

ISSN: 2582 6352

ISSUE 4.3 Sept-2022



THE UNIVERSE Journal

A Quarterly Peer-Reviewed Open Access Multidisciplinary e-Journal

Poetry | Fiction | Articles | Research | Interviews

Editor-in-chief: C.P.Pathakk

An International Quarterly Refereed 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/join_us.php

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INTERNATIONAL CENTRE

ISSN: 2582-6352

Lilies

Samruddhi

I have a secret buried in my daughter's room.

She won't stand for it if she knows. Her eyes would direct a loathing glare towards my bored expression and folded hands silhouetted against the door frame, the second she discovers my sneaky visits. But she can't stop me. I am unable to stop myself after trying to erase the habit several times. On occasion, I wonder if it matters that I keep it a secret anymore. Tending secrets is also my habit now. Mother would disapprove- she had raised me to never tell a lie.

Today, I have had the itch to indulge the secret since dawn. I make my excuses that it's pouring torrents. I need to check if new leakages have appeared or whether the window is closed- otherwise her entire room will turn into a pool. I open the door quietly, using pressure from my shoulder because monsoon always makes the wooden door expand and grate against the floor as it opens. I don't like how the room is neat and clean- almost a degree too much and it should smell musty but a stale metallic tang and stench of rotten grass mixed with sulphuric egg hits me. Faint blackish brown stains cover the wall under the old broken air-conditioner. It was all that accumulated water on the terrace, my girl had said when the leakage first appeared. She had yelled at first then pleaded with me to get it fixed, fill up the gaps between the wall and the air-con unit but I had told her it's hard getting anyone to come take a look at it these days. The air-con technicians in suburban Mumbai say ask the electrician. The electrician says ask the contractor and so on. She had pouted and spent the day rolled up like a porcupine. I shook my head- what an overreaction... and got on with the day.

I fold the urge to go to the place where the secret beckons now and tuck the itch in a pocket. I open the nearest window. Her room has three but is without fail, swathed in darkness at all times of day closed inside colossal concrete the size of Jack's magical beanstalk. I never asked before but now I wonder how she got any work done. She would need an owl's sight to look at anything here. Sometimes, when I opened the door without putting a shoulder to it, she wouldn't hear the door's loud noise because of her headphones. The sight of her face barely illuminated in the laptop's blue light accelerated my irritation so quickly that I would begin yelling as soon as I entered. She would retaliate as soon as the headphones came off.

Raindrops slant in the monsoon but today, the wind is tossing them away from her window. I turn around. The darkest wall with no interruption, slowly comes to life in pastels, green hues and every range of jewel-toned purple tints. I hadn't glanced in the room once when she began taping the A4 pages carefully one winter so I imagine her focused back and arms covered with paint, tearing pieces of double-sided tape and checking the pages' alignment every few minutes. When had she come to obsess over lilies so much? I hadn't asked. I stare at the methodical puzzle of pages now. She said not to worry because the tape could come off easily without ruining the white paint. I had asked her where she got the inspiration from. It was some French Impressionist and his series of oil paintings. She had seen it online and the colours wouldn't leave her mind, permanent stains seeping into soul. At least that's what I imagine it was like for her.

Wouldn't I know best?

I had looked up the originals on some museum's website. Hindsight made me conclude they weren't half as impressive as my daughter's pieces. My own assessment surprised me because I had never been one of those 'biased' mothers. Maybe my frequent trips with the secret buried in this room, were altering how I think. Maybe this is what I always believed but couldn't recognise it. I move to examine the other walls. Shelves full of hair products, books in hexagons, fairy lights and two frames of Japanese calligraphy which my daughter had learnt and written

herself, hang patiently. I should have asked what the Japanese strokes of characters meant. The golden-tinted bulb with its marble base sits waiting to be lit. I remember how she had hinted to gift it on her birthday because her room felt so bare, how I had understood her circuitous words only when she had spelled her disappointment aloud after opening the gift I actually gave.

