# SANCTUARIES

IN YOURS, I FOUND MINE

*An Anthology of South Asian Survivor Stories*

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### AN ANTHOLOGY OF SOUTH ASIAN SURVIVOR STORIES

BY SOUTH ASIAN SOAR

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SOAR

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The creation of this Anthology is rooted in love, care, and the collective power of our communities. We are so grateful for each and every person that held and shaped our vision for this collection.

**Storytellers**
To our storytellers, thank you for trusting us with your hearts. In your stories, we find our own.

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South Asian SOAR is a movement of survivors, organizations, and allies committed to building a future free of violence for the South Asian diaspora in the US.

**We create joy, healing, and justice for South Asian survivors and communities.**

# A Note on the Content

The pieces in this Anthology explore a variety of topics related to violence & survivorship, which can be triggering and/or distressing to engage with. We encourage you to navigate this collection of stories in the way that works best for you.

Some details or stories might feel more familiar than others, and perhaps, weigh heavier in your heart if they feel close to home. To help you engage with the stories with intention and care for yourself, we've noted pieces in which a storyteller might go into more detail about a particular experience of violence and/or survivorship. These stories are marked in the Table of Contents with a note below the title. The note will let you know what type of experience the story details, using the following legend.

***CSA: Childhood Sexual Abuse**
***SH: Street Harassment**
***SI: Suicidal Ideations**
***RV: Racial Violence**
***FGM/C: Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting**
***MSA: Mentions of Substance Abuse**
***SA/SV: Sexual Assault and/or Sexual Violence**
***ST: Sex Trafficking**
***WH: Workplace Harassment**
***PTSD: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder**

For all readers: we invite you to read the Anthology somewhere you feel safe. Be gentle with yourself and put it down when you need a break. Breathe deeply and take the time and space you need to process. Ask your loved ones to hold the stories with you.

If you have experienced harm or abuse, know that you are not alone. You can find resources for healing at:
southasiansoar.org/healingresources

# Editor's Note

Far too often, violence steals our stories.
It silences us into a pain that we feel we have to carry alone.

In this anthology, we seek to hold one another — to create a vessel for survivors to feel safe, held, and seen. To carry even the slightest bit of the weight, together.

Some shared stories from decades ago for the first time
Others reclaimed narratives that once silenced them
Each wrote for another and all wrote for themselves.

It is magic to watch somebody trust their voice, share their healing, and validate their own resilience.
What an honor it has been to create a vessel that can hold such magic.

And it is also heartbreaking to bear witness to the undercurrent of pain; to know the spirits who endured such harm. In their vulnerability, I found my own.

I learned that safety is not only the world we build, but also the way we speak, perhaps, even more so, the way we listen. It is the patience we hold for our healing, the space we take up with our rage, and the joy we promise to find again.

To the storytellers in these pages, thank you for lending your hearts, so that one day others might feel safe to do the same. In holding yours, mine opened tenfold.

# Producer's Note

In yours, i found mine.

In your healing, i found mine
In your voice, i found mine
In your pain, i found mine
In your strength, i found mine
In your dreams, i found mine
In your story, i found mine

We could go on.

These words were first spoken by a storyteller in this anthology. As she searched for her own voice, she found it while guiding another to share theirs. In seeing this anthology unfold, it became so clear that each story itself was a sanctuary—a place for healing. Bound together, these stories sit in community, speaking to and holding space for one another. They invite us to reflect on our own pain, healing, dreams, and beliefs. They offer a refuge, a place of transformation, a sanctuary for all of us.

We hope that within these stories, you find echoes of your own—your own self, your own healing. It is through the alchemy of these moments that we will nurture a future free from violence.

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BY RAUSHAN

**BREAKING THE SILENCE**
**June 2021**
**Healing Practice: Writing**

*Dearest Abbu and Ammu*

*I love you both more than you will ever know and because I love you deeply I am writing you this letter. I have never been good with saying the words but am much better with writing -perhaps that is the part of nana-bhai I carry in my soul.*

*I am sharing my truth with you today on the first day of Ramadan because Ramadan is about cleansing, and new beginnings and as I start with this new moon, I want to invite you both to be a part of my healing journey. I had told myself I would never share with you what I am about to share because I did not want to add worry or trauma to your lives. But today during my meditation it all became very clear to me. I realized, we can never have an authentic relationship if I am not honest with you and I know that when each of us returns to Allah, my biggest regret will be if you didn't get to see and love all of me and I didn't get to see and love all of each of you. Secrets, shame, and darkness are not love. Love is light, love is joy, love is honesty even if it hurts and is hard to handle.*

*I spent my entire life feeling like something is wrong with me, and hiding my pain and my confusion. In doing that I spent my entire life trying to make things better for those I love while my own soul was struggling in darkness.*

*But like both of you, I have a resilient spirit. Like both of you, I too am a fighter — I learned that from you two! So I have been fighting through it all these years - but I am tired of fighting. Alll of us deserve joy in our lives and as Allah's children all of us are divine. And so, I choose joy today and every day moving forward. I want our relationship to be joyous as well! And the only way that can happen is by removing the pretenses and masks.*

*Your first born child sexually abused me throughout my childhood and teen years. I have spent my entire adult life processing the trauma of having someone who is supposed to protect you, and take care of you instead of being someone who takes advantage of you and victimizes you. I know in my heart that by keeping this to myself I have carried a burden I shouldn't have ever had to. As you sit with what I have shared I want to emphasize 2 things: One, I don't have any anger or resentment towards either of you about this - I have worked through that over the years - you two parented best you could with what you knew and had and through your own traumas. Two, I am not sharing this with you for you to feel bad for me or to feel guilty as parents. I believe in my heart that you parented the best you could with what you knew and had and through your own traumas.*

*Opening my truth up to you two is the hardest thing I have ever done but I know I must do it because I love you dearly and when you love someone truly you dare to live outside of the shadows and in the light with them. Take it as you will and I hope you will find it in your heart to forgive me for holding on to this for so long, for having built a wall and hidden behind it for years, and not creating the space for us to authentically understand or connect with each other. I am done having walls, keeping secrets, and wearing masks. I pray for a relationship with you all that is honest and authentic. Life is short and I am done living lies. As Allah's creations none of us are perfect – but the divine is within us all. By opening up to you and asking for what I want, hope, and pray for, I am embracing the divine that is within me and reaching out to see, hold, and love the divine that is within each of you.*

*I understand if you need time to process. Please acknowledge that you have received this letter once you have read it. You can respond when and how feels right for you. May this month of ramadan bring us all sabr, and show us the light.*

*–Your Daughter*

**THE OPENING**
**January 2021**
**Healing Practice: Breathwork**

I clicked on an Instagram ad—an unusual thing for me—that led me to signing up for the weekend breathwork training. In a wellness industry that has long been white-washed and gentrified, something about the familiarity of the healer's name and her clearly South Asian face drew me in. So here I was on a Saturday morning, in a virtual circle on a screen full of Zoom squares, experiencing breathwork for the first time.

The sun was pouring in on my favorite spot on the bright yellow rug in my bedroom. I was laying on my back, eyes closed, enjoying the prickly sensation of the sun rays on my skin.

*"Inhale through the nose into the belly, inhale again to the chest, and exhale out through the mouth."*

The calming effect of her voice as she started the breathwork practice took me by surprise. Just a few minutes earlier during the lecture part of the virtual class, something about the staccato and speed of her voice had grated on me. Yet now it was smooth, comforting, seamlessly blending with the music.

*"Inhale, inhale, exhale. Inhale, inhale, exhale. Inhale, inhale, exhale....."*

My right hand started tingling and moving involuntarily. She had warned us about this—but that didn't lessen my surprise. We moved through the breaths faster, then slower, and then with loud gasping exhales.I kept following the breaths, unsure of where I was going. I committed to not being afraid.

For the first time in years I felt every inch of my body, buzzing and alive. My pelvis violently convulsed up and down and my exhales turned into roars, and the roars raged into angry howls and the angry howls transformed into wails of grief. This was ages old grief. Grief that had buried itself in the crevices of my body for 35 years. Grief that I naively thought I had resolved during all those hours of talk therapy.

The breathwork opened the floodgates to a deep pain that had been sitting patiently in my bones, my pores, my organs, waiting for this moment. This was the pain of betrayal by those who I loved with all my heart. This was also the pain from all the darkness and shame that had been passed down through the blood in my veins.

As the practice ended I remained on the floor, unable to move. I felt the presence of all my grandmothers and mothers standing above and around me. I committed to walking through the portal that had opened. I didn't know how yet, but this was my invitation to disrupt the generational cycles of shame and silence. The mother in me was going to confront this darkness for my daughter and for all who will come after me and for all who came before me.

**FINDING FREEDOM**
**December 2021**
**Healing Practice: Touch**

As I walked up the steep gravel road I could see her—L's lithe and slender body leaning against the rust orange pillar on her porch, sipping on yerba mate with a silver straw. The miracle of our meeting was what others would call sheer chance, but I knew it to be divine intervention.

The table was set up on the open air porch. As she embraced me with a warm hug I felt her flow through me like a river, the rush of the water waking up my nerves and simultaneously soothing my soul. It was just like the other day, when I had first felt her hands on me during a massage. I had no explanation for the magic I felt in her hands but I knew she was not any old masseuse. So I had asked her if she did energy work and she had smiled at me and quietly nodded. And so here I was, unsure of what to expect or what had brought me to her table today, but confident that she had something to offer that I really needed. Speaking my truth had not set me free how I had thought it would. Instead, I had been experiencing a different kind of darkness since writing to my parents. This darkness slowly seeped through my body like black tar and even my breathwork practices were no longer providing relief.

I laid on the table, face up, taking in the lush tree canopy above me. As she guided me into relaxation, taking my body in, piece by piece through the palms of her hands, I gently closed my eyes. She started chanting in rhythm with her motions and her soft touch turned into pain as she dug in deep with her fingers into my ribs and then into the crevices of my belly. I screamed, I cried, and through it all I felt as though I was in a trance. My mind could not fathom what I was experiencing, but my body and spirit seemed to be communing with long lost friends. L patiently crumbled and dissipated the black tar that had calcified inside me, with her bare hands. When she was done, my body felt lighter and my spirit felt deeply loved. She told me my body was ready to be free and it was up to me to move towards that freedom. As we said our goodbyes, her parting words, *"Tienes que bailar mi querida!"* imprinted into me. That night, for the first time ever, I danced unabashed, amongst strangers, without a single drop of the liquid courage I had leaned on for all of my adult life!

## L transformed my relationship with physical intimacy and with my body.

She opened up a new world for me—one that led me to learning how to heal my own spirit and that of others using touch. Through that journey I have found a new me – one who celebrates her sexual self freely and openly, one who hasn't had a drink in over two years, and one who is abundantly comfortable in her body!

**FORGIVENESS**
**March 2024**
**Healing Practice: Plant Medicine Ceremony**

What does it look like and feel like to be a survivor and share your story without anyone to blame? When those who abused you were survivors too. When those who were supposed to protect you were survivors too. When you are in a constellation of survivors. When you break the silence, to heal from the deep heartbreak that has been carried generation to generation. When there is no victim, no perpetrator, just trauma, circumstances, and flawed humans. Plant medicine illuminated the path towards this for me. Plant medicine showed me that we both lost so much, that both our childhoods were stolen, that my survivor story can be a story of healing and of forgiveness. Plant medicine illuminated possibilities that helped me open my heart to forgiving the person who had violated me. After years of holding a wall between myself and him, plant medicine helped me reach out from a place of compassion while holding clear boundaries.

My message of forgiveness:
*This picture reminds me of what was and could have been but couldn't be in our relationship as siblings because things happened and harm was experienced and perpetrated. I have spent the last few years moving through deep healing and reckoning with the sexual and emotional harm I experienced from you for so many years. I know your actions were rooted in your own victimization. My spirit is blessed and I am committed to shifting as much of the generational traumas through my spirit so those after me and in community with me will have a little something better. While I continue to heal and find ways to live as the best version of me that Allah has generously granted me, i wanted you to know that i forgive you for the deep pain and distress you inflicted on me and i truly pray that you find help to heal your own wounds—because hurt people hurt people—and we all get to choose whether we will continue that cycle or break it. My hope is you will sit with what I have shared and respond from a place of love and integrity. Perhaps, then, we will see the opening of a small path for the beginnings of some kind of repair in our relationship.*

His acknowledgement and apology:
*Thanks for reaching out. Am grateful that you are able to open up....I want you to know that I am sorry and I hope we can move forward to establish a healthy and happy relationship.*

**EPILOGUE**

Healing ourselves is a lifelong journey and never a straight line. I am deeply grateful to SOAR for creating this opportunity to share my story. This is my humble offering to fellow survivors of incest—one day I hope to have the courage to not have to do so anonymously but today is not that day. Our communities, not unlike most others, continue to be cloaked with shame around this issue. My wish for us is to start with healing the harm within our families so that one day we can all come into the light without fear of being ostracized.

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# SĀHASA

## BY SYLVIA N. C.

*everyday*
*something has tried to kill me*
*and has failed*

– Lucille Clifton, "won't you celebrate with me" (1993)

Dipu, thankfully, didn't live with us.

He was a bachelor rounding off his late twenties by boarding in the basement of an auntie's house, running errands and picking up odd jobs throughout the Bangladeshi community. In lieu of my family's overworked, immigrant, vehicle-less stasis, a couple times each month he would travel to Jackson Heights, returning to deliver kilo bags of imported SWAD spices, *chyawanprash*, things from the homeland difficult to purchase elsewhere.

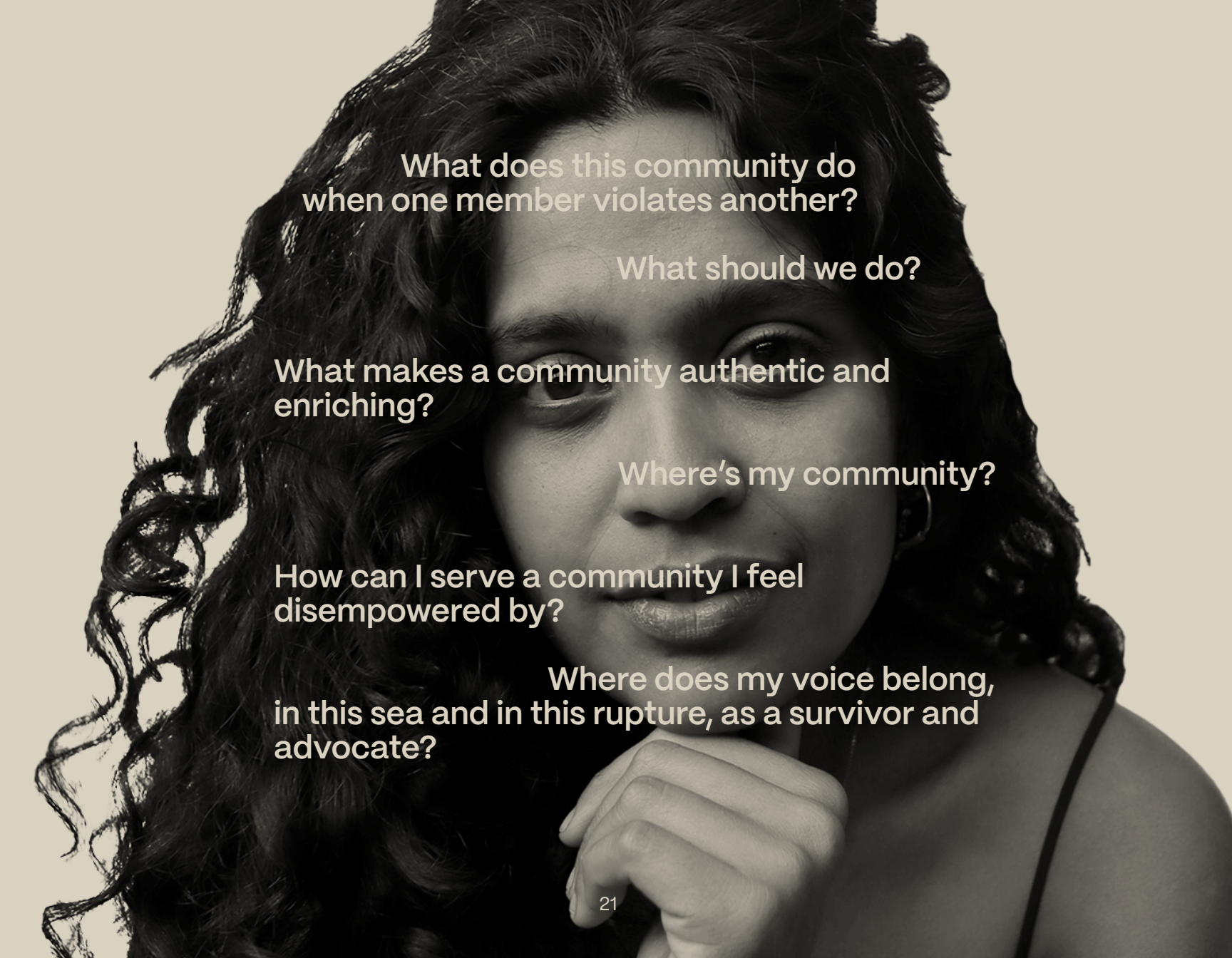
I suppose it comes back to mobility for us, each twisting within the parameters of our own orbits, occasionally coinciding. My parents were already ossifying under the dredge of immigrant labor, and I, inside the home, would curl myself into the crawl space between two sofas, attempting to escape the nuisance of my existence, the problem of my body. I did this until I became too weak to pretend my life was not my life. I did this until honesty fell like virtue's ashes, revealed this part of me only when I need to leverage it, in my most desperate moments, only when I was contending with fear or rejection or defeat. It was the reason I had for everything and anything in my life being fucked up. It was the one thing about myself I felt I could hold onto. The first time I confessed, I untethered like an anchor at sea. I became an animal wailing, then an animal licking its old wound, then a charred circle in the earth giving way to rain.

I can point to each part of me that has belonged to someone else.

