



BRIDGE

E-MAGAZINE

Volume-III

Autumn Harvest

At night the ocean was a field of barley when the wind flattens the ripening grain and the sheaves lie level with the earth. In the distance the lights of the fishing boats were fireflies dancing above the waves. And the gulls, they were the laughter of young children.

Page 10



Christa Bruhn

Featured Poet (USA)

Page 42

Analysis of a Love Poem

Page 53

The Lost Words

Page 19

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2024-2025



THE BRIDGE VOLUME-III-2024-2025

SYEDA FERYAL ALI GAUHAR

Featured Writer (Pakistan)



THE BRIDGE MAGAZINE VOLUME-III

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Writer's Block

Sometimes you dwell too deeply in words that your own inside feels mute. You have a lot to say but the abundance of words inside you makes you empty. The vocabulary you have meticulously gathered over the years feels inadequate and fails to help you say the right thing. It feels like an overflow without any noise. An overflow of thoughts blocked by the crowd of words that you cannot use. It is a weird situation in a writer's life when words sound indifferent, meaningless and insufficient. In such moments, writing becomes a struggle, not because we lack the words, but because they refuse to cooperate. That's when a silent storm of sentiments smirks at your inability to do justice to yourself. Despite the overflow of emotions, you feel choked.

That's exactly how I am feeling right now. Choked. Blocked. Forbidden.

And yet, I must write. Even when it seems impossible. Even when it feels like it makes little sense. Because that is what we do. We write.

So I do. Instead of running away from words, I encounter them. Valiantly. That's the best remedy to the situation.

Over the many years of fruitful investigation, I have learnt some serious tricks on how to cope up with this problem. One of the most effective tricks is to sit back and jot down exactly how you feel, without the slightest fear of being judged. I have come to recognize that the best remedy for such moments of creative paralysis is not to fight against it, but to embrace it. When you feel choked, write about it. When you feel empty, write about it. Do not struggle to find the appropriate words. Trust that the act of writing itself will release the tension. It will allow clarity to emerge. Write fearlessly. Write whatever comes to your mind. Let the pen spill your inside on the paper. Be brave!

So now as I write this editorial note, I find myself embracing a similar approach—courageously expressing whatever comes from within. And surprisingly, I feel light!

Compiling this year's E-Magazine was as usual an ardent task. There were many challenges involved. Many obstacles arose on the way and we had to take our time to lift them aside. The support from family, friends and circle of writers from across the globe has been immense, and I am truly grateful to all.

I am proud of the content we have assembled this year, particularly the sections highlighting our featured writer and poet from Pakistan and the United States. Their work brings a fresh perspective and an enriching voice to the magazine, and I am confident you will enjoy it.

Thank you for your continued support and engagement. May you find inspiration and joy in every word.

Happy Reading!

Aaisha Umt Ur Rashid

Editor in Chief

(Founder /CEO of The Bridge)

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The Bridge Magazine Volume.IV

CONTRIBUTION CATEGORIES

Magazine is published on the website annually and accepts contributions from **1st October till 30th June**. The magazine has the following submission categories:

- Short Story
- Poetry
- Flash-Fiction
- Book Reviews
- Articles
- One Liner Quotes
- One Act Play Scripts
- Memoirs
- Travelogues
- Jokes
- Other

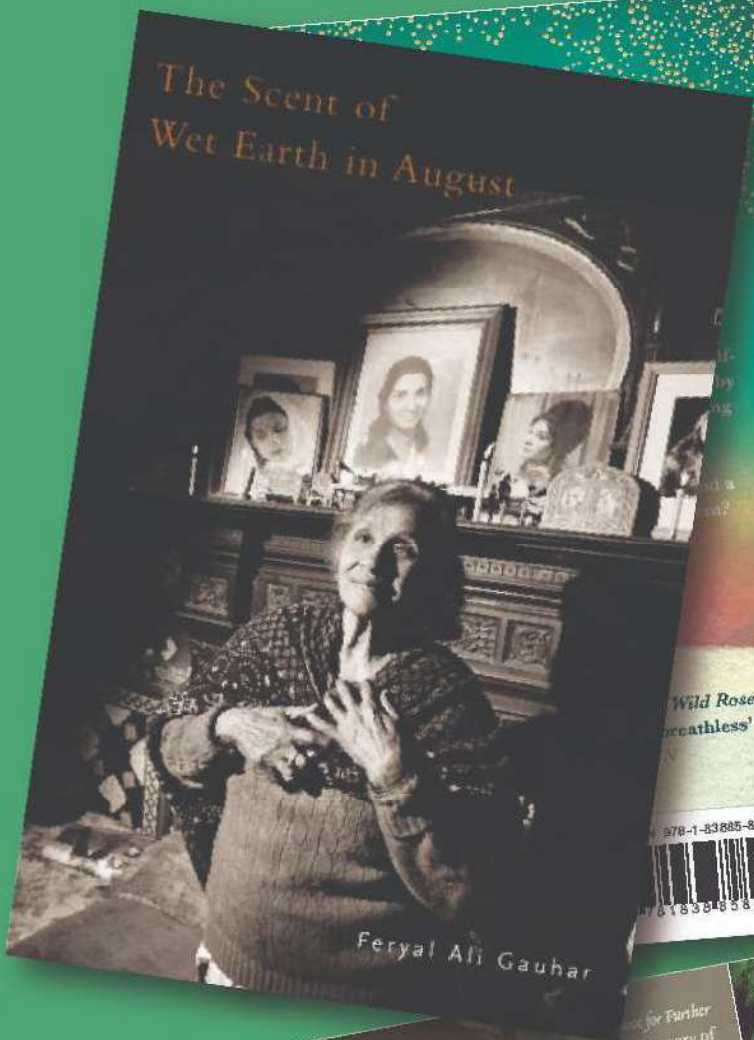
The Bridge Magazine is an opportunity for you to explore multifarious genres of writing and experiment with innovative ideas. So join us to enjoy being a part of the third edition of the magazine coming out next year. For details on submission criteria, visit and register on:

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Syeda Feryal Ali Gauhar

**FEATURED WRITER
FROM PAKISTAN**



The Scent of
Wet Earth in August

Feryal Ali Gauhar

'Wild Roses
breathless'

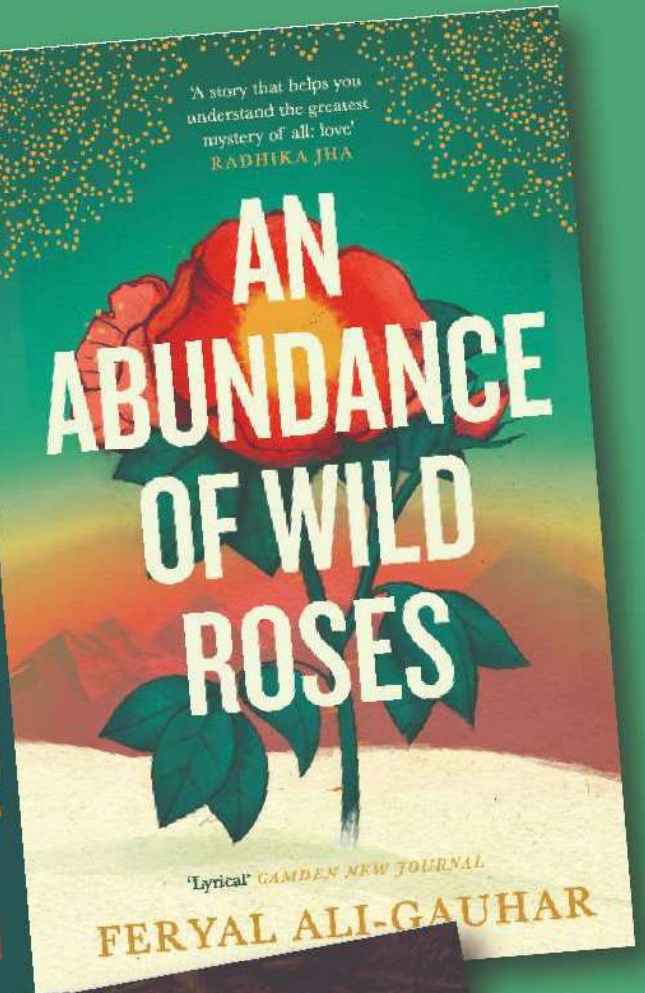
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AN ABUNDANCE OF WILD ROSES

FERYAL
ALI-GAUHAR

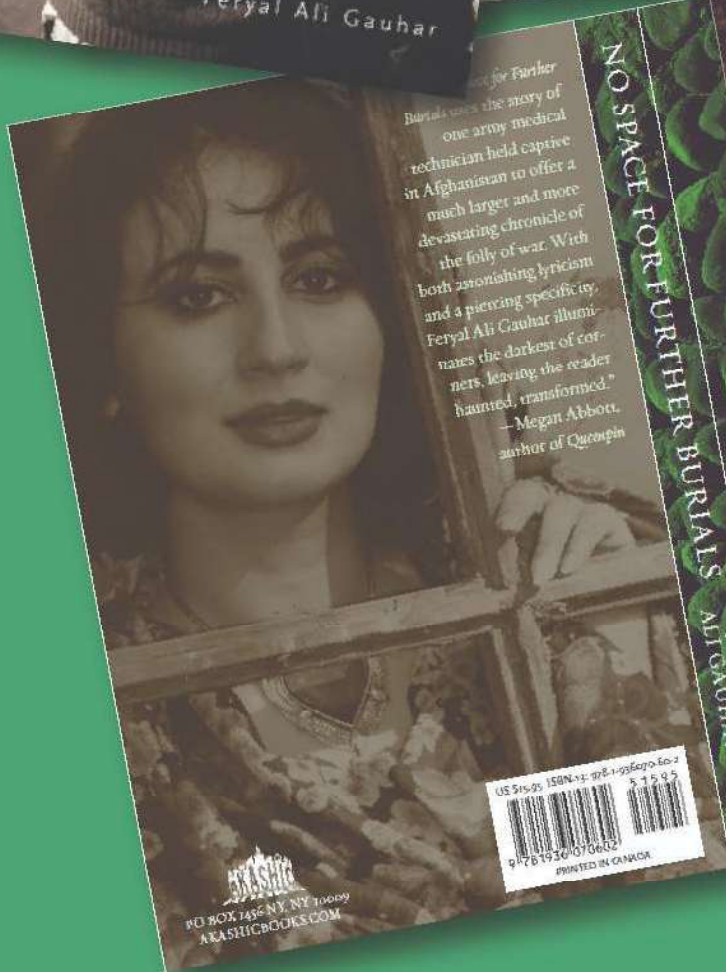


'A story that helps you
understand the greatest
mystery of all: love'
RADHIKA JHA

AN ABUNDANCE OF WILD ROSES

'Lyrical' CAMDEN NEW JOURNAL

FERYAL ALI-GAUHAR



For Further
Burials uses the story of
one army medical
technician held captive
in Afghanistan to offer a
much larger and more
devastating chronicle of
the folly of war. With
both astonishing lyricism
and a piercing specificity,
Feryal Ali Gauhar illumi-
nates the darkest of cor-
ners, leaving the reader
haunted, transformed."
—Megan Abbott,
author of *Queen Bees*

NO SPACE FOR FURTHER BURIALS

FERYAL
ALI-GAUHAR



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NO SPACE FOR FURTHER BURIALS

FERYAL ALI GAUHAR

'Feryal Ali Gauhar has crafted a novel
of unrelenting truth, held in transcendent
prose and an exquisite grace.'
—Chris Abani, author of *Graceland*

A Chronicler of Social Hypocrisies

Taha Kehar - Pakistan

Born and raised in Lahore, Feryal Ali Gauhar is an actor, filmmaker, environmentalist, social activist and an acclaimed author of three novels. She belongs to a family of dynamic women who have forged their own path in various professional realms. Khadija Gauhar, her mother, was an eminent social scientist while her sister, Madeeha Gauhar, was an actor and playwright who founded the esteemed Ajoka Theatre. Feryal Ali Gauhar attended Kinnaird College and later read Political Economy at McGill University in Montreal. She went on to pursue television broadcasting and documentary film production in Europe and the US. An ardent activist for the democratic cause, Feryal Ali Gauhar was imprisoned by two military regimes in Pakistan. In 1999, she served as a Goodwill Ambassador for the United Nations Population Fund. Feryal Ali Gauhar has also been an adviser to the government of Pakistan on matters pertaining to the management of cultural heritage sites earmarked for hydropower projects.

Feryal Ali Gauhar's oeuvre explores the plight of the vulnerable segments of society whose voices are suppressed in an inherently patriarchal milieu. Her first novel *The Scent of Wet Earth in August* is based on her film *Tibbi Gali*, which was released in Urdu and Pashto. In *Hybrid Tapestries: The Development of Pakistani Literature in English*, writer and literary critic Muneeza Shamsie states that Feryal Ali Gauhar's debut novel "makes a biting comment on social hypocrisy and the victimization of the marginalized in Pakistan". According to Shamsie, *The Scent of Wet Earth in*

August evokes Lahore's red-light district, which is "a world intrinsic to Pakistan's patriarchal feudal culture". Featuring a motley crew of characters, the novel examines how the conflicting forces of pleasure and piety coexist in the infamous Hira Mandi. At the same time, the novel's setting -- a street in the red-light district called Tibbi Gali -- effectively portrays the complex interplay of power dynamics in an increasingly unequal society.



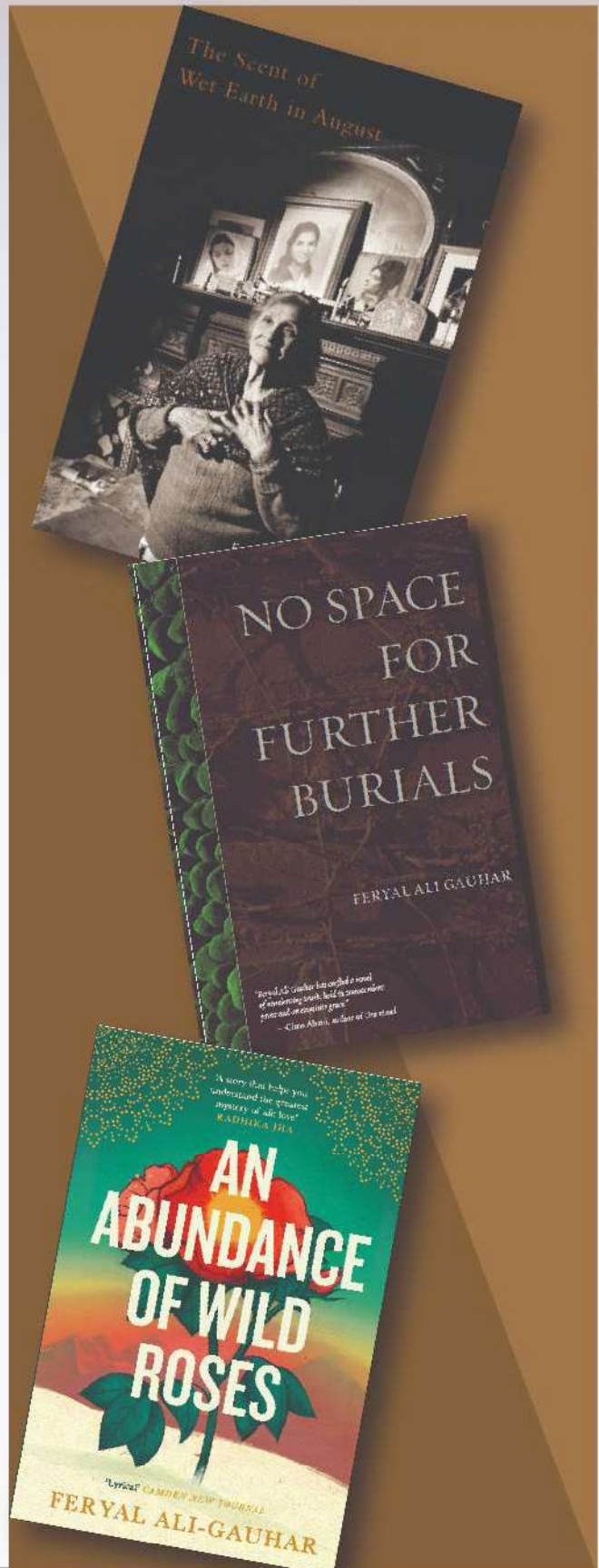
The Scent of Wet Earth in August explores the coming-of-age of Fatimah, the mute daughter of a prostitute. She resides in the crumbling Begum Haveli with three erstwhile courtesans who act as her surrogate mothers. Fatimah initially falls in love with Bobby, the owner of a video parlor, and later finds herself drawn towards Shabbir, a maulvi's apprentice, who is battling his own inner demons and traumatic past.

At its core, the novel spotlights the acid attacks and honour-based violence in Pakistani society. In addition, *The Scent of Wet Earth in August* reveals how taken-for-granted assumptions about the male ego and the ownership of women's bodies enable people to get away with such heinous crimes.

Feryal Ali Gauhar's second novel *No Space for Further Burials* won the Patras Bokhari Award and was translated into numerous European languages. Moving beyond the confines of a distinctly Pakistani milieu, Feryal Ali-Gauhar shifts her focus to the troubled environs of war-torn Afghanistan. The novel falls neatly into

literature inspired by the events of 9/11 and reflects the author's commitment to exposing the challenges faced by the dispossessed. Set one year after 9/11 and the US invasion of Afghanistan, *No Space for Further Burials* is narrated from the perspective of a medical technician in the US Army who is abducted by Afghan rebels during a recce mission. The narrator finds himself in a one-time asylum as the prisoner of an Afghan warlord. Surrounded by a diverse array of inmates, the medical technician confronts a perilous situation wherein he transforms from a so-called 'victor' to a victim of circumstance. Written with heartbreaking candor, *No Space for Further Burials* explores the hardship and futility of war in an intensely polarized world. The author's third novel, titled *An Abundance of Wild Roses*, was penned through the assistance of the Roger Deakin award for environmental activism and marks a new and meaningful direction in her oeuvre. *An Abundance of Wild Roses* is a moving meditation on nature and ecological damage set against the backdrop of a staunchly patriarchal village in Pakistan's scenic northern belt. In a review published in Dawn Books & Author, Sahar Shehryar states that Feryal Ali-Gauhar's latest work harbors "a deep and poetic sadness". As per Shehryar, the author "creates a profound connection with her readers, making them realise that humans are on a collision course against themselves and the nature that sustains them."

Feryal Ali Gauhar's three novels obtain their creative thrust from the socio-political inequities and environmental injustices within the South Asian context. She is a multifaceted and deeply sensitive writer who has drawn attention to copious social issues through a fictional lens.





Autumn Harvest

Syeda Feryal Ali Gauhar

Pakistan

At night the ocean was a field of barley when the wind flattens the ripening grain and the sheaves lie level with the earth. In the distance the lights of the fishing boats were fireflies dancing above the waves. And the gulls, they were the laughter of young children.

The air hung itself above the surface of the dark, whispering water, speaking in a language which only the hounded could hear.

He turned from his perch on the wall between himself and the sea and set off in the direction of the balloon vender. He walked quickly. In his hand he held enough money to buy the bright plastic airplane which hung from the pole held by the balloon vender like a shepherd's staff. He had not yet bought a gift for the younger girl. The airplane would do; the girl would like it, he was sure

.....
In her hand the many-folded paper nestled itself like a sleeping child. Zarmina had studied the markings on that sheet of paper as if she could make sense of the curves and flourishes which made up the words of this secret message. She had

looked away when her mother's gaze had met hers. She knew she could never unravel this hatred, this festering enmity which had already claimed so many lives. With the unwavering certainty of worship, she had given her heart to Zahir Shah the day he had climbed onto the common roof of their homes and declared that she was his beloved, the one he would carry away and make his own, the one in whose eyes he saw the sun and the moon and rain clouds on a summer's day. She knew she could never surmount the distance which separated them after the killings, not even if she was to remove her aching heart and place it on the palm of her father's calloused hand.

.....
It was still dark when she woke, the letter now pressed against her bosom. Stepping tenderly over the legs of her sisters and then gliding out of the room, her veil held in the tight clasp of her quivering mouth, she crossed the courtyard of her home without once looking back. In her hand she carried a small bundle, and in her heart there was nothing but the lament of a bride leaving her mother, never to return.



The bus stopped suddenly. Just ahead a crowd had gathered. She covered her face with the veil and looked out of the window, dread beating against her temples. A passenger was gesturing to the driver to step down and take a look at the body thrown by the side of the road. She peered into the abyss of the graveyard and made out a man's body, his face buried in the lavender and his clothes bloody. She shuddered, and then consoled herself with the thought that she would be with her beloved soon. He would be waiting for her, and together they would begin a new life unblemished by the anguish in the hearts of men and women who had buried a son or given away a daughter so that another son could live.

There was an argument; the driver did not stop. As the bus lurched forward, she turned to look again at the body of the dead man. In his hand he clasped something which looked like a toy, a plastic plane, a suitable gift for a young boy. She smiled; he wanted many sons, he had told her, and she had promised him the richness of an autumn's harvest.

The Dying Room

The road leading up to the hospital swerved sharply, jolting the cargo inside the battered jeep which plowed its way up that steep slope as if it had a mission of a religious nature to complete. Clouds of dust followed the vehicle, obscuring the path left behind. In front, the mountain, stripped bare of trees and the fruit they would have borne and the birds which would have perched on tremulous, fragrant branches, rose with great dignity, despite its obvious grief. The road itself bore the burden of the scars which had carved themselves into deep pits, as if to signify that destruction, too, had a place in this landscape. The driver of the vehicle peered into the sun which had not yet set, lingering at the edge of that mountain, hesitant, almost, to continue its journey in a sky the color of desolation. Beneath his cupped hand, the driver's eyes were fogged with apprehension.

