

## Letter from the Editor

I am so elated to share the first-ever edition of BookSmack!!

This literary magazine was made with the intention of making the literary world accessible and safe for all, to break down those barriers of perfectionism and elitism and exclusion to provide a chance to every writer from any background.

There were no submission restrictions on background, skill level, experience, genre or theme – if someone wrote something and wanted to share it, they were welcome to submit it. I was delighted to see this many submissions for the first issue, especially with minimal marketing!

Thank you wholeheartedly to everyone who contributed to this little dream of mine. Here's to many more editions in the future!

- A.K.R

## Contents

Letter from the Editor .....	1
Feature Story: <i>Conversations in the Dark</i> by JK.....	3
<i>Love Triangle</i> by Ashlee K. ....	27
<i>She Can't Be Her</i> by Dani P. ....	28
<i>Guilty Whispers</i> by Andy S.....	29
<i>Me, Her, and Fireworks</i> by Alexandra R. ....	30
<i>Ripped Petals on the Pavement</i> by Emily P. ....	31
<i>Mommy Issues</i> by Sam R. ....	32
<i>Otherworldly</i> by Ashley R. ....	33
<i>Naivety is a Wound</i> by Stephen W.....	34
<i>Excerpt from "A Very Twenty-Something Heartbreak"</i> by Cassandra J.....	35
<i>The Paro/Chandramukhi Dichotomy</i> by Parul D. ....	36
<i>Rainbow Ode for All the Bigots</i> by Mark G.....	38
<i>Extra Ordinary or Extraordinary?</i> by Valerie W.....	39
<i>Is It Because I'm Brown? Justice for POC Queers!</i> by Keisha P. ....	41
<i>Yes, That's a Swastika. No, They're Not a Nazi.</i> by P.V.....	44

## Feature Story: *Conversations in the Dark* by JK

BookSmack! is very proud to announce that our inaugural edition's first-ever feature story is *Conversations in the Dark* by JK.

JK's novel approach of turning the world of cricket into a field for romance makes her story stand out.

The sporty tension, expert cricket-based worldbuilding, and banter between the characters keep us invested and eager to read more. We hope to see much more of JK's brilliant work soon, both in and out of BookSmack!

About JK: JK is an aspiring writer, slowly working through the ideas in her head and putting them to paper.

## *Conversations in the Dark by JK*

“What is going on with you guys today?!” the coach yelled as Percy entered the dugout. They still had 7 balls left with 15 runs to make up. The sound of the crowd erupted with flags and cheers. Some fans sat with their heads in their hands and the others were still dancing. After celebrating the wicket, the fielder shifted positions on the field and a hum of excitement continued through the stadium.

This one was about to be a close one.

Without a word, Percy tossed his bat with the rest of the equipment and with a deep exhale, he sank into the chair, tugged off his helmet and tousled his hair. He fixed his eyes to the ground as his annoyance vibrated through his body with his shaking leg. The new batsman put on his helmet and the coach placed a firm hand on his back while muttering a new strategy in his ears. Patting his back, the coach guided him towards the crease of the dugout and nodded at him. With the strategy hanging in the air, the new batsman began his walk over to Veer who stood at the corner of the pitch with his bat on his shoulder and the crowd’s noise still echoing through the stadium.

The strategy was already out of his head when he approached Veer.

Veer’s gaze swept the field, calculating their presence, stance, and position carefully. There was a wall around the pitch and without a proper inch between each player a single mistake would crumble the building strategy in his mind. Veer knew the new batsman can run but also knew he couldn’t hit. The strategy of hitting the ball on the ground to let it roll to the boundary seemed like a poor idea. The offensive team had shown him their fielding—the way they roll on the ground to stop a ball using all and every part of their bodies. Their strategy was choking him.

It was possible for Veer to squeeze a few singles against them, and he wanted to do it. He wanted the possibility of a close call when running between the wickets. The thought fueled him. The euphoria charged him, but he also needed to make sure his movements matched with the other batsman. The mismatch could result in a run-out and the risk hovered over him after the last run-out. He couldn’t make that mistake again. He couldn’t afford to make it again.

It was time for big shots.

With the current pitch restricting his swing, Veer had to find a way to move his feet that kept him guarded but also on the offence. The team couldn't stay on defense.

The new batsman clapped Veer's back, and the touch hummed against Veer sending waves of nerves through him. The batsman was more of a bowler than a batter and while he turned the bat in his hands, the strength was different. It wasn't the strength of hitting the big runs. They both knew it as they exchanged a brief glance between each other, and a silent agreement passed through them. Patience, the nod said, Veer's time is coming.

With the next ball flying by Veer, the batsman hit it lightly against the ground—ending the over.

6 balls. 15 runs.

The striker positions changed.

Veer stood facing the bowler and his breathing hitched up to his throat, and his mouth went dry. The roars of the crowds silenced, and his eyes moved quickly from each fielder. There had to be an opening, and he was about to find it.

The ball came spinning and while exhaling, Veer moved away from the crease, leaving his wickets behind, and swung his arm back to meet the ball, sending it rolling between two fielders. The batsmen ran. Their feet stomping against the ground and their eyes on the fielders.

“Another!” Veer screamed over the crowd and again the batsmen ran between the wickets. The breaths were in their throats and the helmets weighed down on them but they slid their bats into the crease and huffed with their chests.

5 balls. 13 runs.

Veer back at the strike was expecting another fast delivery. He was prepared to hit the ball deep into the ground. But then, the bowler pulled the ball deeper into his fingers and Veer tightened his grip on his bat. His muscles stiffened and he widened his stance. The ball flew towards him, and he watched

the spin, the bounce, and the speed to time his swing. Giving himself an extra second, Veer knelt deep into his lunge and swung his bat against the ball with a crack that vibrated through his arms. The swing ended up towards his shoulder and his eyes travelled the long arch of the ball as it flew and landed into the crowd. The bowler groaned and Veer's breath refused to calm down.

4 balls. 7 runs.

The bowler was impatient. Shivers were tingling through Veer's body and his stance kept moving on the crease. Trying to understand the bowler's move and trying to understand his grip was getting difficult and the last over was beginning to feel endless. The bowler covered the ball in his hand and raced towards Veer. The ball flew from his fingers and bounced off the short length and Veer's body stiffened as the ball rocketed against his ear. The sound paused his breath.

They just wasted a ball.  
3 balls. 7 runs.

Groaning, Veer took his spot again. It must be a boundary. Patience gnawed at his impatience, pulling him back and relaxing his muscles. The wall around them tightened again and he flashed a look around again, searching for another opening. His thick gloves had begun to stick to his fingers and his grip and precision were slowly disappearing with the growing tension. Another ball flew towards him, the groan left the bowlers mouth and Veer's body tightened. The ball ripped through the air, and he watched for the bounce to land and with a long exhale, Veer drove the ball towards the boundary.

2 balls. 3 runs.

Veer stared at the bowler as he dashed towards him. It couldn't be a bouncer again, but Veer knew the ball was bound to make him make a mistake. Veer watched the bowler's wrist twist, and he prepared to hit another boundary. The wind travelled against his swing as his bat travelled against the ball. He didn't wait and the batsmen both ran. The hit wasn't strong enough and fast enough to reach the boundary, but he had to fly between wickets twice. He had to get back to the striker end.

1 ball. 1 run.

The bowler ran an impatient hand through his hair and Veer licked his lips. The ball kept turning in his hands and Veer tapped his bat on the ground. He had to stop trying to predict the balls. It was up to his follow through with the bat. It was up to his running. That's all he had to do.

The ball flew towards him, and his bat met the ball with speed and force that reverberated through his muscles and body. Screaming, Veer propelled himself towards the opposite wicket end and prepared his bat to slide towards the crease in case his feet were too slow. He didn't see who stopped the ball or how it stopped but he kept running and the announcer issued the result.

They made it. They won.

