Beetle

November 2021 Issue | DelSlam | Volume 6



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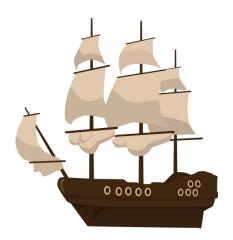
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Beetle is an international literary magazine, filled with invigorating poetry, imaginative stories and straightforward essays. The magazine hand-picks new writing from all over the world. Accompanied by bold and visionary illustrations, Beetle envisions to do the important work of circulating a soul-touching narrative.

Edited by Saumya Choudhury Reviews by Ria Chakraborty

Home

On Folds and an Hourglass

by Sakhi Singh



Home is a place where you know how to live and un-live, if doors and windows could register voices then homes would break, but they never do.

The clock ticks while the walls echo with beating hearts and cracking knuckles. Folding our letters into quarters we stuff the novelty of broken glass into tight corners,

only so laughter can bend their corners again.

Home is where you see eyes like your own, sharp and dim.

Sturdy stabilities make mine

though I've chewed out the edges and splinters,

I believe love is the glass of water ready for me at the table right after.

Homes follow you through continents and sea stretches,

and you might, just might hear the lazy lullaby of the setting sun

and you might just feel your mother's fingers pressing into your scalp.

You hope to never open dusty cupboards but the strong winds snap them open while you struggle to shut the windows.

You may see fans and ropes and bodies desperate against sturdy stabilities and you may be able to separate the what from the outcome but on some days you would curse your hands for not undoing the fall, for not keeping your back straighter.

The kitchen smells like burning chicken,

you turn off the gas and eat it's brown corners.

You don't like how it tastes, not something you would eat on a good day, but you also like how it crunches beneath your teeth, probably something you would eat on a good day.

The walls of home cover your back and hold to testimony the hourglass your poems make.

The Hut Amma Built

by Gayatri Varma

Amma used to build me a hut with pillows and an umbrella. She always used her mother's black umbrella and a dozen of polka dot feather pillows. Those pillows were a gift she once cherished. She told me they reek of stories, of people who once loved her and whom she loved so dearly. I never asked her who they were, and she said nothing more about them. I made stories in my head, stories that shifted and turned with every passing day. They used to be her friends, her long-lost cousin, her mother, and some days my father. I have never seen them together. Even in their wedding photos, there is an unseen crack between them. "Do you want to make a house?" she asked when I was six. I was crying because a girl in school called me 'fat'. I remember the girl so vividly—the sneer on her face, her cackling laughter that entertained the entire class. She was older than me by a year or two. I hated her. I hated school and everyone there.

The hut Amma built was my haven. A sanctuary of a sort with meditative silence. I snuck in a box of chocolate, a bag of tapioca chips, and a couple of praline pastries. Hut always smelled of grease and sugar. A sickening sweetness wrapped me. Most of the days I spend crawled under the umbrella—the buttery yellow light from the bulb flickered in warming me.

Amma was a shadowed figure who lingered in the house and protected me from the dangers of the world. I made up stories of an evil sorceress casting deadly spells and Amma shielding me like a warrior. Every day I added something new to my story, creating around me an ever-sprawling world.



"Does your house have a name?" Amma asked. She looked pleased, but the crease on her forehead deepened.

"No, it's not a house."

I never told her about the world I created under the hut. I wish I had told her and made it our secret lair.

"How long will you stay here?" she asked with the same unaltered smile. "As long as I can."

That day, I didn't leave my hut. My legs were numb and scalding vapours from Amma's handi biryani heated the hut. I was sweating but pretended that I was in an ice kingdom fighting a fire-breathing dragon. It was the day father visited home. Amma didn't want me to see him. I could trace his silhouette as he walked towards the kitchen. I blinked twice, hoping he would turn to look at the 'Umbrella Hut' and ask Amma about me. I thought he would take me out from my world to his, but he didn't. His gaze never strayed towards me. It was as if the hut was protecting me from him.

