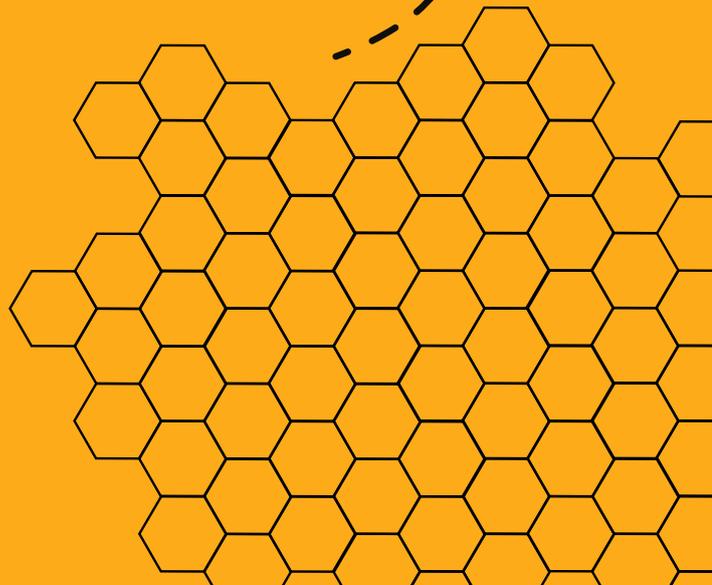
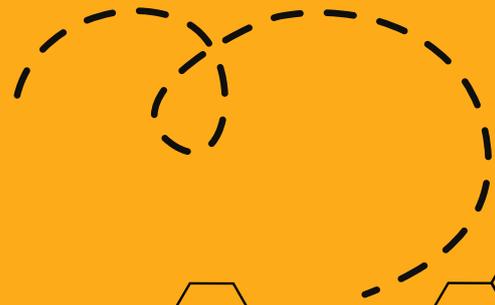
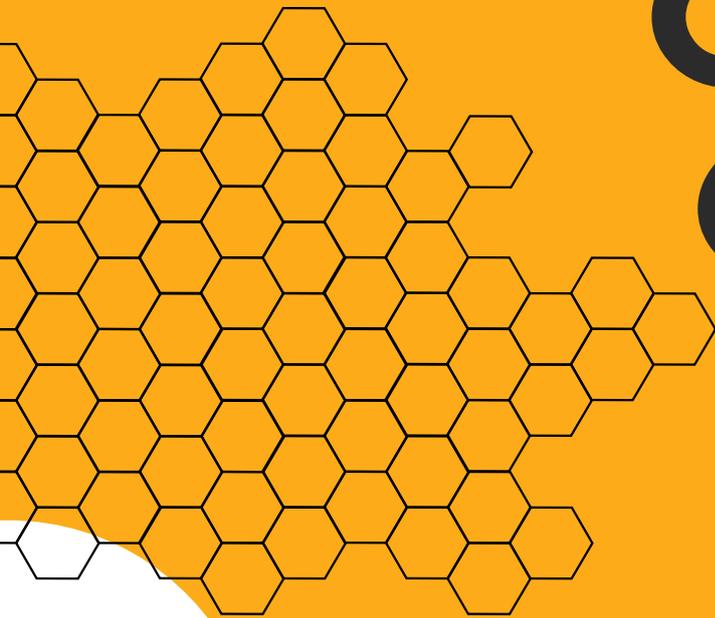


ISSUE 10

MELBOURNE CULTURE CORNER



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Samar Jain

Dear Comrade

Dear Comrade, I always wanted to understand you more,
Alas! I wish I could know what the life had in store,
I wish you could know; you were the one, whom I most
adored, I wish I needn't say, but those times will never be
anymore,

I wish it could just be a nightmare of sore...

Dear Comrade, you lifted me up, when I felt down,
Brought a smile on my face, when what I wore was a pity
frown, You were there as a ray of light,

always tried to make me cheerful and bright as the fifteenth night, you helped
me fight the bitterness of life, and perhaps made it more of a delight, Dear
Comrade, as years pass by,

When there is desolation that envelopes me like the
charcoal darkness of night, I wish you could stand strong by
my side...

Dear Comrade, when melancholy is what I only feel,
I know a Midas touch of yours, would make all my scars
heal... Dear comrade, I wish you didn't have that malignant
mass,

For it led me, helplessly look onto your carcass,
Which left me shattered as a glass,
Dear Comrade, we used to disagree,
But at the end of the day, it was all but glee,
I miss those good old days, days that never will be...

Samar Jain,15, is a student of class 10 at Delhi Public School, Gurgaon and is passionate about Public Speaking, Artificial Intelligence, playing sports and making impactful videos, He is also an avid reader and writer, and has contributed to numerous newspapers, journals and magazines. Furthermore, he is a Tech-enthusiast, and has won several accolades in Debates, MUN's and Group discussions. Importantly he is a fervent environmentalist and a Philanthropist, and considers himself to be a lifelong humanitarian.

John Drudge

Slipping Away

Searching
For something
Less fidgety
And more permanent
Deeper than impressions
On the surface
Something strange
And tempting
On the riverbanks
Of lament
With heroic monuments
Of the modern world
Crumbling
Through fingers
And the sunsets
Of our discontent

On the Shore

Drunk on light
And dunescapes
That stretch out
To the water
Where the old lighthouse
Used to be
In the pale tonality
Of memory
And wandering moods
On the cool
Twilight coast
Brooding in stillness
And the faint eccentricity
Of being alone
On the shore

John is a social worker working in the field of disability management and holds degrees in social work, rehabilitation services, and psychology. He is the author of three books of poetry: “March” and “The Seasons of Us” (both published in 2019) and New Days (published in 2020). His work has appeared widely in numerous literary journals, magazines, and anthologies internationally. John is also a Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net nominee and lives in Caledon Ontario, Canada with his wife and two children.