It had been many days since he had made this round up the steep, forbidding sides of Marastun. In fact, had it not been for the firangi who sat next to him now, clutching on to the handle built into the jeep's dashboard, had it not been for Mr. William Edward Howe, he would most certainly not have risked his life and the battered vehicle he had owned and looked after with pride for eleven years and a few months, having paid for it with money saved up from his years of driving Al Sayed Abdullah Hashim, the manager of a construction firm in the Gulf. He would not have risked his life at this point, no matter who had asked him or what lay in it for him. He would not have risked his life for the sole reason that in his wife's arms lay his first-born, a daughter, but a beautiful one, one he had named Anarguli after the sweet scent of a pomegranate blossom. It was only the possibility that Mr. William Edward Howe, of Middletown Springs, Vermont, USA, would get him and his wife and their new born daughter a visa to get out of the inferno his country had become which urged him to make this trip, this last one up to that terrible place where people gathered to die and where all hope of survival hinged on the comfort of the madness which prevailed. That, and the fact that it was always difficult to refuse Mr. William, for he was a man with great love in his heart and deep concern in his soul for the suffering people of this war-ravaged land. His war -ravaged land, the one he wanted so desperately to heal, the one he wanted so desperately to leave. "I believe you will have to slow down now, Ibrahim", William said. "The boxes at the back are shifting around dangerously and I don't want to risk losing any of the supplies." He spoke softly, in spite of the urgency in his voice. William was a cautious man; deep lines of care broke the even surface of his skin around the eyes, reminders of the years spent shielding his gaze from the harsh mountain sun and from the harshness of the lives he had come to live amongst. It would not have been possible for William to look long into the eyes of the children at the hospital where doctors grew weary of not being able to find limbs to fit the stumps left over from the exploding



mines littering the landscape, innocuous things, tiny metal objects shaped like a child's toy, fashioned with dangerous intent, taking away children's lives, or at least their ability to walk through it with both feet planted firmly on the ground. William had not dared to look into the faces of the children who were carried into the ill-lit, airless rooms by elder brothers or fathers or uncles or neighbors, each one of them with fear etched into the burning orbs of their eyes. Ibrahim put the vehicle into four-wheel drive and revved the engine before taking the hair-pin bend requiring him to reverse the jeep a couple of times before maneuvering it for the final climb. William held onto the dashboard handle, his knuckles turning white from the strain. Ibrahim kept one hand on the shorter gear stick, quick to put the wheels back into normal drive. He did not show the distress which turned William's stomach inside out, spilling secrets buried inside the folds of intestines and colon, secrets of which he was ashamed, fear of which he was afraid. Ibrahim had been born here, at the foot of Marastun, the mountain was like a mother to him. Before the jeep began its final ascent, Ibrahim slipped the jeep into second gear, easing up on the engine as he slowed down, conserving energy for the last ridge which he could see looming up before them. The jeep neared the ridge. Ibrahim reached again for the gear stick and pressed down on it to position all four wheels into climbing over this last bit of rough terrain. The jeep lurched forward. William pressed against the dashboard to keep himself from falling against it. The engine shut itself off just as Ibrahim tried to move the jeep forward. He felt the jeep tip over the edge of the road. Two of the tires had climbed onto a boulder. The jeep teetered over. William heard the stocks of supplies falling over the side. Ibrahim struggled to unlock the jammed steering wheel. Nothing moved. William turned towards Ibrahim and tried to calm the panic

ising in his throat. "You need to straighten her up, Ibrahim, you need to get the wheels off that rock", he said. Sweat ran down the sides of his face, and his fingers curled around the handle in front of him, squeezing the blood out of his hands. Ibrahim did not speak, concentrating on unlocking the jammed steering wheel. Each time he pushed his weight against the steering wheel, trying to force it, the jeep would rock. William could hear the boxes of food and medication slide around, some crashing onto the ground, some falling into the gorge carved out by a river, long dried up and dead. "Take it easy, Ibrahim, you need to keep the jeep steady". Ibrahim grunted in response. With one hand, he tried the key in the ignition and jiggled the steering wheel with the other. The wheel snapped open. Ibrahim grinned, then turned to William. "I have done, Mr. William. I have fix-ed it. No need to worry now, Mr. William," he said. William looked askance at Ibrahim, forcing a smile from his bloodless mouth. Ibrahim pressed down on the accelerator. The back wheels pushed forward, and the jeep straightened itself off the rock upon which it had perched precariously a treacherous moment ago. William released his hold on the handle before him, easing the tendons in his neck and shifting in his seat until his back relaxed and he was able to smile back at Ibrahim who was readying himself for the final ascent. William knew that he was in good hands. Ibrahim had always managed, in the worst of circumstances, on the worst roads cutting through the ravaged map of





this lost land. But that was not the problem.

William looked down below him and tried to spot the boxes which had fallen out of the jeep a few minutes ago. All he could see was the barren soil clinging to the sides of the mountain. There was no sign of the boxes which had carried tinned food and vials of injections and packs of medication for the patients at the hospital at the top of Marastun. William shrugged his shoulders, having learnt that this was the way of destiny, that nothing he could have done would have stopped those boxes from crashing down the mountain side. All he thought now was that he was still alive, that Ibrahim had saved their lives, and that they were almost there, at the hospital where the patients who had entered years ago had even forgotten their names. * Ibrahim awoke later than usual this morning, not that he had managed much sleep in any case. He was concerned that the descent down the hazardous slope, back to the town where Mr. William and his group of medics had pitched camp, may not be an easy one. What if the brakes failed? He had smelt the rubber burning against the brake-pad when he had pulled up the handbrake and tried to budge the jeep off the boulder upon which it had climbed, like a spider. It was a difficult choice to make – to release the brake and to let the jeep slide off the boulder and into the gorge below. In his dreams, Ibrahim had seen the bottom of that gorge. There were many bones scattered over the slopes, and in the water floated the still whole bodies of young children, shot in the back, their faces stretched in a permanent grimace sculpted when the bullet had shattered their ribs and entered their hearts. But that had happened a long time ago, Ibrahim knew that. Then why did these children appear in his dreams again and again, all night, like a relentless warning that all was not well in Marastun. How could it be? How could anything be fit and fine in a hospital where people came to die, ending their lives with nothing but the comfort of divine recompense? William had slept next to him, but now his cot was empty, as was the room where once boxes of medicines

and some food had been stacked against pock-marked walls. Now there was nothing. Not after the cases had fallen into the gorge, that place where children floated in shallow water the colour of pomegranates. “Mr. William! Good morning, Mr. William. I make tea for you. I have something of yesterday’s lunch left in my backpack. My wife give some dried fruit and a naan with some grapes from our own vine at home. Where are you, Mr. William? Ibrahim stuck his head out of the door of the small room and stepped into the verandah. There was no one about. They had arrived late after their jeep had stalled up on the last ridge leading to Marastun. William had thought it better to retire rather than wake up the exhausted staff. He would see them in the morning. Now, there was no one around, not even Mr. William. Making his way to the end of the verandah, Ibrahim peered through barred windows into the dark, suffocating rooms. He could see bodies, inert, huddled beneath lumpy, filthy, torn quilts. Nothing moved. Mr. William was not around. Ibrahim called out, his voice rising in frenzy. Where was this man, this kind man from a place far away, paying penance for what his compatriots had done to this country in the name of Enduring Freedom? Ibrahim ran to the back of the compound, to the place where the jeep had been parked. Mr. William was not there. Ibrahim rushed into the small office where Mr. William would check the patients, helping them to suffer less, easing them towards the inevitable. In front of Ibrahim, hanging from the old hook which had once held a fan, was Mr. William, his eyes closed and his head scarf tied around his neck and looped around the iron hook. A piece of paper floated down from the rickety desk, a white butterfly. Ibrahim picked it up and held it up to the window. In faltering English, pronouncing each letter as he had been taught, he read Mr. William’s last message: I could not save them; I could not save myself. All around him, Ibrahim could hear the wind sighing, Freedom, Freedom, a soft dirge for the people who had lived through the war but could not make it out of the dying room.



Featured Writer from Pakistan - Syeda Feryal Ali Gauhar

WRITER'S BIO

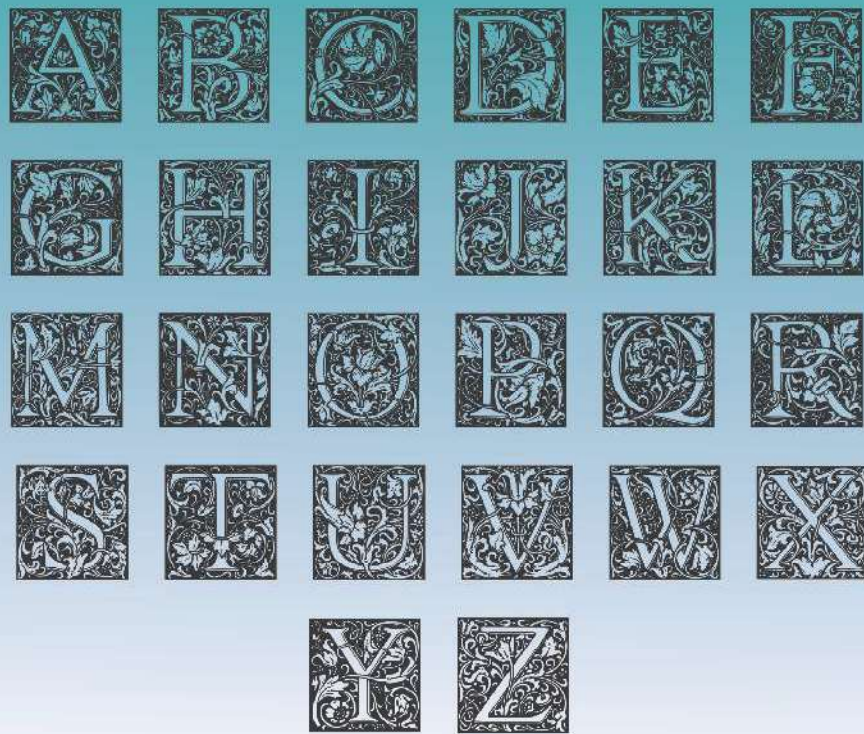
Feryal Ali Gauhar was born in Lahore in a Syed family hailing from Peshawar. She studied at the Lahore American School, Kinnaird College, Lahore, Sweet Briar College, Virginia, USA, McGill University, Montreal, Canada, the University of London, UK, the University of Southern California, USA, and Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, USA. Feryal read Political Economy at McGill University and holds an MPhil degree in Cultural Heritage Management. She was enrolled in the doctoral program in Heritage Studies program at Cambridge University. She currently serves as Advisor to the Water and Power Development Authority for the management of cultural heritage in the direct impact area of Diamer Basha Dam. She has recently completed the first ever digital archive of the most significant ancient rock carvings which will be submerged in the reservoir of the Diamer Basha Dam. Ms. Ali Gauhar was a Gates Scholar in Global Leadership for Reproductive Health and Rights. She served as a United Nations Goodwill Ambassador for the Population Fund and lectures at apex institutions in Pakistan. Feryal has worked with the World Monuments Fund, New York and the Commonwealth Foundation, London. She has served as Project Consultant for the Italian Archaeological

Mission in Pakistan and as Advisor to the Minister of Culture, KP. Feryal served on the consultative committees of Heritage Foundation for the restoration of the Sethi House in Peshawar, the conservation of the Tombs of Sultan Ibrahim and Amir Sultan Mohammad at the World Heritage Site of Makli, and is currently preparing to film the Zero-Donor, Zero Carbon project established by Yasmeen Lari in Sindh. Feryal has led the team which wrote the cultural heritage management plan for Diamer Basha Dam and the Dasu Hydropower Project in Indus Kohistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Feryal raises funds for the SmileAgain Foundation for the rehabilitative surgery of acid burn survivors and serves as an Executive Member for the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty towards Animals, running a shelter for homeless animals. She has written three critically acclaimed novels. Her most recent novel, "An Abundance of Wild Roses", (Canongate, UK, 2024) has been described as a masterpiece. She has made over forty films on marginalization, violence against women, environmental sustainability, and poverty. She is Pakistan's first woman digital videographer and editor, making her first feature film in 1994. She is Ambassador for the Pakistan Softball Federation and Reading Envoy for the Federal Ministry of Education.





Stories



My English Teacher

Dr. Zakia Resshid Ehsen - Pakistan

The papers flung over across her face and fell noiselessly on the floor covered with a wall to wall Turkish expensive carpet. But the thump of every leaf against its soft woollen fluff was deafening enough to tear her humble existence. "I asked you to leave this room", shouted Ms. Shah. The sentence struck her like jagged stones chopping out the minutest atom in her body. The deep rasp in the voice struck her like thunderbolt. This very moment she wished that the floor would split open and her entire existence would drain into it. "But Ma'am...". Ms. Shah interrupted and made it quite clear that she wasn't in any mood to entertain a plea. She turned her lean figure back at her as though to avoid any contact with an untouchable. "Just leave and for heaven's sake don't come in my room again. I can't bear to see people like you...umm...send the class representative, instead." She added as if she remembered to fill in a missing blank in a question in a questionnaire. "Kindly do me another favour, spare me the pleasure of not seeing your stupid face again". Silence followed...

Maria stood still, her feet feeling so heavy that they refused to move after such an embarrassing encounter. She knew today Ms. Shah was again in her customary mood, her disparaging anger targeting lowlife students like herself. The midday heat intensified, and the sun's glow pouring in through the French windows suddenly dimmed. Instantly, the room transformed into a dimly lit stage, with spotlights amplifying Maria's presence. Pictures of eminent literary figures such as Shakespeare and Seamus Heaney adorned the walls, seemingly sneering at her condition through their expensive frames.

"You students lack the skills to write and speak English at all. Why have you opted for English Literature, anyway? You do not deserve to study the English Language; leave the department, please! Save me the ordeal of teaching such incompetent people," Ms. Shah's words echoed, accompanied by mocks and frowns that seemed to pelt her from all around. The spotlight drew closer, intensifying its glare. Maria felt almost naked,

exposed to every ounce of shame imaginable. The room turned surreal.

“Are you still here?” Ms. Shah’s voice jolted her back to her disconcerted consciousness.

Maria noticed a fag tightly pressed between her bony fingers. Her lips were tightly pressed and Ms Shah’s protruding angry gaze wrenched her young aspirations. Her mouth contemptuously twitched and raised an eye brow while she speculated Maria’s threadbare shirt. She condescendingly waved her bony hands as a signal for Maria to leave. “This module of English Literature is a programme for the privileged”. Ms Shah declared and looked askance at Maria’s quivering figure. She drew a long drag on her cigarette and continued, “not for people like yourself, now get lost!”, while she spoke, her wrinkled lips emitted a stench of arrogance mixed with tabacco. This woman, whom she had always worshiped as her teacher, doesn’t seem to understand what it truly means to be a teacher. Can a teacher really be so indifferent? Perhaps she was taught to treat her students—brown students—this way. But she is like us, isn’t she?

Then why such arrogance?

My mother always instructed me that teachers are like second mothers—a substitute for our own. They are, so to speak, our true mothers. They nourish and love their pupils despite all their flaws. They explore, discover, and work tirelessly to bring out the best, even from their worst.

As a soldier of a lost battle, with lowered head, accumulated the splinters of her shattered esteem and prepared to leave. Then she paused. She shut her eyes tight and dashed blindly towards the lifeless accomplishments adorned on Ms. Shah’s wall. She struck with full force whatever came her way. A toss of one stroke right was followed by a thrash on the left. When the deed was done and when she was sated to pour out all her angst on every bit in the room. She looked at Ms. Shah

standing out of breath amidst the ruins of faint pride. The certificates of Ms. Shah’s accomplishments from Oxford University would not mock Maria’s impotent Asian accent anymore.

The day was adrift and sun glowed brighter than before. She lifted her head upright with dignity and muttered “I will be an English teacher but never be like you, ever”.



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Writer’s Bio

Dr. Zakia Resshid Ehsen is an Associate Professor at Kinnaird College for Women. She has earned prestigious certificates in Creative Writing and Teaching English Language from globally renowned institutions, including the University of Edinburgh, the University of Reading, the University of Sweden, and Wesleyan University. Her scholarly contributions include research papers published in esteemed international journals such as Shakespeare, Contemporary Social Science, and Multicultural Shakespeare. Her academic journey reflects a steadfast dedication to advancing literary and critical discourse. She is also the author of the forthcoming book, Shakespeare in Pakistan: Appropriating the Bard in Theatres, Cinema, and Academia, published in the Routledge Studies in Shakespeare series by Routledge (Taylor & Francis Group).

The

LOST

words

Taha Kehar - Pakistan

1

'I can't write fiction anymore,' Jamal told Mina during one of their interminable telephone conversations. 'The television footage from Gaza has paralyzed me and stifled my creative voice.'

Stunned by this declaration, Mina clicked her tongue in frustration and consoled him with reminders of his triumphs as a storyteller.

'You can't give up on fiction,' she said. 'You've written charming stories about people and their idiosyncrasies. I don't think anyone I know has written about the human condition with such sensitivity and grace. Your fiction has the power to help us survive the calamities of this wretched world.'

'I don't think the world deserves fiction anymore,' Jamal said. 'If it can't confront the truth of its own injustices, why should it have the benefit of escaping into a make-believe world?'

His words exerted a magnetic field, drawing Mina into the landscape of her own grievances. She began one of her oft-repeated monologues about the ongoing genocide in Gaza. Jamal listened earnestly, hoping his friend's fevered words would echo his own distress over the crisis unfolding in a faraway land. As Mina spoke, it occurred to him that words, whether spoken or written, could do little to alleviate pain. Catharsis was a fantasy, a fiction unto itself.

Fatigued by the gravity of her own spirited monologue, Mina fell silent and then heaved a loud sigh. 'Why don't you write a fictional piece about Gaza?' Mina piped up. 'If you don't want to give the world an escape into fantasy, why don't you

show them where they're going wrong through fiction.'

Exasperated by her suggestion, Jamal felt the urge to reprimand Mina for her indifference to his dilemma, but reined himself in. Mina couldn't be held accountable for what she didn't know. He hadn't told her how words, which were once within his grasp, had now eluded him. Paralyzed by writer's block, he was now a prisoner of circumstances he couldn't control. Without his creative voice, the prospect of confronting the blank page seemed threatening.

'That sounds like a wonderful idea,' he said before he abruptly ended the call. This is a solitary battle, Jamal told himself. I can't pull others into this vortex with me.

2

After his conversation with Mina, Jamal walked into his study and threw his lanky frame onto the revolving chair of his desk. He hurriedly pulled out a ballpoint, unscrewed its cap and opened his black notebook. Jamal adjusted his pen at a slant above an empty page and creased his brows in concentration.

As he gazed at the lined paper in front of him, Jamal felt unsettled by own foolishness.

Anyone who'd walked past the study would have assumed that he was immersed in writing yet another masterpiece. No one knew that his words had been playing hide-and-seek with him for months. No one would have suspected that he had staged this performance for months – a ritual of sorts to retrieve those lost words.

At first, Jamal was convinced that the pen held a grudge against him and had barred a comfortable flow of words on paper. It eventually dawned on him that the pen was a mere tool in his creative struggle. He could only exert control over its movements along his chosen canvas once his heart and mind permitted him to.

Jamal's daily performances didn't attract any spectators. His house, once bustling with chaos



and energetic chatter, was now eclipsed in silence. His mother, once an indomitable presence, had succumbed to the cruelties of a sudden illness. After her death, his siblings had carved out their own lives and had no space for an ailing, aging brother who needed their undivided attention. Unmarried, he'd sought comfort in the arms of a demanding lover who'd sapped his spirits, turning him into a shadow of his glorious self.

All Jamal had now were these performances, these futile attempts at producing yet another literary masterpiece. Now, as he attempted to repeat the act, Jamal felt gratified that no one knew of his rapid descent into a creative oblivion.

Mina lived in another city, so it was easy to deceive her with fantasies of how prolific he was. They'd known each other as children and lost touch after university, careers and marriage interrupted the course of their friendship. Jamal had reunited with Mina in October, mere weeks after darkness descended onto the streets of distant Gaza. Their bond, solidified by a shared passion for the Palestinian cause, had extended to other aspects of their lives. Mina had read Jamal's stories and found in them the essence of humanity.

Your fiction has the power to help us survive the calamities of this wretched world. Mina's words, which had angered him earlier, now beckoned him out of his self-imposed creative confinement.

As he contemplated her advice, Jamal felt he couldn't write about Gaza from a cold, unreliable distance. It felt disingenuous, almost cruel to write about a reality he didn't know like the back of his hand.

Just then, a question was lodged in his mind, reminding him of unforgotten pains and treacheries. *Is my creative silence a sign of complicity?*

For months, Jamal had silently endured the loss of a parent and a painful separation from his lover. His grief had become his private playground – a hermitage where he found protection from, if not justice for, the miseries he'd endured. *Is it fair to remain silent?*

The question assailed him for a fleeting moment.

I can't allow my pain to shackle me in chains,

he told himself. With those unspoken words, the desire for freedom became the fuel that awakened his sensibilities. The motionless pen shivered in his hand before it performed its rhythmic dance above the page.

3

Jamal's first attempt was a protest against the illness that ate away at his mother's healthy, middle-aged body.

A cold diagnosis, he wrote. A cruel fate. A lifetime of separation from those who we'll never stop loving. Unsaid goodbyes linger in the air – reminders of conversations we'll never have.

He paused to read the words scribbled on the page. Satisfied with the outcome, he drew an asterisk underneath the short paragraph – an invitation for a fresh outpouring of thought. Jamal raised his head with a writerly determination, as if he'd been struck by a revelation about what he'd write next.

Tonight, let's celebrate your treachery, he wrote to the lover who'd abandoned him. You often said that the thought of a separation from me would symbolize a separation from yourself. How does it feel to be separated from yourself? Don't answer that question, my love. I know you very well. The truth is that you valued my wallet more than you ever valued me. Greed led you toward me, but it couldn't disguise your foul, contemptible nature. I applaud you for your separation from me. Don't forget to remain on the lookout for your next victim with deep pockets. I don't think you're capable of any better.

Jamal glanced at the words scrawled out on the page, shocked by their acidic lilt, their undisguised cynicism. Anyone who read these lines could never attribute them to him. His fiction had humanized those who were beyond redemption. Jamal always reminded the impatient, bigoted reader that circumstances led people to make mistakes. He'd never beat his characters with a stick. Today, he'd used the written word to point a finger at the lover who had deceived him.

Stunned by his willingness to use his pen as a sword, Jamal wondered how this transformation had come about. His rage hadn't lost its intensity; it was still pulsing through his veins, lingering like an untamed beast in his heart, waiting for the benefit of release.

While reading the passage for a second time, Jamal was struck by a curious thought. *My anger cannot be suppressed or silenced*, he told himself. *It needs to be channelled in the right direction*

Driven by a sudden compulsion to express himself, Jamal began writing feverishly until the empty page was covered with his illegible cursive.

4

Before I lost you to the vagaries of a violent war, you were still human. Your heart pulsed with a childlike desire for justice, indiscriminate in its intensity, untainted by murderous impulses.

On a gloomy winter's night, we sat around a campfire, with a quilt draped around our shoulders. The orange flames invoked the storyteller within you. You told me the chilling tale of a heartbroken woman, killed by a man she trusted, who lurked through the corridors of a home that was once her own. Frightened by the ghostly presence, the new residents of the house performed an exorcism and expelled her from those corridors.

'She had every right to be in the house,' you said, wagging a finger in the air.

'Does she?' I asked cynically. *'She can't possibly claim ownership in death over what was hers in life.'*

The traces of a smile played on your lips. You leaned forward and patted my shoulder. (I'd now perceive this gesture to be patronizing -- a furtive sign of your future callousness. Back then, I saw it as a marker of a healthy friendship.)

'Would you want to live in a house built on a graveyard?' you asked.

I shook my head.

'Precisely,' you said with triumph in your voice.

'We can't build homes on the tombstones of the

dead. Similarly, the woman's spirit has a claim over the home she lived in. The exorcism was nothing short of an unjust eviction.'

I nodded, marveling at your empathy for the perceived villain. This new-found respect brightened the darkened pathways of our friendship for decades.

Years later, the war became a televised truth. The fiery flames of the bombardment I'd witnessed on the news reminded me of the night we spent under the glow of a campfire. I recalled how a ghost story had become the doorway for a lesson in empathy and sought comfort in the hope that, somewhere, humanity was still alive. I rang you later that day to seek consolation in those distressed hours and soak up some of your youthful idealism.

I should have known that not all childhood fantasies are blessed with the gift of longevity. I assumed the flames of destruction would ignite the spirit of revolt in your heart. Instead, your cold response to the calamity startled me.