Amma grew like a tree rooted in our house, spreading branches and shading everyone except her. Her eyes drooped and her voice softened. She stopped asking me about my hut. I would wait for her with a packet of arrowroot biscuits and a jugful of tea. Every day smell of burnt oil and fried papadum wafted in the air. She never came. She sat in the kitchen sipping filtered water. Had I called her, maybe she would have come. Maybe I could have shown her the fairies that lived with me.

It was Amma's mother who built the first hut. She used straw umbrella and white cotton clothes. There were photos of them squirmed under it, their face beamed with a burst of infectious laughter. It must have been a haven for them. When Amma stopped asking me about the hut, I realised, one day, I too have to abandon the hut she built. It felt like breaking away from a place of comfort and safety to the scary wilderness. That day when father visited, he carried a bag of sugared cherries and a can of diet coke. Amma wouldn't let me have soft drinks.

"Diet coke would be fun," he said and surveyed for me.

I was under the umbrella, hoping to stay unobserved.

"She doesn't drink that" Amma's voice was soft, almost a whisper.

He grinned, opened the can, and took a sip himself. The fizzy drink dripped from his fingernails and gilded the tiled floor. The stickiness of sugary soda remained long after he was gone. Amma scrubbed the floor a dozen times. She called me to help her with the soap. I stayed muted without blinking. Amma scrubbed and scrubbed. I wished she cried or yelled, but all she did was clean the floor and make the tiles spotless.

"Why don't you make a home for yourself?" I asked Amma as we sat to eat rice and kidney beans. Amma had spent most of her early childhood in chilly places with snow-capped mountains and it was kidney beans that kept her warm.

"I had one," she smiled.

"The one in the photo?"

She nodded and took a palmful of rice and kidney beans. Her mouth was always full. I wondered whether it was her way of avoiding conversations, but then we talked little. The only time we had a conversation was when father came unannounced and I needed time to get into the 'Umbrella Hut'.

"You cannot stay there forever," she said.

"Please"

"Go see him" she didn't sound like her, but her words made perfect sense, like a child repeating the maths table. I wondered whether those were her mother's words, the one fed to her when she had to leave their hut.

I sat on a wooden chair. It was rosewood with medieval art carvings, a gift from my father for Amma on their first wedding anniversary. He smiled. His white teeth glowed under the zero-watt bulb. We didn't talk but ate stuffed naan in silence. It's chewy and cold and the butter from the naan greased my mouth. This is the first time I ate something that was not cooked by Amma.

My father was joyous. He stretched his arms for an embrace, but I budged. Amma was transfixed and my father said nothing. I crawled back into my hut and stayed there until sunrise. I heard him walk away, his footsteps—brash yet gentle. "Why don't you stay in my hut?" I asked Amma as we ate rice and kidney beans. It was on a Sunday afternoon. The sky was grey, and the wind was harsh. I made us cinnamon coffee and brought some bourbon biscuits. Amma was worried, her gaze fixed on the door.

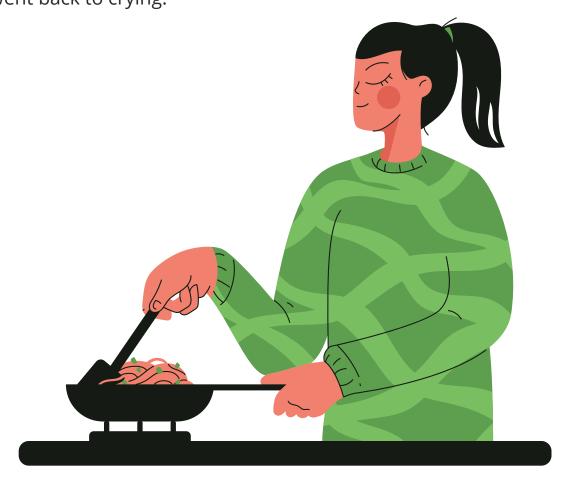
"It will be okay," I said.