A.R.Salandy

Barbarous

Castigated are urban dwellers
Whose journeys are demeaned
By daily commutes that numb
Hopes of wondrous wandering

Beyond underground caverns
That elongate hours 'humane'
Where carriages sprint
Like a flurry of foreign fields

Just beyond a contorted atmosphere,
An encapsulated world
Saturated in suffering
Concocted in ubiquitous greed,

Where stratified
Are those that are chided for lowly labour
Enforced in regimes of societal hypocrisy,

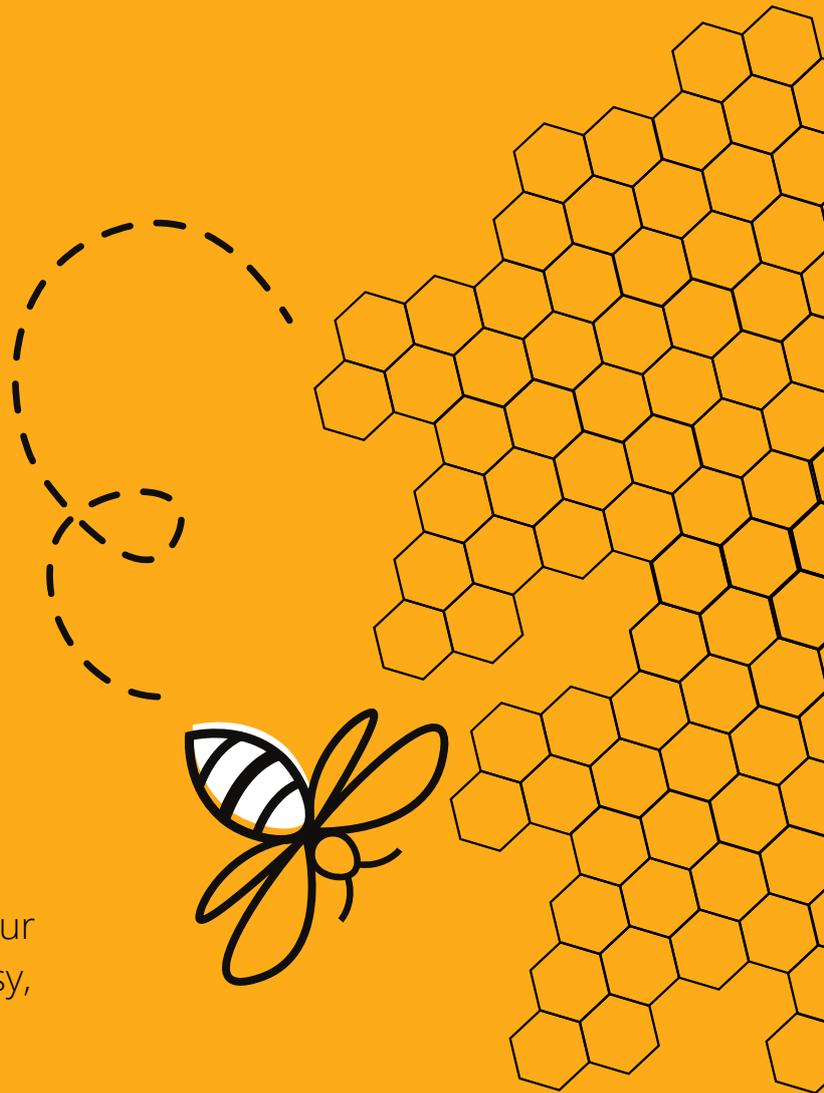
Where meritocratic promises
Are loving lullabies numerous,
Never material in downward fields,
But on as one treads through crowded ways

Can hope be clung onto
Like a darting star surrendering to charcoal ground,
A reunion of materials birthed in fiery division,
A delineation nurtured by superiors overt in strength,

But covert in action barbarous.

A.R.Salandy is a mixed-race writer. Anthony travels frequently and has spent most of his life in Kuwait jostling between the UK & America. Anthony's work has been published 160 times. Anthony has 2 published chapbooks titled 'The Great Northern Journey' 2020(Lazy Adventurer Publishing) & 'Vultures' 2021 (Roaring Junior Press). Twitter/Instagram: @anthony64120 <https://arsalandywriter.com/>

Anthony is the Co-Eic of Fahmidan Journal.



Zakiyyah Dzukogi

Winters & Summers

If the storm
had hidden on our left palms
quite earlier,
and the colour of our hearts
didn't slightly change shade,
maybe somehow, you could
break down and set the flies free,
if the oceans had slept a little more
and the rains didn't pause
at our blended souls,
somehow, you would've felt the cold air
on top of your nostril.
today,
I forgive these ones,
alight in water,
go – I give up
or maybe just blow off ashes
off my hair.

Zakiyyah Dzukogi is a Nigerian poet. She has her works published or are forthcoming in Upwrite Nigeria, Artmosterrific chapbook, the Nigeria Review, INNSAEI Journal, Konyashamrumi, literature voices, Book o clock, corona blues, Poetry Tuesday, Heartlinks Magazine, PoetryColumn, Paradise on Earth International Anthology volume 1 & 2, Of shadows and rainbow anthology, Slegdehammer, piamvoices, Olney Magazine and others. She's a two times winner of the Nigeria Prize for Teen Authors. She won the 2019 December Edition of Splendors of Dawn Monthly Poetry Contest and the Brigitte Poirson Poetry Contest.

