

Hair Tied Back

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A novella submitted to the Department of English and Humanities in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English

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Declaration

It is hereby declared that

1. The novella submitted is my own original work while completing a degree at BRAC University.
2. The novella does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The novella does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I have acknowledged all main sources of help.

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Approval

The novella *Hair Tied Back* submitted by Chowdhury Suraia Mahjabin (19103057) of Spring 2023 has been accepted as satisfactory in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English.

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Dedication

I dedicate this story to the authors who created innumerable self-aware, socially awkward, unconventional characters, by whom thousands of readers have found acceptance.

Abstract

Hair Tied Back is a story inspired by Octavia E. Butler's "The Book of Martha," a short story about a protagonist who converses with God to come up with a new method of encouraging humans to find joy, hope and determination to continue living. Along with Madeline Miller's *Circe*, the downfall of a goddess obsessing over humans and patriarchal validation who experiences her banishment as a journey to selfhood, and the writing style of Fyodor Dostoevsky. The protagonist of *Hair Tied Back* daydreams as a form of coping mechanism manifested from social anxiety and hyper awareness of the lives around her. The aim of this story is to convey how the world is perceived through female consciousness as well as the cultural superiority established in the minds of Gen Z and the constant flow of content through various forms of media that consciously and subconsciously controls our ways of thinking in this postmodern world. This novella depicts what the world looks like through the eyes of a lower middle class young woman who suffers from her reality and she finds it struggling to function as a social individual. She is troubled by the injustices and lack of representation women have been facing from the community and media since childhood. The protagonist is someone who wants to fight for women, and alongside women but cannot see past her prejudices. As the protagonist adopts a moulded identity whose mind is parallelly aware of the gender dimension, it explores the ideas of existentialism, absurdism and feminist theory. These ideologies are intertwined with two isolated antithetical females on a journey of acceptance. Hera, the Goddess of motherhood, fertility and femininity has been portrayed as the fanatical wife of Zeus, Hercules's nemesis, patron of suicidal yet glorious quests for heroes to die in the name of the Goddess. Never has a story been popular with her name written in humane descriptions. Her name has always been associated with men, their stories and as a burden they had to overcome. This novella paints Hera in a positive light by

portraying her in a journey of growth from toxic femininity which encourages her to find her own path to selfhood.

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Hair Tied Back

Chapter 1

Warm wind waves around me, and my tulle skirt dances as I turn my head to the sun. Helios is in the sky preparing for his departure to Ocanos' hall. I laugh in my head. People would call me crazy if they heard my thoughts. Slowly, I take in my surroundings - stoney paths warm in the afternoon sun and delicate little pink flowers. 'Micromeria acropolitana' my subconscious chimes in. 'Small' from the Greek word 'mīkros'. How fitting the name, 'little portion' for it is almost invisible on the horizon. A wildflower not worthy of any special attention. How fitting I thought. For me to be here, among them, in the rocky roads of Acropolis.

How did I get here? I remember reading *Circe* before I fell asleep. The shores of Aeaëa, its slopes, herbs, flowers and wildlife. How beautiful I thought. To live on a lone island with no one's company but one's own. Walk on the beach at night, lie under the naked night sky with cosmos shining, the most expensive view. My bare feet touch the stones and pebbles on the road, but I feel no discomfort. Dreams, I thought, are phenomenal! The sky is painted with hazy yellow. Though if you stand at a place long enough, the sky will roll with a shade of orange that strangely reminds one of runny egg yolks.

Madeline walked around for a bit, soaking in the yellow sky, flowers and hillside view. Her stressed mind did not care about the absence of people or the strangeness of the scenery. It was glad for the change of air from its everyday routine. Not a fool's play to afford student loans in America while trying to build a career and an active love life. Though it seems like an ordinary life, Madeline keeps on looking for a form of escapism almost every day. Whether it is by spending an evening in a cafe, enjoying an Affogato and watching people on the streets from a window seat or reading mythical books of Gods, heroes and glory. This could be her subconsciousness creating a different reality. Not that she would care

if she figures it out mid dream that it is not the reality she lives in. She is where she always wanted to be. Most of her favourite fictional characters live in timeless Greece. Along with a hydra trapped under a huge boulder, she witnessed a coffee truck. This proves the lenient timeline she is experiencing is her own doing. Mythical creatures, queens and sorcerers are welcome, but coffee is a necessity. This is the perfect paradise except for the numerous female sculptures, what is that about?

Madeline walks along the quiet shores of Naxon unsure if she prefers the salty sea air to fresh air. A seagull screams by, flapping its wings a little too violently and a little too close. It didn't even check if the human had any food on her. Dusk must be coming close. Will there be bonfires?

I should buy some marshmallows and crackers. Maybe a bar of chocolate or two. Who cares about a healthy diet when one is in a reverie? Wait, who is taking care of my cats? Oh, silly me.

I could make love to a stranger. I should make love to a stranger.

Everything that drains my social battery would be experimented on today. It is not like it would circle back to me on any given day. Hell, I should sleep with a man. Who was the comedian that identified as non-binary trans-masculine, originally attracted to women though later started taking testosterone and jumped ship? Jes Tom?

I explicitly remember them saying in a Comedy Central show -

“I was a lesbian, now I'm starting to date men.

It's really like

I was born with a get out of jail free card,

and I'm like, ‘But you know, I've never tried jail.’”¹

¹ Comedian Jes Tom on her experience of gender change hormone intake. Work Cited- “Working in a Luxury Sex Shop - Jes Tom - Stand-Up Featuring” YouTube, uploaded by Comedy Central Stand-Up, 2 June 2022, [Working in a Luxury Sex Shop - Jes Tom - Stand-Up Featuring](#)

However scandalous and brave that makes me sound, it does not change the fact that neither that is me nor do I have any interest in being so. My actions might not have any consequence in this scenario but, how much of this is me? The courtship display to find a mate may differ in the animal kingdom, yet it is exhaustingly indistinguishable in humans. One might entertain oneself with the thought that men focus all of their energy to impress women. What a funny thing to say when women are such entertainers. All their lives throughout every generation, it was women who dropped the handkerchief, been the golden apples of Garden Hesperides, the damsel in distress and the mother who feeds.

I have spent my entire adolescence trying to fit into the general concept of normalcy. Now in my early adulthood, I break myself from that normalcy while I try to bring out my originality. In years to come, I know I will break and change and evolve to either fit in society or accept myself.

Chapter 2

A Gelato

Ancient Greece

Served by a phoenix

Hope they have a leash.

