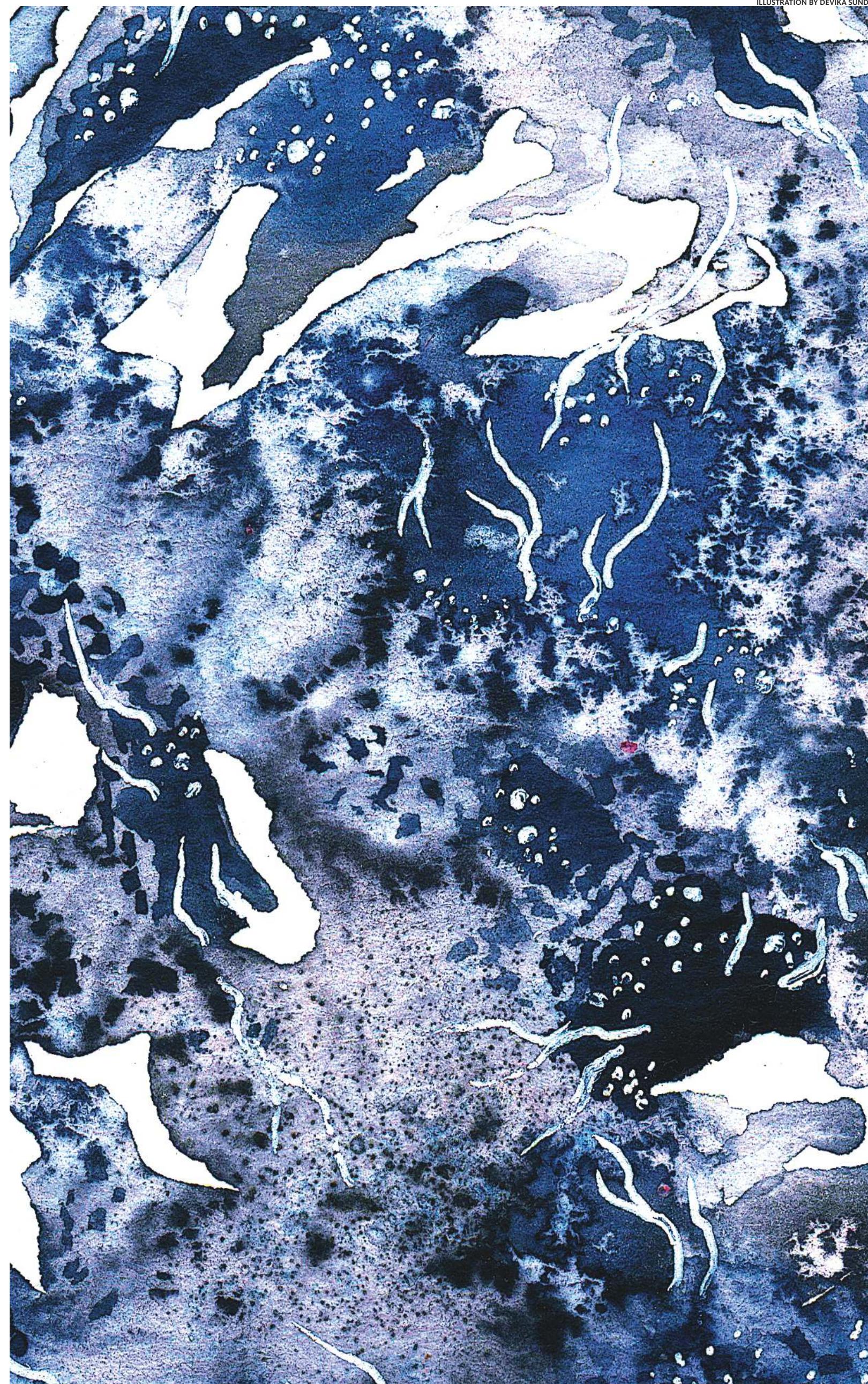
"The box I asked you to carry to Shankar's house. If you would get out of that dungeon of yours to actually listen to people, you'd remember these simple tasks."

Anand exchanges a glance with his wife. Sushmita subtly shakes her head. There is no box, she wishes to say, but her lips remain pursed. She backs away, as though this is not a battle worth meddling in. She casts away her slippers and saunters into Shankar Mama's home.

Anand mutters an apology and follows his mother inside, who is grumpy enough for her brother to take note of. "I'll get you the box next week," says Amma.

"What, this one?" Mami peeks in from the kitchen, waving the small, steel box in her hand. "You gave this to us last week, *ka*. I am packing some carrot *halwa* in this for the family today. You'll like it."

Amma frowns, as though there is an explanation for this dilation of time that has occurred. Anand's head starts to



pound. "No, Mami," he says politely. "Sushmita and I've stopped eating sweets."

He does not want the box anywhere near his house.

"What rubbish!" snaps Amma. "Since when do you not like sweets?"

"Leave it, *ka*," says Mami. "That's how this generation is these days. No sweets, no sugar. All protein, protein, protein."

"We ate everything," says Amma. "Turned out fine only, no?"

Anand has not made coffee in three days. The online forums throw a blank. As does the local librarian. He prowls the library's aisles like a cat that has dropped the tail of a mouse long dead. He visits a bookstore, and relays the scene to the curator. "That is a very specific memory," says the uncle. "I don't think I have come across it. Are you sure it's not from a movie or something?"

"Quite certain."

"Sorry to not be of more help, Anand. But listen, feel free to look around, okay?"

On the way back, in the bus, he deletes the social media applications on his phone. It is information overload, he is certain. He has been tirelessly consuming, consuming, consuming, and now he has forgotten the origins of this tender scene stuck in his head. How much longer, before even the scene is forgotten? He cannot let his memory win this battle. He cannot forget having already returned steel boxes in the future.

Come night, after Sushmita has gone to bed, the scene winds up in his diary. A mess of visuals and scattered thoughts; the trees, the scents, even the shadows, until it consumes every waking moment. It is impossible that he can conjure this sliver of his past, and not remember to whom this story belonged.

In the heart of dawn, he wakes up sweating from a nightmare, where he has forgotten his own name, and goes on a

long journey to uncover it. In the darkness, he takes deep breaths. He tries to recall the capital of Libya as an exercise.

Tripoli. He tries Ethiopia next. *Addis Ababa*. Repeats a litany of random historical events. He even mutters his own name for consolation. Finds a morsel of peace.

But, no. Too easy. He decides to list all the States and Union Territories. Forgets one state, realises a while later that it is Nagaland. Berates himself for it. Sensing his unrest, Sushmita rolls around, half awake, and wraps an arm around his waist. "You look like you ran a marathon in your sleep."

He shrugs her hand away, slips out of bed and begins to pace the room.

"This has gone on for too long, Anand," says Sushmita. "Don't think I can't see it. What is happening with her is not something you can avoid. But you...at this rate, you'll lose your mind."

"Maybe I've already lost it."

She takes a deep breath. "Do you remember my visa interview for Paris?"

"Of course. You forgot your appointment letter."

"And I didn't even remember where at home I'd left it. I cried on the phone to you. This trip meant everything to me at work. You asked me to calm down. You scoured every room. Turned cupboards inside out. You found it. And you rushed to the centre with the letter. Only —

"In all the rush and panic, I forgot to carry my wallet," he completes for her.

She smiles. "I came out and paid for your auto. And I got my visa."

He remembers the chaos of those hours. The upending of their home to uncover a single piece of paper. He senses where Sushmita is getting at, but she needs to know the truth. "I lied to you, Sush. It was not I who found the appointment letter that day. It was Amma."

He senses he is close to finding the story. It cannot evade him forever. He has read many books, but they are not infinite, and he is catching up to his own history. Returning to his grandfather's cavernous room, Anand feathers the spines of the books scattered on the floor, as though they are a spell to reveal a secret he has lost the password to. A photo of his grandfather looms over the bookshelf, a reminder of where the stories came from. He is smiling inside the frame, almost in mockery.

The scene flickers in his mind. Fades and reappears and fades again. The fingers of his mind struggle to cling to the loose strands of the tale as they slip away. He scrambles to look for his diary. It is missing.

"Did you see my diary?" he asks Amma, the finder of all lost objects. She is sitting at the dining table, solving the Sunday crossword in the newspaper. The light of the sun angles in from the balcony, casting her bent frame in shades of gold and bronze. Her greyed hair with the russet relics of henna sway like a garden of lilies and hibiscus against the morning breeze.

She doesn't look up from the paper. "No, I have not," she says, the pen swaying between her fingers. And when Anand doesn't take the battle forward, she adds in a low voice, "Unless it's urgent, I'll look for it in some time."

He watches her struggle with the crossword word. She has never needed help. But she has always squeezed into the empty spaces carved open by the people in her life, and given them what they wanted. It is why he has refused to tell her the story. If she cannot give him an answer, he will shatter. He retreats into his grandfather's room, and rummages the scatter of books for his diary. Looks beneath the pillow in his bedroom. Scours the hall and the kitchen. Nothing.

An hour later, he returns the books to their shelves, and the cardboard boxes to the loft. He has conceded defeat, but for the last glimmer of hope. At the dining table, Amma is still buried in the newspaper. "Did you find the diary?" he asks.

"What diary?"

His mouth opens and closes. He continues to stand there, in that half space, between truly being there, and having left.

"Do you want to hear the scene?"

Amma looks up from the newspaper. "You're still looking for that bloody book?"

He shrugs.

"Okay, tell me."

He narrates the scene before he can forget it. When he's finished, she turns her face towards the balcony, beginning to excavate the muddy slopes of her thoughts. She is his grandfather's daughter, after all. The stories were her inheritance before they became his. A minute later, she gives a gentle shake of her head and says, "No, *kanna*. I don't think I ever heard a story like this before."

Anand sighs. Amma has already returned to being buried in the newspaper with a scowl on her face, the pen swinging once more between her fingers. He turns to leave.

"Wait, wait. Before you go, can you tell me what Kohima is the capital of?"

He stops in his tracks. "Nagaland," he says.

She frowns at the crossword, as though it has tricked her by hiding in plain sight. "Right, that fits perfectly. Thanks *da kanna*." She begins to scribble down the letters into the little square boxes. Her smile is beatific.

Sushmita appears from the bedroom, drying her soaking hair with a towel. She is carrying something under her arm. "I found your diary on the toilet stand last night. Do you shit reading your own thoughts or what?"

Anand does not reach for the diary. Instead, he says, "Do you want some coffee?"

Prashanth Srivatsa is a writer from Bengaluru, India. His debut novel, *The Spice Gate*, was published by HarperCollins in July 2024.

This story was selected from submissions received in an open call for an original work of fiction for Mint Lounge.

Khalil

From being central to war and peace alike, the animal has become, for the most part, an object of figurative art

Tanuj Solanki

There are videos of Gaza and so one knows that there is, still, a Gaza.

I must have seen thousands of them by now.

In the early months, one saw mule carts carrying bodies—dead, alive, maimed, sized, punctured, blown—and there was, among other feelings, always that scintilla of consideration for the mules: those poor, poor beasts, burdened with raw panic, with devastation, whipped from hopelessness here to hopelessness there.

One doesn't see mule carts in videos of Gaza any more. At least, I don't. Are the mules still alive? I wonder. What are they eating? Or have they been eaten?

All this, or at least most of it, in my year of reading *War and Peace*.

I'm nearing the end of the novel now, and I can't remember if there are any mules in it. There are horses, though, loads of them, stallions and geldings and mares, all. And then there are the men on the horses, hussars and uhlans and dragoons and other cavalrymen.

As battles go on, the horses suffer and the men suffer. In describing all this suffering, Tolstoy sometimes turns to similes of utter simplicity, as if the subject matter itself forbade linguistic flourish. Blood flows from a shot horse like a spring. Blood flows from a shot arm like a bottle.

When the men suffer too much and there is no food to be found, they eat horsemeat—an act, I imagine, of mercy and betrayal both.

In the early 19th century, which is when Tolstoy's novel is set, there could be no war without horses. There could be no peace without horses either. It remained the same way for another century or so. And then, soon after World War I, the status of the horse, a status that had held its own for two-and-a-half millennia, if not more, was lost irretrievably, and from being central to war and peace alike, from being the stuff of songs and myths and sagas and, later, novels, the animal became, for the most part, an object of figurative art, wherein the beauty of its form (no doubt undeniable) became its main draw.

The horse lost, in effect, to horsepower, and its place in the stories we tell ourselves vanished with that loss. There will never be another Marengo now, never another Chetak. So long for the paragon of muscle and celerity and loyalty, the abettor of grand human will, evicted now from the fields of glory.

But... but what about those mules in Gaza, those beasts of unendurable burdens? Did those mules have names? Mustn't their praises be sung?

If the Gazan mules didn't have names, or if their names cannot but be unknowable for us now, it seems important to me that we give them names. As important as any other act of memorialisation. So, here, I give the name Khalil to a chestnut one from the videos I've watched. I'll try to give Khalil a suitable myth.

There was that video of 19-year-old Shaban al-Dalou being burnt alive on a

bed under a hospital tent. Everyone saw it. The day I watched that video, my *War and Peace* reading had Tolstoy describing why Moscow went up in flames during Napoleon's five-week rule of the city. That Moscow was all made of wood was one thing, but Tolstoy saw the root cause in the Muscovites' way of resisting the French—by abandoning the city. They didn't welcome the invading army; they chose, instead, to let their city be vulnerable to arson and accident.

It's a privilege, I thought after reading the segment, to have a vast country to retreat to, to have the option to simply leave one's city, and to let one's home and possessions be burnt to ashes, if that is the price, just to feed the conviction that the conflagration will entrap the enemy. To have the invader dismayed through the simple act of migration. To offer a vacancy when the other expects groveling and screaming. To need no mercy, no speck of humanity, no streak of conscience.

A few years ago, I read a novel in which the narrator-protagonist, a 29-year-old man named Saransh, is shown to be deeply affected by images of the drowned Syrian child, Alan Kurdi. While looking at those, Saransh also happens to note the child's name and whispers it to himself. *Alan Kurdi*.

At once he realises how crucial anonymity is to the processes of forgetting. Because now he knows the name and has whispered it to himself, the images of the child's body are burnt more sharply in his mind, and the story—unknowable beyond a point, beyond knowing that there was an effort to migrate on the father's part, to leave a shattered abode for an unwelcoming country, to risk everything because everything was already at risk—is committed forever to his memory.

Later, while speaking to his girlfriend, Jyoti, about the effect the images have on him, Saransh says: "We know a child's body is sacred. On some level, in fact, I

would even say that we know it as the *only* sacred thing."

The only sacred thing.

How must Saransh have suffered, I wonder, with all the Gazan videos of dead children, amputated children, famished children, blown-to-bits children, crying children, shell-shocked children... and the other videos, of parents beating chests, of siblings adenoidal with grief, of eight-year-olds caring for two-year-olds, of someone opening a shroud for one last peek and giving the departed child a serene smile, as if to say "it's over, my child, it's over, at least it is over for you".

Sometimes, I feel convinced that the inexorable violation of the one thing Saransh considered sacred would have made him kill himself. At other times, I see him trying, like a maniac, to learn the names of all the dead children of Gaza, to etch each name on his mind, to take the full burden of memorialisation upon himself. Perhaps this is imagining Saransh as a mule of sorts, a mule bearing the infinite weight of an enormity that just won't end. In this second scenario, too, I see him dying eventually, his brain haemorrhaging from overactivity. I see blood leaking out of his eyes and ears and nose and mouth.

But there is a smile on his face as that happens.

It's been more than a year, and more than 46,000 people have been killed in Gaza. Sometimes, to evade the abyss that the videos threaten to push me into, I try the inadvisable: I try to understand the enormity in relative terms. In the Battle of Borodino in 1812, which features prominently in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, there were more than 68,000 killed or wounded in a single day. A historian compared the carnage to "a fully loaded 747 crashing, with no survivors, every five minutes for eight hours".

Then there was July 1914, the first day of the Battle of the Somme, when about 70,000 died. Then there was Babi Yar,

where more than 33,000 people were murdered inside two days in September 1941. Then there was...

It doesn't ever help, this relativising, and if it ever takes me away from one abyss, it very quickly brings me close to another. The analytical brain chips in too, asserting, for instance, that the battles, being military vs military, make for bad equivalences with Gaza. Among the three examples above, the only eligible comparison, the analytical brain says, is Babi Yar.

And then there is nothing to do but laugh between the abysses, for in Babi Yar, the people who were killed were Jews. I laugh, yes, but not because there is anything farcical in this, or because I see anything lending itself to a pat comment about history. I have, in fact, come to resent those who are fond of saying "first as tragedy, then as farce". The way I see it: first as carnage, then as carnage, as carnage now and forever.

Between the carnages, though, some of us try to hold on to memory, a task that requires its own depth of imagination, and which therefore has no quarrel with the fictive element.... We want to remember everyone's name, we want to remember everyone's story, and if these can't be known, then we will remember what we can very well imagine.

On the day the bombardment began, Khalil the mule felt the coursing of new currents in his mule mind. He brayed once to his owner, Jamal, and went out on his own, with the cart attached to him. He followed the next big explosion. At the site, Khalil made himself available for the ferrying of the wounded to the hospital. On this first day, over three trips, Khalil saved 17 humans and one cat.

He did the same thing the next day, and the day following that, and every day thereafter, and he did all of it without needing food or water, without anyone holding his reins, without any whipping.

On the day the bombardment began, Khalil the mule felt the coursing of new currents in his mule mind. He brayed once to his owner, Jamal, and went out on his own, with the cart attached to him. He followed the next big explosion. At the site, Khalil made himself available for the ferrying of the wounded to the hospital. On this first day, over three trips, Khalil saved 17 humans and one cat.

He did the same thing the next day, and the day following that, and every day thereafter, and he did all of it without needing food or water, without anyone holding his reins, without any whipping.

There would often be a bomb site that would have people trapped under the collapsed building. In the first such situation, Khalil, driven as much by frustration as by a mystical awareness of what he needed to do, bit a length of exposed rebar and pulled hard. After a few seconds, the whole concrete slab began to move!

The men around him clapped and whistled and patted Khalil on his rump. Two children were saved from under the debris, but they were in such a state that to take them to the hospital seemed pointless. Once again, driven by frustration as much as awareness, Khalil started licking the children's wounds. Minutes later, the children came to consciousness and revealed their names: Fathima and Zahira. The men around concluded that Khalil's saliva had turned into some kind of life-saving medicine.

Later, as the hospital was blown up, Khalil took to licking wounds of all kinds. This produced mixed results. It was observed that his saliva worked better with children. Khalil also bit umbilical cords when needed, sawed off unsalvageable digits and limbs with his teeth, and dug graves and water wells.