Shaheer Pulikkal

Story

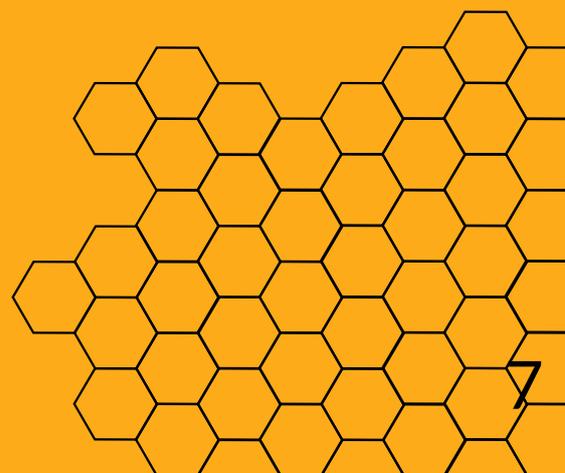
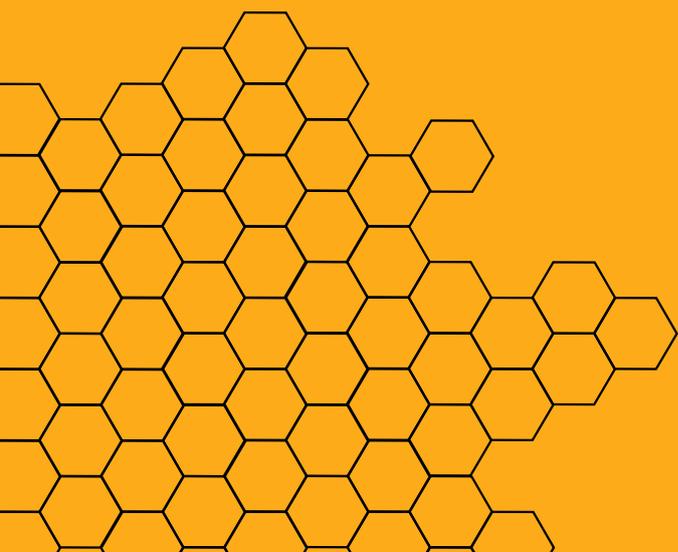
Death is near me. My eyes did not fill and my mind did not freeze. But I tried painfully to forget that the depressing silence was beginning to eat away at me.

I can not sleep today. Because tomorrow morning I will be hanged. Beautiful view when looking out through the holes in the iron door of the room. The moon shining in full brightness, with the stars dancing around it.

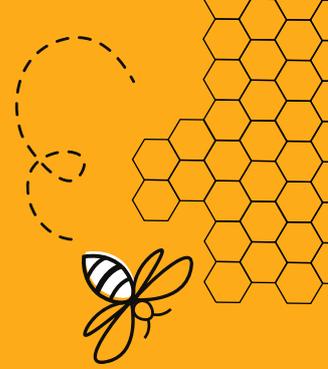
"How beautiful This"

She touched me as a sad memory as I closed my eyes and hugged the iron door. If I hadn't killed her, I wouldn't have died tomorrow.

Born in India, Shaheer Pulikkal is an Islamic history graduate student at Mes kalladi College. He is a young writer. He is just nineteen years old.



Ojo Olumide Emmanuel



wings & ashes

for late tolulope arotile.

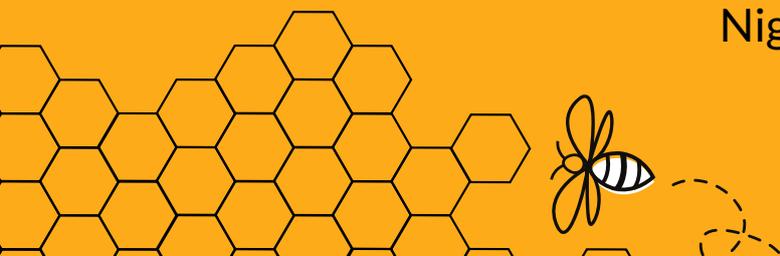
a day is broken
& there is no daybreak
in my dream, birds tread down unseen ladders
on their backs, they carried a little bird riding a girl. ha! a girl that rides a bird
who knows what happens to birds seeking salvation in ashes?
memories are ashes. my neighbour's mouth is where they quench

the opposite of pain is not joy
if it is, ask what happens to a man's memory dipped in a bottle of whiskey?
pain is the dust men breath on & this phoenix refuse to arise to a new light
here, pain is alive like one carried off by a flood of his tears
pain is mouthed, wide, succulent with stuttering words
a day is broken, a girl breaks into an egg, hatches a casket for earth's lunch
birds tread down heaven's ladder; picks the burnt casket
and ashes grow wing back to the sky it came from.

may those who long for (to) sleep find a soothing pillow
for their tired-earth-ravaged heads

Ojo Olumide Emmanuel is a Nigerian Poet and Book Editor. He is the Author of the Poetry Chapbook "Supplication For Years in Sands" (Polarsphere Books, 2021). His works have appeared and forthcoming at Feral, Quills, Poets in Nigeria (PIN), African Writers Space (WSA), The Nigerian Review (TRN) and elsewhere.

He is a fellow of SprinNG Writers Fellowship. He lives in Minna, Nigeria.



Niki Brennan

the ghost

I'm sorry I haven't been answering the phone lately
I've been living in a mausoleum
helping keep the bodies cold.

I lie here,
practicing how to be still,
third wheeling the dead.

In the mornings I count their toes just to make sure

1 2 3 4 5 1 2 3 4 5

1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4 5 -I'm sorry

Betty, it was the dew.

Not everything hard holds strong, and I don't know what to do
with this hidden piece of you that gets smaller each day.

I use the corner of my t-shirt to dust the grey silk that settles quietly.
Sometimes I think I feel a heartbeat before I lose it
and find it again in my thumb.

Betty's smile grows kinder by the day.
I learned to play piano on her teeth.
She's been teaching me how to use my voice

as a ladder.
'I'm stuck in motion between the back seat and the window.'
They sympathise. Their eyes filled with the night.