Are the Gods up for a conversation? There is a constant possibility of Gods getting tired of desperate interactions of minds and prayers. Maybe a visit to Olympus is what this story needs. Readers do not crave prolonged description of landscapes. They crave conversations, and I am no Dickens.

Madeline grabbed a handful of her skirt, hitched it up to prepare herself to scale the mountains. She had never been much of an outdoors person and hiking was one of the things she could not comprehend. The paths of the Troodos mountains had slightly upwards pebble trails that were pressed and perfected for long walks. It required the skills of a walker, not a mountain goat. Madeline always enjoyed quiet walks although she wondered if they could somehow teleport to the peak of Mount Olympus through an earthly mirage as it happened for Orpheus. When the earth parted its dust to conjure the realm of death. Or on the 600th floor of the Empire State Building in New York that grants the half human demigod children of Olympic Gods, free passes; according to Rick Riordan that is.² The thought of half supernova acne prone teenagers standing in line in front of the Empire State Building to visit their Godly parents is tragically comical. It is like a Bangladeshi visiting London on a cheap budget- your eyes and feet make the journey but your body escapes the luxury.

² From the first book *The Lightning Thief* of the series *Percy Jackson & the Olympians* by Rick Riordan.

Madeline is a firm believer of dreams. If your dreams are boring, in the voice of Jake Peralta, “ya boring.”³ Repressed desires, fear, insecurities all unwind and rewind when we sleep. Sometimes our subconscious carefully chooses repetitive thoughts seeping from our mind’s cauldron and throws it in the hand cranked silent film projector.

One time, in a dream, a cowboy and I were in a western standoff on twenty feet of trash in a garbage lot. Instead of drawing out our guns, we started a competition to see who can urinate the furthest.

She woke up with a painful urge to pee.

Despite many wild dreams, none of Madeline’s seem to have any sound. They come in black and white classics, moving pictures with fold lines and exaggerated prejudices in animated whale waves. During her adolescence, her God complex was that she could control her dreams. Rocket science really. Creating extensive scenarios, dialogues with a dash of anger, sadness and longing. You got yourself a dream. Then adulthood entered with four blocks of fox trot from subway to subordination. The private school prestige was long forgotten and came along with the hustle bustle of motorbike riding, back pain and the struggle of nutrition. Mothers and their mindless feedings. Who knew one has to eat such varieties of food just to stay well and alive?

³ A trademark saying of the character ‘Detective Jake’ of the comedy sitcom *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*. Work Cited- “The Overmining” *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, created by Dan Goor and Michael Schur, season 4, episode 9, Fremulon, 6 December 2016.

We eat fat

I have a cat

She is fat, the cat

Today she kills a rat

Sausage, tuna, intestine, chicken skin

Health hazards? My condolences, bring it in.

We have said it before, we will say it again,

We do not want fat

Fat got the rat.

Chapter 3

Last monsoon I saved a cat
He had white gloves for paws and hated cold floors
Siamese or Balinese or Tonkinese
Four others, from the same litter
Two black with white and two orange polka dots.
Me mama gave him back to his mama
They did not get along.
This winter I saw him again
On the dusty roof where the broken wet fence was
The feline mother hid them there.
He had done rape his sister
Different litter, same mother.

Madeline lifted her right leg. A bizarre thing to do when you are on a seat. But her body was in a motion of moving forward with a calm face. To a passer-by, she looked ready to fight. She was on a window seat in a bao shop in Chinatown. Across the shop, a fruit vendor has watermelon, mango, papaya, cantaloupe and dragon fruit in his cart. That is quite a spread and 5 dollars per watermelon is a definite steal. She made a mental note to lecture her father about the digestive benefits of eating papayas. Why torture your rectum by going three times a week? She craned her head to see the central square of the place. There is an informal concrete sitting area orbited around a green street lantern. Older Asian ladies were alone with their plastic bags and hand fans, young girls drank boba tea with their female companions, a white man with bed hair and shorts was filming a travel video, vlog if you may. A slow rumble from her stomach brought her back to her current reality. It occurred to her just then that she had yet to order.

Where is the old Chinese auntie?

She did not waddle out once in the 20 minutes Madeline has been sitting here screaming how hot it is in the kitchen. The young girl at the counter wore a grey hoodie with an untucked white tunic and black wide cargo pants.

“One kimchi, one japchae and one beef bao please,” said Madeline.

Was I not on my way to the court of Olympus under a glass tomb?

“4 dollars and 35 cents” the young girl replied curtly.

“Do you have green tea?”

“No. But we have flower tea served at every table. Why do you not take a seat first?”

Though her smile did not reach her eyes, one does enjoy New York on a budget. The white walls of the dumpling shop have turned a yellowish rusty colour over the years. A family-owned cheap restaurant like many in this great city. Some operate inside a plastic tent on the streets with a ticket booth sized counter slash kitchen taking orders. Together they act as the heart of the city. Chinese food to New York is what Indian food is to London. My seat is so close to the sidewalk that I feel like I am seated outdoors. Unlike regular restaurants, the shop has rolled up shutters instead of glass windows. A woman with auburn hair, high cheekbones and rosy cheeks enters my peripheral vision. She walked with her shoulders back, hands in her pockets wearing a billowy white shirt, bell bottom jeans, leather slippers and her neck adorned with bronze jewellery.

I watched her with a keen eagerness as she sat down with her back on the streets and crossed her legs. The sun lit her shoulders like the insignia of a military lieutenant general. Again, she pushed her hands in her pant pockets, and with her back straight, the woman faced the restaurant. It is neither cosy nor comfortable. The chairs, like the wooden board of the

bistro, are painted red over hardwood and each table has four. Unlike local American shops with digital sign boards with neon colours over fluorescent lamps, their sign hangs low providing shade from angular sunlight titled 'Tsai Shen'. An eatery named after the God of fortune in the land of fortune by people whose biggest festival is concentrated on exchanging fortune. How fitting!

Back to the chairs. They collide when a customer pulls one out or stands up after finishing their meal. The staff are loud servers and yelling can be heard from the kitchen. A man walks by pressing a phone in his ear. One is arguing with Joy, the fruit vendor. A car honks, so does another, bicycles speed by. A whole commotion. Hera's prodding cheekbones are staring at the girl by the counter.

"Are you not going to order?"

"They do not appeal to my tastes."

Talk about being posh.

"Then why did you come?"

"I wonder what secrets the girl has."

She is either dodging my questions or considers me as a radish. I decided to play along. My food will arrive in a couple of minutes anyway. Everything seems tolerable at the possibility of stuffing one's face with food.

"What makes you think she is hiding anything in the first place?" I asked.