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The dressing room erupted when the team found themselves back in the dressing room. Dozens of conversations had begun between players and staff as they waited for their captain to come back. In the middle of the hugs, Veer's eyes glanced towards Juhi as she stood at the edge of the team with her camera recording the scene. Her eyes were focused on her viewfinder, but he could see the smile dancing on her lips and spark of excitement in her eyes. Her usual perfect hair was stuck in a loose hair bun with strands of hair framing her face. For a moment, as his eyes followed her movements within the noise and the laughter, Veer found himself wishing he had seen her celebration, her cheers, and her excitement.

She had been playing in his mind a lot more lately. Recently, he had to physically pull himself back from his mind and focus on the game. The time of showing off his skills and proving his worth was gone—his focus was on the team, on finding victories, and on supporting all parts of the game. And yet, a part of him wandered through his mind, sending a spark to his heart and he thought that just maybe she could be impressed by him. That maybe, he could impress her. That maybe, he could show off the strength of his swing, his sharp decisions, and she would notice him and wouldn't be able to look away. He craved her attention.

He was lost in his mind, drifting deeper into his thoughts as he stood shoulder to shoulder with his team when she saw him looking at her. Her eyes widened when they met his and her smile widened and suddenly the room shifted. The noise and chaos of the team disappeared and what remained was a brighter

room and a room where the world paused for them. Her smile was pointed at him, it was warm, it was beautiful, it was hopeful.

And then she winked at him.

Veer's breath got stuck in his throat. His thoughts scrambled. His heart drummed against his chest. Juhi's expression went from playful surprise and then amusement as her eyes closed as laughter bubbled through her body. Veer wanted to bury his face in his hands, hiding the blush building on his cheeks, but all he could do was break her gaze, close his eyes, and look away while shaking his head. He could face the most difficult and dangerous death bowlers, stand taller than the pressure weighing his shoulder, and yet, her wink, her smile made him crumble.

It was when Percy came in that her smile disappeared. Her back straightened and her eyes narrowed on her camera as she pointed it between the team and Percy. She was suddenly back at work and the chill that travelled up his arms broke him away from his thoughts and brought him back to the dressing room.

"I'm sure the coach wants to share his words, but I was hoping to say something before we got more technical. Boys," Percy put his hands on his hips and huffed, "that was a poor game out there."

All the eyes shot up to Percy as he nodded to himself and the team.

"Fighting to the last ball is not something we should be doing. We are better than that. We have such an amazing line up that the score should have been easy! We must keep the run rate up if we want to climb the standings table. And we can't do that if we play on the defense!"

Veer closed his eyes to keep himself from rolling his eyes. He had gotten used to the tough love Percy used inside the dressing room and the sweetheart charm he used in front of the cameras. Percy had boasted about the unity amongst the team but the silence that fell over the team the moment Percy entered stung everyone.

"It has been hard to find something to compliment us about this match." Percy continued.

"Veer's performance was amazing," a player said.

Veer's shoulders stiffened. He moved his eyes from Percy and glanced around the room. A few nods were travelling around the room, and he was hoping to blend himself with the wall.

“Yes, his performance to keep us alive was fantastic.” A player patted Veer's shoulder and Veer had begun to gather long breaths with the anticipation.

“But it was 2 overs too late. The big shots should have come sooner. There were not a lot of runs on the board and we shouldn't have needed the last ball to make the win. It wasn't good enough. We looked weak!”

Veer squeezed his hands together and tightened his jaw. Percy's comments echoed in his ears and Veer closed his eyes again, crossed his arms, and leaned back in his seat, resting his head against the wall behind him. Percy's words were still buzzing in his ears and pushed his mind to shulle them away in an old drawer. The rest of Percy's updates had gotten too distant and hollow that kept trying to make space in Veer's mind, but he kept himself silent. The messaging blurred into the air.

He was tired. The team was tired. Their excitement had begun to wane off and the celebration of the win was changed into despair. The boys shifted in their spots, sitting in silence, cowering in what looked like a loss.

The room felt hollow. Exhaustion settled in his bones, and he only had enough energy to run home and sleep off his day but Percy kept pushing his rest further away. The muscles that vibrated while he was on the pitch now screamed at him. His body ached for a bath, more food, and a good rest.

“Can we continue this tomorrow?” Veer murmured between the coach talks.

“It's a team brief. It's quite common after a match,” Percy spoke back and stared at Veer, who shook his head.

“We have the recording; we can use it tomorrow. The team is tired and with the win, I think we've earned some rest.”

“The win—”

“We’re still in the top four. The tournament is still in its early stages. That’s what we wanted, so let’s end the day on the high note.”

“They have comments to share—”

“Percy, Veer may be right. We’ve said enough for today. It was a hard day, let’s call it.” The coach nodded.

The team clapped their hands and stood up, grabbing their bags. Patting Veer’s shoulder, the team followed one another and moved towards the parking to find their way back home.

Gathering his equipment, Veer began to stuff his bag with his leg pads and gloves when Percy interrupted his silence.

“You shouldn’t have interrupted.” Percy was also wrapping his belongings into a bag. This wasn’t a fight Veer wanted to fuel. He remained silent and continued fitting his equipment into his bag. The responses were just the sounds of his movements.

“That wasn’t your place, Veer.” Percy continued.

More silence.

The room grew tighter as the tension suffocated them within it. The air was heavy with accusations which continued to cling to them. They were both acutely aware of each other and their movements and the weight of their annoyances pressed into them. Veer could feel himself lose air as he sat in the room. The match was still hanging in the air between them and the anger on the field was rising as they continued to sit and steep. There were words that Veer hadn’t mentioned to Percy yet and he had successfully pressed them deep within him. And yet, as he continued to sit there hearing Percy’s breath and voice, everything chipped at his patience.

The sound of a bat clattering to the floor echoed against the walls. Veer could feel Percy stand up and peer down at him. “Veer—”

“What do you want, Percy?” Veer interrupted him but kept his back towards him. His patience hadn’t left yet but he was near the end of his rope. For years, Veer had built his patience brick by brick, he was trying to cool his anger. But

being surrounded by Percy, Veer could feel his heavy breath and voice grind away his defenses.

“I’d like an answer.” Percy crossed his arms and stared at the back of Veer’s head.

Veer tried to keep his fingers working by playing with his AirPods, “The boys needed a rest.”

“That is such a weak excuse. You know these recaps are important, it’s only for another hour. It’s for their benefit.”

“It just wasn’t necessary, Percy. Not right now.” Veer’s grip tightened around his headphones and his chest rose and fell in slow motions.

“I didn’t realize you were so petty, Veer.” Veer could feel Percy’s sneer travel down his spine and his entire body tightened. Veer kept quiet, secretly hoping and wishing that the more Percy talked the quicker he would leave. And yet, the sounds behind him didn’t move.

“Just because I didn’t praise you and reward your effort, suddenly it’s time to go home. It’s not about you. It’s about the team. I’m here to make them better. There’s a reason why I am the captain and you’re still a player on the team. Maybe try putting your personal vendetta aside and think about what is best for the team.”

Veer threw the towel that was resting on his leg to the floor and turned to face Percy.

“I don’t give a shit what your role is in the team, Percy. I don’t care if you praised me or complained about my entire performance today. I am not looking for your acceptance or your approval. You want to give the team a briefing, go ahead. What annoys me is when you berate the team when they handed you a win that we desperately needed. They gave you the points. They moved us up the table and yet all you could think about is how they screwed up.”

“Because they did! They were too busy getting their videos taken, making stupid videos with each other, instead of focusing on how weak they played.”

“You got out on a run out at zero runs! You didn’t contribute to anything, instead you made it worse because you were so desperate to stay on strike!” He had been waiting to say it and had decided to tuck away instead and yet saying it out loud, seeing Percy’s face reddened finally relaxed Veer. It was a poor gameplay, and it could have lost them the game.

It was Percy’s time to be silent.

They stood there, staring at each other, and trying to read each other.

“The run was your idea,” Percy whispered.

