

ISSN 2582 6352

Issue 4.2 June 2022



# THE UNIVERSE Journal

A Quarterly Peer-Reviewed Open Access Multidisciplinary e-Journal

Editor-in-Chief: C. P. Pathak

An International Quarterly Peer-Reviewed Open Access e-Journal +

<https://www.theuniversejournal.com/index.php>  
<https://www.theuniversejournal.com/edboard.php>  
[https://www.theuniversejournal.com/current\\_issue.php](https://www.theuniversejournal.com/current_issue.php)  
[https://www.theuniversejournal.com/join\\_us.php](https://www.theuniversejournal.com/join_us.php)

**ISSN** INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INTERNATIONAL CENTRE  
**ISSN: 2582-6352**

## Hridi

an Indian artist and writer

currently based in Antwerp, Belgium.

### Sketches from a Delta

I've made a mistake- in the past two weeks, I swallowed stories like a cow swallows grass on a pasture, with the instinctive certainty that it is doomed to starve the rest of its life. Yes, I devoured at least fifty stories this way, night and day, from books, audiobooks, movies, and finally, people. Why, I do not know. But now they are beginning to flow into one another, like water in aquarelles. Exiled into a life far from spoken words, these stories have become as indispensable to my survival as the groceries I buy. But even so, it was wrong to gulp down so many. For now, it has become necessary to speak, one way or other.

I have been wandering in a maze of languages for over twenty years now. Born to the fertile soil of a country where languages and rivers form their deltas in an offering to the endless, I know worship has no words, only music. My family belongs to the Eastern end of the subcontinent where they speak Bangla, my grandparents even further away, from the land of deltas across the border. But I was born far on the western coast, in the rain-tossed city of surf and insomnia- Mumbai. At four, my parents relocated again, to the desert plains of Rajasthan. A childhood was spent thrashed between three tongues, none my own- Hindi, Bangla, English. Returning to Mumbai again at the edge of adolescence, my palate spiced up with snatches of a dozen other languages- Marathi, Assamese, Punjabi, Gujarati, Oriya, Sylheti, Sanskrit... The local trains of the city afforded a new dialect: the Bombay Hindi, a blend of many scattered languages, largely Marathi and Hindi, seasoned with the fast pace of life in this city, garnished with its many shattered dreams. Years later, for the love of a dead artist and a man, I learnt French. Today, I live a continent and a sea away from where I grew up, in a city that speaks yet another tongue- Dutch- a cluster of words that manages to alienate me every day from the world I live in, for I understand it not. Yet, that is only half my exile. The rest is self-imposed.

It is a strange thing, when you thirst the utterance of your lover's words with every atom of your body, but cannot read his letter, that is the torment this language brings upon me, this language Urdu. Like the perfume that drives you mad yet you cannot touch the body it belongs to, thus have the words of this melodious tongue haunted me for months now. But I digress completely, I only wanted to tell you about last evening, it is merely my indecision of which language to narrate in. Perhaps best in the one it occurred. And Urdu is neither here nor there, I wouldn't think of it if not for the chance conversation with Bahar yesterday. But since the discussion came up, let me clarify in the beginning, I am a painter. Words are merely my hobby, so pray, do not take me seriously.

Tired of the silence of the passing months, I decided to spend the evening differently yesterday. I'm member of an expats' group here and they had a drinks' night at a bar near my place; I went there hoping to replenish my bag of experiences after a tiring workday. What I found was a treasure chest of cultures. Never in my life before have I sat at a table talking to a Colombian, Mexican, Iranian, Indian, Belgian, Lebanese, Briton, Brazilian and Cypriot during the course of a single evening. So now you know why the maze of languages...or the confluence.

Of the subtle chiaroscuro such bars notoriously cast on the faces of their customers, I shall say nothing except that they perhaps made my companions more unreal and fascinating than broad daylight would have allowed. The beers were merely catalysts. The first question in such meets that everyone asks the next person is "You are...?", expecting something simple like your name and country of origin. Yet you will agree with me that "You are...?" is the best of acrobatics between question and answer that exists. I could add that *I am* the girl who is baffled by the sudden storm

and snow in the middle of April, a month everyone in this strange land agrees belongs to “Spring” supporting with a flourish towards the blooming trees, so that all of a sudden all that is left of the season of love is a carpet of fallen petals across every street in the city. The next morning even that is gone, the assiduous cleaners of daybreak having removed the remnants of pleasure from a day promising much business.