"Look at her clothes. Baggy cargos, layered top. It is August."

"Baggy clothes are cool."

"Would you consider light grey and dark green as compatible fashion choices?"

"No. I would not."

“She is hiding something.”

I sighed. Stubborn people are borderline despicable.

“She may be with child.”

The incredible self-control and head reflex I had to exercise to not spit on her would have put my ancestors to shame. You see, they exploited the peasantry and denied them basic essentials to get more gold. What she said was ridiculous. Despite that, I decided to entertain the hypothesis.

“Let’s dissect this, shall we? Oversized attire, grumpy attitude, exhausted posture. I can see where you are coming from but consider this - growing bones.”

“I understand that she is in her adolescence, yes.”

“Might be your average teenager with repressed aggression.”

“Hmm.”

I shoved half of the beef bao in my mouth. Warm and salty and juicy and fluffy. Dopamine seeping from my brain like warm nectar. It pairs well with light Pepsi. My happiness could reach its full potential if this mysterious woman talking in riddles left me to my business. To regain my lost composure, I backtracked into a nice daydream. A vision of painting a wall in a black leather bra and a long feminine tutu. The painting has a big glaring sun and a clear blue sky. Under it lays layers of waves in all shades of blues. Between the blues, in layers one skipping the other, humankind swims bearing every emotion known to men. Some human waves have a very light shade of blue, some very dark. But the emotional display remains the same in every colour. Sad, happy, gloomy, joyous, anxious, celebratory, nervous. Whether light or dark, humans continue to laugh and cry. The waves finally crash in

a dramatic dive onto the beach and miles of grey foam emerge on the sandy bright beach. I named the painting 'Life'.

My chewing slows down as I experience this wonderful reverie. As rude as it is to make one partake in a condescending conversation, I have decided to ask her name. To this, Mary Cooper will say, "That is mighty White of you."⁴ Must be nice to be one though.

"Who are you?"

"The Queen of Heavens."

"I know her. She wrote "Summertime Sadness."⁵ You are not her."

Her eyes shadowed and she broke into a little poem.

"I met you alone

Saw each other because we had no phone

Two whole bodies to keep each other warm

Big boy it was not your fault

You wanted to walk while I was breaking apart

I bled from my wrist and you bled from your heart.

Young and beautiful to broken and brittle

Please do not think of me little

Oh big boy hold your head up,

She is healing from the ocean's apart."

⁴ Work Cited- "The Rhinitis Revelation" *The Big Bang Theory*, created by Chuck Lorre and Bill Prady, season 5, episode 6, Chuck Lorre Productions, 20 October 2011.

⁵ An indie song by Lana Del Ray.

Needless to say, I am rendered speechless. Her outer appearance is too put together for her to be this mad. Then again, I was having an ice cream with a hydra a few minutes ago. Taking that into consideration, she is a mythical creature too. Which means, either I am asleep, in a trance or in a coma. The last one seems far-fetched but who is to say that there is any limit to possibilities.

“Are you human?”

“No.”

“Someone who is worshipped?”

“By ancient civilizations.”

“Were they Greek?”

She smiled.

“Is Hebe one of your children?”

“She is.”

Even in anticipation, I realised the dreadful truth.

“Hera?”

“Why yes, child.”

Her. The despicable. Hunter of heroes. Tormentor of the brave. The evil stepmom of the ancients. Hera, Goddess of motherhood, maternity, matrimony and much more. Some associate her image with femininity of woman, saying, she is mother, all mothers, mothers are she and she is them. Pigmented in segments. Their actions are written in her words, her voice, her thoughts. Woven in songs, slammed in poetry, and while the womenfolk cry and weep and beg for salvation, she dances on her green flames while smelling the news

impregnated air travelling from villages, on rocky roads, over mountain peaks, salty oceans and the north pole to her wreath where she sits comfortably on her grandfather's bones.

A memory surfaced. My mothers face. Soaked in orange candle light. Long strips of melted wax pooled at its bottom forging one foot after another. Rooting itself on the wooden side table of the treadle sewing machine. She looked hard at me and my ten little spreaded fingers. "Am I a tiger or am I a bear? Why do you fear me so?"

Chapter 4

An elderly Chinese man brought his food to two tables from Madeline and Hera. His brows bowed themselves in a frown, his nostrils flared and his eyes almost disappeared into his skull.

Cheerful man, thought Madeline.

“Hiding from his wife, you see. She is cheeky, in command of this business place and governs the finances. Must be killing him.”

Hera’s eyes glittered as she slightly shifted her body from the owner’s granddaughter to her husband. He sensed the two of them stealing glances. He chewed his food for a long time and walked over to them with his hands behind his back. Madeline gobbled down her food as soon as she saw the man coming. Men in despair are dangerous trading waters. They would grab onto anything hollow to survive. If not, if the passer-by soul has a heart full, the tin man would grab onto that fullness until they both drown.

“Beautiful weather, is it not? Good day for a baseball game. I heard Ryuhas a match today.”⁶

With that he chuckled away.

Madeline was still in a daze when Hera spoke.

“Everyone here talks about the weather. Sunny, rainy, dry, humid, storm, thunder, lightning. Every day they point out the obvious.”

“New York does not have the best end of the stick you know. It is far from being a tropical land where good weather is just regular weather. One walks among the greens thinking about the fresh harvest it provides, not how deliciously sticky the humidity is. It was humid

⁶ Hyun-jin Ryu, a South Korean professional baseball pitcher for the Toronto Blue Jays of Major League Baseball.

yesterday and probably the day before. One only thinks of unhindered weather while being trapped in the house with eight-foot-long ice outside or in the middle of a thunderstorm.”

Hera seemed unamused by trivial human disturbances.

“Greece has always been graceful. On the days it unravelled its monstrous beauty, its thunderous waves met earth's bones, swept its hollow cheeks causing trembles in the humble hearts. On nights like that, prayers pile at my feet. Say child, ever witnessed a flock in a storm? How the mother hides her feathery children under her and moans a silent prayer to the protector of mothers for her, I shall protect her children against the brute face of nature. See, this is the reason why I accepted the hand of the son of storms. Despite all his promiscuity and indifference, his outrage in the cosmos magnifies the significance of my role.

Motherhood thrives on danger.”

“I disagree. Motherhood is romanticised in the face of danger. Mothers lifting cars fifty times more than their weight to save their children. Making food for the family after working Union hours, helping with their homework, changing dirty diapers while we chant ‘supermom’, ‘supermom’ on the sidelines. Every time I hear the word, I wanna throw up.”