Slowly, I work my way through, making accusations, retrievals, homecomings. It has cost me so much to begin recovering, my voice a spell shattering a silent room.

From what I can remember, Dipu molested me from the age of five to nine, meters away from other adults, often in a house full of women.

How can I explain this in Bangla?



What does this community do when one member violates another?

What should we do?

What makes a community authentic and enriching?

Where's my community?

How can I serve a community I feel disempowered by?

Where does my voice belong, in this sea and in this rupture, as a survivor and advocate?

*O amake pochamothon dhortho. O amar kapur-chupur kulefeltho ar amake dhortho. Ami jokon ghumaithesilam o bisnathe dhukeashtho ar amake dhortho. Amar pyjamar panter bithore hath dhukhaitho. Ami keo ke boline kano amar kub bhoi lagse. Thao bolthe bhoi laghe. Ami janine amar ma ar baap ki korbe, ki monekorbe. Ami monekorsi je ora bolbe ita amar dosh. Amar kub kub shorom lagse. Onek din cholse ar ami khokuno tik mothon e kotha ta bholinei.*

Dipu took all but a handful of photographs I have of my childhood.

It haunts me to imagine him on the other side of that lens, looking at me, posing me.

It has been two decades since he last touched me and there are still moments between us that pierce through time, finding ways to disrupt me. Things he has, without a doubt, I imagine, forgotten about ages ago, that happened to him in an almost past life, have collapsed and entirely recalibrated my psyche. I am constantly weighing the conditions of my life against each other, as if calculating the balance between pain and pleasure would eventually translate into inner settling. What protections did I have as opposed to ones I didn't? What privileges? Shelter, food, shoes, siblings, both parents, a classroom, books, my mind, escape plans masquerading as dreams. I didn't have a stable place to go to be alone, where I could shut the door and lock it, didn't trust any adult in my life to not fault me, and today I am marked by those remnants, uncompassionately hypervigilant and fearful of being blamed.

I try to anthropologically piece the timeline of my life back together, to figure out the patterns, allowances, contingencies which governed the abuse I experienced as if precision about access could have helped prevent it, could continue to prevent it, as if the solution for how and when and where and why girls and women are so unequally harmed could be simple, finite, absolute, pointed to, eradicated. Naively, I think that in identifying the issue, I could attend, at least, to fixing it.

*What does this community do when one member violates another?*

*What should we do?*

*What makes community authentic and enriching?*
*Where's my community?*

*How can I serve a community I still feel disempowered in?*

*Where does my voice belong, in this sea, in this rupture, as survivor and advocate?*

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One of the transformations I would like to encourage in my community is a refusal to allow cultural nationalism to mask patriarchal oppression.

As someone born into the diaspora, I have been prophetically warned throughout my life that I will lose my cultural heritage, and succumb to abandoning my history, and thus, my family. Every choice I've made that was disproved of

(when discovered) was attributed to and conflated with my "being" American. From my parent's generation, this tended to impart as a deep suspicion towards the ways I integrated and interacted with anyone who wasn't South Asian— I was to avoid men, obviously, in particular. I'm confused by my community's vigilant, often oppressive practice of "protecting" us from men of cultures not our own, I find the refusal I've seen in my community to denounce ours as equally dangerous and deeply problematic. In my experience, the sense of caution extended towards the body of girls and women tends to stem from a larger overarching concern with honor, virtue, purity and reputation than with the actual safety, liberty or well-being of girls or women. I mourn that I was not protected from Bangladeshi men to the same lengths, here and there extreme, that I was from other men. I have no confidence that men with whom I share one half of my cultural identity are any less likely to harm me, particularly as a result of seeing how South Asian boys and men are conditioned by practices that allow them to objectify us without ridicule or reprimand.

Once, a creepy uncle brought his family from Bangladesh to visit ours. His equally creepy son, 9 or 10, kept grabbing at my older sister's breasts. She shared this with me and only me, as a warning. In response, I began actively avoiding him. I refused to let him get too close to me, or to touch me, and my disinterest in attending to him irritated and embarrassed my parents tremendously. They called me into a separate room to tell me I was being rude, and their anger escalated when I shared with them why I was avoiding my cousin. My parents shushed me and told me it was inappropriate for me to suggest he would do anything sexual in nature, that he was a young child with none of those senses. They attributed my perception of the situation as a result of my American acculturation which they saw as scandalous, sex obsessed. I wasn't even given the chance to end the conversation when my parents invited my cousin into the room we were in and began mediating forced conversation between us. Yet again, someone's son was getting away with something they knew they shouldn't be doing, at the cost of my bodily autonomy being so easily overridden, taken away, so callously made into nothing. At this stage in my adult life, in my supposed newfound freedom, there remained protocols I was to follow. Amongst them, they were to decide where I'd be, who I'd engage with and on what terms. I was to avoid creating any ripples, was blamed for what came my way, was falling apart under a life I could not sustain. It became rarer and rarer for my parents to allow me to socialize except to attend school and work without it escalating into an argument. I soften towards them when I remember that they were operating, in part, in fear of a world they didn't really understand or know how to fit into. But when I remember the moments in which I've gathered the courage to voice what is happening, what has been happening, inside our homes, under our noses, and they deny me, I share no sympathy.

I was eighteen the last time I saw Dipu. I recognized him immediately. It felt like all the air and blood in my body sunk at once. Like I was already a ghost, maybe had been a ghost, unaware of my own death, looming in purgatory for years. I don't know the details: where I was coming from, if I was living at home, if I moved out by that point, if it was afternoon or evening. I just remember I was already terribly sad. Except for my new relationship, the year had been tense, awful, suffocating, horrible.

The F train lurched into the station. Dipu walks his bike onto the train platform, entering from the door behind me on the right. Time groans to a gelatinous trickle. I feel my body decomposing rapidly by being near him. I don't breathe. I watch him. Purse my lips. Want to speak. Things are heavy, slow. I want to shout what he did, what I remember, what he is responsible for. Want to explain, attest, accuse. Want strangers to believe me, to rally, to fight for me. See him suffer, violenced, bloody, babbling, begging, crawling, praying for someone, for me, to spare him. I want to be so mercilessly violent to this man. Want to obliterate his soft parts, gauge out his eyes. Want to pulverize everything that ever existed about this man. Want to tear from his body what he took from mine. And I know nothing will happen. And I know I will sit here and replay this moment in my head for years and years and years and add to my mountain of regret. I am unable to fully process what is happening. I am so angry at myself for believing I was at all prepared.

Dipu rides one stop before exiting through the door on the side. I miss my chance, and I will never see him again.

Then comes the second panic attack of my life.

I leave the train the stop after him, barely able to lift my feet. All ghost. A few yards down is a dirty wooden bench I can sit on for a moment. I do this, staring blankly at the wall of a subway station so symbolic of imprisoning me throughout my youth. Memories of being spied on in this dirty, broken, rat and piss filled station, of sleepy-eyed workers amongst oglers, a hellscape of people reading my body through my clothing, assessing me, corrupting and digesting me. I would get off at this stop before and after all my friends, coming from and to a place that branded and relegated me to my underclass, South-Asian immigrant descendent status. I couldn't escape.

Often, it felt like my brain and the world were in a tug of war forcing me to look at my pain and trauma and helplessness in the off-hours when I was not directly experiencing it. Ironically, my compulsion to die emerged the moment Dipu disappeared from my life, trading one perversion, one harm for another. I took over abusing myself, and I did it better, from there. I had aged out of interest, I assume, right around the time I began to develop the language to describe what was happening to me, growing to sense the inappropriateness of this form of intimacy between a child and adult without being totally subdued by the overwhelmingness of the experience itself. I remember holding it in my pocket, waiting to tell it to people, as if it made me interesting. I wanted help.

I mourn the person who lived in that world every day, face the survivor's guilt for getting out, becoming able to leave it thousands of miles behind me, get time back, build a home in the mosses. I have to remind myself the person who went through this experience is there inside me, isn't still out in the world needing to be saved, that I am not guilty of not calling her. I am reminded that she is responsible for everything. For me. That she is safe. And alive and at peace and at home. I take comfort in knowing the love I am capable of can redeem me, can fill the absence of the love I wish I would have received.

In the end, I make it.  I do.
I grant myself my life back. Perform miracles.
Tell the truth. Say,
Here and now. Say,
I am free.

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# TO PRAY OR TO PREY

## BY KULVINDER ARORA

How do children learn that telling the truth is important? They tell a lie! Someone teaches them the value of telling the truth! My parents found out I took a dollar from them to buy M&M's. When I was found out, they told me they didn't mind me taking the money as much as they wished I hadn't lied about it.

My family emphasized the importance of telling the truth. In the Sikh religion, the Divine is referred to as One Truth and my father believed that all religions are pathways to it. He believed it so much that I was allowed to attend a Hindu Saturday school. The school's mission was to build 'good character' in Indian immigrant youth.

The school helped me develop a love of learning, laying foundations that likely led me down the path of becoming a Professor.

But they also taught me how to drown my truth. I was molested by a Guru at that school. As a young girl, I didnt even understand that it was sexual abuse. Not many people in my life know that I am a survivor of childhood sexual abuse. I didn't share my story all these years because I was made to feel it was my fault.

It wasn't until I engaged in a type of therapy called Internal Family Systems that I learned to let go of shame.

My therapist taught me to listen to and nurture my younger self with the compassion and wisdom I possess as an adult. She asked me to share what happened from the perspective of myself as a child. It felt strange to put myself back into that voice but I gave it a try by writing a letter to my parents as if I was still that little girl who had just walked out of the room where I was abused.

*Dear Mummy and Papa,*

*H called me this morning and said I should go visit Swamiji. She said he gets lonely during the day when Uncle and Aunti are busy. Mummy, I called you at the nurses' station and they told me you were busy. So, I called H back and told her I couldn't go because my mom couldn't come to the phone. H said you should go and tell her later. She'll be okay with it.*

*I walked over to Saturday School. I knocked on Uncle and Aunti's door. They didn't answer. Swamiji stays in the apartment upstairs, so I climbed up the staircase. He let me in. I looked around and Uncle and Aunti weren't there.*

*He asked me to come sit on his lap. I did. He waved his hand through my hair and said, "Are you a good girl? I replied, "Yes." He asked, "Would this good girl like to kiss me?" I didn't know what to say.*

*He put his tongue in my mouth. It felt strange.*

*I asked, "Where are Uncle and Aunti?" He didn't answer. He put his tongue in my mouth again. I didn't like the feeling and so I got off his lap and asked if we could do something else.*

*He walked me to the kitchen and said, "Let's have some juice." He poured me orange juice in a Dixie cup, the kind we drink after Saturday's class, but it tasted bitter. I left the rest on the counter.*

*Then he walked back to the living room and said we should sleep. He laid down on the floor. I didn't want to sleep but he said I should lie down next to him. I closed my eyes and tried to nap but I wasn't sleepy. I tried to wake him up. He didn't answer. I decided to leave. I stepped out the door. I walked down the stairs and was surprised to see Uncle. I thought he wasn't home.*

*He said, "Ritu, you shouldn't have sat on the stairs waiting for Swamiji!"*

*I was confused, didn't he see me come out of the apartment? I told him that I didn't sit on the stairs, I was inside with Swamiji.*

*He said, "You shouldn't have sat on the stairs waiting for Swamiji."*

*He was mad at me! Again, I explained, I was inside with Swamiji.*

*He said "Swamiji should not be disturbed during his prayers. You should go home now." I felt terrible and I didn't know what to say anymore and so I walked home.*

*I didn't want to get in trouble! I thought everyone would be angry at me for going there, for bothering Swamiji. I know I should have gotten permission. H said it would be okay. Am I in trouble? Am I a bad girl?*

It felt incredibly odd, but my therapist kept affirming how important it was to use a child's voice. Then, she asked me to summon the most compassionate part of myself and speak to my younger self, using the nickname I was called then:

*My dear Ritu, you deserved to be comforted when you were feeling so hurt and scared! You did nothing wrong! You were too little to know that predators groom children to lure their friends to harm. Instead of hearing you out, Uncle doubted you and thereby silenced you! He made you think it was you who had 'disturbed Swamiji.' He may or may not have known that you were harmed in that room but he chose to make you feel ashamed for being there. To protect the school, he needed your silence! You were taught to be a good girl, to do what your respected elders wanted. You had no way of knowing that would bring you harm. It's not your fault, sweet girl! You tried to tell Aunti the next time you returned to class. She bit her lip and walked away. Nobody allowed you to believe your truth mattered! Tell the world, you didn't sit on the stairs! Tell the world, you deserve kindness!*

Some lessons were learned that day that had a great impact on my life thereafter. I learned to defer to male authority even when I knew I was correct because I was taught to doubt my intelligence. I learned to mistrust female authority figures because I feared being diminished. I often walked away when I could have benefitted from nurturance. I learned bodily pleasure meant pleasing men and I learned not to listen to my own desires. I avoided transgressing norms for fear of getting in trouble. I often cry during religious services because I am unable to share how my faith was compromised.

So what makes me want to share my story now? I have a daughter with a learning disability. I was alarmed to learn that the Center for Diasbility Rights reports that more than 90% of people with developmental disabilities will experience sexual abuse in their lives; I want my daughter to know that she should always speak up about misuse of authority. I want this for her and any little girl who hesitates to raise her hand because her abuser has taught her that her words don't matter. What if speaking my truth encourages her to not self-sabotage? What if she learns her truth is empowering and believes in her strength, kindness and wisdom, the qualities that often get diminished with abuse.

Let's help survivors understand that their truth matters because if it doesn't, then neither do we.

Let's help survivors understand that their truth matters because if it doesn't, then neither do we.

# METAMORPHOSIS

BY MEGHNA B

I request you to close your eyes before I share this story...

Imagine a 7-year-old child, with thick black hair, wheatish skin, and chubby cheeks. She is wearing a white shirt, a parrot green pinafore dress, a red tie, and white canvas shoes.

You can see her shyness, quietness, and yearning to be invisible.

Behind her loneliness and struggle to befriend, what you don't see is her caring and sensitive nature.

What you don't know about her is that due to her hypothyroidism at an early age, she is vulnerable to mental and developmental lethargy, depression, weight struggles, and low self-esteem.

As she walks into her school in Mumbai (India), you can see her keeping her head down, not wanting to be noticed by others. All she wants is to go home.

At the end of the day, the school bus drops her off outside her apartment building. She excitedly walks towards the hallways to take the stairs home.

Even in the broad daylight, the hallway is dark. As she walks towards the stairs, you can see a man's silhouette lurking in the shadows. The stranger has his pants pulled down, and you can see him exposing himself to her.

You can witness her shock, trembling knees, and fear not understanding what is happening.

We see that the stranger is smiling at her while masturbating (a word she didn't know at age 7).

She immediately runs away to her maternal grandparents' home close by.

**That day, something had changed within me, that 7-year-old child.**

*I felt so dirty, ashamed, and guilty. How could I be so stupid or slow to have not realized his intentions? Did I do something to provoke him?*

I could not gather any courage to share it with my parents or adults. *How could I when I did not even have the words to describe what I saw?*

Imagine a child feeling this way about herself.

**Unfortunately, this wasn't the last time such "an incident" happened.**

As I grew up, what I wasn't prepared for was the constant cycles of street and public harassment and sexual violence. I became more scared, hypervigilant, and withdrawn.

Another day, as a teenager, I was walking back home from the store. A group of young boys walking on the opposite side started steering towards me. One boy almost grazed his hand on my hips.

I felt so enraged that this boy had the nerve to touch me. I started shouting at him and his friends, calling out his behavior. I was surprised by my rage and fierce voice.

As soon as I started creating a ruckus about the sexual harassment I experienced, those boys laughed and said *"Apne aap ko Aishwarya Rai samajthi hai kya ki hum tumhe chedenge?"* [Do you think you are as desirable as Aishwarya Rai (Bollywood cinema's most beautiful actress) that we will tease or woo you?"]

*Wait, how can someone's desirability, beauty, or appearance be the reason for being harassed?*
*Should I be feeling rejected that I wasn't teased because I am not desirable or beautiful as a celebrity?*
*Should I feel bad that I was "not worthy" of being harassed?*

I went home feeling shaken up, rejected, and violated by what had happened.

As soon as I confided in and shared this incident with my uncle who was visiting us, he jokingly replied, "You should ignore those boys. You should take their 'teasing' as a compliment."

**The most troubling part of that interaction was that I, as a young impressionable girl growing into puberty, almost took my uncle's response seriously.**

*Was the harassment a compliment? Was their teasing meant to be romantic? Did I overreact?*

You see, I grew up eating, sleeping, drinking, and immersing myself in Bollywood Indian cinema with my loved ones and grandparents. I do have fond memories of watching them and enjoying the song and dance sequences. Sadly, the contradictory messages in Bollywood cinema about gender influenced my naïve young mind.

Bollywood movies taught me that aggressively pursuing and harassing women even when they have not consented is fun, romantic, symbolic of love, and should be tolerated.

*But what I contradictorily discovered was that being harassed, objectified, or stalked was never fun—it was horrifying.*

Being told by society that what girls and women wore, how they appeared, their sexual history, relationship status, and so forth meant "they were asking" or provoking to be harassed.

*But what I later read in my psychology class is that blaming girls and women for being harassed is a deeply embedded complex problem of our rape culture and patriarchy in our communities.*

Responses like my uncle taught me that street harassment is a normal minimized part of our gendered experiences as young girls.

*However, I realized being harassed constantly by men after saying no was unpleasant and traumatizing and should not be glorified or 'tolerated' or reported.*

My existence as a woman taught me that irrespective of our age, what we wore when we went out in public spaces, or if we were alone or with folks, it did not matter. We girls and women were still at risk of being harassed.

**When I came to the US at age 23 to pursue my graduate studies, I was expecting safety in shared spaces.** That was the dream I was sold about American life and stories through the media and my relatives. But boy, was I wrong!

In the past 20 years as an immigrant woman, I have not only experienced gendered sexual harassment but also experienced racist and sexist comments, asking about my brown skin, 'sexy' accent, etc.

