Vanishing Act

CURATED BY

Adwait Singh

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

SD Holman

Vanishing Act

VISUAL ART EXHIBITION

Queer Arts Festival 2022

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The Queer Arts Festival takes place on the sovereign, unceded land of the xwməθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam), səlilwətaʔ ɬ (Tsleil-Waututh), and Sḵwx̱wú7mesh (Squamish) peoples. I ask you to join me in acknowledging the xwməθkwəy̓əm, səlilwətaʔ ɬ and Sḵwx̱wú7mesh communities, their elders both past and present, as well as future generations. QAF also acknowledges that it was founded upon exclusions and erasures of many Indigenous peoples, including those on whose land this institution is located. This acknowledgement demonstrates a commitment to continued work to dismantle the ongoing legacies of settler colonialism.

The eerie … is constituted by a failure of absence or a failure of presence. The sensation of the eerie occurs when there is something present where there should be nothing, or there is nothing present when there should be something.

— Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* (2016)

From the opening night at the Sun Wah Centre.

PREFACE

SD Holman

It was 2019 when multimedia titan Paul Wong first started telling me about Adwait Singh. Paul returned home from work in India with the Prameya Art Foundation raving about this brilliant young curator he'd met there. He said we needed Adwait's work in Vancouver, and that while he had thought about approaching the Vancouver Art Gallery, he came to me first at Queer Arts Festival because of our mutual admiration for each other's work, our long-standing working relationship, and his desire to see this work presented by a contemporary queer art organisation.

So at the dawn of 2021, when it seemed we were recovering from the pandemic, Paul forwarded Adwait's draft exhibition proposal. The shock of recognition hit me like a bolt of lightning. I cannot resist paraphrasing at length some words with which Adwait first introduced himself to me:

Apocalypse is hardly news to the queers of the world. It is an existential sea that we are thrown into at birth, to paddle for queer life, in search of a shore or even flotsam of any kind that offers a heaving moment, a brief respite, a ray of hope. For, to be queer is to be always already born at the end of the world.... It is to tenderly craft from the carnage of a future that is our inheritance a makeshift liveable shelter that co-exists with, and in spite of, the attrition of a hostile dominant paradigm.

Like the cyclical nature of our desires and temporality, apocalypse is a recurring fact of queer existence. Indeed, queerness is an embrace of the cataclysmic eventuality that lives for the moment, wallowing in its affects. It is given to an obsessive discovery and rediscovery of the entire repertoire of pleasure, to the coy or coquettish naming of unnameable desires, and even to flirting with the painful (im)possibility of love. Unlike the heteronormative investments in the notions of procreative futurity, immortality and memorialisation, queers have cast their lot with transience and transformation as the faith that not only guards against the loss of meaning but also allows for a fuller immersion into the present...

What is new however, is a certain universalization of precarity, of the feeling that the world is teetering on the brink of collapse and the existential questions that this dredges up, bringing a growing number of citizen subjects into the purview of queer gravity. The sense of alienation, of dissonance and un-belonging that is second nature to queers, has been spreading like a contagion to hitherto well-adjusted sections of society. As alienation becomes universal the universe becomes queer. One could appoint any number of causalities to this mass queering effect, from the rising sense of impending ecological doom, to inimical government policies, to the demanding adjustments and perceived loss of freedom ordained by the 'new normal'...

A queer time calls for a queer politics of survival. There are several defining aspects to this, the primary one being a blind commitment to difference. Because the queer sense of politics springs from an acute awareness of alterity that condemns us in the eyes of the assimilative heteronormative state machinery, it translates into an unconditional acceptance of difference. Furthermore because queer collectivity is forged along non-familial lines and often on the basis of an aleatory discovery of shared vulnerability, it allows greater room for empathetic cross-identifications across the board and not merely on the basis of consanguinity or common socio-cultural, ideological or economic grounds. Thus, a queer politics is first and foremost a social politics that demands the right to be different and to flourish in that difference. Secondly, it is perhaps due to the fact that queers have to exist against the grain of society and are subjectivated through persistent refusals to compromise and fall in line, we get adept at reworking the logics of the 'impossible', bending reality to our will through the sheer force of longing.

In some ways, it is hard to imagine two contexts more disparate than Adwait's and my own: India and Canada, Global South and Global North, hot and cold, the densely populated centre of Eurasia and the uncrowded Western fringe of Turtle Island. Our time zones are 12.5 hours apart—we live on literally opposite sides of the globe. And yet, despite everything that separated us, this remote stranger and I had been ruminating on many of the same ideas. The synergy was undeniable.

When I first started talking about queerness, the environment, and failure years ago, I got blank stares in Vancouver. In 2021, as my part of the world emerged from our plastic-wrapped pandemic lockdown, I mostly still did. And yet, here in my inbox was a proposal from India that read like the culmination of everything I'd been trying to understand and accomplish in my 15 years as founder and artistic director of a queer arts organisation on the edge of a colonised continent.

I was stunned and elated. What unexpected joy to find queer kin half a world away. It felt like falling in love... over a proposal.

I thanked Paul, and wrote Adwait that it felt like he had been reading my mail. I had just submitted a funding proposal using similar language...

If we look back to the pandemic's beginning, we can also remember a time when shutdowns upended plans, attenuated capitalism's hectic pace, and called compulsory busyness into question. Road and air and tanker traffic slowed. Streets and skies and seaways cleared. Southern Resident Orcas had a baby boom. A hush descended as the world took a long overdue exhale.

The centre slowed and warily looked around.

It was the mainstream's turn to learn about space and isolation: what it's like to feel unsafe in public, the danger of standing too close to the wrong person, the fear that stepping outside one's home/family/bubble could mean

death. We saw wider acknowledgment that for too many, the public sphere never has been safe. The racialized, the queered, all of us at the margins—when were any of us privy to life outside the apocalypse?

The echo was eerie. Haunting. Urgent. I accelerated the festival timeline and 18 months later, 'Vanishing Act' manifested itself as the curated visual art component of the 2022 Queer Arts Festival.

Is it surprising that at the dawn of the 6th mass extinction, that we find ourselves troubled by the spectre of the world we are losing? That Adwait and I, queer cultural workers living among the late capitalist revenants of the British Empire's predation upon some of the world's most ancient cultures, should find common cause? That we should both be visited by the ghost of the times? Or is the experience specific to those who are queer in the original sense of the word 'quer, cutting across categories? I don't have the answers to these questions, and/but as artists and artworkers, it is our work to illuminate them.

This exhibition brought together a confluence of artists from India to Pakistan to Colombia to Canada and beyond who use queer subjectivity as a springboard into nonduality and interbeing that articulates a profound relationship between all forms of life who share this fragile earth.

Fast forward to 2024, and back to business as usual... Have we learned anything?

As Adwait and I struggle in queer jouissance and pain to bring you a posthumous catalogue years later, I feel that he and these artists are not only literally 12 hours ahead, but also figuratively harbingers from the future. While we in the global North look out our windows to see mountains that go on forever, for ever, ever, we send our garbage half-way around the world, outsourcing the consequences of our consumption, as we see most pointedly in Shahana Rajani's Cipher for the Missing, Bassem Saad's Kink Retrograde, Hiba Ali's work on Amazon, and Electra KB's sounding of the alarm. All the while we proclaim ourselves as the purveyors of forward-thinking, and point fingers at others while living here on colonised land. With the sharp rise of cancel culture on the Left, while Rightwing extremism barrels down upon us at speeds reminiscent of the 1930's, we need (I need) cultural workers like Adwait who 'bring forth apocalyptic-revelations about radical forms of hospitality, sociality and empathy that are fed by the consciousness of a catastrophic co-becoming.'

Adwait promises me on our calls—him up too late and me up too early—that when the time comes to run for our lives he will send me warning from 12.5 hours in the future...

This catalogue is my own vanishing act as co-founder of the Queer Arts Festival Vancouver and founder of SUM gallery. I stepped down as Artistic Director at the end of 2021, lingering as a resource to my successor, Mark Takeshi McGregor, and to see 'Vanishing Act' to fruition as the exhibition's creative director. I am so pleased to release this catalogue into the wild. It has been an honour to work with Adwait on the exhibition and now the catalogue, and I'm proud to submit to you, Dear Reader, this hauntological beacon amidst imminent desolation.

And now, I think I will go listen to the turtles singing. I hope they sing for me, and for you.

Keep loving. Keep fighting.

Peace.

From left to right: Adwait Singh, Natis, Paul Wong, S.D. Holman.

Special thanks

I would like to to give great big thank you to:

My wonderful and patient designer Odette Hidalgo at Addon Creative

Henry Heng Lu (Centre A) for sharing Space

Sharon Kallis and Means of Production (MOP) for the amazing stinging nettle and your insights into wonders of hard to domesticate plants (grow Wilde you crazy queer plant! - I feel just like you, or think I do anyway— hard to tell but I am leaning into the interbeing

jil p. weaving for the hook up to MOP and Sharon Kallis (Sharon that was the best garden-life-tour ever!)

Johanna Clark, my go-to women in the woods; always ready to meet me halfway, with farm, plant and witchy wisdom

Rachel Kiyo Iwaasa for your constant support of my work, and being able to translate me to others—ghostwriting indeed!

Paul Wong for the introduction to Adwait, and wanting this important work here with the farseeing art queers

From the walk-through at the SUM Gallery.

EDITORIAL STATEMENT

Adwait Singh

The first draft of ‘Vanishing Act’ was conceived from the wintry isolation of a country home located a few hours outside New Delhi. The world was in the thick of the COVID-19 pandemic and we were hunting for secluded nests to hatch our new lives. This bubbled existence, pared down to essentials, afforded a lot of room for reflection. How much we can get used to in a short span of time, rearranging our worlds to suit our changed circumstances, was a thought both bolstering and baffling. Faced with scrawny prospects, our bodies coiled around these gifts—the good things in life that only come into value when threatened with loss.

Out of such broodings over the sudden collapse of the world at large and my queer world enfolded within arose visions of other apocalypses still. As these cataclysms converged across time and space, parallels were drawn between the mainstream coverage of the AIDS epidemic in the 80s and the ongoing pandemic. What duly came to surface is the ironic passing of buck to precisely those sections of society who are the most vulnerable to the malaise. Far from occasioning a critical inquest into the historically entrenched discriminations, the heightened susceptibility to infection was being touted as a sign of culpability, the cause for unchecked contagion. As with the AIDS epidemic which was made out to be a gay problem, once again with COVID-19 one could discern an immunological calculus operating under the guise of exigent measures. The ecocidal hand responsible for triggering the AIDS crisis through its colonial exploits in Africa[1] was once again busy covering its own tracks leading to the recent pandemic. Feeding off of chaos, the actual agent of apocalypse is in the business of posing de-munised minorities as a straw man to advance its biopolitical and monopolistic interests.[2] By keeping the world in a constant fix of firefighting, it ingeniously evades any serious investigations into causality that might expose its red hands. And so the world tumbles towards bigger and bigger catastrophes.

With this exhibition our attempt was to pull the curtain from the patriarchal hand of possession, shining light on its myriad prestidigitations. More specifically, we wanted to revisit the mainstream framing of contaminants where they are made out to be synonymous with certain minorities. Apocalypse is subsequently posed as a mutational threat to re/productive futures and cultural straightness.[3] Thus, by queering apocalypse we were not only calling out the nexus of patriarchy and capitalism, as the primary manufacturer and distributor of the rot that has destroyed many a world, but also collating alternative modes of engaging with toxicity. Given the fact that many queer worlds continue to be forged under hostile conditions, to say nothing of our subjective dalliance with toxicity, we intuited that queer toxic negotiations might yield meaningful insights into our current apocalyptic binds. Queer insistence on virtuosity, mutability, and transience was subsequently upheld as a much-needed antidote to heteropatriarchy's blind pursuit of re/productivity, sameness and permanence which mires our worlds deeper into trouble. In this way, 'Vanishing Act' simultaneously sought to uncover the artifice employed by patriarchal modes of possession and to extend queer re/appropriation of and becoming with toxicity—slurs, viruses, homophobia, self-sabotage, bad romances, and death—as an ethical and tactical position for imperilled times.

When I landed in Vancouver in June of 2022, I was heartsick and exhausted from a previous engagement. The blues saw me clinging to warm cups of lattes and friendly company. Although I couldn't rouse myself enough to explore the museums and galleries the city had to offer, I remember soaking some of its parcels of life over long and solitary wanderings post-work. The exhibition was to be housed at the Sun Wah Centre, located in Chinatown, a neighbourhood that felt like an embattled enclave desperately trying to hold off the tide of time and gentrification. It seemed to me like a place in drag, curiously mirroring my internal world. The building itself had the appearance of a rundown cultural hub and contained a queer assortment of private offices, garment warehouses, art galleries, and souvenir shops. I was told that parts of the building were earmarked for reconstruction soon. Coincidentally, some of these doomed spaces were selected to nest our queer apocalyptic conclave. We couldn't have conceived of a more perfect setting. Towards the very end of my time in Vancouver, the doom invoked in the curatorial note came knocking at my door as I tested positive for COVID-19 for the first time. Yet another apocalypse engulfed me, and all was fog for a time.

Against mainstream visualisations of apocalypse as an impending and momentous doom lurking in the wings, the thread of annihilation engaged by us was far more banal, if no less deadly. Our doom-gathering had a lived immediacy to it; its nature ranged from romantic to environmental, historical or sociopolitical. Each of the eighteen participating artists presented a different face of apocalypse and their unique relationship to it. This dispersion of a singular notion of apocalypse was calculated to engender a spectrum showcasing its myriad shades and intensities. While each dealing with disaster was grounded in a particular context, they frequently blended with others to produce more universal affects. Indeed, the curatorial note posed the recent pandemic in terms of a restitutionary visitation by the ghosts of the AIDS epidemic. With COVID-19 one witnessed a prodigious swell in the dreadful feelings of alienation, dissonance and precarity familiar to queers till the world was consumed by queer gravity. The exhibition seized this moment to sensitise the mainstream about the fact that for some apocalypse is a constant companion from birth. Furthermore, the focus on queer artistic practices from South Asia and

1 Craig Timberg and Daniel Halperin, *Tinderbox: How the West Sparked the AIDS Epidemic and How the World Can Finally Overcome It* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2012).
2 Roberto Esposito, *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life*, trans. Zakiya Hanafi [Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 2011(2002)].
3 Helen Hester, *Xenofeminism* (Polity Press: Cambridge, 18).

its diasporas was intended to create a generative dissonance between different approaches to toxicity assumed by the East and the West.

From the start, this belated catalogue was imagined as a space where the ideas sketched out by the exhibition could be further articulated and parsed. As we were developing this exhibition of works rooted primarily in South Asian cultures for the context of Vancouver, BC, we were scrupulous about avoiding reductionism and exoticism. In addition to this, we were cognisant of differences not only in the cultural approaches to toxicity but also in approaches to queerness itself. These differences bore highlighting in the interest of contextualisation and unsettling our respective homonormativities. The catalogue was thus reformatted as an anthology of commissioned texts from writers who occupy critical nodes in queer artistic ecologies in South Asia. We hope that these words will bring flavour and nuance to the glimpses of the exhibition scattered across the publication.

The catalogue contains seven queer musings rooted in South Asia and its diasporic beyond. In the manner familiar to queer writing, these texts are characterised by spatio-temporal layering, a blending of anecdotal and academic styles, fragmentation, performativity, against-the-grain and unexpected readings of reality, and affective charges. Each of these texts offers generative qualifications on key theoretical issues from a South Asian queer perspective. Asad Alvi's 'Our Collective Orientations towards Death' argues that the relatively recent 'negative turn' in queer theory has precedents in Eastern epistemes and mystical metaphors. Omar Kasmani's 'Queer Religiously' uncovers a significant deviation in South Asian queerness resulting from its leanings on and brushes with mysticism. Portraying saints as queer companions, the essay evidences how Sufi shrines and their cultures can reinforce un-straight orientations to the world. Sadia Khatri's 'Clocks' takes us back to the ruptured time of the pandemic, posing apocalypse as a set of nesting dolls. Continuing this thread, my own text 'Of Love and Blight,' partially offered to the audience during the exhibition walkthrough, probes the protective aspects of self-sabotage in a context where love is charted as an impossibility. The notion of 'killing your darlings' that I use in my essay is expanded by Shayan Rajani's 'Swallowed by the Earth' which offers the picture of death as an enabling space for queer couplings in the pre-modern world. Areez Katki's contribution 'As this chin melts on your knee' unpacks the complex ideas that informed his works in the exhibition. The text essays an empathetic outlook on disaster by cobbling together an archive of anxiety as a coping mechanism. Finally, the exchange between Syma Tariq and Sita Balani holds in productive tension notions of silence and speaking, private and public mourning to survey critical moments, materials, and movements around them.

We hope that these cathartic laments and prophetic ravings will find resonance with the queer parts that reside in all of us. May they be your gentle guide through troubled times!

The curator Adwait Singh addressing the audience on the opening night at Sun Wah Centre.

Plates 1-4: Omer Wasim, *Surrender,* 2018-2022 (installation views). Photographic prints, hanging mechanism, meat hooks, shirts, sheer curtain, concrete planter, stinging nettle, soil, water, growth light, and mirror, variable dimensions. Courtesy: S.D. Holman.

Our Collective Orientations toward Death

by Asad Alvi

Since the publication of Lee Edelman's *Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004), queer theory—both within dominant Euro-US contexts and elsewhere—has sustained a marked interest in the idea, concept, feeling and theme of death. Three years following Edelman's publication, Heather Love published her own seminal work, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (2007). With her, those notions of death refigured in the language of loss and in the critical embrace of the idea of 'moving backward', moving toward a space prior to the self's signification within dominant structures of power.