“I told you to stop, Percy!” The match was still fresh in his mind. He saw him waving his hand at Percy who had begun his run after hitting the ball. Veer remembered how Percy refused to share his strategy when he came out to bat. Veer was forced to stand and watch his captain crumble against the easiest strategy.

“I didn’t want the run; they had a wall around us! You wanted to make sure to keep the striker’s end and you screwed up. Your bowling didn’t work today. Fielding in general was pretty shit. We were running around without talking to each other and you still didn’t say anything during the timeouts. Stop taking your personal disappointment on the team.”

“Watch your tone, Veer.”

“Why? Because the team captain’s ego is too big that he can’t hear his own criticism? Everyone knows it was a weak match. But we won it, we can be allowed to celebrate and show it off to our fans. Also, you were being recorded, like any other time. Maybe, learn to be aware of yourself, unless you wanted your strict, nasty attitude streaming through our social media instead.”

“Social media isn’t the problem; the girls will be able to handle that.”

“You keep—”

“Tread carefully, Veer. Because, yes, I am your captain. I have been given this position because people know I can deliver wins. I know you don’t like me, but I am an international cricket-winning captain. Just because you can’t handle the fact that I took my team from the bottom to becoming world champions,

doesn't mean I don't know what I am doing. Learn to grow up and move on. You're acting like a child, keeping up with your moody, detached attitude throughout the tournament. I know my job, I know how to do it well, Veer. It would be best if you control your emotions and let me do my job."

A shiver travelled through Veer's body, electrocuting all the bones in his body. Everything moved in slow motion around him and his feet moved closer to Percy faster than his brain could understand.

He could curl his hands on Percy's collar. But Veer instead focused on curling his fingers into a fist.

"Percy, it's not that deep. I am not interested in harbouring a grudge. I don't care! I don't care what you did months ago. I don't care if you took your team to the moon. I want to win matches. I want to win matches with my team. We're a team that works for each other. No one is bigger than the other one, no matter how many international trophies you have. I want to win. Now, in this season. And I can't do that if you don't let me rest and make me listen to you suffocate the excitement out of my team. I suggest you also take some rest, Percy. You are clearly seeing things that don't exist."

A cold air hung between them. Their eyes glared at each other, heavy with anger and annoyance. Their argument bounced around the empty room and Percy's eyes bore down at him. Every fibre of Veer's body struggled to keep him from shoving him down.

"They're not your team," Percy specified.

"I built this team from the bottom. It's my team."

"And yet," Percy walked up closer to Veer and whispered enough so the walls don't listen, "you're not the captain."

Silence.

The news about the captaincy still hadn't sunk in for Veer. He's kept a straight face since the news came up on his phone. The notifications came in slowly and then all at once with updates being buried in the sea of notifications. He had chosen not to respond. He was willing to wait and let the rumours grow. He

ignored the calls of his manager just to wait on the team—the team he grew up in and he carried on his back.

It wasn't until the next day that the official call came in. He still didn't react, he just listened. Then, the official live statement was released. There was no warning, instead he stood in the team building watching the screen outside the press room. The questions demanded answers to his questions, but everything was short and rehearsed. There was no time for him to decide if he was grieving or smoldering—the world just kept moving. He just had to catch up.

The owner had tried to soften the reality, saying something about the World Cup, Percy's retention cost, and brand image with a World Cup final-winning captain. Hearing Percy's name had been a continuous slap and Veer stopped pretending. He put on his jersey, rolled the bat in his hands, practiced with the team, smiled for the cameras, clapped for the wins, and followed the expectations. Everything came from muscle memory. It was clear his vice captaincy was a balm, a band-aid for him to stay quiet.

Staring at Percy, the band-aid, the pretense was slowly slipping away. The anger simmering in his gut was willing to replace the silence and finally allow all the tensions in his muscles to release. But instead, Veer stood there watching Percy's face turn into a smirk.

“That's what I thought, Veer, don't—” Percy began when Veer finally found his voice.

“I guess I wasn't clear enough before, Percy.” Veer pushed back against Percy. “I don't give a shit. I don't care who the captain is, I don't care how angry you are at the team, or what you think about me. What I do care about is that I am tired. My body is exhausted. I want a good sleep. I don't want to hear your voice. I don't want to know your criticisms. Talk to me tomorrow.”

Percy pointed a finger at Veer, “This attitude you seem to have because you're the most loved team player in the country won't mean anything when I keep you benched. Don't insult me, Veer. One day, you're going to have to deal with the fact that I am the captain and you're not. See you tomorrow.”

Listening to Percy's footsteps disappear in the hall, Veer threw the towel from his hand and grumbled while running a hand through his hair. His muscles were wound up again, stiff, and tight with the anger stuck in his body. The

tension around his veins had continued to tighten. Percy's words echoed against the walls and the constant flashes of his smirk surrounded Veer and drowned him. His anger began to mix with Percy's taunts and Veer's chest felt tight. His breath refused to move further from his throat and his hands continued to get sweaty. His dry jersey felt stuck to his chest and the room squeezed him further inside. Groaning, Veer forced himself out of the dressing room, forgetting his bag behind, and moved towards the open area and the open air.

Stepping at the edge of where the concrete of the ground connects with the grass, Veer stood and took in a deep breath, finally opening his chest and releasing that tension that crept up. The fresh air flew around him and he tried to bring himself back. He tried to bring the man he had trained himself to become—someone who is more poised, removed from the drama, and reacts only in matches. He felt he was becoming his younger self when he had a chip on his shoulder, a fight to pick, and a point to prove. He wasn't a man to continue an argument; instead he knows he would walk away and yet, Percy's tone and smirk continued to echo in his mind. He would have punched him. He wanted to and that tension lingered in his fists.

"Yeah, make sure to post that tonight. Thanks for checking, I'll see you later!" A voice whispered from the shadows and his eyes followed the sounds. Juhi was stretching her neck while her phone was pinned between her eye and shoulder. Looking up, Juhi smiled at him, and it was then that Veer realized how long he had been staring. Giving her a nod, he looked away and focused his eyes back at the stadium.

"You're still here?" Veer asked when Juhi closed her phone and joined him at the edge of the stadium.

"Yeah, I usually like to stick around after matches." Her eyes were scanning the stadium.

Veer crossed his arms and considered her answer, "Why?"

"Ah—well—," Juhi stopped herself. "That's personal." Veer turned towards her with a question in his eyes, waiting for her to elaborate. She looked away and pulled a strand of her hair behind her ear.

"Why are you being weird?"

“Why are you asking so many questions?” The response was so quick that Veer had to pause. He blinked at her and took a moment.

“I asked one question!”

“Well, ask another one instead!” Veer snickered and Juhi couldn’t help but smile back at him.

“Okay, okay,” Veer cleared his throat and asked, “Something less personal, what did you think of the match?”

“Honestly?” Juhi looked at Veer who clamped up again. Words were beginning to swim around his head. But he nodded.

“It was fantastic! The last couple matches were getting so obvious, we won by such a large difference. But today? Oh man, I was at the edge of my seat, I couldn’t stop clapping.” Veer’s face lit up watching her. Her hands were talking with her words and the excitement playing on her face was so infectious. There was a spark in her words that charged him up.

He wished he could have paid more attention to those claps. “Wouldn’t the close call actually make it worse?” Veer asked.

“When the win predictor goes back and forth, that’s when you know the match was worth it. Just don’t test that theory too regularly.” Veer couldn’t stop smiling - he had to bite his lower lip to stop himself.

“What did you think of the match?” Juhi asked.

Veer took a breath. He didn’t know how he felt about the match because he didn’t give himself enough time to think about it. He knew he was nervous but also confident with the finish. He knew he was proud driving the win the way he did tonight for the team. Veer was too busy enjoying the excitement of team instead of giving himself a moment to bask in that feeling.

He could feel her eyes on him. She was leaning into him, waiting for an answer.

“I don’t—I don’t know, actually. I think I liked it, the thrill of it was fun. When the clock was ticking and the balls weren’t enough, I was more stressed

than anything else. But—” Veer knew the run chase powered him up. He knew he could have run more runs if they had let him, and it would have fueled him. “I think I will settle with I liked it. I wish I got to run more.”