**The more I spoke to my friends and read stories of harassment shared on websites like Stop Street Harassment (SSH) and Hollaback, I realized I wasn't alone!**

Studies highlighted that street harassment and misconduct in public have always been legitimate forms of gendered and racialized violence that continue to negatively impact me and our marginalized communities.

Thanks to the SSH Blog Correspondent Program, I found an ounce of courage to share my lived experiences with street harassment and sexual violence.

I remember writing a blog on how Holi, the festival of colors, started becoming a cultural excuse for harassment and discomfort for many of us girls and women. Since "consent" was an alien practice for us all, some boys and men would forcibly apply Holi colors on our faces to harass us.

A few friends and colleagues messaged me that they had read my blog and felt validated. They too had experienced similar horrifying moments of harassment and non-consensual touching during festivals, which was often normalized.

**Knowing my blog made survivors feel seen and fostered a sense of solidarity was a moment of metamorphosis for me. I had found my lost voice.**

**I felt like a caterpillar transitioning to a butterfly!**

That's why, I have dedicated my "career" to creating culture change, prevention education, community building, and collective healing through storytelling and other creative forms.

## As I turned 43 this July, here's a short love letter to my younger self:

*Dear Megs,*

*I am sorry that you have experienced street and sexual harassment from such a young age.*

*It was and is never your fault! You should be able to loiter, roam, and reclaim public spaces and communities free of harassment and abuse.*

*You should not have to justify, explain, or repeat your story to be believed. If and when you decide to share your story, you should be able to feel safe and supported.*

*Whether you froze, got scared, or called out on someone's harassment, I hope you know you did what you could do best at that time to cope with and survive these traumatizing moments.*

*Looking inward at your behavior, your clothes, etc. is not the answer – the fact that most of us still encounter street harassment frequently means this issue is bigger than our individual behavior. It's a societal problem that's been normalized and used to shame and control girls and women.*

*It is hard to unlearn this deep conditioning of the rape culture where street and sexual harassment of a young child, teen, or woman is acceptable. While you keep exhaustingly negotiating your safety in all public spaces, those who caused you harm move on with their lives, without any accountability or education about the consequences of their problematic behaviors.*

*But I love your earnest efforts to create awareness, have difficult and messy conversations with your community, and reclaim public spaces without fear or harassment using prevention education and storytelling.*

*Thanks to your fierce advocacy, our younger generations will feel empowered to advocate against this form of gender violence, especially boys and men.*

*I am deeply inspired by your wisdom that healing is not linear and far from perfect, but you are a fierce work in progress.*

*So, I am darn proud of you for unapologetically wearing those bright colors, dresses, and red lipstick, which make you feel amazing, confident, happy, and sexy!*

*I commend your efforts to show compassion towards yourself by not belittling your body, curves, and scars, and for centering your desires, needs, mental health, and trauma work.*

*Writing and sharing your stories in different trauma-informed spaces and communities will help you heal, one day at a time. Your radical individual and collective healing work through storytelling is important.*

**Here's to you, bachha (kid), your softness, vulnerability, and courage are much needed!**

*Love and hugs (with your consent)!*

You should not have to justify, explain, or repeat your story to be believed.

**If and when you decide to share your story, you should be able to feel safe and supported.**

# BY AISHA TAHIR

*Writer's Note:*

*It feels like a betrayal to my parents, especially my mom, to be writing this. I'm consumed with guilt, but I know that writing our histories is resisting erasure. We must write, otherwise we will be spoken for. But what does consent in storytelling look like? Are stories of the women in my life mine to share?*

*How do I tell my story when my memory betrays me with my feelings?*

*I'm an abolitionist-feminist who has more questions than answers. I believe in eradicating harm without possible solutions creating more harm. I believe in life-affirming systems and empathy. I don't know what it means to be a survivor because the word survivor feels alienating—but I know it's the best we've got. Is mere survival enough though?*

*I believe that an end to gender-based violence is only possible when we recognize nation-states, capitalism, and policing as sources and sites of gendered violence.*

*These ideas and my story might feel disjointed, but that is what it means to write through trauma. To be confused and triggered—to feel lost and acknowledged, simultaneously.*

*I hope this contributes to a larger archive of our voices and histories.*

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I didn't grow up like most immigrant-diaspora stories that get visibility in mainstream narrative. The ones where white kids making fun of turmeric-doused lunches, embarrassment of the mom's imperfect English, or getting caught kissing the white boy who kind of thought you were pretty for a Brown girl. I didn't have to be Brown in all white spaces. A trauma of its own, I realize today.

I grew up in Alexandria, Virginia. An area which had a little Pakistan, a little Vietnam, a little Korea and many more littles. For most kids in our public schools, English wasn't their first language. They were either immigrants, or children of recent immigrants. Our local grocery stores were the ethnic ones. You could find pan-de-queso and Shan biryani masala in one aisle. The neighborhood that I grew up in, Morning Side, was an apartment complex which had identical rows of three-story buildings in an ugly brown-beige color. The parking lots were lined with yellow, red and silver taxi cabs. A few years before we moved there, a bunch of men had gotten together and raised the money to lease an apartment in the complex. They wanted to turn it into a mosque. By the time we arrived, five times a day, hordes of men were walking to the mosque, most of them: Pakistani.

Mama and I came to the US when I was seven years-old. Baba had been living between the two countries since he was almost twenty-two. We were born in Sialkot, Pakistan—a small industrial city in the Punjab province. The city was known to have an entrepreneurial spirit. Right around the time my dad finished his bachelors degree—the

only one in his extremely poor family who was smart (and a man) to make it that far—white America had been forced by the Civil Rights Movement to make its immigration processes less racist.

It was also a time America needed more low-skilled laborers (low-skilled but essential workers, the kind which required knowledge and perseverance beyond formal education). His family used all their savings and decided to send him to a country which they imagined as heavenly. He landed in Washington, DC, where other Pakistanis were also living, and did what the others were doing: driving taxis. At the time, the dollar was equivalent to almost twelve rupees and Pakistan was thirty-five years old.

For almost a decade, he worked fifteen hours a day, six days a week.

When I was younger, and we had a better relationship, he would tell me bits and pieces of what that time was like for him. Halal meat was rare to find, he lived with five other men in a one-bedroom apartment, the taxi drivers would all work together so they could keep tabs on each other in case anything went wrong. DC, like any other city, had its dangers. But he remembered those times as more hopeful, when there was good money in driving and he was young enough to dream of something more. Baba was a small-business owner of his own car, before the gig-economy economy was a reality—before Uber and Lyft.

With pride, he religiously studied DC neighborhoods, and memorized its streets (google maps is for unprofessionals).

In trying to make his family's dreams come true, of a house and getting his sisters married, years passed by, roaming the streets for customers. At thirty-two, his family decided on a girl that would be a good fit for him. He saw her for the first time on his wedding day. His parents had decided she would make a good daughter-in-law, and she was pretty enough for their son.

Mama says they cared deeply for each other, felt love often, and together fought his patriarchal family for their most basic rights.

Half of the year, she would live with his family alone, as he sent money back from America. Two years into their marriage, I was born. A bitter-sweet moment, I was only a girl. My dad's sisters cried for days, mama once told me with a teary-eyed laugh. Around that time, Baba decided it was time we moved to the US with him. He had gotten his citizenship and could finally apply for us to come.

## Two years after my birth, 9/11 birthed a new world order.

I've never been able to get Baba to talk to me about those years in detail. But I've gathered some passing details through references: taxi drivers were the first on American soil who had the empire's war-on-terror waged upon them. The stories I read about, of Pakistani men being picked up in the middle of the night, some never to be seen again, Baba lived through. He has never really talked about it, but I've seen fear in his light-brown eyes when I mention it. When they were all on the run, for no other reason but the color of their skin, the small beards reflecting their faith, and their mother-tongue.

The empire, in its humiliation, had unleashed itself on Brown men.

I know Baba has dealt with the FBI. I know he was afraid when flying back to Pakistan. At the airport, he was pulled aside and assaulted by men with guns and caged dogs. One of the few times he spoke about that time, he said: "Everything changed after 9/11." But he's never voiced betrayal, or how he survived. He's never complained.

Mama, for ten years of their marriage, lived alone with a young daughter (me), in a house with Baba's abusive mother and sisters. She grew up not seeing love between her parents either.

"They were misfits for each other, Abbu was an educated Marxist-Atheist, who was still misogynistic, men are men, even the progressive ones, and Ammi was a practicing Muslim who wore an abaya and prayed five times a day," she recalls often.

Mama was the youngest of five children. Three sisters and two brothers. Her sisters were married off within the family before turning twenty, without finishing their education. She refused-- and fought to get her Masters in Psychology, in a co-ed university. My nano, her mom, was her biggest hurdle in receiving her education.

Nano was a survivor of partition, from Amritsar to Lahore, she witnessed the horrors of nation-building—a war waged on women's bodies, by men, for men. She was one of the millions of women during partition whose dignity and womanhood were forcefully sold: assets being torn apart in a messy divorce. Today, women of those nations still yearn for safety within their homes, and men still maintain the power to take it away.

For Nano, the yelling and abuse from my nana was never as bad as what she had witnessed during the nation state divorce. There was no other choice but to say: shukar alhamdulillah (thank you God). But it was poverty that she spent her life fighting. For her daughters, she sought for more. The fighting and instances of abuse were a small price to pay for financial security and some basic comforts, which were not afforded to her.

"You're just like her," a friend of Mama's told me when I visited Sialkot two years ago. I had just moved back to Pakistan in pursuit of finding my relationship to the traumatized (and traumatizing) country-- beyond Morning Side's Pakistan. Everywhere I went, people who knew her looked at me amazed. She would tell men off in the middle of the street when something pissed her off. She was fierce and confident. She would go anywhere, however she could, with no fear. "The rest of us would look at her in wonder, she talked about politics and culture among men with no hesitation."

I've been crying a lot since then. What would she have offered to the world if there was no patriarchy – if she had never married Baba?

*What if she got to be free?*

By the time I came into Mama's life, she had been beaten repeatedly by misogyny. Sometimes, over a cup of chai, she would say to me: "I used to be really confident, well read. And then I was married off into Baba's household and forced to be small. They were afraid of women like *me*."

When I got to college, I realized I couldn't remember much of my childhood. I had grown up in a violent, unsafe house. But I was also loved. It was suffocating. And it was conditional. I refused to speak to Mama and Baba. I was so angry. It's taken me almost eight years to think through the contradictions of my childhood and my parent's marriage.

Morning Side was stuck in time. The women were expected to stay home, while the men went to work. The only acceptable outfit in the neighborhood was shalwar kameez; for girls over ten and women. There was no staying out late

because someone would see from the window, and call to ask your parents why you are out. The community had forcefully recreated a picture of Pakistan (stuck in time) because they were so afraid of this new country they had been forced to migrate to.

When I started puberty, my uncle and aunt had a talk with my parents about me going out to the park. They said: "She's older now, it's not respectable to let her out." I was no longer allowed to ride my bike. One of my earliest memories is being told by my uncle I should sit with my legs closed. Achi larkiyan aisi nahi bhetein (Good girls don't sit like that). Which really meant that *pure* girls don't sit like that. At the age of ten, I was made keenly aware that my body was controlled by men. That the place between my legs was intertwined with my value, that I had no agency. For a long time after, I associated my body with shame. And when I rebelled, there was guilt.

But other than these more mundane violations, I experienced love and care. I had a warm relationship with my father and my parents were seemingly happy, for a Pakistani couple of their background. (As a people, we rarely experience freedom to love.)

When I was eleven, Baba was diagnosed with stage three brain cancer. Mama had just given birth to my younger sister, six months ago. The day we got the doctor's phone call marked the last day of my childhood. The next seven years of our lives felt as if there was no world outside of our one-bedroom-apartment.

Baba suffered from an incredible amount of brain trauma, parts of his brain were removed during surgeries, and with intense chemotherapy and radiation he became prone to sporadic seizures. He became a different person. And resented us for it.

A man who grew up in a society that taught him women were his property, with mental illness, became dangerous.

*What happens when patriarchy gets cancer?*

His insecurities shaped our reality. His mood dictated the kind of day we would have. He was an angry man who felt his reality slipping away, controlling us was the only power he had. As weeks went on, his behavior became more aggressive. He went from yelling and throwing things to imagining alternative realities in which we became deceptive and unfaithful to him.

Mama was vulnerable, she had no family and no networks that could support her. She wasn't allowed to leave the house without fear of his reaction – or his brother's – who lived in an apartment across the street from us. She was surveilled. Not allowed to work or drive. With a generational burden to love her husband regardless. As her mother, and her grandmother had.

Between Baba's violence and Mama using me as her barrier, I was often mediating their fights. Telling Baba he could never hit her again and holding Mama as she cried. Everyday I slept,

forcing myself to forget and move forward. It was the only way to survive.

In college, I realized I had trauma stored in all parts of my body. That I wasn't a normal teenager and I hadn't had a normal childhood. When I started my activism against gender-based violence on campus, I couldn't identify as a survivor.

Where I grew up, everyone had stories like mine, or worse. The girls were forced to get married after highschool. I was able to leave for college. My parents were the most progressive in our community. How bad could it really have been?

If I was a survivor, then were all the women in my community, in my family, survivors? The weight of that reality was disabling.

But I knew I had it good compared to what I had witnessed and heard. I remember one summer, on our annual trip back to Sialkot, my cousin sobbed in her sister's arms repeating nothing was wrong. That it was just the man she was married to, who was *so good* to her in the morning, was forcefully having sex with her at night. Violent sex. And when she would say no, he wouldn't listen. She said she knew it was his *right*, but he didn't feel like the man she was supposed to marry. I remember thinking, *should I tell her she's being raped every night?*

A few months ago, my mom said she had gone crazy— she would leave her house in the middle of the night, saying her husband was hurting her. No one believed her. They said it was black magic driving her madness.

More of our women are crazy then, not survivors. *Madness as a more appropriate answer to harm.* Perhaps that is survival. As a people then, we are mad-- what else could we be after the gendered-violence colonial empires unleashed on us for centuries.

In college, as I got less resentful and read more about people fighting for justice, rather than revenge, I learned that histories are more circular than linear. And blame isn't healing. It begins there. Healing is questioning the lack of systems of care and histories of harm. To ask for solutions that don't reproduce more harm.

*To ask yourself, is it freedom for you or for everyone?*

*Is it survival for you, or for everyone?*

As I organized against gender-based violence, I realized then that broken people break more people. I found abolition as a framework to think about harm. I spent the years during and after college triggered at every turn.

I sobbed when I watched my ten year-old sister hug my dad. It wasn't until I was an adult that it hit me what I had lost.

How to mourn a father you don't even like? A childhood you never want to think of again?

I could never go to the police, Mama could never go to the police—we didn't want to get rid of him, we needed help. We wanted safety for us all. We wanted him to get help so he could be better. Mama and I often forget his wrath, but we never forgot the softness in him. Today, he's a softer, weaker man who has never been held accountable for the bad. Erasing him from our lives has never been an option, financially and socially we would be ruined. But the system as it existed, and exists, could never meet us where we needed it to.

I still love him, she still loves him. And I refuse to accept that that is a trauma response. Patronize ourselves in the process. We love him in spite of it all. Just like I love Mama in spite of not protecting me. For not shielding me from them. Because it's not black and white. It's mostly gray where most of us survivors live. Hatred and love co-exist. That to me is human. And humanizing our elders, I've found, is healing.

I'm not sure I can offer forgiveness yet, but what I do know is: intergenerational trauma, grief, stays in your body on an epigenetic level—so when I search for justice, I do it for all my people.

I’m not sure I can offer forgiveness yet, but what I do know is: intergenerational trauma, grief, stays in your body on an epigenetic level—so when I search for justice, I do it for all my people.

Sometimes with resentment, and sometimes with prolific love.

# MEDITATION I

keep one hand on your heart, keep
one hand on your belly, allowing
yourself to channel and tune into your
inner child,

invite them to come out and play, allow your
inner child to explore, creating a safe space
within yourself, remember that you are safe,
you are loved, you are protected.

take a deep breath in,
exhale.
and as you allow your inner child to explore, invite
your trusted ancestors, loved ones, and carriers of
light in.

ask them to come and hold space,
from a place of love and kindness,
welcome them in so they can hold you, gently.
so they can soothe your inner child.

take a deep breath in,
exhale.

allow your beautiful loved ones to hold space, listen to them,
let them clear away any doubt, any fear, any anger, any old stories or limiting beliefs that you picked up as a child,

we're gonna let those things go, we're going to release them.

take a deep breath in,
exhale.

# JOURNEY TO THE SUN

BY KOMAL KAUR

Once upon a time, hailing from the vibrant heart of Punjab but residing in the Midwest, I sensed an emotional distance in my father's eyes from the very beginning—a disconnect rooted in his own upbringing. He was a man molded by stoicism and struggle, unable to express the tenderness that I craved. This absence of warmth cast a shadow over my childhood, leaving me yearning for a love I could hardly articulate.

Growing up with vitiligo, my parents sheltered my legs from the world. They thought they were protecting me from judgment, but instead, they set me up for a lifetime of judgment from them and then judgment from myself. I longed for someone to tell me that I could wear shorts, dresses, and do what every other child was doing. But instead, I got reminders that hopefully someone will accept me for how God made me, but I need to lower my standards as I wasn't going to offer much beauty to them.

As I blossomed into adolescence, the shadows deepened. Trauma struck like an unexpected storm, shattering my fragile sense of self. I found myself adrift in the tumult of emotions that threatened to drown me. The wounds were not just physical but etched deep into my psyche, whispering lies about my worth—telling me I was undeserving of love, incapable of success, and destined to be broken. These insidious thoughts wrapped around my mind like chains, making each day a battle against the voice that said I wasn't enough.