I have extremely fond memories of reading both Edelman and Love during my undergraduate years at a wonderful liberal arts school in Karachi. Extending onto the chairs in the library, feeling the sun pouring through the windows in that building, annotating passages from Edelman and Love that spoke of the self's undoing in the face of tremendous interpellations, I experienced a profound sense of opening in my life. The question many have asked and continue to ask is: why death? Why is this specific concept (used often as a concept-metaphor) as a critical frame for responding to heteronormativity?

There are many theoretical explanations for this. In the case of Edelman, the queer frame is from within the history of Western psychoanalysis. Reading the repressed fear of death that constitutes the identity-formation of the ideal 'stable' subject within psychoanalysis, Edelman's wonderful readings across a vast literary and visual archive link the process of this repression to the making of an authoritarian subject. In other words: we become obsessed with stability, control, power and productivity because we sublimate within us the recognition of that which is inevitable: the eventual fact of our movement toward nonbeing. For Edelman, you have to turn this idea around,

Plate 2:

inside-out: rather than distancing ourselves from this fear (of death), if we surrender to it, then we relinquish in ourselves the obsessive impulse to control our own lives and others. We yield a queerer understanding of a world that delights in *jouissance*, that embraces irony, uncertainty and contradiction, and that voluntarily ceases notions of control, productivity, profit and order that capitalistic life so celebrates. We move somewhat closer to anarchy.

For Love, these same ideas are cast in the context of time and the discourse associated with 'emotional growth': the whole idea of 'moving forward,' of 'healing,' of 'accepting yourself', reproduce for Love those same problematic notions of productivity that Edelman tackles in his work, as if complex and often counterintuitive feelings such as shame, guilt, anger and loss need to be assimilated into an acceptable structure of what ideal (feminist and queer) subjects should act like. Love advises against such violent (though on the surface they appear quite benign) and 'forward-looking' notions of progress and productivity, advising instead that we chaotically 'feel backward' into those vast regions of our soul where everything is indeterminate and where logic is suspended, indeed into the very night of our soul, to hold therein a whole complex range of affects and emotions. Emotions described as 'negative' then are not problems to be solved; our madness, on the contrary, is precisely what makes us exceptional, not the norm.

One can approximate here what moved me about these theorists in my undergraduate years; because of the consistent insistence by heteropatriarchy (in Pakistan and elsewhere) on an ordered and stable script of living for many of us, reading such descriptions of chaos, unruliness, madness, and disorder were profound ways of experiencing a feminist sense of release and freedom; as a critical frame, nonbeing became epistemically relevant to many of us. Within queer studies, both Edelman and Love are now described as part of what constitutes a 'negative turn' in this field, a general theoretical trend away from mainstream, positivist and identitarian forms of queer thinking and toward more complex and holistic modes of reading the world that embrace the more unruly and 'negative' aspects of queer and feminist life that I have described above. These modes of reading have influenced students of queer theory world over.

In such a situation, I have to note that describing Edelman and Love, amidst others, as 'Western theorists' can be symptomatic of an orientalism whereby we narrowly straightjacket theorists into 'Western' and 'elsewhere' theorists, casting them as oppositional and different. While it is true that Edelman works within the problematic history of psychoanalysis, and that Love's archive is from the Euro-US context, I think their general theoretical inferences about negativity can be appreciated. I work within comparative literature and translation: my practice is to inhabit as many languages and traditions as the mind

Plate 3

Plate 4

can train in (Urdu, Sindhi, Persian) and noticing how theoretical ideas shift and take on newer forms and lives as we move from language to language, without always getting into the now stultified debate about East and West. When the exhibit for which this essay is being written describes its interest in critical frames of toxicity, contagion, and haunting, it is participating to some extent in the said genealogy of negativity I have traced above. However, its recommendation that writers approach such notions from within their own geographies and languages of interest is radical and much needed. That is in essence my work, the work of a comparativist: to spread her nets of awareness as widely as possible, across different waters.

This practice that we are describing as the critical embrace of emotions often called 'negative' (we need not always use this word), this embrace of madness, for example, this generalized movement toward an awareness of death and nonbeing–these ideas are not new to the theoretical, literary and epistemic landscapes of non-Euro-US contexts. Queer theory within the Euro-US space may have discovered them now (and this 'inaugural' tone is indeed the problematic of much research in academia), but iterations of these ideas figure across languages, time, texts and contexts. As a translator, I find their most intimate translation amidst my location and historical coordinates in texts inflected with mystical ideas.

I work on the intersections of two fields: queer and gender studies and religion. Within religion, mysticism. My broad understanding is that orientations toward death and nonbeing seen in queer theoretical works such as Edelman and Love, amidst others, find their most intimate re/figuration in other contexts and texts through a recourse to mystical ideas. The languages I have in mind to suggest this are Urdu and Sindhi, the two I work in. In current research, I read an assemblage of texts from Urdu and Sindhi—queer, feminist, Marxist, modern and premodern—and trace the presence of mystical figures, tropes, ideas and discourses in them. In the remaining part of this essay, I'll attempt to read some literary objects from this assemblage to point toward the translation and re/figuration of queer and feminist notions of negativity into and as mystical metaphor elsewhere.

Within the contexts I grew up in and am most familiar with, the idea most commonly associated with a general orientation toward death, nonbeing and what I am calling negativity is the idea of *faqri fakhri*. This idea comes to us directly from Muhammad himself, who in Sufi circles is the archetypal mystical master, and it roughly translates to the sentence: 'In my poverty (*faqr*) is my pride (*fakhr*).' This idea has trickled through the composite Sufi cultures of South Asia across time, down to the present day. In what is essentially an oxymoronic statement that functions as a performative contradiction, the Prophet's wise words bring oppositions together in ways that are not common within dominant Western systems of thought and governance. These words blend joy with the affect of loss, nonbeing with feelings of jouissance, and annihilation with feelings of gnosis. The poverty (*faqr*) mentioned in these words refers to slow reduction of the ego over time, a loss which leads to feelings of nonattachment, freedom from

Plate 5: Installation view of 'Vanishing Act' from Centre A with Areez Katki's *Oneiria* panels in the foreground and Shahana Rajani's video *A cipher for the missing* in the background.

all modes of constraint and suffering, and thus ultimately joy and ecstasy.

Thus, in *Mere Khwabon ke Jazeere* (The Islands of my Dreams) (1936), a seminal text by the experimental Urdu feminist writer Hijab Imtiaz Ali, the notion of agency and freedom is derived from this particular idea of *faqri fakhri*, not from any stable language of rights or any stable regimes of the self. The speaker of this text, standing upon the shores of an island which she calls 'the island of desire,' compares her state to the impoverished state of a *faqeer*. In an initial reading, I had misread this story as a narrative of a woman's defeat. Impoverished on the island of desire, what does that mean, after all? My teacher then redirected me to the particular connotations associated with the word *faqeeri* so that I could appreciate the agency contained in it. To be impoverished on the island of desire is to effectively say: I am abandoned on the island of desire, I live on this island with reckless abandon. Loss here colludes with ideas of reckless abandon and freedom from an existing worldly order, a collusion I had failed to read by ignoring the subtle weaving of this story with Muhammad's words.

Hijab Imtiaz Ali is just one amidst many literary objects in the assemblage I am arranging in work where narrative orientations toward mystical notions of loss-as-freedom are visible, recurring, and flourishing. There are other examples. In a forthcoming essay, to add a case here, I offer a reading of the Urdu poet Hasan Mujtaba's orientations toward the Sufi mystic Sarmad Kashani (1590-1661), a strategy which allows the speaker of Mujtaba's poem to make queer declarations. Developing this example is beyond the scope of this essay; the singular example of Imtiaz Ali at any rate approximates what I am trying to say.

Imtiaz Ali's orientation toward the idea of *faqri fakhri* in *Mere Khwabon ke Jazeere* (1936) can and indeed should be read sideways, contrapuntally, and alongside ideas of negativity, death and nonbeing developed by later figures such as Lee Edelman. There are always echoes, and there are echoes of echoes. Within the queer context, our most brilliant echo is the recent book by Omar Kasmani, *Queer Companions Religion, Public Intimacy, and Saintly Affects in Pakistan* (2022), which I must mention here. This phenomenal work looks at *faqeer* subjects in the lived context of Sufi shrines in Pakistan. Omar does the important work of remaining with actual subjects and documenting real life stories; I in contrast am tracing the contours of the idea of *faqeeri* in literary and philosophical texts. As a qawwal might say, however: *hum hain aik hi suratya ki dou dou muratya* – we are the multiple manifestations of the same one. I must therefore mark here the trace of Omar's contribution to my own thinking, as I write this.

Let us now shift gears and enter the space of the Sindhi language. The poet we must think of when we enter Sindhi is, of course, the greatest poet of this language: Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai (1689-1752). A Sufi poet, Bhittai wrote about the lives of Sindhi people and interpreted their stories in the light of Sufi literary-philosophical ideas. Today, he is well-known not only for the pilgrimage thousands of followers make to his shrine every day (in Sindh, Pakistan) out

Plate 6
(pages 20-21): Shahana Rajani, A cipher for the missing, 2022 (still).
4K video with sound.
Courtesy: the artist.

Plates 7-8: Fazal Rizvi, *Chasing Shadows*, 2022 (installation views). Mixed media.
Image courtesy: S.D. Holman

Plate 8

Dear Ami,

It seems like I have always been on the run. From you. From them. From here. I write this as I am about to move away to Passu soon, a small village in the Gojal region of the north. It is really lovely there Ami.

It was 2018 when I went up north and stayed there for over two months. It was the first time ever that I had spent such a long time close to nature, and it really did something for me. This was also the year when I was super disillusioned by the art world in Pakistan and had seen some of its ugly sides, and I somehow just did not want to be part of it. It was around this time that I just took this break and went off to Shigar Valley, to run a café with some friends. And that was it.

In those two months, I realized that other ways of living and being and breathing were possible.

Yours,
Fazal.

Plate 9: Fazal Rizvi, *Chasing Shadows*, 2022. Close-up of one of the letters from the installation. Courtesy: the artist.

of devotion, but also for what are popularly remembered as his long poems about the 'sat surmiyun' (the seven warrior women of Sindh). Bhittai's choice to locate the ideal Sufi subject within the female subject is well-known and unique; the figure I am interested in reading here is Marvi, one of these seven women that Bhittai celebrated in his verses. A real person at least three centuries removed from Bhittai, Marvi was a nomad from the deserts of Thar, Sindh, during the Soomra Dynasty (1026-1440), a late medieval dynasty that ruled this region. Offered palatial life by the tyrant ruler of this kingdom, Omar, the historical Marvi refuses to settle with him and give up her nomadic ways. In Marvi, Bhittai reconstructs this historical legend in and as poetry. Marvi and nomadic life figure here as the unruly Sufi principle that mere reason, represented here by Omar and palatial life, tries to contain but cannot.

Stunning metaphors abound, as the concrete of the palace walls 'carve rooms inside Marvi's flesh'; Marvi, on the other hand, compares her hair to the 'unruly roots of the trees of Malir,' which she tells Omar she will never 'oil with the fragrances' he has to offer her. Concrete, stone, and rooms thus emerge as concept-metaphors for containment and colonization; the Sufi's own body in contrast emerges as the unruly body of the earth and the desert: each organ a tree, each blood vessel a root or a leaf. By refusing 'the good life' within the palace walls and choosing instead a 'backward', excessive, and unruly nomadic life, Marvi's 'madness' finds an echo in Heather Love's call that we embrace the chaotic terrains of the soul, away from mainstream subject-positions that power structures try to contain us in everyday. We must feel backwards with Marvi, backwards into the desert and into the vast roots of the earth.

I must also mention two artists who were part of the exhibition: Omer Wasim and Shahana Rajani, who have been part of the life of my mind in ways that I cannot describe here. When I see Shahana's phenomenal video work in this exhibition which traces the practice of *massad* whereby the date palm tree is invoked in and as a mode of critique, I think back to memories of reading Marvi's transgression against Omar, through her communion with the trees of the desert. When I read Omer's extraordinary vision, his rare manner of staging the dialectic and tension between stability and flux through the interplay of concrete and plant life in his work, I hear another echo that I want to hold inside my ears.

The reason I am mentioning these works here is not to offer my readings; my readings do not matter; it is only in fact to suggest that there is nothing exceptional about my own readings of figures such as Imtiaz Ali and Bhittai, across Urdu and Sindhi. Throughout South Asia, in Pakistan and elsewhere, artists and writers and poets are recoursing to mystical spaces. I am often thinking about the parallels in our lives and practices. Has the same *'ishq* claimed us all? I trace our collective orientations toward death and nonbeing. I pray that against the violence of the world, may we vanish together.

Plate 10: Andrew McPhail, *FUCK IT*, 2019/2020. Sequins and thread on bed sheet.

Queer Religiously

by Omar Kasmani

Do you identify as Muslim? M's question didn't trigger me, it was more the questioning itself that did. I now know and for the better, that in posing the question my German lover was in fact seeking a mirror for his own relationship to Catholicism. Still, in the moment it felt much too close to the umpteen occasions where romantic evenings in Berlin had unwittingly turned into a defense of Islam, or the difficult heritage White-European gays thought I ought to explain: why do Muslims hate queers? Why were women so badly treated in Islamic societies? Why can't Muslims integrate? Why the terror attacks? Underlying such proverbial interrogation was a facile but familiar assumption: queer was anathema to religion, much so to Islam. Over time, I had come to rehearse my answers. Dates felt like pages out of a script. And still, I struggled as I thought aloud in a lover's presence, the numerous ways in which my relationship to Islam was both messy and intimate. Or, that even if I no longer appealed to the identity in legal terms, I embraced it on political grounds. More critically, not adhering to Islamic precepts ostensibly did not mean that the religion has not shaped my being from inside out. In fact, I continue to draw meaning and theory from the conceptual, intellectual, affective and aesthetic reserves that Islamic life-worlds so generously offer to the queerly curious and the seeking. Such recourse to religion wasn't the same as the reactive trope that seeks to restore queer origins to pre-modern Islamic contexts, or to idealize the lost futures of a past from the perspective of a queer present. Rather, I had hoped to convey how the two notions, religion and queer, were companions, not the antagonistic rivals they were routinely made out to be. After all, my own story with queerness had unfolded parallel to my research encounters in a historical setting of religious devotion in Pakistan. Over the course of a meal, I meandered from point to point. M's frustration was becoming clear as day. Come to think of it, there was no *straight* answer to be given. How is one to recount entire histories, bitesize? What's the best casual way of telling your White-German lover that you have come into your queer self not only in metropolises—Karachi-raised, academic by way of London, Berliner-by-love—but rather more definingly through the unstraight persuasions of an ancient and multifaith place of pilgrimage?

Plate 11: Andrew McPhail, *FUCK IT*, 2019/2020 (installation view). Sequins and thread on bed sheet, 224 cm x 244 cm. Courtesy: S.D. Holman.

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'Shrines break the order of straight lines'.[1] Writing on Islamic saints and space in Cairo, Amira Mittermaier points to the imaginal ways in which shrines materialize a dialogic relation between here and 'an Elsewhere.' Saints' places, she argues, with their concentric circles of sacred affect, but also as doorways to other realms, excite and uphold a non-linear spatial arrangement 'counter to the checkerboard order of modernity'.[2] Religion's imaginally-driven challenges to straight conceptions of spatiality, to stay true to Mittermaier's framework of saintly dreams, hang not so much on the politics of resistance as they point to the presence of 'an alternative but not purposely contrary space' within a hegemonic order.[3] A comparable challenge to linearity prevails in Anand V. Taneja's rendering of Delhi's saintly ecologies.[4] Here, not just saints but the co-presence of Islamic djinns, Hindu deities, anonymous spirits, and talking animals disrupt neat conceptions of historical time and religious belonging in a postcolonial setting. In my own work on a pilgrimage town in Pakistan, I have described Islamic saints as 'queer companions', not as mere provocation, but to bring home the greater point that affective intimacies with saintly beings, figures, and places bear affordances that include departures from established religious lines and social norms. In fact, religious deviance, unstraight modes of piety and crooked orientations to society are part of the ways in which Muslim mystics have historically expressed their inclinations towards the divine. They sustain my interest in the saintly modes and religious means by which a certain unstraightness coheres in the present across realms of the divine, the mundane and the queer. This refers, in particular, to the capacity of enshrined holy figures to alter our relations with history as well as preserve possibilities of staying temporally aslant to the contemporary.

If one is to go by the conviction that queer ordinarily lurks through religious ecologies and lifeworlds, how might we then learn to read queer religiously? Can religious concepts find grounding in quintessentially secular sites of queer theory, which are shaped in the first place by religion's presumed absence? How might we overcome theory's geopolitical bias that already determines why places such as Pakistan or settings like religious shrines, locations I write from, with and about, do not strike us as possible sites for queer thinking? My proposition to think *queer religiously* is about exploring whether queer theorizing can find other lives in the epistemological reserves and affective resources that religious ecologies and its plural life-worlds make available to us. 'This doesn't entail a frenzy of finding one in the other—Islamizing queer or queering Islam—but involves the intricate task of exploring a companionship such that scholars' categories, religion and queer, can remain in creative suspense or question at least their historical disinclination'.[5] So long as queer theory regards

1 Amira Mittermaier, '(Re)Imagining Space: Dreams and Saint Shrines in Egypt,' in *Dimensions of Locality: Muslim Saints, Their Place and Space*, eds. Samuli Schielke and George Stauth (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2008), 48.
2 Ibid., 49.
3 Ibid, 53.
4 Anand V. Taneja. *Jinnealogy: Time, Islam, and Ecological Thought in the Medieval Ruins of Delhi.* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press).
5 Omar Kasmani, *Queer Companions: Religion, Public Intimacy and Saintly Affects in Pakistan* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022), 28.