Juhi giggled. She actually *giggled* beside him, and he was about to fall to his knees because that sound was beautiful. He laughed with her, and it loosened his shoulders. All the nerves were being relaxed and the tightened muscles finally sighed.

“So, what I am hearing is all in all, a good night for the both of us.”

“Absolutely.” And it was the truth. It was a good night; it had just gotten buried in the stink of the argument that had refused to leave his mind. Percy’s smirk, his taunts, and his tone hadn’t echoed in his mind for the last few minutes and suddenly the freedom felt so beautiful.

“What are you still doing here? I saw the team leave.”

“I wanted to see the field.”

“Why?” Now it was Juhi’s turn to be confused. Her eyes were still watching him. His perspiration of jasmine were floating in the air around her and catching the whiff was soothing his mind. He smiled at her, and Juhi could feel the answer in her bones.

“Isn’t that too personal?”

“Oh my god, of course you would,” Juhi rolled her eyes and turned towards the field instead. Her arms were wrapped around her back and Veer could see her hair bun slowly coming undone with the strands of hair beginning to poke out of place.

“Would you like to join me while I go look at the field for personal reasons?” Juhi stifled a laugh and nodded.

“It would actually be an honour.”

Following her into the stadium, it was the vastness that engulfed him first. The further up he looked the smaller he had begun to feel and a sigh travelled through his body. Closing his eyes, Veer let the silence of the stadium mix with

the wind echoing around him. The arena wrapped itself around him and held him. This was a version of home to him and the more time he spent in his head and in arguments, he began to forget the reason for all this effort.

This was the reason. The stadium. The field. The pitch. The grass on the bottom of his shoe and the crunch of the ground was the reason why. Veer wanted this, he had yearned to be in this space since his father put a bat in his hand and he started to watch the players that would one day become his favourites. He wanted to play with his favourite cricketers. And he did. He shared the field with the biggest stars in the sport.

He wanted to play because the crack of the bat against the ball fueled him. He wanted to play to see how far and hard he could hit. Veer wanted to be in the stadium because he wanted to live the game, and everything had been pulling him away. He kept himself on autopilot—moving from field to field, to city to city, focusing only on practice, and keeping his head down. As the wind travelled around him, it washed over his nerves from the last hour and dusted him off. He needed to be held and the field reminded him of the scent of the field. It reminded him of his excitement. It loosened him up from the mechanical machine he had asked himself to become.

It was as if he was recharging. He was at peace.

Still with his eyes closed, Veer ran his fingers through his hair as the air travelled around him and through his bones.

Juhi stayed quiet as she sat cross-legged on the ground. She kept her eyes to herself as much as she could to not intrude in a moment. Her eyes kept wandering up to him to notice the deep breaths travelling through his chest and the small smile playing on his lips. The smile trained on Veer's mouth sent sparks through her body as she saved the mental image in the folders of her mind.

There was no need to interrupt him; but she couldn't help but whisper, "Can I ask you a personal question?" The question cracked Veer's concentration.

Looking down at her with an eyebrow raised, Veer said, "I suppose I can allow it at this time." Veer joined Juhi on the ground. They were knee to knee with a light whistle of air still passing between them. Sharing a smile, Juhi pulled herself to look away so he couldn't see the blush pulling up on her cheeks.

“Does it still scare you?” Juhi’s voice was a low whisper.

“The stadium?” Her face was also turned towards the stands.

“The stadium, the playing, the crowd. All of this.” She said while gesturing towards the stands and Veer thought back to the crowds. The journey from the dressing room, down the stairs, and across the boundary line always felt new. Every time he was a young boy again fighting against his panic attack and personal imposter syndrome. He would still remember the selection committee—he even remembers where they would sit and his eyes would always find a way to stare at the direction. Veer always doubted the applause for him when he entered the field and it’s just gotten worse. And yet, he was still there, he still showed up for the fans. He showed up for his people who he knew were still watching his game.

Nodding, Veer said, “Always. Every time. Whenever I enter a stadium, hear the crowds, or wear my jersey.” Veer sat on the ground following Juhi and continued, “I know I lose a bit of my breath, or it feels like my heart is in my throat. But, man, I can’t stop coming back. I would rather have my heart in my throat than not play.”

She didn’t say anything. Veer waited. It was still silent.

Veer turned towards her to see her looking at him with big, round eyes. Her head was tilted up to face him.

“What?”

“Nothing. I am just realizing you’re a fan yourself.”

Veer felt his cheek warm up. She wasn’t wrong. It was being a fan that made him practice in the morning before school and in the evening after dinner. It was because he’s a fan that he would run after the train to make sure he made it on time for his next game. It was his obsession of the game that made him stay up to think of strategies and practice them early in the morning. It was the love of the game that he still showed up for the league after they buried him in the politics of the sport.

The game was fuel for him. Holding the bat, twisting it in his hands and the sharpness of the grass under his shoes kept him at peace. He wanted to keep breathing the game.

“What about the fans?” Juhi asked.

Veer considered the question. The question had played numerous times in his mind. Lately, his answer had been different with all the doubt swimming around him. The countless analyses of his performance had crowded his feed. The comments were still trickling in, and the initial sympathy had transformed into anger and the fans’ shouts had begun to feel like an attack. Veer knew he found no use in the online world, but the wounds were still fresh, and his defenses were still too weak.

“I feel like I’m always drowning. I want to play the game for the sake of the game. But, with this stage, there is so much they always want from me. And I understand that, I respect it. I respect their time and energy, it’s just...” Veer sighed and ran his hand over the ground next to him. He took a breath. Juhi watched him as he rubbed his thighs and considered his words. He hadn’t interacted with a lot of fans lately; he’s kept to himself. Veer kept his head down and his focus narrowed only on the door of the bus and the door to the stadium. The consensus had changed to disdain over his attitude, but he hadn’t changed. Watching Veer consider and reconsider his words made Juhi reconsider her question.

“You don’t have to answer that,” she whispered as to not break through his thoughts.

“Sometimes, I can’t come out for air.” Veer’s voice was soft—almost lost within himself. His eyes were focused on the ground in front of him and his words came out slow and calculated. “These league matches are tough, but it’s not as heavy. I have so many chances to play with the standings and fans are almost more willing to give their sympathy. But the World Cups! The World Cups are so much worse! If I can’t deliver on the World Cup, then I’m just—” Veer went quiet, again. “Well, you know what happens at the World Cup.”

The weight of the World Cup still clung to the air around them and Veer still found himself being dragged further into the ground. There had been an understanding with everyone involved in the World Cup—don’t talk about it. Veer refused to answer any questions in the media. He still refused to share the

post-match photos. He refused to check the statistics from that day. Media outlets had asked him what conversations and dialogues were shared in the dressing room and every time his answer was polite refusal. The silence from the final still followed Veer from each venue since that day. Even after hiding away from the world, he still couldn't put the chapter to rest.

All his cricket continued to blend in with that match in November.

He also didn't want to let himself move on from that match—he needed to remember his faults.

“You haven't talked about the World Cup.” Juhi's voice was tender. Her eyes were focused on him, and he refused to look up.

“I don't think I can.” His hands were playing with the grass as his voice remained lower than a whisper.

Veer could feel Juhi's eyes still trained on him but he was thankful for the silence. His heart was about to rip out of his chest and into his hands if he had to answer another question about the World Cup. Instead, he appreciated the time to be able to put up more barriers over the jar of feelings that had begun to reach the brim. He hadn't been securing the jar lately and the spillage was beginning to leak out into conversations or lead to arguments. All he'd rather do is keep his head down, shove the jar further down, and keep playing.

“I remember you broke the record for the most runs during the World Cup and yet, somehow, still weren't happy because you got out on a runout,” Juhi spoke her words through a smile, and Veer felt himself smile.

He looked at her with the smile playing on his lips. His shoulders had loosened, and she questioned him. “What?”