Instead of navigating the normal rites of passage into young adulthood, I was thrust into a relentless cycle of healing. I grappled with these wounds, attending therapy sessions that felt like peeling back layers of old scars. The process was grueling, filled with tears and moments of despair, but also glimmers of hope. I learned to challenge the lies, to recognize them as remnants of my trauma rather than truths about myself. Through support groups, journaling, and the unwavering love of a few close friends, I began to reclaim my sense of self. Each small victory in my healing journey was a testament to my resilience, slowly but surely rebuilding my shattered spirit into something stronger and more whole.

My teenage years, meant for self-discovery and joyful rebellion, became a battlefield against invisible foes. The liberating labels of artist, creator, or freethinker—symbols of exploration and self-expression—were distant dreams. These labels represented a freedom to define myself, to mold my identity through passions and creativity, but instead, I was consumed with shedding the scarlet letters thrust upon me by violence and pain. These scarlet letters, symbols of shame and guilt, came from the trauma inflicted by those I should have been able to trust, casting a shadow over my every action and thought.

Instead of embracing the liberating identities that celebrated my uniqueness, I fought to discard the labels of victim, broken, and unworthy. Each discarded label left a void, an echoing emptiness where my sense of self should have been.

I longed to identify as an artist, someone who could paint my pain into something beautiful, or a creator, someone who could build from the ruins of my past. These identities held the promise of transformation and empowerment, contrasting starkly with the oppressive weight of the labels I sought to shed. Despite the emptiness, the struggle to reclaim and redefine myself fueled my resilience, guiding me toward a future where I could finally embrace the liberating identities I so deeply desired.

Time slipped away like sand through my fingers, swallowed by cycles of abusive relationships. I began to believe that companionship without love was my lot. The darkest days threatened to consume me, but the fear of being truly alone was even more terrifying. What if solitude was the gateway to something worse?

Years passed like a blur of shattered dreams, each day blending into the next in a fog of survival. Yet, amidst the darkness, a flicker of distant light began to emerge—hope. I was given a chance to speak, an opportunity to free not just my mind but the minds of others shackled by similar chains. This moment was more than a chance; it was a lifeline.

With my heart pounding and hands trembling, I stood before my community and shared my story, raw and unfiltered. I spoke of the nights spent battling my inner demons, the days where every step felt like walking through quicksand, and the relentless whispers of unworthiness that had plagued me. My words were a catharsis, releasing years of pent-up pain and sorrow.

As I poured out my experiences, a collective recognition dawned upon my community. They, too, had been trapped in these cycles, unaware of how deeply their own wounds mirrored mine. Faces softened, eyes welled with tears, and a palpable sense of connection filled the room. My bravery in vulnerability ignited a shared sense of solidarity and understanding.

At that moment, the community began to heal together. They realized they were not alone in their struggles, and this recognition was the first step towards breaking free from their chains.

**My story became a beacon of hope, illuminating the path toward collective healing and empowerment.**

The echoes of my voice continued to resonate, inspiring others to share their truths and, in doing so, find their own light amidst the darkness.

And so, the journey of collective healing began—a mosaic of voices piecing together the shattered parts of their souls. Through shared pain and shared vulnerability, we discovered the threads that bound us in strength and unity. These threads were woven from empathy, understanding, and a shared resilience. They represented the unspoken bonds formed through mutual experiences of suffering and survival.

Discovering these threads felt like uncovering a hidden lifeline, a support system that had always been there but was now visible and tangible. It was both comforting and empowering to realize that we were not isolated in our struggles. The sense of belonging and solidarity that emerged from this collective healing was profound. It created a safe space where we could be our authentic selves, free from judgment and filled with compassion.

Each shared story and each moment of vulnerability added to the strength of these threads, reinforcing our connection and fortifying our resolve. Together, we found that our combined strength was far greater than the sum of our individual parts. This newfound unity fueled our healing journey, transforming our pain into a powerful force for growth and resilience.

I realized that my story was not just mine alone—it was a reflection of countless others. In freeing their minds, I freed my own.

And in this narrative of resilience and redemption, I whisper, "She is me. We are all her." My story is a universal anthem of courage, hope, and the enduring power of collective healing.

I realized that my story was not just mine alone—it was a reflection of countless others.

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And in this narrative of resilience and redemption, I whisper,

She is me. We are all her.

My story is a universal anthem of courage, hope, and the enduring power of collective healing.

# BALLOONS

## BY ELISABETH SWIM

In Family Life at St. Augustines  I mostly learned from notes girls passed
about our teacher whose everyday pumps had cinched her hamstrings

Boys giggled at textbook diagrams  Pelvi coded positive and negative like ends of batteries
No belly buttons

My period would make me a woman  I could choose pads or tampons,
the rest would be easy  The time for touching is after marriage and then

its purpose is fruitful math  I turned 13 in the backyard of a rented duplex on Regent
Reza lived up the street  We went to different middle schools  Boy beautiful

Floated  hand-blown balloons over sand lanterns Mom and I had made of lunch bags
POP  sudden like in war  Tore pieces from a birthday gift, jelly snake, tossed them

at the votive bags  Reza's laugh  Paper flames  Morning after mom shrugged
Rolled her eyes boys  Our dog Rocky swept up rubber casings gummy shrapnel

Swelled to sickness on his side  Unmarked-van-stranger-danger of the 80s did not warn me
against boys in seventh grade  Swiped my body like a bicycle into 2610 Derby

Chased me around pillars up the stairs  Four arms held me under ice sheets Reza's best bro
watched the door  Later that year in eighth-grade Social

Living  I locked my eyes on the teacher who spoke of womb-sloughing, baby-making  how to
spell qualude  Future water polo players inflated and tied off condoms  floated them hand to

hand around the room  I pretended to squirm at the touch of lubricant so other girls wouldn't notice my attention fixed on Mr. Sperber  Listening for a vocabulary spell that would forget me

everything I knew about Persephone and pleasure as an art of war  When there is consent no one needs to guard the door  Consent is not optional  You can change your mind  Just because you're laughing doesn't mean you like it  Tickling can be assault  None of this is your fault  You are not a burden  Tell a grownup you trust  He did not say any of this  The boys called him Mr. Sperm bank  At my 13th Reza spin-the-bottle kissed me in the shadows his fireworks left behind  My period started within a week

# REMNANTS

BY ANONYMOUS

I was seven years old when I recall going into a medical complex on a quiet Sunday afternoon accompanied by my mother and our family friend. My mother had earlier explained that it was time for my *khatna* or circumcision—a rite of passage, something all of the little girls in our Dawoodi Bohra community had to do. I knew from whisperings that whatever it entailed, would hurt, and I knew the experience awaiting me would not be pleasant. Panic set in as our family friend unlocked the building with her keys and we continued into her desolate practice. We went into one of the brightly colored rooms where alphabet wallpaper bordered me in. I started crying before it even happened while she crooned, *"all I'm going to do is remove a liiiitle piece of skin."* Totally exposed, I was asked to relax and read the wallpapered alphabet backwards. My mother helped hold me still while I was flat on my back and in hysterics. The snip, which took maybe half a second, was followed by a sharp-shooting pain that seemed to last in that moment, for eternity. I bled for three days in a maxi pad and then it was over.

I continued on, as we all did, and never really thought much about it until my first year of college. Unlike most of my South Asian peers, I was a minority presence in "north campus" —where all non-STEM classes were taken. My affinity for the social sciences led me to an introductory sociology class, where I stumbled upon an article in a textbook, describing the experience of female genital mutilation (FGM) and the rationale behind it. It felt eerily familiar as I recalled the *khatna* from my childhood. There was no way this could be the same, could it? My seven-year-old perspective of a little piece of skin being removed was analogous to that of a piece of skin from the top layer of the palm of a hand. My cousin used to stick a needle through that top layer and tell me it was magic that the needle was sticking there. She eventually revealed her secret and showed me the protective top layer that separated her hand from the skin. I guess like that layer, I always figured the skin removed would grow back.

Still the feeling of uncertainty drove me to call a couple of peers in my community to ask whether our *khatna* was in fact a partial removal of my clitoris. Their answers confirmed the worst of my fears. My next concern of *"how much?"* tormented me, and after a frantic visit to the school nurse, I got my answer: *"There's only a remnant left,"* said the nurse practitioner who examined me.

I went from an energetic and hopeful freshman to something else entirely. I became hard, rude, "negative" a coworker once exasperatedly called me. The weight of the emotions I couldn't process was insurmountable. Encounters with the opposite sex were inevitable in college and much to the dismay of my friends, I handled them poorly. "What's the point?" or "they were better off" I would think.

In my last year, I did finally meet someone and I didn't run off. I felt safe enough to share my passions, including advocacy against FGM, which he found admirable. As our relationship progressed, we became sexually active and I revealed the truth behind my activism. I returned to the same nurse's office nearly three years later, this time for birth control and a referral to a therapist who I could discuss my sexual insecurities with. I wanted to get better, and be better for this person who was incredibly supportive and made me feel like there was nothing I couldn't accomplish.

In therapy, I learned it was ok to talk about sex, explore my sexuality, and sexual feelings. I was even prescribed homework to assist me in doing so. Given the way I was brought up, I never thought I would have sex before marriage. The idea behind the circumcision was to curb any sexual appetite I might have. Ironically, once I learned this had happened, I wanted nothing more than to know what my capabilities were. While I was incredibly nervous and insecure about having sex, I became open to losing my virginity in the context of a serious relationship.

One of my main insecurities about sex was that I felt like I was driving without the headlights on. Often times, I didn't know where to go or how to guide my driver. I felt like a failure. To this day, I still have not experienced orgasm.

While sex is enjoyable for me and I could describe what I can achieve as a "mini-climax," I am bothered by the fact that I may never get to experience this wonderful part of life. While it's no secret many women who have not been altered, struggle with the same issues, a part of me will always wonder if that would have been true for me had this not happened.

I continue on, this time with the understanding that I am a survivor. My past behaviors, which I was once ashamed of, I can now recognize as trauma and grief. They are what helped me to cope and persist through difficult times, and ultimately inform the choices I can make now that I could not at seven.

I continue on, this time
with the understanding
that I am a survivor.

# SELF PORTRAIT AS SEEN AND NOT HEARD

## BY ELISABETH SWIM

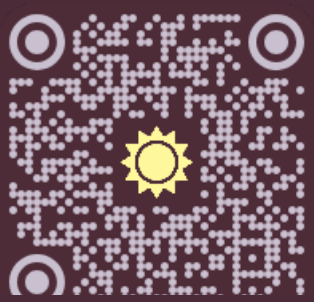
*after Chen Chen*

Regretting not being as covert as a snake.
As sleek as an eel. Impossibly elusive to boys with hands.
Remembering how I fear the word "thick."
When that's all I am: with bone and muscle,
so many fat cells. Water swells my shape which by its design,
is desirable to people who steal softness to replace what was lost.
All I do is hide under tables, books and sweatshirts.
Slither into mother's acid-washed jeans and say they fit.
Zipper cuts into my flap, I'm just too big to slip away.
I'm no cold-blooded vertebrate. I'm a spindrift pillow in a warming ocean. I'm a rainbow ramekin.
Leave your throttle. Get off of my curve.
You want me to keep quiet, not to speak of what you tried to take from me.
I am not the well-tempered girl my mother raised me to be.
I am a siren. I live alone in a world as wide as the reach of my screams.
My grandfather called it genetics, how some women inherit invisibility,
or the ladylike attributes that are inaudible and pleasing to his eye.
I measure refusal in waves that shake the tidiest neighborhoods:
Break the lineage of whitening businessmen who
want their daughters, and starve their wives.

# WALLOWING AND SWALLOWING

## BY AMEERA KHAN

Listen along to Ameera's comedic monologue by scanning the QR code below or visiting: www.southasiansoar.org/sanctuaries-ak



Salam! I'm Ameera Khan, I like KitKats, and my pronouns are her/she.

If anyone hasn't heard, the past few weeks have been a whirlwind for my motherland, Bangladesh. Student protests in the span of a couple months have brought out the military and created over 20 Thousand wounded protesters, 200+ people dead, and the fleeing of the nepo baby Prime Minister from the country like a cat with the zoomies who just knocked over your living room TV.

Bangladesh really feels like Minneapolis after George Floyd. Buildings burning, the guilty despot ousted and her house looted, statues of famous founding fathers and nationalists pissed on and destroyed. Really gives me Pride being a Bengali as well as a Minnesotan... Pissing on a colonizer statue is metal as fuck! It's not quite the same, but in solidarity I did flash my titties at the Lincoln Memorial. This is "fuck you" pride. As a brown transgender woman, I'm like EXACTLY who Pride is supposed to be for. If I didn't have pride in who I was, I the only way I could deal with the other 11 prideless months of the year would be by escaping into video games where I get to be a cute anime girl!

But yeah, that's what's happening in my home country. It's like, can we not have a new once in a lifetime event happen like every other week? Corporations have set the earth on fire, our tax money is going to bomb babies and hospitals in Gaza, and my manager told me that our workplace is like a family. To be fair though, she's probably right, since my family is the biggest reason I have trauma.

In America, a healthy relationship with your parents, in part, means they apologize to you when they fuck up. But in Bangladesh, I don't know if that was the case... it's less of an individualistic society and more of a collectivist society, so we end up doing a lot more self-policing within our social groups. A healthy relationship between my mother and her mother was probably my grandma going "You're getting too fat, no husband will want you. You need to lose weight." And that was good parental advice because without a husband, you couldn't open your own bank account, you couldn't afford a place in the middle class, you couldn't make it to your Orange Theory classes. So mom said "this must be what a healthy relationship with your kids looks like!" And now every time she says I've gained weight, I have to remind her that in the 21st century body positivity means we love and respect all bodies, and that being a little thicc is actually an advantage because I do date men!

And that's not all! Y'all, I'm talking about my family trauma like "But wait! There's more!" Another thing Asian moms do is that immediately after they call you fat, they will offer you a ROYAL spread of food and ask "Did you eat? Did you get seconds? Make sure you eat more." And they'll pile your fourth helping of biryani onto your plate before you can even tell them the chicken is overcooked. No that's a joke, I've never met a South Asian mom who is useless in the kitchen. All that oppression made them great cooks. Love the players, hate the game...

I think it's because they've gone through so much trauma and bullshit in their life, so they know from experience that eating something makes all the burdens of the world a little easier to carry. That's the first question I ask my wife now on her bad days. I'm like babe, I understand the world is on fire and life is meaningless and you're wallowing in nihilism... I also understand that you haven't eaten a thing since last night. Maybe the world would feel like a better place if you ate a sandwich?

And from that angle, the Asian aunties and moms are really trying their best to take care of you! Do you have a mom friend who you call like "Hey, I'm going through a rough time," and she just goes "I thought you liked it rough" and then brings over a freshly made lamb vindaloo for you. Your mom gossiped about your intolerance to spice, so she makes it extra mild since all the aunties know you're that level of Minnesotan.

I think if we had more Community Aunties who were actually in touch with the struggles we face today, that would help so much with our depression and suicide rates. Does the suicide hotline DoorDash to your location? Do they take suggestions? Imagine being an operator getting a call like "Hello Trevor Project? I'm about to jump off this bridge." "Hold up, we got a First Responder Auntie heading your way with some Biryani." "You know, They really don't need to go to all that trouble... but I guess, if you insist... You know, I guess the best way to go out is with Biryani in your tummy..." And then you just sit there eating Biryani with the Auntie as she tells you which kid from your childhood cultural school married a white boy, que escandalo! As you sit there crying, listening and eating biryani. Just wallowing and swallowing. And maybe after this conversation, you still need continuous community care and antidepressants and gentrified Pumpkin Spice Lattes. But at least you have enough fuel to take another step.

And when the world around you is burning and you're overwhelmed, just swallowing some Biryani and taking one step at a time is all you need to do. No weight loss necessary. Thank you!

# DREAMING IN THE BATHTUB

## BY TASNIM ISLAM

I painted this piece looking at some naked selfies I took in the mirror. My relationship with my body has been severed from the emotional abuse from my mother and the sexual violence she (my body) experienced over and over again as a teenager. In this piece, I imagined myself as a kid in the bathtub again, my only true safe haven when my parents were fighting right outside the room. I could spend hours reading, crying, dreaming in the bathtub. Blending in the past, present, and future, I depicted my gender fluidness, tattoos, and taboo imagery, all meshing into one beautiful, spiritual being. This is me. I am her. She's with me always.

*Dreaming in the Bathtub*
*Watercolor & Acrylic on 8"x10" canvas.*

This is me.

I am her.

She's with
me always.

# CHOSEN FAMILY

BY NAVDEP KAUR

Growing up in a DV home is like living on the ocean floor. The force of the water weighs you down in every direction. The sand sinks under your feet, bringing you with it, and the salt water prevents you from opening your eyes. I was drowning. The problem is I never learned how to swim. I didn't even *know* that swimming was an option. In my case, the violence was early and often enough that it felt indiscernible from regular conversations.

In the confines of my parents' home, I knew I couldn't thrive. I knew something was wrong but didn't quite have the words for it. I needed help. I needed someone to teach me how to swim.

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The night before I left my parents' house, my father got drunk and told me I had a month to find a new place to live. His eyes were bloodshot red and wide open as he spoke. My final day, my brother threw his food at me from twenty feet away, ruining my new clothes with tomato sauce.

I didn't leave right away. I called a friend as I sat frozen in my room. She coached me through packing a suitcase with essentials. Outside, as I loaded my car, my mother blocked the driveway. With my friend on the phone, I found the strength to demand a free path. I drove from Queens to my boyfriend in the Bronx. A few months later, we spent our life savings on a home where we could live together in peace. We got married in our backyard, and my friend officiated our wedding. I wouldn't change a thing.

I cared about my birth family, and I wanted to remain close. My mother and father did the best they could given their circumstances, *and* that is not an excuse for domestic violence.