Plate 12: Bassem Saad, *Kink Retrograde*, 2019. HD video with sound (installation view). Courtesy: S.D. Holman.

religion as an 'elsewhere', such thinking to follow Kadji Amin,[6] is a journeying with queer to newer, surprising, or possibly unlikely locations. It warrants analytical moves whereby figurations of unstraight desire and sexual alterity are refracted through a wider social and interpretive frame, an intellectual universe, which is ready and ripe with sacred aesthetics and religious affect. Queer, so conjured, is no longer only a designator for non-normative gender and minoritized sexualities. It is additionally that device by which we are able to ask ourselves whether queer history is always only a history of queer activism—narrowly defined, gay rights and so on? Or, are there ways of thinking more capaciously, let's say a history of queerness that makes space for and is made up of other, in this case, distinctly religious ways of being unstraight in and to the world?

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Nowhere in Pakistan is the sacred as unstraight as it is in Sehwan. This is a formerly Shivaite and now Sufi site of pilgrimage on the Indus River, whose old-world deities and demons crossfade with their Islamic contemporaries. It is home to the shrine of Pakistan's most beloved figure of devotion. Lal Shahbaz Qalandar straddles multiple histories and identities, none of which sit straight with the modern nation-state's singular or exclusive Islamic pasts: an ancient river deity who rode on fish; a Shi'i proselytizer of the thirteenth century; an awaited re-incarnate for the Hindus; a wandering antinomian Sufi who rose to the skies in the form of a falcon.

When I first arrived in the town, it was at the tail end of a 2-year program in Muslim Cultures in London and 3 years after I had quit a 5-year career in architecture. A decade-long unraveling ensued: life, relationships, sexuality, faith—things I knew or as I knew them—were thrown up in the air. I have spent the last twelve years departing and arriving in Sehwan, encountering it up close, writing about it from afar, but also negotiating that distance. Long before I had found companions in queer and affect theory, it was in Sehwan and in the company of ascetics (fakirs) that I would first come to recognize a mode of queerness that was non-metropolitan and more-than-secular, tied to forms of religious-social deviance trafficking across Hindu and Islamic traditions. One among several types of ascetics in the greater South Asian Sufi tradition, fakirs were remarkable individuals: women, men and gender-variant persons who abandoned home, questioned inherited lines, and rejected reproductive economies of family and work simply in order to be close to Islamic saints and their shrines in Pakistan. More remarkable was the insight that saints were allies of some kind, known for returning such unstraight affections. It was through the turbulent accounts of ascetic lives and saintly loves that I also started to make sense of my own wayfaring against settled relationships, work, and faith. In sharing time and space with fakirs, I understood that giving up a secure course in life and taking on new ones invariably involves pursuing an evading

6 Kadji Amin, *Disturbing Attachments: Genet, Modern Pederasty, and Queer History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 183.

Plates 13-16: Bassem Saad, *Kink Retrograde*, 2019 (stills). HD video with sound. Courtesy: the artist.

Plates 17-19:
Renuka Rajiv, *ghosts in the backseat/ exile in the corner*, 2022. Fabric, thread, buttons, 126 cm x 57cm (each). Courtesy: the artist.

cluster of promises; that such moving forward against conditions of the present meant that certain destinations will invariably fall behind; or that arriving takes a brush with uncertainty, ambivalence, and a fear of the unknown. These are also learnings, beyond religious lives, that carry value for queer thinkers. As scholars, we might simply ask what futures are made possible when we forsake usual parameters (of disciplines) or venture beyond inherited lines (of theory). We already know from Sara Ahmed that 'following lines also involves forms of social investment,' or that investments 'promise return (if we follow this line, then "this" will follow)'.[7] Giving up lines of social investment for fakirs—or analytical habits, theoretical genealogies, and epistemological economies in the case of us scholars—risky as it is, may then also mean that new or other futures will appear on the horizon. But are we willing to forsake our old persuasions in hope of new ones?

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I began this reflection with a scene of intimate frustration. I admit to being triggered by a lover's quotidian question regarding my relationship to Islam. I also describe my lover's exasperation with my longwinded answers. The point is interrogative methods, or colonial ways of comprehending the other, even a desire for straight answers can come to impair intimacy's otherwise queer unfolding. Companionship, the affective form and analytical figure that I'm proposing in its stead, demands of us that we keep our faith in unstraight ways of knowing, or at times, in not knowing at all; that we embrace companionable modes of understanding that arrive piecemeal in intimacy's wake. In fact, the intellectual impulse to think queer religiously hangs on a conscientious thinking against easy antagonisms. It is neither about rehabilitating queer in religious tradition nor is it an anachronistic move to repair histories. It is not satisfied by queer-jacketing religion either, that is, overreading scripture or tailoring religious life-worlds to a queer cut of our choice. In fact, journeying with queer is not about transplanting it elsewhere, rather, it is an epistemological moving with queer. The task of conjuring up broader histories of queer or imagining it from less-likely, possibly alternate universes must ensure that queer remains in the present, 'never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from prior usage'.[8] Doing queer religiously then is a call to call out theory's settled habits and established persuasions, an attempt to keep queer politically exigent, exciting. It is as much a search for other genealogies as it is an invitation to veer off the straight of queer.

7 Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 17.
8 Judith Butler, *'Critically Queer,' GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1, no. 1 (1993): 19.

Plate 20: Sharlene Bamboat, *If From Every Tongue it Drips*, 2021 (installation view). Video with sound. Courtesy: S.D. Holman.

Clocks

by Sadia Khatri

It took me two weeks to finally mention the pandemic in my journal. Guiltily, out of an obligation to record the world. ‘By the way, Covid,’ the entry on March 10 begins. ‘We’ve been under curfew for three days.’

My therapist asked me if I was okay, whether I was panicking for the health of loved ones. My mom has sent over gloves and masks, I told her, plus a care package with tea and daal and lavender disinfectant, and I have thoroughly wiped down everything. ‘But are you worried?’ she asked. Maybe I was in some kind of floating shock, but I had no real feelings about the pandemic. I just had to make sure I got the cat’s food before 5 pm, otherwise things were the same. People were putting themselves in voluntary lockdown, cancelling their social lives, halting work, not going out anymore. I really didn’t feel all that different. I’d been living like this for months.

The first box I opened was full of storybooks Sohrab used for his philosophy of children class. There was one by Leo Lioni about a little mouse called Frederick that I love. While other mice gather grain and pine nuts for the winter months, Frederick spends his time daydreaming, gathering colours and words. He’s berated for not helping out; what the mice really need are pine nuts, not poems. Frederick doesn’t care and does his thing. Winter comes and lasts longer than usual, and the mice run out of food. They couldn’t have planned for this. Cold and unhappy, they turn to Frederick now that there is nothing left to do, and the poet-mouse emerges with his poems, ready to share. The mice listen and sigh and stand corrected—poetry isn’t what they *thought* they needed—it doesn’t solve anyone’s hunger, but they can’t deny they all feel a little warmer.

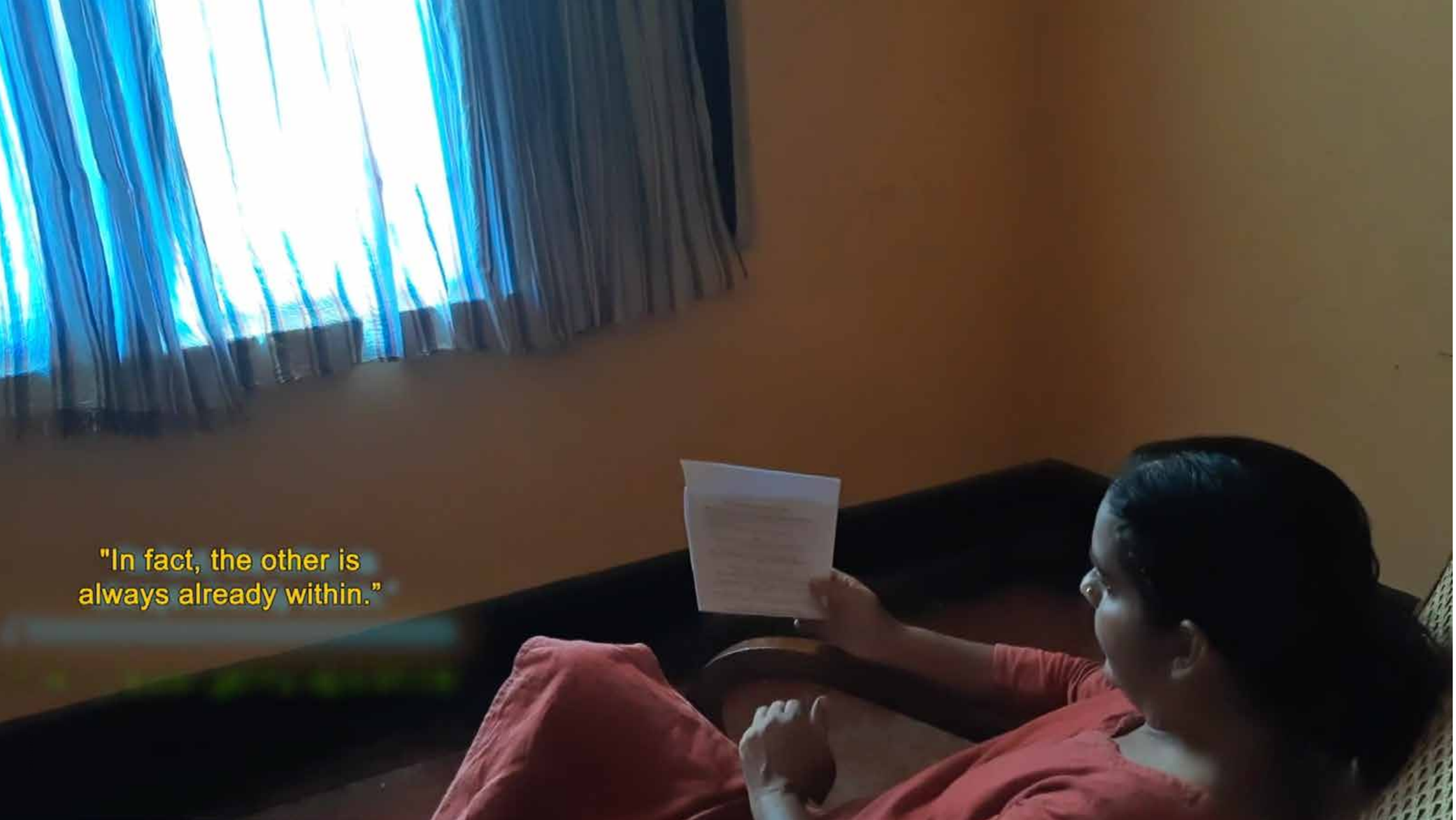

Plate 21:
Sharlene Bamboat, *If From Every Tongue it Drips*, 2021 (still). Video with sound. Courtesy: the artist.

Plate 22: Imaad Majeed, *the impossibility of leaving /the possibility of coming out*, 2022 (installation view). Poetry film. Image courtesy: S.D. Holman.

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I couldn't stop thinking about the mice. What is it that I thought I needed, and what was I turning to? And after Frederik was done reading his poems, how *did* they survive without what they knew to be essential? And would they have listened to Frederick's poems, if they hadn't first run out of food? What did I have to run out of, or maybe I had to run away from.

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'Good!' a friend said. 'When you lose a home that is a person, you need to find a new home.' And what better than this, a room of my own. Ridiculous now that I could stand in a balcony that was mine, watch light fall on a desk where I would not be interrupted, leave books around and trust they wouldn't be moved. It was too unreal, someone else's life. What was I to do with it. I was crying and sleeping my days away, depressed and inconsolable. Friends trickled in and out, assuring me I'd get over this whole thing soon enough, reminding me I was finally unaccounted for and unaccountable, answerable to no one, I wasn't trapped, I was *free*. Put all your energy into the space, they encouraged me, think about how you can nurture it. Yellow curtains, I answered mechanically, and a low wooden table. It's been three months and I've gotten neither.

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That was before Covid. Since January, I have been on what I jokingly call a grief-lockdown. I stayed indoors for days, until I ran out of cigarettes or cat food. Aside from the weekly trek for therapy, I hardly left the nieghbourhood, had no desire to. The city felt garish and open, too much stimuli. I was too exposed, and terrified I'd run into my ex. Staying in felt safest. Sleeping, even more. Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* had convinced me that sentencing myself to a retreat might not be such a terrible idea. A year of this, and I'd emerge fully healed and recovered, ready to face life.

Because really, I wasn't facing much. Privilege and dissociation—a special combination that allowed me to cancel everything. I withdrew from professional commitments, missed deadlines, stopped responding to editors. There were enough apartment related errands to ensure I couldn't completely check out, and a cat to take care of, but most of my awake hours I did nothing. Sat and watched the light, moved my books around, let my cat lick me. Friends came and maybe we'd cook, but mostly I'd unload, go over everything again, what happened, and why, and what was I to do with myself. I was stuck, unable to move past, had lost interest in things. Unaccountable and unaccounted for, I really didn't know how to answer to myself.

When rejections came from writing residencies, I felt nothing. Meanwhile the smallest things sent me reeling. Getting a new book. Recognizing a warbler from its sound. Chai overspilling on the stove. I was smoking myself to a dreg, measuring days from cigarette to cigarette, dreading sleep, whether it would come, and in what shape. Sometimes it came after sunset, and I woke up at 2 am. Other days I'd be up past twenty

Plates 23-24: Imaad Majeed, *the impossibility of leaving /the possibility of coming out*, 2022 (still). Poetry film. Stills courtesy: Adwait Singh.

four hours, mind running, running, maniacally watching the changing colours in the strip of sky visible from my balcony. What I preferred were whole-day sleeping marathons, how they let me erase time. But most of all I craved consistency, and felt worse each time I failed to find it.

'Spend days like you have no clocks,' my friend advised. 'Wake up when you want, sleep when you want. What does it matter.'

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Smart advice; it helped me befriend the night and fall in love with the morning. All expectations off the table, because really I wasn't meeting them anyway, now I often began my day in the quietest hours of morning without judging myself. The world had its clocks, I had mine. I woke at 2 am, put on that lonely cup of chai, forced myself to move. While the city slept and recovered, I was engaging in a different recovery: gathering the things I loved back into my life. Distracted and haphazard, as much as I could manage each day. Journalling, language practice, reading. Sometimes I just listened to music and smoked. And if I did nothing and cried, that was fine too, the main thing was to treat it as a regular day, keep moving, stay awake. There was sunrise to look forward to, some release there, my strip of sky breathing colour just in case I was worried I'd exhausted everything.

One morning went so spectacularly shit, I decided to go outside to see the sunrise. I hadn't stepped out since January on just a *whim*. The dhabawala was also surprised to see me. 'You're going to have tea here?' Two months I had been living in this lane, getting chai and kahva delivered through Abdul bhai, I'd never actually sat there and had tea. I can't sleep, I told him, and placed the chair where I could watch street and horizon both; 7 am and just me and my grief and a bewildered chaiwala. The sky opened. My heart did not, so I focused on my senses, bringing my attention to the things around me. Slowly, slowly. The meat shop shutters clanging open. Fresh smells from a truck heaving in vegetables. The creak of a pipe being dislodged from a Suzuki for the morning water refill.

It was absurd. That the world could carry on with its clocks while mine had ruptured.

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In my early days of abandoning clocks, I met Hijrat. It was another sunrise morning at the dhaba. 'God knows why my parents thought of this stupid name,' he said. 'You've definitely met other Sadias in your life, right? Everyone meets someone who shares their name. Only I've never met another Hijrat.' In fact he was the only Hijrat I met, and the only person in the world who, three minutes into our conversation, tried to convince me to quit writing. I came back, not despirited at all, but laughing, and thinking fondly of the moment of our encounter. I was pulling a chair to place it at the spot from where I liked to watch the waking street, when Hijrat appeared with a friend and ordered chai as well. In a moment of unintended coordination, we placed our chairs in alignment, a neat semi-circle. One of those city moments I live for.

Plate 25: Imaad Majeed, *the impossibility of leaving /the possibility of coming out*, 2022 (still). Poetry film. Image courtesy: Adwait Singh.

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I responded to other bad nights by taking my cycle out at sunrise. I have never known myself to be a morning person so there was a strange curiosity to these ventures, like watching myself to see what I might do next. Inwardly, I sent a prayer to my ex and thanked his grief—it was changing my relationship with mornings, with cycling, which was starting to feel spiritual, turning into the highlight of my day. I don't know how to explain it, wary of giving definite language to an experience I still feel at the helm of. Something about the steady hum you reach when your body syncs with wheels. The sky lifting above the ocean. One day, near sea-view, light rain on my back, except it wasn't rain, but sea-spray. Sea-spray! It tickles you like that only because of the speed of the bicycle. I started crying. All my life in Karachi, and I'd never felt the sea on my skin like *this*.

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Wandering around the neighbourhood one day—I still didn't go beyond these cosy streets—I found a thrift shop. Bought mugs and ashtrays and tea-cups and frames to bring back and pace in the apartment I was slowly furnishing with things that were mine. Curtains I still had not gotten, and may-be didn't want to. They would block my full clear view of the play unfolding on the opposite building, the one I could tune into anytime. The pigeons hopping mad all day, chasing each other in turns, the mynahs' ballet on the electric wires. I was slowly getting to know the human characters, too. Those were two *different* women in that kitchen window, one who leaned out to dump garbage and yell instructions at someone named Ali, who smiled at me if our eyes met in the mornings. The other, younger, liked to hang by the window when talking on the phone. A boy appeared intermittently in the middle window to spit out paan. On the left, a mid-dle-aged guy who often had friends over, we heard laughter from the room.