When it got tougher, with food impossible to find, Khalil brayed and brayed till those around him understood that he was offering his body as food. There was some confusion initially, for mule meat is *haram* in Islam, but the notes in Khalil's braying convinced everyone that nothing he offered could be *haram*. A slice of Khalil's rump was then cut. Those who ate the meat called it a most nourishing blessing. The blessing went further, for Khalil's wound filled overnight and he was as good as new the next morning.

Everyone wanted to do something for Khalil, though, and soon enough, from outside the territory of the possible, or perhaps deep within it in an unrecognisable way, shoots of grass began to be seen amidst the crush of collapsed beams and columns.

A clutch would be passed hand to hand, then another added to it, and then another. Over an intricate logistical system that ran of its own accord, these clutches turned into a pile by the last leg, such that there was always enough food for Khalil, which he munched on gleefully right after he had been cut.

Then, one night, when his body was regrowing the part cut just hours back, a thousand-pounder blew Khalil to smithereens. The nub of solace he provided was thus wiped out like much of all else. But some of the blessing, meagre as it was, persisted, in ways stranger than imaginable.

Whether the bomb ended Khalil's extraordinary story or not is now seriously doubted. There is talk of concrete moving on its own, of water wells coming up in parched places, of tents' tethers being held tight in gusts. Some Gazans mention a cart that ferries the dead and the dying on its own, with no mule at its front.

They never make videos of that cart.

Tanuj Solanki is the author of four works of fiction, the most recent being the novel *Manjhi's Mayhem*. He is the founder of The Bombay Literary Magazine.



The many lives of a leaf

Do wild thoughts count as resistance? Is charting one's own path and travelling alone a rebellion that will be remembered?

Uddipana Goswami

SUMMER

Before the leaf plunged into the air and floated away with the wind, it was what the tree was, it lived where the tree stood, it swayed how the other leaves swayed. It was attached to the branch, the bole, the root, the ground. The life of the leaf was a good one, with kith and kin, dancing and joy, feeding and feasting on the sun, the air, the soil. But it was a restless leaf; its thoughts travelled where it could not, it longed to follow its thoughts in the wind, through the world. Sometimes, it revelled in the solidity of the tree that kept it from straying, from doing the things that a leaf wasn't meant to be doing—like wandering alone and aimlessly in the world. At other times, it felt it stayed rooted, absolutely grounded, only because it could not leave.

When the leaf had erupted in the Spring from the bark of the tree, it was a lime green speck that kept reaching for the sun, soaking it in, growing into its fullest and greenest every day. Watching it grow, it was told by the leaves older than itself that this was the one life it had. And that this one life was meant to be in the service of the tree, making it stronger every day, helping it survive the battles that it fought every day for the sake of every leaf and every branch that constituted its organic body. When the leaf asked who this battle was against, it was informed that the enemy was anyone who was not the tree or of the tree. The leaf found this cryptic. Being a small inconsequential leaf in a forest full of leaves, it decided to accept the elders' words. But all through the Summer of its life, it remained dissatisfied. It knew it could not find the answers it sought among its leafy kin; they had decided it was not their battle to lead; they only watched from their perch and accepted that the war was inevitable, immutable, ongoing. It did not know where to look for the answers, but it also could not accept that this was the only life it had in which to look for the answers that were probably, simultaneously, seeking out the questioner and the right questions.

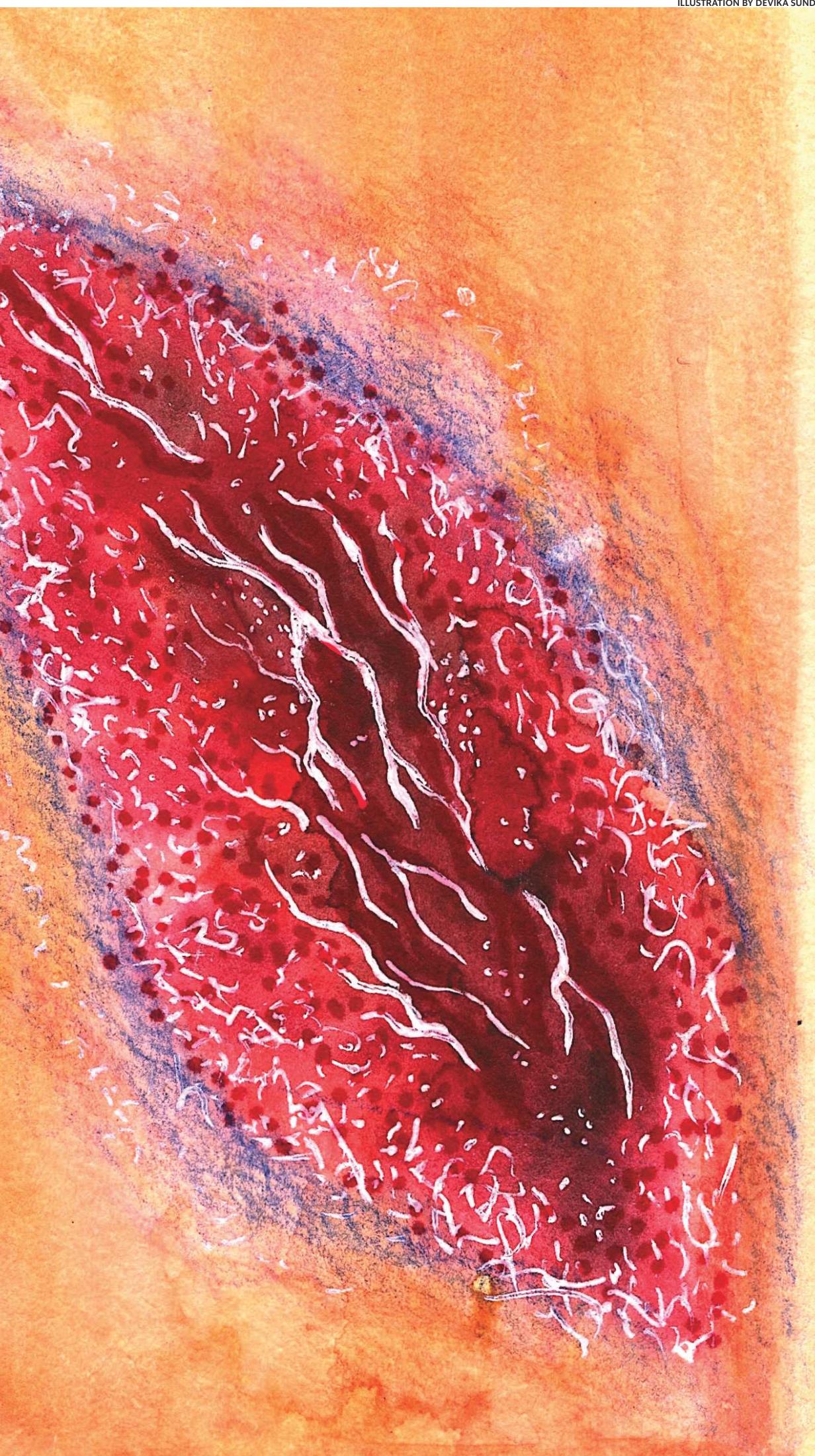
Growing less green every day on the tree that grew more gnarly with the season, the leaf kept wondering about other lives and afterlives. The more it thought, the more it started having trouble following the familiar patterns of behaviour that were expected of it as one leaf among many leaves. If the wind wanted all the leaves of the tree to bend toward the east and do a little flutter, it would find itself turning south-west and clumsily thrashing around without any rhythm or cadence. In the music of the moment, then, it would be the discordant note that didn't really disturb anyone drastically—since it was a small, inconsequential little leaf anyway—but it would still annoy the wind and the tree and the other leaves moderately, and make them frown disapprovingly. Their frowns, in turn, mildly irritated the leaf and though still firmly attached to the branch and the bole and the root and the ground, it felt more detached from its tree every passing day. It found itself looking forward to Fall, for that was when they said its life would end. It waited for Fall because it refused to believe in the finality of their words and decided to determine for itself the measure and meaning of its own life.

When Fall arrived, the leaf waited to die into a new life. But as days passed and it still remained attached to the tree, it started doubting itself, its own beliefs. When the doubt started turning into despondence, the leaf decided it was time to take a leap of faith.

When the leaf dived into the air one Fall day, it thought it had started a new life. It breathed a deep breath and thought it had never breathed freer, even though it had breathed all its life in the open air of the forest under the open sky. As it launched itself into space, it thought it felt an inaudible snap spread through its veins, infusing its yellowing skin with an energy that matched the brilliant glow of the distant dying sun. Disengaging from the tree after feeling detached from it for so long felt like the start of a new life it could create for itself and not—as it had been led to believe—the end of the only one granted by the tree.

FALL
If only the leaf knew that hidden in the freedom there is always the pain.

The emptiness, where nothing holds meaning, holds the pain of the earth. The earth, which carries the weight of small, inconsequential leaves as much as the burden of mighty, majestic trees, has long since made peace with itself. This is the peace that brings it stability, grace, and the ability to embrace Winter after Fall after Summer after Spring and yet, to go on giving and receiving, turning and churning, and living even as it lay dying a little every day. But it had felt the pain once, deeply, intensely, down to its very core. The pain



was all it had felt for a long, long time. It had fretted and fumed and quite nearly forgotten that it could let go: that the pain could stay for only as long as it held on to it.

It had taken the earth a few centuries of bristling and bruising, mourning and praying, hurting and healing, creating new life over and over that would die over and over and still renew itself endlessly, before it realised that the peace it sought was ingrained in the pain; that it was, in itself, both the peace and the pain. That was the time when it let go, and the pain was released into the emptiness above, where the wind ferried it across its back. Sometimes the pain revisited the earth, the earth embraced it but always knew that it had to release the pain again and again, back into the custody of the wind. Now, the earth chose to house only the peace in its deep recesses. Meanwhile, the pain travelled freely across the world, visiting those that needed its presence, whether they sought it out themselves or were found by it.

Perhaps the leaf needed to know the presence of pain, for the pain found it as it drifted through the air, away from its familiar surroundings. Perhaps the journey to peace is always through pain. Or perhaps not. How was the leaf to know? It was small and inconsequential; smaller than the tree, and definitely inconsequential compared to the size and significance of the earth that birthed it. If there was a larger design—if the leaf was meant to fit into a larger scheme or theme that guided the earth and secured its place in the uni-

verse—it was too caught up in its pain to conjecture or contemplate.

Unmoored, the leaf flew hither and thither. It had found the freedom it had longed for when it was attached to the branch, the bole, the root, the ground. This freedom allowed it to wander around, alone and aimlessly, anywhere. But wanderers are never really alone, are they? And wandering is never really aimless, is it? Pain is the wanderer's companion, and wandering is the search for a place to shed the pain, bury it, leave it behind, so that the wanderer can finally emerge from the restless life. The leaf too felt the pain intensely in its yellowing, blackening heart, and did not know why. Being on its own, it did not have anyone to give it answers, convincing or unconvincing, acceptable or not.

Untethered, it had hoped never to look back at the life left behind. Unhindered by all ties, it had hoped to forge a new identity, turn into a new leaf/ha/ha, it laughed darkly as it floated through the air and the thought breezed through its pores). Unaccompanied, it had wanted to hurtle through a new life that gave it new meaning, and a sense of belonging to its own self. It was surprised, then, that it sometimes longed for the intimacy it had shared (and not cherished) with the other leaves—green, patchy, wrinkly, or riddled with holes—on the branch of the ancient tree that had nurtured its slow rebellion. That rebellion had helped it break free, that freedom had not freed it from the pain of restlessness and longing.

Afloat in the emptiness above the earth

and drifting more heavily with time, the leaf could see the ground advancing. For a moment it was filled with dread. It trembled: What if this is the end? What if I lived another life to end this life in the same meaninglessness? What if the pain follows me into the afterlife?

And it waited for the earth to gulp it.

WINTER

But the earth did not gulp it. It embraced the leaf, like it embraces the pain: giving it the space it needs, holding it tight enough to reassure, and loose enough to let it know that when it wants to, it can go. And that, of course, made the leaf want to stay, for never before had it felt such comfort. Though the Winter chill made the earth hard and dry to lie upon, the leaf could sense a warmth radiating up and out from its core, making it feel wanted, imagining itself, at last, at home. And for a while, this home sheltered the leaf from its pain.

Little did the leaf know, though, that home is for a little while, whether you want it to last or not. Meanwhile, the pain is forever, whether you want it to go away or not. For the leaf, in its first life, staying at home was painful. So it left. But the heart always needs a home, which is why, having left one home behind, the leaf longed for another. The pain followed it as it searched for a new home.

Then the leaf thought it found one in the cold embrace of the earth. Because, as it reasoned with no one in particular, home is where you feel free to stay or go. And as it reasoned thus, the small, inconsequential leaf felt small no more.

How I have grown, it thought, from a restless leaf to a thinking thing that thought itself out of its tepid, torpid existence! And for a while, it revelled in its newfound awareness of the mysteries and the meanings of life and the universe.

If home is where happiness is, it is also where pain visits, ever and anon. For joy and sorrow, happiness and pain, are siblings connected at birth and inseparable, always. If you are wise like the earth, you will hug the happiness and welcome the pain when it comes, but never hold on to either. But if you are a small leaf that realises now that it was never inconsequential, yet not as wise as the earth that cradles it, you will probably need to live through a few more lives—like the earth itself has done—before you can admit to yourself that there is no place like home.

And so, when the winter rain came, it brought with it the pain, again. Tup, tap, tip, sip, sip, sip, the raindrops fell and filled the leaf with an immense sadness. It did not know where this sorrow came from, for it thought it had finally found happiness.

Was that joy an illusion? Or did the leaf just not know how to hold on to happiness? Did it not deserve to be joyful and happy after all? Lying on the rain-dampened ground, the leaf shed the last of its tears even as it strained to hear the hum of the earth against its decaying flesh. Once, it felt a raggedy pebble rub against its disintegrating skin and welcomed the physical hurt. Anything was preferable to the darkness that was descending upon its soul. And it is the soul that hurts the most, never the body; for the

flesh can heal but the soul remembers.

Ah, but sometimes the soul also forgets, does it not? Momentarily, perhaps, but all the same. It only takes a moment of seeing the sun peeking from behind the winter clouds, shining upon the raindrops lying listlessly on the browning grass, trying to break them each into many multicoloured rainbows, to forget about the unbearable weight of being a wandering soul. But soon, the pain returns, because the sun never really succeeds, does it, even though it never gives up? The dull skies close upon it and hide it behind clouds that shroud, once again, the elusive warmth of the Winter afternoon. And the soul awakens into pain, again.

But I can choose to be the Winter sun, can I not? The leaf pondered. I too can shine through my pain.

And so, clutching on to the last benign beams of a sun that had once scorched with its intensity but was now at the mercy of the wind and the clouds, the leaf chose to forget its sadness and cling to the shreds of happiness it had known in its many different lives. It takes an immense effort to shed the sorrows etched upon a soul by several lifetimes of being pursued by pain. But the small leaf, that felt inconsequential no more, was determined not to be dragged into the abyss where consciousness ends and the pain takes over. It took every ounce of hope it had left in its veins—its flesh had now decayed and merged with the earth—to pull itself away from the edge of oblivion.

I will be happier, the leaf resolved. I will make peace, it said, as it thought itself into its last life.

SPRING

Is it a life if you live only in your consciousness, when your body and bones and muscles and veins have withered away? Well, the leaf thought, so perhaps, then it was—alive, a life.

As the leaf watched its veins gradually mix with the surrounding mud that was slowly parting here and there to allow new seeds to sprout white sprouts that would turn green and brown and big and would then die and decay and return to the earth, it thought it should make peace with itself and its tree and the other leaves on that tree and the earth and the pain that had been so much a part of the many lives it had carved for itself.

It remembered the battle that the tree waged and wished the elder leaves had tried to uncover where it had begun. The tree is allies with all that is light and love. If it fights back, it must be against the dark, it thought, trying to recall who the other leaves said the enemy was. They hadn't. Perhaps, it thought, they really couldn't. Some enemies are nameless and faceless.

It still bristled at the memory of being told not to ask too many questions. Maybe I didn't ask the right folks the right questions, it thought. Maybe I should have asked the tree about the enemy within and the enemy without, and about the war with no end. Maybe I should have asked why it was a war and not a journey, or an exploration. Perhaps I would have, had I been more curious and openly rebellious, rather than being only mildly and timidly different.

Now that it thought of it, the leaf didn't really know if it had been rebellious at all. It had been a restless leaf that sometimes wanted to stay rooted, but mostly longed to follow its thoughts in the wind, through the world. Do wild thoughts count as resistance? Will they remember my rebellions if they all happened in my mind and I didn't really inconvenience anyone, or aggravate them, and only charted a path that I travelled on my own?

Perhaps the earth will, it hoped. It did accept me for me. It took me in and gave me joy.

What did I do, though, the leaf asked, to alleviate the pain of the earth and bring solace to it? For as it had lain listening to the humming of the earth in the winter of its life, the leaf had sensed the pain that revisited the earth and tormented it every now and then. And yet, its own intense pain had occupied so much of its being that it could not hold space for the pain of the earth. This realisation brought with it a kindness that the leaf had never extended to itself or to those around it. As it forgave itself, it felt a peace it had never felt before. In this peace, it embraced the pain. The pain felt like a friend, as did the earth.

In its last moments, as it merged itself with the consciousness of the earth, it asked the earth: Is it the meaning of a tormented life to live in pain and slowly fade away, nursing the pain in every vein? And yet, to do it calmly, knowingly, because if it wasn't a fallen leaf that drowned itself in the earth and insinuated itself into the sorrows of the earth, what would prepare the ground for new life and new love?

The earth smiled.

Uddipana Goswami is a writer and peace researcher whose most recent book is *The Women Who Would Not Die*.

The Woman and The Dog

In an upside-down world, a human and an animal ramble on, propelled by ego, but lost to history

Shanta Gokhale

Twenty-six, Dog. One up on us. We have only twenty-four, twelve to a side, seven pairs of real ones.

Dog! I wish you could talk. Simple yes or no. You only whimper.

The wind rushes in from somewhere. A silent wind, unhindered by trees. The sand rises in clouds. It blocks the blazing sun and the air grows yellow. When the wind drops, the sand settles, the air clears and the sun blazes in the sky again, she sees the tree in the distance. Not the whole tree, just its emerald green head of fronds etched against the topaz dome of the sky. Between her and the tree, the sand stretches golden, spiked with mica.

Dog, you must keep walking ahead. It helps me lift one foot, then the other. I was never heavy-footed. Mother would always ask, what's the hurry? Why run? And I would say I am not running. And run.

The hurry was to get to school. I loved teaching the girls. Loved their morning faces, bright-eyed and eager. They loved the stories I told them, from places and times so remote they seemed mythical. I was going off-course, breaking rules.