But I didn't say any of this. I prefer listening. I had arrived in a colosseum of loneliness. Do not get me wrong, it was not an unhappy gathering, but the most jovial I'd stepped into in years. For each shadow in the room was seeking company, a few laughs, a conversation they could a part of. A monument where in the eerie pinkish stage-lights of the back of a bar was performed a farce of truth; every face whispered a tale of being stranded far from warmth, every hand trying to reach out to one, anyone, who understands. I, the amateur collector of stories, wanted to listen. To the girl who crossed the Atlantic for love, the man in the yellow jumper who left everything for a marriage that didn't last; what lasted were his two children who he cannot live without. Hence, in this castle of aloneness, he has chosen to build his world. The conversation with Bahar, the Iranian girl, came up when she told me of her fear of losing her language, of not hearing Farsi in the streets, of the terror it struck in her heart thinking of her family a thousand miles away who have become used to a life of which she no longer is a part, of her parents who grow older every day in her absence, of the moments she could not share with all those she loved in that faraway land, for me only a distant paradise of miniature art and Persian poetry, yet another contour on the map.

“I am from Columbia,” announced the drawling heavy Spanish accent of the beautiful lady on my left. The accent reminded me of the haunting fragrance of mahua blossoms. Spring is leaving in my country, far away, the mountains and forests enraptured in the fiery shades of the flame-of-the-forest, the golden *amaltas*, the bold *shalmali*, the shy yet reckless coral bloom... The earth there is a deep red. They named a colour after the soil of my land- Indian Red; I use it often in my paintings, mixed with linseed and turpentine... But she was speaking, I should listen. She had met the love of her life in a dance-club on a holiday in her country. A practising lawyer then, she left her large and loving family behind, her career behind, for this man, who met her people only twice. Cornered in a life of long lonely hours, few colours, an unknown language, and many stereotypes, every morning she wakes up reminding herself, “This is home now.” Gabriela, her only friend, was the cheerful Mexican with few regrets. Well-travelled, the world is her oyster and she loves her life here with her pretty Belgian wife.

Anne is another story. She is from this little country, although not from Antwerp. But she lives in China. She went there with her boyfriend who migrated for work, then falling in love with the country, she chose (quoting her) “China over him”, deciding to stay back when his contract got over and he moved to Germany. Now, for six years she's been living in that vast country, and only because of the pandemic, has returned to be with her family for a while.

One would think people migrate for work, for war. Yet every other person in that room was here because they loved, and loved bravely. It scares me what the heart can do. I thought of getting another beer, but poor artists cannot afford such luxuries.

Today I am trying to think where love has brought *me*. It's a box better not opened. But I would like to love life a little more bravely. The scents from last evening still colour my nostrils; the mellow drunkenness of the neon lights, the gibbous moon on the walk home, the returning warmth after the sudden cold wave, all refuse to leave my senses. My footsteps slow near the magnificent Sint Carolus Borromeus church, alight like a divine creature on this dimly-lit spring night in a city that I cannot understand. Across that threshold is the shrine of art of this land. I think of the artist who brought me here, an ambitious man who four centuries ago breathed life into these buildings for my imagination- Peter Paul Rubens. I came here chasing his legacy.

Entering my apartment, the sudden electric glare of the tube light feels momentarily unnerving. I warm some leftover spaghetti for dinner, and open my laptop to finish the half-watched movie of the day before. *Antareen*- it is the story of two people who don't know each other's name or address, only communicating over telephone, touching each other's lives nevertheless. I check my phone. Two messages. My mother has wished me goodnight. The man with the two

kids has texted he is happy to have met me. What do people mean when they say they are happy to have met you? Will you touch, embrace, or merely graze by, each on a different solitary path?

I suddenly remember it has been almost a month since I saw the horizon and a sunset. The last time was on a boat on the Scheldt. A man told me once, "You are the horizon of all my desires." I believed him. Of that thin line, they speak a lot; *the line separating the divine from the earthly*, the poet said. Beyond that line is my home.

Behind me, miles away, a continent and an ocean away, my little sister waits for my call each night, frothing with all the news from school. I am my mother's closest confidant, yet I can barely hear all she wants to tell me. My friends are scattered around the world, my best friend blocked my number last month. I have had three lovers and failed each of them. At the end of the day, all that awaits me is a canvas and some colours. I am trying to paint a world I cannot grasp, a fast river forever leaving me behind. The pear tree in the courtyard outside my window was full of white blossoms two weeks ago. Then the storm came. The flowers left, but it is green now. The barrenness of winter is gone, spring half-lived, summer to look forward to.