“Are you, by chance, a fan?” His smile was a smirk now.

Juhi's face reddened and she considered her words.

“I did not say that—”

“It's interesting how you would remember my feelings during a match if you're not a fan.” Veer shrugged.

“Look, the entire world was watching, so of course I would know things.”

“Why are you covering over the fact that you might be my fan?”

“Because that’s—” Juhi straightened and cleared her throat, “that’s private.”

Shaking his head and finger, Veer leaned into her, causing her to lean further back, “You asked me a private question, it’s time to pay up.”

Groaning, Juhi looked away and ran a hand through her braid, pulling any loose strands behind her ear. Stalling—that’s all Juhi could think of doing at the time. “I suppose I am just...attentive.”

“Oh, come on!”

Veer said out loud and they both burst out laughing. Their laughter travelled around the stadium. Veer leaned back on his arms and his face refused to stop smiling. The tightness around his jaw wasn’t due to the heaviness of the day anymore—the lightness in the night was untying the knots in his body. After the long day, Veer’s shoulders relaxed as a long breath escaped his lips. The weight of the day had slowly started to evaporate from him.

A silence wrapped itself around them and the whistle of the wind was quiet. The city around them moved at its pace and they stepped in the chill of the night. There was no need to fill the silence as Veer ran his hands over the short grass on the ground and Juhi kept her eyes glued to the sky. It was a quiet kind of peace where suddenly the day didn’t feel as impossible anymore. The heaviness of the match had withered away, and Veer could finally feel the buzz of the match through his bones. His muscles were tired. His mind was tired. And Veer felt good with the exhaustion.

The effort felt worth it.

Seconds turned into minutes, and they continued to sit there without interrupting the world around them. Life was coming back into Veer’s body and finally he felt prepared to pack away the day, forget the bad, and allow himself a chance of genuine restful sleep. He snuck a glance towards Juhi, who kept her eyes closed and her face pointed towards the wind. The strands of her hair moved in the wind and her lips played a small, content smile. Veer didn’t realize when,

but he found himself glancing towards her more often—he noticed her footsteps, he recognized her laugh and waited to hear her voice. There was a sweetness in her voice, like the world was about to become a better place with her words.

He had been wanting to discover more of her, understand her. He couldn't explain why he couldn't pull his attention away from her, but he was getting less interested in figuring that out. Instead, he was hoping to just stick around her more.

“Maybe, I should get back to the hotel.” She spoke.

“Let me go with you.” The answer was quick. Almost too quick. But Veer didn't regret it. Juhi stared at him, her mind scattering to make sense of his answer, but before she could form her question, “I'd like to, if you don't mind.” Veer saw her face move from confusion to what he could swear was a blush in her cheeks.

“Sure, of course.”

“I just have to grab my stuff,” Veer said as they stood up, wiping themselves off.

They walked side by side, his hands tied behind his back and her hands in the front. The silence from the field travelled with them and neither of them were prepared to interrupt. Their pace was slow, and Veer had begun to think of something to say. Something about the next content video, interview, or behind-the-scenes. Something to make her talk. Just something to make her talk so he could listen to her again.

They took in a breath together.

“How did—” Veer started.

“I think—” Juhi said at the same time.

“Sorry, go ahead,” Veer said. He closed his bag and grabbed his headphones.

“No, no, you started first,” Juhi shook her head.

“Please, I insist.” Veer pulled the straps of the backpack on his shoulders. At least she was talking.

“Well,” Juhi played with her fingers and cleared her throat, “It’s nothing to be honest.” She considered her words again as if balancing the words in her mind. “I guess I was just going to say that if it is any consolation, I hope you don’t feel like you need to keep regretting the World Cup.”

Veer froze and kept his breathing slow. His eyes moved away from Juhi to the wall behind her.

A buzz travelled through his body and his fingers tightened around his bag straps.

“I know it’s easier said than done, and whatever I say now won’t take away the hurt. But, sometimes, we forget to remember there was some happiness in the hurt. Like, your performance was incredible, and the team was at its best. It was...” she smiled, “magic.”

The bus rides. The dances in the dressing rooms. The cheers on the field. The jokes amongst the team. The tight hugs. Everything pulled him back to the autumn months of the World Cup and his heart stung but it also grew bigger. It was a time when he forgot all other times. He forgot the dates and the days of the week. Veer was so deep into the World Cup, none of the other noise reached him. The laughter always tugged at his heart, always pulled him to the floor because it was so overwhelming. He always wanted to bask in the goodness, but the hurt never went away.

“I know me saying this won’t make the feelings go away, but I still wanted you to know that you gave me something memorable.” Her words sank around him, and his heart was beating in his ears. It wasn’t that he didn’t try to remember the good. He had just buried the happiness because remembering it was too much. When he didn’t say anything, Juhi fixed her hair and cleared her throat.

“But, anyways, I am just yapping.”

“No—no, thank you for saying that.” Juhi waited for him to continue but he just shifted in his spot, fixing his watch and bag. He gestured towards the door, and she moved towards the exit. A silence had fallen on them again but not due to her lack of trying.

November was still too fresh, and the hours, days, and months were not letting the hurt truly pass away. Veer was also unwilling to let go of it. Veer wanted to talk to her. He wanted to ask her of her favourite World Cup memory, but he was willing to let it remain an unknown. The distance between their shoulders grew and Veer was still grasping at Juhi's words. He heard them, he felt them, but he didn't know what to do with them yet.

"The cars are almost here," Juhi spoke up, her eyes focused on the road. Her voice was still soft, kind, and smooth.

"Separately?" Veer said.

Juhi nodded, "There's always cameras at the hotel." We can't be seen together.

"Juhi," Veer shifted on his feet, balancing his words. "Thank you for tonight."

Juhi tilted her head and squinted her eyes, "I didn't do anything."

"But you did a lot." Veer looked at her, a quiet look, a relaxed look. She looked back at him, not answering right away. A faint smile played on her lips. He wasn't rolling his shoulders anymore. His muscles weren't aching. His back wasn't heavy. His heart was calmer. Suddenly, he didn't want to run away from his team. Veer was willing to spend another day with Percy.

"Well, then for that, thank you for tonight."

Chuckling, Veer said, "Now what did I do?"

"You gave me another win." It was a matter of fact. It was like it was the easiest thing he could have done for her. It felt simple but her face lit up, the red of the cold still colouring her cheeks and Veer's heart sighed. He was still figuring out why.

The sound of the cars slowing down near them broke their stare. The low engine filled their silence and Veer refused to move. He refused to let the night end. He'd have to go back to training, to living in his head again. The world

would reset, and he would stand away from her and the distance would be so far that he couldn't reach her.

Juhi broke away first. Glancing from the driver, she nodded at him. "Well then, I wish you a very good night, Mr. Verma. I'll see you at work."

"Until next time." Veer's voice was hard and stiff.

"Very soon," her smile still lingered as she sat in the car, and he watched her drift further away from him.

## *Love Triangle* by Ashlee K.

She kissed him and left him ruined.

We never touched, yet I feel her in my soul.

He says if he sees her with someone else, he'll kill him.

*Him.*

I think I just wish her to be happy. Him, her, them – anyone.

Just happy.

He says he can't listen to Coldplay anymore because of her.

I flew to another country to meet her favourite artist last summer.

He still texts her now and then. Wishes her happy birthday every year. He says she never replies.

I changed phones after she left.

He talks about her all the time. I try not to talk about her at all.

But he and I love her just the same.

Ashlee K. is a writer who recently traded the Alberta winters for rainy days in BC. After finishing her Master's in Creative Writing next year, she hopes to move back to Edmonton and finish her upcoming fantasy novel.

## *She Can't Be Her* by Dani P.

You look at me and you love me;  
I look at you and I love her.  
But she doesn't look at me at all.  
So I keep looking at you, while you look at me  
And you mistake it for love  
And I let you.

Dani P. is a 26 year old poet who spends too much time yearning and not enough time writing. She also loves cats.