'It doesn't matter.'

Astonished by your indifference, I tried to invoke the child within you.

'But don't you remember the story you told me? Don't you remember what you said about building homes on graveyards?'

'That storyteller was deluded,' you replied calmly. *'The living cannot carry the burden of what's been lost. They must look towards the future.'*

'Not everything has been lost,' I said. *'All we have to do is assert the people's right to exist in their homeland, to not become ghosts.'*

I've forgotten your response to my passionate words, but I cannot forget the note of cruelty in your voice. Like a specter, it still haunts the graveyard of my mind.

5

The creaking din of the ceiling fan in his study ferried Jamal back to reality. He let out a gentle sigh, relieved that he had challenged himself creatively, allowing light to momentarily pierce through the dark chambers of his mind.

I'll read the story to Mina tomorrow, Jamal told himself.

When he rose from the revolving chair and left the study, Jamal wasn't concerned about what Mina would think about his story. His lost words had retraced their steps and found their way back to him. Nothing else could rival this homecoming.



Writer's Bio

Taha Kehar is a novelist, journalist and literary critic. A law graduate from SOAS, London, Kehar is the author of three acclaimed novels, *No Funeral for Nazia* (Neem Tree Press, 2023), *Typically Tanya* (HarperCollins India, 2018) and *Of Rift and Rivalry* (Palimpsest Publishers, 2014). He is the co-editor of *The Stained-Glass Window: Stories of the Pandemic from Pakistan*.



His Keys

(A pure fiction – names, place, plot)

Dirha Qazi - Pakistan

It all started when he handed me his keys. The destruction; the doom; the fate I signed up for myself.

Hashim had always been everyone's favourite. Although, I happened to be his closest confidant among the whole boys' gang, I could never really claim the entire friendship to myself. There were always other contenders. He was someone's 'great friend', someone's 'only friend' and somebody would call him his 'truest friend'. Was I jealous? I would not say so. He always treated me how I wished to be treated and when, one day, he handed me over his keys to his private studio in the basement of an old building erected near main M M Alam road, I had certainly swollen with pride and affirmation that I was the one.

The best friend of Hashim.

The immense focus laid on the friendship

part was because Hashim was an orphan with no siblings. How he inherited entire family property while managing to be a humble being; with always so much love and money to shower around, was too much of a story for us to stress about. So, we only focused on the good parts: The first one being Hashim's goodness. The second one, Hashim's wealth.

The day he handed me over the keys to his studio after we had already been there a couple of times for parties, was a day of celebration. Celebration of friendship, of trust, of loyalty. At the same time, it was also a masterstroke of luck for a poor man, who knew he would have never earned a single room in Anarkali, let alone a fully furnished studio at M. M. Alam road, Lahore. Hashim had not just gifted me a fancy studio, he had also gifted me a better destiny. And I, like every other pretentious but internally-giggling, a modesty embracing and wealth hating bloc on the outside, because that was

most convenient, eagerly signed the papers after a brief drama of hesitation, that I quickly winded up, in fear of Hashim changing his mind.

Gluttony is bad, everybody says, but even worse is the need of love in your life. It was not just the wealth of Hashim that brought me to my knees, but the love too. So, when Hashim finally turned up in my life to make it blossom, I was deprived of all my ability to judge him. Now when I think back to this day, I feel helpless for how I could have escaped the past 7 years of imprisonment. If the modesty I always professed was real, and if I had not dwelled too much on the void Hashim filled in my life.

Back to the day of festivity, I spent whole night pondering over how to manage my life onwards. The life after studio. How much I needed to struggle now, how much I did not. The first few weeks went by just like that. Me, my thousand business plans, dreams of more dollars and ultimately more friends. The pattern went on until it had been 3 years being the rich owner of the studio, where every malpractice was allowed, additionally. You name it, and Hashim would arrange it. I had become a much more incompetent and lazy human being, contrary to my vision. I was always high on drugs and the still new, wealth. And so whatever Hashim would bring to me for signatures, I, without having the need to read, would feel obliged to sign them away.

It was not then surprising that one day, the studio bell that nobody had rung in weeks, rang hysterically. I barely managed to get on my feet after snoozing hard for entire noon that I couldn't decipher at the first glance that it was police standing at the door. However, I still remember the victorious eyes of the ASP. And he must have remembered the defeated of eyes of mine.

I lost again. This time again, due to my mistake.

The crimes of embezzlement, drugs, fraud, money

directly back to that studio, might by Hashim's own, but the mistake of trusting him was mine. Hashim had always realized that he might be soon in the clutches of police, especially after the transfer of the very ambitious and competent ASP, Mohammad Azam, to Lahore District. Hence, he planned out perfectly how to make me sign every document that would legitimately connect me to each crime, after the purchase.

It was only after 4 years that the ASP had found out that the real culprit was in fact not me, but someone else, someone who must be much smarter than me. Nonetheless, despite all his sleepless nights of investigation, ASP Azam could never legally apprehend Hashim, or release me. I therefore spent another 3 years in jail.

After finally being acquitted after 7 long years, and saving my face from everyone for the first few months, I decided to catch up with one of my old batchmates. The steaks in front were still too hot for us to devour when my friend, Tahir, pleasantly broke it to me that our friend Hashim had recently gifted him the keys to a handsome studio in a Karachi plaza.

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Writer's Bio

Dirha Qazi is a talented fiction writer based in Pakistan, known for her compelling storytelling and keen insight into the complexities of society. Through her powerful and thought-provoking narratives, Dirha masterfully weaves intricate tales that serve as a subtle yet impactful critique of the numerous social, political, and cultural issues plaguing Pakistani society. Her stories explore a wide range of themes, from gender inequality and class divides to the struggles of marginalized communities, highlighting the often-overlooked realities faced by many.

Amropali

Jackie Kabir - Bangladesh

Judith put the brown paper bag on the kitchen counter. She just bought five kilograms of Amropali from the local market. I asked her, don't you get mangoes in the US?

“Oh yes! We get mangoes, but you know they are just mangoes, she made a round shape with her right palm. We don't have any names for them but here we get Chosha, Himasagor, Fazli, Langra, Amropali and god knows how many more varieties!

Judith and I and share the flat with another girl that was provided by the NGO we worked at. It had three bedrooms and a shared kitchen. We were sitting at the table next to the kitchen. Judith was an American girl with a head full of black curly hair and a heart shaped face. She wore deshi clothes bought from the local shops which catered the foreigners who lived in Dhaka. This was her first summer here.

Seeing the mangoes, I just remembered one day my paternal grandmother; our dadi told us the story about Amropali. Each summer we visited the village. After dinner all the children in the house would sit around my dadi and pester her to tell us a story. It was on one of those nights she narrated the story of Amropali which remained with me ever

since. I asked Judith if she wanted to know the story of Amropali, she said yes, so I started,

“This story is about 2500 years old. There was a small village in the kingdom of Vaishali. A man named Mahananon was returning home on a stormy night. There was a strong gale and rain was imminent. In the flickering lightning of the sky he saw something was wriggling in a bundle in swaddled clothes under a mango tree. His heart almost

stopped, when went near and saw there was an infant in the bundle. He looked around to see if there was anyone around. He even shouted to see if anyone responded. He was in two minds about what to do; surely, he couldn't leave the child here in the storm like this. Big droplets of rain started to fall by then. After thinking a while, he picked the infant up and ran home. His wife was



overjoyed seeing the baby girl. Since they had no children, they decided to bring her up as their own. She was found under the Mango tree, the husband and wife named her Amropali, a Sanskrit word, Amro meaning Mango and Pallab meaning young leaf. As she grew up, she became known for her beauty. In a land of dark, brown skinned people she had a skin colour of milk tea, it's a beautiful dark yellow. Her eyes that were greyish as if they were one drop short of the colour blue. In fact, her foster

parents noticed that she had blue eyes when they found her but gradually as she grew the blue started to turn grey. Her hair was that of reddish brown. Her long curls made her look like a girl from a foreign land. People noticed her when she went to fetch water and visit a neighbor or even when she walked around the fields. Soon after she reached puberty, one day the boatman sent a proposal to marry her, the next day the farmer working in the field, yet another proposal came from the rich merchant. The prince from the neighboring village wished to marry her also. Then another prince from another land wanted to marry her. There was a duel between the two and one was killed. The news spread around to all the villages and towns. Controversy arose about what should be done about someone so beautiful. People talked about her in small gatherings, big gatherings, tea stalls and in yards when women sat sewing their blankets or sat in verandahs for afternoon tea. When things escalated too far, the panchayat decided it was time to decide Amropali's fate. The panchayat at that time was the highest committee who were responsible for keeping the law and order of a community. So, a meeting was called, after a lot of debate it was concluded that since there were so many suiters who fought for this beautiful girl, even if she got married to someone there was still a danger of men falling in love with her. After a long discussion the head of the panchayat sitting under the age-old Banyan tree whose beard was similar to the reeds hanging down from the branches came forward. He addressed the crowd in his meek voice, as if he was almost shy,

"Since Amropali, the beautiful sixteen-year-old girl is a threat to our society, we know many men have lost their minds trying to win her heart, there has been a death in the village and who knows how many more people would be injured or killed if this matter is not taken care of soon." He then paused and looked at the crowd before resuming his speech and added with a softer tone,

"So, we decided that Amropali can't be anyone's

rather she should be everyone's, we will make a house for Amropali in the most beautiful place of the village; where anyone and everyone can visit her. But there would be some conditions to the visits." He added, "people would have to pay 500 gold coins for one night, no one can go to her place a second time, if anyone wants to see the house even, it can be done once only. And the law enforcing people will keep track of the people who come and go to Amropali's house."

The people of Vaishali stood in pin drop silence for a couple of minutes. Never had they heard any verdict like that, never did they imagine they would hear something like this from the most learned, revered people of the village. But a verdict is a verdict. So, the elderly people dispersed with heavy hearts while the younger ones started thinking of ways to gather 500 gold coins, the richer men already started the queue, they began fighting now regarding who would go after whom.

And Amropali? What became of her?

When the news reached Amropali's cottage, she screamed so loud that it ripped up the sky, her scream rose up to the seventh sky and shook the bottom of the heaven's door. The birds flying by stopped and gathered in the trees around her cottage, the bees which came to collect honey from flowers kept on going around in circles and circles forgetting what they were supposed to do. Even the stream behind her house stopped flowing becoming stagnant. Her foster mother wailed in the yard and neighbours came and tried to pacify her.

The King of Magadth was called Bimbishar. He had 500 women in his harem, he would spend each night with whoever he pleased. One day he had a dancer at his court. He commented

"I have never seen anyone so beautiful!"

One of the attendants at his court told him that this beauty is nothing compared to Amropali's beauty.

Hearing that the king wanted to know everything about Amropali. And after hearing her story he said he wanted Amropali at any cost. He was told that was not possible since she was officially an asset of Vaishali Kingdom. And they would have to wage a war against that kingdom. Besides many princes and kings who want to spend one night with Amropali are in queue. They are at mercy of her wish. She will only see someone when she wants to.

Hearing this Bimbisha got more interested to see her, get to know her. He made up his mind to go to her in disguise. He was curious to find out what was it that made Amropali so appealing that everyone wanted to be with her. So with a lot of caution, after months of preparation he went to the garden where Amropali sometimes went for walks. And when he saw her, he was speechless! Is she an angel who had descended from heaven above? Bimbisha immediately lost his heart to her, he couldn't eat, he couldn't sleep, he couldn't even go back to his own kingdom. Day and night, he thought about her only. How could he make this woman his own? he wondered. He returned home with a heavy heart.

Meanwhile one of his sons named Ajat was also in love with Amropali. When he came to know about his father's devotion for the same woman he was in love with, he got furious. He rebelled against the king and put him in the underground jail. Then he attacked the kingdom of Vaishali. A huge fight broke between the two kingdoms. Many people were killed, even more wounded. Amropali was sad, this was the only thing she wanted to avoid. Ajat was severely wounded and Amropali's men brought him to her place. Since no one was allowed in her place, the wounded prince could not be found by his men. They went back to their kingdom. Amropali nursed Ajat and got him back on his feet. But she refused his love and told him she would not marry him under any circumstances. Ajat left Vaishali with a broken heart.

One day Gautama Buddha came to Vaishali with a few hundred of his disciples to preach. They preached about non-greed, about banishing malevolence, hatred and ill wishing to others. One while taking a walk, Amropali saw a young disciple in the orange shroud sitting in a meditative pose. She watched him for a while but he seemed to be in deep meditative trance. She wished to get close to him. She was confident it would be easy to win his heart. Dozens and dozens of kings and princes would give anything to be near her, and this young man stood no chance of not paying attention to her. So, she flaunted her beauty, spreading her hair, bringing them on her shoulder. She put her dazzling smile on her lips and walked towards him tinkling her anklets. Her beautiful bare feet left footsteps on the red dusty isle she walked on. After he finished meditating, he looked at her and lowered his gaze and kept them like that for as long as she stood in front him.

What is your name?" Amropali asked tenderly.

"Sraban." He replied without any emotions in his voice.

"Can I offer you to stay at my residence and teach me Buddha's teaching?"

"I cannot accept any offering without my guru's permission."

So, Amropali sent her messenger to Gautama Buddha to ask permission for Sraban to stay at Amropali's place for four months. The messenger was sure, as were the people around; that in no way would Buddha give permission to keep Sraban in Amropali's place. How could he? Wasn't he the wise one? Didn't he know that any man who went near Amropali lost his head, no matter how strong willed he was? But to everyone's surprise The Enlightened One gave permission for Sraban to stay at her place and teach.

Amropali and all her helping hands sat around

Sraban Every morning to learn how to do meditation, how to love everyone without any discrimination. And that to love another one has to love oneself first. He taught them about the position of the seven chakras and how they were connected to the universe. He taught them everything in this world were interconnected and actually they were one. Sraban taught everything he had acquired from his guru. For he was ardent learner and was delighted to be able to give. For it is a far greater joy to give than to receive. Amropali also was determined to offer everything she had on Sraban's feet. So, every night she bathed in rose petal water, put dark khol in her eyes, spread her hair on her back and walked to the place where he rested. She would attire herself in thin muslin that was given to her by the kings and princes, which accentuated her beautiful body more than it covered. But the monk would not budge an inch from his meditation. One night she sat close to him and touched him and he responded, noticing that she whispered,

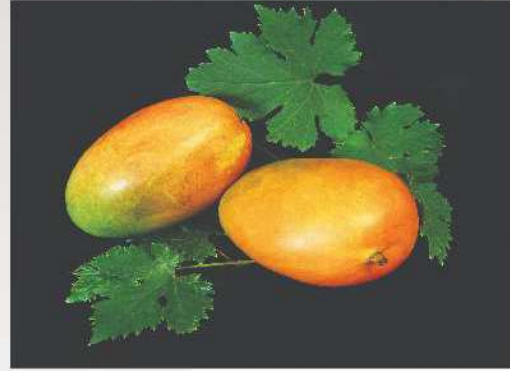
“See! Your body has answered to my touch, .”

“The body has responded because that's what it does, how will you arouse my soul? It's no use for the body to respond if the soul doesn't.” Sraban answered.

One day the four month's teaching came to an end, Amropali couldn't seduce Sraban. She became his disciple and decided that she would give away all her wealth and become Buddha's servant. And elders of the village understood that Amropali had ceased to be the village bride as of that day.

Now that was the story of Amropali. In 1978, the researchers of mango plantation made a hybrid of two genres of mangoes named Doshohari and Neelam and produced a new kind of mango which was sweeter, tastier than any other kind of mangoes and hence they called it Amropali.”

When I finished narrating, I saw Judith's eyes were welled with water as she quietly listened with her chin resting on her right palm propped up on her elbow.

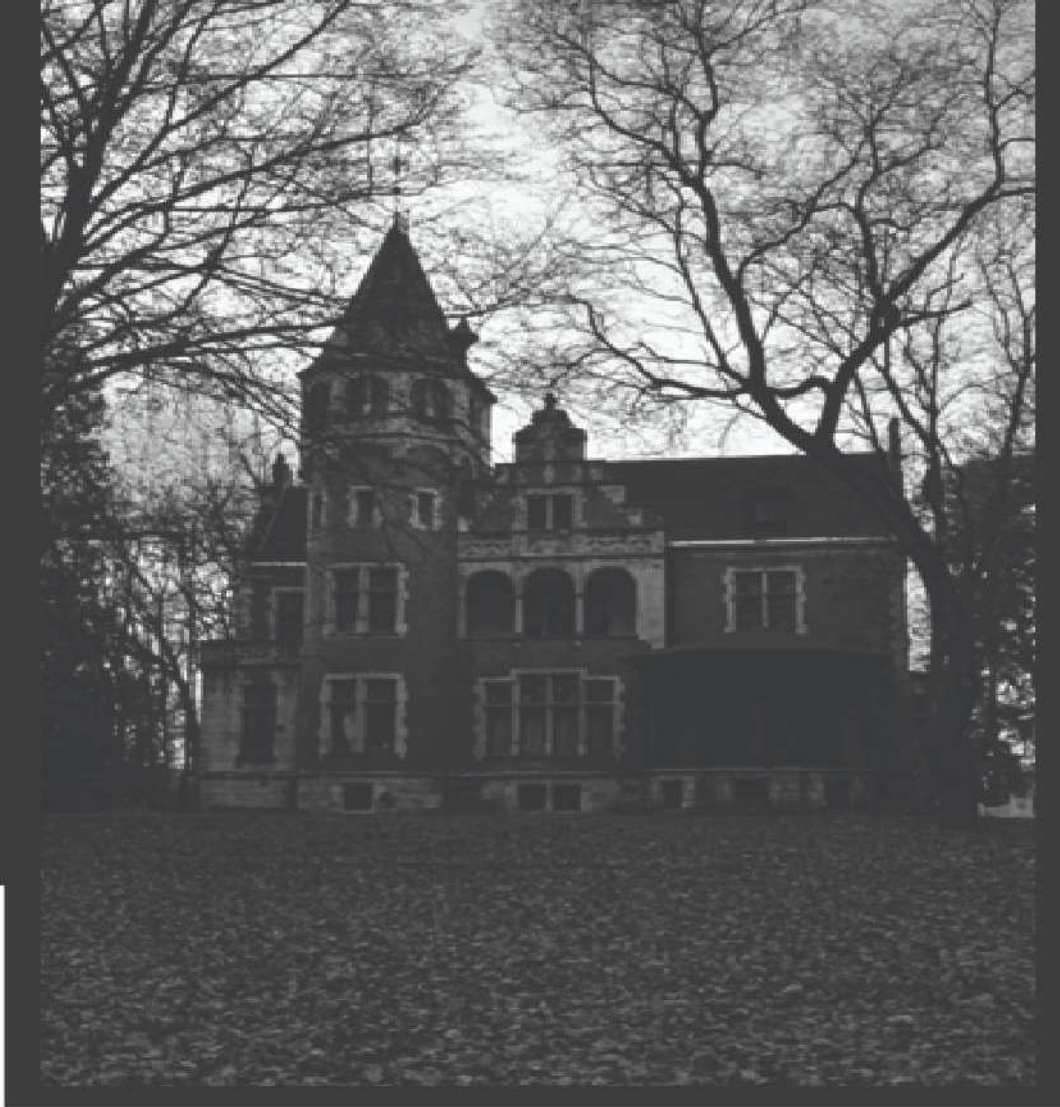


Writer's Bio

Jackie Kabir is a writer and translator from Bangladesh, born in Sylhet in 1971. She has contributed to numerous anthologies both locally and internationally. Her debut short story collection, *Silent Noise*, was published in 2016, with its titular story being taught in BA English courses in Tamil Nadu. She translated *Between the Rivers* by Ngugi Wa Thiong'o into Bengali as *Moddhikhane Nodi* in 2023. Kabir has edited literary works, including the translation magazine *Juktaswar* and *Atit Theke Aduna* (2024).

Her stories have appeared in *The Bridge Magazine*, *Borderless Journal*, and *Ten Square*, among others. She also authored nonfiction pieces like *Green Helmets* in *Stories from the Edge* (2020) and contributed to academic papers on various literary topics. Kabir's translations include *River of My Blood* (2017) and *The Charcoal Portrait* (2019), and she co-translated *Unfettered* (2012).

A frequent conference participant, Kabir has attended the Saarc Literary Festival and the Hay Festival. She has also been involved in workshops led by notable authors like Bernardine Evaristo and Julia Bell. She is a member of literary groups such as *Gantha*, *The Reading Circle*, and *Pen Bangladesh*.



THE EVIL SPELL

Zeena Hussain - Pakistan

In the year 1907, there lived a witch in the village of Brooklyn, or so it was said. The house in which she lived was called the haunted house and the villagers, be it even the bravest of men in town, were scared of going near it. Spooky tales were told about the house, "Hey Sara, my brother was telling me that his friend heard sounds from the house. God knows how true is that?" said Hazel, a villager. Unknowingly, people did stroll by the haunted house unaware of the stories told about the house and its spooky atmosphere, only to find windows and doors swinging to and fro. Terrifying shrieks could be heard from within and sometimes one could hear the howling of a wolf coupled with hooting of an owl. The story ran such: Years ago

there lived a very, beautiful young woman, Sandra, in this village. Her beauty was compared to the beauty of the moon and poets wrote poems about her many suitors, whom she would turn down because she was in love with Jack, a really handsome and rich guy from a nearby village. However, Jack did not turn out to be as faithful as Sandra thought him to be, and he ditched her in order to marry another female. Sandra could not bear this, so she sought revenge on him. It was then that she became evil. So evil that she came to be known as the witch. Rumours started to spread about her all around. "I am so sure she would have untied unruly hair, long pointed nails, and a crooked nose. Exactly like a witch!" said Gertrude to Jane Children

would throw stones at the windows of this house and to their thrill, I shadow would be soon running towards them. Before ill could catch up on them, They would run, run for their lives.

One day it so happened that a girl, Sabrina, who had I strolled near the haunted house with her friends, was captured by the witch, though her friends managed to escape. When she returned to the village, she could not speak. The witch had cast a spell on her. She was an example for the villagers that they would stop going to the haunted house and bothering her, or otherwise face the consequences.

Sabrina had a very pious grandmother and she tried hard to break the spell, but failed to do so. She prayed very hard but even her prayers were not I powerful enough to break the spell cast by the witch.

"I feel so sad to see Sabrina so silent," said her mother to her friend. She was a child with a sunny disposition," said the friend. No stone was left unturned. Various means were tried to break the spell. So much so that somebody suggested, "a fortune of gold coins should be offered to the witch they went to the extent of calling the village 'priest to help them break the spell but that too in vain. The priest though had a suggestion, "Take some holy water and sprinkle it on the witch. You will definitely break the spell then." However, even this did not work and certainly did not break the spell.

Sabrina had now grown into a fair maiden but she was silent as a stone. One day her grandmother came with the news about a wizard in a nearby village. It was said also. This might prove to be of some help. They tried to contact the wizard but he "refused to meet anybody, without giving any reason good enough.

One day while Sabrina was sitting in her backyard peeling fruit, one of the apples slipped from her hands. To her surprise she called to her room. She

could not believe that this was happening. She had actually called out to her mom. She tried again and yes! There it was - the word mom! Her mother heard her, not believing her ears at first. She ran out and hugged Sabrina. It was time to rejoice. Her mom asked her dad to get as many sweets as he could. "I may distribute them in gratitude of the mercy God has shown us."