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I believe the dysfunction within my birth family stems from intergenerational trauma, resulting from centuries of oppression from imperial rulers and the government that took their place:

**The Mughal and Durrani Empires killed thousands of us in the 18th century.**
**People fled their homes. Families were split. Villages were burned down.**
**The British empire tore our land in two pieces during the 1947 Partition, and in the chaos that ensued we lost thousands more.**
**People fled their homes. Families were split. Villages were burned down.**
**The state-sanctioned Sikh genocide of 1984 led to thousands more dying.**
**People fled their homes. Families were split. Villages were burned down.**
*This time it was televised.*

Following Operation Blue Star and the assassination of Prime Minister Gandhi, the 1984 genocide particularly impacted my parents' generation of Sikhs and was the catalyst for many Sikhs to chase stability abroad. Unfortunately, this often has the opposite effect. It isolates the diaspora from their social networks back home while simultaneously thrusting them into an unfamiliar environment, where they may be solely reliant on a new partner they barely know. Domestic violence thrives in these conditions.

I was born and raised in the Richmond Hill, Queens, community, where the effects of domestic violence have been felt by everyone. The deaths of several members of our community have made the local news in recent years, but no one talks about the intergenerational trauma and social isolation that led us here.

Here's an example. Like many others, my parents moved from Punjab to Queens in the 80's for better economic opportunity. It's much easier to call relatives now, but when I was growing up we had to use expensive calling cards. What's worse, our relatives back home had to travel to the nearest city and find the local ISD office, a tiny stall with a singular phone capable of making international calls. They would wait in line, make the call, and pay by the minute. Timing was everything, and calls took coordination on both sides. Because calls were expensive, they only lasted a few minutes, so people only shared highlights: who's getting married, who was born, who died, who needs money, who's moving out of Punjab, who's coming back to visit. There was no time to share bad news about our lives in the US, especially when our relatives were too far to do anything about it.

We also had no relatives in Queens that we could rely on. My father was our only lifeline, so when the violence began, we had no one to ask for help.

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Six years ago, my husband encouraged me to seek mental healthcare for what we now understand was PTSD, resulting from years of physical, emotional, and verbal abuse. Many years of therapy and unlearning have taught me that people in healthy families share similarities. They value autonomy. They can try new things. They can make mistakes and change their minds. They can think beyond their material needs. They can openly experience and share their feelings without being judged. I chose my husband because he knew this, too.

He asked for permission, and it felt good.
He caressed my hand, and it felt good. He listened to my problems and supported my decisions, and it felt good.
He became my safe space, and it felt good.

We found chosen family in each other. Our friends became our siblings, our neighbors became our elders, and our home became a paradigm for what we hope to see in the world.

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In my professional life, I study structural barriers to mental healthcare access in the hopes of opening more avenues to care for survivors. In practice, I crunch numbers and make colorful graphs, but I know that my numbers and graphs are not enough.

Numbers tell you *who, what, when*, and *how*. Stories tell you *why*.

Sharing my story is an extension of my advocacy work to end domestic violence in the Sikh community and to improve our collective mental health. I hope that my story will encourage other survivors to trust your discernment. Reach out for help from people who value you. Choose the family that *feels* good. If you are unsure of who to call, know that your chosen family is awaiting you at organizations like Sikh Family Center.

My lived experience has also taught me that creating a chosen family requires the opportunity to meet people who share your values. As I searched for mental health resources for myself, I saw a major gap in the services available to the Sikh community. There remains an immense need for opportunities to make chosen family—a culturally-specific space for people to receive validation and emotional support as we rebuild. In particular, there are few spaces for the next generation of survivors—adults like me, who grew up in a DV home. I urge organizations serving the South Asian diaspora to create safe spaces for Sikh survivors of domestic violence, particularly for my generation of survivors. This appeal is particularly time-sensitive because we are now adults, urgently seeking hope and support as we reshape our futures. Please help us rebuild the community that we lost because of violence and distance.

We found
chosen family
in each other.

Our friends
became our siblings,
our neighbors
became our elders,
**and our home
became a paradigm
for what we hope to
see in the world.**

# BREAKING THE CURSE AND INVOKING THE GODDEXX

BY NANDANI DEVI

I woke up disoriented, with a splitting headache to a text from a friend:

> "You were in my dream last night. Using your healing to help me after I was assaulted <3.
>
> I was able to push ***** off of me and run, but as I was running I fell. I fell so hard my head was bleeding. As **** was coming towards me, there you were. Protecting me, telling ***** to run and never come back!
>
> Then you held me, stopping my bleeding, telling me to let this feeling engulf me and let it go. Then you performed energy healing on me. I woke up and at first was scared but I also felt an energy release."

It's not the first message I've received like this. Friends, clients, even an ex-therapist who experienced extreme childhood violence have mentioned seeing me in a meditation, vision, or dream giving guidance or healing or just emanating a presence.

As much I trust and believe these experiences, and to some extent understand them spiritually—I know it's a very taboo subject: *dream wuk* or spirit work.

When Guyanese people say *"wuk"* we mean spiritual works — *dream wuk* is a term I use to understand what's been happening all these years where I am connecting with myself, others and Spirit in the dream world. I come from prophetic dreamers and people who say things like *"mih spirit nah tek dem,"* meaning my spirit does not feel aligned with this/that situation or person. We *know/feel* that there is power in understanding the metaphysical world and we hold remnants of that with us in our daily lives regardless of religion or fear-inducing indoctrination against our indigenous spiritualities. Healing as a survivor has meant reconnecting to that intuition and strengthening it enough to share it with the world.

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I am a survivor of white supremacy, witnessing and experiencing gbv, racialized harm, intimate partner violence, gun violence, queer-bashing, intentional psychic harm, grooming, coerced/forced s*x work, date r*pe (and filmed without my consent) and multiple accounts of stalking. I've endured decades of sexual, psychological, verbal, emotional and physical abuse in close relationships (including having PTSD from serial cheaters-liars) and harm by strangers (sexually harassed in the streets and assaulted by a neo-nazi).

I also come from a lineage of survivors. All of us are surviving white supremacy and the effects of indenture/trafficking, colonialism, patriarchy, queerphobia, transphobia and capitalism. And we somehow find a way to persist and resist. Today I'm learning to move beyond surviving into thriving with that in mind.

Unlearning harm patterns is messy and non-linear—there is so much of my "identity" wrapped up in these experiences—things that feel a part of culture, gender, relationship roles etc When I finally get a bit of clarity I often want to fix myself (or worse others).

I learned I cannot stop the behavior of abusive people. They exist. They do what they do and they are not stopped by these tyrannical systems or racist cops—I have never been helped by these systems in any case of harm—it's never been safe to turn there for support. But together and through our own intentions we can begin to heal and see change in these systems – to build our own way for the people by the people.

When I started intentionally healing I found all the nuanced ways that I was being groomed to be harmed later. Intergenerational trauma patterns impacted me as a child as well as systemic oppression. (A really helpful read on colonial trauma is Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome by Dr Joy DeGruy.)As an adult, removing myself from those generational patterns and naming systemic harm is challenging. I know I deserve and **need** to but it takes time to move into action from self awareness and to overcome the fear that I'm betraying my family or myself by exposing these harmful secrets or worse that to come out would be futile and even more isolating.

Part of the process is feeling all the buried feelings. They say it takes ninety seconds to fully feel into an emotion—if I can do that with patience and compassion there is healing. But sometimes when the feelings come through it can seem like they will never end and I may need a lot more than ninety seconds at first for deeply buried pain. There are hours, sometimes even days of feeling time-drunk, dissociated or out of it—sometimes I've become retraumatized looking into that history. Other times there is so much confusion it can result in panic attacks—but even confusion is a feeling that needs to be witnessed with compassion, patience and breath.

It took me a very long time before I was able to begin an intentional journey of recovery. And my understanding of these systems gave me answers as to why – and with those answers I held compassion for past me and for how others showed up. It wasn't just my abusers to blame, it was all the ways that society and culture upheld these systems leaving me trapped between various harmful places and dynamics. I've faced homelessness, addiction, eating disorders and left one abusive space for another in attempts to get free. I experienced the dangers of being shamed for staying in abusive situations. I felt weak, unloved, belittled and blamed in and out of abusive dynamics. Abuse throughout my life and the impacts of white supremacy ignited a toxic inner belief system that was self punishing and just as harmful long after the harm occurred. With no resources, nowhere to go, no outlet, healing or support to let all that pain out, I returned to the harm and even self harm as well. Denial is part of safety in these situations and what I needed was love, compassion and harm reduction tools. Despite the bleakness of my past I do hold gratitude for the ways people tried, and for punk rock and art and the occult. Learning about systemic oppression and magick has saved my life a 1000x over as well as friendship no matter how imperfect at the time.

I hold compassion for all the survivors who were triggered by witnessing my experiences and wanted better for themselves, their moms, their child-selves and wanted that through seeing me get free. I'm grateful they believed in

my potential even if I didn't know how to actualize that yet. As I heal I notice I become more understanding, trauma informed and empathetic towards others and myself—which leads to less people pleasing and more boundary making. I have come a long way and remembering that helps me to keep going.

I was raised to blame myself first before pointing the finger, which delayed the process of holding others accountable fully. I still struggle with that. BIPoC aren't often afforded the grace to be as vulnerable and soft as white women. I've been taught that to claim victimhood is to admit to being "weak/vulnerable"- something that could invite more danger based on what we experienced in past colonial dynamics. Coming out of silence is said to bring "shame" onto myself and my family rather than the truth which is relief, healing and freedom from these cycles. To really do this work I had to break the silence and admit the truth about the past—all of it—the collective and the personal. I needed to fully claim victimhood which would inevitably lead to the courage, self awareness and strength for accountability—the accountability I owed to others and to myself.

Through learning about and embracing the abandoned victim within, I was able to give voice to those subconscious and unhealed parts of me. I'm slowly maturing into a space of personal responsibility and able to see my own harmful behaviors. In reflection I saw it was mostly times where I was sharing space with white survivors or in relationships with cis-men survivors where I've acted out of self protection. And also in family dynamics where I was/am enmeshed in a co-created harm cycle that I can only stop with proper space and boundaries. I have spent years trying to find change through self forgiveness. I believe true accountability comes from responsibility to disrupt these patterns and that includes my harmful trauma responses as an adult in co-created spaces. None of my abusers did that work and that was a major element in harming me. As survivors talking about the harms we cause is often a later stage of recovery. But we deserve to cultivate spaces of healing without blame or shame for the ways we cope so that we can build new models of restorative justice. Spirit and community-making has been an enormous part of that healing for me.

Decolonial work has been a huge part of holding accountability and responsibility. My ancestors' spiritual practices and intuition were distorted and suppressed, but I believe their spiritual medicine became more esoteric (hidden underneath dominant religions) safely away from the oppressive forces — including our own colonized minds. Decolonial processes returned me to that hidden medicine and restored the Spirit in all the mundane. Even though there are so many challenges, my healing and harm reduction journey has created space for so much more of me to arrive—intuitive, wise, talented, joyful parts of me hidden under the effects of trauma. Decolonial work has been an enormously important part of self healing and receiving support with discernment in institutional spaces that I rely on to navigate life in the present. It's integral to the work I do in the world and I am grateful for all the thought leaders, especially Black activists who shared these gifts with us.

With time I've healed through connecting to nature, therapy, taking healthy risks, boundary work, connecting with my inner eco systems, dancing, writing, creating, communing with Spirit, claiming my psychic gifts and being of purposeful service to others.I learn so much about myself when I work with other survivors on our collective healing journey.

I engaged practices to empower myself like tarot, banishing, cleansing, spellwork, meditation, Reiki and herbalism. And I became a Reiki Master to bring these resources to QTBIPoC—all of which I consider to be decolonial work as well—returning to the repressed Spirit. When I started my journey, Reiki was a completely white-washed practice and being capitalized on by white new agers who were untethered to social justice and perpetuating systemic harms without any intention to change. Reiki helped me to remember my own power, it cleansed the pathways of my energy systems and opened me up to my own spirit. I made deep bonds with deities, nature and found my natural place as an Animist.

The morning I woke up to the text from my friend, I felt affirmed: I am a force of healing for survivors and we are all connected in the Divine planes. But still the difficulty in my spiritual journey is reconciling the ongoing impact trauma has had on my mind and body. Knowing that infinite power exists in the universe isn't a solve-it-all but rather a Guide and encouragement to keep going. Through my spiritual practice I explored the energetic elements of my physical and mental illnesses. I was forced to stop self-abandoning and focus on my health. And to reflect on the legacy of illness in my family lineages and their correlation to gender based violence, famine and displacement. All of the harms I've experienced are rooted in systems, not just people.

Spirit has continued to guide me through these awarenesses by leading me into spaces and resources to back up my intuition.

Sometimes I still inhabit unsafe dynamics—what helps is not neglecting the healing, and moving with COURAGE—the dead leaves begin to fall away through the seasons of that healing. There will always be some level of life experiences happening that feels like a transgression or trigger—but I remind myself that I'm not going backward. I'm in a spiral of putting myself back together and falling apart. But each time is not wasteful—each time I fall apart less, and for a lot less longer and the harm is reduced to something less than the original harm. I can't make grounded sense of it all—it's centuries of stories I hold in my body playing themselves out but getting weaker every time. Each one telling me their tale as they exit completely and for good.

Throughout this journey I've had to get to know myself again, uncover submerged parts of me, distorted parts of me—I get to explore the question: Who am I? when I am not trapped by the legacy of this pain.

Something tells me I'm nearing the end of an era, where the people of my lineages and my soul groups are releasing something big—something that has placed its horrors into our DNA for far too long. Something systemic is exiting for good.

**So here is a go at claiming my multitudes discovered through self love, witchcraft, decolonial work and alchemical relationships ...**

I am a survivor.
I am a bouquet of beings, a vessel for a brilliant and thriving inner ecosystem.
I am an astral warrior! Working through the spiritual planes to aid others in their journey.
I am an Animist witch. I honor Spirit in all living things.
I am a High Priestess, I am a student of the mysteries of the earth and sky. I am your student.
I am a seer, an oracle, medium and psychic reflecting your power back to you.
I am a healer. The Divine works through me to assist me and others.
I am the Divine keeper and embodiment of ecstatic joy named after bliss.
I am the Goddess incarnate and I worship myself while being worshiped.
I am the embodiment of pleasure, soaking up life and living in the goodness of it all.
I am a creator, a writer and I am a muse — others create from what I exude.
I am a storyteller and writer. I heal myself and others with my words.
I am a diaspora dakini. I pray with my body.
I ignite collective healing and pleasure through movement.
I am a reminder of what was forced into the shadows into erasure will return to the light.
I am a witness to all who are marginalized. I see you with love and compassion.
I am a conduit of liberation for all beings.
I am a child of the Divine, being cared for, loved, restored and nourished in all the ways I need and desire that align for my path and purpose.

**I am all and I am nothing, form and formless, forever in the cosmic dance of healing and enlightenment, destruction and creation, I am the embodiment of joy and prosperity just existing.**

## I invite you to claim who you are!
## Remember who you are!

# I TOO CAN BE WOVEN

BY SARAH MICHAL HAMID

Our bodies tell the stories of our lives, even when we are gone. Similarly, ink lives in our skin forever, even when we don't. Though impacted considerably by British colonialism, imperialism and continued exploitation of cultural practices, South Asians have woven ink into our skin for centuries. Tattooing and trauma are taboo, and this is no exception in the South Asian diaspora. Yet somehow the process of pain and creation ignites ancestral rage and revolution within us, and my body is a testament to this.

My upbringing was shaped with the sense of never feeling at home in my body. Raised in a Punjabi-Kashmiri-Ashkenazi household, my formative years were spent engaging with the long lasting impact of forced displacement, Islamophobia, settler colonialism and the legacy of British family separation policies in Pakistan. Through cultural, familial, religious and social institutions, I was taught to view my body as a site of shame rather than liberation. I was not safe to ask questions about my body nor was I safe to be in my body.

After navigating the aftermath of physical violence and sexual assault as a teenager, I adorned myself with my first tattoo. I recall retreating to my family's prayer rug to find solace, bowing down to the intricate motifs delicately etched into fabric. I so desperately needed these motifs to revive me. Needle and ink in hand, created with what limited resources I could find, I transformed my skin from a site of existence to reclamation. I was young and this was my first tattoo, but I knew it was right. As I poked memories of resilience into my flesh I felt myself come into my body as mine, just as our ancestors previously did.

My journey of self tattooing brought me to the larger diasporic community of South Asian tattooers and tattooed South Asians. This community has transformed my life entirely. As the first daughter in my family to not experience forced marriage as a teenager, I have proudly documented this through the intentional piercing of my right nostril. This is considered taboo, and this defiance brought me comfort and joy. So when I found I could continue these visual and visceral acts of resistance with my body, through connection with South Asian tattooers who utilized our cultural practices to enact bodily autonomy, I embraced the strength of ceremonial acts of pain as survivorship. I had survived far too much. Now I would choose to be art, albeit a process filled with pain, but grounded in my ability to make conscious and intentional decisions about what and how I felt.

**I now treat my body with love.**

**I honor it as a flexible and dynamic textile which is woven with the stories and motifs of my people.**

I've had the honor to be tattooed by three of the most dedicated and revolutionary South Asian tattooers of our time, Ciara Havishya (@la__tigresse____), Iman Sara (@inkbyimansara), and Kainanti Tattoos (@kinatitattoos).

Each experience is unique, filled with trials and tribulations, and also connective like the tissues in our bodies. Every time I choose to adorn my vessel with the patterns of my people, I reclaim traditions that have long remained dormant. We sing, chant, pray, hum, cry, ponder, tell tales, talk about our families, and envision a world where our art transforms the South Asian community more than our pain. I am proud to live past the moments I thought would break me. I wear this pride in myself and my ancestors on my skin. In a world where our art was once shrouded by shame, we share life with one another through the act of tattooing. We survive together, and this is enough.

# We survive together,

# and this is enough.

# MEDITATION II

take a deep breath in,
exhale.

we recognize in ourselves our capacity to hold,
the space we create for these stories and
storytellers.

take a deep breath in,
exhale,

allowing our hearts to open and
expand.

we remember our powers of healing, of
building a kinder, safer world,
let us remember to pour our love,
inwards and outwards

may we let our hearts liberate and heal,
ourselves and each other.