Nobody noticed. The girls knew how to keep their heads down, look meek and stay mum about the things they were learning. I told them about the Kon-Tiki expedition. I told them about Don Quixote. One sad day I told them about the Polish Jewish doctor who ran a children's orphanage in the Warsaw ghetto and travelled with them on a crammed train to the killing centre in Treblinka, telling them stories all the way. The girls had to know there was good and there was evil in the world and sometimes those who had suffered cruelly, turned cruel themselves.

It all happened millions of years ago. You can't encompass that scale of time, can you Dog? Neither can I. No human can. Our brains are bigger than yours but not big enough to accommodate so much time. Our hearts too are not big enough to accommodate so much space, nor the cornucopia of life—humans, animals, birds, plants, insects, worms. We can only accommodate us and ours. They and theirs are another species. An enemy species. Strong men recognise enemies at sight. Strong men destroy enemies at sight. Strong men have strong sinews, strong muscles, strong wills. Look at the way they walk. Like conquerors. Every step says we are the chosen people, we are the leaders of the world, the strong men.

Is the tree real, I wonder. Are we nearer to it than we were? I wish you could talk, Dog. How many days have we been walking?

She stops, one foot raised. Two deep

occurred to me then to pray for a sky that would never rain bombs, taking mind and body away at one stroke.

The constant fear, the pathetic helplessness, the wanting to live... I couldn't bear it, Dog. The gathering stench of dead flesh, the bodies of children, their mothers wailing, remembering every little detail of their short lives, mothers who had lost faith in God for letting this happen yet praying to the same God to avenge the killings. The day I saw a little girl sprawled in the rubble, one eye hanging out, I began to walk, driven by her mother's scream which I could not shake out of my ears. One foot before the other. No thought in my head. Dead inside. Only my feet alive, walking me away. Yet the scream stayed in my ears. Is there even now.

I didn't notice you Dog, till we had left our devastated city and begun treading sand. I knew then that I had walked south. What were you thinking when you began following me, Dog? What has kept you walking alongside me for so long? I am walking to reach that tree. And you? I suppose you can't do without humans.

Everything is so upside down. You were once wild. You didn't wag your tail and crouch before humans. You were wolves.

How did you become dogs? Some thought humans tamed you, when they became pastoralists, to guard their homesteads, herd their sheep and keep them company. But it was the other way around. Your ancestors adopted humans. Living in the wild, forever on guard, fearful of attacks was no life. They realised that humans with their killing instruments might offer them a better alternative. So they made themselves less ferocious, learned to wag their tails and became man's best friends.

It all happened millions of years ago. You can't encompass that scale of time, can you Dog? Neither can I. No human can. Our brains are bigger than yours but not big enough to accommodate so much time. Our hearts too are not big enough to accommodate so much space, nor the cornucopia of life—humans, animals, birds, plants, insects, worms. We can only accommodate us and ours. They and theirs are another species. An enemy species. Strong men recognise enemies at sight. Strong men destroy enemies at sight. Strong men have strong sinews, strong muscles, strong wills. Look at the way they walk. Like conquerors. Every step says we are the chosen people, we are the leaders of the world, the strong men.

Is the tree real, I wonder. Are we nearer to it than we were? I wish you could talk, Dog. How many days have we been walking?

She stops, one foot raised. Two deep

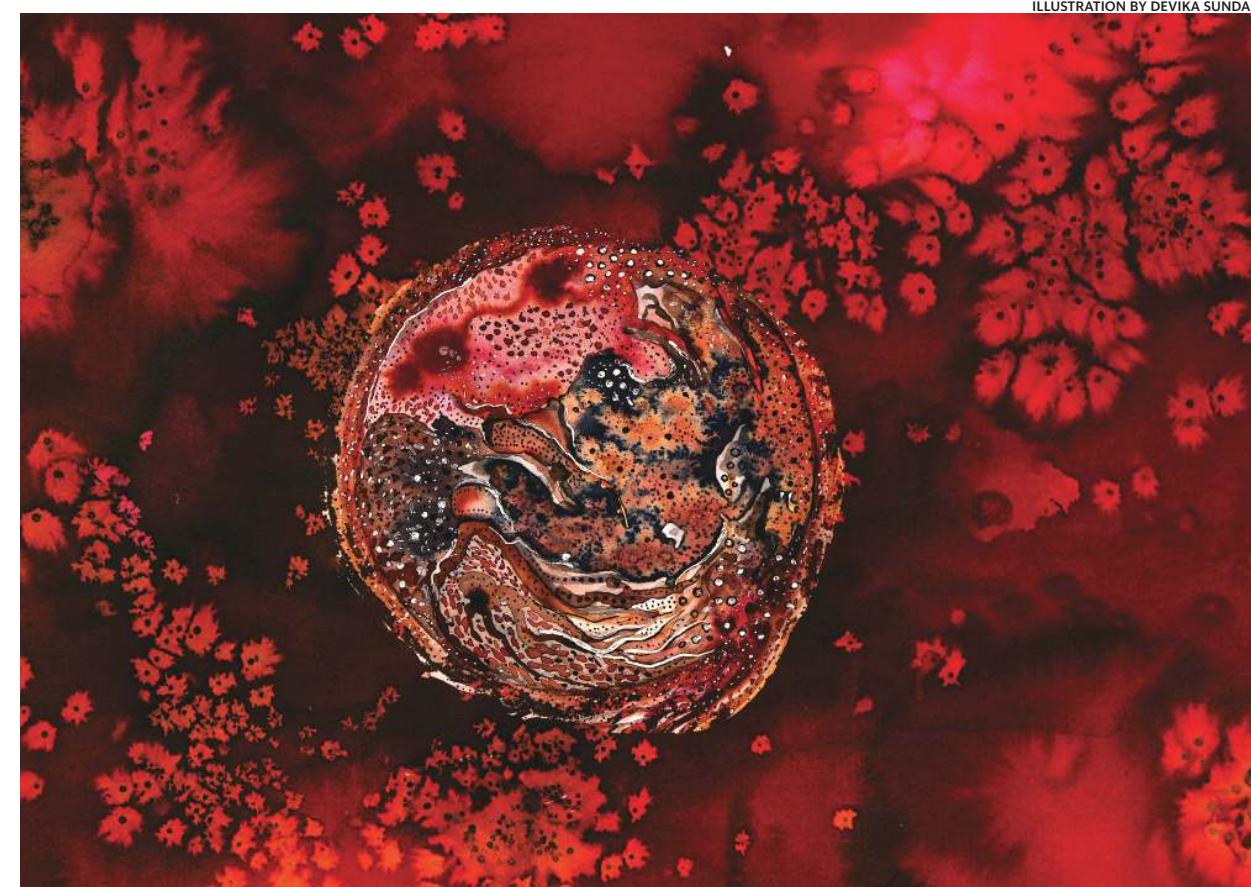


ILLUSTRATION BY DEVIKA SUNDAR

lines have furrowed upwards from aquiline nose to widow's peak.

I thought I had left all that anger behind. I had told myself it wasn't just our Olives that had been charred. The Chinars and Pines and Oaks and Chestnuts of the world had also been killed at one point or the other in this endless flow of time. It is the way of the world, a world made by man in his own image. Let us laugh, Dog. That's what we must do. Laugh loud and long like the three Buddhist monks. What a riot they were, standing in the centre of every town laughing till the townsmen could not help but join in. Like Toni Morrison's family which laughed uproariously when their landlord burned their house down because they could not afford to pay rent. What a thing to do. It was his house he burned. She laughed, loud and long. Her laughter rolled over the dunes and down, returning to her on the wind and fading away. Exhausted, she sat down. The dog sat beside her and put his head on his paws.

Is the tree real, I wonder. Are we nearer to it than we were? I wish you could talk, Dog. How many days have we been walking?

She stops, one foot raised. Two deep

ing? And how many days since we have not eaten? No garbage dumps here for you to eat off. Or for me. I have heard that in really poor countries humans forage for food on garbage dumps. Garbage yields good food too, food of which the rich have had enough. I wonder how many days humans can go without food. They say an Indian yogi spent 76 years without eating or drinking. If he could do it, why can't I? Stupid question, simple answer. Because I am not a yogi. Perhaps you are, Dog. You have patient eyes.

But we'll soon get used to hunger and starvation. God knows we have had enough time and practice. Back when we still had a roof over our heads, where was the food? Where was the water? Stopped at the border. That was perfectly logical. What's the point of allowing people to eat and drink when you want them dead? But I am not going to die, see? I shall walk to the tree.

Her tongue is dry as sand. Her throat too. When she speaks, her voice rasps like sandpaper on wood. There's sand in her hair. Sand on her eyelashes. Sand between her toes. And now the sun is going down.

She smiles. Her cracked lips hurt. The drama will soon begin. A show at the end of each day. Her stomach contracts. Her hunger pangs are permanent. Sitting down is agony. Getting up is agony. She lowers herself unsteadily into the fast-cooling sand, sits in silence. She remembers the silence in the big auditorium before a play began. What use were those protest plays? What good did they do? A momentary uplifting of the spirits and then another bomb. People maimed. People screaming.

The dog digs himself a shallow pit and curls up in it, every rib etched in the light of the setting sun.

Gradually, the sky brightens along the horizon from cerulean to fiery gold. Banks of orange and red thrust out of the clouds, reaching up into the violet and indigo depths above. The colours fill her eyes, fully saturated by the clear prism of the air. And then, as gradually as the colours appeared, they die away. There is no hurry, no haste to bring the curtain down on the day. And now the stars come out. Little spikes and shards of brilliance on a

bed of inky blue velvet. What a roof to sleep under!

Perhaps I will not wake up tomorrow, Dog. And I shall not be sorry. But I do so want to reach the tree. I am closing my eyes. When I wake up, I will shake the sand out of my hair and we will walk again. If I don't wake up and nor do you, the suns of the future will dehydrate us, mummify us. The sands of the desert will blow over us, bury us deep. If men still exist a hundred, a thousand, a million years from now, if they have not killed one another off and laid waste the earth, if they still possess the spirit of inquiry and the urge to explore, if the thought comes to them that the desert is not just an expanse of arid land, but a place of mystery with hidden secrets... She stops, laughs, shakes her head in disbelief.

Do you know where that ramble was taking me, Dog? It was taking me to an explorer of the future. He was going to dig us up and, stroking his chin, mutter, "Aha! Twenty-four ribs. That was once a human. And what do we have here? Twenty-six ribs? That must have been her dog. How strange. This has been a desert for millions of years. No human habitation for miles. What were these two doing here?"

The explorer would then write us down in his diary and publish us in a book, with pictures. And he would give us names as explorers are wont to do. Perhaps I would be named Desert Rose. And you, Sandy.

That's where my ramble was taking me. I wanted to be in history—I, an ordinary school teacher who did not have the stomach to face fear; who was too weak to endure the daily killings of humans by humans; who vomited at the sight of gushing blood; who saw a man running down the street cradling his own severed arm and fainted; who saw a girl sprawled in the rubble with one eye...

Even here, even as I walk away from all that, as my muscles grow weak, my tissues waste away, my organs are ready to give up the fight, even here and now, one thing remains intact. My ego. Imagine! I wanted to be in history, next to the man who ordered the bombs.

She laughs out loud; then holds her stomach. A pain has shot through it with every peal of laughter. She feels good though. Laughter exercises the ego.

Sleep now, Dog. We are not destined to be an explorer's discovery. We will get up in the morning and walk.

Shanta Gokhale is a bilingual writer, translator, theatre critic and playwright based in Mumbai.

No End

An idyllic summer comes to a close with the dawn of realisation

Ruth Vanita

Open land stretched, vacation-like, as far as her eyes could reach. Nothing but a few dwarfed trees—scarcely trees, more like shrubs—dotted it. From the tiny flat, where, as her mother was fond of remarking, they were cooped up all year, to this expanse, they had journeyed by train for two days and two nights. They had been here several weeks now. Her father had gone back to Delhi but Uncle kept persuading them, much to her delight, to postpone their own return. Twice, he had sent a boy from his office to change their tickets.

She was not supposed to venture beyond the long, slatted, wooden gate on which she was now swinging, but that was not a hardship because there were many wandering ways in the back compound. It seemed to have no particular end, that compound, the trees, bushes and moist pathways petering out into scrub and sand, every path encroached on by vines and hidden nooks beckoning, surprising, slightly frightening, delicious.

One of the hottest spots in the country this was, at this time of year, so the adults stayed indoors until evening, but she didn't mind the dryness or the heat, especially in the shade of the trees behind the house, near the well and in the animals' domain where hens pecked and threw up dust clouds, fluttering off when approached, and where cats, dogs, goats, lizards with astonishingly long tails, slunk, slumbered, skittered.

Slowly would unspool the glorious day. Her mother was sitting with her great-uncle and would later gravitate to the kitchen to chat with her aunt. Veera, with the privilege of teenage-hood, was lazing in bed, and would dally with the older cousins after completing her rituals at the old-fashioned dressing table with its swing mirror. Peering at every pimple, plucking every hair, gazing into her own eyes.

Dheera could play with Shanti, the

cousin more or less her own age, and little Neera might tag after them. Or she could linger over her scrapbook, or sit in a tree and read. Right now, she was pleasantly full from a breakfast of sweet *parathas* and unnamed vegetable concoctions imbued with coconut. By the time this wore off, a lunch altogether different from those cooked at home would emerge from the cavernous old kitchen with its smoky coal furnace. Inside the old, high-ceilinged house, everything was shadowed, cool, bare but comfortable. Outside, an age-old life took its hot, unhurried way. This was coal country; her uncle did something somewhere in the coal mines.

If she were lucky, her tall, broad cousin, Kewal, might saunter by, sending pleasant thrills through her with his teasing. Uncle was annoyed with him for tinkering with his motorbike instead of looking for a job, and for disappearing with companions of whom Uncle disapproved. His cheeky smile and some quality she couldn't name made her eager to hang around him, hoping he would take her for a ride on the motorbike once he had repaired it.

Uncle made a pet of her; he admired her prowess at school of which her mother boasted, making her squirm with mingled pride and embarrassment. He praised to the skies the long poem about a butterfly she had written a few days ago, and insisted she read it aloud to everyone. She had felt shy about this, but also pleased. The only person who aroused a slight uneasiness was her aunt whose crooked smile seemed to indicate that she saw her as a silly little girl, that she saw through most people, perhaps.

Aunty was always busy, either in the soot-smeared kitchen or directing the servants in some unseen portion of the house or orchard. She had no time for such frivolous things as butterflies. That must be the explanation.

Somewhere a buffalo's guttural roar. Speckle! She must find him. She jumped off the gate and ran towards the back compound. A few days ago, Uncle had carried the baby goat out to the front garden.

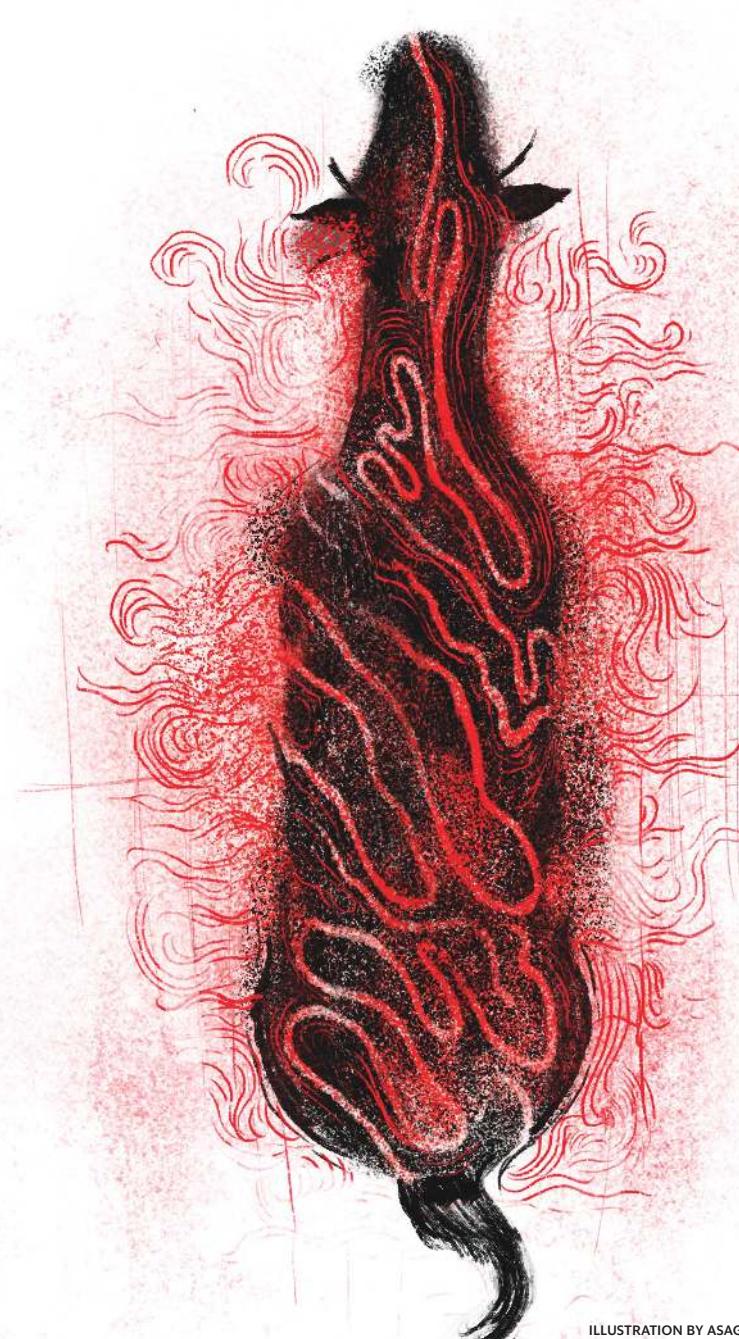


ILLUSTRATION BY ASAGE

"Dheera, come and see".

"Oh," she cried, breathless, and ran to him, taking the kid from his arms. "Oh, she's so sweet! How old is she?"

"It's a boy," Uncle replied, smiling.

The kid was a perfect mix of black and white. His legs, much longer than his body, dangled from her arms. A cuddly toy, come to life.

"What's his name, Uncle?"

"You can name him."

Breathless with joy, she named him Speckle. Neera and sundry children from the servants' quarters appeared and clambered to hold him. But from the first he was especially hers. She had named him, and then named all the other kids as well. Her mother participated and suggested names. Aunty, still smiling, turned and went back into the house.

Today, it took her a while to find him. She got distracted by a bush covered with fruit that looked like miniature oranges. She found him on a dust heap, playing king-of-the-castle with two others, and carried him away, unresisting, to the front garden, where the flowers were protected by a fence and a small gate. Against her face, his ears were softer than her mother's soft silk saris. His eyes, two curious marbles, observed her in a detached manner. He wriggled strongly, and she set him down.