“You see, one of my sacred creatures is the cow. They are perfect representatives of fertility, motherhood, nurture and grace. The vast mainland Greece is very welcoming on its afternoons. As my dusty feet strolls on earth's skin, I watch as the cattle return home swinging tails, bobbing heads and lazy steps. Gracious creations, they are. Proud as well. Though they chew grass all day, they never accept the same meal twice and their peculiar fondness for bananas as it appears to me, makes them even more endearing.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Cows”

“Why?”

“The girl in grey hoodie.”

“What about her?”

“She despises her mother, her grandmother, along with her little sister. Although she protects her little sister fiercely.”

“I am a regular here and I never saw her talking to her mother loudly or with any hint of annoyance for that matter.”

“What is her name if you do not mind me asking?”

“Jeenie”

“She hates her mother for staying with her father.”

“What did he do?”

“Jeenie believes that he does not love her. He always failed to ask her about her day or express slight interest in her. She suffocates being held in his gaze while her mother endures his indifference.”

“What about her sister, Meenie? What does she think of her father?”

“Nothing more than an ordinary parent. I understand that she was born into the system of indifference. For her, parental love resides in material things. As long as her little wishes are fulfilled, she does not bother with not being loved. However, Hoodie deals with the heavy blows as indicated in her role as a firstborn. Do not look worried, my child. She fights back. While ensuring sissy is in the audience.”

“She must feel so alone.”

“She does.”

“Wonder what she is thinking right now.”

“How about a repetitive monologue?”

“Alright.”

Practical. I have to be practical. Take it at heart and work for it. Develop your determination. If there is will, there is a way. Manipulate your mind. Believe. Words. Words. Words. They will call you Doctor. Dr. Dr. Dr...I owe it to my mother. Until I find my source of happiness, it is up to me to make her happy, fulfil her dreams. Her first fruit cannot be sour. I am asked to bear the smell of chlorine, hydrogen peroxide, iodoform; not love the woes of humans. I will carry the book, stitch the scar, and answer the relatives. I will drag my feet forward, I will accept reality. Money, prestige, pride. Money, prestige, pride. Money, prestige, pride. Pride pridepridepridepridepridepridepridepridepridepridepridepridepride. One for every year. I will sell paintings to support my studies. They will not question it then. It makes my heart flutter. It makes my soul dance. Not an electrifying excitement, no. A fluttering sensation as my escaping soul settles in its mortal cage and hums a tune cradling its bars. Brr brrbrrhummmhummmhummbrrrrrrrrr...

Jeenie swashes her brush across the canvas. Vibrant blue, magenta, black everywhere.

Madeline follows the passionate movements of Jeenie’s wrist. A noise from downstairs drowns Jeenie’s humming. A man and woman conversing...

"I love you every day."

"What about on Wednesday evenings?"

"After a shower."

"To get the dust and sweat out of your toenails."

"And between the eyelashes."

"When I am being unreasonable for no reason? Cruel when I cannot show my anger. Do you love me then?"

"No. I despise you. I find it very hard to look at you."

"You do not love me every day."

"I loathe you so I can love you. Why would I dwell on my anger if I did not care about you? I hate you someday so I can love you every day."

"Then you must not love me at all."

Chapter 5

Customers moved around the shop buying various types of bao.⁷ Some even bigger than one's face. Filled with mushy peas and carrot gravy. Milk bread is not the best seller but it is there. Layered Bing for tradition's sake.⁸ A few elderly women ordered it to eat with chilli oil. The afternoon egg yolk looking sun snailed away from the pastel blue sky and the fluorescent bulbs flickered in the shops. Scenario of Chinatown shifted its aesthetic bath in glorious shine to emerging poverty. The fruit vendor's eyes left its cheerfulness and the shadows prodded out under the streetlamp, only the saran wrapped fruits looked fresh. A grandma spread out a rexine mat on the edge of a sidewalk and started showcasing her junkyard. On closer inspection, they seemed to be food on the verge of their expiration. Each item would cost 1 dollar. From peanut butter, crackers and cookies to half cabbages, young college students gathered around to buy some sustenance. Two of them conversed while looking for things they could make dinner with. Girls.

“Are you a sunshine girl or a moonlight mystery?”

“I am the blues and purples of the sunset.”

They giggled and the sunset girl looked happy about her groceries. She would only know after reaching her dorm that the purple cabbage had holed in its leaves and half of it had blackened. But who could tell over the flashy wrapping under the streetlight.

Madeline and Hera were still inside Tsai Shen, the bao restaurant. Madeline had her right arm casually flung over the chair next to her watching the commotion in the streets.

“Are you not tired of eternity?”, she asked.

⁷Chinese steamed bun

⁸Chinese name for bread

“No. One cannot outrun time or enjoy it. One simply exists. For the sake of existing. ‘What a dreadful thought to have.’ You might be thinking. Humans have always underestimated the workings of being. For the opposite of it is unthinkable.” Hera replied. Her arms crossed.

“What is unthinkable?”

“Oblivion”

“You mean, not existing? I would not mind that deal to be frank.”

“No silly girl. It is existing in the non-existence. To be alive in nothingness. To belong everywhere, in everything without seeing, without touching, without knowing.”

I stared at her for a long time. Her eyes were soft and without tension. As if lost in a wistful moment. A sick thought gargled up.

“Does that comfort you?”

“What? Oh... No. My husband threatened to throw me into it once. Tied me up and hung me over it for months. Visited me every morning to remind me of what I did and that he would cut the ropes if I do not take a binding oath to never think of it again.”

This I am aware of, thought Madeline. The famous tale of Olympus becoming a Republic from Zeus's dictatorship. Hera was the mastermind, but failed miserably. Bound to tyranny with the ropes of matrimony.

She gazed at the Chinese wind chimes with a laze composure.

“I looked down into that pit of madness for thousands of hours. Maddening. Utterly maddening. The emptiness never really ends. It travels within itself. In time and in length.

Void knows not time not space. Nothingness needs neither seconds nor metres to exist. It exists in itself.”

Women should write a book with that much passion in store. Gods know how much we need that around here.

When Hera did not emerge from her comfortable daydreaming Madeline bursts out.

"They believe it is feng shui. Wind chimes. Wind brings luck to them and the sound brings the news. Is it not nice to believe in a little good luck?"

Gods know we need a little bit of that too.

"It makes beautiful sounds. Are they placed in houses to declare God's visit in their mortal homes?"

"Spirits."

"What?"

"They assure the homeowners of the blessings of the spirits."

"Whose spirit?"

"Everyone and everything. God, nature, glass, trees, insects, birds, animals, humans, clouds, rocks, rain. Spirit."