As they sat together one day, happily, now that Sabrina could also speak, her grandmother explained.

"Yesterday I met Mrs. Anne. She told me that the spell on Sabrina was broken when the wizard visited the witch. A woman's ego matters to her the most. The witch's ego had been deeply hurt when she was ditched by Jack. When the wizard visited her, they had a long talk and she realized that it was unfair to make the villagers' life miserable because of her own miseries. It was then that she broke the spell. She further explained that in reality there is no such thing as a witch or a wizard. It is pure evil in a person that reveals itself at one point or the other.



Writer's Bio

Zeenat Iqbal Hussain has inherited writing skills from her father, late Ahmed Jivanjee, a well known writer of Karachi. She has two sons and a daughter. She tries to maintain a balance between looking after her home and her writings.

Good Fences Make Good Neighbours

Hamda Rafaaqat - Pakistan

Life in the sleepy village of Alderwood followed the predictable cycle of the seasons, with undulating hills and old oaks surrounding it. Everyone in the little village knew each other's business and valued privacy, making it a close-knit society. Two families, the Harpers and the Millers, whose farms had shared a boundary for many centuries, were among the residents.

The well-maintained and well-organized Harpers were well-known for their immaculate estate. A hardy yet fair man in his fifties, Richard Harper took great satisfaction in the neat rows of crops and the well-built, recently painted fence dividing his property from the Millers'. Evelyn, his wife, reflected his attention to detail in her immaculate house and lovely flower gardens. The Millers, on the other hand, adopted a more carefree lifestyle. A cheerful man with a worn face and a big laugh, Frank Miller loved his farm's raw, almost wild beauty. With her gentle smile and inviting eyes, his wife Alice took great care of their three kids and animals.

The Harpers and Millers lived in harmony for many years, with courteous conversations and sporadic mealtime gatherings. The fence stood tall and powerful, a sign of their shared respect and the edge of their respective worlds. But one particularly hard winter, a portion of the fence gave way under the weight of the ice and snow. It fell in, creating a huge void. The border, which was once unambiguous, became contentious as spring approached. Overwhelmed by the responsibilities of his farm, Richard became increasingly agitated

upon realising that Frank had neglected to fix the damaged fence. Frank didn't think much of the repair because he was more concerned by a sick cow and the arrival of fresh lambs.

Beneath the surface tensions were simmering. A mess was made when the Miller farm's chickens walked into the well tended garden of the Harpers, scratching up seedlings. After being chained, the Harper family dog started running around the Millers' fields, scattering sheep and generally upsetting the peace. Unable to control his annoyance, Richard stormed over to the Millers' home one evening. He discovered Frank caring for a baby lamb in the barn.

"Frank, we need to talk about the fence," Richard said, straining to maintain a steady tone. It has been weeks, and it is becoming problematic for us both. Frank's look was tired as he wiped his hands on his dungarees. Richard, I am aware. Simply put, things have been really busy here. But you're right—we must make the necessary corrections.

A grudging truce emerged. The next Saturday, both families congregated with tools in hand at the shattered fence. The birds chirping in the distance and the sound of lambs bleating filled the clean, cold morning air. A subtle but noticeable shift took place while they worked side by side. Once-brief discussions developed into deep and profound talks. Richard was first disapproving of Frank's work, but as he skilfully measured and cut fresh planks, Richard's gaze softened. Though their methods were different, he came to understand that



Frank's commitment to his farm was equal to his own.

After first being aloof, Evelyn began to laugh with Alice as they related tales of their lives as mothers and in the hamlet. Sensing that the stress was releasing, the kids made the task into a competition, seeing who could bring in the most nails or hammer the straightest. The air was filled with the sound of laughter and the steady beat of hammering, which gave everyone a sense of purpose and solidarity. The fence was tall once more as the sun sank below the horizon, signifying re-established borders and revived respect. The family took a step back and observed their labour, feeling a sense of solidarity and success. In the days that followed, Alderwood's daily routine resumed. The Miller's sheep contentedly grazed, while the Harpers' garden thrived unhindered by straggling hens.

Once a point of dispute, the fence now served as evidence of their capacity to put aside differences and find common ground. After giving it some thought, Richard realised that the fence represented more than simply a physical limit—rather, it also symbolised the significance of having defined limits in interpersonal interactions. The outcome was a stronger, more durable connection, but maintaining it took work and cooperation. The lesson was evident: well-kept fences do, in fact, create excellent neighbours. However, what really pulled people together was the mutual respect and understanding that existed beyond those walls, transforming neighbours into friends and creating an environment where everyone could prosper.



Writer's Bio

Hamda Rafaqat is an English Literature graduate with a passion for delving into the complexities of life through her writing. Based in Lahore, Pakistan, she seeks to explore profound and intricate themes in her work.

Shadows of the Past

Sameen Junaid - Pakistan

It is a thrilling stormy night with a fierce sky, heavier clouds, and striking lightning that creates horror in the environment. The wind is wandering like silent death. In such darkness, dogs are barking to have some shelter from the ferocity of weather while the bolting in and out of the light mesmerizes and makes bizarre shadows on the walls. Such a black magical night shows the sight of an ominous monster, a destroyer of happiness and peace. At midnight in such daunting weather, she is running alone and fearfully on the road with an uneven heart beat. Everything beside her is fluttering with rain. The idea of leaving and living overpowers her and she starts wailing like a lost child. Abruptly, she acknowledges that someone is calling her name Pari, by gently pressing her hand and she wakes up from her haunted nightmare. Now she feels solace when she finds her beloved mother sitting beside her and so she hugs her. Her hand in her mother's warm hand, soon, she goes into the valley of sleep as a lost child is now rescued and handed over to her parents.

It was the first day of her university life when the first glance of him bubbled some emotions in her pure heart but she snubbed the voice of her heart and shoved her mind to just focus on the targeted destinations that she had come to accomplish and she turned herself into a determined and purposeful being. She inclined toward his hardworking attitude, his passion for books, his personality as a naughty serious being, and his eyes which beamed when he laughed. Parishay marveled how love could be so silent, so powerful. Her love for him stimulated her to move ahead, to show the world her capabilities. One day he messaged her. Would you like to tie up with our Literary Society? You are supposed to give an interview and we will choose the dedicated ones on behalf of their prior experiences, and their future aspirations. She just said Ok. The initial message from him made her nervous. How did he get to know about her?



From where did he get her contact number? On the outer look, she retained her image as a confident lady but at heart, she was so naïve as she couldn't get any strength to ask from him or did she just want to escape from his persona? The next day she asked her other fellows if they had received any notification regarding the literary society and the answer was no.

A few days passed, and she again received the message from him about a certain criteria in the department to apply for scholarship. She only said Thank you. Now, Parishay was surprised that he was taking care of her. How could he recognize that she loved him even though she didn't express or utter anything in front of him or was it just a senior and junior relationship or may be he wanted to help her or to see her doing the best or was it something else... What else? She couldn't understand. She shrugged her overthinking and started reading a book. After this, she started getting his messages on regular basis about her health, interests and studies.

But Parishay noticed that the person who was active in mobile texting was so strange when they met on campus. She wondered whether he was just using her for time pass or was it a pure emotion or respect that he didn't want anyone to notice. Then she came to know that he was joining the Army and will leave the department soon. This news upset her but she wanted to see him happy pursuing his goals. He always sent her documents of clearing initial, medical, physical, and all other tests before joining Army and asked her to pray. Was it the reward of his persistence or her selfless prayers for him, that he was selected in the army? It was a proud moment for him and soon he left her.

After six months, he came back for a week's vacation. Now, she messaged him and inquired of every detail like a motherly figure. Some connections are so unique, so precious, and selfless. They stay with you against all odds without any intention of taking advantage or lust. How a butterfly without colors, a flower without fragrance, a tree without leaves,

a light without brightness, and a bird without flying is incomplete as Parishay felt incomplete without Hassan. When he was there, life was full of laughter, solace, completeness, and beauty like a peacock, dancing with all its colorful feathers.

Three years passed and one day, she was going home after taking classes but something unknown stopped her feet from moving so she decided to go home late and started walking on the greenery in the department's background with her solitude and aching nostalgia. Suddenly she saw a person standing there, looking at her with that gleaming smile in his eyes which melted her heart. As their eyes met, she could see an ignited spark in his eyes. Oh, he is actually here or is it just her hallucination, she couldn't identify. They both looked at each other for minutes ignoring the world they were surrounded by. How Love can be so intuitive through which she could acknowledge the presence of her beloved. Now he had become a disciplined and patriotic soldier whose devotion to his country was superior to everything.

How fast time flies. When he became a Captain, she was done with her MPhil degree. When he wanted to be with her, she disregarded him and tried to maintain distance, now he was at a distance, then why was she so hurt? She felt a transition in his attitude. Detachment and disinterest had taken the place of tenderness and affection. Was it the aftermath of his cold training or was he now mature and considered talking to her as a foolish act? She thought about the person who came into her life when she didn't need him but left her when she wanted him the most. A person who once desired to talk to her passionately, and now a time when he ignored her the most, a person whose peeping into her life and heart was a sweet dream which now turned into a nightmare, a person who knew she never forgot his minor moments of happiness to celebrate, but he always disregarded her moments to be cherished. Still without any intention of revenge or hate, she wanted and prayed for his countless blessings, abundant happiness, and boundless success.

The next day, her mom put her hand on her head kindly and asked her will on the proposal sent by her father's friends' son. Parishay could not reject it as her parent's happiness was connected with her "Yes" and she could not leave Hassan as he was her soulmate. And sometimes life becomes so cruel to leave a person alone on the verge to fall or to endure.

In her last call, she asked him to take care, to keep struggling, and to touch the Sky. Parishay was moving forward in her life and wished to see him happy. The time they had spent or wasted was just memorable, it was not their fault as they just floated with the time, but now they were mature enough. If the connection was not leading them to any destination they just had to leave the path sensibly, keep each other in good books with positive vibes.

It was the day of her mayoon. Girls decorated her hands with red henna. She was incapable to figure out her emotions. She agreed to marry because Hassan was satisfied with it and she was sacrificing her happiness for the sake of her parents. Unexpectedly, her mobile rang. It was Hassan's number but someone else was speaking. After an hour, she found herself running with looming uncertainty in the white corridors of the Hospital. Hassan was lying lifeless in the ICU and severely injured in the military expedition at Line of Control. Now he was just calling her name Pari. She was out of the senses to catch sight of her dearest who was so vigorous and vibrant, now looking frail, so delicate. She begged him to open his eyes and the moment when he opened his eyes was unforgettable. She listened calmly to whatever he was trying painfully to put in words in his abrupt breath. "The first day at university when I saw you, it seemed like you were the lost part of myself. I felt complete when I talked to you but I know that everything is uncertain in a soldier's life. I couldn't give you any hope for our future partnership. I could not see you depressed. The day, when I asked you to marry Shahmir was the day when I was torn apart. I knew you will be upset by my bitter attitude but I couldn't make you used to me, it was

the last gift of Hassan for Parishay". Before she uttered anything, his lifeline went straight on the screen. Her world was shattered into pieces. She didn't know how she stood beside him and watched the screen with uncertainty.

Sadly, the day when he was buried, was the day of her marriage. He was no more, but he was the hero and savior of her life. She knew that he will be alive in her heart and prayers. The world where relations are so fickle and transient, some bonds are rare like gems. These bonds fill your life with light, the light that surpasses time and space and knows no end. After one year, she was the mother of Hassan, her satisfaction, her irreplaceable bond, her aspiration to live, the light in her darker days, and the hope when everything surrounding her brings despair. The echoes of yesterday will always remain in the chambers of her heart.

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Writer's Bio

Sameen Junaid, an MS English Literature student at Lahore College for Women University, is a passionate advocate for mental well-being and societal change. With a deep curiosity for unraveling human psychology, Sameen envisions a society free from chaos, binaries, and divisions. She has earned accolades, including first place in the Story Writing Competition by Youth for Pakistan, and has completed courses in content writing and freelancing. Her articles have been featured in prominent publications like Sunday Magazine Jang, The Asian Mirror, and HumSub. Additionally, her research paper has been published in the International Journal of Literature and Arts. In her free time, Sameen enjoys reading, writing, sketching, and engaging in conferences and book clubs, striving to make a meaningful impact beyond academics.



The Journal

Fiza Ali - Pakistan

He found it on the bus seat. It was an ordinary leather-bound journal— nothing special, but Mustafa felt drawn to it. The night was cruel with its sharp winds and occasional drizzle. The metro bus, usually brimming with people at this hour, was empty. Every living creature in Lahore was tucked warmly inside its sweet abode, except Mustafa.

The long hours at work were starting to get to him. The last thing Mustafa wanted was to be out at this hour. The worst part was he still had 35 minutes to kill, before he'd reached home to his darling Milo, a ten-year-old Siamese cat. Mustafa knew it was bad manners to peek inside somebody else's journal, but he hadn't seen anyone get on or off for at least four stops now, meaning the journal had been there a while, all alone, just like him.

Curiosity got the better of Mustafa, and he finally relented. Opening the journal, Mustafa came across a single entry. The person who had lost this was certainly cursing themselves, Mustafa thought. And so to pass the remaining 33 minutes, he decided to take a glimpse inside the stranger's life, which now lay open in front of him.

I don't remember when I noticed her for the first time. She stood still as a mannequin, lurking quietly in the corner. Her thin frame and baggy shalwar kameez were nothing out of the ordinary; at least nothing to raise alarm bells. It was easy to ignore "her in the beginning. With everything that life had been throwing at me, it was perhaps too easy to forget she was even there. Perhaps, it was

lessness that had intertwined my path with hers.

In the beginning, I had wrongfully assumed her to be a stalker, but no matter what I did, all my attempts to reach her turned out to be futile. I'd walk and walk, but the distance between us would remain the same, and I'd be no closer to reaching her than I had when I started walking. That didn't remain a problem for too long, though, because she seemed to be inching closer and closer every day.

And now that she is at arm's length, I see her clearly for the first time: a thick, long braid wraps around her bent neck, cascading down her left shoulder. Sunken, bloodshot eyes stare at me unblinking. Her mouth is open wide as if stuck in a silent scream, her face full of agony and terror. What terrifies me most are her twisted limbs, bent in different directions. It shouldn't be possible for her to stand upright. But she does.

Nobody else sees her. I sought help from everyone—from doctors to moulvis, but no one had an answer. Everything feels hopeless now. I used to think of death as a distant event, but now that I find myself looking at it right in the face, all I can do is warn the unfortunate soul who finds this journal: there is no escaping it."

Mustafa grimaced upon seeing the last sentence. What a disturbing entry, he thought. Somebody was trying to play a stupid prank on the bus passengers. Mustafa sighed and placed the journal on the empty seat next to him. He could now see the familiar streetlights shine through the window. Mustafa was home now. He stood up, gathered his belongings, and walked out of the bus door. The driver spared a smile and quietly wished him "Allah Hafiz". Mustafa returned the smile and waved as the bus drove away.

Across the street, some distance away, a man stood under the yellow streetlight!

Writer's Bio

Fiza Ali is an aspiring English Literature student with a passion for storytelling. She draws inspiration from the world around her, turning her experiences into compelling narratives. Through her work, she aims to show a different and unexplored side of Pakistan.

Beyond Gender: A Ramadan Revelation

Aila Shafiq - Pakistan

It was first of Ramzan and sehri time when I was standing alone in the kitchen rolling the dough on rolling pin, I was moving my wrists back and forth speedily but the flat dough was neither getting bigger nor it was turning into a perfect round chapati, my mother was not feeling well so I decided not to wake her up and prepare the chapatis all by myself, I was getting frustrated meanwhile I realized that I also have to put two eggs to get boiled so after rolling the chapati I turned to them, while I was putting them to boil i heard my father's voice from the lounge, asking me to bring him a glass of water, I hurried towards him with a glass filled with water when I entrusted it to him he asked me to wake my brother up for sehri as well. MY GOD!!! my frustration increased. I went to his room tried to wake him up, he after just replying with "hm" went back to his deep sleep i also didn't try again and came back to the kitchen. While situating the non-circular chapati on the griddle I was thinking about how rude my family members are they do not care about me at all, why do they think that's it's only my responsibility to complete all the chores? how can they leave me here in the kitchen all alone to do everything while I was sleepless. Thought that it was all like this surely just because I'm a woman, just because they are men and they think it's only my duty to do house chores , just because I'm a woman I don't need anyone's help, I flipped the chapati. At the very moment a polythene box wrapped in the plastic bag placed in the corner of the shelf caught my attention making me realize that it was brought by my father, right before I starting preparing for sehri he ,who was also sleep deprived like me, went out and bought

us some bbq and readymade curry so me and my mother do not have to put any extra efforts for sehri and then I had another epiphany about how my brother was busy the whole day getting the car's work done all alone whereas I was enjoying my Saturday at home at that time, I remembered when he came back he was so tired and hungry but didn't complain once hence they both fulfilled their duties as they always do and I was also fulfilling my duty right now as I should do. I was just doing the bare minimum for them. And as far as it is concerned, about me thinking of my family members mainly men being rude and careless, it was not my feminist side infact it was my human side that was not able to tolerate watching everyone else taking rest and I alone doing all the toil, That moment I made myself understand that it's not always about being woman sometimes it's about being human.

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Writer's Bio

Aila Shafiq is an emerging writer based in Pakistan. She writes about identity, nature, love and loss. When not writing, she enjoys reading or making calligraphy.





The Injured Sparrow

Ajwa arooj - Pakistan

On a cozy evening, as the warm, golden light of the setting sun bathed the house in a soft glow, the elders were sitting on the porch, enjoying their tea in peace. The air smelled fresh, and the sound of birds chirping filled the quiet moments. Zahra had just taken a sip of her tea when, out of nowhere, Baran and Eliana came running towards her with bright, eager faces.

"Bajjo!" they shouted at the same time, almost knocking the tea cup out of Zahra's hand with their excitement. Zahra looked up, surprised and amused by their sudden burst of energy. "What's going on, you two munchkins?" she asked, setting her tea down, her face pretending to show anger, though her eyes sparkled with amusement.

Baran was 4 years old and was always the more energetic of the two, grabbing Zahra's hand and pulling her gently. "Come with us! We wanna show you something!"

Eliana, who was 2 years older than Baran, with her

voice full of excitement and a hint of worry, added, "Yes, Bajjo! We found an injured bird in the garden and we need your help!"

Zahra's expression softened with concern. "An injured bird?" she repeated. "Oh no! Let me see." Without waiting for another word, Baran and Eliana quickly ran ahead, pulling Zahra along toward the garden. Their feet made light tapping sounds on the gravel path. When they reached the edge of the garden, where the flowers were bright and colorful, they stopped near a small bush.

There, in a little corner, was a tiny bird. It was a sparrow, its feathers were messy, and its wings were tucked in close. It looked fragile and scared, chirping softly as it tried to hop around. Zahra crouched down beside the bird, feeling sorry for it. "Oh, poor thing," she whispered. "It looks like it hurt its wing."

Zahra's voice softened as she looked at the bird. "It's so important to show kindness to animals, even if they can't speak to us," she said gently, her eyes filled with concern. "They feel pain, just like we do, and they need our help when they're in

trouble."

Baran crouched next to her, staring at the bird with wide eyes. "What should we do, Bajjo? Can we make it feel okay?"

Eliana gently put her hand on Baran's shoulder, trying to make him feel at ease. "Don't worry, Baran. We'll help it. Right, Bajjo?"

Zahra nodded and spoke gently but firmly. "Yes, we'll help it." Eliana asked if they could keep it, to which Zahra smiled warmly, and then, with careful hands, she gently picked up the little bird and wrapped it in a soft cloth, making sure it was safe and cozy. Baran and Eliana watched closely, amazed at how gently Zahra was with the bird.

Once the bird was wrapped up, Zahra smiled at them. "Let's take it inside where it's warm." The three of them carefully walked back to the house, with the little bird safe in Zahra's hands. When they reached the porch, Baran's father was sitting with a book, enjoying the cool evening air. He looked up as they approached, surprised.

"Well, well," he said with a smile and excitement clear in his voice. "What's this? A new little friend?"

Baran and Eliana knelt beside him and explained. "We found this bird in the garden. It's hurt, and we're going to help it." Baba jaan smiled kindly and encouraged them, "That's very sweet of you, my kind souls. Just make sure it's comfortable." Together with Zahra, they found a small wooden box and lined it with soft cotton. They placed the bird inside and gave it a little water to drink. The bird seemed to relax a little, chirping softly and tucking its wings under.

As the evening went on, the family gathered around, chatting and laughing. The little bird, now calm and safe, became the center of attention.

Baran and Eliana took turns checking on it, making sure it was resting peacefully.

"Ana! Can I name it Chirpy?" Baran whispered to Eliana, using the name he loved to call her. Eliana agreed and they began calling the bird Chirpy. Baran's face softened with concern as he gently stroked the bird's feathers. "What about its mama and baba, Ana?" he asked, his voice trembling slightly. "Chirpy will cry if it can't be with its parents again."

Eliana, looking thoughtful, nodded. "You're right. We have to find a way to help it." She glanced at Zahra, who was leaning back with a gentle smile, feeling proud of how both kids were understanding the pain of a creature that couldn't speak to tell them what it needed.

"We'll make sure it's okay," Zahra said softly, her voice filled with reassurance. "And when it's better, we'll let it fly back to the garden."

"But Bajjo! I want to keep it and take care of it, please!" Eliana begged, her eyes full of hope. Zahra stood up and walked over to where they had been watching the bird. She gently ruffled Baran's hair and then playfully pinched Eliana's nose. "I know you both want to help, and I can see how much you care," she said kindly. "But remember, the best way to show love for the bird is to help it get back to its family. We'll take care of it until it's strong enough to fly, and then we'll let it go. That's the best thing we can do for it."

This time, Baran asked, "Why can't we keep it?"

Zahra thought for a moment, then knelt down to look at him. "Well," she said gently, "birds belong in the wild, with their families. If we keep it here, it might be safe for a while, but it needs to learn how to survive on its own and be with its parents. If we keep it, it might not know how to do those things." She smiled softly, brushing a strand of hair from Baran's face.

After two weeks, when Zahra was sure the bird was strong and healthy again, she decided it was time to let it go. "Sometimes, the kindest thing we can do is let them go when they're ready," she said. Baran and Eliana nodded, both feeling a little sad. They had grown very fond of the bird, and the thought of letting it go was hard. But they understood Zahra's words, even though it made them feel a little bit sad inside.

"We'll make sure it remembers us," Eliana whispered, her voice full of hope. "Maybe it'll come back to visit us one day."

Baran smiled, though his eyes were a little teary. "Yeah, and we'll know we did the right thing," he said, looking at the bird one last time, wishing it could carry a piece of their love with it when it flew away.

Writer's Bio

Ajwa Arooj is an aspiring writer from Government Graduate College Wapda Town, Lahore, with a deep passion for crafting nature-inspired stories and poems. She strives to create compelling narratives that resonate with readers across the globe, drawing inspiration from the beauty and serenity of nature. Through her writing, Ajwa aims to forge meaningful connections with her audience, inviting them to explore the world through her words.