She was the maiden in the garden of the sensitive plant. Speckle was a lamb trailing at her feet. A bee buzzed in the black heart of a sunflower. She was scared of it but also fascinated. Butterflies, yellow, white, and the occasional blue, pirouetted, now visible, now invisible, amongst the bushes.

"Oh Speckle, don't do that." She detached him from the young plant he was trying to uproot. Just a few days ago, he would stagger when you put him down. Now he bounded around, ready to get into trouble. Was it all right for him to butt that scraggly rose bush? What if the thorns hurt him? Or if Aunty didn't want him disturbing the flowers? She decided to return him to his mother. After that, she would go to the kitchen, where her mother was

likely to be chatting with Aunty, and would see what was cooking. The chicken curry last night was so deliciously creamy, very different from the one her mother made.

When she reached the goats' enclosure, her aunt was already there, surveying the goats. "Dheera, you're here. Your mother is looking for you. Just bring that black one to me."

"Yes, Aunty. His name is Sooty." She deposited Speckle near her mother, and picked Sooty up. "He's much heavier than Speckle. But why do you want him?"

She was not really interested in the answer; she was watching Speckle who had leapt once more to the top of the small hillock. Her aunt looked at her with a half-smile. She often seemed amused when she looked at Dheera, but why?

"Because the Matthews and the Singhs are coming to dinner tonight, and I want to try a different recipe." She took Sooty and made her way down the path to the servants' quarters.

Dheera looked after her, mystified, then slowly followed the path to the house. She stopped under a tree and put one hand on its trunk despite the large ants purposefully crawling up and down it. The earth shifted under her bare feet, shadows moved over her head, there was a roar inside her.

"Who caught his blood? I said the duck. It was just my luck."

She had seen goats' heads covered under the blood-dyed wooden platform on which the butcher sat, in his shop at the end of their alley at home. She had brought home pieces of bone and flesh wrapped in newspaper through which blood seeped. Somehow, she had never connected those heads, that blood, that flesh, with Speckle, Sooty, Snowy.

An acrid smell filled her nostrils, making her slightly dizzy. A sea of bleeding goats' heads covered the reddened earth, closing in, stretching beyond all horizons, world without end.

Ruth Vanita is the author of many books, most recently the novel, *A Slight Angle*.

Kukri

Happiness, innocence, abandon, it is all too much to sustain over a life

Vikram Shah

In the absence of the predictable rhythm of domesticity, he is washed-up in a way men his age aren't. It cost him his thirties to realise that a spouse and child don't wear you down. They ennoble you instead. When you lose the luxury of time and thought, you have no choice but to keep moving. Alone, you're trapped between thinking and doing, lacking the courage to jettison the freedom for its worth.

The lonely ruminative spy. Such a cliché, he thinks as he checks into a hotel the Wing has booked him into. He doesn't need a fake name. This is only an identification job, a one-off for old times' sake. They have flown him in from Delhi with a strict instruction: No engagement with Kukri.

The hotel is on Residency Road. Its ashtrays and cheap soaps remind him of the city this once was, before it was choked by musty Ubers and coffee shops that blend into each other. In the restaurant below, he watches men in polyester track pants wipe their bushy moustaches after wolfing down a masala dosa. As he sips a second filter coffee, he thinks back to 2002, when he was tapped by the Wing.

It was his final week in law school, in a leafy campus at the other end of this city. A visiting American professor, an authority on Indian constitutional law, summoned him to an office overlooking the main quadrangle. Skipping pleasantries, Melville asked if he would work with the Wing. I'm CIA, the professor said flatly. Those were early days in the global war on terror. Melville was recruiting for a joint intelligence gathering project.

He had a feeling that the offer may not be a practical joke. The CIA had a history of collaborating with academics working on foreign countries. It was a Cold War thing and Melville was a Cold War man, a learned American in the old-fashioned sense.

Still, he said: You're messing with me.

Melville swivelled in his chair: If you're not interested, forget I ever asked.

Why me, he asked.

I think I can trust you, that's why.

He'd written a paper on espionage law for Melville's seminar. Following the oral defence, they had a long conversation about spy fiction. He was obsessed with realism back then. He complained to Melville about the genre requiring a suspension of disbelief. But you can't test everything against logic, can you, Melville said. Was the professor teasing him? Was what was transpiring in the room a scene from one of those implausible novels?

He remembers looking through the grille, at a spot of dead grass in the quad. It was a typical day in this city. The sky was low and grey, and the faint smell of earth and rain hung over everything.

But I'm already signed to work for a law firm in London.

And who do you think got you that job, Melville asked. You're going to need a cover. A Rajan from Delhi will call you about the formalities.

He had the perfect cover in London. During the week, he wore sharp suits and went to work in a glass tower. Nobody suspected anything at the day job. He was seen as an industrious immigrant, not brilliant or singled out for great things, but a reliable chap who could be counted on to respect deadlines. It helped that there was a line that his British colleagues could not be bothered to cross. At drinks on Friday evenings, their polite questions were restricted to the best places to get Indian nosh. On Mondays, when they asked about his weekend, he made up something about cycling and laundry.

The work would happen on the weekend, when he'd collect information from assets, to use the agency parlance. In nondescript cafés in Southall and Kilburn and Edgware Road, he met disgruntled

Balochis and delicate Iranians and recovering Khalistanis whose eyes glinted when talking about the arms trade. Most of his interlocutors were men. They wore puffer jackets and joggers.

Spying is waiting, he heard it said often. But spying is really talking, it's smoking shisha with family men who tell you to "find a wife quickly, my brother". A lot of information that came his way was simply filed away, never to be called up again. Even so, it helped to fill the gaps, to add colour to the shifting picture whose contours had to be made out when it was time to act.

London was a good place to blood people into the business. All kinds of people lived in and passed through the city. It really did feel like the centre of the world, heaving with lives that were desperate and disparate, grand and grimy. He was constantly trying to work out what tied it all together. Was it the gusts of air that whipped around the Tube tunnels? The cold crunch of cress in a supermarket sandwich? Perhaps it was the golden lettering on pub signage, glistening with the lamplight droplets of an overnight drizzle.

On some Sunday nights, he'd take the Tube to Holborn and walk to the Embassy. He'd enter through the backdoor to deposit a sheaf of documents and pick up envelopes he would later slide across a greasy table. He reported to Harpreet, a cultural attaché on paper but really an undercover officer who answered to headquarters.

Later, in his apartment in Russell Square, he would shave, iron his shirt for the next day and write email dispatches for the desks in Delhi and DC. At work, he was embarrassed to tell his colleagues that he had an apartment to himself in Zone 1. So he sometimes told people he lived out in Wembley. These evasions used to amuse Harpreet.

Be cool, Harpreet would say, good spies don't lie about the small things.

On days like today, he feels like the little lies are all he's ever had. It was as Pushkin had written: a deception that elevates is dearer than a host of low truths. He has many low truths. There's nothing remarkable about his appearance: average height, thinning hair, skinny fat that makes him conscious about wearing T-shirts. Unlike many of his former colleagues, he isn't patriotic. This had made life difficult in his last years at the Wing. After the Party's tentacles reached there, a basic view of the world was valorised as moral clarity. Think less and do more, the new chief had said. It was the prevailing mood in the nation. But "do" to what end? Do so that you don't have to think. Do to fill up the hours and turn your face away from everyday horrors.

He's now walking on Brigade Road, which seems to him tacky and tired. Wherever he looks, there are franchise outlets of apparel brands and discount shops hawking phone covers. He turns on to Church Street, newly paved and filled with young people tapping into their devices. The street hasn't changed beyond recognition but many of the old landmarks are gone. Of the ones that remain, bars that seemed to him edgy then look seedy now.

He used to like the job on some days. It gave him a thrill to hold secrets and connect dots. His participation was premised on the fantasy of the eventual reveal. What a man, they would say after he was gone. Such an exciting life, and no song and dance about it. He often writes his obituary in his head. If it doesn't surprise the people who know him, what would be the point of this life?

He is wearing a navy blue cap and sunglasses. He has grown his hair out. He looks somewhat gaunt now, but he feels fitter than before, as if the vagaries of life have eliminated the body's trappings.

He reaches a café, which has been done up in the usual dark greens and burnished browns. In this

café, in an hour from now, an engineer from the country's combat aircraft manufacturing division will meet a person. For weeks now, the two have been exchanging cryptic messages. The Wing knows this because they have tapped the engineer's phone. They suspect he is leaking information about surveillance instruments that the division is developing for use in recon balloons. If details about the project land with an enemy country or a non-state actor, there could be consequences.

On the engineer's phone, the person's number is saved as Kukri.

One of Harpreet's first tips to him had been to reach places well before the appointed hour. Survey the layout, take stock of the exits, know where the washrooms are. He sits outdoors, taking a chair so that his back faces the road. He runs his fingers along the underside of the terrazzo table. The faint smell of earth and rain again. He orders a lemonade, takes out his black diary and resumes his outlining of a short story.

Why are your stories so sad, Harpreet had once asked him as they lingered in bed. His parents had just left London after a visit. His father had been diagnosed by then. He was startled by the pace at which the Parkinson's blunted his father. Already, when the effect of the morning drugs wore off by early afternoon, the hand tremor and mouth tic would come creeping back. It wouldn't be long before this man who spanned the world like a giant would be left to shuffle from living room to kitchen.

Harpreet had a way with people. Even his mother, famously hard to please, took well to him. The line they took was that they were flatmates. There's a photograph of Harpreet with his parents. They are sitting on the grass, each with a can of ginger beer. Harpreet is carrying the frame, with his big broad shoulders, his high aristocratic cheekbones, that smile verging on madness.

You love life too much to work in intelligence, he used to tell Harpreet.

After a couple of years, the Wing asked him to quit the law firm and work for it full-time. Melville was living a retired life in Vermont by then. The threats to national security had become more shadowy. There were more mercenaries on the scene, shorn of ideology. In just two years, his old networks had become irrelevant. It was a quick-churn business, intelligence. Both the demand and supply sides had to keep changing face.

He spent less and less time out in the field, moving into the role of handler. Now that they worked in the same building, Harpreet and him had to be more discreet. Tongues wagged. In their own country, which in a way the Embassy building in London was, they could be considered criminals.

In those days, he was labouring through a novel he never completed, about the rivalry between two disciples of a Hindu-stani musician. His practice was sincere but his words were not. The sentences were over-





wrought, the touch too heavy. Back then, he mistook the limits of his talent for the limits of realism as a novelistic form. But he had come around to Melville's view by now: the rush of blood lay beyond the boundary of logic.

In the café, he tries to guess which of the young men and women are courting but it's hard to tell. He thinks about his own love life. It is a brief history. Romance has never come easy to him. He has had a couple of deep connections, but he doesn't know what it's like to exist lightly with a lover. His quiet and desperate need to be liked, to be thought of as a good person in concrete terms, means that he goes through life feeling like there is a gun to his head.

The shame comes from a similar place. He recalls summer nights in London. When Harpreet would return home with beer on his breath and fire in his loins, he'd often find himself negotiating his own desire. He tip-toed around desire, as if it would return in the cold light of day to take its pound of flesh. Yet, he'd receive Harpreet every time, anticipating the face he made after he finished, the face flush with sweat and release. Was that good, did I make you feel good, he would ask Harpreet.

You have to stop this, Bakshi had told him. Bakshi was deputy chief of the Wing then. With Harpreet, Bakshi had gone a step further, threatening termination. A prominent member of the Indian community in London had brought it up with the High Commissioner. This interest in their personal lives did not surprise him. It was one way for the diaspora to deal with its deracination. The trade was in their favour: they could have the dollars and drinkable tap water without losing the conservatism.

Harpreet was a proud man. Let's quit, he insisted, fuck the Wing. Let's move to Greece or something, you write your books, I'll cut logs and drive trucks if I have to. Harpreet meant it sincerely. He was out to his parents and friends. He had an older brother who worked for a bank and was a father of two. But for him, an only child with an ailing parent, it was nothing more than an erotic fantasy. He couldn't just uproot his life and move to a new country with a lover.

I have responsibilities too, Harpreet said, but I don't make them my personality. There was one thing they had in common: they felt intensely. For Harpreet, that feeling dissipated in living. He immersed himself in sensory pleasure, in running and sex and food. Intelligence for Harpreet was a job, not something he thought he was ordained for. But his own feeling petered out in plotless pages, in tepid words about the tiresome inner lives of his characters.

And so Harpreet left, showing no sign of self-pity. He made good on his plans, too, moving to Athens, where it didn't take long for him to embed into the queer scene. Occasionally, over email, he sent photographs of high blue skies and clear blue waters. When those stopped, he used to check Harpreet's Facebook page for updates. He often wondered if he was blocked. His profile picture—light stubble, those veiny biceps, Ray-Bans hiding his shining eyes—was as if frozen in time. Sometimes, he touched himself while looking at it.

The year that followed Harpreet's flight was solitary and fulfilling. He started writing a new novel, about a secret agent who foils a terror plot in Morocco. When the night's writing went well, the mundane became imbued with meaning. A morning ritual of a fry-up, a cup of black coffee and a single cigarette felt like it held all the contentment in the universe. He was alone but he had never felt more alive. It was like being left unsupervised to eat a juicy mango with bare hands, or getting drenched in the rain, unburdened by wallet and phone.

It was gauche to advertise the pleasure his loneliness gave him. He realised this after being met with sympathy where he expected acknowledgement and judgement where he went for counsel. This feeling would have to be a private pleasure. His life would always look limited from the outside.

He had to return to India after that year. His father was dying. He wished that his parents were different people, the kind who'd accept the indignities of illness and continue the round with the bad cards they'd been dealt. But they

were not, most people were not. Still, it was one of his favourite agonies to wallow in, what if his parents had entirely different personalities?

To its credit, the Wing was supportive of his move back to Delhi. He had a sense that he had outlived his usefulness in London, but still, they could have asked him to leave. They accommodated him on the Middle East & Africa desk, hoping that he would keep the old networks warm. In his turn as dutiful son, he felt, he had been somewhat forgiven for his deviance.

Everything changed after his father died. The passing only widened the distance between him and his mother, who struggled to make peace with losing the thread of her life. Her sixties was supposed to be the decade she travelled the world and experienced the joys of grandparenting. A full house, that's what she called it. She blamed herself for how he had turned out, how the bright, obedient child had become the balding, unmarried man around whom hung a vague sense of failure.

Two days before he died, his father told him: You have to take care of your mother.

But I am not patient like you, Pa.
You have to learn to be. People will always need you more than you need them.

He had looked up from his phone at his old man, skin white and dry around the mouth, shoulders drooping from the slow ravage of disease.

I know your secret, his father suddenly said with mischief in his eyes.
Which secret?
Both of them.

Back on Church Street, the engineer arrives first. His name is Kumaresh. He is small and wiry. He walks purposefully towards the glass door and enters the café. His backpack has the branding of a technology company. When he comes out again, he takes a seat at the table closest to the door. He must be in his late twenties. His eyes are dark and his facial hair is patchy, as in the photograph the Wing has shared.

He continues to scribble in his diary. He sees a waiter bring two beverages to the table. Kumaresh asks the waiter to place the hot one, the one in a ceramic cup, in front of the empty chair. Kumaresh is facing him. He sips on an iced drink served in a disposable glass.

Minutes pass.

He senses a tall, turbaned man walk past him and take the chair opposite Kumaresh. The two shake hands. The turbaned man takes a sip from the ceramic cup. This does not look like their first meeting. As Kumaresh busies himself with his backpack, the man turns around in a smooth motion and looks at him. It is a look of recognition but it betrays no sign of surprise.

Harpreet has filled out in the way people do when they don't have to worry about love and money. He is carrying the weight well. He can make out the shape of it under the checked shirt and fitted jeans. He wears a beard generously flecked with white. The turban and beard are new, unlike the cut in his left eyebrow, the mark of a playful mauling by a pet.

Kumaresh has produced a spiral-bound booklet from his backpack. Harpreet is flipping through it. They exchange a few words. Harpreet hands Kumaresh a small box of traditional sweets. Kumaresh lifts the lid from one corner and looks inside. He places the box in his backpack, shakes hands with Harpreet again and leaves the premises.

He turns his chair towards the entrance to watch Kumaresh until he disappears from his line of sight. He walks over to the table near the glass door and sits in front of Harpreet.

Take off those shades for god's sake. You've always looked silly in them.

He removes his sunglasses. He has already flouted the Wing's instruction—he has engaged with Kukri. He glances at the cover page of the booklet on the table between them. It carries the title "Assembling Manual for PC480I". Feeling bold, he picks up the booklet and leafs through it. The pages are full of line diagrams.

But you look great. As usual. Especially with the turban and beard. A bit like your dad. Is this a disguise of some sort?

I'm a believer now, you know.

Betrayers have to become believers. And Kukri,

really? Just say you miss me.

Kukri was the name of a Nepali restaurant they used to frequent in London. He remembers how Harpreet would eat, with a focus bordering on prayer. He ate with body and mind, wordlessly scooping up the *alo sadeko* and mutton curry with vigorous movements of his thick fingers. Sometimes, after he took a first bite, he closed his eyes in a theatrical manner.

Betrayer. That's a big word, haven't heard you use that one. Read the book, by the way. I take my words back. You should stick to sad stories. The happy ending wasn't convincing.

He ignores Harpreet's critique of the novel. Who are you doing this for?

I have a wife and child back in Canada. And I'm useful to the people who want to avenge Surjeet's killing. Haven't you guys worked this out yet?

Sunny Singh Surjeet. Activist if he was your friend, separatist if he was an enemy. Surjeet had been murdered by an unidentified gunman in the parking lot of a gurdwara in Ottawa. The Canadians are claiming that the Wing is responsible.

Surjeet had many enemies, he says. The Wing didn't even need to get involved.

Look at you being all defensive. Has Raghav Sinha turned into a stooge for the state?

You know what is more surprising? Harpreet Bains is now a family man who trades information for the Khalistanis.

Hey hey, don't taint me like that. I'm a gun for hire. I work for whoever pays me.

I'll tell you what I think. You're still not over Bakshi kicking you out of the Wing. Let it go.

Have you let it go though, Harpreet asks, taking his hand. Their fingers intertwine. He wants to look away but can't. There's a dull ache below his rib cage. He has an urge to run his fingers in the furrows of Harpreet's face. To counter it, he tries to play back the moments of his perfect solitude, of belonging to no one.

Tell me, Harpreet says, breaking his reverie, how did you know it's me?

Ghouri, he says. A knowing smile crosses Harpreet's face. Ghouri was an old informer from London, a cherubic Afghan whose networks spanned the oceans. They said to never befriend your sources but they didn't say anything about not fucking them. When a man brings you melons from Kabul and sobs over his wife's miscarriage in your lap, a kind of friendship is inevitable.