"They are not wrong."

"Rocks pray to you?"

"No. They have no gender or reproductive desire. My existence means nothing."

"To them"

"To them"

"So he really does not care?" Madeline asked suddenly.

“Jeenie’s father?”

“Yeah.”

“In their future, he does. Their grades, skills, potential. A socially applauded job and handsome salary. They are not presentable to society if they are incompetent at making him proud.”

“Well, too bad. He will need them in old age.”

“Not necessarily. He has a young son. The daughters receive education. The son acquires wealth. He desires his girls to scatter around and fend for themselves. His son is expected to stay back and tend the father’s legacy.”

“What kind of twisted feminism has the world come to?”

“Misogyny and feminism walk hand in hand, little one. One cannot exist without the other.”

As a young woman, Madeline felt responsible to get angry for her entire gender. This idea is too real and too confrontational for her idealistic mind to handle.

“Misogyny and misogyny walk together too,” she said hotly.

“Yes. Yet, feminism only rises when misogyny is present. No one will buy hammers if there is no shackle. Hammers exist because shackles do.”

“There are pins. Pins need hammers. They do not work against one another. They work together. To build things. Hold things. Together. People put frames on them, and art. They make a home smile. Remind people of their memories. You need a hammer to feel human.”

Hera smiled at the familiarity of the conversation. How many women she had the same conversation with, she lost count.

“Try using a hammer with cuffed hands. Everything has order. You can barely put pretty pictures on the walls when the house it belongs to is not even yours. If there is no antagonist holding a machine gun or a machete, the good protagonist will never be able to raise the nation’s fist. The bitter, cold and unloving man creates a fierce, axe holding, angry vixen. No hero is born out of happiness. One needs greatness to win war and it is moulded in pain.”

“Maybe after twenty or forty years, when my youthfulness metamorphosizes into a bitter middle-aged woman who dislikes her wrinkles, her cellulitis and her failing body. When my pot-bellied husband with a fatty liver becomes porn addicted and when the human infected workplace I will not be able to make myself quit or afford to quit, maybe then I will accept your notion. But that is in the future. While my eyes still shine from the prospect of exploring the great unknowns. While my troubled mind finds solace in whale songs and the sounds erupted from blackholes make me feel less alone, I would believe that killing myself takes more courage than to keep on living. As long as I have faith in myself, I will never stop trying to find goodness in greatness.”

At this point, the cinnamon eyes of the goddess turned into a swirl of milky whiteness that terrifyingly resembled the first few seconds of milk being poured in honey tea or fog trapped in a glass marble. Her voice bellowed around the darkness that crept up on them as quickly as drawing a black curtain over a westward window.

Your scars that you claim to pride

Your slain love, you remind

Nails dug in your back,

A slash between your bones

*Some on your back,
Thousands on your hands.
The prodding whiteness on your brown
Shining eyes tell the tale
'Out of love I got these
Out of love I got those
I love them, I love them, I love them'
Love came to you as you let go of pain
Scars to your beautiful, wounds to your healing heart.*

Her eyes steadily regained their humanness as if someone pushed the playback button on them. The cream stopped spreading its clouds and sucked itself back into the milky ceramic pitcher.

“There is nobility in hope and assurance.”

“Nobility aside, this is the only way I learnt to live. For my mind to stop thinking about its existence.”

“Existence? You are only 23 years of age.”

“It is how one becomes aware of breathing. All is well on its own but the moment you notice it transforms itself into labour.

Breathe in, breathe out.

Breathe in, breathe out.

Inhale through your nose, not your mouth;

Stick out your chest, not your stomach,

Breathe out.

Again

Breathe in, pump chest, notice how hunched your back is.

Straighten your spine, breathe out.

Breathe in, it is easier now.

Loosen your shoulders, they are almost touching your ears, breathe out.

See how something involuntary becomes exercise?" Madeline exhaled in exasperation.

"Well, you were made from the same substance you will return to, disciple of Abraham. It only makes sense to trouble your mind with existential dread to ignore the unanswerable trust of the universe."

"Are you aware that monotheism refutes your existence?"

"Of Course. I enjoy being on top of things."

"And what do you know of his discipline?"

Dawning with the mad messiah,

"And the Lord said unto Moses, 'Behold, thou shalt sleep with thy fathers; and these people will rise up'."⁹

and unlike a middle child, the good shepherd preached the same,

'By the sweat of your face, you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken, for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.'¹⁰

In the fullness of time, my admiration resides with Ta-ha, for his teaching resembles ours. 'Out of dust we have created you, to it we shall return you, and out of it we shall bring you out a second time.'¹¹

⁹Deut. (31:16)

¹⁰ Genesis (3:19)

¹¹ Surah Taha (20:55)

The promise of afterlife makes this life a little less bearable yet a cauldron full of river
Lethe is inevitable.”¹²

¹² (river of unmindfulness), the Lethe flowed around the cave of Hypnos and through the Underworld where all those who drank from it experienced complete forgetfulness. Lethe was also the name of the Greek spirit of forgetfulness and oblivion, with whom the river is often identified.

Chapter 6

20.2.2020

I always found visually pleasing dates to be a little saddening. They look special, all symmetrical and square as if they are suited for an evening outing. Maybe someplace special. The Ritz maybe, where Hemingway's gang go dancing. But they never are. Not the place, I mean, the date. When you put too much emphasis on a day, it never turns out to be great. Especially for people on this earth who function like Charles Boyle.¹³

“Boyles don't make decisions. We delay our decisions until the universe makes them for us. That way, we never make the wrong choice.”¹⁴

If the universe itself has reached a unique day, should it not make the day special for the people who rely on it?

Yet it is not the case.

The day remains the same unless someone attempts to indulge it in the speciality of their lives. Hundreds of marriages took place on the 12th of December 2012. China had a marriage boost on that day because superstitious hopeless romantics associated the date 12/12/12 with ‘Will love/will love/will love’ in Chinese. Dung Coffee makes more sense than this. If you are wondering what I am talking about, it is Kopi Luwak. Made from coffee beans plucked from civets' faeces. Although many reliable sources from my previous generation, that is, the millennials, have informed the internet that they do not taste any better than Nescafe Gold.¹⁵ They are the generation who chose iced Americano and avocado toast as their stepping stone for nutritional needs, I do not trust their judgement completely. But as an

¹³ A beloved character from the show *Brooklyn Nine nine*.

¹⁴ Work Cited- “The Tattler” *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, created by Dan Goor and Michael Schur, season 6, episode 3, Fremulon, 24 January 2019.