Tom is a cup of warm milk with a little whisky.
I can smell where his beard used to be.
He says he'll take me fishing one day.

Confession: I liked to have fun decaying.
I got rid of time by burying it in holes.
I became addicted to the feeling of erasure.

They just smile, they only see what's left.
I breathe awkwardly into the abscess, conscious
that I am forgetting how.

I tuck my feet into the shroud
and listen to the kids sneaking around outside
trying to catch a glimpse of the ghost.

Niki Brennan is a writer and poet from Glasgow, Scotland. His recent publications are in or upcoming in Fahmidan Journal, Sledgehammer Lit and the Kalopsia Literary Journal. He has an Mlit from the University of Strathclyde and you can find him on twitter at @NikiBrennan_



Somsubhra Banerjee

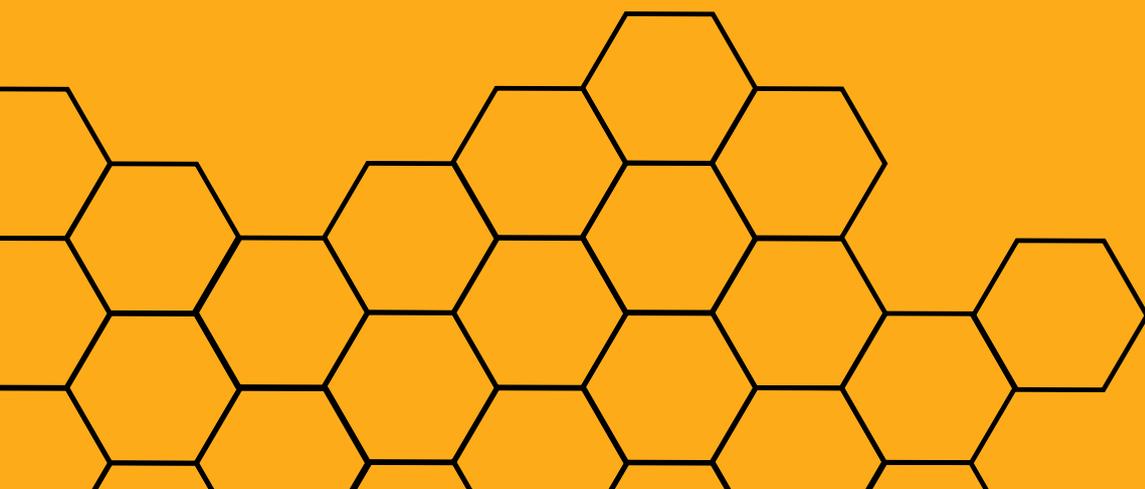
Face-blind town

The cup of steaming hot tea entered his throat, and he felt relaxed, for the first time that day. He took out a few coins from his dust-infested money bag and handed it over to the tea-stall owner, someone he should have known, yet he couldn't. He could see that he wore white pants and a discoloured torn, maroon t-shirt, his shrunken skin, displaying the map-like veins, but as soon as he tried looking at his face, it was hazy, he couldn't see his face. Yes, that scene scared him, but somehow he managed to get out of that little stall, walking on to the insides of the town, his town.

He crushed the earthen teacup, jumping over it a couple of times, seeing it break into infinitesimally small pieces, and feeling a sense of relaxation getting built inside him. He looked around, it was still early morning as if the shiny grass tips were crying to the morning sky, sharing its grief about the dewdrop that has evaporated, while the morning sky reciprocated saying that it too has lost all the twinkling stars.

It is not that the tea-stall owner was the first person whose face was hazy, just like a thick layer of fog gobbling up the snow-clad mountain ranges. The passengers in the bus, by which he journeyed to this quaint little town, were the same too. Seemingly strange at first, his brain somehow managed to believe the fact that, let their face look hazy, I want to revisit my city, after so many years. But a tingling consciousness kept nagging him, why does everyone look like that, today? Why is it specifically the face, and not the whole body? Did he land in a different realm? But this is his town, where he grew up, the tea stall, was that same stall, where the owner handed them freshly baked cakes during holidays. What happened to him?

He knew he had to at least ask someone, but again that may release bouts of laughter from everyone. Did some curse get conjured all over the town? Or is it him? No, that cannot be the case. As far as he remembers, he had a proper meal last night that was devoid of anything to make his brain play tricks. He knew he wanted to search for a mirror and see himself, that could be the clue.