Between these people and Hijrat and Abdul bhai and Muneer at the superstore who apologized whenever they ran out of pink cake, I was getting to know a whole new range of people in my life. And all strangers, no trouble, I'd never have to know them well. It was good to fill life with strangers, with distance.

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Strange, distance, how it's collapsed. The few friends who came over don't anymore, but more are available any minute, on House Party, Zoom, Instagram, Twitter. I always thought of dystopia as something that would stand out, but perhaps the most dystopian thing about dystopia is how easily and unthinkingly we get absorbed into the new normal. Normal for all interactions to have moved online, as if the world were always primed for it. I haven't seen Hijrat or Abdul bhai in weeks. Last month I was courting a mad sleeping cycle, now I am virtually accompanying my friend in New York down his street when he goes to buy cigarettes, I'm in his pocket and can see the American sky.

Plate 26: Installation view of 'Vanishing Act' from SUM Gallery with Imaad Majeed's poetry film on the left, Sunil Gupta's prints in the middle and Charan Singh's video on the right. Courtesy: S.D. Holman.

When I leave the house, I diligently put on a mask and wear gloves, out on the street I gauge people's expressions through their eyes. A police van pulls in at 5 pm to force shutters down, I don't bat an eyelid. Cycling in the evenings, I feel less unsafe because there are so many cops. No long empty stretches to pass through worrying about stalkers. Feeling grateful for surveillance. Dystopia.

At home, logged onto video calls all the time. A friend and I hang out for hours, playing songs in turn, a listening party across oceans as we do our own thing. Normal for time zones and borders to not matter in the same way anymore, and somehow reveal they never did.

'For the first time,' my friend says, 'It feels like external reality is matching internal reality.'

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On the day curfew was announced, this same friend came over at 8 pm and woke me up. I'm locking down with you, she said, matter-of-factly. And I remember thinking, not about the pandemic, or about the coming deaths that had necessitated cities to shut down, but most selfishly: how grateful I was for love, of any kind, to show up, to choose to shut itself down with you.

Now she wouldn't have to go home, I wouldn't have to wait another day to see her. The comfort helps, the physical presence, the intimacy on hand. To take love for granted like this. We're finding new rhythms to our friendship. Putting on chai for the other without asking, knowing when it's time for silence. We read poetry, cook, listen to music, do nothing.

Sign up for courses, all these sudden free classes. On the one hand the world shutting down, on the other, new imaginations of generosity. Libraries making books available online, JStor releasing its archives. Grander acts of kindness too; through the internet, people offering to run errands for elders, giving free services in exchange for donations for Corona. Then smaller joys, Instagram abundant with live streams: Ali Sethi everyday, Shilpa Rao on Rekhta, Bieber when he feels like. Since curfew I have joined two writing circles and one book club, War and Peace with #TolstoyTogether.

Days move easy and open in our cocoon of comfort and privilege. We're reminded of Corona every now and then, but it seems to have little bearing on our bubbled lives. Sometimes we watch our neighbours and the pigeons, wonder how they're dealing. The woman at the window always got her vegetables delivered, but now everyone's followed suit. The man appears more and more, looking bored, tired. We make up stories about their lives and how they might have changed. His friends have stopped coming over, my friend reasons, they played board games together. That's why he's restless and coming to the window so often.

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This bit from Jenny Offill's 'Weather': 'My #1 fear is the acceleration of days. No such thing supposedly, but I swear I can feel it.'

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Underlying panic at the store the other day. Not more crowded than before Covid, but the

Plate 27: Elektra KB, STRIKE: A Popular Uprising, 2022 (stills). Video with sound. Courtesy: the artist.

shelves messier and everyone hurried and frenzied. Main uncle at the counter urging the packaging guy to move faster, handling two bills simultaneously though really there's no reason to, there's no line. When I ask him if they have brown eggs as I usually do, he's exasperated. 'I don't know bhai, just whatever is there is there!' While I'm still going around picking things he yells, 'I'LL BE WITH YOU IN A MINUTE!' and I hear it in all caps, and I haven't even said anything. Things to note: Things to note; they're out of Twix, Dayfresh, Gold Leaf whites. I ask a helper if he can bring sugar from upstairs. 'I just can't, right now,' he pants, then collapses, hands on knees. 'I just can't, I am done, can everyone WAIT!'

Take a moment and breathe, I tell him. Do you want a glass of water?

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Or maybe this is the dystopian part: I wake up, log on. Check the numbers. Next day, they've doubled. It doesn't shake me. I obsessively keep reporting statistics and updates to my friend. Really I'm hoping to make myself feel something. London's in lockdown till end of May, I tell her, New Zealand has frozen rent. But the facts feel like dead information even as I'm saying it, no matter how much I learn, I can't get an emotional reaction. Maybe all this is too much and my body doesn't have the room to deal with pandemic-level philosophical self-investigations. In any case, how do body and mind absorb a change so rapid, what is the way to comprehend something that's accelerating at this pace? And with such strange, surreal developments. In Russia, I learn on Twitter, lions are released on the streets to force people to stay in. Somewhere in America, Penguins are allowed to roam free in the zoo since there are no visitors. The world is a novel writing itself. In India, Modi asking people to bang utensils in their balconies at the same time everyday to create a frequency that will fight the Corona.

So much upturning, I think maybe my emotions will magically stop following their tired tracks too. Anything is possible. But then the Russia lions news turns out to be fake, and I realize no, everything is not actually possible. People will believe anything. The novel we will have to write ourselves.

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There is what you *should* do about a situation, and how you actually feel. I *should* join my friends in organizing drives. I *should* get myself together and write. I *should* just get over my ex and move on with my life.

It's not that hard. People deal with worse all the time. People, in the background, are.

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Then are hours when dystopia looks kinder than I'd imagined. Evenings out cycling, the city is a version of the one I know, but brighter, less hostile. The whole stretch along the sea view, people walking, jogging, cycling, skipping. Like some beach town in another country, my friend notes. And if I crop out the policemen, the landscape doesn't look so gendered either. There are aunties laughing as they jog together,

Plate 28:
Elektra KB, *STRIKE: A Popular Uprising*, 2022 (stills). Video with sound. Courtesy: the artist.

Plate 29: Elektra KB, *No SMILES (Simplified molecular-input line-entry system) Yet (Crip Lullaby)*, 2020 (installation view). Single-channel video with ASMR sound. Courtesy: S.D. Holman.

women exercising and doing yoga, little girls leaping with dogs. You'd almost believe the chaar-deevari was an outdated concept here.

The sea it somehow looks cleaner, and I'm not sure if I'm just listening harder, I swear the birds have gotten louder.

One morning a policeman stops me cycling at night, and I momentarily panic, sure I've done something wrong, but he yells, 'Aap ne helmet aur mask donon pehnay hain! GOOD JOB!' and thumbs ups away.

Terrifying also, this ability to romanticize the city when deaths are piling everywhere.

///

These lines by Li-Young Lee which I cannot get out of my head: 'There are days we live / as if death were nowhere / in the background.' In the poem, living without death in the background has to do with dwelling in joy, 'from joy / to joy to joy, from wing to wing.' I kept these lines close as intention and aspiration, to live life paying attention to such a spirit of joy, but these days when I think about it, I feel guilty.

Is it fair to tend to what I owe to myself, before I look at what I owe the world?

Not fair, you could say, to make this distinction.

///

In astrology circles, my sister tells me, this year is huge. Saturn's wrecking the heavens, creating a lot of tumult in the skies. The prediction being that a major event is unfolding, and the human species is not going to come out of this experience the same. Apparently, this big shift will have something to do with our comprehension of time.

Already everyone has been talking about clocks. No Zoom catch-up call goes without addressing three things: how time is spent (either relentless productivity or passionate laziness); what we think is going to happen to the world once we're out of lockdown (anarchy, upheaval, back to the same); and how slowly everyone is losing their mind. The reasons vary: Covid is getting too much, they're worried and troubled, this is worse than the Spanish plague, staying in is taking a toll. I can't relate, still can't register involvement or culpability. Even the guilt on some level feels manufactured. Nor can I compare my self-imposed lockdown to the pandemic shutdown. When I decided to stay in, I had the comfort of knowing that the world was out there, I would come out whenever I was ready.

But the world we will collectively walk back into, now, is both uncertain and unknown. And it cannot be the same as before, whether you believe in astrology or not. Something rewires deep when clocks rupture, when their unthinkingness is seen. One doesn't need a collective upheaval to know that; daily we survive and swallow small deaths, shift with them. Changing habits and people and places. We know it intuitively.

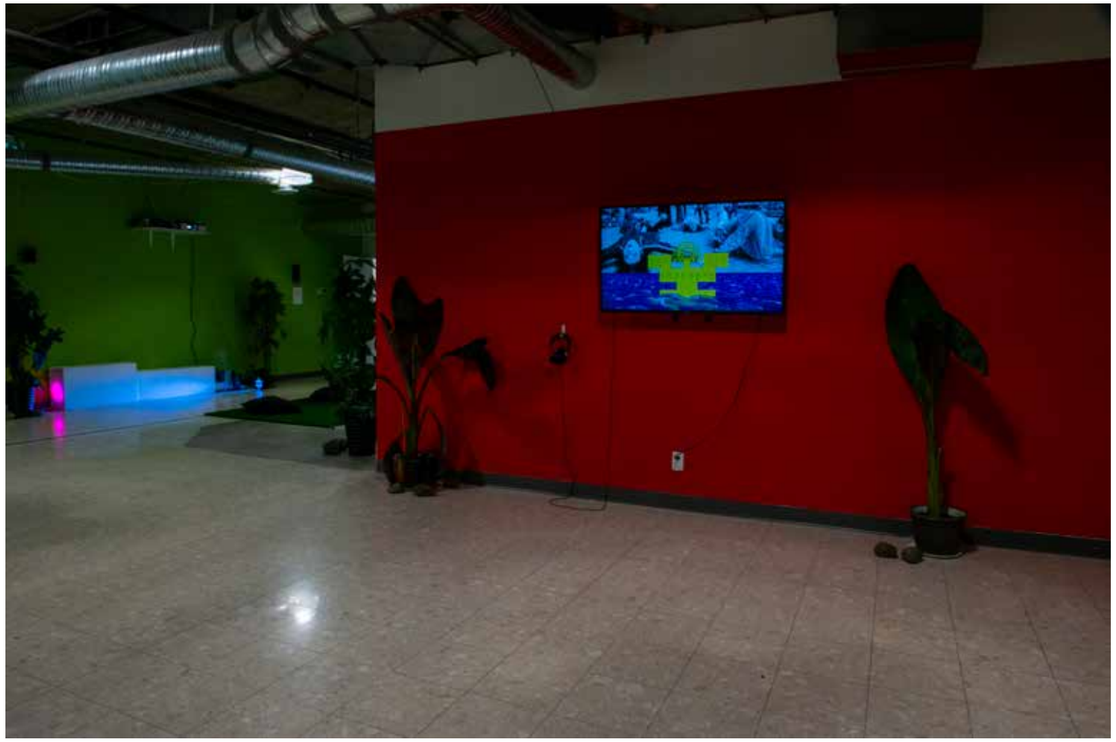

Plate 30: Elektra KB, *STRIKE: A Popular Uprising*, 2022 (installation view). Video with sound. Courtesy: S.D. Holman.

But maybe there is a difference between choosing to go inward to introspect, and being thrust there. What happens when the thrusting is not a private, interior storm, but a shared, global spectacle? A collective sentence on the world's body and psyche? How do we make sense of something like that?

///

Leo Tolstoy on clocks: 'As in the mechanism of a clock, so also in the mechanism of military action, the movement once given is just as irrepressible until the final results, and just as indifferently motionless are the parts of the mechanism not yet involved in the action even in a moment before movement is transmitted to them. Wheels whizz on their axles, cogs catch, fast-spinning pulleys whirr, yet the neighbouring wheel is as calm and immobile; but a moment comes—the lever catches, and, obedient to its movement, the wheel creaks, turning, and merges into one movement with the whole, the result and purpose of which are incomprehensible to it.'

///

This time is a suspension, a friend says, and curfew sure, but not a trap at all. Whole weeks of pause, suspension, rest. RESET! What will we re-imagine and re-make? That's what I am thinking about.

What I'm thinking about: What is it that we think we need, and what is it that we turn to?

///

In that journal entry where I first mentioned Covid, I only wrote a paragraph about it, then returned to regular programming: thoughts on heartbreak, on the light in the apartment that day, *salty* and cool, how maybe it is steadily healing me, how a mynah's feet look like tiny tree barks, drained of brown. How I'm thinking about the architect who designed this space with blessed, well-positioned openings that allow air to flow all day and you can hear the city as long as you're present and paying attention, and you never really have to believe you're shut inside.

///

How do we emerge from any rupture? The word emerge—bring forth, bring to light—comes from the Latin emergere, *e* meaning 'out, forth' and *merger* meaning 'to dip'. Like rising from a liquid by mastering buoyancy. Frederick emerged with poems because he dipped inward, sank into light and colours and poetry. What are we sinking into, when we allow ouselves to at all?

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This essay was first published in *Dawn's EOS*, in April 2020. It also appears in the anthology *Narrating Pakistan* (2023).

Plate 31: Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz, *Toxic*, 2012 (installation view). Super 16mm / HD film. Performance: Ginger Brooks Takahashi and Werner Hirsch. Courtesy: S.D. Holman.

Of Love and Blight

by Adwait Singh

This text attempts to situate the unassuming backdoor to apocalypse that I hope, nonetheless, would convey the expanse of its edifice and grounds. The apocalypse that I paint here is not some epic end-of-the-world scenario from science fiction, spectacular and conclusive, or a metaphysical conception of doomsday that signals the end of time. Instead, apocalypse signifies to me something far more banal, familiar even. It's a recurring fact of day-to-day existence, a damp that imperceptibly seeps through one's subjectivity, and a slow poison that can terminate a world just as surely. Like a set of Matryoshka dolls, this apocalypse nests within and touches other apocalypses. It can resemble a heartbreak aghast at finding its seclusion breached by a global health crisis.[1] It can also resemble private blues touched off by discriminations that are systemic.[2]

Sometime ago, this apocalypse caught up to me in the little hollow I had dug out for myself within the heath of straight time. My refuge revealed a two-storey house that sat leaning against a hill, caressing with its weary sighs the sea of grass that sprawled before it. Its stony facade was relieved by a number of arched windows, portals that were habitually plied by a clowder of cats. When it hailed one afternoon they were nowhere

1 This convergence of apocalypse is explored in Sadia Khatri's essay 'Clocks' carried in this publication.
2 See Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Duke University Press: Durham & London, 2012).

Plate 32:
Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz, *Toxic*, 2012 (still). Super 16mm / HD film. Performance: Ginger Brooks Takahashi and Werner Hirsch. Courtesy: the artists. Performance: Ginger Brooks Takahashi and Werner Hirsch. Courtesy: S.D. Holman.

Plates 33-34:
Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz, *Toxic*, 2012 (stills). Super 16mm / HD film. Performance: Ginger Brooks Takahashi and Werner Hirsch. Courtesy: the artists. Performance: Ginger Brooks Takahashi and Werner Hirsch. Courtesy: S.D. Holman.

to be found, not even the curious one with a monkey face. I scooped up a fresh hailstone that had skidded onto our balcony like a messenger god who having delivered its tidings retreated behind the gentle numbness pooling within my palm. Momentarily, my eyes scanned the horizon, striving to pierce the haze beyond which stretched a warzone. Then withdrawing back to our two-bedroom apartment, I plopped into my bed, wallowing in my own vaulted doom. Having saturated the room, my doom spread through the ceiling to enfold the Chechen family who lived on the second storey. Swirling like a dervish, it danced itself out. Then reluctantly, it shrank behind the cracks in the walls to recoup. Freed from its delirium, I turned to face the love that lay in the cavernous chamber across from me. Two curtained windows in the conjoining wall afforded stolen glances at its sweet face, the same windows that allowed for its sun to be cut off when this love displeased me. O love, we were so close! So why did it feel like we were separated by a sea? For all your warm proximity, you might as well have been a hailstone cupped in my hand, helplessly vanishing through my fingers.

Now lest we mistake the axe for the executioner, I'd hasten to clarify that the axe in question is equally helpless in the face of the attrition that I am reporting, and in fact, represents to me a source of salvation just out of reach, a point that we shall return to towards the end. No, the rot eating away at my world is something else entirely, subtending and punctuating individual catastrophes. Nor is the site of execution to blame, having been sanctified by the (im)possibility that it came to house however briefly. It is at this point that we must release this metaphor from its outgrown abode and back into the ether wherefrom it was conjured.

The apocalyptic that I am at pains to name is to be sought within the broad umbrella of socio-legal conventions that denies the sun to my love, keeping it from fruition. The hook that pulls me by the jowl mercilessly towards cataclysm goes well beyond the house, the boy, or for that matter, beyond other houses and boys. The houses and the boys merely denote the idols that this apocalypse reigns from. Shatter one and it will promptly secure another. The symptoms of this self-sabotage would be familiar to anyone whose primary relationship to love is that of impossibility. For the purpose of this exegesis, this is how queer love will be appointed i.e., as a ghost of a possibility. Self-sabotage is that little foreboding, heart-sinking voice that swells into a commandment as one mentally exhausts the variations on the script, searching hopelessly

Plate 35: Vishal Jugdeo and vqueeram, *Does Your House Have Lions*, 2021 (installation view). 4K video with sound. Courtesy: S.D. Holman.

for a felicitous frame. It is the earworm that eggs one on to pull the plug on an embryonic romance, sometimes even before it can hatch. It smothers amorous hope by prognosticating a self doubled over, writhing in agony.