The photograph of hers with her mother—their toothy smile and unhinged happiness, lightened and radiated the room with a familiar sense of belonging. She clutched it and clambered into the Umbrella Hut.

Noise

by Khushi Datri

The first time I made quiche, I cried
I was twenty-five, in a room by the railway line.
I looked up from the pan, mid-tear and scanned the room
There was no one. No one to tell me how expensive the pan was
Or how the eggs leaked out of the pastry, how sloppy, how clumsy,
How wasteful I'd been.
I went back to crying.



If you peel back the pages of my life, you'd see that noise was a constant fixture I contested with, screams and shouts that increased with a yearly frequency. When I was younger though,
Home was mid-afternoon slumber after school,
The quiet peppered by my munching of banana chips
Comic in hand, leg askew, a head full of stories
I read by light that seeped out of curtains
Sprawled on the floor, I drew patterns with the light
I played with the silence.

Farther on, with more shouts than the quiet could put out Home became a windowsill in my room whose panes closed on the inside I was shuttered away from my house, sitting out to the world Free in those moments, I wrote, I read, I got wet in the rain and sneezed for days Yet on that window, there were no mistakes.

On and on, the pages flew
Home changed meanings as my ears opened
to more sounds, more noise,
interference clogging the thoughts churned out by my mind,
Enough noise to knock me out.

Home was then a 2am movie night by myself Behind the closed door of my room, plugged-in ears because to find silence, I now had to manufacture it. So, with the lights switched off, and earphones in I hunched on the bed, and escaped worries yet another night One movie a time.

Home grew smaller and smaller
Till all that was left was the patch of bed I slept on
The space I occupied on the chair
The paces I walked silently
The house with its walls and big halls sat on my chest
drumming and grating, suffocating me.

Knowing that the people in my home harmed me, didn't help. It made the home smaller, the house lonelier. I was happier when I was ignorant, or a version of happy which was all I'd ever known Contentment was how I described it a 13-year-old child, explaining happiness as contentment.

Knowledge ripped me of that, being this open, my wounds found the sun and craved a salve.
All I could do was be detached Humour and anger, coping devices, which I used in turn. They were all that was left to me As protection.

When I finally left, I said Goodbye, not to somebody but to parts of me most that I had flayed by my own hands

I'm sadder now, my home is quieter sounds of the train are my lullaby
The small bedroom, all the comfort I could want.
Home is what I made, a kitchen, baking supplies, shower gel, not soap; a bookshelf, black and white dresses; my name, less harsh in my own ears, so many triggers but no noise because there are no people, to dread.

The Home Within Me

by Sanjana Saksena Chandra

There is a scar on my ankle from the time I tripped over the last few stairs while running down from the garden as dadaji's white fiat pulled into the garage. Little drops of blood from my foot mingled with the pink and red petals of the bougainvilleas that had fallen on our drive like a threadbare but beautiful carpet

There is a recurring dream I have of the iron swing set with coarse U-benches placed at the end of the backyard installed by proud grandparents for their two granddaughters, born days apart I see those little girls laughing in delight blissfully unaware of how lucky they are to be encouraged to soar and to fly





There is a birthmark on my stomach that Dadi once told me was a remnant of a previous life perhaps a map of the city I grew up in or the scar from a wound that killed me I listened in awe, sitting cross-legged on her bed in my five-year-old head, her petite frame filled the large room the eerie afternoon silence broken by our hushed whispers and dadaji's gentle snoring

There is a tingling on my tongue every time I eat a Pringles chip, the cream and onion ones to this day they taste like an exclusive reward handed out by dadaji sparingly during evening tea from the worn-down white corner cupboard where he stashed all his American goodies away from the greedy eyes and grubby hands of us kids

