

**FEARLESS
LOVE**

ANTHOLOGY

FEARLESS LOVE

Published by Mohini Books
on 6 September 2019

www.mohini.no

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ISBN 978-82-93637-03-5 (Print version)
ISBN 978-82-93637-02-8 (E-book version)

Cover image by Balbir Krishan

*Celebrating the 6 September 2018
Indian Supreme Court Verdict
on LGBTQ+ Rights*



Introduction

by Vikram Kolmannskog and Stefan Storm

‘Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal, shall be punished with imprisonment for life, or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine.’

Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code was introduced by the British colonisers in 1860. Although vague in wording, ‘carnal intercourse against the order of nature’ has mostly been understood to mean non-procreative sex, and the law has mainly worked as a criminalisation of homosexuality. After introducing Section 377 in India, the British introduced similar legislation in other colonies. The law is still in effect in many of the ex-colonies, and in some it is actively used in persecution of LGBTQ+ persons.

Since the early 2000s mobilisation against Section 377 has grown steadily in India. It has been a long, winding road in the legal system. Finally, on 6 September 2018, the Indian Supreme Court delivered a 493-pages-long verdict on LGBTQ+ rights and love. ‘Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India’ is arguably one of the most progressive and comprehensive verdicts that the world has seen in this field of law. While many describe the verdict as a decriminalisation of homosexuality, it is worth noting the words of Justice Chandrachud: ‘Decriminalisation is a first step. The constitutional principles on which it is based have application to a broader range of entitlements.’ LGBTQ+ Indians are entitled to full constitutional protection,

including equality and non-discrimination.

LGBTQ+ Indians have allied with various other movements, including the women's movement, and have emphasised intersectionality and the connections between various struggles. The LGBTQ+ mobilisation has also been formulated as part of a wider mobilisation for the right to love, whether it is same-sex love or love across castes and communities. The Supreme Court judges recognise these and other connections.

In celebration of the Indian Supreme Court verdict, Mohini Books decided to create an anthology. An open call was published on webpages and social media, welcoming anyone to submit a text and in particular queer people with a connection to India or the Global South. We asked for texts that focused on ideas and/or experiences of fearless love, and we published quotes from the verdict on social media, hoping they would inspire people in their writing and to submit a text. We also reached out directly to people in our networks, asking them to submit texts.

The mobilisation against Section 377 in India has not been restricted to litigation and lawyers but has been broad and included artists, academia, activists, and media. The verdict reflects this by referring to fact-finding reports, narratives of persecution, academic writing, poetry, and more. The verdict shows inclusiveness in both form and content, a value that is arguably the best of both Indian culture and queer culture. Inclusiveness has also been a guiding value for us in the creation of this anthology. We decided to accept all the submissions we received. As editors we have provided feedback, but it has not been a requirement that contributors take this into consideration and submit a revised version. Some contributors have, some have not. The contributors self-identify as men, women, cis, trans, gender non-conforming, gay, straight and with various other sexual and gender labels. Many are Indian or Indian-origin, but there are also contributors with Scandinavian, Pakistani, Sudanese and other national backgrounds. Texts are in the form of poetry, essay, short story, song lyrics, and letter. The order in which they appear here is random, arranged by the initial of the contributor's first name, starting with Ahmed and ending with Sheba. These are interspersed with quotes from the beautiful verdict.

This has been a labour of love for all involved. We have made this anthology available digitally for free – and as a printed book at production cost. We hope readers will appreciate the anthology, spread it as much as possible, and consider supporting an LGBTQ+ organisation in India or elsewhere. The struggle for our rights continues, but celebrating and practicing love should always be important components of the struggle.

*‘More than 2,000 years
of Indian literature
[demonstrates] that same-sex
love has flourished, evolved
and been embraced in various
forms since ancient times.’*

JUSTICE CHANDRACHUD

referring to the work of Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai

Pounds’ Clang

by Ahmed Umar

Where should the line end?

By the corner of my eye? A little longer? Thick? Or just Nefertiti-like?

I’ve always believed we’re related. We look somewhat alike, or at least I wish we do.

I stand before my mirror, a soul slowly releasing itself from the fangs of toxic masculinity, carefully on its way towards comfort. Or as outsiders may say, femininity.

I go for the thick and black eyeliner. I gild my eyelids, shoulders, waist, legs, feet, all the way down to my toes.

Like a Sudanese bride, I crown myself with a headpiece made of faux-golden British pounds. It is believed to bring fortune and prosperity.