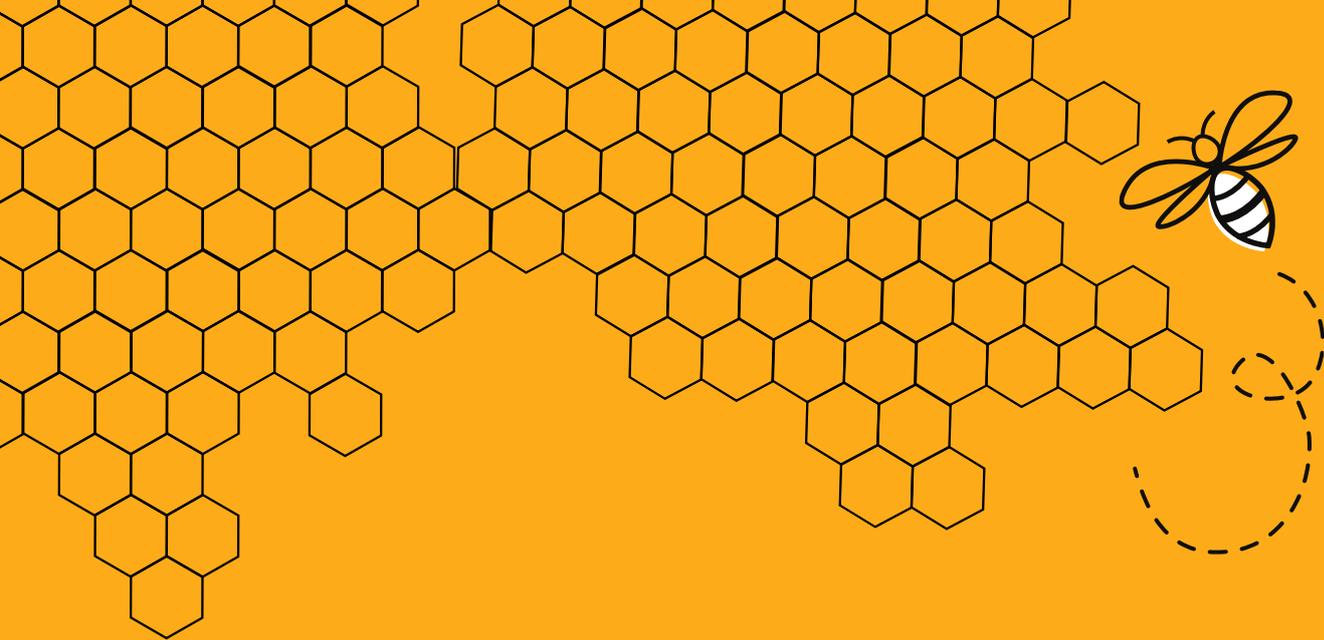
For a few moments, he decided to ignore the strangeness around him, and enjoy the place. Everything had changed every single thing. And why won't it? It has been twenty long years since he left the place. He made some quick calculations on places he would love to visit.

One, walk by his own home, which probably would have been consumed by the tentacles of crawling trees. Two, the small patch near the river where he used to sit and watch the water flow by. Three, to have his favourite curry from his favourite food shop if it still exists. Four, to walk the length and breadth of the town, which he is already doing. And Five, see her, yes, if she's still here.

The river, its low murmur pierced his eardrums. It was invisible but somehow, made sure to make him feel its presence, nearby. He walked towards it, searching for that sweet spot, where so many evenings were spent, reminiscing, thinking, writing. Ignoring the strange looks that some animal turned people gave him, he managed to find himself sitting on that spot, the sound of the river and the river itself showing it all to him. Welcoming him with open arms, asking him to jump in, and let it caress him, let each drop nourish him, head to toe. The soft rustle of leaves because of the meandering winds, punctuated by the song of the river, almost put him to a slow slumber, his mind going back to those days, when friends, so many of them spent most of their time, here, fishing, chit-chatting and swimming. Those were the days. But he had no time for nostalgia, a couple of more places to cover. He got up.

The town is a small one, a single muddy road cutting through the town, the same way a knife cuts through a cake. He kept his head down, to not feel that horrendous feeling of seeing faceless people all through the town. But the child inside him wanted to see through those shops, those green fields, houses that changed over course of time. Does any of his friends still reside in any of those little houses made of mud and brick? Or they have migrated to places, unknown? How he wished he stayed in contact with all of them. He thought he'll visit someone some other day, because it is already noon, and he had two more important places to visit.

Overwhelming emotions engulfed all his senses, as he saw the house, after a gap of so many years. It stood there like a lightning-struck banyan tree, alone and dilapidated as if still trying to come to terms with the fact that its heart is empty. Empty of those cacophonies, those waves of laughter, quarrels, and what now. Probably feeling a bit jealous of seeing the houses around, that still echoes with lively sounds. There were far too many reasons for their family to flee their motherland, ranging from debts, and rivalries, about which, his young brain couldn't fathom much about. The surroundings looked like a dump yard of household stuff, and amongst it, stood his own house, half-broken, and the other half waiting to go down soon. He wished he could enter it, touch those walls, where memories, sounds, and smells, probably may juxtapose together and sing a song of the yesteryears, in that old gramophone that they had. No, he is not ready to feel them now, if it gets too strong, he won't be able to conquer it. Those memories



would delve deep in him, pierce each vein in his heart, and he may not get up, again. Quickly, he turned around and started to walk away, but the ears listened to a sound. Turning back, he saw his grandmother, calling him earnestly, with so much love on her face, asking him to come home quickly, because his favourite lunch awaits him. Strangely enough, he could clearly see her face, those dimples, her toothless smile, the shrunk skin mapped across her cheeks, every single dimension of hers were visible. He started to walk faster, rubbing the corner of his eyes, where a few teardrops eventually dried down.

A left turn, from the house, and there was the balcony, a cozy two-storeyed house, that smelt of love. That same smell of tantalizing jasmynes entered his nostrils, and he felt like being swayed across places, a sense of comfort, a *deja vu*, it was all so familiar. As if, she would now, any moment, open the windows and take a peek. Her freshly combed, wet hair would rest on one side, while he would try to drip those extra water off them, drop by drop, they would fall on that dusty lane below. How lucky that lane must be!

The town had considerably thinned of movement, it was afternoon and the sunrays managed to draw beads of sweat from the skin. Heaving a sigh, he turned back but was stopped on his step by this familiar-sounding sound of windows, opening. It had to be her, or no?

There she was, her hair dripping wet with water, lunging out of the window sills, she combed them, which resulted in sending flurries of droplets on that lucky lane, down below. His mind was beside her, seeing her, and feeling in the aroma of fresh jasmynes, as she continued her combing. Moments later, he folded her hair in a neat bun, and her eyes fell on him. They were surprised, probably a bit bewildered, and he quickly turned and made his way to the main road. Ohh, those eyes, still so beautiful, she had aged so gracefully. The hairs were now a mix of silver and black, but it was all so magical, and he thanked the heavens to let him at least have a short glimpse of her.