There is a lingering fear I have of heights one that I discovered as a child while sitting in the corner of an expansive terrace with only waist high railings I never went too close to the edge to peek down at the adults only gathering taking place in the front lawns the tinkling of glasses and the smell of jasmine my only company

The house that bore witness to these moments and experiences no longer stands neither do they who fondly built it but much like them, the home they created lives on in scars and scraped knees in a generation's fears and hopes and dreams in a family's tastes and memories

Looking in the mirror you see

Reflecting Masquerade

by Anoushka Panda

I stand, amidst a crowd of expensive wine and billowing skirts, of manicured nails and polished pomade,

Khamaj hums around me, a steady drone of melody and litany,

Chin up, eyes down, I stand, amidst a crowd of unforgiving eyes and puncturing mouths, Back straight, mouth sewn shut, I stand, amidst a crowd of prejudice and pride, Assuming eyes palm my back, twist my gut, Sharp tongues vitiate my skin, permanently bruising, Composure tightens around my cinched waist, an unyielding leash;

Around me, the world speaks in hushed whispers of supposed saints and sinners, of debauchery and propriety,
Around me, the world does not forget and its memory does not forgive,

I am tall, I am timid, Suffocated I gasp, gasp, gasp for breath and my eyes fall close,

My jewel studded feet ache from carrying the woes of a lifetime, they move, involuntary, seeking solace,

A lock clicks beneath my palm, my eyes open, solitary haven at last; I breathe,

Looking, I see bespoke glass embedded in amethyst and topaz, Looking into the mirror, I see, a carefully masked face gazing back, Looking into the mirror, I see myself, I see a familiar stranger, I see countless withered words on my lips, dry teardrops beneath my lashes, dissonance in my eyes, Looking into the mirror, I see myself, swollen eyes, marred and painfully cinched waist, I see my inhibitions,

My ragged heart, thud, thud, thuds against the scintillating glass, emotions threaten to spill over onto the velvet carpet, rigid underneath my feet, Looking into the mirror, I am tall, I am timid, I blink out of my chaos, As I move, I trip, momentarily losing balance, I catch myself before I fall, I always do, I am okay, I always am,

Armed with sword and shield again, I turn one last time to glimpse the glass,

Looking into the mirror, I see myself, battle armour up, timid and tall, cracked at the seams, I see a reflection of my fears,

Slowly, I pick up my courage and let myself dream,
I see a word void of prejudice and judgement, a world void of cyanide and vitriol,
Looking into the mirror, I let myself hope for a moment as I envision iridescent
light, a luminescent tomorrow, and I turn away,
Chin up, eyes down, I walk,
Khamaj envelopes me once more, as,
I face the world again.

Walls of Glass

by Arsch Sharma

She sat brushing her hair in the grey autumn light: a chestnut storm upon her bare, delicate shoulders. It wasn't a day for talking: speech eluded her as she stared into the mirror, at this sweating bag of flesh with her face on it. Her sheets lay crumpled with insomnia, and the pink of the walls, which raged in its vigorous loneliness through the fluorescent night, was now nearly indiscernible.

"You seem distracted", Mariam spoke, leaning over the nightstand drawer. "You didn't sleep all night, did you?"

"How'd you know?" She spoke into the mirror, looking at her black button-eyes. "Did you hear me?"

"Mhmm", a lock of yellow yarn spilled out of her little scarf. "I'd like to wear it short, I think. I hate it when it gets long. Could you trim it for me?"

"Dolls can't grow hair. You're being ridiculous", she continued brushing her hair that flowed onto her breasts. Mariam looked at her enviously.



"What?" She stopped and turned around, but the doll fell silent once again.

"You want to go out for a stroll?"

"Where would you take me", Mariam uttered through her sewed-on smile.

"Oh well, there isn't a plan. Maybe I'll get some groceries. I've been craving cu noodles."

"The ones that look like my hair?"

"Maybe." She smiled in silence.

"I'll pay by cash", said she in a whisper to the store clerk across the counter.