The herald that salts the earth of queer love is a nemesis as wily as it is cruel. Its abortive curse arrests our gaiety, contorting it into a sardonic rictus. The tithe it exacts in our love's blood is then lavished on the upkeep and advancement of re/productive futures. Like an ancient god of war, it dispenses the future from one hand whilst stealing it from the other. Remember when it washed its hands off any responsibility for unleashing the spectre of AIDS through its colonial exploits in Africa, branding it as a gay problem?[3] Once again, with COVID-19 the familiar sleight of hand sweeps the ecocidal backdrop to the pandemic under the carpet of exigency. By keeping its audience focussed on firefighting and spectacles, it eschews any serious investigation that might reveal its own hand in the disaster.[4] What hope is to be had when the deliverer himself is unmasked as the agent of apocalypse?

In 2018, Helen Hester, a founding member of the collective Laboria Cuboniks, gathered its theories of emancipatory alienation in a compendium titled *Xenofeminism*. The publication details how certain ecoactivisms pose toxicity in terms of purported queer encroachments on reprofuturity. 'Mainstream anti-toxics discourse,' Hester explains, 'then, takes a stand against a certain idea of the mutational in the name of unaltered future.'[5] Put otherwise, environmental toxicity is to be resisted not because it compromises liveability for instance, but because, and to the extent, it poses the threat of mutating or (xeno) feminising the species.[6] Hester's provocation is that this queering toxicity that can potentially disrupt the reproduction of the socio-sexual body and its structural inequities should be nurtured in the interest of emancipatory futures.[7] While embracing the mutagenic, Hester simultaneously exposes the prestidigitations through which queerness is tendered as a future-feminising corruption and scapegoated to preserve the actual agent that summons and disseminates apocalypse—the patriarchal hand of possession. Our love has known and feared its cold touch for far too long. Since the only future it can offer us is an abortive one, let's lose this strai(gh)tjacketed future once and for all!

3 See Craig Timberg and Daniel Halperin, *Tinderbox: How the West Sparked the AIDS Epidemic and How the World Can Finally Overcome It* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2012).
4 See T.J. Demon, 'The Agency of Fire: Burning Aesthetics,' in *e-flux Journal*, issue 98 (March 2019).
5 Helen Hester, *Xenofeminism* (Polity Press: Cambridge, 2018), 46.
6 Ibid., 48.
7 Ibid., 49.

Plates 36-37:
Vishal Jugdeo and vqueeram, *Does Your House Have Lions*, 2021 (stills). 4K video with sound. Courtesy: the artists and Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles.

There's a queer legend associated with River Ganga which goes back to the ancient Sanskrit epic Mahabharat. According to the legend, Shantanu, the Kuru king of Hastinapur, was strolling along the banks of the river when he encountered the goddess Ganga in human guise. Enamoured by her beauty, he asked to marry her. Ganga accepted the offer upon the condition that the king would never question her actions. One after the other, Ganga bore seven sons to the king and drowned them in short order. Bound by his vow, the king swallowed this knowledge in pained silence. But, when the eighth son was born and was about to be drowned, he could bear it no longer and confronted Ganga about this apparent cruelty. With a wry smile, Ganga announced the dissolution of their accord, but not before revealing her true identity and intentions. She explained the curse of mortality put on the eight *vasus* (attendants of lord Indra) by sage Vasishta for stealing his beloved cow, Nandini. Ganga was subsequently called upon to remit their curse and was, in fact, doing them a mercy by releasing them from the confines of embodiment at birth. The eighth son who escaped her mercy was the *vasu* who actually led the cow away and was consequently fated to live out his entire sentence.

Upon her departure, Ganga took away this son for training in statecraft, promising to bring him back to the king when the time came. True to her word, Ganga returned the son to his father when he came of age. This accursed child grew up to be the great warrior Bhishma, whose name connotes a severe vow, the vow never to bear children.

The lore of Ganga steers apocalypse towards its Greek etymological shores, remodelling it as a critical revelation. This re-signification affords one a measure of control over the relentless tug of self-sabotage by endowing the doomed lover with a vital ken. The fatal knowledge blooming inside me put my inability to carry love to term in terms of the climatic hostility to non-re/productive forms of love. Gradually, rage burned away the dross of self-pity as the truth sank in: accursed is not the womb but the world that reaps its future. With this knowledge emerged a fresh understanding of queer as a catastrophic embracing of and co-becoming with the contagion. Rising from the bog of straight expectations, queerness shone like a lotus of prodigal virtuosity. For once, the impulse to kill my darlings appeared to be something other than nihilism, an ethico-political stance against 'the infection of purity,'[8] and a radical form of conservation.

8 Hester, *Xenofeminism*.

Plates 38-39 (page 68): Aryakrishnan Ramakrishnan, *Sweet Maria Monument*, 2013 - ongoing (installation views). Mixed-media installation. Courtesy: S.D. Holman.

Greek mythology is littered with accounts of filicide that register feminist rebellion against fates issued by patriarchy. Whether undertaken out of desperation or spite, filicide in these allegories becomes a way for women to wrest the narrative and rewrite the ending on their own terms. Take for example, Procne who avenged the rape and mutilation of her unwed sister Philomela at the hands of her husband Tereus by carving up and feeding their only son Itys to him. When Tereus asks after Itys, Procne coldly replies, 'Thou hast within thee, that for which thou art asking.'[9] As the horrific import sinks in, Tereus is enraged and charges the sisters with his sword. However, before the sword could find their necks they are all turned into birds by divine intervention. Procne, transfigured into a nightingale, is left to eternally mourn the loss of their son with her haunted trills, 'Itys! Itys!'

Another myth relates the lay of the maenad Ino, who casts herself and her remaining son Melicertes into the sea in her attempt to escape her maddened husband Athamas, who has already dispatched their other child Learchus to an early death. Both Ino and Melicertes are transformed into marine divinities. In fact, the affliction of filicidal frenzy haunts this entire family of maenads. Ino's sister Agave, in a fit of Bacchic hysteria, tore her son Pentheus limb from limb with the help of her sister Autonoë. One wonders whether this murderous madness indulged by the maenads wasn't simply an expedient for flouting the oppressive social bindings placed on them by patriarchy.

The most celebrated child-killing mother from antiquity is probably Medea, who suspends her maternal instincts to sate her vengeance. The story begins when Jason casts his foreign wife Medea aside to marry Glauce, the daughter of the Corinthian king Creon. Feeling humiliated and betrayed, Medea masterfully executes her retribution by poisoning Jason's new bride and her father. Subsequently, she decides to kill her two children to protect them from a fate far worse. Traditionally, her children were believed to have been murdered by the Corinthians seeking revenge for their king. The Euripidean invention of filicide was thus calculated to minimise indemnity and offer an alternative ending to this proto-feminist protagonist. Her actions are exonerated by the fact that hers is the only filicide in Greek tragedy allowed to go unpunished.[10] Not only does Medea make it to the end of the tragedy unscathed, her escape to Athens on the chariot of Helios suggests divine approbation.

9 Publius Ovidius Naso, *The Metamorphoses of Ovid*, vol. I, book VI, fable VI, trans. Henry T. Riley (George Bell & Sons: London, 1893).
10 See the introduction in Edith Hall, *Medea: Hippolytus; Electra; Helen* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1997).

Plate 39

Plate 40: Aryakrishnan Ramakrishnan, *Sweet Maria Monument*, 2013 - ongoing. Close-up of one of the vitrines. Courtesy: S.D. Holman.

Moving from myth to reality, the motif of radical preservation, or killing as an act of kindness, can be traced in the story of Margaret Garner, a runaway slave who resorted to killing her baby daughter when slave catchers came for them. It would take Tony Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) to fully articulate the subject position and parse the complex impulses that drove this self-sabotage. In the novel, the protagonist Sethe, modelled after Garner, is visited by the ghost of her daughter, impossibly coming alive. The daughter referred to simply as Beloved, symbolises the regurgitation of a truncated future that insistently demands reprocessing and redressal. Ironically, the infanticide that will continue to haunt Sethe allows her to claim 'Mother Right,' as explained by Sharon Patricia Holland:

> Sethe establishes herself as mother when she claims the 'right' to kill—to possess this body in the literal sense of the word. She becomes a 'mother' when she kills her daughter, when the local papers recognize her as the author/mother of both the act of infanticide and the birthing of her baby.[11]

What this drastic bid to authorship underscores is how certain kinds of love can only become tenable in the fleeting moments of their desperate consigning to the past. Viewed in this light, the cold-blooded act of self-sabotage appears to be nothing less than a full-blooded claim to love. It represents a violent rejection of the calculus that differentially grants its benedictions for love across society. The transgressive care exemplified by the filicidal actions of Sethe, Medea, Agave, Autonoë, Ino, Procne, Philomela, and Ganga can guide our

11 Sharon Patricia Holland, *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity* (Duke University Press: Durham and London, 2000), 57.

Plate 41: Aryakrishnan Ramakrishnan, *Sweet Maria Monument*, 2013 - ongoing (installation view). Mixed-media installation.

own schemes to save our loves from a slavish fate. According to Hester, 'pollarding one's family tree' can 'help us rethink modes of intimacy, sociability and solidarity beyond the nexus of the nuclear family.'[12] Bloodlines thus aborted can help nurture our desires for queer kinships and relatings unchained from the hegemonies of production, reproduction, and inheritance.

For the heirs of blighted love, the future promised by heteropatriarchy represents the impassable Tartarus[13]. Instead, they turn to the past as a place for commune, care and congress. It is after all the treasured retreat of all the darlings dispatched and one that we bleed back to copiously and compulsively. With each abortion, traces of the love curtailed are left behind, errantly roaming the corridors and chambers of our bodies. Put otherwise, we remain microchimerically haunted.[14] Our subjectivities are revealed to be under mutual gestation by slurs, viruses and lovers. These toxicities intimately harboured are both a source of our empathy and our resilience. By gestating and nursing these 'superior forms of corruption'[15] our bodies can forge monstrous alliances between various agencies cast out from straight time. These monstrous becomings might be our only way to fend off the relentless assault of apocalypse. Therein lies the radicality of our non-re/productive hosting. The loves that we are forced to abort are to be found redolent between the pages of our past. Faced with a troubled future, birthing this past into the present becomes a sacred mandate, an ethical impulse and a rallying call.

In closing, I'll return to the axe that has been my salvation. Seven abortions later, as I verged on the eighth, the axe chose to kill me with kindness. And while my neck got acquainted with its terrible edge, surprised to find warmth where it expected cold steel, my sabotage flickered and fled. The apocalyptic hounds relented and fell behind for the moment, though I suspect they haven't dropped the chase altogether. My head, no longer attached to a body, is still ringing from the musical cries. Finally, a delivery to deliver the mother. The past gushing forth in sanguine streams pools around me. At last, my love has come home.

12 Hester, *Xenofeminism*, 57.
13 The carceral abyss in Greek mythology from which it is impossible to escape.
14 Microchimerism is the scientific term denoting the colonisation of the body by the DNA remains from the foetus. See Sophie Lewis, *Full Surrogacy Now: Feminism against Family* (Verso: London, 2019), 270.
15 As called for by Laboria Cuboniks' xenofeminist manifesto. https://laboriacuboniks.net/manifesto/xenofeminism-a-politics-for-alienation/ (accessed: 27 July 2024).

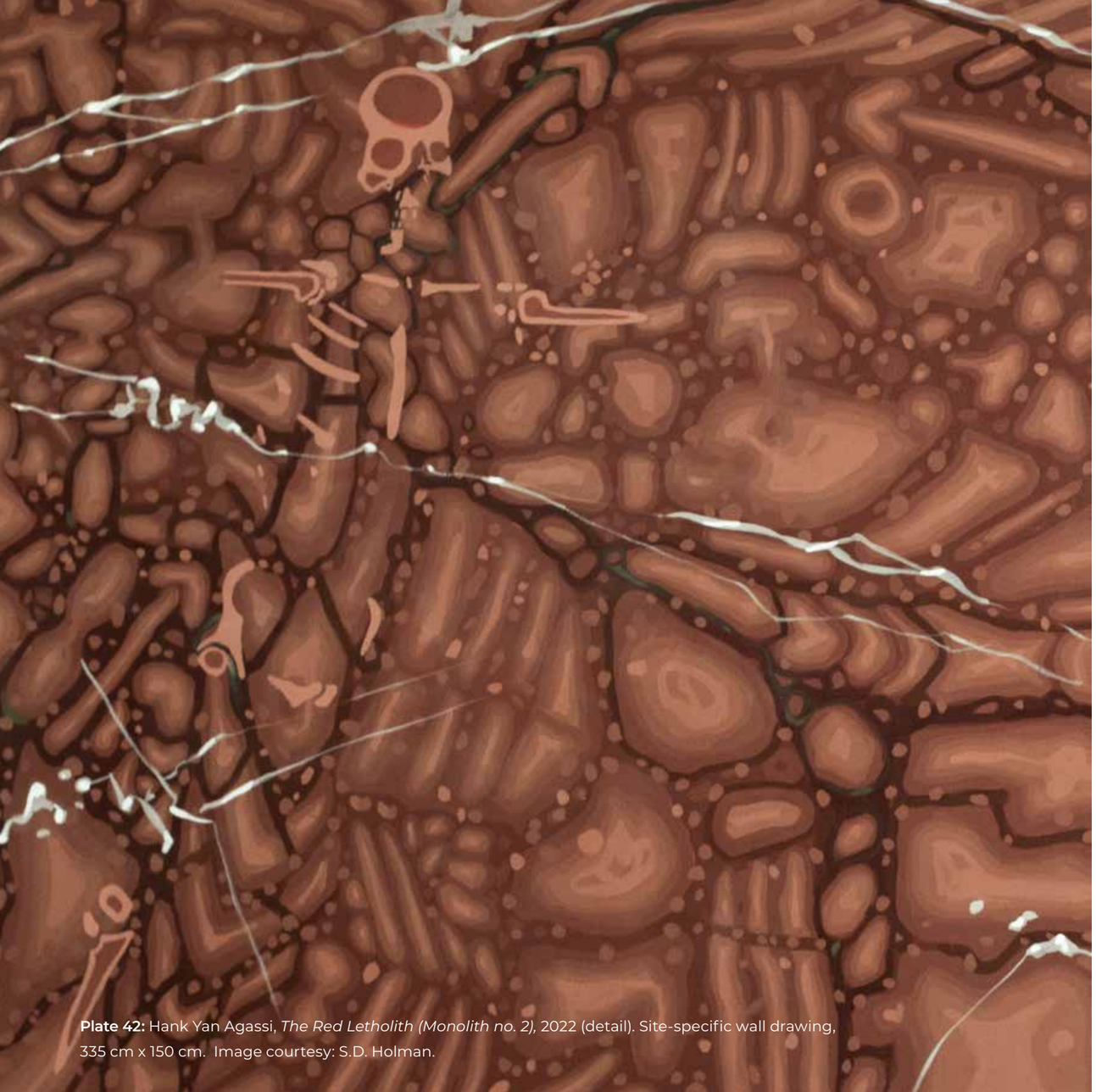

Plate 42: Hank Yan Agassi, *The Red Letholith (Monolith no. 2)*, 2022 (detail). Site-specific wall drawing, 335 cm x 150 cm. Image courtesy: S.D. Holman.

Swallowed by the Earth

by Shayan Rajani

The knowledge of death as continuity was a key resource to chart non-reproductive futures in the pre-modern world. Death was not *the* end. It marked the relocation of bodies from upon the earth to within the earth. An individual need not have descendants or successors to leave a mark upon the world beyond their death. The dead participated in life, not as ghosts or spirits, but as bodies. Burial was not the beginning of decomposition and decay, but rather held out the possibility of preservation and extension, facilitating a unique relationship to the earth. In pre-modern South Asia, there were queer paths, at a tangent to the normative commitment to extension by reproduction. Today, these stories may well spur another look at our own relationship to life and death, the past and the future, the earth and its alchemical possibilities.

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There is an odd feature of epic love stories that circulate in Pakistan. Stories of love between women and men end overwhelmingly in tragic death. But, the stories of love between men do not.

A long time ago, a girl was born to Brahmin parents who upon learning that she was fated to wed a Muslim cast her into the river. The baby was adopted by a tailor in the ancient port city of Bhanbore in Sindh. He named her Sassui after the moon. Sassui grew up to become a legendary beauty, whose reputation was carried far and wide. Upon hearing these descriptions, Punhun, the son of the ruler of Kech Makran, fell in love with Sassui. The prince went to Bhanbore and became the tailor's apprentice in the hopes of being close to her. When Sassui reciprocated his love, they married.

Plates 43-44:
Hank Yan Agassi, *The Red Letholith (Monolith no. 2),* 2022 (installation views). Site-specific wall drawing and text, 335 cm x 150 cm. Courtesy: S.D. Holman.