# ECHOES OF RESILIENCE: A JOURNEY THROUGH SHADOW TO LIGHT

BY GVQ

In the tapestry of life, hope is the thread that binds our steps forward, despite the unpredictable paths we tread. It's a peculiar brand of human confidence, illogical at times, but utterly indispensable.

I want to unfold for you the journey of a 21-year-old woman—someone I know intimately. Her life was a mosaic of intelligence, kindness, and vibrancy, laced with the naiveté of youth. As a dedicated student, she trod the expected path towards medical school, the hallmark of a "good Indian girl." But beneath the academic conquests, her heart yearned for the companionship she saw bloom around her. She was eventually pursued by a young man, and they began dating. She felt like she was on top of the world!

Unfortunately, that high lasted very briefly, and life took a very unexpected turn for her. She entered a world of severe abuse and victimization. She wasn't scared to take a calculus or microbiology test, but she was more scared whether she was going to live the next day to walk into the classroom and take the test.

It was her junior year in college, and the relationship she was so excited about turned into something very abusive that lasted for a year and a half, but to her, it felt like a lifetime. As the cycle of domestic violence often goes, her boyfriend was very nice and charming in the beginning, but out of nowhere, he took a 180-degree turn.

He was quite methodical when he beat her; he would never leave any marks or bruises on her face but left plenty of painful ones on the rest of her body. He beat her numerous

times in the corners of the library where no one could see, in her car, and in her apartment. He used his fist to punch her, strike her with hangers, wooden spoons, and at times a belt — but it all depended on the mood he was in. Let's not forget the stern yelling to keep her in line!

But then came that day — the first time he beat her the way he wanted to. He struck her with a metal hanger on her back and left welts, all because she brought back ketchup instead of mustard for his burger. There were so many other times he beat her for no reason — she will never understand why. Now the veil had been lifted and the MONSTER was released!

He made her do things that were humiliating and degrading. He would constantly call her "DISGUSTING" and other names that no one could even fathom. Every day, she felt like she was emotionally raped. This was not how this young lady grew up; she came from a loving and caring home. She felt trapped and ashamed and didn't know how to get out of this. Even the thought of killing herself crossed her mind. Although she tried to break it off, she was scared to death of what he would do if she did. She couldn't tell anyone, and if she did, would anyone believe her?

One evening, while talking to her mother, an unsettling intuition struck her mother — something was terribly wrong. Distracted and anxious, she didn't properly place the phone back on the receiver after the call ended. Her roommate was out for the night, leaving her alone. As she turned around, there he stood. It was like a scene from a movie, but this was her terrifying reality.

He questioned who she was talking to, she told him it was her mom, but he didn't believe her. So, he did what he enjoyed the most — he began punching her, kicking her, hitting her. A day or two later, she was talking to her mom who said to her, "what is going on, I heard you screaming and shouting STOP STOP!" Well, she denied it and brushed it off, suggesting that her mom might have picked up some other line or heard something on TV.

The last time and final time he laid hands on her was when she almost became best friends with death — she found herself bleeding, bruised, and wasn't sure if she could even get up. But she did. In her most vulnerable moment, she found strength and hope. She managed to get out, found the courage to tell her parents, and was immediately pulled out of college and taken home.

The beatings were over, but the suffering was not — sleepless nights, twitches due to the trauma, and recurring nightmares. After going through fear, even love can be painful. One of the most difficult things for her to hear was her mother, who was sleeping in the same bed with her, hugging her, wiping her tears, and saying, "Why did this happen to my child?"

That 21-year-old child was me. Today, I ask myself, "Why would this have to happen to anybody's child? I never thought I would overcome this. I hated myself for the longest time because I allowed such a nasty human being into my life.

But I remember that I couldn't tell anyone — and even if I did, who would believe me?

## The stigma surrounding dating violence and domestic abuse remains deeply entrenched, especially within the South Asian community.

I couldn't tell my family or friends because things like this "didn't happen in the Indian community," and if it did, our job was to brush it under the rug because "it would bring shame upon the family." Not to mention, we'd always hear the victim-blaming— "you brought this upon yourself, it's your fault this happened." Someone somewhere would always find a way to minimize it, to make it seem like the violence was somehow justified or "you are just exaggerating," leaving the victim to bear the burden alone. You're damned if you do, you're damned if you don't.

With time, I healed. My encounter with violence inspired me; it has compelled me to help others going through similar situations and, if possible, to prevent it from happening. When we go through torment, we feel as if no effort or avenue will help, but I can tell you that you may feel WEAK, but you're NOT. Within you is the courage to LEAVE and LIVE. Within you is the strength to overcome. The power is yours and only yours. You are STRONG and RESILIENT. You're not just a survivor; you're a warrior. And when there is HOPE, there is LIGHT.

You are STRONG
and RESILIENT.

You're not just a survivor;
you're a warrior.

And when there is HOPE,
there is LIGHT.

# REDEEMED

BY SEWA FIELDS

Those eyes. They were blue, they were enticing and they had a sincerity in them that I fell in love with. They had a depth and longing within them that I knew even at 18, I would have to unearth in the years to come. I wanted to wake up to them every morning, I wanted them to lean in as I poured out the treasures of my heart in the early hours of the morning. I found comfort in his arms and in those eyes. They met me at the altar on June 10, 2006. I stared into their tenderness on our wedding day and fell in love with him all over again.

Those eyes. They were the same eyes that stared at me years later and despised me for being me, hated me for speaking up. Those eyes. They changed their appearance, almost like they glazed over, they lost their blue in the dim lighting in the house, they looked at me with rage. Many nights I sat there wondering how this once kind soul who vowed to love me, has begun to hate me.

It all began on a small town campus of a Christian college in the North GA mountains. He met me in the dusty hallways of an old mechanic shop adjacent to the college paint shop where I worked. He was tall and lanky and handsome and it didn't matter if his hands were covered in grease, I couldn't help notice every time he looked over at me. He had striking blue eyes and a smile that could make you dream for days.

And when he finally asked me out, it was like young love. It was a life that I never had growing up in a lower middle class immigrant family from India. I almost immediately felt drawn to him, his seemingly put together life, his fancy car and his way with words. He had a charm, he knew how to give the best compliments. His words were like honey to a young girl who craved love and affection like they were the cure for every wounded piece in her past. "You're so beautiful." "You're so smart." "You're the best thing that has ever happened to me" These words captivated my heart over and over again and they translated into love and attachment that would be hard to break. Our emotions usually ran high, and our connection grew deep. We couldn't spend a day without each other. Young love, maybe, infatuation in the best and the worst sort of ways. I wanted him to want me, I wanted him to look at me the way he did so I could feel whole inside myself. Years later, even though I felt some hesitation in my heart and gut, no matter how much I loved him, I still said yes on the day he asked me to marry him.

Married life began in that small almost 900 sq. ft. apartment, just the two of us. Cozy and sweet, just enough space for two people learning how to intertwine the past and present of who we were. Slowly things changed from me being the best girl he'd ever known to someone that could not do anything right. His insecurities became more and more apparent. He needed me to be home with him so I stayed isolated longing for people and connection. He would berate me constantly, straining my energy and my self-worth. His words fell heavy in my heart daily, causing my heart angst, the weight of them, slowly draining the self-worth that I was barely holding on to. There was no way to be good enough for someone

who was not good enough for himself. The pressure he put on himself to prove his own worth, was the same pressure he placed on me to be what I could never measure up to be. And when I finally stood up for myself, the berating turned to violence and intimidation. I was scared for my life and the life of our child on a regular basis. He was unstable and unable to control his emotions when he was in a rage.

8 years is what it took to leave. Many people asked me why I stayed so long. That's the question of a lifetime I guess. No one knows the answer because there is never a right time. There's just the time when it gets unbearable to live and breathe in the same air where you are no longer wanted and loved by the man you loved the most. They say that women try to leave on an average of 7 times before they finally have the courage to walk away for good. I thought about it more than 7 times I'm sure, but the day I looked over at our 2 year-old daughter and the fear in her eyes, I knew I couldn't stay in this any longer. I knew that she deserved more, even if I didn't believe that for myself yet. I knew that she would be my saving grace, the reason I left, the reason I survived, the reason I healed and gave myself the chance to live and breathe and hope for something more beautiful in the years ahead.

Healing from years of abuse, gas-lighting, physical violence and intimidation, would be a long and slow process. The future seemed bleak and leaving an abusive marriage was traumatic in and of itself. I faced harassment and threats on a regular basis while I was trying to leave and find safety for my daughter and me. I came to a breaking point and wanted to end my life, because I had believed that this trauma was going to define me, it was going to be the single story of my life and that nothing good could come from it.

But I was so wrong! In those moments, I just held onto a tiny bit of hope! Hope that maybe my story held some purpose to it, that somehow this pain would not be wasted. And as I took time to grieve, hold space for the deep wounds that tried to take me out and go to intensive trauma therapy, I realized that not only was I capable of healing, but there was joy, freedom and peace on the other side of the pain.

I began to believe that my was pain not going to be wasted, but it would be redeemed for my good and for the good of women and children who were also facing abuse. I reframed my perspective and chose to believe that my life would be defined by the ways my story has impacted others, that this pain will matter for something that is way beyond my comprehension. I chose to face the devastating emotional wounds that were open and bleeding. They would not be fixed by slapping a band aid on them. I knew that if I didn't face my pain, I would eventually "bleed all over people who didn't cut me." These wounds needed tending to, they needed the bravery to look at them directly and face their gravity and pain.

One day, these wounds would become a scar, a beautiful reminder of what I had come through. And in this process, I came to realize that God takes even the most broken pieces and brings beauty from ashes and life from the dust. After everything that life has thrown at me, I can say with promise and certainty that it is possible to hold both grief and gratitude, both pain and hope. One day I will look back and say that this story held eternal and generational purpose beyond what I would have ever imagined.
This is true for all of us. Even you. The work of healing you do now will reflect in the lives of your children and grandchildren. It will reverberate through the generations. And now that you've been through this and come out on the other side, whatever life holds ahead, you will get through that too!

**The work of healing you do now will reflect in the lives of your children and grandchildren.**

**It will reverberate through the generations.**

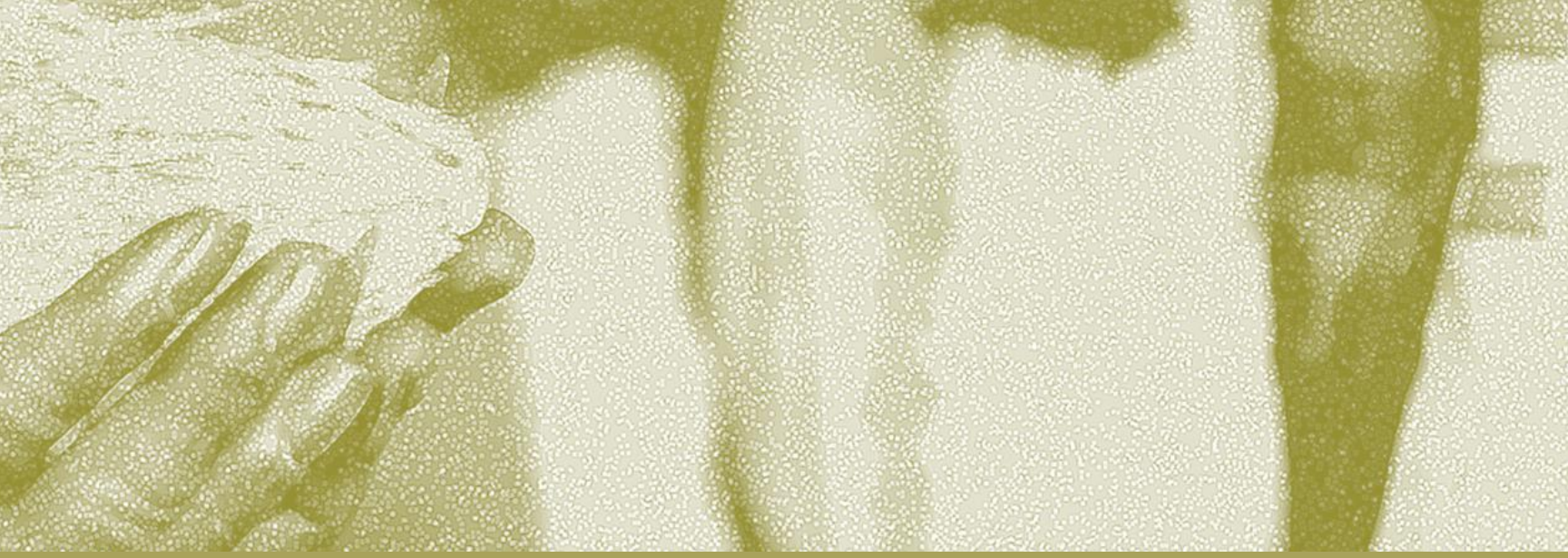
# THE UNJUST BURDEN OF HONOR

## BY DIMPLE D. DHABALIA

I came down the stairs just as the sun peeked over the horizon, bathing the living room and in soft shades of pink and orange in the early morning light. My Nani was already in the kitchen, the smell of ginger and cardamom wafting up from the stove where she stood making chai.

"Before you go, I have something for you." She turned the knob on the stove to the lowest setting and went into the adjoining dining room. She returned a moment later holding a coconut with a bright red sathiyo drawn on the top in red kum kum. She was solemn as she held the fruit out to me.

"Carry this with you today through the wedding," she said as she gently placed the coconut in my cupped palms. "Tonight, when you and your husband are together for the first time, break it open and make sure to have him eat some of it," she said as I took it from her. My face flushed at the mention of my wedding night. This was the last thing I'd ever expect to—or would want to—talk about with my grandmother.



"And remember that after today, you represent the family you are leaving behind, and the family you're marrying into. It's your duty to always uphold the honor of both families and ensure they are always looked upon with reverence and respect. Understand?" I felt the knots in my stomach begin to tighten as I nodded.

When I think back on that moment in my life, I sometimes wonder if any of my ancestors—other women from my lineage who had been unjustly burdened with the same responsibility—were in the room bearing witness, screaming into the void that the crushing weight of this obligation wasn't mine to carry alone.

Did they weep knowing that I never stood a chance?

I grew up in a household of conflicting messages. My dad insisted that he only ever wanted daughters and that his girls could grow up to do and be anything they wanted. My mom, having learned from her mother, who had learned from her mother before her, taught us through word and deed that marriage was the ultimate duty, a rite of passage for a woman that defined her worth and success in this world. Education and career aspirations were encouraged, but always within the context of finding a suitable husband. The pressure to marry came at me from every direction, magnified by my desire to escape from a home where my dad's mental health issues and violence had been a source of hidden shame for decades.

The threats in my marriage had started two months after our wedding. I had confided in my then fiancé during our whirlwind courtship that I avoided conflict out of fear that the other person would leave me. So when, after a minor argument, he yelled, "I don't know why I married you. I should just divorce you!" his words cut deep. But we were still at the beginning, and I was still secure and tenacious enough to stand up for myself and didn't hesitate before taking off my wedding ring and putting it on the coffee table.

"Well, nobody is forcing you to be here," I had said, looking him in the eye, my voice calm and steady. We were so new in our marriage that I didn't yet know that his flaring nostrils and balled up fists were not only a visceral embodiment of his frustration and anger but would also serve as a precursor to him storming out of our apartment, driving the seven minutes to his parents' house, and complaining to them about how I'd wronged him every time we argued. When our landline started ringing twenty minutes later, I took a deep breath and answered after the third ring. My mother-in-law's stern voice echoed in my ear.

"What happened? Why did you take off your wedding ring?" Without giving me a chance to respond she continued. "You're married now! You should never take off your wedding ring!" She said emphasizing the "never." I felt the familiar flutters of anxiety in the pit of my stomach.

"Did he tell you why I took off the ring? Did he mention that he was threatening divorce just because we had an argument?" I asked, trying to keep my voice even, as I felt heat rising up through my chest. If this was news to her, she didn't let on.

"Well, he shouldn't have said that, but this is how men are. Sometimes they say things without thinking. You're going to struggle in this marriage if you can't learn to let these things go."

*If I can't let these things go?* My chest felt heavy as tears began streaming down my cheeks. I felt so alone.

Reminding me that I wasn't worthy of being married to him and threatening divorce became my husband's go-to refrain over the course of our three-and-a-half-year marriage. But his words were only one cause for my pain. I'd married into an exceptionally educated family that had lived in Canada and the United States for close to 40 years. They were the most modern Indian family I had ever known, and yet, the day I walked into their home as the new daughter-in-law, something shifted, and my mother-in-law seemed to move back to an oppressive time and place I'd only ever read about in books.

Every time I considered confiding in someone, I'd remember my grandmother's words and my cheeks would flush with shame, believing that I would be betraying my family and the values they had spent their lives teaching me to uphold. So, for three years, I silently endured verbal assaults from my husband and his mother about me, my family, my friends,

my career, and my body, retreating further into myself with each confrontation. Not wanting to worry my family, I bore the weight of his debts and obligations, some of which he disclosed to me just days before our wedding, on my shoulders. As days and months turned into years and my career flourished, his own lack of professional progress fed his temper and his lack of confidence, and as his jealousy grew, so too did his need to have control of every aspect of my life.

My dad's unexpected death a little over three years into our marriage shifted something in me. I no longer cared what my husband and his family—or really anyone—thought of me. So, when we had another argument and he yelled, "I don't know why I married you! I should just divorce you!" my palms started to tingle as a rush of blood moved through my body, and a wave of exhaustion washed over me. I had nothing left to give.

"Fine. Let's get a divorce." My voice was flat and devoid of any emotion. "You've told me for years that you don't know why you married me, and I no longer have the energy to fight with you. So, you want a divorce? Let's get a divorce."

Not knowing how to respond, my husband stormed out of our apartment and went to his parents' house to tell them about our argument. An hour later he returned with his father who sat down to "talk some sense" into the two of us. While my husband glared at me from across the living room, my father-in-law tried to reason with me.