## *Guilty Whispers* by Andy S.

She'd smile and my heart would leap

and the world would feel okay again.

Sometimes I still catch myself whispering I love you

to her memory

while you make shrimp alfredo in our kitchen.

Andy S. is a writer from Ontario who specializes in reminiscing. He is also a proud dad of three beautiful children - being a father is the greatest story he's ever written.

## *Me, Her, and Fireworks* by Alexandra R.

There was a moment with Her that I can never forget, one that still haunts me at the back of my mind during every carnival, every Canada Day, every grand city celebration.

Edmonton was celebrating with a spectacular light show. I had been too nervous to invite Her yet. She was still too new and unflawed and daunting. Everyone else from the shop was easy to talk to. They didn't make my heart race and my palms sweat and make me want to fix all my vices.

She did, though. For some reason. And I was seeing her that evening to give her a silly "Romcom Trivia Game" I had found sitting unopened and forgotten in our basement. Any excuse I could make to see her again. Even though we had gone out not eight days ago.

It turned out to be easier than expected. Inviting her, then dropping her home, then picking her back up to meet everyone else. The idea of being with Her was always more intimidating than the actuality. Once I was with her, it was the simplest thing in the world. She calmed the chaos in me.

Once the fireworks had begun, everyone had drifted from our original spot to catch a better view; She stood with Steff and Vishek in front, but I had hung back and was watching the sky light up spectacularly.

And there was this moment, this picture-perfect moment between us, where She turned around as the fireworks went off behind her.

And she looked at me. And I looked at her. And the entire world just stopped and disappeared. All that remained was me, Her, and fireworks. As if all there ever was was me, Her, and fireworks. She came and stood next to me and it took every fiber of my being not to grab her hand and hold that moment between us for a bit longer.

It wasn't until months later that she told me it would've been okay if I had. But by then, it was too late. Just as we were always too late.

Alexandra R. is a writer from Edmonton, hoping to break into journalism one day. When she's not busy studying, you can find her watching old films, writing sapphic fanfics, and finishing her upcoming romance novel.

## *Ripped Petals on the Pavement* by Emily P.

He got me flowers yesterday

*He loves me*

He smashed a plate because dinner got cold

*He loves me not*

He took me to my favourite café

*He loves me*

He fought when I asked why he came home so late

*He loves me not*

He said I looked pretty in the morning

*He loves me*

He calls me a slut for laughing with my coworkers

*He loves me not*

He breaks up with me for someone younger

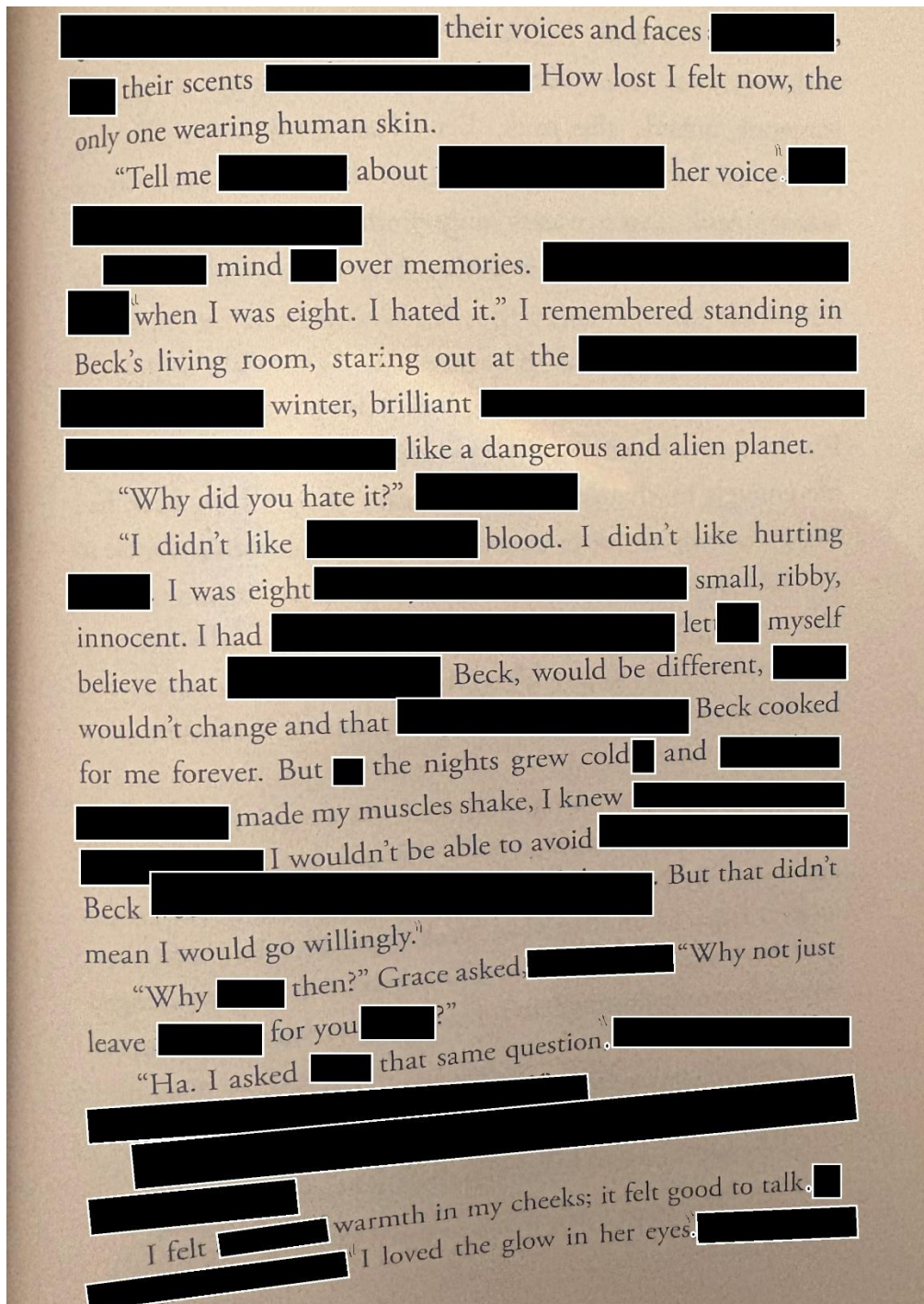
*He loves me*

But he always comes back.

***He loves me.***

Emily P. always knew she wanted to be a writer - she was a born yapper! Drawing on inspirations from her loved ones and people watching, Emily enjoys writing about relationships and their complexities.

## Mommy Issues by Sam R.



Sam R. uses blackout techniques to create new stories from pages of their favourite old novels. They write about issues like trauma and bigotry to promote important conversations.

## *Otherworldly* by Ashley R.

I do not grieve  
the way others grieve,  
the way I am supposed to grieve: *briefly, periodically,*  
*gracefully.*

I grieve as the heavens do: *openly;*  
I grieve as the goddesses did: *chaotically;*  
I grieve as I always do: *perpetually.*

I do not love  
the way others love,  
the way I am supposed to love: *quietly, gently, cautiously.*

I love as the sun does: *blazingly;*  
I love as the stars do: *recklessly;*  
I love as I always do: *ferociously.*

If I cannot grieve and love  
and live  
as they do,  
then who can I relate to?

Ashley R. is a queer POC author who writes to better understand both themselves and the world that consumes them. They are also a group art facilitator and an expert dog trainer!

## *Naivety is a Wound* by Stephen W.

When I was a child, I thought freedom and adulthood were synonymous. I pictured my life as it could be: a three-storey home, an open backyard, enough food to fill the table, my parents by my full-grown side. There would be a mix of Chinese and Canadian dishes on the table. I would have a dog to give the scraps to and tell him he's the best boy. I would be happy and strong and have enough time to play video games with my friends.

My parents never explained to me the growing pains of what it means to be an adult. How moving isn't just a physical process, but a mentally taxing one. The scenes and slurs you have to endure to reach your dreams in a foreign place. How it stings to forget the words of your own language as you assimilate into this world that never really takes you in.