One night, Punhun's brothers kidnapped him to bring him back before his father. When Sassui awoke and found Punhun missing, she left her home to search for him. Distraught, she made her way barefoot through the rocky mountains between Bhanbore and Kech Makran. Along the way, a shepherd attempted to waylay her. Without refuge, Sassui appealed for divine help, whereupon the earth split open and swallowed her whole, leaving just a trace of her shawl. Punhun, who had been whisked away on swift camels, retraced his steps, but arrived too late. At Sassui's grave, the grieving Punhun was swallowed by the earth as well, uniting the lovers in death.[1]

The story of Madho and Hussain takes a different turn. Hussain was a Sufi saint living in sixteenth-century Lahore. As part of his practice, Hussain sought out actions that opened him up to reproach. He grew his hair long, wore red, danced in public, drank alcohol in the open, and he loved a man. Hussain saw Madho, a Brahmin, on the streets of Lahore and fell in love. He took to circumambulating Madho's house, where Madho lived with his wife. After sixteen years of devotion, Madho finally reciprocated his love. They spent their lives together till Hussain died. Thereafter, Madho became Hussain's deputy and spiritual successor. After living a long life, Madho was buried next to Hussain. Their two graves survive till this day in Lahore and are the center of the Madho Lal Hussain shrine complex.[2]

Other stories of love between men end similarly. Love was reciprocated and lives lived together in the case of Sarmad and Abhai Chand, and Qadir Bakhsh Bedil and Faqir Ghulam Muhammad. Their love, while marked as reproachful, incurred no social sanctions. Nor did it cause a tragic ending.[3]

For a time, I wondered whether the unsanctioned love of women was more dangerous than the unsanctioned love of men in pre-modern South Asia. For women to love across caste, religious, or community lines, may well have threatened political order in north India, which, since the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, depended upon the control and exchange of women to facilitate alliances and consolidate power.[4]

However, there is more that joins the stories of Sassui-Punhun and Madho-Hussain. In both cases, the lovers spent some years of their lives together and some years apart. Yet, the lovers were reunited in death. I do not mean that the lovers reunited in the spirit world or the Hereafter, but rather that they were united bodily within the earth that claimed them. Sassui and Punhun shared a grave, while Madho and Hussain were buried side by side. The description of tragedy for Sassui and Punhun can only be sustained if one believes that their existence terminates with death.

1 Story from the eighteenth-century Persian history, *Tuhfat al Kiram*. Qani, *Tuhfat al-Kiram*, ed. Makhdum Amir Ahmed and Nabi Bakhsh Khan Baloch, trans. Akhtar Rizvi (Karachi: Sindhi Adabi Board, 1959), 76-81.
2 I draw their story from the nineteenth-century Urdu text, *Tahqiqat-i Chishti*. Nur Ahmad Chishti, *Tahqiqat-i Chishti* (Lahore: Al-Faisal, 1993), 307-60.
3 Sarmad was executed by Aurangzeb for blasphemy. It had less to do with Sarmad's love for a man and more to do with his support for Dara Shukoh, Aurangzeb's older brother and rival to the throne.
4 See Aditya Behl, *Love's Subtle Magic: An Indian Islamic Literary Tradition, 1379-1545,* ed. Wendy Doniger (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

Plates 45-46: Installation view of Sunil Gupta's prints and Charan Singh's video at SUM Gallery. Courtesy: S.D.

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An eighteenth-century Persian text tells that a man named Ismail once set off in search of the grave of Sassui and Punhun. Upon reaching the vicinity, he dismounted his camel and spent three days fasting. On the third day, an old woman appeared, bringing some bread and water. Ismail refused. He would not eat till he saw Sassui and Punhun. The woman revealed that she was in fact Sassui. She showed him her youthful self as proof. But, she would not allow him to see Punhun for fear that she would lose him again. After much pleading, she relented. However, Sassui brought Punhun only partially out of their grave, holding both his hands tightly the whole while. In the eighteenth century, the text continues, pilgrims often journeyed to this remote grave and spent the night there in hopes of being visited by the lovers.[5]

Sassui and Punhun's life upon the earth was temporary, but life within the earth extends, stretches out till the end of the world. This intervening time, the lovers spend together.

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There are numerous reports from the pre-modern period of bodies miraculously preserved in death. The aforementioned eighteenth-century text narrates the story of the Kalhora kings of Sindh who were raising a new capital at Hyderabad in 1768, over the ruins of the ancient fort, Nerunkot, which dated back to the eighth century. Many bodies were dug up, which were in pristine conditions. Two bodies, a man and woman, appeared as though they were still alive. The author notes that people said this man and woman were lovers.[6] It may well be that he was alluding to the romance of Mall Mahmud and Bibi Nigar. Mahmud was part of the Arab army sent out to conquer Sindh in the eighth century, while Nigar was the daughter of the Hindu king, Nerun, after whom the fort is named. The pair fell in love, but met death at the hands of the army of Nerun.[7] They spent the intervening millennium buried next to each other.

Lovers were not the only ones to defy decay. The Mughal Emperor Jahangir, who ruled in the seventeenth-century, was of an investigative bent, and particularly fond of exposing superstitious beliefs. In his first-person memoir, he writes that he sent a trusted official, along with a surgeon, to exhume a tenth-century saint, Khwaja Tabut, whose body, it was rumored, was perfectly preserved. His officials reported back that half of the man's body had decomposed, while the remaining was, in fact, intact.[8]

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The preservation of bodies within the earth meant that those who could not or would not have children had other means to participate in the world of the living upon their death. Shah Abdul Latif of Bhit was an eighteenth-century Sufi saint

5 Qani, *Tuhfat al-Kiram*, 81-82.
6 Qani, *Tuhfat al-Kiram*, 516-17.
7 Richard Francis Burton, *Sindh and the Races That Inhabit the Valley of the Indus* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1973), 131-33.
8 Jahangir, *The Jahangirnama: Memoirs of Jahangir, Emperor of India*, trans. Wheeler M. Thackston (New York: Freer Gallery of Art, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery in association with Oxford University Press, 1999), 81-82.

Plate 46

of Sindh and the head of an ascetic order. He composed poetry in Sindhi about women in a woman's voice addressing other women, whom he called sisters and friends in his verse. Some of his most famous compositions are about Sassui running through the mountains after Punhun. His poetry is set to music and sung till today.

Latif cursed his unborn child for being a burden to his band of ascetics, resulting in his wife's miscarriage.[9] Latif left no descendants.

However, he consulted with an Islamic scholar on an intriguing question: can the dead, who exist in the world of *barzakh*, between this life and the next, assist the living? The scholar replied in the affirmative. To receive help from people in their graves was acceptable by logic and law, he said. Death was only a change of condition, not the door to non-existence. Those close to God are promised dominion till the very end of the world and could intervene on behalf of supplicants even after death.[10]

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The disciplines of history and art history, and the global project of heritage preservation, encourage us to think of shrines as material monuments, architectural projects with their own political and cultural contexts. A historian of Shah Latif might be able to tell you about the construction of his shrine by a Kalhora ruler, its expansion by a subsequent Talpur ruler, and its current administration by the Pakistan government. Latif's blue-tiled tomb adorns many government brochures and social media posts, visually representing the saint and Sindh. Any changes to the edifice of shrines might provoke indignation. But the influence and power of Latif's tomb, and of other such places, comes not from the structure above the ground, but from the body enclosed within. Pilgrims attest to this when they take dust from saintly graves to consume for spiritual, moral, or medicinal purposes; when they kiss the grave; or rub their hand, forehead, and cheek upon it. The saintly body, and the earth that encloses it, has the power to affect the living. This power works not through the visual alone, but moves in the tactile, gustatory, olfactory, and auditory, too.

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Before his death, Hussain had arranged a garden in the suburb of Lahore as the site of his burial. He had foretold that thirteen years after his burial, there would be a flood in the area, and his grave would have to be relocated to Babu Pura. He had also instructed Madho to leave Lahore a year after his death, travel for twelve years, and then return to become his successor.

The flood came as promised. When Hussain's followers dug up his grave, instead of a body, they discovered a bouquet of basil. Hussain appeared to one of the followers in his dream, assuring him that his body had been transformed into basil, which

9 Abd al-Husayn Khan Sangi, *Lataif-i Latifi: Ahvalu va Asar-i Hazratu Shahu Abdullatifu Bhittai* (Karachi: Department of Culture and Tourism, Government of Sindh, 2012), 14.
10 Makhdum Muhammad Muin Thattavi, *Risala-i Awasiya*, ed. Niyaz Humayuni (Bhit Shah: Shah Abdul Latif Bhit Shah Cultural Center, 2005), 23-48.

Plate 47: Charan Singh, *They Called it Love, But Was it Love?*, 2020 (stills). Video with sound. Commissioned by: Visual AIDS for A Day With(out) Art 2020 - TRANSMISSIONS. Courtesy: the artist.

should be buried in the new location. If anyone wants to see me, he told his devotee, they should turn to Madho. There is no difference, he continued, between him and me.

When Madho returned from his sojourns after twelve years, Hussain's followers were astonished to find that he appeared identical to Hussain. Today, their marble-clad graves and headstones, too, are identical in dimension and appearance, neither receiving priority over the other.

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The home and refuge that the earth affords to the human body is not specific to the Abrahamanic traditions alone. Perhaps, the oldest and the best known story about the earth protecting a person by swallowing them whole is of Sita, one of the protagonists of Ramayana. Upon being freed from the clutches of Ravana by her husband Rama, Sita undertakes an ordeal by fire to demonstrate her virtue. This was a condition for her reentry into the political community. Yet, she is ultimately exiled by her husband because of the unabating suspicion of the people of Ayodhya. Many years later, when Rama wishes for her to return, she is asked to prove her purity yet again. Sita turns to her mother, the Goddess Earth, who answers her prayer by swallowing her whole, demonstrating, once and for all, the impossibility of her existence within the political community.[11]

In the fourteenth century, when the Sammas overthrew the Soomras in Sindh, it is said that seven Soomra princesses fled the armies of the new rulers, who sought to marry them by force. In the end, they, too, received refuge from the earth, which swallows them whole. Today, various places along their flight are sites of pilgrimage for women across Sindh.[12] They are remembered as the Satiyun, the Pure Ones. People also call them the Seven Sisters. However, in the company of Hussain and Madho, and the poetry of Shah Latif, we might remember them anew as seven companions, friends, or intimates.

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Bodies in proximity affect each other across the divide of life and death, mediated by the earth we walk upon, and the futures it encloses. The dead insist upon their stakes in the world. They relate to the living not as forebears, kin, or lineal relations, but as co-participants in the world. They draw toward the living through dreams, apparitions, stories, and other signs, asking us to consider their interests and demands. The living, in turn, approach them with their own desires and devotion. As we, the presently alive, but soon to be dead, wrench up the earth for our own purposes, we would do well to remember that we are neither inheritors nor proprietors of the earth, but just one of the many beings, alive and dead, who share a claim in it.

11 For the details of Sita's ordeals, see Valmiki. *The Ramayana of Valmiki: The Complete English Translation, trans. Robert P. Goldman*, Sally J. Sutherland Goldman, Rosalind Lefeber, Sheldon I. Pollock, and Barend A. van Nooten (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 703-12, 841-44.

12 See Annie Ali Khan, *Sita Under the Crescent Moon* (New York: Simon & Schuster India, 2019)

Plate 48: Sunil Gupta, *Dissent and Desire*, 2018.
Archival inkjet print, 107 cm x 71 cm.
Courtesy the artist.

Plate 49: Installation view of Areez Katki's *Oneiria* panels and *Fragments* at Centre A.

As this chin melts on your knee

by Areez Katki

'Dead yesterdays and unborn tomorrows' translated by FitzGerald from Omar Khayyám's *Rubáiyát* has always struck me as an apocalyptic maxim: it haunts and auspices how a queer body might temporally exist.[1] In spite of its gentler refrain, '[...] to stop fretting and to live in the moment', that first clause remains with me alone, as I repeatedly pack and unpack homes with my own approaches to futurity.

It is evident through such notions how queer time often refuses to adhere to linearity, to logic: it dwells within its own tendencies to languish in painful reveries, often indulging in legacies of trauma and recycling them into present-day manifestations of mistreatment. These cycles of self-abnegation never cease. But buried amidst these (insert Grindr message trill) sounds and desperately swiping left or right, our flirtations with chaos, with doom and inevitable loss, lies a desire for care, for some radical softness that allows the restless mind a break from itself. As a kind of response to this whisper of hope, I seem to have cultivated a new urge lately: to create an archive of anxieties.

This archive is both old and new—it has been stacking up, growing broader, heavier; it is full of corporeal and cultural affects that lay unlaundered, partially-examined, often unclassified. It consists of tendencies, gestures, mannerisms, symbols, motifs, objects, fragments of literature—all half-

1 Omar Khayyám, *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, trans. Edward FitzGerald [5th ed] (Mumbai: Wilco, 2011) 37.

Plate 50-53: Areez Katki, *Fragments 1 – 5,* 2022. Cotton embroidery on khadi handkerchief. Supported by CNZ (Creative New Zealand). Courtesy: the artist.

remembered but catalogued nonetheless. For fear of them fading, these premonitions of loss are placated by giving them a place, any place, to be stored. It is possible that I've inherited these anxieties, several of them, from both of my migrant parents. But more generally they sprouted, I think, from the cusp of queering itself. Certain physical portents of disaster, such as forgetfulness, carelessness or mindlessness that occur throughout queer experience often have an analogue in the material world: memories fade, languages disappear, paint chips, fruit rots, relationships dissolve, flowers wilt.[2]

This nervous tarrying with tidings of disaster is contextualised with a hopeful and empathetic reaction to trauma in Julietta Singh's essay, 'A Thief, A Desire', which recalls an occasion when her Minneapolis apartment building was plagued with a series of home invasions.[3] Singh herself has a close brush with a thief who barely skims past her threshold yet still manages to steal a pair of her trainers—an object useful to them both. While this demarcates a link between their common experiences and needs, Singh anticipates another imminent, perhaps more intimate strike. She begins analysing her material possessions, making an inventory and leaving post-it notes on objects that she doesn't associate with dire necessities in her life. These objects are then marked as offerings to the thief, should they choose to return. She reframes the thief as an inevitable visitor, an abstract entity that will soon grace one's company. Through analysing her effects Singh attempts to bridge the violent dissections of socio-economics, class and culture by cultivating an empathetic approach to the thief's presence: one that acknowledges conditions of desperation, deprivation, plight. This cataloguing was still an anticipated reaction, not yet a reality, when Singh wrote: 'Waiting to be robbed is like waiting for an imminent accident in which both you and your assailant are together in disaster'. I see this as an emergent anxious archive: a site where dominant tropes of relationality are troubled; where we (re) evaluate our relationships with ownership, with care; an extension of things spilling beyond our guarded borderlands. What purposes might it serve?

In her writings about queer diasporic understandings of settler colonialism, Gayatri Gopinath explains how '[the] work and aesthetic practices [of queer diaspora in general], becomes the portal through which history, memory, and the process of archiving is itself (re)worked, in order to both critique the ongoing legacies on slavery, colonialism, war and occupation, and contemporary forms of racialisation, as well as to imagine alternative forms of affiliation and collectivity.'[4] Gopinath's text further unpacks how the 'materiality of the everyday—the small, the anti-monumental, the inconsequential,' could be linked closely to queer diasporic endeavours that excavate a past, even a faded and nearly-erased one.

2 Judith Halberstam, 'Dude, where's my phallus? Forgetting, losing, looping,' in *The Queer Art of Failure* (London, UK: Duke University Press, 2011).
3 Julietta Singh, *No Archive Will Restore You* (Santa Barbara, CA: Punctum Books, 2018).
4 Gayatri Gopinath, 'Archive, Affect, and the Everyday,' in *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora* (New Delhi: Zubaan Publishers, 2019) 125-168.

Plate 54: Areez Katki, *Fragment 5: A fish in the net is a reed in the sun,* 2022. Cotton embroidery on khadi handkerchief. Supported by CNZ (Creative New Zealand). Courtesy: the artist.

There is a counter-archaeological approach to this process of archiving affects when we trace their provenances; this excavation isn't one that mines for precious artefacts or outstanding moments in history. On the contrary, as children of the diaspora, when we make returns, we locate how and where ancestral spirits dwell within the queer corpus. How some apparitions create temporal passages, and where they manifest inside migrant bodies is in the remarkably small things, quotidian things. Textiles, books, clothes, tiles—material culture—all sit beside delicately-sustained histories, memories and languages that we all carry with us across decades, oceans and continents. From home to home. In the aesthetic affinities of South Asian diaspora, in this particular case the Parsi ethnominority that I was raised in, affects seem entwined with modes of endurance and adaptation as a means for survival. In my family home they've all been embalmed with a sense of imminent loss. I've felt compelled to add my own layers of analysis to these feelings when I look at the systemic privileges that were afforded to my ancestors, and those which their descendants, including my parents and myself, are still able to exploit.

This investigation into familial counter-histories began for me when I, who was raised and socialised far away from India, returned to Mumbai for the first time and dedicated a year to observing how both connected and disconnected I was from the politics of this place. Inserting myself, always uncomfortably, in positions that didn't feel natural. I observed how a Parsi identity and all cultural contributions synonymous with this small ethnominority, have been romanticised in what I like to call the Bombay Imagination; I also learned how coded they are with coloniality, with colourist supremacies, with vast expanses of wealth and privilege that were accrued through activities of trade and administration that directly complied with human exploitation. This, like many intergenerational dialogues across fractured landscapes, leads to a repositioning and reframing of the self. The positions I occupy in Aotearoa new zealand in no way correspond with the ones I assume when I return to India. The archive of anxiety grows sub-compartments, where concerns that are brought on by systemic issues, witnessed very differently in both positionalities, cause discord; things get muddled as these feelings and arguments branch out in puzzling directions. This feeling of confusion raises complex issues for me, about the nature of hybrid positions and our social responsibilities: what is privilege, once it is quantified, and how should it be wielded? It also introduces ingredients, like guilt and shame, to an eternally bubbling identitarian stew. And so, again, we return to a queering of time and a reframing of one's perspectives. Where might one store this ever-evolving material? Yet a new compartment someplace, perhaps by the spleen?

If the body is an interminably growing archive, then how might we elucidate its shape today? Where does one store these precarious stories? Do we possess at hand a suitable container? And if this queer body were to feign returning home, or establish one of its own, then I ask: is the volume of our hearth substantial enough to remain alit, to sustain this hunger and this desire for warmth?