The strange thing, he could visualize her face, see every bit of it. It all seemed so very strange now, he saw his grandmother, who has passed away a long time ago and now her. No, no, no that cannot be the reason. He started to walk furiously searching for a mirror, wanting ever so urgently to see his own face. Looking around, yes, everyone who is walking around, has a hazy face. He saw this eating house having a mirror and almost ran towards it, almost being hit by a white ambulance sort of a vehicle. He stood in front of the washbasin, which had a mirror, and looked intently.

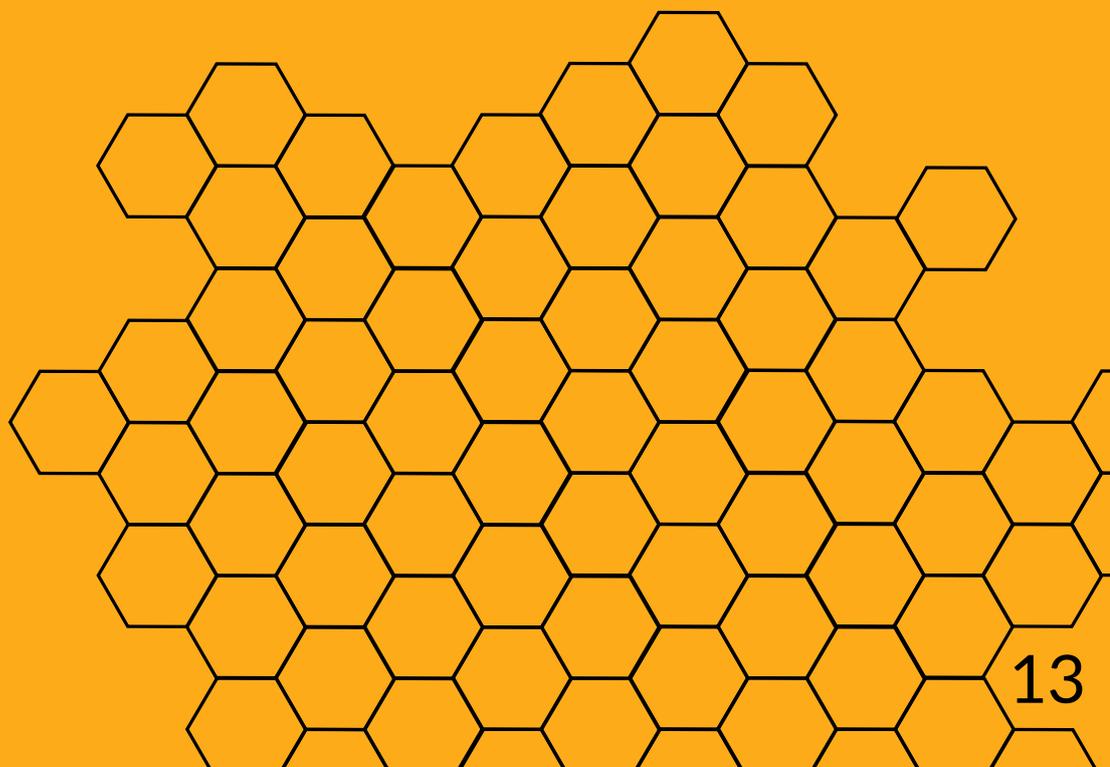
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"Hello Madam, yes we found him. He was lying unconscious in a deserted town, I have no clue how he escaped, but don't worry, he is under control."

"Hello Madam, yes we are almost there, but he has regained consciousness, and is blabbering about facelessness, love of my life, the smell of food and family. We have administered your recommended dose of the medicine, to calm him down, and the rest you can take up, once we reach. No, Madam, I still don't know why he ended up in that deserted town, maybe once he's a bit better, we may ask him. We'll see you soon at ward number two of our asylum."

Somsubhra is an IT engineer, working in Calcutta, and trying to find some time to scribble every day. He loves to personify nature and inanimate objects, which forms the basis for most of his stories.

Find him here: <https://linktr.ee/shombnrje>



Milks I have drunk

As an infant I had breastmilk,
warm and close and sour.
I don't remember it.
My body remembers.
Your body remembers.

Then in my childhood fridge was only skim
and usually UHT. You buy it on special.
And when you go to weight watchers
you can feel a little less guilty
writing it in your tiny book,
alongside unsatisfying imitation chocolate.

In high school I bought cartons of vanilla malt
with heavy bronzy two-dollar coins.
On days when stress and cement glued my jaw shut,
I slipped a straw between my lips
so I could suck milk through the gap in my front teeth
and watch other people eat sandwiches.

When I met a lover we bought full cream
and I learned to love all those luscious things
I could put into my mouth.
Butter and cream and other flavours so big
they had always scared me away before.
We sipped and swigged and sighed until
our joy was almost unremarkable.

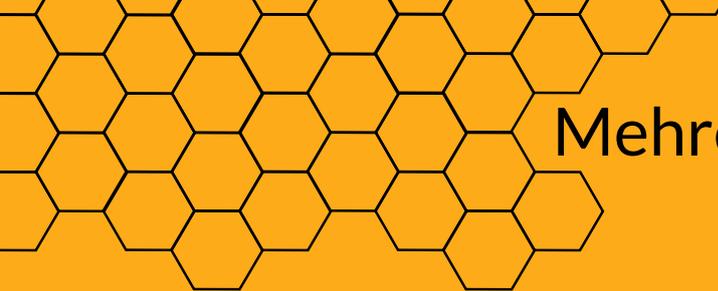
I tried soy milk with a friend,
in a coffee that I also didn't like,
with two shots of vanilla syrup that I did.
I never managed to shake the impression
of a skin forming on the swiftly cooling
surface. And was that a fly stuck on top?
Soy milk kind of tastes like flies.