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Christa Bruhn

FEATURED POET
FROM USA



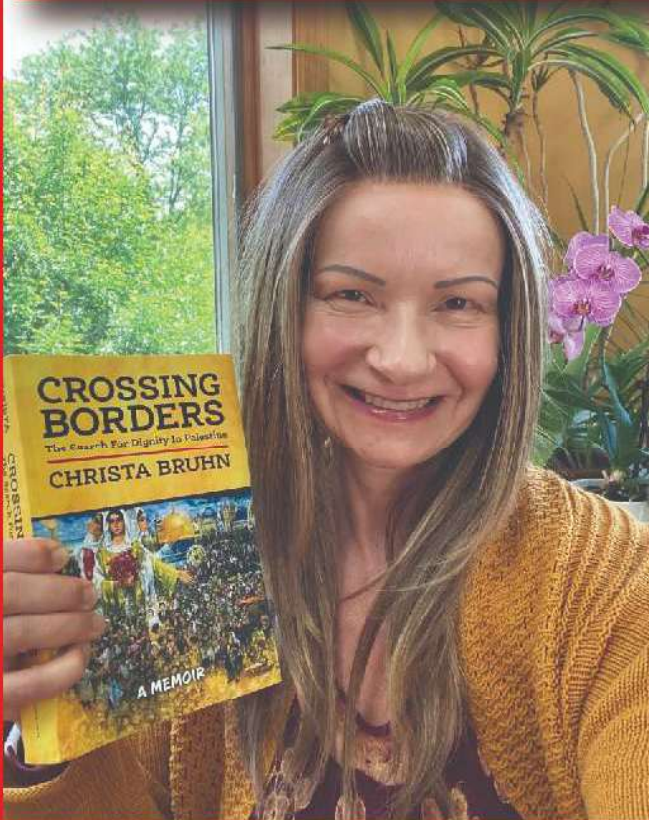
Poet's Bio

Christa Bruhn is an award-winning American author, photographer, and culinary artist with a lifelong passion for peace and justice. She is the daughter of a German immigrant raised under Nazi Germany and the mother of three Palestinian Americans. She holds degrees in International Studies (BA), Middle Eastern & North African Studies (MA), and Educational Leadership & Policy Analysis (PhD). She has published academic work on Palestine, peace education, and diversity and led and participated in roundtables on the future of Palestine and Israel. She splits her time between Madison, Wisconsin, and among her extended family in the farming village of Jalameh, Palestine.

Christa Bruhn's life unfolds like a vibrant tapestry of stories, each chapter reflecting her passion for creative non-fiction and poetry. As a writer, she transforms her experiences into rich narratives that connect with the heart of human experience.

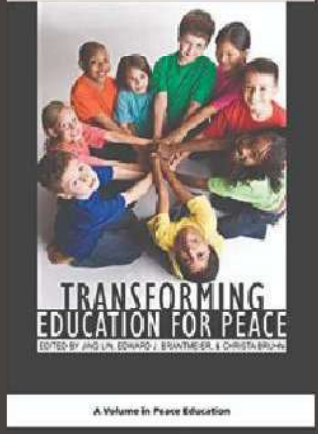
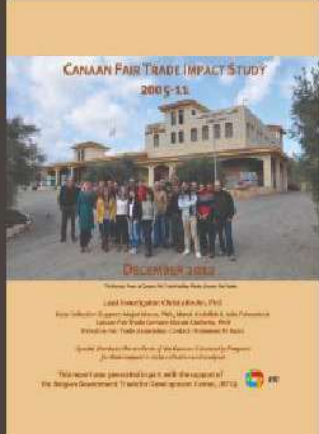
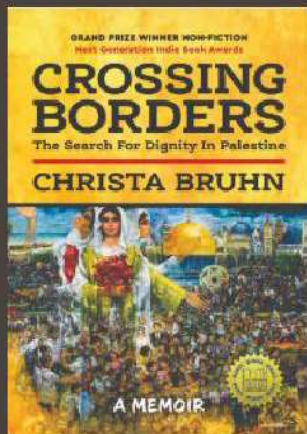
Her curiosity knows no bounds, and she is constantly drawn to new places and people. Christa is fascinated by the unique qualities of every culture she encounters, as well as the universal threads that bind us all. In her view, despite our differences, we are all part of the same story.

Beyond the written word, Christa finds inspiration in the world around her. Whether walking the bustling streets of a city or wandering through the tranquility of nature, her camera is always by her side, capturing the moments that speak to her. Her culinary artistry adds yet another layer to her creative expression—she has a special gift for turning any gathering into a festive feast that nourishes not just the body, but the mind and spirit as well.





Books



Mohammad

Christa Bruhn - USA

In honor of Mohammad Bhar. Israeli soldiers expelled his family from a home in Gaza City where they were taking refuge on July 3, 2024. The army let attack dogs approach him and did not let his family help him. Mohammed had Downe's Syndrome and Autism. The Israeli army left him to die in the home without attending to his wounds.

Occupation Forces
force us
out of our house
Mahammad
in his chair
forced
to leave him there
soldiers
don't care
canine approaches
Mohammad reaches
Khallas ya habibi
Enough my dear
is all he said
patting his head
teeth piercing
blood seeping
soldiers laughing
flies buzzing
another boy
dead.



Photo of Mohammad Bhar

Source of drawing: [eye.on.palestine /](http://eye.on.palestine/)



Soul of My Soul (حورلا حور)

Christa Bruhn - USA

Dedicated to Khaled Nabhan and his three-year-old granddaughter Reem who was killed along with her four-year-old brother Tarek by an Israeli airstrike on November 22, 2023 in Gaza. Khaled called Reem Soul of My Soul as he held her lifeless body.

You, the next generation
laid to rest before me,
before you even lived.
I live, carrying the past,
the weight of the present
too much to bear.

Now the earth holds you
after I held you close.
Yesterday laughing,
Now motionless.
The last I see of you,
your eyes closed.



Source of photo:

Family video which also appeared in following article:

'I kissed her but she wouldn't wake up.' Grandfather

grieves for 3-year-old granddaughter killed

as she slept in Gaza, CNN, November 29, 2024,



Could We Imagine

Christa Bruhn - USA

Could we imagine when there were drinking fountains
for Whites and Coloreds in South Africa, in America,
that one day we would drink from the same fountain?

Could we imagine when it was illegal for us to marry whom we love –
Germans and Jews, Blacks and Whites, men and women,
that one day we would walk down the aisle hand-in-hand?

Could we imagine when the borders of our neighborhoods
in Miami or Chicago or Detroit, or the Bantustans of South Africa,
were the borders of our lives that we would one day choose where to live in peace?



Could we imagine when the thirst for freedom on the plantation left us lynched,
in the Warsaw ghetto led to transport to Auschwitz, in East Berlin left us dead at the Wall,
that we would one day escape the confines of our Masters, survive the uprising
to tell our story, destroy the Wall without a single shot fired?

Could we imagine that one day the IRA would sit in Parliament in peace?
That Nelson Mandela would not only walk free, but lead the nation?

While Israeli captives sit underground,
waiting for their leaders revenge to wane,
while Palestinian bodies in Gaza pile up by the thousands
and thousands more remain underground,
not in tunnels, but buried beneath the rubble,
while thousands more leave their homes again, another Nakba,
while Palestinian farmers guard their land with their bodies
and children defend their towns and villages with stones
from settlers and occupation forces who answer only to God,
while world leaders quibble over the semantics of humanity
with blood on their hands...

I can imagine a future where all people between the River and the Sea
live in peace, equality, their voices heard, their children safe,
heading boldly toward a life with dignity,
where extremists can speak, but not rule the land,
where voices of peace and prosperity, faith and justice,
govern our grievances into history books,
where schools tell the whole story
of how two peoples came to live in the same land,
to call Palestine and Israel home, each other's homeland,
shared, a center of world religions, a crossroads rather than a battle of civilizations,
where the greatness of two peoples became not a graveyard of grievances,
but a light unto nations.



I Could See the Sea

Christa Bruhn - USA

August 16, 2024

I could see the sea from my window
hear the waves lapping onto shore
taste the salt in the air
in a few steps across the sand
I could sink my feet into the heat
of a beach that extended
all the way to Egypt and Lebanon
and beyond.

Just up the coast past Asqelon
lies Jaffa with its stone homes
narrow passageways
seaside restaurants
the open cavities of the mosque
still sealed from holding prayer
layers of paint falling from the ceiling
marking the years barring our return.

Now when I walk along the shore
the open sea stares back at me
like a freedom I can see but not touch
and when I turn around
I see through what was once there
over the mounds of rubble
through the few open cavities
of window frames and verandas
support beams fractured
like the bones beneath buildings
dust mixed with ash.

This is not how we bury our dead.



The Mediterranean Sea, Palestine
Photo: Christa Bruhn

We Are Not Numbers

Christa Bruhn - USA

1
10
100
1000
10000
100000
how many
zeros until our
lives equal yours



More than 10,000 killed in Gaza, Hamas-controlled health ministry says, as condemnation of Israel's campaign grows, CNN Staff, November 9, 2023,



No More Bombs

Christa Bruhn - USA

*I wrote this poem after the bombing on the Al-Tabi'in School in Gaza on August 10, 2024
during the dawn prayer known as Al-Fajr in Arabic.*

It is 1948

...

October 8

October 9

October 10

October 11

October 12

October 13

October 14

...

November

December

January

February

March

April

May

June

July

August 1

August 2

August 3

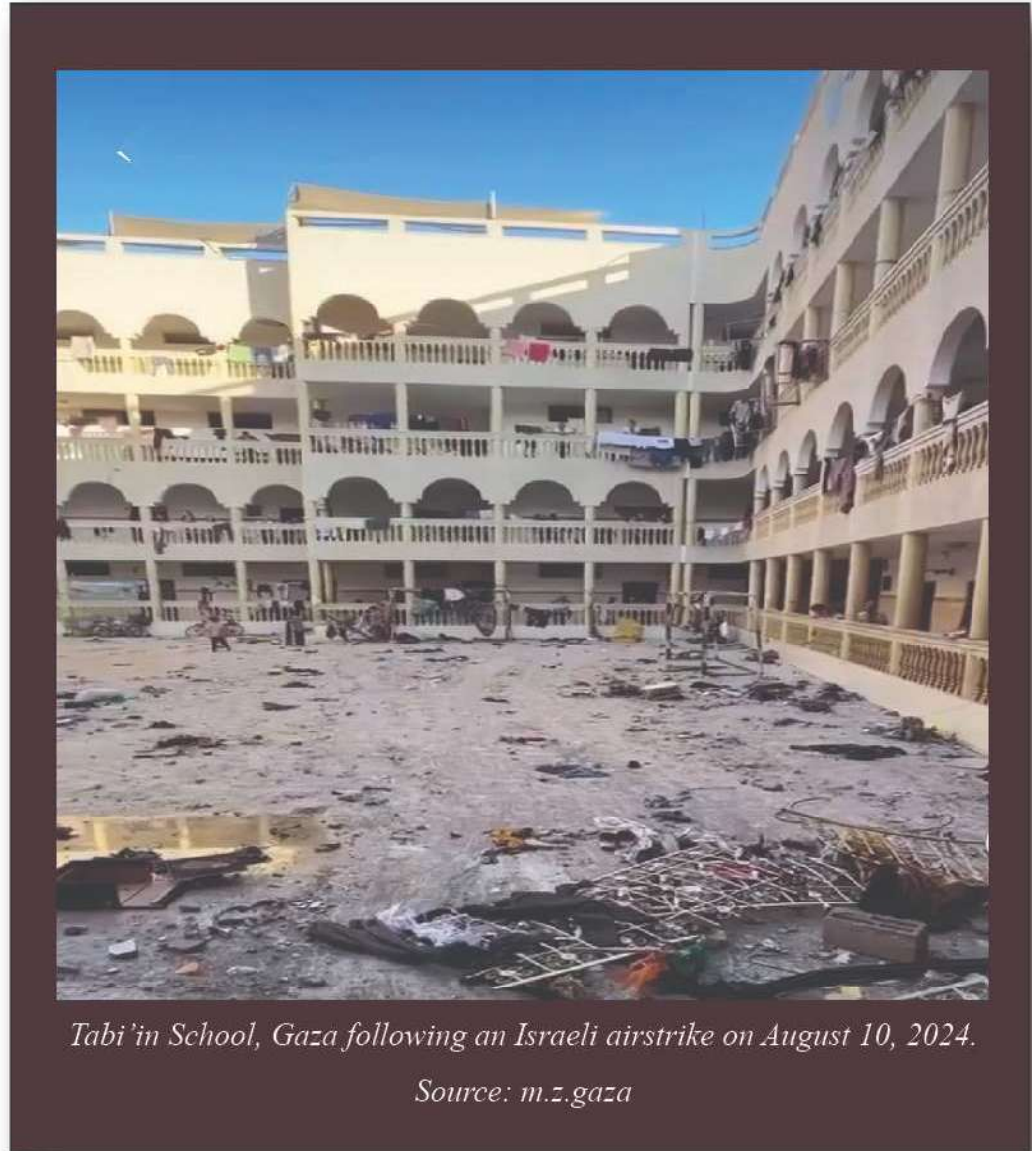
Last week

Yesterday

Today

Please

Not another bomb



They Were Praying

Christa Bruhn - USA

In memory of those taking refuge at Al-Tabi'in School in Gaza on August 10, 2024 who were killed by three Israeli bombs while praying the dawn prayer known as Al-Fajr in Arabic.

People say
Kill two birds
With one stone
Al-Fajr
Birds chirping
Men gather
Pay their respects
To God
Three bombs
100 dead
Jackpot

Scream

Christa Bruhn - USA

Please scream
so I hear you
so I find you
before the
rubble
silences you.

Last Breath

Christa Bruhn - USA

How long
can a child
hold
the weight
of a building
before
hey take
their last
on August 4, 2024.



Frontline Poet

Christa Bruhn - USA

In memory of the thousands of Palestinian families who have lost numerous family members to Israeli airstrikes in Gaza and in dedication to those who survived and have to witness and live with the heartbreaking loss of their loved ones.

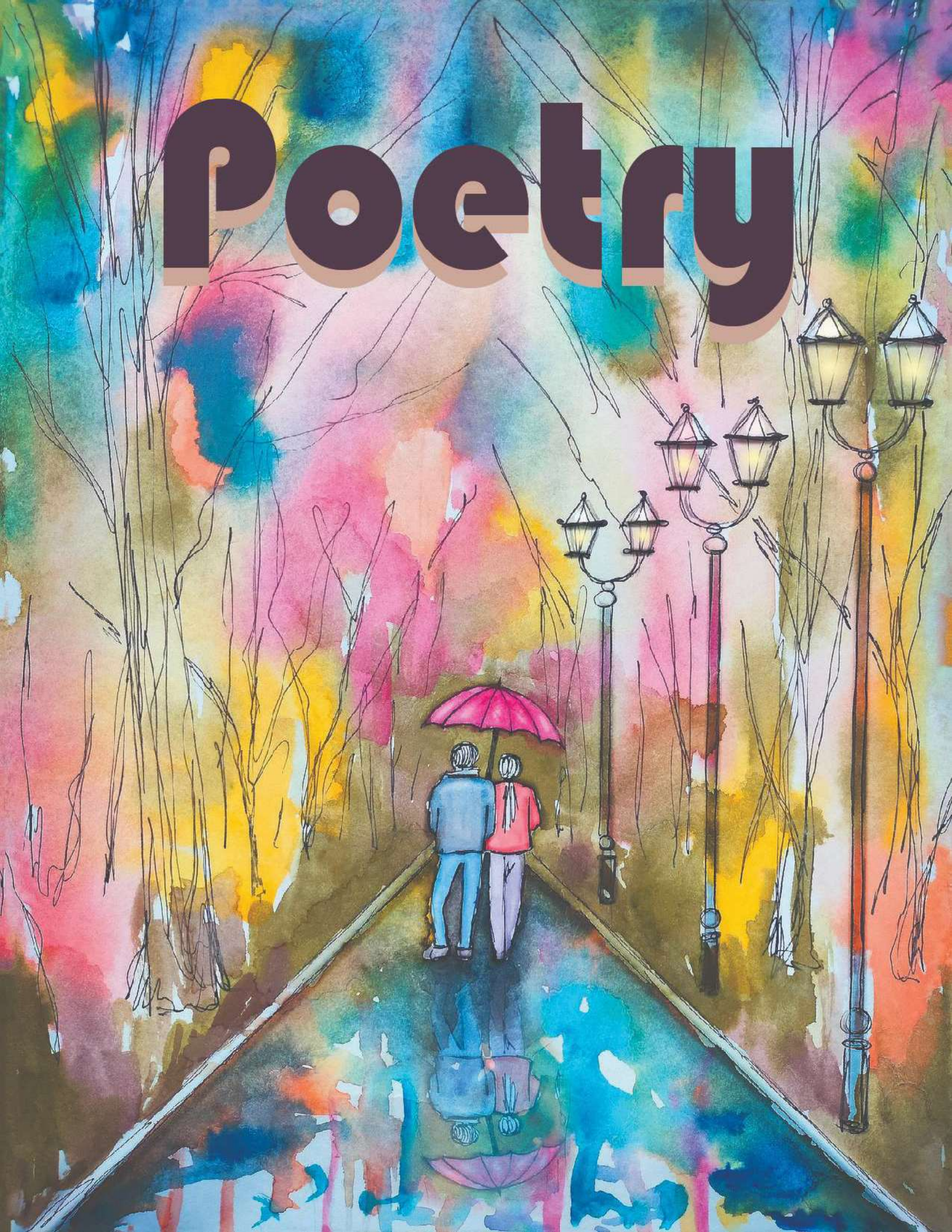
What words
Describe
Slaughter
Daughter
Son
Mother
Father
Baby Brother
Another
In pieces
'Amu's nieces?



Source: Mahmud Hams, Agence France-Presse (AFP)
Truck carries bodies wrapped in burial shrouds of the Abu al-Awf family and other victims killed in a home housing internally displaced Palestinians.



Poetry





A Lover's Void

Rizwan Akhtar - Pakistan

watching out time drifting through a bough,
a bird picking on grass is not the spiritual end of
a day rather than a honking history of an event,

the standard pattern is to muddle, and then
expect clarity, deform the language because
times are deformed, an impulsive read is simple,

the eyes of a woman haunt when it is farewell,
dust over things is sacred, infer symbolically from
the twirling tail of a robin in the last couplet,

her face says love will return philosophically,
need the patience to let this theme take its course.

Analysis of a Love Poem

Rizwan Akhtar - Pakistan

When you can't love, you express it
an interpellation with amor
is justified, erotics are banned
bodies begin to talk, the must-all
ego, for a beloved whom you cannot
wire revealing identity, but it is not
irony it is the statement that brings
boredom, keep coming into my room
I wait, waiting is the last resort, even
silence becomes envious of this plan.

◆◆◆

Writer's Bio

Professor Dr. Rizwan Akhtar, a poet and scholar from Lahore, draws deeply from his city's rich cultural heritage. His debut collection, *Lahore, I Am Coming*, explores themes of exile, identity, and loss, responding to the challenges of a city marked by violence and turmoil. Dr. Akhtar earned his PhD in South Asian Literary Studies from the University of Essex. As both a poet and professor, he continues to inspire students with his passion for poetry.



Dreaming the Moon

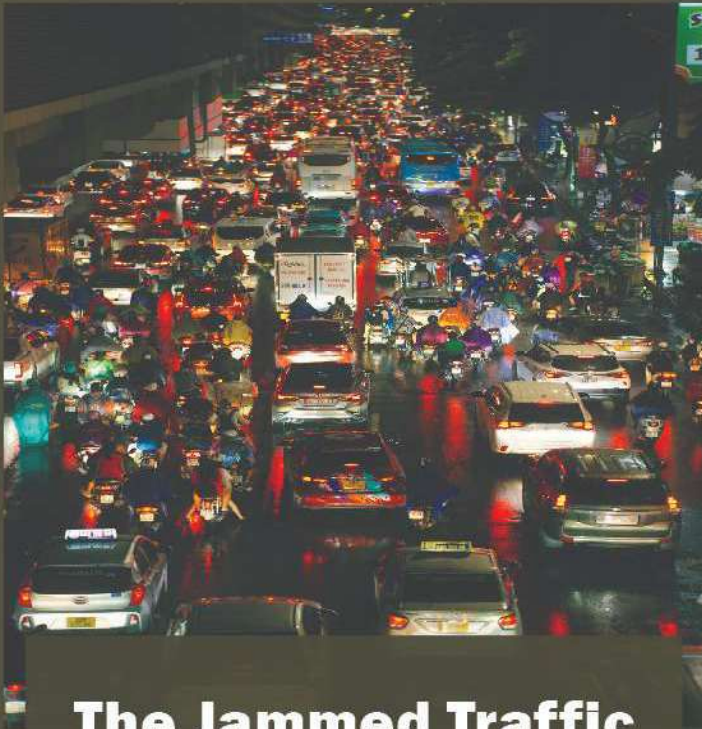
Haikal Hashmi - Bangladesh

I saw a full moon in my dream—
It was smiling,
Casting its milky light
Across the surface of my thoughts.
Someone whispered in my ear:
“A moon is just a moon.
Far away it may seem,
Yet it can turn one lunatic,
Even within a dream.
Beware!
Do not chase it,
Even in your dreams.”



Writer's Bio

Haikal Hashmi is a Bangladeshi poet, short story writer, and translator. He was born in Dhaka, Bangladesh, in 1960. He completed his Honors and Master's degrees in Management at the University of Dhaka and earned a Master's in Banking and Finance from the University of Bocconi in Milan, Italy. Professionally, he works in banking. Haikal writes in Bengali, English, and Urdu. He has published six books of poetry in Bengali and six books of translations into Bengali. A collection of short stories and a collection of English poems. His translations encompass Urdu, Hindi, and English texts and vice versa. His literary works are featured in national newspapers and journals. Haikal resides in Dhaka with his wife.



The Jammed Traffic

Aaisha Umt Ur Rashid - Pakistan

I turn the Google maps on
To look for a short cut
Honking horns of the hybrid hooligans,
these four-wheeled fiends on the canal road,
Fracture my focus
I turn my window pan up
But I cannot turn the ignition off
So I stare ahead from the windscreen
Pondering on the situation
How ironic though
That the jammed traffic of thoughts inside my
brain
Is nothing less chaotic
The hybridity of these thoughts confuse
Me even more
Where should I focus?

The internal struggle of creating peace with my
thoughts
Or
the outside mess
Of this road?
Should I drive this vehicle with steady hands
Or let the storm of thoughts within command
And drive me crazy?
I ponder on the situation a little more quickly
But now
The honking horns of the hooligans inside my head
turn louder
Until I cannot hear the outside world
I swiftly lift up the windowpane
Of my restless mind,
And roll down the car window
The horns outside now sound nothing compared to
the inside ones
I smile, leaving the window pan wide
The smog filled air enters my lungs
But that doesn't bother me anymore
It's a lesser mess I am sure
I can deal with the internal chaos when I am home
So I shift to the first gear, turn off the Googlemaps
and breathe...
This long route back home is delightful!