I open the lid of a candle which smells like pancakes, thick unlit wicks. Has she been saving this for a special occasion? A succulent in its pot looks carved from grey - green stone beside the lamp. She had begged me to buy plants- did I know it made a room lively, she reiterated. I had let her keep a real potted one but it withered within three months- proof that she couldn't take care of living things so I forbade her the next time. It was my mother's logic- she had made me return a cat I found on the street. At least I hadn't managed to cause any harm to it. Mother said it would be fine. I remember never seeing it again.

My itch for the secret is at highest pitch. I tend to forget about it the moment I see those lilies and then the itch comes on like a fever. I have to marinate in the delirious mire before it reveals itself. Every time, it hops and skips. The secret's refuge, makes me hunt for it. My girl's hair ties are scattered in unexpected places. Where does it hide now? Pieces of a claw clip come apart, one sock, a phone case with faded sharpie ink, a discarded pen, an empty jar of lip balm. Just when I think I can't take it anymore and something rises, blocks the breath in my chest, I open a drawer and there it is- her lavender hairbrush. I check if it still has plenty of her long hair stuck in it. Once I had made the mistake of throwing away her owl figurine and I couldn't find the secret or travel back for weeks. So I know better than to clean this brush. Everything must be as is. Or maybe something else makes the secret work.

Shouldn't I know it best because I know her best?

I sweep the thought away hastily and touch the brush. Is it within a second or a minute that the bristles engulf me into darkness too bright and spit either body or conscious inside the tinted memory? This one is per usual, different than the last. It feels cool, smooth, translucent as glass or water. The last one was velvety, satiny, creamy. My

daughter has to be here, I simply can't see her yet. Hiccups click in the closed air like someone is trying to contain and smother their sobs from bursting out. My hands grasp for a long time before finding her head. The hiccups stop as if she is suddenly afraid. When she looks up at me, her face breaks.

'Why did you say it's okay to not have friends?'

'Why did you say you have also never had any friends?'

'I told you I can't go on like this!'

'Why does everyone I meet hate me?'

'Why don't I ever meet kind people?'

'Why don't I have any people?'

'What is wrong with me?'

At first, I used to answer or try to answer all her questions frantically, words rolling into each other, turning to gibberish. Then I began calmly listing the answers in order of her questions after my visits turned frequent. Then I infused empathy into my tone, hoping she would see that I wanted to relate to her. This time, I say nothing and stroke her hair because none of my actions have made any difference so far. The hallway light illuminates a strip underneath her door. She says her stomach hurts. I rub it and ask if she wants to eat anything even though I know she will shake her head. I stroke her hair, back and stomach in turn. She makes me cross my legs and lays in my lap, frequently sniffing.

I don't want it to happen so soon but her heartbeats slow and I am pulled back in the darkness then a high strong violet light consumes me and I am spit on the floor of my daughter's room now bathed in dusk's light. One of the corners of her water lily painting wilts, yellow square of double tape visible. Every trip is the same- I don't know when the repetition will stop or what it is that I do to make it switch to the next memory. I have given up figuring it out.

I realize the darkness in her room is still cloying, eating, disintegrating my skin. Just like inside the memory.

*

Since her seventeenth birthday twelve years ago, my daughter does her cardio and weights or pilates every evening seven on the dot. She is just as religious about weekend off-days. She loathes being snobby about food but has one rule: that it must taste good. She crows that her parameters are wider than average. Sometimes, I wonder if she has this balance because she has watched my plumpness and that's all she remembers. I want to defend myself when I catch her in these moments that my mother had whittled any childish ampleness I possessed and before her birth, my husband's family had deemed me statuesque. Mother had leaned back in the chair, pleased at this.

My daughter has always liked to come flying and squish my middle. I wonder sometimes, where she got this excessive expression of love. Her father and I, we discourage PDA. Reeks of artifice. I remember he used to bring hundreds of toys, encyclopaedias, atlases, storybooks, candies and chocolates every time he went for business trips, gone most of the year. On the international calls, I would remind him- she likes sour more than sweet, she likes red not yellow, she enjoys play-dough more than legos. I would bite my pinky nail till it bled perpetually, until he returned and laid out the gifts. Only if her face lit up, would the anxious bile slide back down.