¹⁵ Micro Grinded Arabica beans with Robustas, a deliciously strong, intense coffee with a bold flavour and aroma of the brand Nescafe.

unemployed Gen Z with very little future prospect, I believe their wisdom is unmatched. It is very hard to not like a generation that does not want to pollute the earth further by reproducing.

Back to the beginning, 20th February of 2020, a winter night. An unusual weather in a tropical land in springtime.

Our neighbouring house is under construction 20 feet from our front gate. A heap of sand barely 2 feet in height is left unattended before the unfinished 2 storied building. On its sloped body, a kitten, barely 2 months old. My mother ushered me to the window.

“Look here, look here.”

“What?” I looked around the unlit road under weak moonlight.

“Go switch on the light first.”

“Ugh. Just tell me.”

“Now.”

I understood why. Our overhead long fluorescent bulb illuminated a huge square on the tiny pile of sand and the kitten switched sides to warm her left side that had been exposed to the cold night air.

“Did you see? She has been sleeping here all night.”

“It is only 11:30.” I said, without much thinking. It is not the first kitten or pup on the street.

You see them hairless, dusty, three-legged, starving dead. At least it is alive.

“So small.” My mother said softly.

“And alone.”

“And alone.”

The next day. Independence day. Holiday. Friday.

The religious aspect of the obvious holiday overpowered its nationalistic aspect.

I woke up at brunch time. That is, almost noon but not quite. The sun was up but no one was on the streets drying their long damp hair. I wondered if the cat was still here. Should be roaming the neighbourhood for possible food waste. That is the smart thing to do. My feet counted 20 steps as I descended to my mother's workplace. The cat is on her feet trying its best to open its eyes smeared shut with eye boogers. My first instinct was to rub it clean and that stupid cat looked smaller in broad daylight. Despite the glaring sun, it trembled so violently I thought it would fall over on the concrete. Its poking nails and claw trembled as it took a step forward and another. Cold, cold, cold. Every fur on its body is upright like a comical cat zapped with electricity. Its big grey eyes are lined with red boogers, half of its nose lacked colour and its smaller than my palm body painted a very pitiful picture in the eyes of its viewers.

I had to bring it home.

A cereal box cut horizontally to make its litter box, my illogically expensive cropped sweatshirt I bought as a farewell souvenir from my high school, a blue-green snack bowl a neighbour gave us sweets in, a white melamine bowl shaped like a Chinese ceremonial tea bowl with red and orange flower patterns.

All prepared for the arrival of her majesty, the booger cat.

Chapter 7

The white public bus has yellow, green, blue and indigo painted on its body in the shape of a tree trunk and a singular branch. The crown of the tree is occupied by the windows. From its small spaces between each shiny, reflecting, brown glass, tired faces peek out to enjoy the new green leaves standing tall on the shoulders of the old ones. Does it hurt their pride or are they happy to leave their responsibilities to the young ones? It is no longer their duty to live, breathe or move. No one will cut their body to make the streets beautiful. The young ones stand tall, like the tip of a spear, the pride of the arrowhead. They are soft, bright, light and see-through. Their bodies have not hardened with age and nutrition. It is easy to rip, make a mush in the palm of one's hand yet its body is hard to burn. Youthfulness is inextinguishable.

Directly in front of my seat is a balding man with a 15th century Christian monk haircut. He is staring out of the window into the leaf mounted street. There are rows of trees with new leaves. The youngsters are hanging from the lower branches where the deep elderlies are still moving proudly on the top. Here, the botanical hierarchy is outright absurd. Every now and then a light breeze would sweep the yellow leaves lay abandoned on the dusty grey concrete street relaying the message of a new season. Spring is here.

A gust of wind swept all of my baby hair from the left to my face. The yellow leaves danced around the modern street as it swirls around the skirt hems of Disney princesses in grey clouds as squirrels sweep the floor with their tails in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*.¹⁶ The red, violet, and blue leaves circle Pocahontas¹⁷ as she stands on top of a cliff overlooking the James River in Virginia. The hot wind of the city creates the same effect of

¹⁶ A princess movie of the fantasy genre released in 1937 about the friendship of seven outcast dwarfs and a banned princess.

¹⁷ A 1995 American animated musical historical drama film based on the life of Powhatan woman Pocahontas and the arrival of English colonial settlers from the Virginia Company.

fallen leaves as the overactively imagined animation film. A monk, mild weather and a middle-class man's imagery.

Talk about living in cliches. For this reason, let us start with a love story.

Something fell in my right hand. Please God, let it be a red leaf. Alas, a stem. I rolled it between my fingers, a green leaf shaped like the mangoes on commercials. You know those? The ones with curves and no yellow dots. Its front is a smooth dark green but its back has scars. Yellow dots with red dots inside, like a popped zit that just stopped bleeding. One flew in my hands, a scroll from the wind gods.

Boreas (North)? Eurus (East)? Zephyrus (West)? Notus (South)?¹⁸

Did you bring me news? On the spine of a leaf? My eyes zoomed in the molecular boxy compartments of the stem and whooshed away from my familiar environment.

A family apartment. Well-lit from the glaring long lines of bright sunlight coming from the French windows. The furniture is white, much like the 500 dollar Serta Carmina arm sofas you find in Walmart. Two of them are facing each other on a round white-grey zebra printed rug. Their art is modern too. A 16x16 canvas of a woman's face, pink backdrop, pastel green umbrella hair, white almond eyes, and pink pupils. Everything is drawn with geometric precision. Digital art made by a real human, on a real canvas, with real paint and expensive art mediums. The picture would have been a lot less eerie if it was printed. The strangeness of the mechanical, passport ID smile and symmetrical eyes brings a strange humanness to the house strongly lit with direct mid-afternoon sun. The lovers in the city work all day. Come home and work some more. Their daughters read romance novels on kindle and mystery novels in second hand paperbacks. Dust flows out and shimmers over her face

¹⁸ The four mail winds gods of Greek mythology

every time she opens *Sherlock Holmes*.¹⁹The mother receives packages online. Body bath, body wash, bath bomb, body balm. A tiny clay pot covered with a crimson bottom.

“Put the rouge on so I can lick it off.”

“How vulgar. This is Aker Fussi.”²⁰

“You crave for more fussing?”

“I crave stimulation.”

“I see. The scarlet pot is writing you a letter, is it?”

“It is, but not in blood.”

“With what then?”

“Poppy powder and naturally dried pomegranate rind.”

“Will you show your red demon tongue or your rosy red lips?”

“Depends. Answer me this. Who do you think about? When you buy your coffee. Talk to a stranger. Stand on a girl's doorstep.”