I have a three-storey home now with a decent backyard. Food fills the table thanks to the 9-5s my wife and I work throughout the weekdays. My parents join us, too, on the weekends when I have enough time to bring them from their care homes. I don't think I tell my dog he's the best boy as much as I should, but my son thankfully helps out in that department. I can't remember the last time I played video games with my friends – I don't have nearly as much time or social skills as I did when I was 7. But my daughter and I game every Sunday night.

I don't know if I achieved my dream life. I wonder if my parents did. I wonder if anyone ever did.

Perhaps we have, just through a new lens. Maybe our naivety didn't allow us to see the finer print, the little asterisk life has beside all of our dreams that make them complicated.

Or perhaps life was just simpler at 7 than it is at 54.

Stephen W. took up writing at 50 years old; it's been 4 years now and he has never looked back. Stephen finds writing helps him shed the burdens of being a first generation immigrant, caught between two worlds.

*Excerpt from “A Very Twenty-Something Heartbreak” by  
Cassandra J.*

Clay, you used to be this: my hand reaching to blast the country song crooning on the dash as you sang along; the smirk on my face as I ask others what their favourite smell is while you're in earshot; the instinct to save every Supernatural TikTok to share later; the feeling I got when I looked at the sunrise; every dazzling star in the sky signifying infinite possibilities and better days.

Now, Clay, you are this: every bated breath as I see a new text; my indifference as I flirt with someone new and insubstantial; thumbs hovering over letters of words I'll never send; the tightening of my chest as I remember a similar silence; the ache as I wish I were someone different; every 11:11 wish that I'd hear from you anyways.

Cassandra J. is a writer who recently moved to Edmonton for her studies. She is currently working on a collection, “A Very Twenty-Something Heartbreak,” which is based on her navigating love, loss, and friendships in this new big city.

## *The Paro/Chandramukhi Dichotomy* by Parul D.

*“How foolish is the fly/*

*That leaves the lily pad/*

*To sit on a paper flower?”*

You laugh at Devdas’ line,  
with such sweet innocence,  
such believable grace -

it shatters me irrevocably.

I wonder if you understand

his desperate plight,

sympathize with the man who

lost his love

out of spite,

so he pacifies himself by falling

for the courtesan no one

bothered to fall for.

Or was something lost in the subtitles?

You check your phone right after,

the shadow of the taunting laugh still on your lips,

begging me to ask:

in your drunken stupor,

am I made of paper or lily pads?

Am I Fuckable or Lovable? Are they synonymous to you?

Did Chandramukhi feel the difference in Dev’s love? Did she care?

Or did she bask in her paper form, revel in it,  
knowing she could be lit ablaze with his intoxicated love  
at any moment.

Parul D. is a Kelowna-based writer who merges her love for Bollywood into her stories about humanity.

## *Rainbow Ode for All the Bigots* by Mark G.

Red is for the blood on my hands, flowing deeply from the kids you fail to protect

Orange is for the Indigenous communities still fighting for rights on their own stolen land

Yellow is for the shining sun on a rare, peaceful summer day when acceptance feels possible

Green is for the envy in your eyes when my boyfriend and I walk hand in hand away from your slurs

Blue is for the uniforms that seek to suppress and erase us

Indigo is for everyone in between who is told they don't belong

Violet is for my trans nephew's favourite flowers, that I lay on his grave

Because love doesn't always win down here.

Mark G. is a gay writer and dedicated activist for queer rights in Canada. He specializes in writing content for and about queer communities. He lives with his partner, their son, three cats, and two dogs.

## *Extra Ordinary or Extraordinary?* by Valerie W.

My favourite word has always been “extraordinary”.

Growing up, I always had a fear of all things ordinary, all things mundane. Being the bookworm I was, I spent most of my time reading fantasy series like Percy Jackson – I loved a good escape into other realms. All of my favourite series followed seemingly normal people who ended up going on remarkable adventures. As a child, I was in awe of all of their journeys and fantasized about one day having my own crazy stories to tell. I wanted to grow up and fight dragons, sail a ship through a stormy sea, fly a plane over the Bermuda Triangle... as far as I was concerned, the world was full of magic and exploration opportunities.

Fast forward to junior high and I was still optimistic about my thrilling future, although now my aspirations were a bit more “realistic”. Skeptical about the existence of magic, my dreams now included things like diving into waterfalls, riding a motorcycle to the Grand Canyon, and spending a year in the rainforest.

In high school, things changed a bit. I realized that money, time and motorcycle licenses were real-life things needed to fulfill my made-up dreams. I also became acutely aware of how outrageous my future plans were compared to those of my “future doctor” friends.

So, I let my wild adventures take a backseat, and instead focused on the tame idea of getting into university. “But this is only plan B,” I convinced myself. Surely, I would write a bestselling novel, or become a YouTuber or work backstage for Broadway musicals - anything but succumb to the average, mediocre lives destined to everyone around me.

Now here I am, in my second year of university, pursuing a degree to get a job that I will most likely work forever. This is the total opposite of what I wanted to become. At least, that’s what I thought until a few weeks ago.

I’ve realized that I don’t need overtly crazy stories to be different than everyone else. Everyone out there has had their own share of distinct adventures that are theirs alone. Did Percy have to become a Vampire’s Assistant? No. Did Susan Pevensie explore ley lines? No. But they were still amazing people who faced very different, but remarkable journeys.

We are often so focused on all the things that make us common that we overlook all that makes us unique. We don't need to compare ourselves to other real or made-up characters, because we ourselves are completely unlike anyone before or after us. And that ensures that we will have our own various crazy adventures - who knows, that may even include a trip to the rainforest one day!

I was reminded of this when I remembered why my favourite word was extraordinary: it states that even the most extra ordinary of things are special.

Valerie W. is an English major undergrad who hopes to teach creative writing someday! She can often be found in local cafe shops, writing away her thoughts in a tattered notebook.

## *Is It Because I'm Brown? Justice for POC Queers!* by Keisha P.

Look, complete and defined closure is a grand myth, alright? You know it. I know it. Our queen and savior Lana Del Rey knows it. That being said, it's still something that's usually intensely desired, especially when you're on the other end of an unexpected breakup. Dare I even say it's the considerate thing to do? At least that's what I had always thought, every time I rehearsed my long and awkward "this isn't working out" spiels.

I had never not been the one to end things in my early dating years. In hindsight, it's easy to see why. All my previous relationships were with men and always felt too superficial, too dispassionate, too scripted for me not to exit stage left before we got a chance to explore things further. It wasn't until I was in my early twenties that I discovered all those feelings were just synonymous with comphet. I was definitely much more into women. Like, almost exclusively.

Perhaps that's why I dove head-first into my first "real" relationship with another woman - it just felt so unabashedly true to myself and she smelt so nice and felt so soft and everything about being a couple with her just made sense. As if all the flowers, all the rainfalls, all the love songs were made specifically for her and me. She seemed to answer all the questions I had about myself with just a quick glance.

The best part was, she didn't even seem to mind how inexperienced and shy I was around her. I knew she had been with other women and had an established group of lesbian best friends that she could rely on. She knew all the best, most lemon-y texts in existence, and where to find the best fanfics for all my wlw ships. She knew exactly what she liked and what she wanted me to do. And I was eager to accommodate and learn and please - I wanted so desperately to be a part of this Sapphic world she seamlessly fit into. My gateway into the gay realm I'd always dreamed of.

Except, I wasn't out yet. Nor did I plan on being out soon (or so I thought). She didn't understand this. After all, she had come out to her parents at a young age, and they had been understanding of it, so why wouldn't mine? If I didn't think religion and queerness were mutually exclusive, why couldn't I just explain that to my friends and community members?

If brown cultures are as rich and awesome as I was always preaching, why did I feel prevented from coming out? It's now important to state that she was - and I still feel I have to whisper this word - White.