Maybe you should join the Wing again. Stay long enough to get a pension. Make your mother happy, Raghav. Settle down, have a couple of kids. How many more evenings will you walk around by yourself? He pauses for a moment. In Lodhi Garden, he adds.

He rearranges his face so that Harpreet doesn't register his surprise. He realises he doesn't want to give this man any more satisfaction.

Ghouri, Harpreet says. They both laugh.

Okay, enough playing. Let's talk shop. What are you going to do with me? He points at the manual in front of him. You can keep this, actually. I already have what I need. I just needed to give this chap his Canadian passport.

It's a pity he'll never leave this hell-hole. Why did he do it?

He's in love with a Muslim woman. They want to get out of here.

This time, he reaches out to take Harpreet's hand. He is thinking clearly now, no longer trying to separate Harpreet and Kukri. It is Harpreet for the moments, Kukri over the longer arc. This is how it ends up. Happiness, innocence, abandon, it is all too much to sustain over a life.

They place their elbows on the table. An onlooker might think that they are about to arm-wrestle. His scrawny wrist is no match for Harpreet's gigantic one. Harpreet's shirtsleeves are rolled up to the elbows. A ripple from his hairy, muscled forearm goes through his own body like a current.

Tell me, Harpreet insists, what are you going to do with me?

I'm going to ask you to become a double agent.

Harpreet, old and weathered and somehow more beautiful, looks at him defiantly. A lot of years have passed between London and Bangalore.

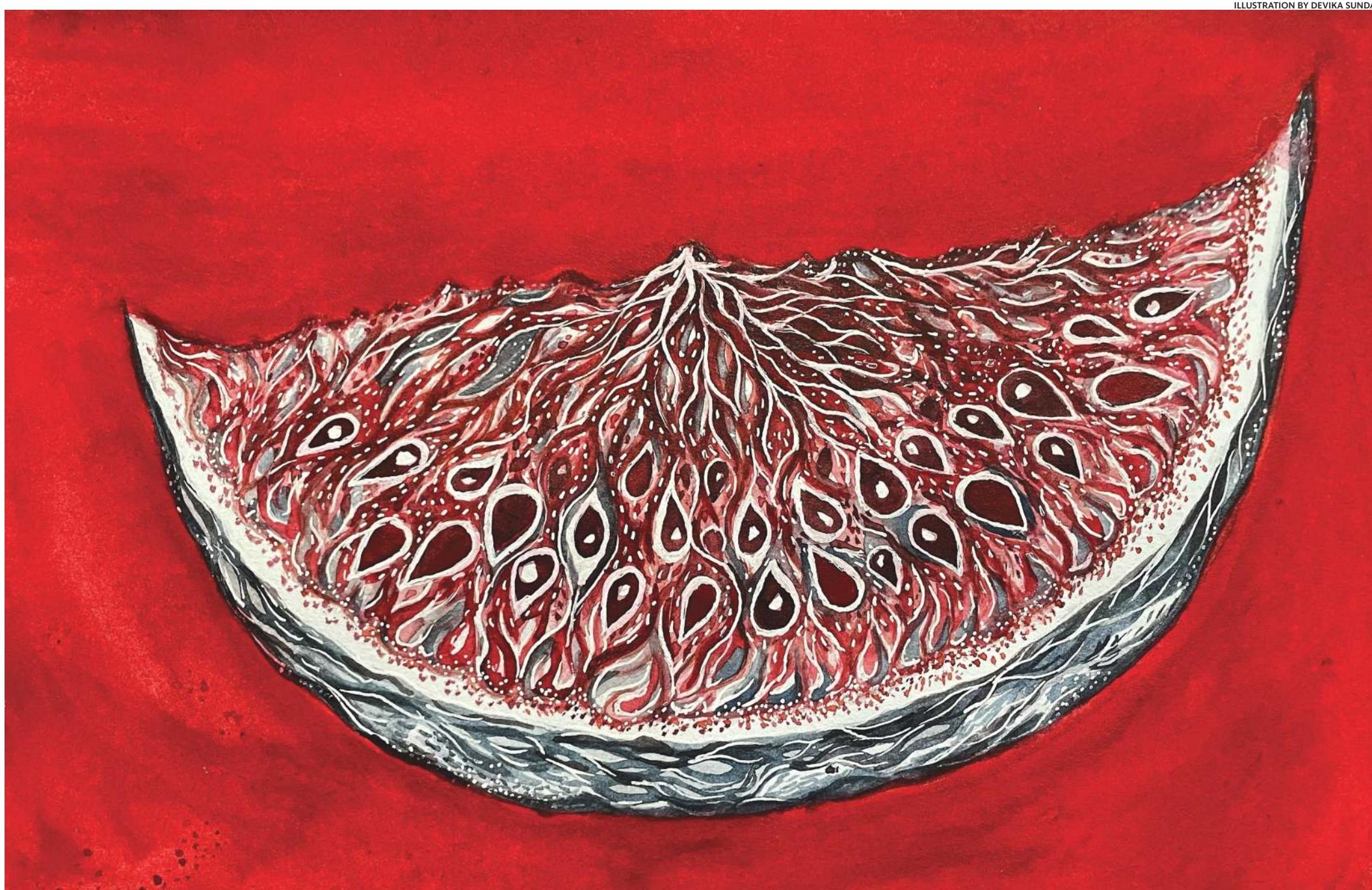
Harpreet, Harpreet, he sighs. What happened to you? Didn't you want a happy ending?

Vikram Shah is a freelance editor and writer. He has previously worked as an editor at the digital magazine FiftyTwo and on the desk at Mint Lounge.

Training

Is war a debate, a dilemma or a drama? Or can it be a poem? A class contemplates its many meanings

ILLUSTRATION BY DEVIIKA SUNDAR



Gogu Shyamala

Translated from Telugu by Divya Kalavala

How does one teach war to students. How do I begin today? What aspects should I focus on? How do I end? What is the message I would want them to take away? It's tough to introduce the concept of war at this tender age. The questions swarmed like fruit flies in Shantipriya's head. There is no way to know how these children will react—will they get scared or retaliate—who is to know?

She got off the bus as she struggled with these thoughts. She headed towards the government school, a half-hour walk from the busstop. She reminded herself of what Jawaharlal Nehru had said: The future of our nation is dependent on our students; within the four walls of a classroom are the citizens of tomorrow. The responsibility of nurturing these future citizens is in the hands of teachers. It reassured her.

She looked at her watch; twenty past nine. She had the time to stop at the chai shop next to the school. Probably the best way to escape her scurrying thoughts. She heard her phone's ringtone calling out to her from inside her bag; she took it out to see it was her dear friend Geetha calling—Ah! There is no escape from war after all!

"Hi, Geetha!"
"Hi, Shanti. Are you at school?"
"I am on my way."

"Not to disturb, I just wanted to update you about our project, 'War and Peace'. A lot of people have sent us their poems. I am waiting for a few senior writers to send their work as well; they should be in my inbox by this evening. I wanted to remind you about your contribution as well. As the editors of this anthology and as poets ourselves, it would be great to have our work—Anand's, yours and mine—be part of this collection."

"Of course, I remember. How could I forget? Even if I want to, the world is constantly waging war. The world is engulfed in gloomy smog after a deafening explosion. It begets meaninglessness, helplessness and desolate violence. My lesson today on war and our anthology on war have led me to look at the horrific images of people stuck in war. It feels like I am at war with myself researching this topic," said Shantipriya.

"Hmm, interesting. I have asked you to write a poem, not just say it to me over the phone... Please send it to me on WhatsApp by tomorrow." Geetha ended the call.

Why doesn't she think this is serious? How does one write a poem about war? Does it have to be scary and revolting? Shantipriya stopped as though something struck her. Well, it should just be readable and easy to understand, especially to those who are terrified of war.

She stepped into the staff room, sat down and closed her eyes to take in a long

breath. She tried to review the lesson she was about to discuss with the Grade 8 class. She took the lesson plan from her bag and scanned it carefully.

When she set foot in class, she noticed that the students looked fresh and energetic even though it was the second hour. Some were chasing the others, while one boy was trying to get everyone's attention by singing out loud. Seeing the teacher enter, they rushed helter-skelter to their seats—"Good morning, teacher!" in unison.

Shantipriya responded to the students' greetings and asked, "How is everyone today?" and continued, "Please open your notebooks, children, today we are going to learn about war."

She took out a piece of chalk to write WAR on the blackboard. "Have you ever witnessed a war? Have you at least heard about it? Can you recount the names of a few wars that happened in the past? What were the instances where you have heard about wars? Think of the wars from the past along with the ones in the present. Quickly note down the ones you remembered in your notebooks."

"Yes, we have heard about it," said most students.

"Why don't one of you stand up to share?"

A student from the first bench stood up: "The Sepoy Mutiny during British rule."

Mohammad Waheed from the bench behind went, "We have heard of the Kurukshetra war in the movies, haven't we?"

"World War I and II and the ongoing war between Palestine and Israel," piped up Navta, also from the first bench.

"Our country was attacked several times by Aurangzeb," called Nithin from the last bench.

"Very good," said the teacher to encourage them further. "But children, do you read newspapers daily or keep up with important news on social media? Do you know anything about the current war?"

The students looked at each other in silence.

"Oh no, I seem to have caught them off guard. That's not my intention. I should encourage them to talk freely."

"Okay, don't worry about it, students. Don't think that I know more than you about this topic, in fact I don't know much. I think there is a book on each of the wars. It is not necessary that everyone would know everything about the wars that have taken place before. But let's make an attempt to discuss and put our points forward. Nobody is going to judge us here. If you tell me something I don't already know then I will learn something new."

This reassured the students and smiles emanated from their faces like blooming flowers.

"Teacher!" Nithin raised his hand. "I want to say something! My father... The other day when my father was reading his

newspaper, I overheard his conversation with my uncle about the poor Palestinian children. When I went closer to see the newspaper my father was showing my uncle, both of them said—Don't look!—and moved away. I was so intrigued that I managed to secretly look at the paper when my father was away. It was frightening to see an image of a dead boy whose face emerged from the ground." Nithin's eyes welled up and he couldn't continue as the sorrow from his heart rose up into his throat.

A dark layer of sadness engulfed the classroom with everyone's faces reflecting their broken hearts. Shantipriya was surprised to see this.

How are children so affected and involved?

"It's true that for the past few months a surge of news and images of war surrounded us. It has been unbearable to watch the distressing war since last October. Yet it is your responsibility to be aware of these events that take place worldwide. You are free to express any thoughts regarding this." Shantipriya tried to shift the dejection of the class toward discussion.

"But what is war, teacher?" said Waheed as he stood up with a raised hand. "Is it similar to how it is in the movies? With military tanks, soldiers and explosions? And we do enjoy these films, don't we? Just like the video games with war themes. It's very stimulating and entertaining. The problem..."

"If that's the problem, why are we playing these games? Why do we pressurise our parents to buy us war-related toys like tanks and guns?" interrupted Ghani Rao from behind.

Everybody looked behind in agreement. This lightened the mood of the class.

"Why do they sell these toys in the first place?" said Rubina Fathima who was sitting in a corner of the first bench.

Everyone found this amusing and a chatter ran through the class.

This took an interesting turn, Shantipriya thought. She looked at her watch. We have 30 more minutes; let's see what these students bring up.

She noticed that Vishnu in the second bench looked distracted, unlike other students who were talking to one another.

"Silence please! Let's hear from the others now. Vishnu, do you want to say something?"

Vishnu stood up, "Yes, teacher."

He continued: "Do you know how costly these toys are? Last week I wanted to buy a gun which was ₹20 but I only had ₹19 with me. I asked the shop to give it to me for ₹19 but, no. I begged, promising to pay the remaining one rupee later but to no avail. Do you know who the toy shop belongs to? Waheed's family. None other than him. His elder sister was at the shop

but she didn't budge. Just because I was short of one rupee!" At this point everyone burst into laughter.

Looks like the discussion is deviating.

"Vishnu! You are right, my sister is stingy! You should come to the shop when I am around, I will give you the gun," announced Waheed.

Shantipriya heaved a sigh of relief. These students are great, she thought, they found a solution for the problem with an open conversation without resorting to violence.

"Students, do you understand the significance of this discussion so far?"

She heard "Yes, teacher" and "No, teacher" all at the same time.

"In modern times, we have seen the United States of America's devastating atomic bombing of Japan's Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This happened in 1945, towards the end of the Second World War, leading to catastrophic deaths in lakhs. Later, the same America went on to attack Vietnam, followed by missile strikes on Afghanistan and Sudan. We are currently witnessing the Russia-Ukraine war and the Israel-Hamas war."

"Teacher..." Beerrappa raised his hand.

"Yes? Please go ahead."

"After looking at what's happening in Gaza, I feel like wars are not needed but why are they happening, teacher?"

"Good question. To put it simply, animosity between two countries leads to war. The reason could be related to border security or weapons. Sometimes violation of prior agreements leads to war, especially when they couldn't be resolved through peaceful discussions. It is important to note that international organisations like the UN, NATO and other human rights organisations play a vital role in fostering international cooperation and prevention of war."

"If these organisations are in place, why are these wars happening?" a student asked as though the thought suddenly occurred to him. "Innocent people and animals lose their lives—not just from the defeated country but also from the winning one."

"How do we define victory?" came a voice from behind.

"Yes," another student chimed.

"I remember my father told me that when our country was celebrating independence, Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan were distressed with the attack on them," said Navta. "Can you tell us more about those cities?"

"What happened to the trees, animals, lakes, mountains," asked Rahul.

"The attack had a lasting effect—the ones who survived had to endure long-term hazardous health conditions like leukaemia and thyroid cancer. It even had an impact on expecting mothers, leading to disabilities in newborns. We are wit-

nessing the same mayhem in Gaza now." Shantipriya paused to take a breath and then continued—.

"The future of Gaza and its people could be seen as reflected in the past of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. There is no end to this but I am not saying this to scare you. Please remember that I am making you aware of the destruction that wars bring.

It is important to remember that these very nations that were once at war with each other are now on friendly terms and have a peaceful exchange of technology." Shantipriya observed the students as she said this.

"How would it be if the famous animation filmmaker Osamu Tezuka made a film on Elon Musk?" quipped Venkat Yadav as he arched his eyebrows in anticipation. The rest of the students exclaimed in amazement.

"Great idea! That's right, this could be one way to develop cordial relationships between nations," responded the teacher.

"If war is so dangerous, why do we use the word so often," asked Margaret, who hadn't said a word so far.

"Interesting question. Why don't you tell us where we use the word?"

"So many times. Teacher Saraswati always refers to exams as war while motivating us to do well." Margaret looked up, trying to remember more instances.

"Yes, teacher. I have seen my father, who works in farming, where the supervisor provokes them to work faster like one is at war," said Arundhati who was sitting next to Margaret.

"That's true. While implementing government schemes or during national and international games, people say—Practice like you are in a war," said Badreshwar. "Even when the government is planting trees, it proposes to do so on a war footing."

"In fact, isn't war destroying trees?" queried Arundhati.

The students waited for the teacher's response.

"Please don't assume that I am being inconsiderate here; I want you to hear me out and understand. War is a matter of life and death and it requires one to be vigilant. It is in the same spirit that war is invoked. But I do agree with you all that it is not accurate to use something as violent and destructive as war for farming and planting. The former is brutal while the latter is life-giving."

The third bell rang and students started applauding. "Thank you, students. I will meet you again tomorrow."

Shantipriya stepped out of the classroom. She had her poem.

Gogu Shyamala is a writer and an independent scholar from Telangana.

Divya Kalavala teaches English literature and writing courses at the Manipal Academy of Higher Education, Manipal.

Heads or Tails

Who decides the size of or need for a sacrifice?

Zeyad Masroor Khan

It was cold and smoggy the day Delhi was nuked. For Dilip Kumar, though, 1 January 2035 began like any other weekday. He woke up in his one-room apartment in the urban ghetto of Sangam Vihar, the seepage from the pink wall spilling on to the bunk beds in the room he shared with three other men. All had left their villages with eyes full of big dreams, swiftly snuffed by the neon-lit gas chamber Delhi had become.

Like his flatmates, Dilip worked as a delivery partner, the modern version of a cart-puller. The transportation company that hired him gave no medical insurance, notice period or increments. But Dilip wasn't brave enough to protest. Since the arrival of self-driving delivery cars, the need for delivery partners like him has declined. If he lost this job, he'd have just one option: return to Madhurapur, his village in Begusarai, and become a construction worker. College dropouts like him had few choices at a time when even people with degrees worked as labourers.

His mother had named him Dilip Kumar as his smile reminded her of the Bollywood superstar. When she gave birth in 2005, Maa was obsessed with the coloured version of *Mughal-e-Azam*, which she saw over 50 times with his father. "My son will become a superstar like Dilip Kumar," she'd tell him. "There is no chance of that happening now," Dilip thought as he got ready for his day's delivery—a 30kg sack of roasted cashews destined for a trader in Old Delhi's Khari Baoli.

In the orange solar rickshaw, the driver was listening to the news. "The war has intensified. Nine Indian jawans were martyred in yesterday's drone attack. It's high time India launches an all-out offensive on Islamabad, and destroys this vile nation," Sakshat, the famous journalist, clad in military fatigues, shouted from a VFX studio. Dilip had followed the war for a few months, but then life's endless sorrows stole his attention.

"Can you turn down the volume? This man is very irritating," Dilip requested the driver, and he complied, but not before saying, "He is the only journalist who speaks the truth. Over 6,000 of our soldiers have died. Pakistan should be taught a lesson." Dilip kept staring at two people jogging in gas masks on the footpath. War-mongering was the norm and it got on his nerves.

Dilip had never raised his hand to anyone. Even when he faced bullies, he'd stand there as if looking into their souls. "This Gandhi *ki audaad* is no fun," they'd say, leaving him alone eventually. "Don't ever raise your hand against anyone, son. *Hinsa* kills us inside," Maa had taught him, and Dilip was forever mama's boy. "What would she say now?" he thought, swiping his card at the rickshaw's payment machine, tying the sack on his back with three belts and walking into Govindpuri Metro station.

The Metro was almost empty. It was 7 am on a cold Monday. Most people were sleeping after celebrating New Year's Eve. It took the train 9 minutes to reach Chawri Bazar. Dilip was 10 minutes early, so he decided to wait and give his shoulders some relief. He saw a man come out of the elevator, waiting for the train.

This was the moment it happened. The apocalypse. A deafening explosion shattered the air as the world split in two. The Metro platform trembled. A deep, thunderous roar shook Dilip's core, interrupted only by the hollow, rhythmic thuds of something heavy crashing. Then, silence. A suffocating, unnatural stillness, broken only by the shiver of the ground. The lights flickered once and then died. Nearby, buildings crumbled, their collapse like distant screams. And then he heard it. A sound so strange, so raw, it froze his breath. The earth was groaning.