"Beta, if you walk away from this marriage, you'll be miserable for the rest of your life." His tone was gentle, but the consequence of his prophecy lingered in the air between us, like a curse, casting a shadow that would follow me for years to come. But at that moment, none of that mattered.

"Maybe." I said, looking him in the eye. "But I honestly can't imagine being any more miserable than I am right now." With nothing left to say, he stood up and walked out of the apartment, my husband following him like a lost puppy. The thing nobody tells you about the end of a relationship is that even if you're the one leaving — even if you make the decision because you know you deserve better — it still hurts like a motherfucker. For me, the initial relief of escaping an unhappy and abusive relationship was quickly overshadowed by feelings of shame for being unable to make my marriage work, the pain of loss, and uncertainty about the future. I feared that the harsh and unforgiving cultural stigma surrounding divorce in South Asian communities would disproportionately place the blame on me, regardless of the circumstances that led to our breakup.

I was fortunate to have the support of my family–the women in particular, with each of my mom's sisters calling me in the days after I left my husband, telling me they were proud of me for having the courage to walk away. Their words provided me with the strength and encouragement I needed to move forward and begin taking steps to rebuild my life.

Though it's been almost twenty years since I made the decision to walk away from my marriage, over the years my father-in-law's words during our final conversation have haunted me at times. In those moments, my mom would sit down with me to look back at how far I'd come and to help me recognize the legacy that was born out of my courage. Walking away from my marriage had led me to walk towards a career serving some of the world's most vulnerable people. It allowed me to spend almost two decades living, working, and traveling in over 40 countries where I had the privilege of interviewing thousands of asylum seekers and refugees, helping them escape their own persecution and violence to start new lives.

My mom passed away in 2019, but the conversations I had with her helped me to acknowledge my numerous achievements and to see how they served as a testament to the strength I had found within myself. I now take comfort in knowing that none of this would have been possible had I stayed in my marriage simply because I, like so many other women in my family, had been taught that it was my responsibility to uphold the family honor. I now take pride in knowing that my choice to walk away didn't just help me to let go of outdated beliefs and break a cycle of violence for myself–it helped me to begin creating a legacy of healing for generations of women in my lineage who came before me, and those who will come after.

I now take pride in knowing that my choice to walk away didn't just help me to let go of outdated beliefs and **break a cycle of violence for myself—**

it helped me to begin **creating a legacy of healing for generations** of women in my lineage who came before me, and those who will come after.

# DANCING THROUGH THE FIRE

## I AM BRAVE. I AM BRUISED. I AM WHO I AM MEANT TO BE. THIS IS ME

## BY PADMAJA SURENDRANATH

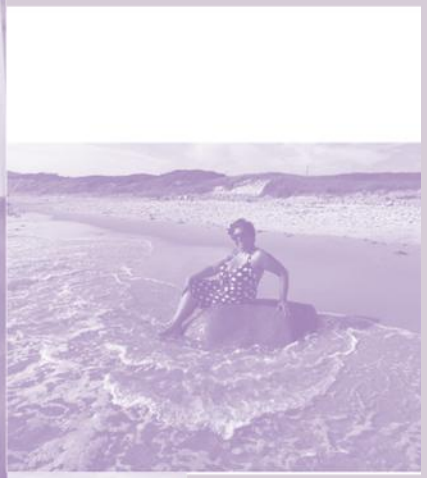
Windows of my bright orange car rolled down, salty breeze flowing through my short henna-ed hair, driving along the seashore of Martha's Vineyard, I turned on the radio.

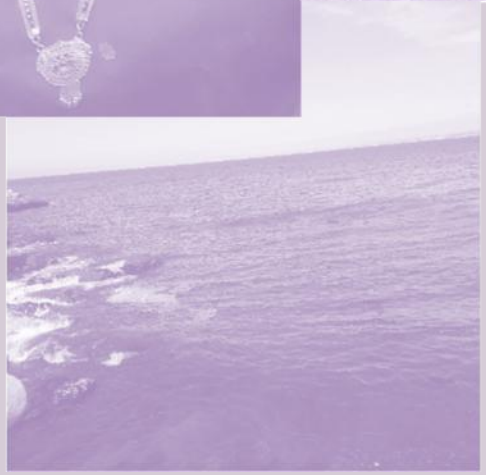
*Unstoppable. I Am A Porche With No Brakes.*
*Invincible. I Win Every Single Game*

Sia's powerful voice filled the airwaves. And reverberated in every nerve and cell of my body. The feeling took me back to my younger days in Chennai when I first felt such a strong surge of hope and energy upon reading the story of Joan of Arc.

Summer vacation days in Chennai were for two things: eating juicy mangoes and reading books atop my favorite tree. After completing all the household chores and filling up the container as tall as me, with water I fetched from our backyard well, I would sit with my brother in the kitchen. We would finish the lunch my mom made for us from scratch at 4:30am, before she left for her 3 hour commute to work at 7am. My brother and I would each grab a book and a juicy mango, climb the tall Ashoka tree in front of our home, and find a comfy branch to settle in. It may sound idyllic and heavenly, but it was also our coping strategy.

When I was in 5th grade and my brother was in 1st grade, the factory our father owned suffered a loss. The overseas job in Iraq he accepted turned out to be a trap organized by a labor trafficking ring. We lost contact with him for more than 3 months. Single, alone and unprotected, my mother was targeted by a few local men and experienced a horrific act of sexual violence, which my brother and I happened to witness. These events left my parents severely traumatized and emotionally unavailable for me and my brother. The void of adult presence in our lives, put my brother and me at risk of sexual molestation by neighbors and strangers. To cope, my brother and I immersed ourselves in the fantasy lands of Amar Chitra Katha, Nancy Drew, Hardy Boys, Famous Five and many other children's books. From Amar Chitra Katha, a children's cartoon book, I learned about Joan of Arc who saved her village and Jhansi Rani, the warrior Queen from Rajasthan who fought valiantly against British colonial rule. I was instantly captivated.





Inspired by the works of thinkers such as the poets Bharathiyar, Bharathidasan and the philosopher Swami Vivekananda, my parents were socially progressive, strongly rejecting the practice of untouchability and refusing to participate in worker exploitation. These were cited as reasons for their respective families and the community to refuse to support them. I developed a burning desire to avenge the injustices against my parents by restoring my family's respectability. I didn't know how, but I had the resolve. As if to match my mood, on came Adele in the radio, singing about a Fire starting in her Heart, reminding me of how angry I still felt that my parents were left unsupported and abandoned by our community.

Being a voracious reader, I consumed the writings of these progressive thinkers at a very young age. A poem by Bharathidasan on the importance of women's education and Bharathiyar's famous poem calling upon women to break the shackles of the patriarchal society laid the blueprint for my life. The blueprint got transformed into a concrete roadmap upon reading the American classic *Little Women*. When I read how the dynamic Jo March, the protagonist, broke into a male-dominated field as an author and supported her family financially, I knew then what was possible for me to do as a woman in the modern age. I decided I needed to get myself to America, so I too could be liberated from the patriarchal chains. I secretly started preparing. I needed to keep it a secret because I didn't want anyone to make fun of me. At that time, only wealthy people with family ties in America could afford to have such a dream, not a girl like me, with parents who only had a high school level of education and lived paycheck to paycheck. But, I was not going to let that stop me. Joan of Arc, Jhansi Rani nor Jo March let anything stop them either. So why would I? And the song in the radio now blasted Katy Perry's *Hear Me Roar* and I recalled how fired up and lit up I had felt as a 10 year old with a burning fire in her heart.

Fast forward 12 years later, despite my stellar record in school and diligent preparations, all my prospects of pursuing graduate studies in America appeared permanently closed off. A clerical error in my college finals rendered me ineligible to apply for graduate schools in America. In addition, the marriage my parents arranged for me turned into a nightmare of a failed sex trafficking attempt, resulting in severe psychological and sexual abuse. My new father-in-law made a horrendous attempt on my life. I miraculously survived but was shaken to the core. I was given a second chance at life and I resolved then to dedicate it for women's empowerment. However, abandoned by my ex-husband, I was trapped with no options for a divorce and therefore, no foreseeable future. My father fell ill, heartbroken by the event and my mom went into shock. On any given day, the chaos meter in my life was trending in the red. My days included taking my

father to the Emergency Room or dodging motorcycles trying to run me off the road on my way to court hearings, in efforts to intimidate me out of pursuing my divorce. During all of this, I was holding a full time job and attending courses to become a software developer. I had absolutely no space to entertain any mind chatter that caused doubt, fear or hopelessness about my future. Unable to read any more, I told myself, somehow *I Will Survive* (Gloria Gaynor). The 90's were a great time for music. *Man In the Mirror* and *I Believe I Can Fly* were constant companions. Three years went by with no change in my situation. But I was not going to give up on my childhood dream without a fight. It was mind over matter. And I was resolved to win.

In mid 1998, things started to shift in rapid succession and I boarded the plane to America seven months later. Through a miraculous turn of events in the court system, I was granted my divorce, though I had previously been told it would be next to impossible and might take close to a decade to do so. Stepping into my office with the divorce decree in my hand, I was informed that my visa for a project in America was approved.

I landed in Detroit, MI on a chilly sunny morning in March 1999. The streets were lined with fresh snow from the previous night, soft and dreamy, while on the radio of the cab I was in, Johnny was singing how he could 'See Clearly Now The Rain is Gone', capturing my mood perfectly. I had never seen snow in my life before and everything appeared magical. Here I was in the land of my dreams.

As the excitement of the arrival of a new millennia started to build up, I reflected on the next phase of my life. The embers of the resolve I made on the day I survived the attempt on my life, were now kindled into a roaring fire, propelling me to create an expansive vision for my life—one of bringing about meaningful change in society through women's empowerment. Having experienced the power of education in my personal journey, I chose that as the core purpose of my life—to make education accessible to women. I wrote the mission statement of my life and laid out a detailed action plan with 5-year and 10-year goals. I chose to work in a university and acquire a Master's degree in Education. I figured these would help me build my knowledge and credibility to be able to bring about a meaningful change in India's education system and enable access to more women. In 2005 I joined Harvard University and worked for five years gaining valuable insights into how universities operate. Leveraging employee benefits, I took courses at Harvard Business School and Harvard Law School on topics related to Leadership, Social Justice and Gender Studies so I could accurately understand the challenges that may arise in my path. I graduated in 2010 with a Masters degree in Educational Technology from Harvard School of Education.

It was a huge achievement that I not only met these milestones exactly on the timeframe I had set 10 years earlier, but I did it while also holding down a demanding full time job, wrangling with severe health issues and navigating the impact of the 2009 economic crash. You would think my graduation day would have been one of the biggest celebrations. In contrast, I was experiencing what was, perhaps, one of the worst times of my entire life.

Five years prior to my graduation, while awaiting my Green Card, I was sexually assaulted by someone whom I considered a friend. It destabilized me emotionally. Things worsened when I relocated for a new workplace and became a target of sexual harassment on my very second day. I felt alone and unsupported, with no family or friends close by. The stress was so severe that I got into an autocrash, totaling my car. My life was spinning out of control and I could do nothing to stop it. I was terrified that taking time off from work would jeopardize my pending Green Card and I was fearful of going back to India to be with my family. I was flooded with memories of abuse I had suffered as a child, of my mother's sexual violence I witnessed, and of the harassment I encountered during my divorce. Unable manage my symptoms, I finally took the advice of my close Buddhist friend and took myself to a rape crisis center. I felt very ashamed that I was so weak-minded for needing this kind of support. I felt like a loser. LIttle did I know that this would be a major turning point of my life.

As she was filling out the form, the intake coordinator at the Rape Crisis Center said to me, "I want you to know none of this was your fault." I was completely floored. I sobbed for the first time in a long time. Throughout my life, I learned to be ashamed of my various sexual violations (approximately 20 within a span of 26 years). I had shame about my body, shame about my helplessness, shame about my inability to protect myself, shame about my parents absence and so many more. As if tuning into my mood, Keala Settle's voice floated from my car radio, piercing my singing how 'I have learned to be ashamed of all my scars.' But no more. The conviction in the intake coordinator's voice made me lift my head up and tell myself 'I'm gonna send a flood to drown out' the shame monsters living rent free in my head. Yes, 'I was bruised, I felt broken. Maybe this is how I was meant to be' as Keala Settle continued in her song.

Taking my friend's advice, I took full ownership of my healing. I educated myself about Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD), set monthly goals for therapy and diligently tracked my progress. As I continued in therapy I realized I needed to self-advocate for treatment that aligned with my personal values, my cultural background and my spiritual beliefs. I learned clinical terminologies related to my conditions so I could better convey my needs to my therapist and whenever I felt their counseling, guidance or advice was not aligned with my lived experience as a non-white, immigrant woman from a different culture, I sought changes. I learned valuable skills in therapy and got better at managing my flashbacks and triggers. But the aspect of trauma that left me with a deep sense of distrust towards people still remained. I was unable to build friendships and social relationships. To address this, I created a curriculum for myself to develop and cultivate interpersonal skills. These helped me understand how to set boundaries, how to stop people pleasing, how to relate with others authentically and from a place of self-respect instead of shame and how to set the right expectations for my friendships. These gave me

the confidence to build personal relationships. To build myself different types of support systems, I sought out and became a member of Systers, an online community for women in the tech field and its in-person group called Women in Tech both founded by Anita Borg. Being a part of this community of women helped me successfully navigate the various instances of sexual harassment and discrimination based on my gender, immigrant status and race I experience at work. It also helped me overcome my imposter syndrome and build my professional confidence. These were critical in enabling me to continue in a hostile and toxic work environment without being defeated by them.

Two years after my graduation and after working in K-12 schools, I started to realize that education and economic freedom alone may not be sufficient to empower women. Something was missing and I couldn't put my finger on it. Around this time, my brother revealed to me that one of his perpetrators was a woman. This came as a shock and I felt completely lost. It seemed like I had been chasing the wrong goal all my life. Maybe women didn't need empowerment. Maybe I was biased based on my personal experience. Even as I was grappling with these thoughts, the Nirbhaya incident happened—a young women in New Delhi was gang raped and murdered. I was stunned by how closely this incident resembled my mother's experience of sexual violence 40 years earlier. The sheer horror of the violence the young woman suffered, caused a deep shift in my thinking about women's empowerment.

Maybe I was biased based on my personal experience. Even as I was grappling with these thoughts, the Nirbhaya incident happened — a young women in New Delhi was gang raped and murdered. I was stunned by how closely this incident resembled my mother's experience of sexual violence 40 years earlier.The sheer horror of the violence the young woman suffered, caused a deep shift in my thinking about women's empowerment. I realized enabling emotional healing and recovery from trauma was far more powerful than education and financial independence. Because, sexual violence of any sort dehumanizes the victim and causes them to lose their personal sense of value, self-esteem and confidence. They instead suffer from deep shame. Achieving educational or financial success does not help them regain their lost self-esteem, only emotional healing does. I learned that while 30% – 50% of women worldwide experienced sexual violence, there were no meaningful interventions to address the long term emotional impact on the survivors. Using what had helped me in my healing journey, I decided to focus on building an intervention based on psychoeducation and the collective power of having a community of women.

I participated in a social impact competition organized by Echoing Green in 2015 and submitted a design for an online learning platform for sexual trauma survivors to learn trauma coping skills. I oulined how technology will be harnessed to develop multi-lingual and culturally relevant learning content at scale and help learners personalize and customize the curriculum for their learning needs. My design was one of the semi-finalists positioned at the top 14% among 5000 applicants. I chose to launch it as a non-profit and named

it SanghWE (a collective for women's empowerment). I was invited to present my design to clinicians of South Asian descent at the Asian American Psychological Association in 2016 in Denver, CO.

Energized by the positive feedback I proceeded to prepare for a pilot. I finally felt I had found my footing, my life purpose. 'Here I come,' Kealy Settle sang and I could feel it in my bones.

The excitement of realizing how every single one of my life experiences brought me here to this point of how I could contribute to a better world for survivors and their healing. I was thrilled and couldn't wait to get started.

But I couldn't.

A series of health events—cancer first and then a traumatic brain injury—forced me to take a break for 2 years. And, just as I started to recover my health, I experienced another sexual assault which had a devastating impact on me. I lost my ability to speak in English and was at a huge risk of losing my job since, as a pre-sales consultant, my primary job responsibility was to speak with our customers. I was confronted with the option of either declaring my PTSD condition as a disability so I could get medical accommodation at work or quit my job. I felt very ashamed at having to admit I was disabled. After agonizing over many weeks, I finally recognized my own deep prejudices about disability.

Having a disability does not diminish who I am and does not take away my capacity to be a productive employee or a good human being. This realization was a significant moment in my life. For the first time, I was able to accept myself fully—bruises, wounds, warts, scars and all. I felt no shame or fear to reveal the truth of who I am. I negotiated adjustments in my performance expectations with my manager, sought cutting edge treatment and within a matter of 3 months, not only did I regain my speech but, I also excelled at my job. I was awarded the highest performance rating.

I became a more vocal advocate for promoting emotional and mental health in the workplace. I openly spoke about my survivorship, finally uniting my personal and professional persona. As a founding board member on the Mental Health and Wellbeing Affinity Group I was invited to define the vision and mission statements for the group. It was a proud moment for me when the group was rolled out to 1M employees globally, and later went on to receive the Platinum Bell Seal Award, the highest recognition for employers committed to creating mentally healthy workplaces. I also serve on the I also serve on the Board of Ready, Inspire, Act, a non-profit that provides emotional healing services, among other forms of support, for survivors of commercial sex trade.

My vision for women's empowerment has undergone more fine-tuning. Survivors know how to heal, they dance through the fire of their lives. What is needed instead is a supportive community that keeps them going.. With this goal in mind, I recently launched a startup called Maithri Metaverse, an online social learning platform where sexual trauma survivors can build friendships with one another, learn interpersonal skills and build a support system for themselves.

I stepped out of my car and ran towards the blue ocean. I gleefully met the high waves which almost knocked me down.