◆◆◆

Writer's Bio

Aaisha Umt Ur Rashid is an emerging poet, short story writer, editor, and educator based in Lahore, Pakistan. She is the CEO of The Bridge project as well as the Chief Editor of The Bridge anthology and E-Magazine. She is currently serving as a Lecturer of English at LCWU, Pakistan.





Writer's Block

Dieter Bruhn - USA

I'm sitting here all by myself,
Alone, inside my home,
Searching deep inside my soul
To find a special poem.

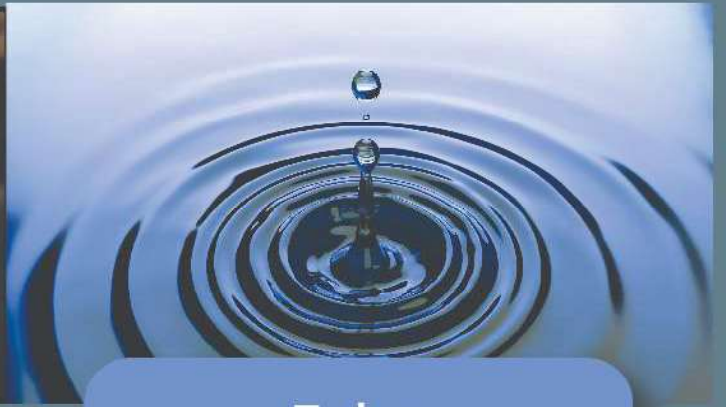
But pressure pushes down my thoughts,
As fog fills up my mind,
And though I try with all my strength,
The words, I cannot find.

It's a gift to be a poet,
As on most days my words rhyme;
Poems flow from my spirit,
As I lose all sense of time.

And yet today feels different,
As I don't know what to say;
The cobwebs in my head are real,
And they won't go away.

Although I want to write a poem,
I cannot win this fight,
So I put my pencil down
And close my notebook tight.

For there will be another day
When all my thoughts are free,
And like river, words will flow,
Until eternity.



Echo

Dieter Bruhn - USA

When I yell,
It yells back.
When I sing,
It sings along.
When I laugh,
It laughs with me.
But when I cry,
It sheds no tears.



Writer's Bio

Dieter Bruhn is a dynamic leader, teacher, trainer, mentor, and entrepreneur, as well as a passionate poet. He has trained thousands of teachers and business professionals across the globe, empowering them to improve their performance. This has included empowering educators with innovative strategies for incorporating creative writing into their classes.

The Words of the Elephant

Dieter Bruhn - USA

I'm a gentle giant who walks softly on the earth;

Like you, I love my child when I give birth.

I bring no harm to any living beast,

And yet some people couldn't care the least

If I am shot and killed,

So their pockets can get filled

From the ivory that they sell.

Oh hell!

All I want is to be free,

To roam with my herd, that's where I want to be;

To live my life until its natural end.

Please don't pretend;

Just do all that you can to save my soul,

And understand that I am only whole

When I'm with the ones I love.

So be peaceful like a dove,

And let me be free;

Just let me be...





To Neil Aitken
(re his poem to the chess computer Deep Blue)
Stephanie Barbe Hammer - USA

this is just to say
I think about your computer poem
as I try to learn
chess.
see -- I learn and play uniquely with
bots -- Deep Blue's children --
and they are programmed to be
kind, encouraging
even, especially Coach Mae
rated 800. "She" always tells
me I'm doing a good job
and asks (rhetorically)
when I learned to
play.
I'll have to challenge an actual
Human
At some point
but first I

need to learn how to
master
some better
openings.



Writer's Bio

Stephanie Barbé Hammer is a 7-time Pushcart Prize nominee in fiction, nonfiction and poetry. Originally from Manhattan, Stephanie moved to California in 1986 to teach at the University of California Riverside, where she taught for 30 years. Her most recent books are the magical realist mystery *Journey to Merveilleux City* (Picture Show Press), and the poetry chapbook *City Slicker: encounters with the outside* (Bamboo Dart Press). She lives in Santa Barbara with her husband, writer and political organizer Larry Behrendt.



Cataract

Madiha Arsalan - Pakistan



There is fire
There is pain
Weeping willow instilled .
There is longing
There are dreams
They are busy
Always thinking,
Intelligent and restraint.
Weighing...To express
or maybe not!
A certain animosity
Distrust! Grey ashes! Complex.
Brutally focused.
Detached from the world!
Playing alien
With the person -
who lived with you
All your life!
I see ,don't see
The ownership.
Looking for peace
Conflict inside!
Your eyes...
When they look into mine,
Burning sensation !
Blurring my vision !
Muddling sense of direction.
And still
Your eyes stray !

Reasoning ,existence.
Prisoner,
Waiting to run free
Flickering ! Growing on me,
Buttercups on roadside wild.
Lined from squinting-
into too many suns!
Lurking optimism
While chanting,
I've -seen- it- all .
I am not giving up.
Your eyes!
Clouded...
Clouded with cataract!

◆◆◆

Writer's Bio

Madiha Arsalan Haneef is a versatile writer and educator based in Pakistan. She is a feature writer for The News, The Friday Times, The Nation, and We News. A passionate poet, Madiha is working on her second volume of poetry, as well as a travelogue. With a deep-rooted passion for education, she has taught at institutions such as Hamdard University and SZABIST, and previously headed the City School Main Margalla Campus for O-level boys. Madiha also works as a Creative Consultant for USAID, runs her own online pastry shop, Buttercups, and leads community development initiatives through her philanthropic work with Leadlings.





LeadLings Consultants

Changing Lives

Ode to the Spring

Sundar Huma - Pakistan

Not to the Daffodils
But to the Merry Orchard
Tired and enjoying the nature
Soothing and getting rid off
Of the mighty bustle

The unheard whispers of
The unheard rose wine
Entangling with the tiny twig
Not to the Daffodils
But to the Merry Orchard

The sweet whistle and whisper of
Yellow bird chirping and singing
Singing the melodies of
The upcoming spring
Saying hello spring, Good bye winter



A young girl with blonde hair, wearing a white sleeveless dress and a white paper headband, is looking down at a silver balloon. She is holding the string of the balloon. The background is a soft, light-colored wall with several other silver balloons floating around. The overall mood is nostalgic and celebratory.

Silver Jubilee of Childhood

Sundar Huma- Pakistan

One breezy eve of spring sprang;
with sweet sound of childhood
Said to the gentle soul;
engulfed in the memories of childhood
Let us bring the cheeky uproar of the unknown world
Let us celebrate the togetherness of past
One edgy eve of autumn sprang;
with gushy sound of adulthood
and said to the selfish soul;
engulfed in pleasing the soaring world
Let us bring the cheeky uproar of leisure time
Let us celebrate the self once filled with happiness
Once breezy eve of spring sprang with melodies of happy life!

Writer's Bio

Sundar Huma is a lecturer of English at Lahore College for Women University, where her passion for both linguistics and literary studies has shaped her academic journey and career. With a strong foundation in linguistics, she has cultivated a deep enthusiasm for research, resulting in nine published works in both national and international journals. Her love for literature has not only enriched her teaching but also fueled her creative writing, allowing her to express powerful emotions through poetry and short stories. One of her poems, "The First Encounter," was featured on The Bridge website. The themes of her work often explore childhood nostalgia, collective effort, nature, and love, offering readers a glimpse into the profound connections she fosters through her writing.

Night

Hibah Masud - Pakistan

O waking hours!
Thou are awake with me
and bear a testimony to
my desirous longings
that consume me
moment by moment
and melt me softly
into the waxing drops
of a warm existence
that is reciprocated
profoundly well
in the valley of feelings
that burn at every turn
to make me genuinely
more subtle, more humane.



Post-Truth

Hibah Masud- Pakistan

Imagine a world
Where
Fair is foul
And
Foul is fair.
And witches bent upon the cauldron
Adding magic to the air;
So as to distort truth
And give the pretense
Of glittering gold,



In chants glorified
Deceits ennobled
And wills unquestioned,
Designs malign!
Mocking honesty
Sowing doubts,
And in so doing,
Things fall apart
And center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is let lose upon the world!

Writer's Bio

Hibah Masud , a Lecturer in English currently at samanabad college, having diverse teaching experience in notable Universities, is a dreamer by heart, a poetess by soul. Her literary genius centres on sharp, crisp yet meaningful fiction particularly in poetry where she lets her creative muse reign freely on literary substrate. Her literary forte celebrates the profundity of being human. Her interest lies in creative critical writing, confessional poetry and world history.

What Is Lost, What Is Found

Hamda Rafaqat - Pakistan

As we journey through time, memories fracture,
Slipping like sand through the fingers of our
minds.

We lose more than objects—phones under
pillows,
Keys in forgotten drawers, documents left behind.
We misplace our hearts too,
Lost in the labyrinth of our days.

When we lose something real, like love,
We search in the unlikeliest of places,
Finding traces in corners we'd never thought to
look.

In trying to reclaim what was ours,
We bend ourselves into unfamiliar shapes,
Filling spaces that feel foreign, ill-fitting.
We settle for what doesn't quite belong,
Crafting unfinished poems, fragments of feeling,
Echoes of emotions left incomplete.

In our restless pursuit of peace,
We grasp at a hope so deep,
It feels like another world—
A quiet force that anchors us in chaos.

This elusive pull offers more than comfort,
It gives us the strength to trust in the unseen.

And as we search, perhaps a song begins to play,
A melody that echoes what we cannot say.
Like Fields of Gold by Sting, it weaves through
our hearts,
Reminding us of love that once was ours.
Its notes are bittersweet, a touch of gold,
A memory of what we seek to hold.

To trust in the will of God,
To trust in life's unfolding,
Is to surrender to a higher wisdom,
A divine order blessing us in ways we may not yet
understand.

What is meant for you,
What is truly yours,



Writer's Bio

Hamda Rafaqat is an English Literature graduate with a passion for delving into the complexities of life through her writing. Based in Lahore, Pakistan, she seeks to explore profound and intricate themes in her work.

Scar

Tooba Ahmed- Pakistan

Whenever I look at the starry night,
I find a star so bright,
The bright star tells me to smile,
Smile! If only for a while,
He tells me about the numerous stars,
That no star shines on the galaxy without any scar,
I ask him, "where do you hide the scar?"
He smiles and says, "I hide it behind the bar",
A bar so strong hidden in my shine,
Though this scar is mine,
but it is healed now it doesn't bleed now,
God has blessed me the shine too bright,
I rise and shine with light every night,
I ask the star, "where should I hide my scar?"
Where is my bar?

The star whispers in my ear,
and says, "it's in your heart"
The heart that can listen,
The heart that can see,
The heart that can feel,
The heart that can heal,
The heart that can kindle with fire of love,
Love is the ultimate shine and twinkle,
where you can always hide the scar,
and the sorrows dwindle,
I look back at the star and say, "I miss you"
The star looks down upon me,
repeating over and over again,
That he loves me, he loves me.

Writer's Bio

Tooba Ahmed is an accomplished English language instructor, researcher, academician, artist, poet, and writer with 17 years of experience. She has exhibited her art internationally and nationally, and her expertise in English language, literature, ELT, and TESOL led her to present research at Harvard University and serve as a session chair. A Fulbright scholar, she taught at the University of Oregon and was a keynote speaker at an international conference in San Francisco. Tooba has contributed to national and international teacher training, published in prestigious journals, and attended Oxford University's summer course, shaping the future of language education worldwide.

Haiku

Sobia Kiran - Pakistan

She is only ten
A girl with swollen belly
Shocked at her destiny

Long, black trail of blood
Decaying, molested bodies
They were killed weeks ago

Busy on the tabs
Detached, estranged broken bonds
Are they parents and kids?

Hybrid, dual man
In search of his identity
Wanders an immigrant

How difficult it is
To select virtue from vice
To search light in the dark

Writer's Bio

Sobia Kiran has recently completed her Ph.D. Humanities (2024) from York University, Toronto, Canada. She has written a pioneering dissertation on Pakistani science fiction comparing it with Western and Indian science fiction traditions, using an interdisciplinary approach to discuss the mimicry and hybridity of Pakistani sf genre and its glocal themes. She has also worked as a teaching assistant at York University teaching English and Humanities courses (Science Fiction, Stories in Diverse Media, Ideas of America, and Science and Humanities). She is on leave without pay from Lahore College for Women University where she worked as an assistant professor of English. She also worked as an assistant professor of English at Forman Christian College University Lahore, Pakistan. She has diverse research interests, and her literary criticism combines various theoretical frameworks to discuss feminist, socio-political, historical, and other issues in the primary texts. She has several scholarly publications and paper presentations to her credit.

A Sweet Memory

Hamail Fatima - Pakistan

I saw him in a bookstore, the place I love staying the most after my room,
A sanctuary where strangers feel like family, and I find my bloom.
I saw him looking at the book of my favorite genre, so near,
I pretended as if I didn't notice him, yet his gaze was clear.

I could feel him judging my taste as I picked from the shelf,
For a moment our eyes met, a connection beyond myself.
Though I have a goldfish memory, his eyes I still recall,
A feeling I've never known, a spark that felt so small.

I bought my books and left, never to see him again,
Now it's a sweet memory, a whisper in the rain.
I wish I had talked to him, but I hold it close and tight,
A moment in the bookstore, a flicker of delight.



Writer's Bio

Hamail Fatima is a Literature student who believes in the power of words. She wants to be an author and poet who can share stories that inspire, challenge, and leave a lasting impact on readers. For Hamail, the act of writing poetry is a journey of self-discovery, leading to greater understanding, empathy, and personal fulfilment.





Race

Sheher Bano - Pakistan

Once a young girl was clad in a gown,
 Petite, gorgeous, wearing a crown.
 Her eyes buttery
 Her walk sluttary
 Oh shit! but she was Brown!



Departure

Sheher Bano - Pakistan

Departure of sentiments on a cold evening
 Like Northern Bird flocks migrating to South
 A black Bear hibernating after its ravening
 So is he with my warm blood on his mouth

Termites of reminiscence clinging to mind
 Like a mother embracing her dying son
 Hope crippling stumbling all the way, blind
 Faith finally holding on its temple a gun

Ice cold sorrows but soon will be spring
 On vines of resilience the joy will swing



Tea

Sheher Bano - Pakistan

Overflowing cup of tea,
 Fiery and steamy
 Similar to my Porcelain heart.
 Filled with warm emotions
 and liquid of foolishness,
 A few love bubbles float on top.

Leaves of sorrow in
 the kettle of sensitivity,
 Boiling on a medium
 flame of madness.
 Milky purity turning brown with
 a gushing excess of sadness.

Sometimes spicy
 Sometimes bitter, often it is
 salty with cry drops.
 One spoon, two spoons or
 no sugar- it mostly
 depends on who you are!

Pouring it through
 the strainer of eyes.
 Hot enough to burn
 the tongue of your lies.
 An overflowing cup of tea.
 It's no one other but me.

Writer's Bio

◆◆◆

Sheher Bano is a sensitive poet and fiction writer from Pakistan, known for her ability to capture the nuances of human emotions. Through her writing, she delves deep into the complexities of the human experience, exploring themes of love, loss, identity, and personal growth. Her work reflects a keen understanding of the emotional landscape, offering readers a profound connection to the inner workings of the heart and mind. With each piece, Bano aims to provoke thought and foster empathy, making her writing both powerful and relatable.



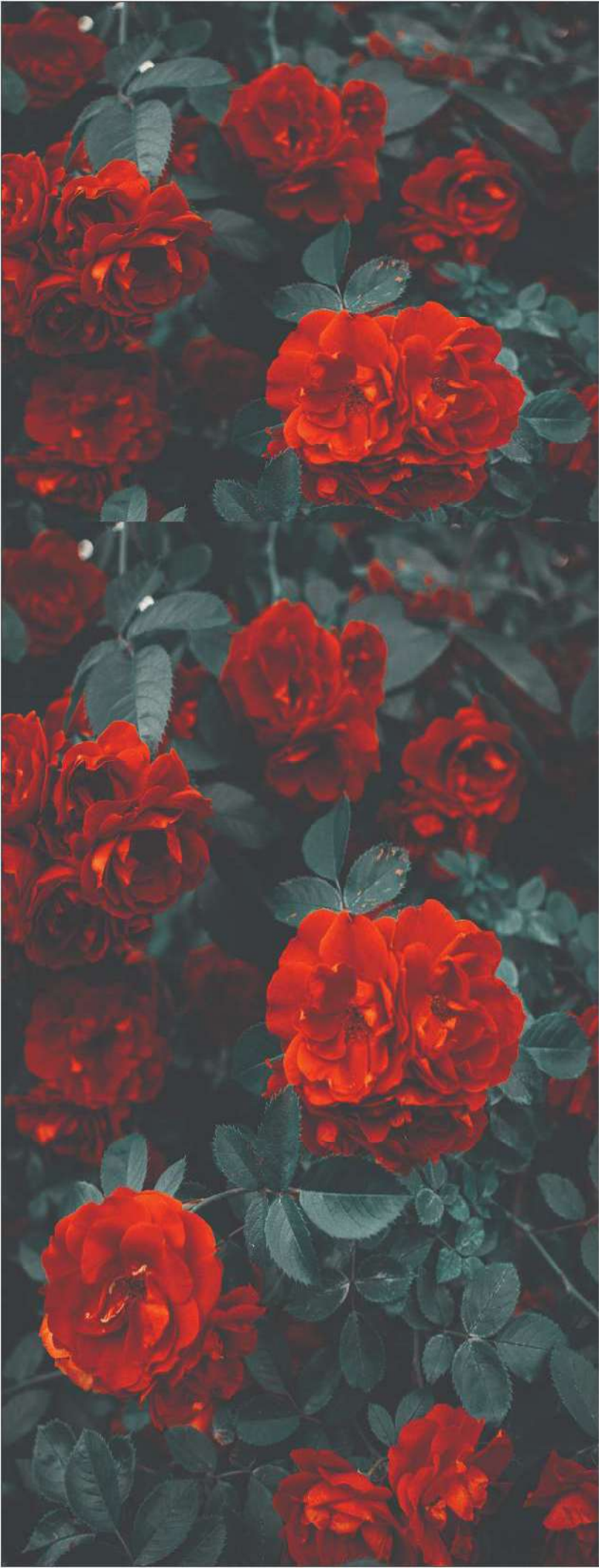
The Deepest Dive

Dua Zainab - Pakistan

I tried to learn swimming when I was ten
Some said its too late to start
Etcetera etcetera are the hardest part
How would I swim , I am too late
How could I learn , I am too late
Just to prove them wrong, my ambitions were high
But after hearing these whispers , I had to defend “I”
Defend and guard the little me
The one who was horrified
And wasn’t able to scream
I jumped into the water
Without knowing the depth
It made all of them quiet
Yes, all of the rest
Kept the hope in and held my breath
Moved my hands and feet
Just to prove them wrong
I portrayed myself, O! so strong

Writer’s Bio

Duaa Zainab is a senior year student of English at Lahore College. She loves spending time with nature, which inspires her to write and express herself through poetry. With a passion for words and big dreams , Duaa hopes to become a writer and poet one day.



Love of My Life

Wania Aamir - Pakistan

You're the sparkle
sparkle of my eyes

You're the peace
piece of my heart

You're the calmness
calmness of my face

You're the sweetness
sweetness of my tongue

You're a dream
dream of reality

You're a sun
sun that shines in my life

You're a moon
moon that brightens my night

You're a purity
purity of my soul

You're the love
love of my life!



Writer's Bio

Wania Aamir is an emerging writer who is currently pursuing a degree in English Literature at Lahore College for Women University. Her poetry showcases her unique voice and perspective on themes of identity, love and nature.

CAR 125

Narjis Raza - Pakistan

Amidst urban hustle, emerges CAR 125,
A green rickshaw, a symbol of change,
Proudly displayed on its plate,
A woman at the helm, veiled in hijab,
resilience masked.

Cross-body bag slung, navigating traffic
signals,
A lone figure, defying the crowd of men,
Challenging norms in quiet rebellion,
Earning bread, defying unspoken rules.

In a land where expectations confine,
She breaks barriers, a silent revolution,
Choices matter, even when scarce,
Her wheels turn with determination.

A society that whispers constraints,
Yet, she steers through, emblem of
strength,
Options denied, yet carves her own,
A strong lady, breadwinner for her kin.



Writer's Bio

Narjis Raza is a passionate emerging writer based in Lahore, Pakistan. Her work mostly deals with the topics concerning the natural world around her.





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Hajj & Umrah
Accessories

Articles

The Community is celebrating its 12th birthday today! Over the last 12 years, we've achieved fantastic milestones, we thank you for being part of this amazing journey. We've grown to over 3.2 million contributors, over 290,000 featured photos, over 127,000 featured videos, over 91,000 featured sound effects, over 85,000 featured music tracks, over 23,000 featured GIFs, over 1,000 featured works have been uploaded by 327,000 contributors. And they've been downloaded (and enjoyed) over 3.8 billion times by 48.6 million monthly visitors.



Diversity is Strength and Humanity

Dr. Saima Eman - Pakistan

When I don't understand something, I say sorry?... but when my maasi doesn't understand something, I hear kiyaa...!?! I talk in Urdu while my mother in law replies in Punjabi. My ex-supervisor communicated at night, another one organised frequent online meetings in the morning, still another one made sudden video calls. Research collaborators drop in and then drop out. Students come with varying abilities. Just as you expect others to be kind to you and to give you some space, you need to adjust with others' quirky ways.

I usually adapt to various tastes of different people. My abbu liked doodh patti, ammi liked English tea, my husband loves truck waali kardhi chaey! The point here is that every personality comes with a unique flavour as people from different cultures.

Diversity is variety and acceptance of variety in our lives is humanity. If we keep talking to someone whose frequency matches ours, we would never learn and grow. If we keep doing the things we have always done, we might master one or several skills but we might compromise our ability to learn other essential life skills.

Some people have a physical disability and others are neurodivergent (have a different way of thinking, perceiving and behaving from a typical person known as a neurotypical) and thus might be having

clinomania, autism, social anxiety, dyslexia, ADHD, or they might be night owls.

People can have a variety of intersecting identities that might be facilitating or preventing them to participate in an activity. For example, we often find that people from WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrial, Rich, and Democratic) countries have more publications and citations as compared to other countries. In another example, a woman with

a visible disability (e.g. being in a wheelchair) might be allowed to park her car in the disabled parking area while a man with an invisible disability (e.g. knee problems or an internal injury/infection) might be fined for parking in a disabled car park.

Embracing diversity means that one is tolerant, humane and inclusive. Different people have different choices,

perspectives, values, learning, and ways of life. We should not exclude (physical, psychological and social exclusion, such as pushing, beating, shouting, blocking on an app, bullying, ignoring and other micro-aggressions) anyone from a conversation, meeting, gathering, nor make anything inaccessible for anyone based on our stereotypical expectations.

To find strength in diversity, we need to be mindful



of our assumptions, thoughts, what we say and what we do so that we can challenge various systems of oppression. We need to think instead of reacting or behaving in an impulsive manner. Effective communication and inclusion will only happen when we attend to the sensitivities of the differences (apparent or non-apparent differences in demeanour, actions, perceptions, etc). For example, we might perceive sharing as a way of effective communication but the listener might perceive it as inappropriate oversharing. Similarly, a person might be tired or sick and we might react aggressively assuming that the other person is being rude.