At some point, all the friction (catalyzed by the uproar of George Floyd's murder) began to highlight just how distinct our lives and experiences with queerness had been. If her coming out had been met with criticism, it would've been a statement on society as a whole and its intolerance toward anything that goes against heteronormativity. If my coming out was met with criticism, the stamp of prejudice would get applied distinctly to the groups I belong to as a minority. Her story of coming out sounded like a tale of empowerment and choice and emancipation; my coming out felt imperative and coerced, with each of her "joking" comments pushing me to test the waters, to try and prove that my community could be accepting too. (Spoiler: she was right, sorta.)

We were an interesting dynamic, to say the least. Once the novelty of attraction and excitement wore off, it took a lot more effort for us to reconcile the gap between how "comfortable" we both were with our identities. She would joke about my baby gay status and how my lack of knowledge about Lesbian Jesus should revoke my queer card (side note: I am now a diehard Hayley Kiyoko fan, so this part actually worked in my favour).

As a result, I tried even harder to fit in. I even stopped cringing at her friends' choice of bad desi restaurants and started giving them tips to achieve the same "exotic" makeup look (the secret was kohl on the bottom eyelids). I wanted to maintain my queer card at all costs, and this relationship and its branches felt like the only thing still rooting me into the queer world I so desperately wanted to remain a part of.

Plus, it wasn't a bad relationship. We had our different outlooks sure, but I'd chalk those up to systemic inequalities and years of my world being vilified in the media. I finally had someone to show this gay side of me to, and who so eagerly showed me the ropes. And ultimately, I loved her and she loved me, and that's all that really mattered. Until it didn't.

Seemingly out of nowhere she texted me one night saying it wouldn't work out. I was confused. I begged for a reason. She said she didn't have one, and that she wouldn't contact me again as she needed space to heal and process. And that was that. She never spoke to me again.

As much as losing her hurt, I think I mourned the loss of all the other queer friendships and connections I had made more. She no longer served as my bridge to the gay side, and the swift severance stung. I no longer had a group to attend drag shows with or other bi/pan/queer women to still validate the sliver of hetero within me. I couldn't grieve my failed relationship at home or among friends without feeling the weight of my recent coming out moments. In all honesty, to know of the warmth and openness of queer groups and have that taken away so suddenly felt infinitely worse than not knowing them at all.

But the worst part was how the lack of a reason got internalized by me. Had she given me some half-assed response, some hint at someone else or what went wrong or where she was at, I wouldn't have blamed my identity. It's a harrowing feeling, finding yourself wishing - even briefly - that you were someone else, someone with lighter skin and slightly more privilege, just so you could feel more in ownership of your sexuality - so you could feel worthy of being queer enough for someone else. No one should have to sit and try and reconcile their queerness with the other parts of their identity, especially when those parts have already been so oppressed and racialized already.

There are countless studies that have established just how much further marginalized queer POC are from our white counterparts, and how much of a negative impact that has on our overall quality of life and sense of belonging within the queer world. This is precisely why closure is so crucial in queer relationships involving POCs, so we don't have to ever sit and ponder if our colored-ness attributes to our queer worth.

Of course, there are many instances where closure is not warranted, especially in toxic situations. However, if you find yourself wanting to end a mostly healthy and committed relationship with a woman of color, let this serve as your Closure Manifesto - a call to arms to remind your soon-to-be ex-partner that they are still valid as they are and that the dissolution of your relationship is not a result of their non-white status, nor does it make them any less deserving of the Sapphic and queer communities that claim to thrive on diversity and inclusion.

Since coming out, Keisha P. has become an unstoppable writing force for all causes close to her heart. While political posts are her favourite things to write, she also enjoys writing wlw stories, usually placed in local Edmonton settings.

## *Yes, That's a Swastika. No, They're Not a Nazi.* by P.V.

2020 was a tumultuous whirlwind of events, most of them unfortunate. Globally, people found themselves affected by the pandemic, even more so with Covid highlighting all the systemic issues that produced varying reactions within different groups. While some demographics were rocked to the core by consequences of things such as lay-off-caused poverty, George Floyd's murder, and isolation-driven declines in mental health, other (and infinitely more privileged) groups found themselves preoccupied with resisting the restrictions imposed upon them. The latter resulted in the unexpected resurgence of the Swastika in parts of the Western world, especially Canada, with those vehemently against government mandates and vaccines using it to spark controversy. Some users were likening their assumed oppression to that of people governed by a fascist state; others were using it as a power statement; many just wanted to be problematic pricks and stir trouble. All were ignorant of how this revival of a hate symbol would affect those with an actual connection to it.

One afternoon, a friend of mine casually told me about an in-law's tattoo that disappointed them: "he seemed like such a nice guy, but then I saw the Swastika on his back."

Their confusion was palpable as I deliberately swallowed, not immediately bashing the repulsive choice of ink and the supposed monster of a man that wore it. But I knew he was Fijian. I knew he was Hindu. I knew what the tattoo likely meant to him, what it meant to me, and how that differed from what it meant to most of the world. I just didn't know how to articulate all that and reconcile years of hatred with the fact that the symbol had been stolen, appropriated, and tarnished without our permission. Especially over a half-hour lunch.

As arguably with any religious symbol, the message behind the Hindu Swastika lies in the eye of the devout beholder. For some, the Swastika represents the power of creation and the universe; for me, it represents balance, stability and the intertwining of the mundane being with the divine. As a whole, most Hindus see it as propitious and deriving of good fortune, hence the inclusion of the symbol in important rituals and events, from weddings to that iconic entry scene in *Khabhi Khushi Khabhi Gham*.

Of course, the Swastika does not pertain to Hinduism alone - various religions and cultures have had their ancient associations with the symbol. The Swastika has been known to initially have migrated across many cultures, races, and religions, becoming a universal symbol whose meaning fluctuated but always stood for something positive, pious, and profound.

Unfortunately, that meaning was irrevocably tainted once the symbol was associated with Nazis, transforming it from a well-intentioned emblem into something synonymous with violence, fascism, and pain - an angry and radicalized polar opposite of its sacred origins. This appropriation of the Swastika has been discussed and contested by various scholars. However, the truth behind the Swastika's stolen reputation is much more nuanced, stemming not only from the amalgamation of such smaller factors, but a much larger sense of entitlement and the historically imbalanced power dynamics between the East and West.

Despite the Swastika's renowned love and fame throughout history, its origins and true meaning are still ignored by those in power. While these decisions may not be inherently malicious, they again display an ongoing ignorance that allows the West to continuously define, vilify, and control the East and all they refuse to understand about it.

It becomes abundantly clear then that the Western world favours the erasure of past mistakes as opposed to the opportunity to grow and learn from them. Rather than focusing on absolving the Swastika of its notorious reputation and separating its sacred nature from its heinous misuse, the impulsive reaction to any resurgence is not to penalize the Nazi-idolizers who use it, but rather to condemn the symbol and distance themselves from it as quickly as possible. Not only does this further perpetuate the tarnished reputation of the Swastika, but it again places its meaning in the hands of those who do not understand it, diminishing the value of the Swastika and all the religions and cultures that revere its truth.

It's undisputable that the Nazis committed atrocious crimes whose impacts are still unfairly suffered by those they oppressed, with Nazi symbolism serving as a trigger to all their past pain and trauma. Hence the Swastika's vindication is still a difficult and delicate matter, since all the groups behind the ancient meaning can never compensate for all the damage inflicted by the Nazis and their misappropriation of it.

However, difficult does not mean impossible.

Whether or not the Swastika can ever be fully redeemed is hard to say, but it undoubtedly can be better understood on the path to healing. Perhaps one day it can even be recognized as the symbol of well-being and good fortune that it truly is, rather than a misinterpreted and weaponized hierogram that has become synonymous with intolerance.

If only all this could be explained and heard during a half-hour lunch break.

P.V. is a South Asian scholar by day and fantasy writer by night. He has been writing since he was 12 years old and, decades later, still finds it to be his favourite mode of thinking and healing.