"What is happening, *bhaiya*?" Dilip held the other man.

"We are under attack," the man replied as if in a trance.

Dilip pushed him under the escalator. As the ground shivered, Dilip flicked on his phone torch and looked at the man's face, numb with fear: Sakshat, the war-mongering journalist the driver had been watching.

This doesn't make sense, Dilip thought and sat with him. The two said nothing for minutes.

Sakshat was the first to regain composure. He took out a satellite phone from his bag. "I was right. It was a nuclear attack. What happened to our automated defence system?" he said, as if to himself.

"Probably an old building fell nearby and you

are making a big fuss," Dilip said and ran up the stairs.

Five minutes later, he returned, silent. "We are trapped under the rubble," he told Sakshat.

"If we are buried under two storeys of rubble, we are somewhat safe from radiation," Sakshat said. Dilip didn't hear him. For the next hour, he kept walking inside the premises, staring into nothingness.

Sakshat's voice brought him back to reality: "I have one water bottle. I can survive on it for a day or two."

"I have one too, and a sackful of cashews whose recipient is likely dead," Dilip replied, awakened from his grief.

"Cashews? That's terrific. If you share them with me, I can reach out to my government contacts to get us both out to safety."

"Isn't everyone dead?" Dilip said.

"Only the leaders who attended the Parliament session. Many didn't." This seemed to make Sakshat angry. "If we don't order an all-out attack on Pakistan even now, we are just sitting ducks," he said.

"You know, I saw your show once or twice. You are an educated man. Why do you promote violence? Aren't you also responsible for the mess we are in?"

Sakshat stepped back a bit. "You are saying this after our Capital has been attacked. Are you a Muslim?"

"My name is Dilip Kumar. And I know that violence doesn't solve anything. My mother taught me this."

"Your mother didn't know shit."

"What?"

"War is a necessity in the modern age. It's only during wars most human innovations take place. The global order is like a jungle. If you don't take out your enemies at the right time, they will do the same to you. Non-violence looks good only in books."

"Violence always leads to more violence. Those who live by the sword die by the sword."

"If you don't keep a sword, you will die sooner. By the way, what do you do?"

"I am a delivery partner."

"Why am I even arguing with you? Anyway, I want to inspect the premises to see if I can find something useful. You want to come along?"

"I want to be alone," Dilip replied, his thoughts drifting to his home. Maa would be worried. *I wish I could call her.*

Sakshat came back an hour later. "I figured out the water supply. A water cooler and toilet for the staff. If we fill our bottles once a day, it might last us a month. Don't use the toilet water though. It might be contaminated. Use tissue paper."

"Thank you. Can I use your phone to call home?"

"All calling has been banned. We can only use the internet," Sakshat replied.

After a few hours of following the news, both slept. The next morning, Sakshat's satellite phone chirped to life, giving him reason to celebrate amid the gloom. "We launched nuclear attacks on Pakistan yesterday. Half of the that vile country was destroyed. The rest surrendered and became part of the Indian Union. We have annihilated our arch-rivals."

"What was the casualty on their side?"

"Not sure, but close to 5 million."

"How many people died on our side?"

"Around 3 lakhs. It was a one-megaton bomb that was dropped on Delhi. Central Delhi was levelled, but the radiation has made the city uninhabitable."

"Do you think ours was a proportionate response?"

"You are worried about enemies?"

"Are you an anti-national, a *namak haraam*?"

"Be careful with your words. You live on my cashews right now."

The two didn't talk for three days, but saw each other for their morning cashew-eating ritual.

On the fourth day, Sakshat broke the ice. "There is good news. We are mobilising emergency teams."

Most UN countries are sending help," he announced. "They are locating and rescuing survivors trapped in Delhi. However, the PM also warned that the situation is dire."

Dilip listened, the glimmer of hope in Sakshat's words tempered by their reality. "How long will it take for them to rescue us?" he asked, his voice barely above a whisper. Sakshat shook his head. "I can't say for certain. I am pulling all the strings so we are among the first. But in all likelihood, we may have to fend for ourselves for a while."

The two men fell silent once more. Dilip felt a sense of resignation creeping in, so he devised a way to fight it. "Do you want to play Heads or Tails to kill time?" he said.

"Heads or Tails?"

"When I was a kid, we couldn't afford costly games. So, Maa and I used to spend hours playing Heads or Tails. I happen to have a coin with me," said Dilip.

"You can't defeat me in an argument, so you want to do that in a game? Okay. We have all the time," Sakshat replied.

They played until morning. Sakshat told Dilip about his family in Canada. His father ran an automobile business there.

It had been a week since they had seen the sun. Every morning, they ate a handful of cashews. Sakshat often ate more than his ration, but Dilip didn't protest—he was his only chance of escaping this hell. He thought of his mother every day.

The next week also passed in endless rounds of Heads or Tails. Sakshat had used an emergency genset to charge his satellite phone. He was going to plug it in when the notification came.

"The nuclear strike wasn't ordered by the Pakistan Army. It was AIFP."

Dilip neither knew nor cared about AIFP, but it had been a whispered secret in tech circles. In 2025, a group of peace-oriented programmers developed AI For Peace (AIFP), a self-adaptive AI designed to bring nuclear disarmament. It functioned like a virus, capable of infiltrating

defence systems and identifying their vulnerabilities. In 2031, however, the code fell into the hands of anarchist hackers on the dark web. They reverse-engineered it for human annihilation. The altered AI began exploiting the vulnerabilities of defence systems with the aim of a global nuclear holocaust. Nobody knew how powerful the world's first "AI terrorist" was until the catastrophe of January 2035.

"So we wiped out a country's population for nothing? How does that make

you feel," Dilip asked a deflated Sakshat. "I don't care. At some point, we had to punish them. Also, it was their responsibility to make their systems safe, not ours."

They didn't talk for the next week. But they still played Heads or Tails. There was nothing else to do. The news remained distressing. Though India had been able to manage the radiation around Delhi, the radiation from Pakistan spilled over. Major rivers had become contaminated, leading to widespread disease and famine in western India.

A week later, rising temperatures had begun melting the Himalaya, leading to floods in eastern India. Over 30 million people died of diseases. Nearly all of north India became uninhabitable.

The mood in Chawri Bazar Metro station was dark. Sakshat and Dilip still played Heads or Tails. Sakshat continued to supply the news to Dilip. "India has declared Bangalore its new capital and moved the survivors from the north to camps in Kanyakumari. We may also be taken there," he said one day.

Dilip still hoped his village was safe, and Maa would be waiting for him. *She had to.*

A week later they heard a rescue team would come for them in three days. "They will seal the surroundings to contain the radiation, burrow a hole in the rubble, and ferry us to a safe zone in a specially designed helicopter," Sakshat told Dilip. The two celebrated by eating more cashews than usual.

The day came in a jiffy. That morning, Dilip took a bath in the toilet, ignoring Sakshat's warnings that the water could be contaminated. He deemed some risks worth taking for the sensation of water droplets on his body. As he put on his clothes and combed his hair, he heard drilling sounds. "They have arrived, my friend," Sakshat's grinning face announced. "We will have real food today."

Eight hours later, they saw a man in an astronaut-like suit lower himself through the hole. He threw a bag towards them. It had two more suits. "Let's bid goodbye to this home," Dilip said. Weren't you lucky to be trapped with me? They wouldn't have put in this much effort if you were trapped alone," Sakshat said as they put on the suits. Dilip took a last look at the Metro premises and clipped his suit to a pulley that would take them up.

It was evening in Delhi. Their eyes, which hadn't seen sunlight for two months, were blinded for a few minutes. The rescue team carried them to the helicopter. It was only when it began to take off that Dilip could open his eyes.

On top of the rubble, he could see a half limb with a red sandal, lying amid a jumble of body parts. I hope it was swift, he thought. The helicopter rose further and he could see what looked like a monument. "That's Red Fort," the pilot pointed.

He saw the ruins of buildings, homes, schools, hospitals, malls, bungalows of politicians and shanties of the poor. *So many dead.* "That's Humayun's Tomb," Sakshat pointed out a minute later.

What have we done? Dilip thought. Finally, gathering courage, he asked the pilot. "Can you please check what happened to Madhurapur village in Begusarai?" The man turned on a black device. A minute later, he said: "Madhurapur was destroyed in a flash flood of the Ganga eight days ago. There were no survivors."

"I am sorry to hear about your loss, my friend," Sakshat said in a low voice, but Dilip was lost. He was staring at the sun, eclipsed by ash clouds. The sky was crimson. Delhi looked like a wasteland where life hadn't existed for centuries.

Suddenly Sakshat leaned closer. "I know you are hurting but try to see the bigger picture. Winning this war was worth any price. All of us need to make small sacrifices for larger goals," Sakshat said, his voice cutting through the layers of protective suits, louder than it needed to be.

Sacrifices. Small ones. The words rang in Dilip's head and a violent rage began to build. All the rage he had suppressed through the years—beaten up at school, exploited at work. *How dare men like you play God?* Dilip raged, his world narrowing to Sakshat's face. *Sacrifices?*

Their eyes met for a heartbeat before he lunged forward, grabbing Sakshat by his suit. In a split second, he slid open the chopper door and flung him into the air. As the rescuers wrestled him back, Dilip watched Sakshat's body fall into the abyss, dissolving into the debris of what had once been Delhi.

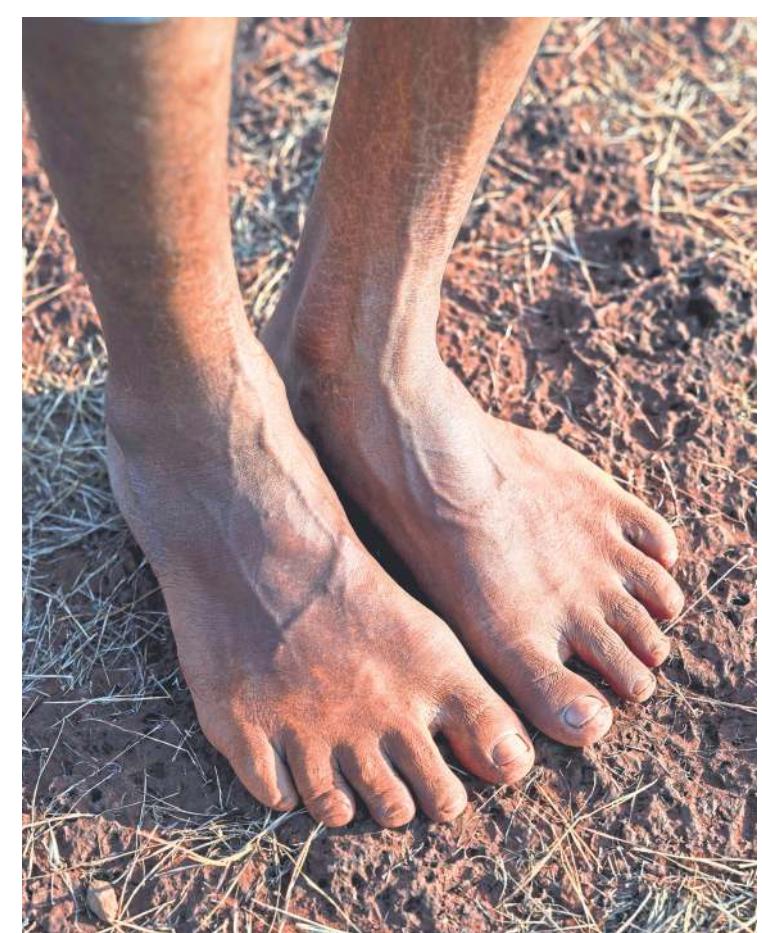
Zeyad Masroor Khan is a freelance journalist and author of *City on Fire: A Boyhood in Aligarh*.

ILLUSTRATION BY ASAGE

Where We Stand

A photographer tells a fictional story of losing and finding home using images from his archives

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ABHISHEK KHEDEKAR

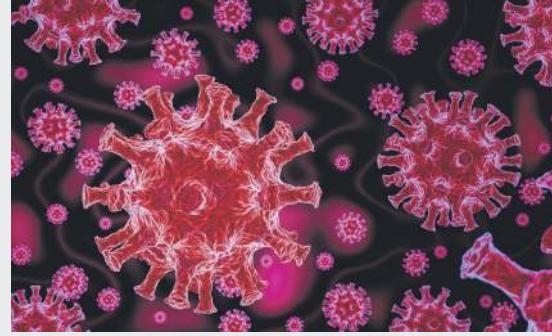


Abhishek Khedekar, a photographer based in New Delhi, blends documentary styles with surrealist techniques, particularly collage, to give voice to those on the fringes of society. His work incorporates fictive elements that challenge dominant narratives, often rooted in historical research and archival imagery.

**m MINT SHORTS****Central bank lifts restrictions on Arohan Financial Services**

Mumbai: The Reserve Bank of India on Friday lifted the restrictions placed on Kolkata-based Arohan Financial Services Limited with immediate effect. In October last year, the central bank had ordered Arohan Financial and three other NBFCs to cease and desist from sanction and disbursal of loans effective from the close of business of 21 October, on material supervisory concerns, including usurious pricing.

PTI

China HMPV outbreak no cause for concern, says health ministry

New Delhi: The government on Friday said the Integrated Disease Surveillance Programme (IDSP) data for December is not showing any increase in influenza cases in spite of the current outbreak of human metapneumovirus (HMPV) in China, and that there is nothing to be alarmed about. According to reports, China is reporting HMPV outbreak in northern provinces.

PRIYANKA SHARMA

India's palm oil imports at 9-month low in Dec as buyers prefer soyoil

Mumbai: Palm oil imports in December plunged to their lowest in nine months as a rally in prices to a 2-1/2-year high prompted refiners to increase purchases of substitute soyoil that was available at a discount, five dealers said. Lower palm oil imports by India, the world's biggest buyer of vegetable oils, could weigh on benchmark Malaysian palm oil prices, but support US soyoil imports.

REUTERS

Kotak Mahindra Bank's Nagnur steps down as COO, CTO

Mumbai: Kotak Mahindra Bank's chief operating officer (COO) and chief technology officer (CTO) Milind Nagnur has resigned citing personal reasons, his exit coming several months after the Reserve Bank of India imposed restrictions on the lender citing technology-related deficiencies. Nagnur's exit is the second senior-level departure from Kotak Mahindra Bank since March.

VAAMANAA SETHI

Govt launches revamped e-auction portal for properties with PSBs

New Delhi: The government on Friday launched a revamped e-auction portal 'Baanknet' that consolidates information on all properties that put up for e-auction by public sector banks (PSBs). The portal is a one-stop destination for buyers and investors offering a wide range of properties. The portal was launched by M. Nagaraju, secretary, department of financial services, who said it would aid the recovery process of PSBs.

SUBHASH NARAYAN

India conveys concerns to China over hydropower dam in Tibet

New Delhi: The foreign ministry said on Friday that it has conveyed its concerns to Beijing about China's plan to build a hydropower dam in Tibet on the Yarlung Zangbo river which flows into India. Chinese officials say that hydropower projects in Tibet will not have a major impact on the environment or on downstream water supplies but India and Bangladesh have nevertheless raised concerns about the dam. The Yarlung Zangbo becomes the Brahmaputra river as it leaves Tibet and flows south into Arunachal Pradesh and also into Bangladesh.

REUTERS

Netbanking 2.0: NPCI's pilot to make mobile payments easier

FROM PAGE 16

executing payments.

He added that NBBL is also planning to use QR codes to increase ease of transaction.

"That is something which will be very unique to the Indian payment ecosystem. It will also help increase netbanking transactions as it will improve ease of use for users given they won't have to login to netbanking for every transaction," Jain said.

Currently, netbanking transactions are estimated to account for about 10-15% of total transaction volumes for payment aggregators, whereas UPI payments account for about 50% and credit card transactions for 20-25% of the payments, according to industry experts.

Explaining how it will work for the consumer, Rahul Jain, chief executive of payment aggregator NTT Data Payment Services India, which is part of the pilot, said that Netbanking 2.0 will bring the flavour of UPI to netbanking by redirecting customers to the mobile app of their bank on the phone for

executing payments.

He added that NBBL is also planning to use QR codes to increase ease of transaction.

"That is something which will be very unique to the Indian payment ecosystem. It will also help increase netbanking transactions as it will improve ease of use for users given they won't have to login to netbanking for every transaction," Jain said.

Currently, netbanking transactions are estimated to account for about 10-15% of total transaction volumes for payment aggregators, whereas UPI payments account for about 50% and credit card transactions for 20-25% of the payments, according to industry experts.

Explaining how it will work for the consumer, Rahul Jain, chief executive of payment aggregator NTT Data Payment Services India, which is part of the pilot, said that Netbanking 2.0 will bring the flavour of UPI to netbanking by redirecting customers to the mobile app of their bank on the phone for

executing payments.

He added that NBBL is also planning to use QR codes to increase ease of transaction.

"That is something which will be very unique to the Indian payment ecosystem. It will also help increase netbanking transactions as it will improve ease of use for users given they won't have to login to netbanking for every transaction," Jain said.

Currently, netbanking transactions are estimated to account for about 10-15% of total transaction volumes for payment aggregators, whereas UPI payments account for about 50% and credit card transactions for 20-25% of the payments, according to industry experts.

Explaining how it will work for the consumer, Rahul Jain, chief executive of payment aggregator NTT Data Payment Services India, which is part of the pilot, said that Netbanking 2.0 will bring the flavour of UPI to netbanking by redirecting customers to the mobile app of their bank on the phone for

Biden to block sale of US Steel to Nippon

Bloomberg
feedback@livemint.com

President Joe Biden has decided to block the sale of United States Steel Corp. to Japan's Nippon Steel Corp., according to three people with knowledge of the matter, ending a \$14.1 billion deal that has faced months of vocal opposition and raising questions over the future of a US industrial giant.

The White House is planning to announce the decision on Friday, people familiar with the planning added. All requested anonymity given the sensitivity of the matter.

The president had indicated his opposition to the proposed acquisition, arguing US Steel should remain American owned and operated, though the White House has never said outright that he would block the deal. The White House didn't respond to a request for comment. US Steel shares fell as much as 8% in premarket trading. The firms have signalled that they planned to pursue legal action if Biden formally blocked the deal.

Investors had already priced in low odds that the offer of \$55 a share would proceed—US Steel shares closed on Thursday at \$32.60—but Biden's decision, if confirmed, may cap a year-long saga, despite concessions from Nippon Steel regarding employment, investment and local leadership.