Almond milk, I discovered in
the pursuit of plant-based righteousness,
tastes like dust. And memories
of dry days at the end of summer.
Orange sky, and a mouth full of hot dusty air.
These things, I suppose, are an acquired taste.

At your bedside I watched you drink Sustagen,
'Neutral' flavour. When I tried a sip
it tasted thick. Sweet but not really.
Sour but not really. The flavour is strange
and hollow to me. And you were tired.
And you just closed your eyes, and breathed.
Sustagen tastes of your soft breath.

Tara Willoughby

Tara lives in
Canberra with her
spouse and their
cockatiel, Pooface.
She works as a union
organiser. Her
poetry has
previously been
published in
Cicerone Journal,
Post Ghost Press,
and perhappened
mag.



Mehreen Ahmed

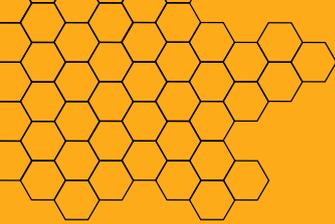
Twig

At midnight, someone was knocking on my window pane. It was a sinewy twig, wavering in the blustery winds. Knocks persisted. The window had fogged up from the recent cold waves. I walked up and stood before it. A coal spattered night, there was the twig rubbing itself on the fog. This reminded me of Grandma's fantasy metamorphosis of the moon shadow; that it was a woman, sitting and spinning for a thousand years.

Spirits breathed through leaves. Grandma had often said before she passed away, now buried in a graveyard downstairs. This was it, the twig, it nodded and said something to me. The fog on the window cleared up, to be re-fogged. I kept looking at it until the twig left a sign on the fog, as though it breathed onto the window pane. It stirred, I walked to it and wrote the letter G on the breathing. The twig stopped stirring. That was the sign. In the moment, I knew that it wasn't just a twig. An all fogged up window pane.

Mehreen Ahmed is an award-winning author, internationally published and critically acclaimed by Midwest Book Review. One of her short stories won The Waterloo Short Story Competition, 2020. Her works have been nominated three times for The Best of the Net, 2020. Pushcart Prize nomination, 2020. Two times for Ditmar Awards in 2016 and 2019, Aurealis Awards nominee, 2015 and nomination for Christina Stead Prize, 2018. Her book was announced as The Drunken Druid's Editor's Choice, June 2018. Three of her books received Author Shout Reader Ready Awards, 2019. One Received Silver. The other two Bronze medals.





Rajiv Bakshi

A Meet to Remember

I was going to meet my cousin almost after 30 years. He stays in Gaborone in Botswana in Southern Africa. The last time I met him was when he got married in Delhi, around 32 years back. That was the only time I saw his wife though we had stayed together for 8 years in our grandfather's house in Model Town Jalandhar in the mid-1960s. The cousins from Delhi, Hoshiarpur, Jammu, New York, Jhansi used to meet once a year during the two months of summer vacation. It was a fun time then. The oldest cousin who is now a Dean in a New York University and the youngest cousin who is a Banker by profession now in Jalandhar had an age difference of 18 years. Still, the cousins are attached to each other and they try to meet once in four or five years. Since the cousins are spread over India, the USA, Sweden, Canada, Australia, Gaborone, it's a tough job coordinating with each other and arranging a cousins meet at a common and convenient place.

One such meeting took at the initiative of one of our Fauji cousins in Delhi in the year 2016. It was a three-day meet and the arrangements for staying and food were perfect. Most of the cousins were accommodated in different localities in Delhi, where most of the cousins stayed. Breakfast, lunch, heavy tea, dinner with beer and vodka were served at different localities. Two functions were on the patio of one of our cousins who stayed in Defence Colony Delhi. On the last day of the meeting, we met in an Officers Club mess and there was a session for drinks, songs, dance and Tambola. There was a family photograph of all the cousins and a copy of the photograph was couriered to each family. The cousins decided to meet at least once every two years. As such the group on WhatsApp was created with the nomenclature of: "Harmonious Cousins Group". Since the expenses were contributory, there was no extra burden on the host and the hostess of the meet.

The next cousins meet was held in Chandigarh in 2018 and

10 cousins along with their wives attended the meet. To add fun to the meeting, a resort was booked near Kalka. A few new games were played and the meeting ended on a happy note after three days.

The next meeting was scheduled in Mumbai in 2020. But due to the advent of Covid-19, the meeting was postponed for infinite times. There was no end to the pandemic and it looked that the meeting will never take place due to the start of the second wave in India. Even though most of our cousins had got both doses of vaccination, no one wanted to take an unnecessary risk and arrange a meeting. Out of 20 cousins, 6 cousins were down with Covid-19 and two of our cousins were even hospitalised in Chandigarh for a week due to their low Oxygen level. Thank God, all cousins recovered and are now on their way to recovery and resume a normal life.

I was in Chicago since April this year and with the opening up of all establishments in the state, I sent a message to all cousins of this group to plan a meet in Chicago this year. Two of my cousins who stayed in Botswana had come to meet their son and daughter who were students at Michigan University in the USA.

I immediately got confirmation from 6 cousins of mine that they are ready to join the meet provided it's on a weekend so that it does not clash with their work from home. They can get one day off for Monday.