"He's waiting! Are you listening to the fridge hum again?" Mariam chided her, as she fumbled for a five-hundred rupee note half-dazed.

"I don't get it", she went on, "What's so great about this noise?"

"I don't know, it sounds familiar."

But Mariam was disinterested. "I'm hungry", she uttered in her rag-doll petulance. "Just a little while, we'll be home soon."

Her eyes darted to rows of cigarette packs and vials of cheap deodorant behind the counter, and then as if quite unnaturally, she caught her face looking back at her from within a small silvered square.

Behind her glasses, she saw her eyes: perhaps for the first time in a while. The crow's feet had deepened since she'd witnessed herself at such close quarters. A rogue lock of her hair popped beside her otherwise perfect hair-bun, which made her squint in annoyance. 'All that effort in the morning for nothing', thought she. Mariam was laughing at how silly it made her look: it was terribly easy for her to look silly.

"Here's your receipt, ma'am", the clerk pulled her out of her head politely.

They walked in silence. Mariam was looking at the afternoon sky: it burnt a lazy azure, and the streets were quiet. It was just after lunchtime, and the neighbourhood was immersed in its careless siesta. A couple of cats fought in the shade beside the desolate community park for a kill. They caught her eye for a while, but their antics were the same old, well-rehearsed manoeuvres.

"Winter's still away", hummed Mariam with her eyes closed inside the handbag: in the distance, cicadas pierced the air with their screeches. The moss was still lush upon the stone wall that they waited by for the winter every year.

"Will you go see him again?" Her voice was asleep.

"I don't know", said she, "I do feel like a drink."

"But you hate the talking, don't you?"

"You know me", she contemplated, and then fished her cellphone out of her bag.

"Do you still talk to our doll?" He smiled bright against the blazing sunset with an arm around her waist.

"Let's not talk tonight? Is it okay if we just drink and sit still?"

"What's gotten into you?" He looked over the bar: it was a quiet night. Not many people came in on a Wednesday evening. "What're you having?"

She looked over to the brilliant bottles against the mirrored shelf: blue Bombay Sapphire juxtaposed with the clear, cut-glass amber of Johnnie Walker. "I'll have the gin", said she.

They drank that way, sitting across the little round table. The clear marble-top was strafed across its face in grey, fluid veins.

"Do you mind if I smoke?"

"Go ahead", she said sipping at her gin.

"Keep your knees together!" Mariam whispered excitedly to her, "You're being too rude."

She looked across the room: the air had already turned bluer.

'Maybe I should smoke too', thought she.

*

The walls of her room turned a solitary pink again as the night crept upon them. She was at the dresser again, brushing her hair, carefully prescribing each brushstroke. The woman in the mirror was naked, and she was looking at the walls. There was tobacco on her breath.

Mariam was looking out the window, at the diner across the street.

"It's like a painting", she said, "A Hopper painting."

"Where do you know Hopper from?"

"The gallery last week. Don't you remember?"

She brushed her hair all the same, avoiding looking at her face.

"Aren't you cold?"

"A little. Why?"

Mariam shrugged dismissively, "You're getting old."

It was true. All this while she had been avoiding it. The woman in the mirror was cold, her breasts had started to sag a little. Blue veins and stretch marks led to each carefully regarded nipple, to her lonely waist that shimmered in the neon light from across the street.

"There isn't much in the world, you know", she caught a tangle in her hair, "Not enough worth being for."

Mariam didn't turn her head. "He thinks you're crazy because you speak to me."

The moon was out now, but its light fell pale against residential floodlights and street beacons. The woman in the mirror was crying. Tears rolled down her face, to the back of her hands that brushed her hair as if they oared through an endless river, as if those locks were the only hope that burned at her horizon.

"I'm sleepy", Mariam cooed. Her face wouldn't move anymore, "Promise me that you'll sleep tonight. It hurts when you don't."