As I walk, the pounds clang, calling my soul to dance and pride.

I gracefully parade around Oslo, dance in honor of my mothers, challenging my brothers and shaming my fathers.

I feel beautiful.

My insecurities retreat under an assault of hugs, compliments and selfies with strangers.

I feel safe. Love is making my skin thicker.

I walk home.

I hear them laughing.

I look to the left, I see them laughing,
their phones aimed at my golden feet.
I look straight ahead, keep walking, the laughter is louder.
I look to the left, still laughter, phones aimed at my face.
I look straight ahead, keep walking, the laughter is louder and louder.

I stop.
I look to the left. I raise my middle finger.
I look straight ahead, keep walking.
I don't look to the left.
I walk.
Someone taps my left shoulder.

'Why are you raising your finger at us?' arrogantly asking.
'Why haven't you asked for permission to film me? Why are you laughing?'
'You don't want attention, huh?'
Two men, twice my size.

My golden pounds have a different clang.

I fight back, I hit, and when the moment I've waited for comes, I kick.

I'd rather be murdered by them than by my pride.
One holds me, the other hits me from behind.
I fall to the ground, feeling dizzy, tasting my own blood.
They run away, leaving my body in the middle of the street.
I call the police.
I call the media.
I go to the clinic, glue my wound, check my head, making sure I'm good to go.
I arrive at home, shower, re-apply the thick eyeliner, re-gild my eyelids, shoulders, waist, legs, feet, all the way down to my toes.
I go to the Oslo Pride closing party.
I get on the highest podium and dance until dawn.

*'Section 377 criminalizes
behaviour that does not
conform to the heterosexual
expectations of society. In doing
so it perpetuates a symbiotic
relationship between anti-
homosexual legislation and
traditional gender roles.'*

JUSTICE CHANDRACHUD

Meeting New Men

by Akhil Katyal

In the first meeting
I want to give them three lilacs
one stapler and a picture
of a giraffe

basically to say
it's okay to be confused
it will take some work
figuring each other out

can we take it slow

this way
I will know

the ones who stay
holding these oddities
in their hands
without dropping them
can take uncertainty
a small dose every day
and still phone
to say good-night

at our age
we're no longer
gifts to each other
we're labour come
in different colours

we've each had our
pasts desiccated
but lived to eat pie
in the summer

we've each
lived a little lie
that we've told no one

we've been wronger
than we had imagined
we would be

do you see

come, look at
this giraffe
craning his neck

to look on the other side
of the sun

didn't we all think
we'd be stronger

will you stay
will you stay
long enough to
want to stay longer

*'The effort to end
discrimination against gays
should be understood as a
necessary part of the larger
effort to end the inequality of
the sexes.'*

JUSTICE CHANDRACHUD

This poem is previously published in the Lihaaf Journal.

Misunderstood Love

by Akshay Sarkate

Funniest was the way I was introduced to you:

I was looking through your boyfriend's profile. I never knew you were in a relationship with him, and I used to say tons of things about you to him, LOL, dumb-ass me :P And I saw that you and I work in the same company.

I then talked to some of the mutual friends we had, one of them was my teammate, and another was a close friend of yours who also worked in the same company (Bengali chap whose name starts with S).

After pleading with this fellow, I finally got added to the WhatsApp group where you were a member.

After getting added, people were in a rage that I could be so partisan about you and that my very existence there was only because you were a member.

Later, I also got into a lot of negotiations with the members, but in the process made some good friends, acquaintances actually, like Tanu (a sweetheart who could not sugar-coat but always gave me right advise from day one).

Then one day people gave up and suggested that I should personally chat with you and not loiter around in the group. (Never understood why they were so defensive about the fact that you are engaged, as if I am going to breach into the existing relationship and snatch you from him.)

With your permission, I started PM with you over WhatsApp, and that's how it started.

Stay tuned to know how this slowly turned into The Obsession.

This is an excerpt from the blog misunderstoodlove.tumblr.com.

Fearless Loving: From Nowshirwan to Navej Singh Johar

by Arvind Narrain

‘[N]o species has been found in which homosexual behaviour has not been shown to exist, with the exception of species that never have sex at all, such as sea urchins and aphids.’