This pursuit of archiving anxieties manifests almost unremittingly for someone in my position. What often emerge are totems

Plates 55-59: Areez Katki, *Oneiria: Night 1 – Night 5*, 2022. Cotton embroidery on khadi towel, 136 cm x 72 cm (each). Supported by CNZ (Creative New Zealand). Courtesy: the artist.

and corporeal gestures—abstract and non-linguistic material—that create associations with communications and materialities that I've been precariously holding, investigating, fearfully examining, over the duration of (my) mark-making processes. But the enigmatic resonances of these cultural effects persist in their appearing, vanishing and reappearing acts, often in fractured iterations over the years. On the surfaces of shelves and drawers in the domestic spaces I live in between Aotearoa and India, sometimes they arrive transmuted, replicated, but almost always fragmented as they gradually steal their way into the anxious archive. I fear how these materials might dissolve from the heat emitted by my hands, or evaporate from my mind before I am acquainted well enough to remember them. And yet this wariness is overridden by an urge to understand, restore, classify and memorialise them as acts of affective restoration. Our motivations for being continually drawn to such precarious operations are not entirely known. But if I were to guess, they stem perhaps from a desire to heal and consolidate something within oneself that has remained broken, stateless, incomplete.

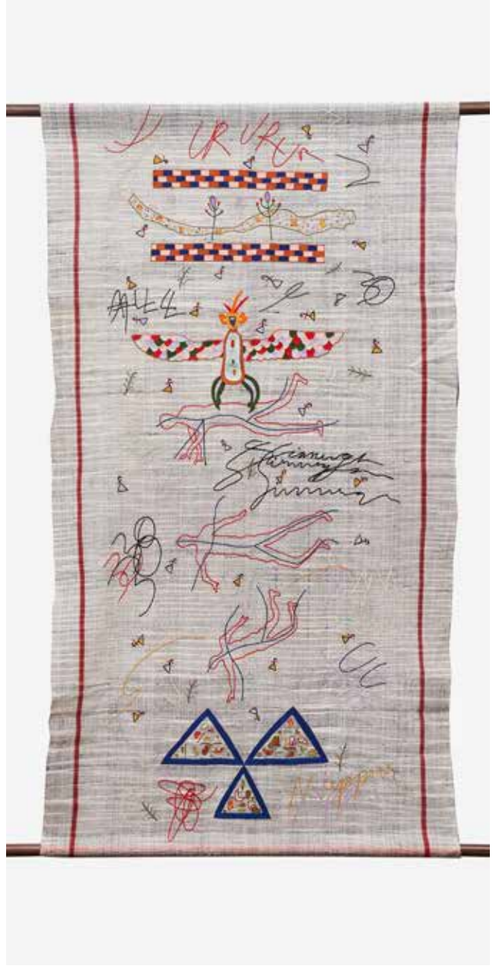
///

Setting the stage: over four thousand years ago in ancient Sumer, by the foothills of Mount Lebanon, Enkidu attends to Gilgamesh's oracular divinations in a Dream House constructed by him at various camping sites as they travel through the wilderness over five nights. There is a palpable sagacity in these exchanges, particularly through Enkidu's interpretations of Gilgamesh's apocalyptic dreams, which I've studied and meditated on over the past few years. Each night the dreams of Gilgamesh seemed to grow more vivid and apocalyptic: the ancient lyric sequences often reveal how Gilgamesh envisioned a barren vastness. In the third dream, he describes:

> The dream that I had was an utter confusion:
> heaven cried aloud, while earth did rumble.
> The day grew still, darkness came forth,
> there was a flash of lightning, fire broke out.[5]

And just as we anticipate Enkidu's response to this dream, we discover that it was scribed (in standard Babylonian cuneiform) on a part of Tablet IV that has been damaged: another whisper forever lost. This brought to mind how frequently fragmentation and erasure occur across queer imaginings of futurity, perhaps urging one to examine how we might creatively supply those apertures by re-interpreting stories of our pasts and invent means of survival. That said, there are some preserved examples of how Gilgamesh and Enkidu's intimate relationship unfolds across this chapter, rather softly at first, through some of the existing texts where Enkidu's interpretations of Gilgamesh's anxious oneiric meanderings serve as soothing devices. I like to read them as confiding whispers, akin to acts of seeking context and clarity, which some may associate with divinations and others with attempted

5 A. R. George, *The Epic of Gilgamesh: The Babylonian Epic Poem and Other Texts in Akkadian and Sumerian* (London, United Kingdom: Penguin Books, 2000) 33.



Plates 57-58

rationalisations of fears. Like scribing, journaling or confiding our bad dreams with a safe 'other'—a reflective vessel that supports the pursuit of psychological growth. Like many troubled heroes, particularly those who fall victim to self-doubt, depression and cycles of unresolved trauma, Gilgamesh is comforted by his wise, wild yet gentle, paramour who provides him with confident restitutions about his dreams during their quest.

> One such example:
>
> My friend, favourable is] your dream .....,
> ..... this .....
> ... Humbaba like .....,
> will be kindled ... upon [him.]
> 'We shall bring about his ... , we shall bind his wings,
> ..... we shall ...
> His ....., we shall stand upon him.
> [And next] morning we shall [see] a good sign
> from the Sun God.[6]

Amid the confidence and care that Enkidu instils in Gilgamesh through his simple interpretations, I see deposits of queer maintenance that sit at an affective juncture. Because of the fragmented state that Tablet IV exists in today, I read it as an open source for fabulating images of the intimacy between these figures.[7] One must remember that Gilgamesh was not from the Greek lexicon of heroic demi-gods, or any Western epic tradition, but rather a collective mythography scribed and re-scribed by many hands across centuries of interpretative sequences. This legend hailed from Sumer and Mesopotamia—it predated Homer. Though the Gilgamesh tablets were studied and contextualised by the likes of Herodotus and placed thusly within an epic canon by the West, to me Tablet IV may yet be examined as an anomalous glitch, a chasm where queer time resists dominant paradigms.[8] And so, it is from here that we might stray from the proclamations made by thinkers of epic convention.

The sustained motifs of intimacy on Tablet IV are stored within the amorphous 'Dream House,' which I've decided to interpret their travelling encampment as. I imagined them

6 Ibid., 36.
7 The version of these literary fragments being read and cited were inscribed and circulated across the 13th – 10th centuries BC.
8 Translated from Standard Babylonian cuneiform, these tablets all bore the incipit 'Sha naqba īmuru'—'He who saw the deep'. From A.R. George, *The Epic of Gilgamesh: The Babylonian Epic Poem and Other Texts* in *Akkadian and Sumerian.*

Plate 59

situated close, huddling beside blankets, flasks, jars, amulets, tincture boxes—amid modalities of care. I choose to hear the soft timbre and melodic tone of their exchanges, which evoke thoughts of blooming male vulnerability, of reassuring whispers, scenes of nocturnal intimacy. Such was the fraternal moral support system between Enkidu and Gilgamesh for me. This nonetheless fractures that masculine stance, the epic scale of their heroic journey toward doom. The quest for greatness, commencing with the slaying of Humbaba the Cedar God, is momentarily dreaded and suspended from reality. Do we really seek greatness, you and I? Or is there a deeper, more tender, sense of resolution that we yearn for?

I'll confess to leaning into questions like these, which decentralise imperialist and capitalist notions of heroism. The tools of dreaming and divination described on Tablet IV are not those that can be imperiously wielded: these godlike men are rendered vulnerable, softened by a dystopian landscape. This image soothes us as readers, but it can also auspex loss, through a trepidation that is palpable between the two questers. Their fates, particularly of separation and of Enkidu's eventual death, is nonetheless felt as a clear possibility by the end of this chapter, where their bodies become increasingly entwined over the looming psychosexual twists in this journey toward the Forest of Cedar.
I found that this mode of imagining was aided by the use of an affective device. It arrives in the form of a refrain between each dream sequence:

> Enkidu made for [Gilgamesh a House of the Dream God,]
> [he fixed a door in its doorway to keep out the weather.]
> [In the circle he had drawn he made him lie down,]
> [and falling flat like a net lay himself in the doorway.]
>
> [Gilgamesh rested his chin on his knees,]
> [sleep fell upon him, that spills over people.]
> [In the middle of the night he reached his sleep's end,]
> [he rose and spoke to his friend:]
>
> ['My friend, did you not call me? Why have I wakened?]
> [Did you not touch me? Why am I startled?]
> [Did a god not pass by? Why is my flesh frozen numb?]
> [...] [9]

9 Ibid., 30.

The Dream House contains fearful premonitions, the kind I associate with images of monsters, like Humbaba. These premonitions could be (re) interpreted as signifiers of apocalyptic belief systems that have existed, that still resonate, within queer embodiments. They perhaps operate as omens that help us parse love's alienating terrain. The notion of an epic text seems suspended here, cocooned by the vividity of that intimate dwelling, assembled night after night by Enkidu, whose roles in Gilgamesh's life serve the pluralities of guardian and lover but also a sage rooted in the wilderness.

The Dream House is a vulnerable space, one of mending and melting: perhaps a nomadic tent peripheried by a circular threshold containing soft furnishings, compact and portable devices of today, maybe weapons and tools for survival. I have (re)imagined this abode as one constructed for the purposes of protection from exposure, a site delicately situated in the wilderness yet cloaked from it. It evokes our recurring desires to be shrouded from hostile ecologies, to fantasise and turn inward. Taut cloth panels flutter against trees in the wind; evoking, here, an abreal approach to facing impending dooms—dooms synergised by fantasy, both as a means of survival and as a narrative modality within queer paradigms.

The Dream House is a metaphor for plurality: it contains an archive of reveries as the men within soften between exchanges of anxious yearning. This happens to them, to us, as we journey into the belly of trouble: to knowingly enter an inhospitable terrain that subjects one to systems of violence, to promises of loss.[10] Do such experiences rally us in some way to face earthly conquests? The amorphous shape of this Dream House is in conversation with the hostile environments in which it exists. Divinations of disaster, like falling mountains, earthquakes, menacing thunderbirds, are apocalyptically explored, teased out and deciphered throughout those five nights on Tablet IV of Gilgamesh. They splinter into archetypes, synthesised across generational planes. We encounter glimpses of these in the spatiality of queer imagination—on dating apps, in bars, clubs, cruising parks. These anxieties manifest, for me, as scratches, markings and swirls of light emanating from inside the Dream House; their forms are silhouetted, marked, across the five textile panels that both shelter and reveal (our) unstable futurities.

The Dream House was collapsing around me as I felt the imminent end of a relationship with a beloved companion. I sit today among its ruins and breathe in that loss; I meditate on the temporal fragility of a feeling: the joy of having comrade along the journey with whom one shared rations of nourishment, tenderness and hope in the way that Gilgamesh and Enkidu once did. Until it all went so wrong, as had been feared, and Enkidu met his untimely death. And then, eventually, that feeling dissipates. Fragments and hauntings disorient all the senses. Such endings bring to mind an image of the fragile body, withered and haunted by one's youthful pursuits, in a late poem by Constantine P. Cavafy, who wrote perpetually from such places, of longing and loss:

[...] Now that all belongs to the past,
it is almost as if you had yielded
to those desires too—remember,
how they glowed, in the eyes looking at you;
how they trembled in the voice, for you, remember, body.[11]

Like all other matter, such a loss is now made immaterial: vapourised, and it floats around my breath. It is a virus I'm forced to breathe in and be infected by. I take another moment to acknowledge how and when this affective material makes its way back into the body, its anxious archive. He is in my breath, still. The body never forgets.

The Dream House is multidimensional. It contains countless versions of ourselves in various modes of corporeal distress: states of anxiety are refracted across time, with trauma that may be experienced or inherited. It is through the act of constantly deciphering the waves of emotions, the interpretation of our dreams (which correspond with our past and future selves) allow us to map these sentient lineages. This relationship with queer time, its unresolved histories and myriad interpretations, was indelibly felt as I held in my mind over five nights the original dream fragments from Tablet IV—those which were recalled by Gilgamesh and interpreted by his Enkidu. They dwell in our bodies and manifest as futurities. And so, even as we melt into the arms of a lover, the archive of loss grows on.

///

Two years passed since this text was written, originally intended as a companion to the *Oneiria* panels, which were exhibited in 'Vanishing Act' at the Queer Arts Festival (Centre A, 2022). Over this time the act of studying dreams has persisted for me; it regularly foretastes counter histories, which provide insights into psychic conditions brought on by loss. But dreams, when examined closely and regularly, also indicate how the bodily archive is able to understand itself. How, even in the midst of catastrophes, it feels urged to reflect more compassionately today—as a means through which we might mitigate our aches, our longings, and imagine hereafters in the sun.

10 Carmen Maria Machado, *In The Dream House* (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press: 2019).

11 Constantine P. Cavafy, 'Remember, Body,' in *Selected Poems*, trans. George Connolly (Athens, Greece: Aiora Press, 2015).

Plates 60-61 (page 100): Syma Tariq and Sita Balani, *both/and*, 2022 (installation views). Audio voicenotes. Courtesy: Adwait Singh.

both/and

a voicenote exchange between Syma Tariq and Sita Balani

This edited conversation is taken from a series of voicenotes exchanged over a few weeks in spring 2022, in quiet moments between sending emails, packing boxes, doing laundry, reading articles, meeting deadlines and dealing with the ongoing health issues of loved ones. We tried to speak of difficult things, of grief, mass death, violence, neglect, of things bigger, more urgent, and more immediate than queer identity. But nonetheless, queerness is in here, part of how we were made, how we came to know each other, and how we understand the worlds in which we find ourselves.

As we exchanged the final voicenotes in this series, the Palestinian-American journalist Shireen Abu Aqla was shot and killed while covering an Israeli military raid on the Jenin refugee camp in the Occupied West Bank. News of her death reverberated across social media and into the streets, as vigils were held around the world in her honour. As Palestinians gathered for her funeral in Jerusalem, the Israeli police descended, beating mourners with batons, attacking pallbearers, and almost causing her coffin to hit the ground. Watching the footage of her funeral, the reach of state violence became painfully clear—even the dead are not free of it.

We speak here of silence and of voice—implicit is the essential role of witness, of presence, of refusing to avert our eyes or cover our ears, of trying not to turn away.

Syma: I guess I want to start our exchange with a point on wordlessness. Because there are some spaces of violence—colonial, racial, gendered, sexual, and at the moment this public health violence that we're seeing—that remain beyond words. I have been struggling with this during my research. I am finding it more and more difficult to listen to violent stories, to speak about violence. In some ways that has meant sometimes feeling slightly withdrawn from the violence of the present.

You and I both seem to have misgivings about the idea that the pandemic has, to quote the prompt we were given, 'universalised' alienation, precarity, illness, hopelessness... words that describe the queer mass death and

Plate 61

demonisation of the AIDS crisis. Acknowledging this history and its echoes is important, but has COVID really universalised these characteristics? What do we mean by universal? As queer people, do we tend to desire apocalypse so the world catches up to our grief? Is this even a question I should be asking?

Sita: I share that scepticism about whether or not the pandemic has universalised a particular queer experience, but I think maybe what it's done is made visible how many people don't live within what we've often thought of as a normative family structure. I feel like there has always been this sense in which we, people who identify as queer, see ourselves as living distinctly outside of protective family structures. So much of queer life is a discussion of that. But I think the pandemic has shown how few people live *within* them.

I've been thinking a lot about the way in which public health measures in Britain but also in much less authoritarian circumstances, have turned on the notion that everyone lives in a nuclear family household or a couple form, or in some space in which care and sustenance and bonds of kinship co-exist under one roof. But of course that's not how most people live. The shifts away from social housing in Britain, the general destruction of the social safety net, means loads of people live in different forms of precarity, and that the experience of living outside the family unit is one that is more common than we had assumed it to be. What's been made visible is just how few people really live protected lives—but those who do live very protected lives have an outsized access to controlling the narratives through which we think of ourselves.

In relation to wordlessness: I wonder if one of the things that is interesting about our current predicament is that we have constant access to means of communication but we have fewer ways of making our words matter. And that's a point I've been stuck on for a long time.

Syma: What struck me about the start of the pandemic is how many people started to argue for a different politics that accounted more for the precarious and the marginalised outside of 'normal' systems. The virus is a portal, Arundhati Roy argued.[1] The Black Lives Matter movement maybe showed that impetus most visibly. There was a kind of feeling of hope actually, that maybe now society would be imagined and actualised differently. Two years now feels like a long time ago.

In Urdu the word 'aawaz' means sound or noise, but also means 'voice'. There's something in that for me, about that collapsing of the word and the sound. I don't know about other languages but in English in contrast, voice and sound are more separated. Liberal norms of speech, like Nikita Dhawan writes, means we think that using our voice is redemptive, liberatory, speech is taken as the opposite to silence, and silence is therefore harmful. 'Silence equals death' is Act Up's really important phrase. Again, I don't think that's universal in the present.

1 Arundhati Roy, 'The pandemic is a portal', *Financial Times*, April 3 2020: https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca

Plate 62: Syrus Marcus Ware, *Fire Is Burning*, 2022 (installation view). Single-channel video & soundscape. Courtesy: S.D. Holman.

Following your point on words mattering—why do you think there are fewer ways of making them matter? Are we maybe too used to thinking that speaking up is enough?