"I know. I'll try to." She got up and saw the last of Mariam's life drain out of her button eyes. Her mouth had sewn itself shut again. Things had returned to a caustic normalcy: one plagued by the life she had unloaded on the woman in the mirror.

'Nighthawks', thought she catching a glimpse of the old couple in the diner, 'She was speaking about Nighthawks by Hopper.'

She wondered if they could see her, her bare flesh against the neon pink. She wondered if it was anything they hadn't seen already.

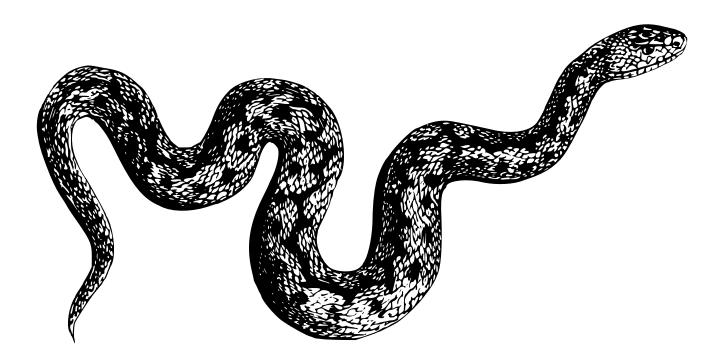
Mariam was lifeless in her hands now, just as she ought to be. Dolls weren't meant to be spoken to. Dolls weren't meant to know art. The woman in the mirror was the one who was supposed to know, and she did: as if it were folded in every crease of her being like some ancient fragrance.

Mariam was not needed anymore.

Someone who inspires you and why

The Garden Snake

by Maxine Pamela Mathew



It felt weird being back in my childhood room after nearly a decade. The air in the room still lay heavy with the insecurities, anger, fear, and the almost inescapable feeling of being a disappointment, a failure, yet again. All the feelings that had once suffocated me as a young teen came rushing back again. The mask of bravado and confidence that I had put on for all these years had melted away to reveal the scared and unhappy little girl that still remained inside me. I had escaped from this house, those feelings, as soon as I was able to. Now, ten years later, it seems like very little had changed. Suffice to say, it was not a happy homecoming. In fact, it was a tragedy that had hurtled me back to my childhood home.

My aunt Liza had died. It still feels weird to say that out aloud. Aunty Liza is dead. I am still trying to wrap my head around the fact that this person who always seemed full to brim with life was no more. Even as she grew older, she seemed ready to take over the world, ready to embark upon another big adventure. Even though I had seen her lifeless body during the funeral, it was still hard for me to

imagine her devoid of life and laughter. I had seen her just before her death. She smiled upon seeing me, her face seemed to settle back into her old familiar warmth, and the twinkle in her eye that always made you feel that you are the only one there who is in on her secret, returned.

She had beckoned towards me to come nearer and as I bent down to hear her better, she had whispered to me, conspiratorially, in her raspy voice, 'The garden snake. It is yours. It shall bring you all the luck in the world.' That was one of the last things aunty Liza had said to me. For the rest of my stay, she said little to me or anybody else. She just kindly smiled towards the hoard of relatives who cluttered the room, who had cared little for her throughout her life, but now hovered around her deathbed; almost vulture-like; keeping vigil till she died; hoping to claim a piece of the treasures she owned from around the world or the piece of land where she had built her home.

Aunty Liza, or rather my great aunt Liza, was the black sheep of the family. Youngest of my grandfather's siblings, she had forged her own path at a time when the women in my family had little to no agency in choosing their future. She had run away with her dashing young neighour when she was just eighteen. When the marriage fell apart, her family took her back but hardly let her forget the ignominy she had brought upon the family name. None the less, nothing seemed to put her down. She scrounged up money tutoring the neighbourhood children, put herself through college, and won a scholarship to a prestigious London college; thus, finally freeing herself from the chains that had held her down.