I never felt like eating breakfast much but Mother used to say my body would suffer if I skip the first meal.

I force cereal down and glance the window framing still grey clouds. They seem on tip toe, expectant. I half-heartedly try to avoid going to my daughter's room, drown myself in cleaning but the clouds hold my attention. A vase falls down but doesn't shatter because of the carpet underneath. Recently, a marble box had slipped from my daughter's hand. Glittering pearly smithereens covered the uncarpeted part of floor. Mother had given it to me on my wedding day. I said nothing to my daughter but a crest rose high inside. My hands closed to fists. My daughter apologised, kept on

repeating it until I snapped at her to stop. I brought a broom and pan, without looking at her face, muttered it was okay. Not a sound came from her. Later, I was furious at the crimson print under her foot. Cleaning the wound and bandaging it, I rebuked her unrestrained. She could have said something! A yell of pain at least. The wound looked deep. Why had she not ... Over the month, I would chide her and she would peer with those large eyes. I didn't understand then. Mutinous? Resentful? I wonder if I will understand today.

In these moments, I'm grateful that the secret exists. The object that hides it, might change in nature but it is always waiting to be found- like my daughter is still playing hide-and-seek. I would refuse to participate in her infantile games but I want to play them now, more than ever.

Feeling drained out of my body, I open her room, forgetting to put my shoulder to door. Today's trip is short, abrupt, unfulfilled.

In childhood, she always wanted to wear hair past her back. I told her to keep it short and swishy. I really couldn't be bothered to braid it in the morning on top of waking her up, checking if her homework was finished, ironing her uniform, polishing shoes, making lunchbox-mine and hers along with our breakfasts. If I had to attend to her hair, I felt it would be the last straw that broke my back. Her father crashed on one of his friend's couch, then. We were smack in the middle of our separation. Every morning, I would notice her face light up for a second when I said I would pick her up after school or buy her that thing she had asked for yesterday, let her eat at that trendy place her classmates went to. I can't remember how many promises I kept. But my daughter would watch me with the same measure of hope every morning as I combed the wavy tangles into pouffy bursts of hair. She stood calmly, sometimes fiddled with her ribbon or school uniform as I made her hair look worse than before. Wish as I might, the secret, if it lets me travel that far back, like today, never gives me enough time to stay or do anything. The memory is too distant. Paper wrinkled, stained and burned around edges. So fragile that I don't dare touch, much less stroke

for fear it will crumble away. I wish I could figure out how it worked... I want to so badly see her wearing long hair.

*

My daughter had started up a new pattern once she hit puberty: locking her door. I had taken to standing stock still outside, trying to discern the tiniest of distortions in air, the most measly tinkles, crackle or chaffs. The thuds, garbled exclamations, crinkles of plastic, pen scratches, paper rips, heavy breaths- I thought they would comfort my anxiety but they only frustrated me to no end. The day I couldn't take anymore, I deliberately turned her doorknob. It didn't give so I pounded for minutes until she was embarrassed and compelled to open it.

The fight I still don't recall but later as she had been in tears, her mutters, incensed as she spit that there was such a thing as privacy. What did I think she had been doing exactly? It was more a rhetoric but I hissed 'dirty things' while staring at her laptop. She had a veneer of appal like I had insulted her. My hard face must have made her shift eyes. Her cheeks quivered like they were waiting to be slapped.

I scoff at myself now when this futile echo of our fight reaches back. 'Dirty things'? How laughable! What I had been angry at, the reason, the granulated fear, it was all bored into a well. The darkness in it had made me stumble but now I recognised the undercurrents- I was deathly afraid, she had grown up too fast, she would and probably already was doing all things adults do. She would soon walk alone and need me less and less. What would I do then?

I should have seen she didn't want to walk alone.