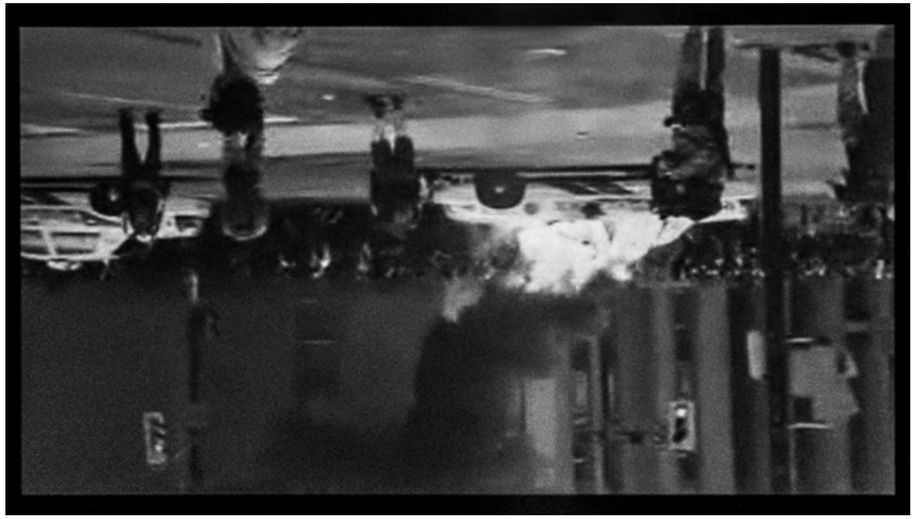
Sita: It's so interesting to hear you talk about the beginning of the pandemic because it was such an intense time, such an extraordinary time. And in some ways a time, as you say, with a kind of hope threaded through the fear and the despair. And it's harder I think to find that now. I think that line from Arundhati Roy, that the pandemic is a portal was so striking, and now feels something like a missed opportunity I guess. Though that might be an unnecessarily bleak view of things, given that, as you say, the BLM uprisings were in some way a kind of capturing of that possibility of a reimagined set of social relations. And we are, of course, seeing both a counter-revolutionary response to that uprising from the powers that be, but also a kind of continuation of the consciousness that was raised then, and the movement that was sparked by those events. So I guess it's always *both/and*, never *either/or.* But there was something in those early days where it felt like everything could change.

It relates to your question of voice and sound and silence. There was something in the enforced stillness—though there were many other people still working and acting and doing, I know your family have lots of doctors who must have been working their arses off the whole time. But for a lot of people there was an enforced stillness, and a different relationship to sound. I remember hearing, so regularly, sounds of sirens and hospital helicopters piercing the otherwise unusually quiet, quiet soundscape. So that's something that really stays with me.

As I was listening to you talking about words and voice and sound and the way that language seems to be at the top of the hierarchy, I was thinking of the silent Grenfell marches, the monthly marches in North Kensington to mark the act of social murder that the Grenfell Tower fire was.[2] And how in some ways, some disturbing way, I feel like that awful atrocity kind of prefigured the pandemic in some way. That it was another act of slow violence that became a torrent of violence. In its aftermath, the community there have taken on silence as a kind of tool. Those silent marches are really extraordinary and powerful, partly because the people there and the people who join them—sometimes I'm one of them—don't shout slogans and don't speak until the very end, and the presence of those that survived and those that were lost is somehow made collective, made visible or present by the silence. And so I wonder about that as a practice.

Syma: I actually recorded one of the last Grenfell marches before the pandemic, in January 2020, 31 months after the fire. It was terrible weather and the mic just captured wind and traffic. I don't know why I thought recording the silence was meaningful, I actually felt quite stupid.

2 For more information see www.grenfellunited.org.uk



Plates 63-64: Syrus Marcus Ware, *Fire Is Burning*, 2022 (stills). Single-channel video & soundscape. Courtesy: the artist.

At the end of the walk, there is a collective 72 seconds of silence before all the victims' names are read aloud. I have never experienced anything like it before or since. Particularly hearing predominantly Muslim and non-Western names read aloud, which at moments, listed in repetition many people with the same surname who died in the same flats, was angering and heartbreaking. Phase two of the public inquiry is not really giving anyone any hope for real justice. But I do think collective, silent presence is a very meaningful practice. And a really difficult one. I feel like it takes much, much more effort and strength to not speak than it does to speak up.

Your idea of the Grenfell fire prefiguring the pandemic is quite perceptive and interesting, especially when we think about the state's denial of collective mourning as a denial of justice—which you have written so beautifully about. Perhaps there needs to be more collective, or unsanctioned acts of remembrance. And maybe not only to mourn queer people, but also mourning for or in spaces that aren't necessarily for us. I'm not sure what you think about that but maybe to me that is genuinely queer solidarity.

In any case, David Wojnarowizc, the ACT UP activist and artist, said something powerful about the political funerals during the AIDS epidemic that resonates a lot with what we are talking about. He said: 'I have loved the way memorials take the absence of a human being and make them somehow physical with the use of sound. I have attended a number of memorials in the last five years and at the last one I attended I found myself suddenly experiencing something akin to rage. I realized halfway through the event that I had witnessed a good number of the same people participating in other previous memorials. What made me angry was realizing that the memorial had little reverberation outside the room it was held in. A TV commercial for handiwipes had a higher impact on society at large. I got up and left because I didn't think I could control my urge to scream.'[3]

Sita: This question of the relationship between queerness and mourning is so compelling to me. I think there's a long history or a long tradition of trying to think through the ways that at moments of death, in the context of the ritual surrounding it, queer people often feel excluded or at odds from those rituals and the way that they are carried out within the family context. I'm thinking of the funeral in *Stone Butch Blues* in which all the butches are told that they have to wear women's clothing so as to not upset the family of the person who's died, and some of them can't or won't do this, and find themselves disrupting the funeral. Or I'm thinking of the moment in *Queer as Folk* where someone dies and their friends go round there to get rid of his porn collection. So it seems like it's a constant preoccupation, and an important one. I recently saw a powerful rendition of this question in a drag show called 'Homos and Houmous', that was exploring that question in relation to Jewish rituals of grief and death.

And I think that's one part of a story that you're telling, or we're thinking through together: the

3 From David Wojnarowicz's *Postcards from America: X-Rays from Hell* (New York, October 1989).

Plates 65-66: Hiba Ali, *abra*, 2018 (installation views). HD video. Courtesy: S.D. Holman.

Plate 66

position of queers in relation to public rituals of mourning. Something like the Grenfell Silent Walk or the many moments in which people come into the street after someone dies at the hand of the state, and the ways in which it's important to be there and not foreground issues of our own identities—not to leave them at home, but also not to make them the full story. I often feel that that's really essential, and a thing that many people very quietly get on with doing in a humble and generative way. So I think that you're right, that's really the thing that's at stake.

So thinking about those two things together —the private rituals of mourning or the familial ones, and then the public ones—I often wonder about the ways in which those two things can come together a bit more fully. One thing that I keep coming back to is that funerals are incredibly expensive, prohibitively so, and have become a source of extreme anguish for many people, much in the way that they were for people in Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries. There's a dreadful tunnelling back to an earlier moment. But one sort of small act of solidarity that I'm constantly moved and quite shaken by is the way people contribute to the funerals of people they don't know, and those they have never met, via crowdfunders shared on social media. And I'm often sceptical about social media but I think that gesture of love and solidarity is one that's all the more powerful in relation to death. So maybe I'll leave our conversation there for now.

Syma: It's really interesting and staggering to hear you speak about all these fictive and real moments that reveal that jarring relationship between private and public mourning. I do remember that scene in *Queer as Folk*, it's really hilarious and dark at the same time. I'm aware that our chat has been focusing on the Western context—I guess that is our context after all—because there is probably so much to say about how elsewhere the possibility of mourning is taken away completely. Where people are disappeared by the state for example, so I'm thinking of places like India, Pakistan and occupied Kashmir and probably so many others—where this other kind of 'loss' of life is transformed into collective punishment, because that finality of death never comes for the people left behind, because they are still searching for justice.

These are really difficult things to speak about and as we have to end at some point, maybe I can finish with a personal note on our shared exercise in 'aawaz', if you want. Speaking to you has been quite curative, for want of a better word—whenever I see your name pop up in my notifications I've felt this strange mix of excitement to hear you, but also dread, because we are speaking to each other about quite heavy things at quite a difficult time. I am very wary/unsure of publishing these quite informal thoughts about these really important subjects with limited time and limited space. At the same time, we have taken our time to think about our words to each other, and the slow pace and almost intimacy of our remote conversation has been a unique experience. I love the familiarity of voicenotes to be honest, the crappy audio quality and the inability to self-edit: you just have to hold down the mic button while speaking and then let it fly. Thank you, and hopefully we can continue our conversation in person soon.

Vanishing Act Plate List

Plates 1-4: Omer Wasim, *Surrender,* 2018-2022 (installation views). Photographic prints, hanging mechanism, meat hooks, shirts, sheer curtain, concrete planter, stinging nettle, soil, water, growth light, and mirror, variable dimensions. Courtesy: S.D. Holman.

Plate 5: Installation view of 'Vanishing Act' from Centre A with Areez Katki's *Oneiria* panels in the foreground and Shahana Rajani's video *A cipher for the missing* in the background.

Plate 6: Shahana Rajani, *A cipher for the missing*, 2022 (still). 4K video with sound. Courtesy: the artist.

Plates 7-8: Fazal Rizvi, *Chasing Shadows,* 2022 (installation views). Mixed-media. Courtesy: S.D. Holman.

Plate 9: Fazal Rizvi, *Chasing Shadows,* 2022. Close-up of one of the letters from the installation. Courtesy: the artist.

Plate 10: Andrew McPhail, *FUCK IT*, 2019/2020. Sequins and thread on bed sheet, 224 cm x 244 cm. Courtesy: the artist.

Plate 11: Andrew McPhail, *FUCK IT*, 2019/2020 (installation view). Sequins and thread on bed sheet, 224 cm x 244 cm. Courtesy: S.D. Holman.

Plate 12: Bassem Saad, *Kink Retrograde*, 2019. HD video with sound (installation view). Courtesy: S.D. Holman.

Plates 13-16: Bassem Saad, *Kink Retrograde*, 2019 (stills). HD video with sound. Courtesy: the artist.

Plates 17-19: Renuka Rajiv, *ghosts in the backseat/ exile in the corner*, 2022. Fabric, thread, buttons, 126 cm x 57cm (each). Courtesy: the artist.

Plate 20: Sharlene Bamboat, *If From Every Tongue it Drips*, 2021 (installation view). Video with sound. Courtesy: S.D. Holman.

Plate 21: Sharlene Bamboat, *If From Every Tongue it Drips*, 2021 (still). Video with sound. Courtesy: the artist.

Plate 22: Imaad Majeed, *the impossibility of leaving / the possibility of coming out*, 2022 (installation view). Poetry film. Image Courtesy: Adwait Singh.

Plates 23-24: Imaad Majeed, *the impossibility of leaving /the possibility of coming out*, 2022 (still). Poetry film. Image Courtesy: Adwait Singh.

Plate 25: Installation view of 'Vanishing Act' from SUM Gallery with Imaad Majeed's poetry film on the left, Sunil Gupta's prints in the middle and Charan Singh's video on the right. Courtesy: S.D. Holman.

Plates 26-27: Elektra KB, *STRIKE: A Popular Uprising,* 2022 (stills). Video with sound. Courtesy: the artist.

Plates 28: Elektra KB, *No SMILES (Simplified molecular-input line-entry system) Yet (Crip Lullaby),* 2020 (installation view). Single-channel video with ASMR sound. Courtesy: S.D. Holman.

Plates 29: Elektra KB, *STRIKE: A Popular Uprising,* 2022 (installation view). Video with sound. Courtesy: S.D. Holman.

Plate 30: Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz,*Toxic*, 2012 (installation view). Super 16mm / HD film. Performance: Ginger Brooks Takahashi and Werner Hirsch. Courtesy: S.D. Holman.

Plates 31-33: Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz,*Toxic*, 2012 (still). Super 16mm / HD film. Performance: Ginger Brooks Takahashi and Werner Hirsch. Courtesy: the artists.

Plate 34: Vishal Jugdeo and vqueeram, *Does Your House Have Lions*, 2021 (installation view). 4K video with sound. Courtesy: S.D. Holman.

Plates 35-36: Vishal Jugdeo and vqueeram, *Does Your House Have Lions*, 2021 (stills). 4K video with sound. Courtesy: the artists and Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles.

Plates 37-38: Aryakrishnan Ramakrishnan, *Sweet Maria Monument*, 2013 - ongoing (installation views). Mixed-media installation. Courtesy: S.D. Holman.

Plate 39: Aryakrishnan Ramakrishnan, *Sweet Maria Monument*, 2013 - ongoing. Close-up of one of the vitrines. Courtesy: S.D. Holman.

Plate 40: Aryakrishnan Ramakrishnan, *Sweet Maria Monument*, 2013 - ongoing (installation view). Mixed-media installation. Courtesy: S.D. Holman.

Plate 41: Hank Yan Agassi, *The Red Letholith (Monolith no. 2),* 2022 (detail). Site-specific wall drawing, 335 cm x 150 cm. Courtesy: S.D. Holman.

Plates 42-43: Hank Yan Agassi, *The Red Letholith (Monolith no. 2),* 2022 (installation views). Site-specific wall drawing and text, 335 cm x 150 cm. Courtesy: S.D. Holman.

Plate 44: Hank Yan Agassi, *The Red Letholith (Monolith no. 2),* 2022 (installation views). Site-specific wall drawing and text, 335 cm x 150 cm. Courtesy: S.D. Holman. Hank Yan Agassi, *The Red Letholith (Monolith no. 2),* 2022. Site-specific wall drawing, 335 cm x 150 cm. Courtesy: S.D. Holman.

Plate 45: Installation view of Sunil Gupta's prints and Charan Singh's video at SUM Gallery. Courtesy: S.D. Holman.

Plate 46: Charan Singh, *They Called it Love, But Was it Love?*, 2020 (stills). Video with sound. Commissioned by: Visual AIDS for A Day With(out) Art 2020 - TRANSMISSIONS. Courtesy: the artist.

Plate 47: Sunil Gupta, *Dissent and Desire,* 2018. Archival inkjet print, 107 cm x 71 cm. Courtesy the artist.

Plate 48: Installation view of Areez Katki's *Oneiria* panels and *Fragments* at Centre A.

Plates 49-53: Areez Katki, *Fragments 1 – 5,* 2022. Cotton embroidery on khadi handkerchief. Supported by CNZ (Creative New Zealand). Courtesy: the artist.

Plates 54-58: Areez Katki, *Oneiria: Night 1 – Night 5,* 2022. Cotton embroidery on khadi towel, 136 cm x 72 cm (each). Supported by CNZ (Creative New Zealand). Courtesy: the artist.

Plates 59-60: Syma Tariq and Sita Balani, *both/and*, 2022 (installation views). Audio voicenotes. Courtesy: Adwait Singh.

Plate 61: Syrus Marcus Ware, *Fire Is Burning*, 2022 (installation view). Single-channel video & soundscape. Courtesy: S.D. Holman.

Plates 62-63: Syrus Marcus Ware, *Fire Is Burning*, 2022 (video stills). Single-channel video & soundscape. Courtesy: the artist.

Plates 64-65: Hiba Ali, *abra*, 2018 (installation views). HD video. Courtesy: S.D. Holman.

The Pride in Art Society (PiA) presents and exhibits with a curatorial vision favouring challenging, thought-provoking art that pushes boundaries and initiates dialogue. As producers of the Queer Arts Festival (QAF) and SUM gallery, PiA brings diverse communities together to support artistic risk-taking, and incite creative collaboration and experimentation.

Pride in Art was founded in 1998 by Two-Spirit artist Robbie Hong, Black artist Jeffery Gibson and a collective of visual artists mounting an annual art exhibition in Vancouver, BC, Canada. Spearheaded by Jewish artist SD Holman and Nikkei-Danish artist Rachel Kiyo Iwaasa, Pride in Art incorporated as a nonprofit in 2006, mounting their first multidisciplinary Queer Arts Festival in 2008. In 2018, Artistic Director SD Holman founded SUM gallery as a permanent space presenting multidisciplinary exhibitions and events. At the time of founding, SUM was the only queer-mandated gallery in Canada—not the first, but earlier attempts had succumbed to gentrification, or exhaustion, or both.

QAF is an annual artist-run transdisciplinary art festival in Vancouver. Each year, the festival theme ties together a curated visual art exhibition, performing art series, workshops, artist talks, panels, and media art screenings.

QAF has incited dozens of artistic milestones, notably the commissioning and premiere of Canada's first lesbian opera When the Sun Comes Out by Leslie Uyeda and Rachel Rose in 2013; TRIGGER, the 25th-anniversary exhibition for Kiss & Tell's notorious Drawing the Line project; Jeremy Dutcher's first full-length Vancouver concert; Cris Derksen's monumental Orchestral Powwow; and the award-winning premiere of the play Camera Obscura (hungry ghosts), Lesley Ewen's fantastical reimagining of multimedia titan Paul Wong's early career.

Recognized as one of the top 2 festivals of its kind worldwide, QAF's programming has garnered wide acclaim as "concise, brilliant and moving" (Georgia Straight), "easily one of the best art exhibitions of the year" (Vancouver Sun), and "on the forefront of aesthetic and cultural dialogue today" (Xtra).

QUEER ARTS FESTIVAL

The Queer Arts Festival (QAF) is an annual artist-run multidisciplinary arts festival in Vancouver, BC. Each year, the festival theme ties together a curated visual art exhibition, performing arts series, workshops, artist talks, panels, and media art screenings. Recognized as one of the top 2 festivals of its kind worldwide, QAF's programming has garnered wide acclaim as "concise, brilliant and moving" (Georgia Straight), "easily one of the best art exhibitions of the year" (Vancouver Sun), and "on the forefront of aesthetic and cultural dialogue today" (Xtra).

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QUEER ARTS FESTIVAL

SUM GALLERY

PRIDE IN ART SOCIETY
celebrating queer art and artists