My car radio was not playing but in my head I was hearing Queen's song 'We are the Champions, my friend...Champions of the world!'

Yes. Every. Single. One. Of. Us. Are.

For the first time, **I was able to accept myself fully**—bruises, wounds, warts, scars and all.

**I felt no shame or fear to reveal the truth of who I am.**

# ON SURVIVAL

BY PGS

Domestic violence can be earth-shattering and often bone-shattering. For me, it was also soul-shattering.

In America—far away from the country I had grown up in—there were 101 more ways to be beaten down and not one to stand back up.

In that isolated, fragile, vulnerable state, there are no safe places to run to. And when you can't run outward, there is only one way to go—inwards. For me, that inwards journey turned into writing poetry.

I wrote poetry about love, and I also wrote poetry about unlove.

*(1)*
*You pull me in with your rope voice*

*And I reel in like the fish –*

*You have love on your mind, on your arms, your nails which rake me*

*You are a gentle surprise*

*You are a rude awakening*

*(2)*
*Your hands in my hands, your eyes in my eyes*

*Your breath in my breath, my blood on your hands*

*My taste on your lips*

*You eat me and leave no trace*

Over the years, I wrote and saved many such poems. And these poems—they saved me right back. In their words, in their rhythm, in their meaning, I found meaning that I was beginning to lose in my life.

Over time, I started submitting these poems and articles to publications. Often, they got selected; sometimes, I received awards. But my biggest award came when my lawyer submitted some of my writing as evidence of abuse.

I had been an award-winning journalist in India, but my changed circumstances put an end to my career. Looking back, I don't know which moment started that downfall, but I know where it ended. That moment was a visit to the hospital.

I was in the ER when the counselor first showed me a picture of the cycle of abuse—a cycle that I know so well now—the honeymoon phase, the tension-building phase, and finally the explosion phase, and then back to the honeymoon phase. At the center of that cycle was denial—something I recognized but didn't want to.

That was my life—staring up at me in black and white. It forced me to face that I felt powerless, that I had been too scared to leave, that I had become so diminished that I had disappeared even for myself.

As I faced myself for the first time in many years, I knew I could not go on like this. I reached out to an agency that works with South Asians facing abuse. I took their advice and started journaling, took pictures, and recorded videos. I needed out. I also wanted my voice heard.

But making one's voice heard isn't easy. My first lawyer was not trained to handle abuse, nor was my second—if anything, they took all my money and then didn't fight for me. My third lawyer, an elderly woman, became my fierce advocate.

I consider myself very privileged to have been represented well and to have received information about abuse.

But what about women who are still in that state that I was in for years? So many who are suffering, uninformed, or simply in denial like I was. I think of these women every day and it is this which makes me shake myself awake in the morning and continue my work in advocating against domestic violence.

It is what made me earn a fellowship in domestic violence writing and storytelling. It is also what made me join my county's Domestic Violence Taskforce where I now walk up the steps of that same courthouse where I had fought for my rights.

But even as I write this, I recognize survivorship is an everyday process. Before it becomes pathbreaking, it is backbreaking. Starting afresh, starting without support, starting without money. Starting in a different country, starting on the wrong side of age, starting as a single mom.

It is only recently that I have been able to open that door that I had shut tight for many years—the door behind which my unacknowledged anxiety and trauma reside. But I have slowly made a start.

*The year buzzards came to the fields,*
*she was out tilling a book in her hands*
*There was a war on somewhere she had heard —*
*there was a field on fire, a stream had cried*
*itself to sleep*

*But she tilled the book in her hands, pulled out weeds*
*within the black ink, picked words gently,*
*prepared beds for the next crop*

*When the war noise grew louder and*
*buzzards flew close,*
*she carefully put the book in the stream that*
*it may start flowing again*

*Next morning, when the dawn came*
*She was out in the charred fields*
*Sowing poems and reaping them —*

Someone said we offer others what we valued and didn't have. I find it to be true because it has helped me find my calling. I founded a nonprofit advocacy and support organization where we offer information and resources against abuse, especially for immigrant women. It is also a space to share survivor stories, personal journeys, poetry, fiction, and art. We also organize on-ground activities in partnership with domestic violence agencies.

I found my way to healing through my words. In the past many years, I have seen many others join me and find theirs. I hope more can join me in that circle of listening, of holding hands, of sharing, of healing.

**May this circle grow so no one is left struggling with earth-shattering, bone-shattering, and soul-shattering trauma *alone*.**

It is only recently that I have been able to open that door that I had shut tight for many years—the door behind which my unacknowledged anxiety and trauma reside.

**But I have slowly made a start.**

Sati (goddess)
*The first wife of Lord Shiva, whom she married against her father's wishes. She committed self-immolation to protect her husband's honor, and is seen as a paragon of a virtuous and dutiful wife.*

sati (practice)
*A practice, now mostly historical, that gained prominence in the late medieval period, in which a widow, dressed in her wedding attire, commits suicide by sitting atop her deceased husband's funeral pyre. The practice was outlawed by the British Empire in 1829. The Indian Government passed the Sati (Prevention) Act in 1987, criminalizing the practice and its glorification as an act of selflessness.*

# SATI

## BY RENA PATEL

This story was previously published at The Sunflower Station Press, 2023 and the Heduan Review, 2023.

Disclaimer: *A Hindu bride's life begins and ends with fire. Sati, a story of a woman forced into marriage, follows the bride through the Hindu wedding ceremony (specifically the North Indian wedding ceremony). The work is a piece of magical realism with fantastical elements meant to convey emotion in the abstract as opposed to being fully grounded in reality. It does not depict a real event or experience. This story takes the original myth of Sati, a dutiful wife who committed self-immolation to protect her husband's honor, and the now outlawed ritual of widow-burning in India and places the flame at the center of a marriage in a culture where it's expected for the bride to view her husband as God, to erase her desires, to endure silently. She burns until she cannot take it anymore. Until she is free. This story is for all the women enduring, burning silently. May you also break free.*

Embers crackled. Pieces of ash rose and languished into the air. The stone was warm under my feet as I slipped my shoes off and stepped onto the mandap. The long, almost opaque rectangle of silk held by my brothers separated me from the yagna fire and from the eyes of my future husband. I hadn't been able to catch a glimpse of him today, but I knew he must be adorned with just as many jewels as I was, if not more.

My neck, wrists, waist, ears, and ankles were weighed down with gold, all gifts from my parents to take with me into married life. I sat down on my red velvet chair shaped like a throne in a sari of my mother's choosing, shackled by my grandmother's bangles, and listened to the pandit recite the holy Sanskrit verses of matrimony.

"You look like a bride," my mother had told me after clasping a golden choker around my neck. "This is more than you deserve."

The veil, still in place, obscured me from my future husband's view—though with my rouged lips, kajal hooded eyelids, and foundation three shades lighter than my actual skin tone—I very much doubted he would even recognize me.

Every little Indian girl dreams of their wedding day from the moment they understand what a wedding even is. From their mother's wedding album, filled with blank faces staring into the camera, to the passionate wedding scenes of Bollywood blockbusters, there are fantasies about the dress, the bangles, the dancing, the food, and sometimes the person sitting across from them in the mandap itself. We were told that marriage is the start of a new life. Marriage is sacred. Marriage is supposed to save us.

The veil dropped. Across from me—dressed like a conquering prince — sat the man I was meant to marry. He smiled with embers in his eyes. I felt the heat roll off my skin. I shivered.

He was handsome—there was no doubt in that. I'd heard the aunties say as much after he'd compliment them on their jewels and their figure. How I managed to secure a marriage with him, what sort of bargain I struck to beguile him so, was a repeated conversation from the moment the invitations went out. They would never know he'd already taken what he wanted.

Someone—my father—handed me a garland without meeting my eye and turned me towards my fiancé. The priest motioned for us to stand together.

"Place the garland around his neck," he instructed.

The string, weighed down by red roses, dug into my palms. He bowed, eyes never moving from mine, as I laid the garland over his head. My hands stung when they touched the fabric of his salwar kameez. The scent of his cologne – smoky and overwhelming – burned my nostrils like ashes. I bent down, holding back a cough, as he dropped the garland down onto my neck.

My skin prickled in pain as soon as the string touched my neck. An itching, almost burning sensation enveloped through my dupatta, heating the choker like a hand. The clamor of applause from the audience drowned out my gasp. I ran my fingers over the back of my neck, feeling nothing but the woven garland string and my own skin.

My mother, stern and unflinching, took the end of my dupatta and tied it to his with finality.

He grabbed my hand for the pheras, and I jolted back without thinking. When he touched me, a spark—hot and painful—ignited.

Each step burned through my soles as the yagna fire boiled the ground under my feet. Family members pelted us with petals, singeing my skin like coals. I could feel blisters bubbling with each hit.

After following him for the first two rounds, it was my turn to lead.

His knuckles dug into my back like a branding rod, forcing me forward. I cried out as the skin on my soles, melded into the stone, tore away from me—stuck to the mandap.

"Move," he hissed. "This is what you wanted."

Red footprints trailed behind me. Fallen rose petals stuck to the blood and coated my feet but did nothing to temper the heat radiating from the fire into the floor. Each step scalded my skin, cauterizing the wounds, and ripping them open again.

He sat down before I could even comprehend that the pheras were over. The first one to sit rules the household, they said. Blood burned my ears from the hums of approval from the audience.

The pandit was speaking, but I could hardly hear him through

the hissing of the fire. Seven betel nuts, each perched on a mound of rice, sat in a line at the front of the mandap.

"The Saptapadi unites the souls together with the seven vows," the pandit explained. "With each step the bride takes, she must tip the betel nut with her toe to accept the vows."

He was by my side again, pulling me forward to face the audience—witnesses to my vows.

"May God shower you with food and nourishment as you vow to put the wellbeing of the family, and of each other before your own."

I stumbled. His strong hands, possessive, grasped my waist, slipping in between fabric, meeting bare skin—retracing the ghosts of his bruises.

The first betel nut tipped over and burst into flames.

"May God bless you with a healthy life as you vow to support each other and protect your family."

A ring of fire shackled my ankles as the golden anklets burned into my skin, prickling like pins, pulling my feet forward.

The second betel nut tipped over and burst into flames.

"May God bless you with sacredness and service as we vow to respect our elders, and to thank them for the support they have given us."

The bangles—my grandmother's—were scalding, blistering, twisting my skin into the gold. Tightening around my wrists like his hands. An imprint of his breath crackled against my skin. "I will ruin you. You are mine."

The third betel nut tipped over and burst into flames.

"May God bless you with children, as you vow to continue our sacred traditions."

The golden chain around my waist burned directly into my bare skin, bubbling over into my abdomen, slick like his tongue, lapping at the heat erupting into my core.

The fourth betel nut tipped over and burst into flames.

"May God shower you with bountiful seasons as you vow to share in each other's joys and sorrows."

The necklace my mother had secured around my neck melted my flesh in a chokehold until gold blended with blood, dripping, holding me in place for him to do whatever he pleased.

The fifth betel nut tipped over and burst into flames.

"May God bless you with peace and fulfillment, as you vow to remain true and faithful in love."

The golden thread embroidered into my clothing ignited, searing the designs into my skin.

Flames like his fingers split through my skin, felt up my shoulders, over my breasts, down my stomach, between my legs.

The sixth betel nut tipped over and burst into flames.

"And may God bless you with a long and lasting life as you vow to never part, in this life and the next."

The last betel nut tipped over and burst into flames. The mandap was engulfed in fire, but no one paid any heed. Fire roared in my ears, pooling my earrings into my hair, whispering sweet nothings in his voice. "You asked for this."

Ash filled my lungs, burned my chest. My skin scalded, sinew melting into gold as flames danced around me. The curves of my mendhi gleamed like coals, the lines of his name hidden in the designs seared through flesh down to the bone.

My husband presented the mangalsutra—gold and black beads—the necklace of a married woman. He delicately dragged the necklace over my charred collarbones, splitting skin with fire, and secured it around my neck.

My skin, waxy and hollow, stretched against my muscles, blistering, breaking against bone. His hands were everywhere, following the flames around my throat. Holding my arms in place like he had when he spread my legs apart.

I couldn't breathe. My nose dripped away like wax, nose ring clattering to the floor. Fire ate at my hair, licking my scalp. My lengha fused into my flesh, fabric weaving into skin.

Everyone watched the ceremony as my whole body was burning.

His fingers dipped into the sindoor, blood red, to mark me as his wife. He brought his hand over my head.

The burning reached my heart, and I screamed.
I could see it so clearly. The flames, eating away at me, leaving nothing but melted gold and bubbling blood behind. My bones crackled, steam hissed underneath my skin, stinking of sulfur and charcoal.

I clawed at my neck, my fingernails disappearing, breaking the choker, gold spilling over my fingers, taking the place of flesh.

He tried to touch me.

"Stay away from me!" I growled.

The wedding guests watched in horror as I tore away at my dupatta, ripping away burnt hair, splitting the cuffs on my wrists, then my waist and my ankles. Each piece ripped open blood, coating my charred muscles with red, but it was still too hot.

I ran, clothes burning behind me, eating through each seam while my hands tore away the rest.

Cool air hit bare skin as I shoved the doors open. Heaving, I struck my arms, my legs, pushing away the last of the fabric. Wind whipped around me, spinning me in flickering clouds, struggling to stamp out the flames.

The first drop of rain sizzled against my skin, caressing me. The heavens cried above me, tears mingling with my own, softly pressing away at corroded skin. My hair plastered around my head, down my shoulders, over my breasts, wet against the smooth skin of my stomach—leaving my body bare, unmutilated, untouched.

Fresh air filled my lungs, uncharred. Free.

You are pure—the fire said.

You are whole.

Fresh air filled my lungs, uncharred. **Free.**

You are pure—the fire said.

**You are whole.**

# TO THE WOMEN BEFORE ME

BY MOHINI GIMA

Listen along to Mohini's poetry by scanning the QR code below or visiting: www.southasiansoar.org/sanctuaries-mg

I honor my elders & ancestors, who passed down their wounds AND their wisdom. These women did the best they could with what they had. Some unknowingly passed down pains & limiting stories. That was their truth, and they shared from those experiences.

Many were silenced & shamed, didn't feel safe to express or use their voice. They gave away their innate power. They were shut down + complacent, quiet, practically invisible.

Generations of wise women, who have gone through some shit. Some stuck in the victim stories. Some on the other side.

And I, well I followed that path for a while too...

Until I said this ends with me.
Until I reclaimed my power.
Until I activated my voice.
Until I connected to the innate wisdom of my body.
Until I listened to my womb.
Until I embodied my truth.

I choose to be a woman who has gone through some shit & used those experiences as fertilizer, to alchemize that shit into straight up gold!

I have wounds & have felt them, sat in the mess, & figured out the message. I GET to actively be a part of healing for the women in my life who couldn't.

I am the one who breaks cycles of silence & shame. I'm grateful for those past lessons.
And I know I am meant for more...

I'm here to ruffle some feathers, color outside the lines, bust through the damn boxes society/culture/religion/family/patriarchy placed on us women, & to speak up for the women who didn't feel safe to speak up.

I GET to heal that. I GET to shift that.

So now, I use my voice as a vehicle for alchemy. For myself, for generations before & after me. The baton has been passed to me & I don't take this lightly. Though I will safely bring light to the shadows, with it with love, joy and compassion.

And as I free myself from any limitations passed onto me, others see what's possible for themselves. I heal the wounds & embody the wisdom that was passed down.

As I free myself of suppressed energy stuck in my body, I see my mom's life transforming too. She is becoming free too.

I get to have more in my life than the women in my family could have even imagined was possible in their lifetime. I can safely express my truth and step into my new growth edges because of them.

I'm here to tell you, your voice matters. You make a difference in the world. Step into your power. Activate your voice. Listen to the wisdom of your body. Trust your intuition. Communicate with love. The wounds and wisdom of previous generations are present in our bodies. We get to listen and tune into these wounds and alchemize them into wisdom, rather than avoiding or shutting down. The truth is, we have all the answers within. We get to heal these old stories and create more for our lives than what our elders could have even imagined. There's endless possibilities of healing available to us if we quiet the mind and listen to our truth.

We get to heal these old stories and create more for our lives than what our elders could have even imagined.

**There's endless possibilities of healing available to us if we quiet the mind and listen to our truth.**

# MEDITATION III

take a deep breath in
exhale.
bless the space to your left and right

take a deep breath in,
exhale.
bless the space above, below, and all around you

take a deep breath in,
exhale,
bless yourself within

one hand on your heart, one on your stomach
feel and bless your heart, your inner purpose, your fire, your stomach, your intuition, your gut knowing, your inner compass.
take a deep breath in and exhale.

call in joy
call in liberation
call in rest
believe in every cell of your body that the deepest wishes of your heart are possible without fear, without hesitation

# SANCTUARIES

## IN YOURS, I FOUND MINE

## SANCTUARIES:
## In Yours, I Found Mine

*Sanctuaries* was created to support South Asian survivors to feel seen and know they are not alone and to hold their stories with kindness, dignity, and care. It also aims to deepen the understanding of community, cultural, and legislative leaders and members about the unique experiences and challenges faced by South Asian survivors.

Each storyteller in the anthology received support through a combination of a 5-week academy, personalized coaching, editing assistance, and compensation for their time. The collection is not only an act of care but also a critical contribution to research, bringing much-needed depth and nuance to South Asian survivors' lived experiences.
As storyteller Navi Kaur beautifully puts it, "Numbers tell you who, what, when, and how [gender-based violence happens]. Stories tell you why."

## South Asian SOAR

South Asian SOAR (Survivors, Organizations, & Allies — Rising) is a national network of 100+ survivors, 40+ organizations, and allies. SOAR was founded in 2021 to prevent and end gender-based violence in the South Asian diaspora in the US by cultivating survivor leadership, increasing capacity for frontline advocates, and shifting culture through research and storytelling.

southasiansoar.org

STORIES ARE
SANCTUARIES.

IN THESE,
WE INVITE YOU
TO FIND YOUR OWN.

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