“Aren't you the quiz whizz today?”

“Answer my questions.”

“Keep your foot inside the line.”

“I will ask you three questions tonight. One. What do you dream about?

Two. When you scream at me, who do you think about? Three. Want to eat cold bread for dinner?”

“What will you do if I refuse to answer?”

“I will give you a deadline.”

“What if I do not answer even then?”

“I will ask you three more questions and set another deadline.”

19 Stories of a British detective with a brilliant mind written by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

20 A Moroccan organic beauty product used for reddening lips and cheeks.

“And after that?”

“Three more questions and the last deadline. If you refuse to answer my questions, I will cook your favourite food without your favourite ingredient. I will burn your coffee before I grind it. I will sneakily increase your sodium intake so that one day when you will try to charm a stranger in a dimly lit club your tongue will feel heavy, so will your heart and eventually your body when it will hit the dirty, nut-shell covered ground with a thud.”

“Damn the city.”

The writer now picked up the whole leaf hiding in the fold of her scarf and put both the leaf and the stem in her pocket. Should she keep the pitiful stem God threw at her or the dazzling, bleeding beauty she chose to pick up herself? She announced her arrival at her residence without arriving at a decision. In her room, she pulled them out of her pockets to observe them. The leaf entered with her, unappreciated, in her ghostly lit apartment in the workers colony. Here, the elites became the lower middle class and the labourers learnt the ways of new money. A new coating of paint means money is plenty. A new dress is paraded on the roads, in the salons, and corner shops. The lucky owner washes it frequently to exhibit it from their balcony.

Here, the mammal hierarchy is material. The writer kept staring at the lonely stem at her palm.

“I see we have dreamt ourselves to another place.”

Hera said while her eyes moved wildly along the lines of cobwebs. The writer’s eyes goggled so wide. In the dark, her face and open mouth comically resembled the monster from *Death Note Ryuk*.²¹

“How did you get here?”

21 A Japanese psychological thriller and supernatural anime (animation) and manga (comic) series.

“Presence is a state of mind.”

“I believe philosophy is dwelled among humans.”

“We adapt, or surely our image does.”

“How so?”

“Songs and stories.”

“Who makes them?”

“Bards.”²²

“We do not have bards anymore.”

“This world will always have bards.”

“What about the other worlds?”

“They do too.”

“What do they sing about?”

“Relevancy.”

The writer took hold of the last word like a frantic scholar whose wind-swept notes had her running for a mile and finally caught a page. She turned and observed the thought as Harry Potter eyes Felix Felicis²³ the first time in the hands of Professor Horace Slughorn.²⁴ What stays relevant? Violence, rage, love, warmth, coldness, sun, moon, sky. Any species of any world with similar emotions, senses and nature as humans are bound to have the same history despite the change in elements and dimensions.

“Are we alike?”

“The other mortal?”

“Yes.”

22 A poet, traditionally one reciting epics and associated with a particular oral tradition.

23 A potion that makes the drinker lucky for a period of time, during which everything they attempt would be successful, also known as “Liquid Luck” in the book series by J.K. Rowling *Harry Potter*.

24 A potion master of ‘Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry’ in the book series by J.K. Rowling *Harry Potter*.

“Answer the question yourself. Among the species you have on earth - the trees, worms, birds, toads, animals - are there any similarity in behaviour or intelligence?”

“To some extent, yes. The chimpanzees are in the stone age, I saw an orangutan rip the plastic off a juice box straw and proceed to drink from it. Rats have the same brain chemicals as us. Mad hatterpillars save the discarded skin of their head and pile them on their head to look cool and intimidating. They are similar to us in ways more than we let ourselves know.”

“Humans are complex creatures. Their nature is very close to nature itself. They are peaceful, need constant care but the minute you push your thumb on their freedom, they fight back. No matter how many gods, heroes, tyrants and diseases we send, there is no change in their spirits. It is very hard to impose a certain kind of lifestyle on human beings. You can cut down nature, trim its edges as long as you nurture it. Try controlling it, stop it from thriving, existing; see what happens. Try breeding oranges in apple trees. The very core of a fruit - its taste, texture, and seed will transform. It will look like an orange. It will smell like an orange. But it will not taste like an orange. You cannot change the essence of a being. Humans have the same false sense of pride as we do but their collective sense of rebellion emerges after their livelihood falls into tragedy.”

“Will women of this world assemble on the streets if their livelihood is threatened? Will that even change anything?”

“Why do you say that?”

“See how the world is right now. Women of all countries are protesting against religious extremism. We are united at last over the basic idea of the Woman’s question. Freedom to

choose. But the Taliban²⁵ took away women's right to education and healthcare. If we are taking two steps backwards for one step forward, are we making any impact at all?"

"They have everybody's attention and empathy."

"Empathy is not enough."

"It is something."

"How so?"

"The States that hold so much of your affection banned married women from working during their time of great depression. Look at them now. More than half of the workforce consists of women. Men are willing to stay at home while their spouses act as breadwinners. Their response to these current acts of violence is not only empathy, it is a roar of rage. To women, it is another act of oppression. Yet to my surprise, men view this as a violation of human rights. They have finally accepted you as comrades. My worshippers of the past would not have dared to wistfully muse today's reality. Compared to history, it is a win. Celebrate it."

"Will my joy of personal accomplishment as a female overshadow the guilt of my lack of involvement in the women's movement? I do not think so. Every time I return home from my female empowered workplace, no matter how much my projects help underprivileged women find employment, no matter how much more awareness they have of female health and hygiene, whether it is a productive day or not, I always pass by a homeless mentally ill mother and her pre-adolescent daughter. Every day I see the mother plucking chicken feathers off its dead skin that the vendors throw away and her little daughter stares at her own palm with her back resting on the roadside shrubs. Each day at 4 pm, they sit on the grassy road under the divider along with the pillars of the rail line adjoining the overpass, plucking chicken skin. Until one day. A malnourished man covered in red rags and large wooden bead

25 A Deobandi Islamic fundamentalist and Pashtun nationalist militant political movement in Afghanistan.

necklaces tried to steal their spot. As the argument proceeded, the agitated mother brought out a plank of wood with nails hammered in it and started swinging it threateningly while her daughter kept pulling her back. The man, so wrongfully trying to hog the space, brought out a brick from his sack. He took two steps forward, forcing the mother two steps back. The mother then took a step repositioning the nails forward and slashed the plank very close to the madman's temple purposefully avoiding injuring him. While the angry raggedy man and chicken skin peeling mother engaged in an act of angry flamenco,²⁶ my vehicle rushed past."