Later, I sifted through these shelves of memories, rusted, cobwebbed, stacked dangerously. After she went to college, I promised myself, then trained my mind. As soon as I became aware of my rage, I separated it and locked it in a box, only unfastened when alone or forgotten altogether. I remembered my mother's rage in bouts of childhood. It was agonising friction on my skin. Cane marks on my shin. The

burns till my elbow or cheek that stopped only when father reminded her that who would marry me if I was so disfigured.

*

The last time we ate together, I asked why she wasn't eating much nowadays. I told her- those fad diets don't ever work. She wouldn't look up from her empty plate that had only crumbs left. Yes, it was raining the entire month, unseasonably so, the seasons seems to have shifted, global warming and all, it made appetites smaller but she skipped meals yet snacked constantly. Or so she said, I never could see any food going inside her mouth. Small bowl of salad leaves and dinner was done. She didn't smile or reassure me when she looked up that day. Instead, she pointed to her temple and said it was all here. Straight serious face. I blinked twice and let it go. She had gone on 'diets' in her puberty once but it didn't last. I was sure it wouldn't last now. When she visited for holidays, she always slept in and it was normal for her to get up in the afternoons. I didn't pay much attention when she wouldn't step out of bed for periods. She stared at the platters I delivered but they were empty when I went to collect them. She would sneak out of her room at night because junk food wrappers always piled in the bin when I tidied in the mornings.

I remember suddenly fresh, a grin swelled over her face, loud, cutting cheek to cheek. Though I don't know what put it there. Will I touch the petal-softness frozen in that second if I reach out?

I dig boundaries in the kitchen and prepare an extravagant lunch- pasta, salad, bread, dips, custard. At one, I look around the empty dining chairs, pick at steaming heapfuls and seal the leftovers in the freezer. Just drizzles today. The leaden clouds started sobbing an hour before noon. I shoulder open my daughter's door.

Now that the familiar has been inscribed in deep layers of ink, I see what escaped notice before- tender green creepers enveloping the bars of one of her windows above the desk. My daughter has immersed a sweet-potato completely in water, the metal container crusted at the sides with water levels, sitting patiently over the sill. I can't decide how I feel about this defiance. I should have known about it.

Ants march on the opposite windowless wall. Even though the floor is swept and mopped everyday, roaches the size of thumbs, scuttle where surface lets them. One earring-sized soldier timidly moves antennae, stopping near my toe. I step forward. It scurries off.

I press the petals of her succulent under my thumb and fingers. It had been fake, yet looked fresh at any given time. A relief. The A4 papers with many forms of lilies and gardens are peeling at numerous corners now. Watercolours on them weep. The emeralds and amethysts have bled into each other because of monsoon's humidity. I rub at the pastel parts of the lilies and I like this sensation best- the stain doesn't come off for days. Some of the leaves and parts of stem on the sweet-potato creeper have yellowed and browned. The bedsheets still retain a dent of her body. A roach stops, tentative at the foot of those floral sheets. Seems like it looks straight at me, then in two seconds, vanishes back to the corner. A muggy breeze strides in behind timorous raindrops.

She desperately wanted to make those Native-American dream-catchers at twelve years. She moaned that they would trap her bad dreams. I was writing my paper on a project our team was working on that year. I had waved her away and said she could look it up on the internet. Her growl had entirely slipped out of notice.

I finger the feathers, the pristine shell-toned dreamcatcher behind her bed.

Analyse, peruse, understand. Even the smallest of details from what she had left behind. At a point it seemed that all I ever came to know of her was after I couldn't touch her. At this point, I believe I still don't know her as well as I thought. Shame grips and tightens my navel, spreads past endurance.

I dive deeper in her paintings and the internet's vortex. The French Impressionist's recorded interviews about his work, had announced that the series of Water Lilies are meant as an illusion: this endless whole of water without bank or horizon.

It was never about the lilies, apparently.

People say that when you stand in front of a water-lily painting, there's always magic afoot. You will surely be transported somewhere. It will change. Either you or something else- it's unclear.

It was always about the lilies. Just never only about them. My daughter knows. So why is her room still empty?