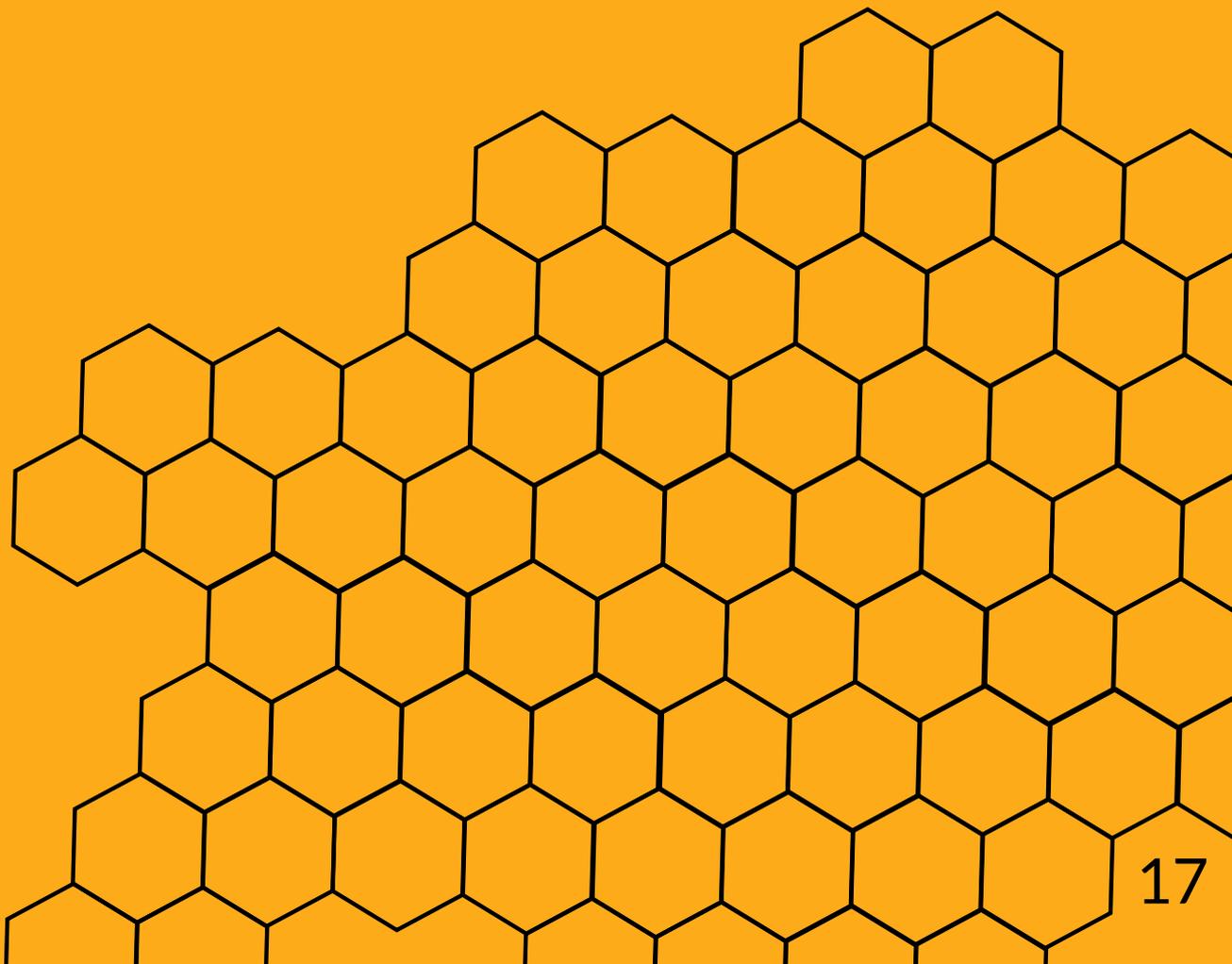


Convenient days were proposed and two of our cousins who were coming from New York even got their air tickets on hold. Two cousins of mine who stay in Botswana were driving from Grand Rapid in Michigan. Some of the cousins who are now NRI and too formal proposed to stay in Hilton hotel as they had enough ' points ' with them being frequent flyers before the pandemic times and preferred staying in a good hotel for the meet. This proposal was turned down by me and my better half and we proposed that all the 6 cousins stay with us in our home in Downtown Chicago where my son stays with his family. We had got three queen size air mattresses laid in the basement of our home.

The evening started with Barbeque on Saturday with a lot of good food which included ChickenMasala, Paneer, Corn, Mixed vegetable and local Beer. There was also fresh lemonade and the evening ended with Sanders Chocolate Icecream scoops. No one was in a mood to sleep even at 12 pm. Then started a session of Flash Card game with low stakes. The card session ended at 3 am. On next day morning after a heavy breakfast with a lot of fruits, scrambled eggs with vegetables, it was the start of the Carrom Board session with stakes. It lasted for more than 4 hours.

It was decided that whichever cousin wins in the Card game and the Carrom game will treat all other cousins in the restaurant in John Hancock Tower, at one time the tallest building in the USA on the last day of the tour. After carrom board, there was a gossip session with each cousin telling about the highs and lows of their family. We came to know how each of my cousins was progressing in their life.

The meeting ended with a lot of byes, hugs and wishes with a promise to stay in touch with each other and decided to give an invitation to the next generation kids and grandkids for a mega meet after the end of the pandemic may be in the year 2022.



Priyanka Srivastava

The Morning Song

Awaken me
and sing me that morning song,
be that petrichor which brings back
those rainbow clouds.

Love me but let me be alone
when I want to break quietly.

I am a poet but
some days I need to
quietly rhyme my life.

That Indulgence

her fingers danced quietly on the keypad
when everything is quiet she needs to indulge
that writer within her with a new song.

her fingers danced quietly under the moonlight
and the stars awakened the flowers.

by morning her poems would become dust
and her eyes would steal the dewdrops.
by dawn she would be a poem which would be lost.

Priyanka Srivastava is a writer based in Singapore, her poems are often about her life in India and Singapore.

When she is not lost in words, she loves to read especially non fiction books. She also loves to play with colours.

Thank you to all our lovely contributors for their support and submissions, and to everyone taking the time to read all these amazing poems and stories we receive!



As always we would like to acknowledge the original custodians of the land we live and work upon, and pay our respect to all indigenous peoples past and present.