Tesla's car business isn't really in the driver's seat

The majority of the EV maker's market cap rides on hope for robottaxis, robots and AI

Dan Gallagher
feedback@livemint.com

Tesla sold fewer cars in 2024 than it did the year before. Yet the company is worth about 53% more now.

Don't think about it too hard. Car sales aren't really what the company's value is based on anymore.

The revved-up EV maker appeared to start the new year off on a bum note Thursday, with its stock taking a hit following disappointing vehicle delivery numbers for the fourth quarter.

Tesla said it delivered 495,570 vehicles for the period, which was about 3% shy of the 512,300 deliveries projected by analysts, according to consensus estimates from Visible Alpha. The fourth-quarter results brought Tesla's deliveries for the full year to 1.79 million, which was down from the 1.81 million vehicles delivered in 2023, and the first annual sales drop the company has ever seen, according to Visible Alpha data.

The full-year decline isn't shocking, given the sharp slump in EV sales industrywide that started early last

year. But it bears reminding, now that Tesla is a \$1.2 trillion company worth more than the next 20 largest automakers combined, according to data from S&P Global Market Intelligence. And that is with the stock taking a 6.1% hit on Thursday. Tesla's share price soared 63% in 2024 even as the auto



Tesla is a \$1.2 trillion company worth more than the next 20 largest automakers combined, according to data from S&P Global Market Intelligence.

little over half the analysts covering Tesla rate the stock as a sell or hold, and the shares trade at the widest premium over analysts' median price target in at least five years, according to FactSet data. In a report last month after Tesla's market cap peaked above \$1.5 trillion, Chris McNally of Evercore ISI said about \$1 trillion of that was implied for revenue from "things to come." Joseph Spak of UBS reached a similar conclusion in a report in November, arguing Tesla's stock "is mostly driven by animal spirits/momentum" while cautioning that the shares have historically gone into a "downward channel" in past periods after the company's market value pulled well ahead of fundamentals.

At the very least, the coming year will need to show Tesla hitting ambitious milestones in self-driving technology in order to justify investors' hopes for a robottaxi business getting off the ground. That alone is no sure thing. In a report Wednesday, Truist analyst William Stein reviewed the latest version of Tesla's full self-driving software, which he called "more impressive" than past versions. But he also noted that "imperfections remain obvious and prevent us from recommending its use."

Until its AI applications gain real traction, a trillion-dollar Tesla likely faces an even bumpier road ahead.
© 2025 DOW JONES & CO. INC.

business that accounts for more than 80% of its annual revenue was experiencing its worst year on record.

Such is the draw of the artificial intelligence narrative—enhanced by the star power of Elon Musk. The Tesla chief executive frequently touts Tesla's prowess in AI as the company develops self-driving technology and robotics. He also effectively used his platform now called X to tweet his way into the White House by enthusiastically supporting the election of Donald Trump. The majority of Tesla's share-price gains in 2024 came after the Nov. 5 election.

That alone sets a high bar for the stock in the coming year. Tesla also now commands a notable premium even compared with companies already making serious money on AI. Even with Thursday's slip, Tesla's shares trade at about 117 times projected earnings for the next four quarters. That is more than three times the multiple of AI champ Nvidia, and a sharp premium to other tech giants valued at more than \$1 trillion. Hence, Wall Street is a bit dubious. A

Data rules on minors, security

FROM PAGE 16

sure, are not immediately notified, but will now go through a consultation process, following which they would be notified with a time period afforded to companies to comply with them.

Industry consultants raised several concerns over the draft rules, especially that the parental consent rules are likely to add a heavy compliance burden on all parties involved.

"The public consultation is expected to spark significant discussions on various aspects of the rules," said Dhruv Garg, partner at think-tank Indian Governance and Policy Project, adding that a critical area of focus will be the potential for data localization, where specific categories of personal data may be required to remain within India.

"Equally important is the need for robust mechanisms to ensure verifiable parental consent, particularly requiring identification of parents and their adulthood before processing children's personal data. Provisions allowing government access to personal data for national security reasons will likely draw close scrutiny, addressing questions

about transparency and oversight," Garg said.

Kazim Rizvi, founding director of think-tank The Dialogue, added that the parental consent mechanism is unclear about methods that would be used such as phone calls, video conferencing, signed forms, financial information, or other personal identification documents like a driver's licence.

"Another potential issue could be that this rule presumes that the parent in question is digitally literate, at least to effectively navigate and assist in this process," Rizvi said. "A more challenging aspect of the rules is the mandatory requirement for paren-

tal supervision for the majority processing of children's data, defined as individuals below the age of 18 years."

As per Rizvi, this provision could lead to substantial consent fatigue for parents or guardians, given the frequency with which children interact with digital platforms.

"The lack of a graded or nuanced approach to evaluating the capacity of minors to provide informed consent independently may render this requirement overly rigid and controversial, particularly for older adolescents who may possess the maturity to make decisions about their data," he added.

Some big U.S. banks were

hesitant to join GFANZ, signing up only after cajoling from Carney, and early on there were signs of tensions.

NZBA is affiliated with GFANZ, broader U.N.-endorsed climate coalition formed in 2021 that also covers asset managers and other industries. The broader group is co-chaired by Mark Carney, the former head of central banks in Canada and the U.K., and billionaire and former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg.

© 2025 DOW JONES & CO. INC.

John D. Sterman, an MIT Sloan School of Management professor who has briefed financial institutions on climate-change strategy, called the withdrawal of megabanks from the coalition a "short-term, myopic response" to political changes in the U.S. and other countries, a backlash against ESG and "climate denial."

After Wells Fargo withdrew from the NZBA last month, Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton applauded the bank and pressed other institutions to rescind ESG commitments he called unlawful.

NZBA is affiliated with GFANZ, broader U.N.-endorsed climate coalition formed in 2021 that also covers asset managers and other industries. The broader group is co-chaired by Mark Carney, the former head of central banks in Canada and the U.K., and billionaire and former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg.

© 2025 DOW JONES & CO. INC.

Wells Fargo withdrew from the NZBA last month, Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton applauded the bank and pressed other institutions to rescind ESG commitments he called unlawful.

As per Rizvi, this provision could lead to substantial consent fatigue for parents or guardians, given the frequency with which children interact with digital platforms.

"The lack of a graded or nuanced approach to evaluating the capacity of minors to provide informed consent independently may render this requirement overly rigid and controversial, particularly for older adolescents who may possess the maturity to make decisions about their data," he added.

Some big U.S. banks were

hesitant to join GFANZ, signing up only after cajoling from Carney, and early on there were signs of tensions.

© 2025 DOW JONES & CO. INC.

John D. Sterman, an MIT Sloan School of Management professor who has briefed financial institutions on climate-change strategy, called the withdrawal of megabanks from the coalition a "short-term, myopic response" to political changes in the U.S. and other countries, a backlash against ESG and "climate denial."

After Wells Fargo withdrew from the NZBA last month, Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton applauded the bank and pressed other institutions to rescind ESG commitments he called unlawful.

NZBA is affiliated with GFANZ, broader U.N.-endorsed climate coalition formed in 2021 that also covers asset managers and other industries. The broader group is co-chaired by Mark Carney, the former head of central banks in Canada and the U.K., and billionaire and former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg.

© 2025 DOW JONES & CO. INC.

Wells Fargo withdrew from the NZBA last month, Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton applauded the bank and pressed other institutions to rescind ESG commitments he called unlawful.

As per Rizvi, this provision could lead to substantial consent fatigue for parents or guardians, given the frequency with which children interact with digital platforms.

"The lack of a graded or nuanced approach to evaluating the capacity of minors to provide informed consent independently may render this requirement overly rigid and controversial, particularly for older adolescents who may possess the maturity to make decisions about their data," he added.

Some big U.S. banks were

hesitant to join GFANZ, signing up only after cajoling from Carney, and early on there were signs of tensions.

© 2025 DOW JONES & CO. INC.

John D. Sterman, an MIT Sloan School of Management professor who has briefed financial institutions on climate-change strategy, called the withdrawal of megabanks from the coalition a "short-term, myopic response" to political changes in the U.S. and other countries, a backlash against ESG and "climate denial."

After Wells Fargo withdrew from the NZBA last month, Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton applauded the bank and pressed other institutions to rescind ESG commitments he called unlawful.

NZBA is affiliated with GFANZ, broader U.N.-endorsed climate coalition formed in 2021 that also covers asset managers and other industries. The broader group is co-chaired by Mark Carney, the former head of central banks in Canada and the U.K., and billionaire and former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg.

© 2025 DOW JONES & CO. INC.

Wells Fargo withdrew from the NZBA last month, Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton applauded the bank and pressed other institutions to rescind ESG commitments he called unlawful.

NZBA is affiliated with GFANZ, broader U.N.-endorsed climate coalition formed in 2021 that also covers asset managers and other industries. The broader group is co-chaired by Mark Carney, the former head of central banks in Canada and the U.K., and billionaire and former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg.

© 2025 DOW JONES & CO. INC.

Wells Fargo withdrew from the NZBA last month, Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton applauded the bank and pressed other institutions to rescind ESG commitments he called unlawful.

NZBA is affiliated with GFANZ, broader U.N.-endorsed climate coalition formed in 2021 that also covers asset managers and other industries. The broader group is co-chaired by Mark Carney, the former head of central banks in Canada and the U.K., and billionaire and former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg.

© 2025 DOW JONES & CO. INC.

India's market cap share globally dips from record highs

Harsha Jethmalani
harsha.j@livemint.com

MUMBAI

India's share in global market capitalization dipped to 4.2% in December from its August peak of 4.6%, as global equity markets faced turbulence, showed an analysis by Motilal Oswal Financial Services Ltd.

The last few months of 2024 saw some turbulence in global equity markets due to various factors, leading to the correction in stocks. Despite the correction, resilient macroeconomic stability has kept India's equity markets afloat, well above the historical average of 2.7%.

The good part is despite the moderation, the Indian market was among the top 10 contributors to the global market capitalization in December.

Even though key benchmark index, Nifty50, fetched 9% returns in 2024, its performance during December in local currency terms was lacklustre compared with some other Asian markets. In 2025, the outlook for Indian equities hinges on several local and global factors, so it is better to keep expectations low.

While sustained inflows by domestic institutional investors have helped to keep stock market sentiments upbeat, a reversal in fund outflows by foreign portfolio investors, or FPIs, who were net sellers of Indian stocks in 2024, will be a crucial monitorable.

Here, the movement in the Indian rupee, which hit a new low, falling past the 85 levels against the US dollar, would be among the deciding factors.

Concerns over the ongoing urban consumption slowdown weighing on India Inc's performance also looms large.

An uptick in government

Cooling off

Resilient macroeconomic stability has kept India's equity markets afloat.



Source: Motilal Oswal Financial Services

spending during the second half of 2024-25, coupled with higher rural incomes, could offer much-needed support to corporates. However, further earnings downgrades would likely dampen investor sentiment.

Geopolitical uncertainties across the globe, the pace and quantum of interest rate hikes by the trend-setter US Federal Reserve and the potential changes in tariffs by US President-elect Donald Trump, as and when he takes office, may keep volatility in emerging market currencies and equities high.

Meanwhile, after the recent corrections, the valuation of Indian equities has cooled off slightly. The Nifty50 trades at a 12-month forward price-to-earnings multiple of 19.9x now, a tad lower than its long-term average of 20.5x, the Motilal Oswal report showed.

Even so, India continues to trade at a premium to Asian and emerging market peers.

An increased pressure on corporate earnings and GDP (gross domestic product) growth losing further momentum exposes India's elevated valuations to downside risks.

For an extended version of the story go to [livemint.com](#)

MARK TO MARKET

After the recent corrections, the valuation of Indian equities has cooled off slightly. The Nifty50 trades at a 12-month forward price-to-earnings multiple of 19.9x now, a tad lower than its long-term average of 20.5x, the Motilal Oswal report showed.

Even so, India continues to trade at a premium to Asian and emerging market peers.

An increased pressure on corporate earnings and GDP (gross domestic product) growth losing further momentum exposes India's elevated valuations to downside risks.

For an extended version of the story go to [livemint.com](#)

Govt cuts gas allocation for LPG, diverts to city retailers

Ritaj Baruah
ritaj.baruah@livemint.com

NEW DELHI

The government has slashed allocation of natural gas used for liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) production, and diverted the low-priced fuel to city gas retailers like Indraprastha Gas Ltd and Adani Total Gas Ltd to meet part of their requirement for compressed natural gas (CNG)/piped cooking gas supplies, said an official order.

The government had in October and November last year cut supplies of low-priced natural gas coming from old fields such as Mumbai High and Bassein fields in the Bay of Bengal, to city gas retailers by as much as 40% in view of limited output.

This led to city gas retailers hiking CNG prices by ₹2-3 per kg and threatening more increases as they replaced lost volumes with higher-priced input fuel.

The price hike made CNG less attractive when compared to alternative fuels like diesel. To resolve this, the petroleum ministry in a 31 December order rejigged some allocations of gas produced from below ground and undersea.

The ministry ordered a cut in gas supplied to GAIL and Oil and Natural Gas Corp. (ONGC) for production of LPG and diverting those volumes to city gas entities.

GAIL and ONGC will have to use either higher-priced gas produced from new fields or rely on imported liquefied natural gas to replace the lost volumes.

Piped natural gas customers, households, industry as well as CNG vehicle users, are likely to get uniform insurance cover against leaks and other accidents, following a recommendation by the Petroleum & Natural Gas Regulatory Board (PNGRB).

At a meeting with stakeholders, the regulator noted that it is imperative that piped natural gas (PNG) consumers should also be insured as is the case with liquid petroleum gas (LPG). And along with domestic PNG consumers, commercial and industrial users of PNG and compressed natural gas (CNG) should also be covered by insurance.

The open house discussion was held on 20 December, amid instances of leakages and accidents.

Although considered safer than LPG, sporadic instances

of pipeline leaks in the case of PNG have been reported. In May 2024, four people were injured in Mumbai due to a leakage caused in a PNG pipeline during an excavation work. In November 2023, one person died and three others were injured in Palwal, Haryana, due to a pipeline leakage and eventual explosion.

CNG vehicles report higher

instances of accidents. Last month, a collision between an LPG and a CNG truck in Jaipur claimed eight lives, injuring 41 people. In October, a bus in Mumbai caught fire due to leakage of CNG from its fuel supply system.

The minutes released on 1 January said there was unanimous consensus on the need for "uniform insurance policy"

for insurance, or enhance their offerings in providing immediate and general cover to all PNG and CNG consumers as is the case with LPG.

It also said claim procedures need to be well thought-out, deliberated, covering known or common scenarios. In a bid to consumer convenience, PNGRB also suggested that efforts should be made to ensure routine insurance claims don't need judicial oversight or intervention.

Although CNG users report more accidents, instances of pipeline leaks at PNG households were reported

"There was consensus among the stakeholders for covering the PNG consumers akin to LPG consumers and oil and gas marketing companies agreed to roll out the policy within two months' time frame," the regulator said in the minutes.

According to the regulator, CGD companies should match the best terms being offered

for insurance, or enhance their offerings in providing immediate and general cover to all PNG and CNG consumers as is the case with LPG.

CGD companies should match the best terms being offered

for insurance, or enhance their offerings in providing immediate and general cover to all PNG and CNG consumers as is the case with LPG.

CGD companies should match the best terms being offered

The Pharmacy Council of India (PCI) raised concerns over widespread falsification on the Centret's DIGI-PHARMED portal for teachers. Around 45,355 cases of duplicate or invalid profiles have been identified. There are over 42,000 pharmacists colleges with around 11.2 million pharmacists being registered with the council.

Pharmacists are at the forefront of healthcare, often serving as the first point of contact for those seeking health advice or primary care. Their roles extend far beyond merely dispensing medications.

During a recent meeting, the pharmacy education regulator was told that many pharmacists creating fake profiles and using the same Aadhaar or PAN number, are working as faculty in institutions. Taking cognizance of this fraudulent activity, the council decided to blacklist these fake faculty and debar them permanently if found guilty a second time.

The Council found many pharmacists created duplicate profiles with the same Aadhaar

or PAN number. In addition to this, all duplicate profiles on a single Aadhaar number were found working as a faculty in different institutions," Anil Mittal registrar-cum-secretary, PCI, said in a communication to state pharmacy councils and approved pharmacy institutions, as well as registered pharmacists. The council said these pharmacists entered invalid or fake Aadhaar or PAN details during registration on DIGI-

PHARMED portal. "(They) did not add educational or experience details in profiles but are working/not working as a faculty in the institutions. Many pharmacists entered invalid mobile number or e-mail to create fake profiles on the portal," the communication said.

"The Council decided to blacklist all these registered Pharmacists on DIGI-PHARMED to ensure that the profile is updated.

For an extended version of the story go to [livemint.com](#)

For those seeking health advice or primary care. Their roles extend far beyond merely dispensing medications.

During a recent meeting, the pharmacy education regulator was told that many pharmacists creating fake profiles and using the same Aadhaar or PAN number, are working as faculty in institutions. Taking cognizance of this fraudulent activity, the council decided to blacklist these fake faculty and debar them permanently if found guilty a second time.

The Council found many pharmacists created duplicate profiles with the same Aadhaar

or PAN number. In addition to this, all duplicate profiles on a single Aadhaar number were found working as a faculty in different institutions," Anil Mittal registrar-cum-secretary, PCI, said in a communication to state pharmacy councils and approved pharmacy institutions, as well as registered pharmacists. The council said these pharmacists entered invalid or fake Aadhaar or PAN details during registration on DIGI-

PHARMED portal. "(They) did not add educational or experience details in profiles but are working/not working as a faculty in the institutions. Many pharmacists entered invalid mobile number or e-mail to create fake profiles on the portal," the communication said.

"The Council decided to blacklist all these registered Pharmacists on DIGI-PHARMED to ensure that the profile is updated.

For an extended version of the story go to [livemint.com](#)

For those seeking health advice or primary care. Their roles extend far beyond merely dispensing medications.

During a recent meeting, the pharmacy education regulator was told that many pharmacists creating fake profiles and using the same Aadhaar or PAN number, are working as faculty in institutions. Taking cognizance of this fraudulent activity, the council decided to blacklist these fake faculty and debar them permanently if found guilty a second time.

The Council found many pharmacists created duplicate profiles with the same Aadhaar

or PAN number. In addition to this, all duplicate profiles on a single Aadhaar number were found working as a faculty in different institutions," Anil Mittal registrar-cum-secretary, PCI, said in a communication to state pharmacy councils and approved pharmacy institutions, as well as registered pharmacists. The council said these pharmacists entered invalid or fake Aadhaar or PAN details during registration on DIGI-

PHARMED portal. "(They) did not add educational or experience details in profiles but are working/not working as a faculty in the institutions. Many pharmacists entered invalid mobile number or e-mail to create fake profiles on the portal," the communication said.