It's approximately three years, seven months, thirteen days and nine hours since the secret made itself known. This time the portal is hidden in the painting. Not in the water lilies but in their reflection over the pond.

I dive into a new tinged memory. So vulnerable, so delicate yet the edges are jagged, irreparable. A stench of stagnant lilies. The scent sends vibrations, I could always smell my daughter- not the odour her memory carries.

This must be where they had stayed during the vacation. My daughter is in the precise centre of the small room. Clothes are strewn on every bed but hers. Her phone buzzes with one birthday message from a clothes brand. She apparently has a discount code. I am not myself anymore. This is also new. I look down and feel my daughter's hands instead of mine. Her body feels so weighed down that it's hard to lift a finger. A retro alarm clock beats on the make-shift table- stack of books, beside her bed. Each tick bears a new agony.

Long tick. When did it go wrong?

She/I chew(s) at the lower lip. Tastes of blood.

Short tick. Emptiness rising in the throat.

Long tick. Why doesn't anyone understand?

Short tick. I need it to stop.

She/I pick(s) at the cuticle of the toenail. Rip. It doesn't tear clean. Uneven, transparent minuscule strips of skin.

Long tick. No-one cares.

Short tick. I have nothing and no-one.

She/I scratch(es) pimples on the back and only stop(s) when blood draws.

Long tick. Why?

Short tick. What's the point?

She/I walk(s).

Tick. Picket fence.

Tick. Lavender. Clouds. Forgotten dreams.

Tick. Grey. Foam. Shimmers. Crests.

Tick. The first wave already comes to her/my knees.

Tick. The second engulfs her/my head.

Tick. The third beats down her/my back. She/I fall(s).

Tick. The fifth invades rends, ruptures, torrents.

Bays and Seas all unite here. Oceans are so generous- they fill everything with themselves.

Her/my chosen element.

Water climbs up in gurgles and fizzes, whistles into plugs. Every crevice fills up. She/I pretend(s) her/my hollow is occupied with so much substance that she/I fear(s) it will overflow.

Purple lights over moss, undulate in shimmers. The last thing I can think about, see or remember. My daughter scarcely looks like quartz and jade but I am beyond certain she is inside them. She is here.

*

I should have sent her to the swimming lessons.

She went in the ocean on the same day I had carried her into this world. It seemed like she was saying her life should be treated as a void, because that's what it felt like to her. The ocean had battered her until she was found. I couldn't feel relief or belief even after the Uniform said: at least she hadn't sunk like a shipwreck in the Arabian Sea or she would never have been found. I memorized each shadow and granule of the place where they say she was found.

I opened her room first thing and that's when the secret portal appeared: a miracle. Back from her mnemonic bubble now, I hungrily search my daughter's room for the secret. Hairbrush, journal, shower-head, keychain, bookend, lucky charm. It's taking longer than usual. Curtains?

Five times, the sun rises through one of her windows and limp pieces of hair hang out of my bun, I have removed my cardigan. My stomach is bloated. My chest, shrunken. This hasn't happened before. Ever. The secret would always be found within a day. Dread creeps under my bones. The secret has its own rules.

What if it stopped existing?

But it can only stop if its purpose is fulfilled. My hands rub the floor.

I go back to what I saw beneath closed eyes.

She is pointing at her temple/ I nod hastily.

She doesn't want to get out of bed/ I wring my hands.

She keeps her hair short even though she's no longer in school/ I clutch at my side.

She looks at me, unseeing. Glazed eyes, broken bones/ I am a marionette whose strings are cut at the end of show.

Her breath is cold where it should be warm/ I shriek and carve and cleave myself with her.

How can I leave her alone after knowing it all?

*

The secret buried in my daughter's room is collapsed. Dissolving into a beam of sunlight that shines unearthly through still clouds and an earnest window. This shaft finds the water lilies half concealed under droopy paper. The water lilies erupt.

*

I no longer touch the secret to begin again. I dive inside the grey, her shadows and granules sweep back from the shore. Now I sit beside my daughter just beyond the amethyst-emerald light.

*