When our routines get monotonous and we see the same things on our phones, read the same newspapers, meet the same people, talk in the same language and in other words cozy up in our comfort zones, that is the danger sign that we are reclining into false worlds where everyone and everything is the same. We gradually get so much used to the sameness in our lives that anything different then becomes an annoying challenge for us! We then are likely to become intolerant towards diversity. Thinking, assuming, behaving and expecting sameness and everyone having the same ability is ableism (sort of unconscious racism/prejudice/bias towards disabled people while favouring abled people). When we are deliberately excluding disabled people from any activity, and showing bias towards them, that is disableism.

We might either glorify change or belittle it depending on how we perceive different things. For example, we often see crowds wanting to have a photo with a White foreigner when White people come to conferences in Pakistan. On the other hand, brown fat people might be ignored despite their extraordinary achievements.

Critical thinking, and self analysis are ways in which we can prepare ourselves to accept and celebrate diversity. The differences only need to be acknowledged to facilitate somebody in any matter, not to ostracise or glorify anyone. The

beauty is in diversity lived with harmony. I would end on the following phrase. You are beautiful as you are! Geo aur jeenay du!

a



Writer's Bio

Dr. Saima Eman, CPsychol, APA MFP Fellow, Ph.D (UK), M.Sc. (UK), M.Sc. & CHRP. (PK), B.A, B.Sc. (PK)

Commonwealth Alumni Advisory Panel Member, UK (selected for the second time).

CSC mentor at CSC mentoring scheme.

DARTP and External Examiner and Voluntary Careers Speaker at The British Psychological Society, UK.

UK Alumni Awards 2021 Finalist in the Professional Achievement Category in Pakistan by the British Council.

International Affiliate, American Psychological Association.

American Psychology and Law Society Member and conference reviewer.

Certified Publons Peer Reviewer.

E-mentor, University of Sheffield Careers Service eMentoring Programme at University of Sheffield, UK.

Assistant Professor, Department of Applied Psychology,

Lahore College for Women University, Lahore, PK.

Advisory council member at Global network of Psychologists for Human Rights.

President, Khan Bahadur Visionaries Welfare, PK.

Psychology Tutor at Preply, Skype, and Fiverr.

Psychology Online consultant at Activity Review Corner.

Ex-UREC student rep, UoS, UK.

Profile link: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/Dr-Saima-Eman>

<https://www.lcwu.edu.pk/saima-eman.html>



Access to Education is Endangered

Areeba Mehboob - Pakistan

“Pakistan identified the need for education as a critical priority for the nascent state right after its creation”

Abdullah A. Fadil -Chairman of Unicef in Pakistan.

Pakistan has been dealing with illiteracy problems since 1947. Climate changes and the COVID-19 pandemic have exacerbated the situation by increasing the learning gaps.

Over the past few weeks, an educational emergency has been declared in the country by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif. The ongoing literacy crisis is jeopardising the country's future and prosperity. The escalating educational crisis fuelled by poor planning and flawed execution, lack of educational facilities and insufficient financial resources. Pakistan ranks second in Out-of-school children in the world with approximately 22.8 million out of school children. The exploitation of child labour persists in Pakistan, depriving children from the basic rights. Pakistan was the sixth nation and first Muslim country that signed the UNCRC in 1990, although it has expired in 2023. The UNCRC is often identified as the standard source for measuring child rights, ensuring better future for them. Moreover, Pakistan has enacted multiple child rights related laws that has been inconsistent and often barred by a lack of stakeholder engagement. Despite facing challenges, still Pakistani children are deprived from their rights to survival, protection, education and development. 60 million people in the country are illiterate. Most of these are children with disabilities, girls from underprivileged areas and children from minority groups. The major reasons contributing in illiteracy are poverty, child labour, inadequate infrastructure and gender inequality. It's existentially imperative to address education challenges by providing consistent frameworks and assistance to the education

department. We must prioritise children's educational continuity by raising awareness amongst children and parents and by letting the parents know that we are ready to invest in the best interests and future of their children. Non or semi-literate parents could be encouraged by public awareness campaigns and by organising different campaigns in collaboration with non profit organisations, emphasising and stating about the lifetime benefits of education. Literacy crisis can be tackled by supporting early childhood education.

“A child is born like a blank slate “

-John Locke

John Locke pictured a newborn's mind as a tabula rasa, means a clean slate or a blank tablet on which anything can be written. Quoted by our Prophet Muhammad “Acquire Knowledge from the Cradle to the Grave.” It is the need of the hour to establish primary education system in Pakistan. Most of the children don't know how to read and write. The primary level education should be the utmost priority to ensure proficiency in local languages, Science, Maths and English. Furthermore, Teachers from underprivileged areas should be trained and provided with enough resources to setup Street schools in their areas. More fundings should be provided for building schools in rural areas. An internship initiative should be established, providing job seekers with opportunities to teach underprivileged students, ensuring employment and professional references. The crucial aspect of this initiative would help the students form underprivileged communities to learn for free and the job

seekers to get employments. The students from host communities in Balochistan, students from minority groups and the children of labours should have the opportunity to educate themselves. Domestic workers and mothers should be counselled to leave their children in schools, ensuring their safety during working hours. Besides this, students in primary and secondary schools should be encouraged and emphasised to pursue higher education and to learn the importance of modern education and technology.

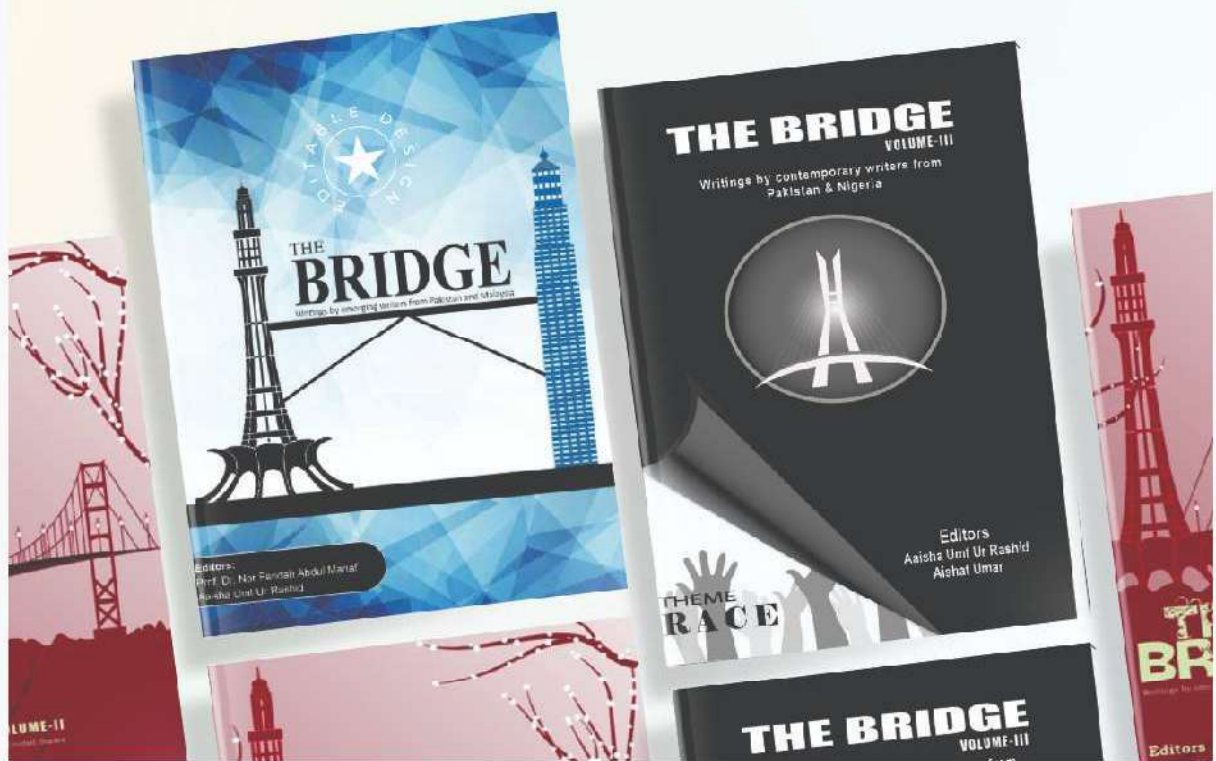
Writer's Bio

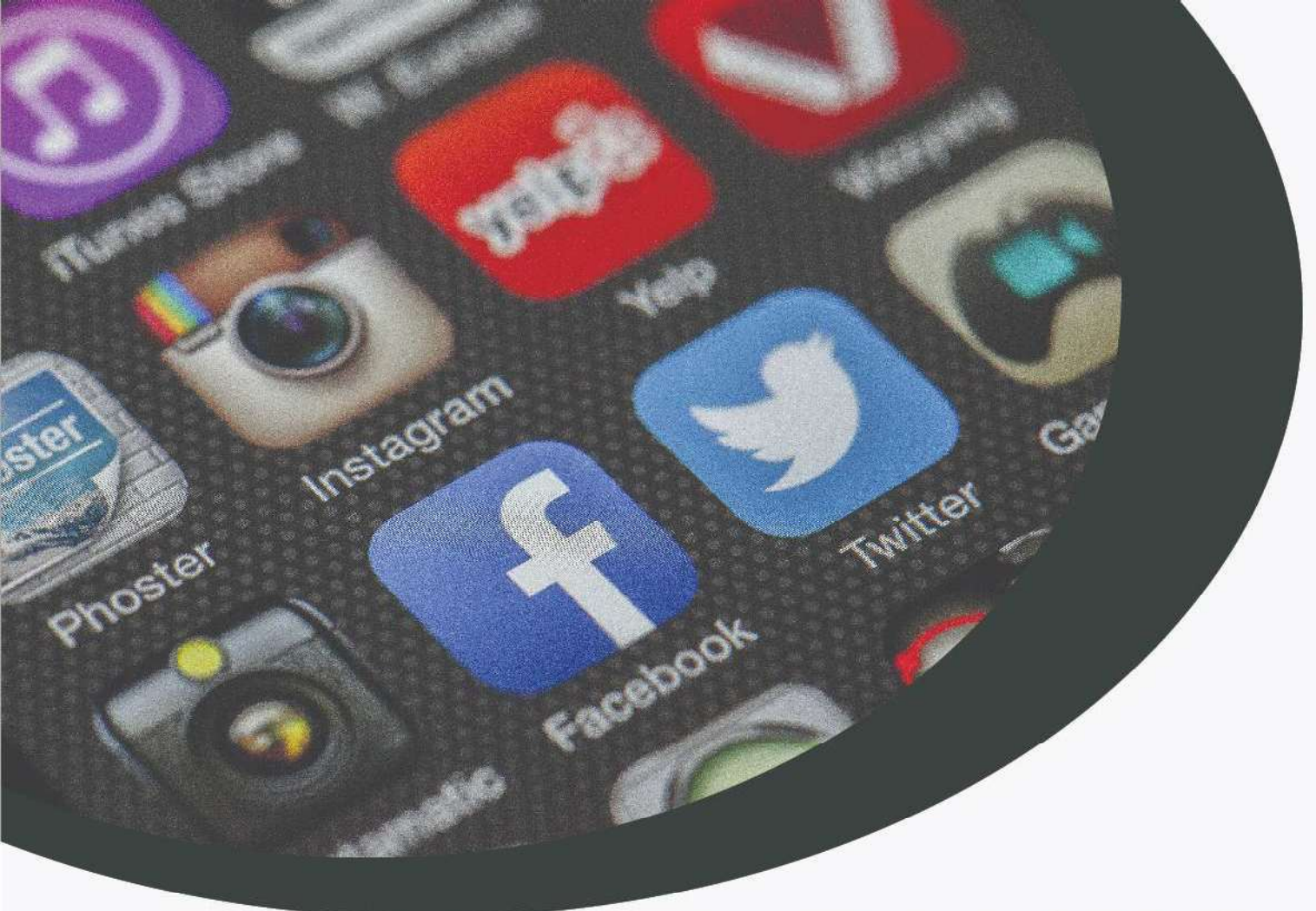
Areeba Mehboob is an enthusiastic student of English Literature with a deep passion for exploring societal issues through her writing. She frequently addresses a wide range of general concerns, using her analytical skills to reflect on contemporary challenges. Through her thoughtful essays and articles, Areeba aims to offer meaningful insights and potential solutions to the problems that affect her community. Her approach is both reflective and proactive, as she combines her literary knowledge with a genuine desire to contribute to positive social change.

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WHAT DO WE LACK ?

Abeha Tariq Jameel - Pakistan

Dear readers, in this story I will tell you how I spent six days without internet connection.

Our WIFI device got some technical issue. Elder siblings had their own internet but what about those financially broke younger siblings? We always think that we cannot survive without internet. And we always wonder why the time flies so fast. Is this the sign that the day of judgement is near? But believe me it's not the case. Just turn off the internet and you will get all the answers to your questions.

When our WIFI device got some technical problem and I had to survive without the internet I felt like I could not breathe anymore. I mean how can we? Chit chatting with friends and scrolling through social media is the only purpose of our

lives these days. Admiring the Birkin's bag and red bottom heels, watching someone riding ninja H2r, BMW 1000R, racing with McLeran and BMW, with our broke bank accounts. This is the only purpose of our lives as we cannot buy them. But we can admire this stuff, right?

My day 1 went like "oh my God why me... God why?????" Day 2 went like "hope this problem gets sorted out immediately because I cannot survive anymore". Day 3 went like "oh my God why is my wardrobe so messy?" (Cleaning of wardrobe done). Day 4 went like "oh my God does this house belong to a human? Why the hell is this so dirty?" (Cleaning of house Done). Day 5 went like "I don't even know how to feed myself when no one is around" (Cooking basicsLearnt). Day 6 went like "I should take care of my health" (Pilates

and walk Done). Just 6 days and I was turning into that girl I admired the most while sitting on a couch like a rotten potato.

We spend hours in front of the six inches screen to become the version we admire the most and we of course want to become that version but we do not take the action and keep scrolling. Social media has hacked our brains. It is designed in such a way that we find satisfaction and comfort in using this. It is designed in such a way that the brain gets attracted to colors and the change of topics within seconds. One reel is about our interest, another about our vibe, and then one about politics and then celebrities. And we don't know how dangerously it is messing with our brains. We are being addicted to high dopamine. Most of the important work of our daily lives is associated with low dopamine. When we do something with low dopamine our brain does not like this and it results in procrastination and ADHD which are the major issues of this generation. Ever wonder why AI is becoming more intelligent day by day? The reason is we are turning lazy every passing day. The AI algorithm is

designed in such a way that even if we are not using mobile phone and just talking with someone and then when we turn on our mobile phones we finds our social media platforms, bombarded with the things we were just talking about. That's how we are getting manipulated by AI and it is taking over the humans.

So my dear readers, if you want to become smart then take action. Do not just admire things while sitting on a couch but turn your internet off and do whatever that makes you one step closer to your goal. We don't lack potential but energy and vigor to use that potential.



Writer's Bio

Abeha Tariq Jameel is currently a data science student in comsats. She wants to highlight the social injustice for importance of skill and blindness of grades. In her opinion, the Society should bring an environment in which importance of creativity is more than getting grades with typical study system.





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2024 Winners



1st Position-5th International Writing Competition

The Breath of Hope

Dieter Bruhn
(The United State)

Open up your heart and lungs;
Breathe the breath of hope.
The pathway's there before you;
Just climb upon the rope.

Pull harder than you ever have;
Escape the depths below.
Breathe deeper than you think you can,
As toward the light you go.

Too many things have pushed you down,
They're heavy on your soul,
Making you feel broken,
And far from being whole.

But you are stronger than their force,
Much tougher than their weight.
They want to crush your confidence,
But that is not your fate.

There's still so much for you to do;
Perhaps you find it strange.
But the voice you bring into this life,
The world, it sure can change.



So as you grip upon the rope,
Move higher, toward the light,
Remember that you have a gift
To make the world, right.

I know it's hard, each pull you take,
Your body wants to scream,
But the strength inside of you
Will guide you toward your dream.

So as you slowly make your way
And see the sky so blue,
The world and all its mysteries
Are waiting there for you!



1st Position- 6th International Writing Competition

A Visionary's Nightmare!

Syed Huzaifah Ahmed
(Pakistan)

Hello Professor. I'm very sorry for asking you to do this on such short notice. I know you're a busy man so I'll keep this interview quick." said the man at the Professor's doorstep. "This interview will be part of an article on the cover page of Dawn News, correct?" The Professor inquired. The interviewer replied "Of course!" so the Professor welcomed him inside. "No one has heard from you for five years since you retired! You were the leading scientist and founder of Gensec International, the largest biotechnology industry in Germany!" He said, sounding almost dramatic. "That, I was" the professor replied rather grimly. "Then suddenly," the interviewer continued "four years after your contract with the military, when your organization was at its peak, you retired without making a single public statement. It's rumored that you even told your coworkers and subordinates to do the same. The people have since been dying to know the whole story. So naturally this will be a hit on the cover page." The Professor simply said, in his gruff voice "Good then, I'll be over with tea" he had been preparing tea beforehand for the interview.

Once the two sat down in the living room, with the air conditioning turned on, the interviewer took a recorder out of his coat and turned it on. "So, Professor Mauren," he started "you were the leading scientist and founder of Gensec International,

the largest biotechnology industry in Germany. Before that you started by contributing to research done on prosthetic limbs in the local research facilities, while on the side you made your own firm to manufacture and sell artificial limbs. That firm soon developed into a large business with a dedicated research team spearheaded by you yourself. Then you expanded your horizons to make other ingenious inventions, micro-robotic medicines, organic batteries, stuff that people could only dream of. You and your company became famous for revolutionizing so many other industries" The Professor, looking down at his knees, replied "Yes, that's true." "Then you made a contract with the military, your business grew exponentially with their funding. But then you quit, without any explanation or public statement. The question on so many people's minds is: Why? Why would someone quit at the height of their glory?" Upon hearing these words, the Professor clenched his fists and started trembling slightly. The interviewer, not noticing this added "I was hoping you could enlighten us on that." The Professor spoke in a slightly louder voice while managing to keep his calm demeanor "Very well, I'll enlighten you."

"Every part of the story you've told so far is true, up till the part about the contract. I never made a contract with the German military; General Ubel came to me with the offer. I made it clear that I had





no intention of working with him, as I knew what the outcome would be. But he never stopped coming after me with the contract. Now as you probably know, just because a business seems to be doing well on the outside, doesn't always mean it's financially stable. Over time, my investors started to either go bankrupt, or pull funding from my company, you might call me a conspiracy theorist for this, but I have no doubt that he had a hand in all of it. Because when I was at my most desperate, he came to me with the offer again, saying it was the last time. And so, thinking I was backed into a corner, I shook the devil's hand." The interviewer had been listening intently now, and was almost at a loss for words, but he finally managed to say "I-If I may, you said you didn't sign the contract at first because you knew the outcome. What were you afraid would happen?" The Professor replied, "Exactly what did happen. At first he only bought the medical equipment to treat wounded soldiers. I was okay with that for a time. Then he wanted my organic batteries, the inventions I made as a renewable alternative fuel, to power his weapons of war. But when he told me they were going to weaponize my prosthetics technology, to 'build' the ultimate soldiers, that was the last straw. I told him my organization wouldn't be a part of this madness anymore. So, he removed me himself."

"That's the story, you can omit whatever feels inappropriate, just make sure the message gets across." The man finally said "Thank you Professor, I'll be on my way now." The news report the other day was "The German military is about to set out, armed with the latest in cybernetic warfare technology, in their conquest of--"

The Professor turned the TV off, he needn't see all of that. It had haunted his nightmares long enough.



Get ready, Writers!

The stage is set for an electrifying literary showdown! These are not your typical competitions — they are battles of words, of imagination, and of creativity that will push the boundaries of your writing abilities.

The 7th International Writing Competition (Poetry) is calling all poets! This is your chance to weave words into breathtaking tapestries, capturing the raw emotions of the human experience in a way only you can. Let your verses dance, strike, and resonate — this is where the art of poetry meets the world stage. **(Deadline – 15th April, 2025)**

The 8th International Writing Competition (Short Story) is your opportunity to spin tales that leave readers gasping for breath, eagerly flipping through the pages. Create characters that leap off the page, settings that transport, and plots that twist like never before. The clock is ticking — can you craft a story that will captivate and intrigue? **(Deadline – 15th April, 2025)**

The 9th International Writing Competition (Script/Drama) awaits playwrights, screenwriters, and dramatists. This is where your dialogues must sizzle and your characters must leap to life! The world is waiting for the next epic production, and it could come from your pen. Can your script be the one that sets the stage on fire? **(Deadline – 15th June, 2025)**

The 10th International Writing Competition (Science Fiction) is a playground for the bold and the brilliant. It's time to bend reality and shape worlds beyond imagination. Dive into the unknown, challenge the laws of science, and craft futures that are both astonishing and thought-provoking. Can your story ignite the future of speculative fiction? **(Deadline – 15th June, 2025)**

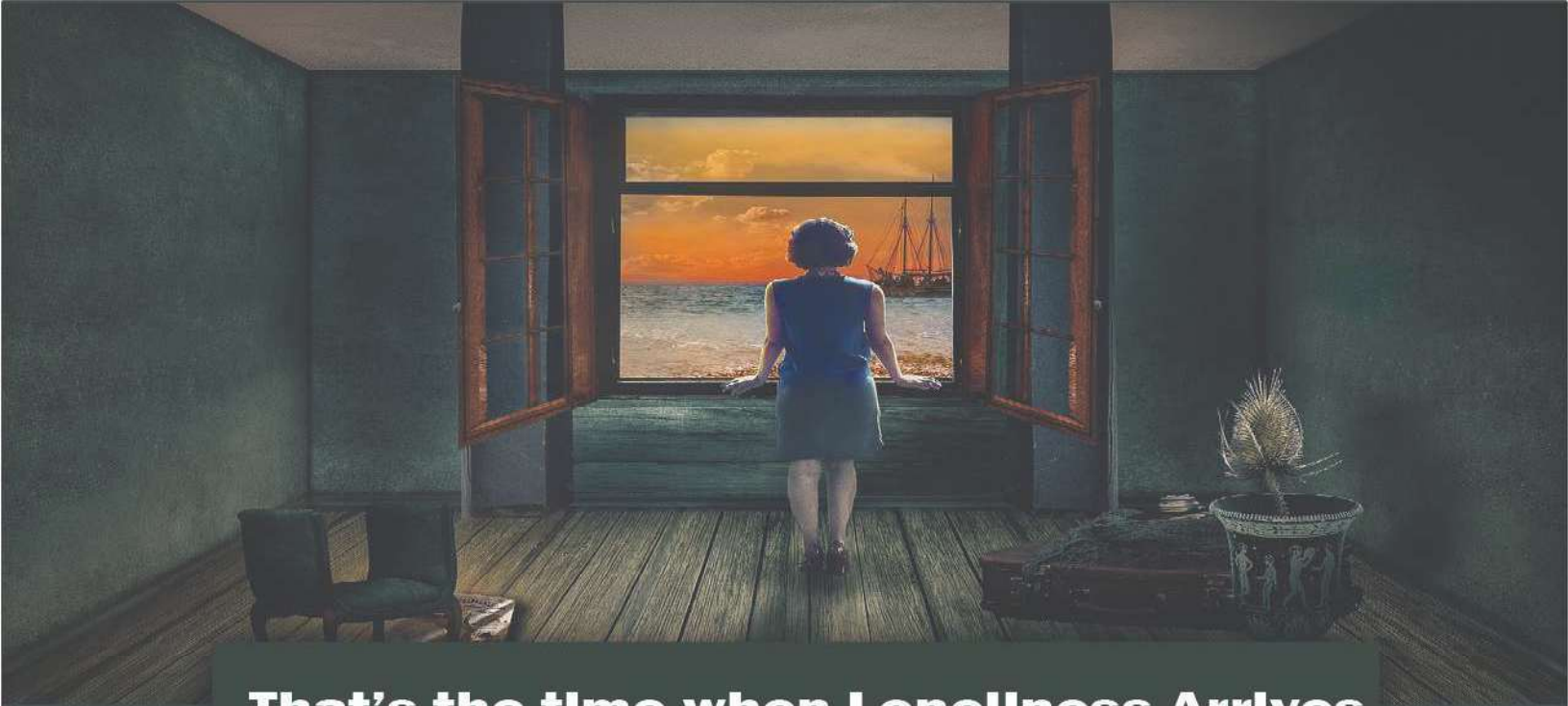
These competitions are more than just events — they are opportunities to leave your mark on the world. The clock is ticking, and the world is waiting to hear your voice! Are you ready to take the plunge?