London was just the first step of her never-ending adventures. She hopped across the world—first as an intern to a bohemian writer, and then as a travel photographer and writer. All the while, her parents, siblings, and relatives tutted her life choices, even as they boasted about their famed relation to strangers.

By the time I was born, she was at the peak of her career, travelling less for the need for money and more to satisfy her restless spirit. I was bundled off to her home during the summers that she had bought just a few years prior to my birth, where she had chosen to retreat and rejuvenate from her travels. I had wondered

why my parents kept on sending me back to her house to spend my days, even though their scorn for her was apparent. Perhaps it was to remind her of the few relations she still had, should she forget to add them in the will. I had always wondered why they had disliked her. Was it her boisterous laughter that echoed throughout the house? Her refusal to get married again, have children, or as they called it to 'settle down'? Perhaps it was her lovers who came in and out of her life, unable to keep up with her uncontainable energy and boundless spirit that craved knowledge and adventure. I had cheekily asked her about them once when I was almost sixteen. She had laughed and had said, "Oh! My five great loves and a few mistakes. Unfortunately, they all seemed to want too much of me for themselves." That was that. She never elaborated. I had never felt the need for any other explanation as well. To think of Aunty Liza being tied to someone, to give up pieces of herself to conform to the norms of relationships, was absolutely unthinkable.

Her home, with its vast gardens, was a place of happiness and freedom, in a way my own home was not. It was there, during those carefree summer days, that I had encountered the garden snake. It was nestled among the rose bushes. When I had first encountered it, playing some make-believe game as a child of six or seven, it had greatly perturbed me. It stood there, bright green in colour with yellow spots and black eyes made of glass. It was just a statue, but it seemed as if it was ready to spring to life any minute. Those black glass eyes seemed depthless and appeared to hold secrets from the time before humans walked the earth. I had created a tiny little dance, which in my mind became a childish hex to ward off the evil spirit that I had once thought was contained within the statue of the yellow-speckled snake.

One day upon curiously observing my elaborate ritual to avoid the statue in the garden, Aunty Liza had enquired about it. She stood listening to my childish fantasies, barely cracking a smile. As I finished my tale, she sighed and told me, "Oh hon! That statue does not contain any evil. However, you intuit well. It is an ancient relic." A shrivelled old witch doctor had given it to her during her travels when she had helped and taken care of the old lady when she fell in a busy Turkish bazaar. The witch doctor had confided in her, recounting how she had fought an evil magician to win the statue. "The statue of the garden snake was far from evil. In fact, it imparts those who hold it with good luck and the fulfilment of

all their dreams." Aunty Liza told me. She led me to it and held it in all earnestness with her eyes shut closed. "There," she said, "I have made my wish. Now it is your turn," as she handed it to me. It felt too heavy, too big, in my tiny child-like hands. I closed my eyes tight, imitating my aunt and made a childish wish, long forgotten with the passing of time.

Since that day, the garden snake has been my comfort and companion. I went there when I was afraid of what the exam results would reveal, wished upon it to have the cute guy in my class to notice me, hoped that I stopped seeing the grotesque figure that I saw in the mirror, and wished for courage to move out of my home.

I returned to the statue the day after Aunty Liza's death. It had faded away in colour to reveal a brown body underneath it. The black glass eyes, however, remained as bright as ever. I picked it up from its resting place to bring it home with me. Perhaps, rather than a mythical creature, it was just a thrift store buy. However, I held onto the hope that it was an ancient relic, fought over since centuries, imbued with magic to fulfil one's innermost dreams. It now sits beside me on my bed table. I think it carries with it the spirit of my beloved aunt, along with the ancient spirit, now. I hold it, closing my eyes hard, wishing away the insecurities of my childhood. Perhaps, it will also send me on adventures, revealing some new aspect of my identity. I hold it tighter, grasping to find inspiration from my aunt's lively and exhilarating life, hoping to find an escape from my loneliness and insecurities.

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