"Did you find out what happened next?"

"I was in agony during the weekend. However, I saw them again four days after the incident. The mother was still plucking chicken. The daughter was still staring at her palm."

²⁶ A traditional Spanish dance form.

Chapter 8

“Why do you mention yourself as Madeline? In your thoughts before sleep or on a lonely summer noon.” Hera sat in the dark, on the same red wooden chair. Her palms on her thighs.

“My actual name has a practical and loving meaning behind it.” The writer looked into the honey dripping eyes of the goddess. They shone bright, like a penny under the sun.

“What does your name mean?”

“Fortunate.”

“You do not like being fortunate?”

“I do. I just do not enjoy the guilt ridden with it.”

“What do you enjoy, child?”

“Madeleines.”

“I bear witness of the absurdity shown to me today.”

“The house I grew up in had a farmers’ market in front. The muddy alley was always filled with rotten spinach, discarded cabbages and chicken feathers. If you muster enough courage to execute the task of walking over the puddles without soiling your elementary school uniform, paradise opens up. Rows of corner shops filled with shiny wrappers of orange, red and yellow. Hardened caramel candies alluring children with pictures of Australian cows and ads of apple eating alligators. Crackers red and green, twisted and spiced. Cakes with colourful raisins and finally cookies. The square ones that taste like powdered milk, the rectangular ones topped with a layer of hardened condensed milk and madeleines. Airy deliciousness shaped like seashells and tastes like vanilla. Unlike the cream biscuits in tin boxes, it required no filling. It tastes like a biscuit when your teeth sink in, but it changes itself to a texture of cakey softness. I wanted to be as delicious, beautiful and surprising as a madeleine. Second to that, the Hebrew Bible named the daughters of Magdala, Saint Mary Magdalene’s birthplace, Madeline. She was a diamond in the muck. Her stories shine despite

her sufferings. In the Bible, it says, "...we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame..."²⁷ Saint Magdalene birthed hope into the darkness. The righteousness of the righteous should be passed down. The daughters of Magdal will bear the ability to hope and dream into this world of existential crisis. At long last, the name was born in Greece."

"Food, Faith and fantasy. They indeed stroke all your interests."

"Indeed, they do."

Madeline and Hera smiled at each other with a shared fondness often found in female friendships, unsullied love from one being to another.

"Your consciousness after the Chinese shop was mostly occupied by a stray cat and the colour yellow. Care to explain?"

"The booger cat?"

"Yes."

"I named her Timothee after the gorgeous actor Timothée Chalamet, who is half French. When I first brought her home, her eyes were grey and lined with soot-like boogers that took weeks to come off. She hit puberty at the age of half a year. She ran away from home and her eyes turned yellow. My mother cried and cried some more. For the cat that was two weeks old. My father went out to find our little cat. My mother cried her eyes out until nothing but her sleepies were coming out."

"You named her Timothee to honour your God?"²⁸

²⁷ Romans (5:3-5)

²⁸ The French variant Timothée of the ancient Greek name Timotheos means "one who honours God."

“God is everywhere. In the yellow leaves leaving its home, in the parching concrete street under the sun, in the abandoned cat that taught me to love. If God is in everything, why not name it as such as well?”

“Your perception is charming.”

Madeline picked up a lime green notebook decorated by washi tapes from her study table beside the window. Timothee sat on a cardboard scratcher. Her beautiful white fur illuminated by the fluorescent street lamp. Her straw brown fur formed upside-down spades from the middle of her back to the end of her tail and a scorpion-shaped pattern of a Bengal cat sat on her head. Between the cat and the pile of notebooks, a saucerful of mashed fish meat remained untouched.

“For your cat?”

“She is a picky eater. She will eat when no one is looking.”

“Like a mediaeval housewife?”

“Yeah.”

Hera and Madeline doubled over with laughter. The cat’s nodding head jerked up in surprise.

“What secrets reside in your notebook?”

“Poems and rebellion.”

“Are there poems regarding rebellion?”

“Of course.”

“Let this old spirit hear of youth.”

Madeline skimmed through the pages, dog-eared three of them, crossed her legs on the sitting chair and comfortably started reading.

*The world is full of illusions
Here everything seems bright.
Blood, war
Death feels right.
We find pleasure in pain
Happiness in sorrow;
As hate comes from love
Light fills the dark.
We laugh as we weep
We smile as we grieve
We cut as we heal,
We take as we give.
Here, Everything has a price to pay
Here, Everyone has a game to play.
Freedom
Say, what is wanted to be heard.
Tell what is needed to be told.
Play along;
Or be left on your own.
Make them hear-
Of the voices unknown,
Of stories untold,
Music that has never been played;
Pictures that have never been exposed.
You do not have armed forces.*

Not even guns or grenades.

But you have words

And

Words have the power to destroy.

Let them hear the voices

Tell them the stories untold

Because

They all felt the bounds

They all taste the tears.

Acknowledgement

In every book, the page of acknowledgement is the final page. If you are a person like me, who lives on a tight budget, your books probably have a few more pages of faded carbon prints of advertisements of other books by the same publication or internet site. Let us be real, a few dozens of rough yellow pages of locally printed paperbacks are our most expensive purchases. Only authentic readers read the acknowledgement page. It has no connection with the book and it provides us with very little information on the writers' writing process or their inspirations. Why read it then? My reason? I refuse to believe the story has ended. This story has a wholesome ending. Two women acknowledge and accept each other despite their difference in perspective. I never believed in such things. How can two people of different age, religion, class, family and educational background see eye to eye? To prove me wrong, nature/fate/God/Allah/circumstances/manifestation have provided me with numerous beautiful relationships among women. Everything I know about love, growth and respect, I have known through women. This story is a fraction of my understanding of the world and the design of my soul. Its designers are Ria, Mohona, Barsha, Boishakhi, Auditi, Halima and many more. These are my dearest friends who taught me how beautiful it is to be a human. My loveliest friend Mohona has been my constant rock on days I despised my disabilities as a writer. My dearest friend Ria taught me that one does not suffer from the blisters of reality if they submerge oneself in dreams. To my strongest friend Barsha, I never thanked you for amending my prejudices without judgement. From an omega female, this is my love letter to you. I would like to thank my parents for never asking me what I write in my fancy sketchbook every time it rained and why I absolutely needed to work on my thesis in the dead of the night. Surprise, Ma and Baba, it is a novella. I would like to show appreciation for all of my fellow university classmates whose undiluted enthusiasm regarding my creative piece

encouraged me enough to not abandon it. Lastly, I acknowledge the reader who made it until the end of the story. You are a real one.