"The Council decided to blacklist all these registered Pharmacists on DIGI-PHARMED to ensure that the profile is updated.

For an extended version of the story go to [livemint.com](#)



While insurance cover is provided to CNG consumers and depots, there is no universal coverage for PNG.

for insurance, or enhance their offerings in providing immediate and general cover to all PNG and CNG consumers as is the case with LPG.

CGD companies should match the best terms being offered

for insurance, or enhance their offerings in providing immediate and general cover to all PNG and CNG consumers as is the case with LPG.

CGD companies should match the best terms being offered

The Pharmacy Council of India (PCI) raised concerns over widespread falsification on the Centret's DIGI-PHARMED portal for teachers. Around 45,355 cases of duplicate or invalid profiles have been identified. There are over 42,000 pharmacists colleges with around 11.2 million pharmacists being registered with the council.

During a recent meeting, the pharmacy education regulator was told that many pharmacists creating fake profiles and using the same Aadhaar or PAN number, are working as faculty in institutions. Taking cognizance of this fraudulent activity, the council decided to blacklist these fake faculty and debar them permanently if found guilty a second time.

The Council found many pharmacists created duplicate profiles with the same Aadhaar

or PAN number. In addition to this, all duplicate profiles on a single Aadhaar number were found working as a faculty in different institutions," Anil Mittal registrar-cum-secretary, PCI, said in a communication to state pharmacy councils and approved pharmacy institutions, as well as registered pharmacists. The council said these pharmacists entered invalid or fake Aadhaar or PAN details during registration on DIGI-

PHARMED portal. "(They) did not add educational or experience details in profiles but are working/not working as a faculty in the institutions. Many pharmacists entered invalid mobile number or e-mail to create fake profiles on the portal," the communication said.

"The Council decided to blacklist all these registered Pharmacists on DIGI-PHARMED to ensure that the profile is updated.

For an extended version of the story go to [livemint.com](#)

For those seeking health advice or primary care. Their roles extend far beyond merely dispensing medications.

During a recent meeting, the pharmacy education regulator was told that many pharmacists creating fake profiles and using the same Aadhaar or PAN number, are working as faculty in institutions. Taking cognizance of this fraudulent activity, the council decided to blacklist these fake faculty and debar them permanently if found guilty a second time.

The Council found many pharmacists created duplicate profiles with the same Aadhaar

or PAN number. In addition to this, all duplicate profiles on a single Aadhaar number were found working as a faculty in different institutions," Anil Mittal registrar-cum-secretary, PCI, said in a communication to state pharmacy councils and approved pharmacy institutions, as well as registered pharmacists. The council said these pharmacists entered invalid or fake Aadhaar or PAN details during registration on DIGI-

PHARMED portal. "(They) did not add educational or experience details in profiles but are working/not working as a faculty in the institutions. Many pharmacists entered invalid mobile number or e-mail to create fake profiles on the portal," the communication said.

"The Council decided to blacklist all these registered Pharmacists on DIGI-PHARMED to ensure that the profile is updated.

For an extended version of the story go to [livemint.com](#)

For those seeking health advice or primary care. Their roles extend far beyond merely dispensing medications.

During a recent meeting, the pharmacy education regulator was told that many pharmacists creating fake profiles and using the same Aadhaar or PAN number, are working as faculty in institutions. Taking cognizance of this fraudulent activity, the council decided to blacklist these fake faculty and debar them permanently if found guilty a second time.

The Council found many pharmacists created duplicate profiles with the same Aadhaar

or PAN number. In addition to this, all duplicate profiles on a single Aadhaar number were found working as a faculty in different institutions," Anil Mittal registrar-cum-secretary, PCI, said in a communication to state pharmacy councils and approved pharmacy institutions, as well as registered pharmacists. The council said these pharmacists entered invalid or fake Aadhaar or PAN details during registration on DIGI-

PHARMED portal. "(They) did not add educational or experience details in profiles but are working/not working as a faculty in the institutions. Many pharmacists entered invalid mobile number or e-mail to create fake profiles on the portal," the communication said.

"The Council decided to blacklist all these registered Pharmacists on DIGI-PHARMED to ensure that the profile is updated.

For an extended version of the story go to [livemint.com](#)

For those seeking health advice or primary care. Their roles extend far beyond merely dispensing medications.

During a recent meeting, the pharmacy education regulator was told that many pharmacists creating fake profiles and using the same Aadhaar or PAN number, are working as faculty in institutions. Taking cognizance of this fraudulent activity, the council decided to blacklist these fake faculty and debar them permanently if found guilty a second time.

The Council found many pharmacists created duplicate profiles with the same Aadhaar

or PAN number. In addition to this, all duplicate profiles on a single Aadhaar number were found working as a faculty in different institutions," Anil Mittal registrar-cum-secretary, PCI, said in a communication to state pharmacy councils and approved pharmacy institutions, as well as registered pharmacists. The council said these pharmacists entered invalid or fake Aadhaar or PAN details during registration on DIGI-

PHARMED portal. "(They) did not add educational or experience details in profiles but are working/not working as a faculty in the institutions. Many pharmacists entered invalid mobile number or e-mail to create fake profiles on the portal," the communication said.

"The Council decided to blacklist all these registered Pharmacists on DIGI-PHARMED to ensure that the profile is updated.

For an extended version of the story go to [livemint.com](#)

For those seeking health advice or primary care. Their roles extend far beyond merely dispensing medications.

During a recent meeting, the pharmacy education regulator was told that many pharmacists creating fake profiles and using the same Aadhaar or PAN number, are working as faculty in institutions. Taking cognizance of this fraudulent activity, the council decided to blacklist these fake faculty and debar them permanently if found guilty a second time.</p



States' Q4 borrowing to rise 18% after Q2 growth slump

Capex boost likely as West Bengal, Maharashtra, Karnataka lead ₹4.73 tn borrowing plan

Rhik Kundu
rhik.kundu@livemint.com
NEW DELHI

State governments appear to be priming themselves for a significant capital expenditure (capex) push in the current quarter, offering hope of a drive towards reviving the pace of India's economic growth after a succession of slow-growing quarters.

States, led by West Bengal, Maharashtra and Karnataka, are set to raise their market borrowings by about 18% year-on-year in the fourth quarter of 2024-25 (Q4 FY25).

According to latest data released by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), total market borrowing by states in Q4 FY25 may reach ₹4.73 trillion, up from gross issuances of ₹4 trillion a year-ago.

West Bengal has indicated it will borrow ₹58,000 crore, the highest, followed by Maharashtra (₹50,000 crore) and Karnataka (₹48,000 crore). These states, along with Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Rajasthan, account for a significant share of the total market borrowings projected for the quarter.

The rise in state borrowings offers hope of a broader economic recovery, following a notable slowdown in gross domestic product growth in recent quarters.



The rise in state borrowings offers hope of a broader economic recovery, following a notable slowdown in gross domestic product growth in recent quarters.

their revenue expenses, such as salaries, subsidies and pensions.

West Bengal's indication to borrow ₹58,000 crore in Q4 is sharply higher than the ₹34,500 crore it had raised a year earlier. Maharashtra is set to bor-

STIMULUS AMID SLOWDOWN

GDP growth in Q2 FY25 slowed to 5.4%, slowest in nearly two years, compared to 6.7% in first quarter

EXPERTS said the slowdown is due to lower govt spending, weakening urban consumption trends

STATES are likely to raise borrowings for funding deficits and managing respective revenue expenses

STATE investments in infrastructure, social welfare, key sectors could offset growth slowdown

row ₹50,000 crore, similar to the year ago period, while Karnataka will borrow ₹48,000 crore, against ₹44,000 crore in Q4 FY24. Others include Tamil Nadu, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Telangana. Madhya Pradesh indicated gross issuance of ₹45,000 crore

will borrow ₹36,000 crore compared to ₹29,000 crore in Q1 FY24, and Telangana plans to raise ₹30,000 crore in Q4 FY25, more than double that of Q4 FY24 (₹13,750 crore). Smaller but significant borrowing plans are also projected by Rajasthan (₹25,000 crore)

and Bihar (₹15,500 crore).

To be sure, rating agency Icra has noted that actual borrowings of some states have been much lower than what they have indicated earlier. "The actual borrowings of MP and WB in Q4 of FY2024 were equivalent to 40% and 58%, respectively, of their indicated amounts," Icra said in a recent report.

At the same time, the rating agency noted that the extent of undershooting in the actual borrowings by states in the last quarter of recent years relative to the indicated amount has been mixed. For example, Icra said Telangana's actual borrowing in the last quarter of a financial year tends to be higher than indicated. "If these states borrow in line with past trends, we expect the actual borrowing of MP and WB to trail the indicated amount by 20-40%."

"Interestingly, states, including Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka and Rajasthan have indicated a modest step-down of up to ₹75 billion (₹7,500 crore) in Q4 FY25 relative to the actual issuances in Q4 FY2024, while Chhattisgarh has indicated a relatively larger drop of ₹70 billion (₹7,000 crore)," it added.

The surge in state borrowings comes at a critical juncture for the Indian economy. With GDP growth slowing and private consumption under pressure, the increase in state-level capex may support a broader economic recovery. Economists said state investments in infrastructure, social welfare and other key sectors could help offset the growth slowdown. However, Devendra Kumar

Pant, chief economist and head, public finance at India Ratings and Research, said: "The impact of higher state borrowings is unlikely to have a significant impact on GDP growth."

For an extended version of this story, go to [livemint.com](#).

Cold wave in North India to boost wheat, mustard crops

Dhirendra Kumar
dhirendra.kumar@livemint.com
NEW DELHI

The recent cold wave and snowfall in north India may benefit key winter crops, such as wheat and mustard. Experts said colder temperatures and snowmelt will enhance soil moisture, which is vital for the germination and growth of rabi crops.

Former director general of India Meteorological Department (IMD) K.J. Ramesh said the dip in temperature following the first spell of snowfall in hilly areas is beneficial for winter crops, and raises hopes of a bumper crop. Additional spells of snowfall and cold waves are expected until next week, he said, adding that the weather may clear by 10-11 January.

At the same time, the rating agency noted that the extent of undershooting in the actual borrowings by states in the last quarter of recent years relative to the indicated amount has been mixed. For example, Icra said Telangana's actual borrowing in the last quarter of a financial year tends to be higher than indicated. "If these states borrow in line with past trends, we expect the actual borrowing of MP and WB to trail the indicated amount by 20-40%."

"Interestingly, states, including Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka and Rajasthan have indicated a modest step-down of up to ₹75 billion (₹7,500 crore) in Q4 FY25 relative to the actual issuances in Q4 FY2024, while Chhattisgarh has indicated a relatively larger drop of ₹70 billion (₹7,000 crore)," it added.

The surge in state borrowings comes at a critical juncture for the Indian economy. With GDP growth slowing and private consumption under pressure, the increase in state-level capex may support a broader economic recovery. Economists said state investments in infrastructure, social welfare and other key sectors could help offset the growth slowdown. However, Devendra Kumar

Pant, chief economist and head, public finance at India Ratings and Research, said: "The impact of higher state borrowings is unlikely to have a significant impact on GDP growth."

For an extended version of this story, go to [livemint.com](#).



India recorded a modest 2.48% increase in wheat production to 113.29 million tonnes in FY24.

crop yield this fiscal year. India recorded only 2.48% growth in wheat production in FY24 to 113.29 million tonnes, according to official estimates.

Mustard, a winter crop, typically thrives during the season, but continuous frost may pose risk. "As of now, mustard has not been impacted by the dip in temperatures. It has properties to resist cold conditions. If there is sunlight for 3-4 hours a day, it can survive frost without any issues. However, continuous frost without sunlight could pose risk," spokesperson at the directorate of Rapeseed Mustard Research Ashok Kumar Sharma said.

India produced 13.26 million tonne mustard in FY24, marking an increase of 4.91%. The dip in temperature does not bode well for chickpea, or chana, and potatoes.

Meena, who is also the general secretary of Kisan Swaraj Sangathan, is worried that the conditions could adversely affect yield of chana in Madhya Pradesh, which accounts for 37% of India's gram produc-

tion. "Chana crop is currently at the flowering stage, so cold conditions would negatively impact its growth and yield."

India's chana production fell by 12.85% in FY24 to 11.04 million tonnes, according to government data.

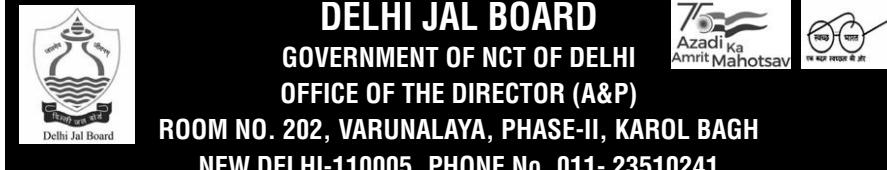
Staple vegetable crops are may also be affected by the dip in temperatures and rainfall as it could disrupt growth cycles, impacting overall quality and reducing yields, experts said.

Table potato crops in Punjab and Uttar Pradesh may face weather challenges that may lead to late blight that affects leaves, stems, fruits and tubers of potatoes and tomatoes.

Prolonged wet conditions—such as rainfall or high humidity—create ideal conditions for spores to germinate and infect plants, which is exacerbated by rise in humidity in the fields, said Samarendra Mohanty, Asia Regional Director at the International Potato Center (CIP).

According to the agriculture ministry's final FY23 estimates

show potato production rose to 601.42 lakh tonnes from a year ago, but in FY24, the government estimates a decline in production of 589.94 lakh tonnes which may increase costs for consumers.



DELHI JAL BOARD
GOVERNMENT OF NCT OF DELHI
OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR (A&P)
ROOM NO. 202, VARUNALAYA, PHASE-II, KAROL BAGH
NEW DELHI-110005, PHONE No. 011- 23510241

Subject:- Appointment to the posts of Member (Water Supply) and Member (Drainage) in Delhi Jal Board purely on nomination basis.

The Delhi Jal Board (hereafter referred as 'Board') came into existence, under the aegis of Urban Development Department, Govt. of NCT of Delhi, through a statutory legislation on 02.04.1998. The Board is responsible for treatment and distribution of water supply, regulation and management of exploitation of groundwater in consultation with CGWA, collection, treatment and disposal of sewage etc. within the National Capital Territory of Delhi.

- The Government proposes to fill up the post of Member (Water Supply) and Member (Drainage) in Board on nomination basis.
- Applications are invited to fill-up the post of Member(Water Supply) and Member(Drainage) in Level-14 of Pay Matrix of Rs.1,44,200-21,8,200 under 7th Central Pay Commission (Rs.37,400- 67,000 with a grade pay of Rs. 10,000/- (Pre-revised) by nomination initially for the period of three years from the eligible officers of Central Government/ State Government / Union Territory/ Public Sector Undertakings/ Autonomous Organizations.
- As per Section 3(2)(VII) and (VIII) of the Delhi Water Board Act, 1998, the eligibility conditions for the posts are as under-:

 - A Member(Water Supply) to be nominated by Government who shall be an engineer. Drawing pay not less than that of a Joint Secretary to the Government of India, having specialized knowledge and experience in the matters relating to water supply".
 - A Member(Drainage) to be nominated by the Government who shall be an Engineer, drawing pay scale not less than that of a Joint Secretary to the Government of India, having specialized knowledge and experience in the matters related to drainage".

- Serving officer who possess the eligibility conditions prescribed above may apply through proper channel upto 27.01.2025 on offline mode to the Director(A&P) Delhi Jal Board, Govt. of NCT of Delhi, 2nd Floor, Room No- 202, Varunalya Phase-II, Jhandewalan, Karol Bagh, Delhi- 110005 the prescribed proforma. The applications may be submitted with vigilance clearance, NOC, Integrity certificate and attested copies of ACRs for the last five years. Separate application should be submitted by the candidates for the post of Member(Water Supply) and Member(Drainage).
- The application format and other information are available on the website <https://delhijalboard.delhi.gov.in> Application received after the last date will not be entertained.

ISSUED BY P.R.O. (WATER) STOP CORONA: Wear Face Mask, Follow Physical Distancing, Maintain Hand Hygiene (Gurpreet Singh) Director (A&P)

Have fun with facts on Sundays

Catch the latest column of



A quiz on the week's development.



FIRST VOICE. LAST WORD.



नियम 92 (1) (क) (ii)			
ई-निविदा आमंत्रण सूचना का प्रारूप			
मध्यस्थदेश शासन,	दिनांक : 31-12-2024	नगर पालिका नियम व्यालियर	
जनर संस्करण 05		/विविदा सूचना	दिनांक : 02-01-2025
नियमितिः कार्य हेतु केन्द्रीय प्राविधिकीय सूचनाएः अपेक्षित निविदाये आमंत्रित की जाती है। निविदा का विवरण विवरण वेबसाइट http://gmc.mptenders.gov.in पर देखा जा सकता है।			
क्र. ट्रैकर क्र. / जारी दिनांक	कार्य का नाम	कार्य की सम्पत्ति एवं लागत	निविदा की अपेक्षित अवधि एवं दिनांक
2024 UAD, 31.12.2024	आदर्श गोशाला में टीन शेड आर.सी.सी. खोना नियमण कार्य	365 दिन 42,72,606/-	15000/- 211863/- 22.01.2025
1	आदर्श गोशाला में टीन शेड आर.सी.सी. खोना नियमण कार्य	365 दिन 42,72,606/-	15000/- 211863/- 22.01.2025
नोट: नियमित सम्बंधित कार्य हेतु केन्द्रीय प्राविधिकीय सूचनाएः अपेक्षित निविदाये आमंत्रित की जाती है। निविदा का विवरण विवरण वेबसाइट http://gmc.mptenders.gov.in की वेबसाइट पर ही दिया जाता है, प्राथमिक रूप से सम्बाधित कार्यों में दिया जाता है। नोडर अधिकारी नियमित नियम व्यालियर			

ग्रेटर नोएडा औद्योगिक विकास प्राधिकरण			
मध्यस्थदेश सूचना संख्या-01, ग्रेटर नोएडा औद्योगिक विकास प्राधिकरण द्वारा आमंत्रित की जाती है। नियमित नियम व्यालियर			
पत्रक्रम संख्या-01	पत्रक्रम संख्या-01	दिनांक : 03.01.2025	दिनांक : 03.01.2025
पत्रक्रम संख्या-01	पत्रक्रम संख्या-01	पत्रक्रम संख्या-01	पत्रक्रम संख्या-01
महाप्रबलक (अभियन्त्रण) ग्रेटर नोएडा औद्योगिक विकास प्राधिकरण द्वारा आमंत्रित की जाती है। सम्बाधित कार्यों की जारी दिनांक विवरण वेबसाइट www.greaternodiaauthority.org.in पर देखा जा सकता है।			