The spotlight is yours!

Visit the website (www.bridge-the-nations.com) for more details regarding each competition!

Children Section





That's the time when Loneliness Arrives

Hiba Bokhari - Pakistan

When you're all alone
And there's not even a clone.
At that time, you wonder what you might do
And it's obvious
that you are feeling blue
 you might feel good but you're alone
 you think about things you could
Dream about travelling the world
 Where u roam and swirl
 But you might feel lonely
 Moving around slowly
Looking for someone to chat with
 OR
 To play with
 But you find no one
 In the whole wide world
 And that's the time when
 Loneliness arrives
Which makes you cry
 Loneliness arrives

NOTE: Don't wait to be lonely , to recognize the true value of friends!





Morning of Spring

Hiba Bokhari - Pakistan

I can see the blooming flowers
On trees as tall as towers
The sky is blue
And with sun's light it's all true
The weather feels warm with a light breeze
And I am surrounded by uncountable trees
I can feel the fresh air
Hugging me with care
Hearing the sound of chirping birds
I think of many words
Seeing the cotton clouds
Makes me sing the words aloud
This is just the start of morning
With nature I am making a bonding
Roosters told me to arise
To open my sleepy eyes
Now livings of the sky
It's time for me to say goodbye!

Writer's Bio

Hibba Bukhari, a 12-year-old student at Lahore Grammar School, is the daughter of Syed Kashif Ejaz Bukhari. Currently in the 6th grade, she is an emerging writer from Pakistan, with a particular passion for imaginative writing and poetry. Hibba's work reflects her creative spirit, weaving intricate stories and vivid poems that capture the essence of her unique perspective.





scared, but then I fell asleep. When I woke up in the morning, a young girl knocked on my door. I opened the door and she immediately hugged me. I was surprised and asked her who she was. She replied, "Have you forgotten me Elina? I am Zahrah, the one you used to play with in our childhood. We were good friends." Then I remembered that she was the daughter of the lady who used to cook for us in this house. When I was not allowed to go outside so we became friends. Seeing her made me very happy, and I invited her inside. She asked me about my parents, and I told her that they had passed away in a car accident some time ago. Now, I am alone, and I have come to this country to manage my father's business. She expressed her condolences. Then she asked if I remembered any memories before the accident. I told her no, and she said, 'Don't you care about what happened before the accident? How were you back then?' I replied "No, whatever had to happen has happened.

Shattered Reflections

Fatima Irfan - Pakistan

The middle of the night, a driver from the company picked me up from the airport and dropped me off at the old, nostalgic house where I used to live 12 years ago. I spent 2 years in that house, as my parents didn't let me go outside due to my accident. As I looked around the house, I started feeling a strange mix of emotions. I put my belongings down and went upstairs to my room. At first, I was

What's the point of remembering the past? I want to make my future better.' She agreed and said, 'Yes, you're right.' Then we talked a bit and she left.

So, my work began after some time and I got really absorbed in it. Then, after a month, the whole of Pakistan got super excited about Eid and everyone went off with their families to celebrate the occasion. At that point, I was the only one who felt a bit lonely. But one of my friends, Anisha, who also happens to work with me at our company,

extended a sweet invitation for me to celebrate Eid in her village and put an end to that loneliness. I quickly packed my bags and joined her on this exciting adventure. It's amazing how friends can make such a difference in our lives.

When I stepped foot into the village, I had this strange sensation as if I had some sort of connection to this place, even though it was my first time seeing it. But as soon as I entered my friend's house, I was greeted with such warmth and hospitality. It made me feel incredibly happy. Later that night, there was an Eid ceremony in the village and we had an absolute blast. I never expected to feel such a strong bond with people I had never met before. After having a great time, my friend and I decided to explore the village. The cool breeze was blowing gently as we chatted and wandered a bit further from the village. I was feeling tired, so my friend suggested that I take a seat on the bench in front of us while she went to get some water for me.

As I approached that bench, my heart started racing and I felt a surge of panic. My head began to spin, and then out of nowhere, a vivid memory came rushing back. I remembered running to that very spot, calling out desperately, "Almas Brother, where are you? Please help me! These people are trying to catch your sister!" I struggled to catch my breath, overwhelmed with fear. I thought maybe he was following me again, so I took off running once more.

Retracing the same streets from my past. Eventually, I found myself standing in the middle of a busy road, and suddenly, another flashback hit me. I saw a car speeding towards me. I was so disoriented and frightened and I collided with that car. In an instant the world was out of my control. My head collided with an unforgiving force sending a searing pain. The world blurred, and a hunted silence replaced the chaos around me. Tears welled up in my eyes. It was the moment where the time stood still and fragility of life became painfully apparent.

As I recalled my past, my head started to spin and I felt dizzy. I was overwhelmed with a sense of despair. The intensity of my headache caused me to lose consciousness.

When I opened my eyes, I was at Anisha's house. Anisha asked me, "Are you okay?" and I replied, "Yes, I'm perfectly fine. What happened?" She told me that I had passed out in the middle of the road and she brought me home with the help of some people. She asked me what had happened, but I diverted the conversation by saying that maybe I had seen the beauty of your village, which I couldn't handle, and she laughed. Anyway, the next day I didn't go out of her house, and on the third day, I returned to my home.

All the time I kept thinking whether I had any connection with that village. Whether I used to live there. I knew where and how my accident happened, but it's just so hard to believe. My parents kept telling me it happened around noon when I was coming back from school. But here's the kicker: I can't shake the feeling that someone was following me that night. Who were those people trying to nab me, and who's this mystery brother I was calling out for? Do I even have a brother? Anyway, the Eid festivities were over, and I had been trying to brush off those flashbacks and focus on work, but my mind kept wandering back to that one thing. I wanted to know more about my past.

I just remembered that my aunt and her daughter Zahra, who I spent my childhood with, used to live in that house before I had my memory loss. I think it's worth asking them if they have any information. As soon as I finished work, I headed straight to their place. After a while, I finally mustered up the courage to ask her about the accident. I asked her that you have lived in my house before my accident, right? Then I asked her to share whatever information she knew about my past. She inquired if I had any recollection of my past. In order to uncover the truth, I confidently stated that "I remembered everything". This caught her off guard, and she anxiously asked if I remembered

being adopted. I was completely shocked in that moment. Seeing my reaction, she became confused and asked, with a frightened voice, if I truly didn't remember. In a barely audible voice, I asked her again that "Zahra, was I adopted?" She fell silent, appearing upset, and didn't respond. We sat in an uncomfortable silence for two minutes. I said "Can you please share the details of my past? I want to know everything you know."

She said that "at the time of the accident, I was just a child and I don't remember much. All I know is that when you came home, you had the accident and lost your memory. They kept you at home for two years and didn't let you to go anywhere so that you wouldn't remember your past. After that, my mother will know everything about you." When I went to meet her, she was very ill, but she was really happy to see me. After talking to her, she told me that "this family didn't have any children and they always wanted to adopt a child. One day, your dad was coming back alone from his company at night, and I accidentally hit with his car because they were speeding. This caused a severe injury, and as a result, you lost your memory. When you woke up, you couldn't remember anything, and this family didn't know anything about you either. They decided not to let you remember your real family and instead chose to adopt you, pretending to be your parents. That's why they kept you at home for two years, so you wouldn't remember anything. We were all told not to talk about your past. It was definitely not right, but this family did their best to take care of you and even left all their belongings for you. However, your actual family has been waiting for you for a long time, and you should try to find them."

At that time, I was listening carefully to everything, but when I was returning home, it was becoming difficult for me to bear all of this. I started feeling dizzy and eventually fainted. When I opened my eyes, I was in the hospital. A nurse told me that a young man had brought me here. I went outside the ward and saw a young boy sitting there. She pointed towards the young man and said that

he had brought me to the hospital. I went and sat next to him, expressing my gratitude to him. After a little while, a little girl, who was wearing a hospital gown, ran towards him and said, "Brother, you have arrived!" He hugged her and asked how she was doing. She replied, "I am perfectly fine." Seeing the love between these siblings, my eyes welled up and I thought that I must also have a brother who loves me in the same way. At that moment, I made up my mind to find my own family too. I don't want to be alone anymore.

Now the journey of recalling my past begins.

Now I started thinking about when this series of events began. I remember when I was 12 years old, I had an injury to my head. And now, at 26 years old, it means I haven't seen my real family for 14 years.

Then I went to my friend and asked if she knew about that girl who went missing from your village 14 years ago. She thought for a moment and said, "Yes, I know her. She used to be my friend, but one day she got angry with her family and left. I haven't seen her since. Why are you asking?" I said, "Maybe I know her too." Then I asked her if she knew the address of her house. She said, "Yes, the house is closed now." So, I requested her to take me there, and we both set off towards the village again. We reached the village and started walking. I was lost in my thoughts, wondering if I hadn't left out of anger and someone seemed to be following me during that time. Suddenly, my friend called me and said, "This is the house." As soon as I saw the house, my heart started racing. I thought about turning back, but then I thought, since I've come this far, I should have a look. I thanked my friend and said, "Let me go inside and see for myself." I took slow steps inside, approached the living room, and there was a big frame with a family picture. It had a man, a woman, two children, a boy and a girl. Seeing that picture brought back memories for me. I remembered that my original name was Aliyana.

I looked towards the stairs and remembered how my brother and I used to run down, chasing each other for candies. We would sit in the room across from the stairs and draw together. I started remembering my whole past. My older brother loved me so much, but our parents would often argue during our childhood. One night, when our dad had a fight with mom and left the house, he got into a car accident and he passed away. Seeing his lifeless body, my mom had a heart attack and she also passed away on the same day. And we both became lonely in our childhood. Then, our aunt took care of us and loved us dearly. I remember one night, before going to sleep, my brother and I made a promise that we would never fight and never leave each other. As I remembered everything, tears filled my eyes. I went upstairs and entered my brother's room. I saw our posters of drawings and my art supplies in his drawer. Then, I remembered the time when I accidentally broke my aunt's favorite vase, and my brother scolded me for it. I got angry and stormed out of the house. I started running without knowing where I was going. When I finally stopped and looked around, I found myself in a strange place. I asked a man for help, and he took me with him. I walked with him, and he left me outside a shop. Inside, I overheard a conversation where someone said that I have kidnapped a girl. Just after I listened to this I panicked and ran so far that they couldn't find me. I ended up on a bench, and then I ran again on the same street. And then, I had an accident. When I regained consciousness in my present, I found myself back at the same place where my accident had occurred. I was tracing my flashbacks and ended up there again, but this time I fainted. A couple who was heading to Islamabad took me to the hospital. When I woke up, I thanked them and they left. As I looked around, I realized it was the same hospital where I had been admitted before. When I stepped outside, I saw that little girl who was with that young man. She was crying. I went up to her and asked what had happened. She told me that her brother's cancer was getting worse and he needed blood. I felt very bad after seeing

him, then I found out his blood type from the doctors standing near him and I realized that we had the same blood type. I thought that in exchange for his help, I should also have to help him so that the little girl continues to receive love from her brother. I have lost my brother, But he must not lose his brother. So after some tests, I donated my blood to him and then left.

Now, I remembered my entire past. I wanted to find my brother and aunt as soon as possible. I asked my friend about that family, and she told me that they had lost contact with the girl's family and that she herself had come to Islamabad. I went back to that village for the third time and asked the people around that house if they knew about the people living there. An elderly lady told me that a girl had gone missing many years ago, and her aunt and brother had been searching for her day and night. Due to the sadness, the aunt fell ill and passed away two years after the girl went missing. Then, the girl's brother left the house and went to the city. I asked if they knew where he was living in the city, but they said they had never met him and didn't know where he was. I thanked them and left. I feel sad because my aunt, who raised me, has also left me, and now I don't know how to find my brother.

Then I remembered my brother's best friend, with whom he had been friends since the beginning. I went to his house and found out that he had also gone to the city with my brother, and they were living together. I took the address from his family and quickly headed towards Islamabad. While returning I was very happy that I will meet my brother again. It was a strange sense of peace and happiness in my heart. When I arrived at his house and knocked on the door, a man in his mid-thirties opened it. I said, "Brother," and he looked at me and replied who? I said that I am Aliyana. He was astonished and said, "Aliyana?" I replied, "Yes, it's me. Your sister." My eyes were filled with tears, and I went to hug him, but he stepped back and said, "I am Zaki, your brother's friend. Even his eyes were filled with tears when he saw me." He took me inside and asked me,

"Where were you all this time? What happened to you? Didn't you come to meet your brother? Why did you leave him?" Without answering all of that, I asked him where my brother was. He was silent, and tears began to flow from his eyes. I pleaded, "Please tell me where my brother is." He said, "Your brother never stopped looking for you after you went missing. He became a police officer and worked overtime to search for you. Every day, he woke up with the hope of finding you and every night he went to his bed with disappointed. The result was that your brother was diagnosed with stomach cancer, but even after that, he didn't care about his own life and he kept trying to find you. Now, he is in the hospital, playing with his last breaths, and he assigned me the duty to find you. His first question is always, "have you found Aliyana." After hearing all this, I fell to the ground and started crying uncontrollably. Zaki said, "Come with me, I'll take you to meet your brother." I got into the car with Zaki, and we drove to the same hospital where I had been twice before. My heart started racing, and I began to feel anxious as we walked slowly. When I reached outside a ward, Zaki signaled for me to go inside. As I entered, I was astonished to see that it was the same person who had brought me to the hospital and whom I had donated blood to. He looked very weak and didn't look well in terms of his health. His eyes were closed. Zaki asked, "Almas, how are you?" He didn't answer and then said, "Almas, open your eyes and see who has come to meet you." Then in a trembling voice, I softly said, "Almas Bhai, it's me." He slowly opened his eyes and looked at me, and then he said, "Aliyana, is it you?" I nodded, tears streaming down my face, and he held my hand tightly, crying along with me.

Almas: Is it really you? I can't believe that I have seen you after 14 years 3 months and 17 days. I have missed you more than words can express

Me: Due to an accident, I remained unknown that I had a brother. My life was tough without you.

Almas : I have carried your memories with me all these years I never stopped hoping we did reunite. (After a long sigh, he said in a disappointed voice)

I am sorry for all the time we lost. I could have protect you.

Me : I am really ashamed I have given you a lot of hard time.

Almas: Your presence brings me comfort and peace. I can really die in peace now. I am really thankful to Allah.

Me : (while crying I replied) No you have to stay with me for a long period please please brother.

Almas : We have lost each other once but sadly when we finally reunite, we have to lose each other again (his voice starts to tremble) . Liyana you (He stops for a while) You have to be strong.

(I was sobbing intensely)

Me : bhaiya plz be strong I want to live with you (he was having difficulty while breathing)

He said : Never regret about your past Live a good and happy life.

After that, he started taking deep breaths, and I was holding Almas hand. He was indeed close to death, but he could see me, and there was a strange sparkle and happiness in his eyes. Then his hand slipped from mine, and I noticed a flat line on the oxygen flow meter. I called the doctors urgently, but they glanced at me with disappointment and I realized that I had lost my brother once again. It was so difficult for me to bear at that moment because my brother's lifeless body was right in front of me. It was the greatest loss of my life. Fate had only allowed me to be with him for a few moments.

After that, I had completely lost myself. I used to think whether I should have to be happy or sad about the fact that my memory had

returned to me. If I didn't remember anything, I would have lived a normal life, but now that I remember, I have realized my true reality. I only met my brother for a few moments and then he was gone. My life changed so much because of an accident. I experienced a life of luxury and fame, but soon after, I returned to my true reality. Yet, I still ended up being alone. Every day, I tried not to think about anything, but I was alone and the silence was the killer.

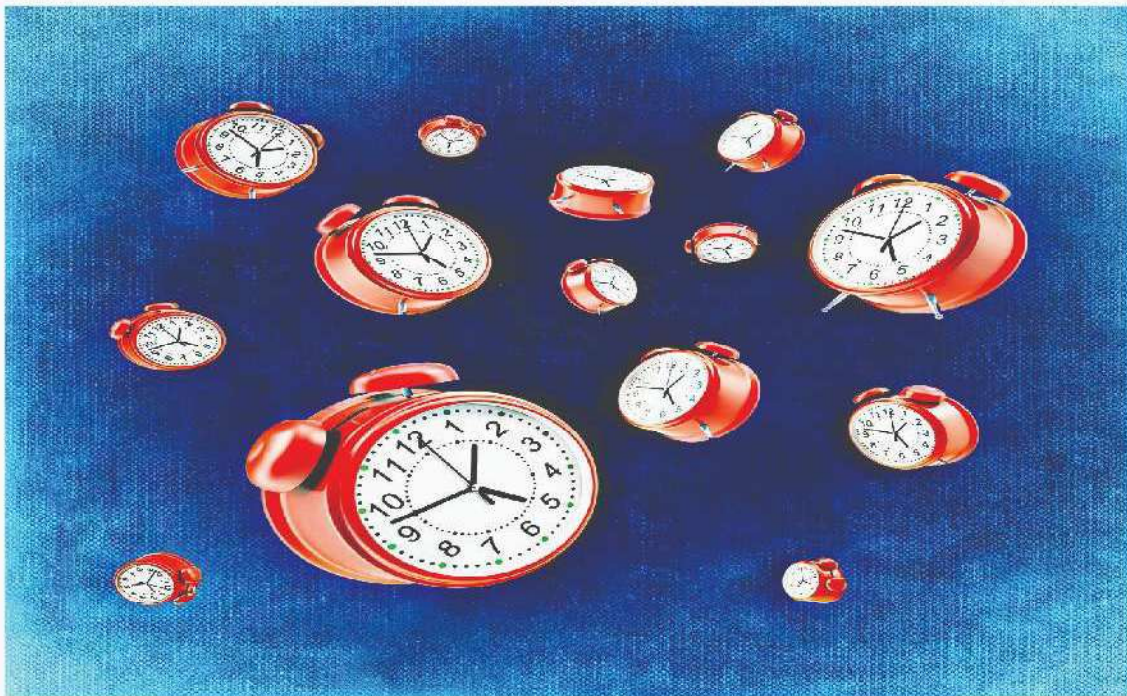
After a few months, I went back to the hospital to meet that girl. I brought her toys and chocolates. She was so happy to see me, and then I asked her about my brother and her relationship. She said that Almas Bhai treated me like his own sister, and we used to be admitted side by side. Their younger sister had gone missing, to end his loneliness I became like his little sister. They loved me so much and he was always happy to be with me. But now, they have gone somewhere far away. And I've gotten really sad. I replied "If your brother has left, what if I become your sister and we play together like that?" She got super happy hearing that. I thought that my brother made this girl his sister in my remembrance so now I'll make her my sister in his remembrance.

After that, whenever I saw her, I remembered my brother and recalled good memories of him. I think that my brother would be very happy watching us from above. And that girl gave me a reason to live my life again.

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Writer's Bio

Fatima Irfan is an emerging writer from Faisalabad, Pakistan, whose literary voice is steadily gaining attention. Known for her compelling storytelling, she delves into the realm of mystery and the unknown, crafting short stories that captivate readers with their intricate plots and thought-provoking themes. Through her writing, Fatima explores the deeper questions of existence, often reflecting on the complexities of life, identity, and human nature. Her work invites readers to look beyond the surface, urging them to ponder the mysteries that shape our world and our place within it. As an aspiring writer, Fatima's unique perspective and imaginative narratives continue to resonate with those who enjoy stories that challenge the mind and evoke a sense of wonder.



The Secret Door in the Bookshelf

Subhaan - Pakistan

Once upon a time there was a girl named Jennie. She really liked reading books. One day she was looking for a book to read and she discovered a secret door in the bookshelf. She went inside and found herself in a storybook. In that story was a villain named Voldemort. He was evil and very cruel to all the people in that storybook. His powers were summoning snakes and ghosts to kill people. Jennie wanted to save these people by fighting Voldemort but she could not as she did not have powers to fight him. Voldemort found Jennie and started to fight with her. She was about to lose but suddenly she found a note in the book that said "Draw anything and it will come alive". Jennie then drew a huge blue dragon and eventually the dragon killed Voldemort. Then a door opened and Jennie quickly came out of the door and went back to her home.

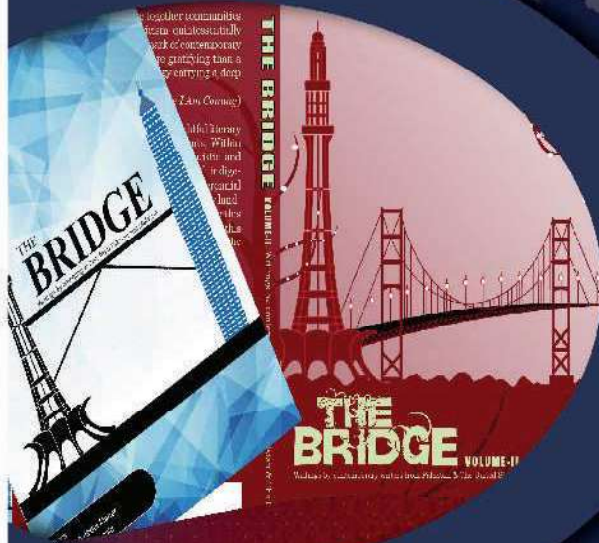


Writer's Bio

Subhaan is an exceptionally bright and curious young boy based in Lahore, Pakistan, with a natural enthusiasm for learning and exploration. Currently in grade two, he exhibits a maturity of thought and imagination well beyond his years. His inquisitive mind constantly seeks to understand the world around him, always eager to uncover its mysteries. One of Subhaan's greatest passions is dinosaurs, and he delights in learning about these fascinating creatures from the past. His love for creativity extends to drawing and sketching, where he expresses his ideas and observations with impressive detail. Subhaan has also proven his exceptional abilities by winning Gold medals in both the CATSO and IKLC competitions. With a mind full of big dreams, Subhaan is poised to achieve great things as he continues to grow and explore his many interests.

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