JUSTICE CHANDRACHUD
quoting Bruce Bagemihl

INTRODUCTION

On 6 of September 2018, the Supreme Court of India decriminalized the intimate lives of LGBT persons by ruling that Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code violates the right to equality, privacy and dignity. The judgment itself marked a culminating point of a 25-year-old socio-legal battle which began when AIDS Bedbhav Virodhi Andolan (ABVA) filed the first petition challenging Section 377. The journey involved the Naz petition which was filed in 2001, the judgment of the Delhi High Court decriminalizing LGBT lives in 2009, the setback of recriminalization in 2013 and the judgment in Navtej Singh Johar in 2018. The judgment in Navtej Singh Johar which recognizes the right to love of LGBT persons is the result of the hard work of the LGBT movement in India and the solidarity of other social movements.

The element which underlies the hard work of both changing social mindsets and making the court a hospitable space for LGBT people are the countless acts of fearless loving by innumerable persons. In Michel Foucault’s invocation, an element of what he calls fearless speech is speech which is a form of truth-telling. Fearless speech is speech which is being true to yourself, regardless of the danger to your own life. Fearless loving would involve being true to oneself in who and how one loves regardless of the risk of state prosecution or social ostracism. Innumerable people across the centuries have faced the risk of police prosecution, social

ostracism, blackmail and violence for daring to exercise the right to love. Here I will explore the idea of fearless loving in the Indian judicial record in both colonial and contemporary times and argue that the decision in Navtej Singh Johar vindicates the idea of fearless loving.

NOWSHIRWAN AND RATANSI

In a reported decision from the High Court of Sind in 1935, Nowshirwan Irani, a young Irani hotel owner, was charged with having committed an offence under Section 377 with a young lad aged around eighteen called Ratansi.

The prosecution story is that Ratansi visited the hotel and had tea there. Nowshirwan asks him why he had not come to the hotel for some time. Ratansi then went to the pier to take a boat, but on finding that he had no money came back to Masjid Street where he saw Nowshirwan standing on the road a little distance from the hotel. Nowshirwan asked Ratansi to come to his house and in his house as per the case of the prosecution, he 'locked the door and started taking liberties with the youngster who resented the overtures and wanted to go away'. 'Nowshirwan removed his trousers, loosened the trousers of Ratansi and made the lad to sit on top of his organ. Ratansi got up from his lap, but in the meantime Nowshirwan had spent himself, wiped his organ and put on his pants.'

The reason this incident came to light was that a police officer Solomon along with his friend Gulubuddin saw the incident through the keyhole, marched in and took both Ratansi and Nowshirwan to the police station and filed a case of Section 377 against Nowshirwan and got Ratansi to be the complainant.

The story of Nowshirwan and Ratansi is a story of sexual desire acting itself out between two men of different class backgrounds. The limited material present in the appellate decision gives us a clue that even the judge was convinced as to the consensual nature of the relationship. As the judge notes, 'Moreover the medical evidence militates against the story of a forcible connexion on the cot, the appellant who is a fairly hefty young man having intercourse in the manner stated originally. There is not the slightest symptom of violence on the hind part of the lad.' He concludes

that, 'If he was in the house of the accused behind locked doors, I have not the slightest hesitation in believing that he had gone there voluntarily.'

The judge's appreciation of the evidence seems accurate as the two parties consensually decide to go to Nowshirwan's room. The only reason why this consensual narrative becomes a non-consensual affair is because a police officer happens to witness it. If it were indeed a case of non-consensual sex, Ratansi would have approached the police, rather than the police chancing upon a case of non-consensual sex. The role of the policeman is crucial in converting a secret consensual rendezvous into a non-consensual act of carnal intercourse.

The story of desire secreted within the judicial narrative seems to be that Nowshirwan and Ratansi knew each other and therefore Nowshirwan makes the first move and asks Ratansi why he had not come to the hotel for some time. Ratansi after finishing his tea, leaves the hotel only to come back in the same direction. When he comes back, Nowshirwan is waiting on the road and asks him to come to his house. They seem to have some sort of pre-arranged code by which they signal to each other the desire to meet in Nowshirwan's room. Following this arrangement, they go to Nowshirwan's room. Due to a misfortune of an overzealous policeman or a policeman with a grudge, what should have been an intimate act between two consenting parties in their bedroom becomes a public scandal.

A consenting act between two men is twisted by the prosecution into a story of Ratansi being forced into having sex with Nowshirwan. It seems fair to accept the judicial interpretation that Ratansi is coerced by the police to pose as a complainant against the very person with whom he had earlier had a consenting sexual relationship. The fact that it is a consenting relationship does nothing to exculpate Ratansi from ironically becoming a victim of judicial ire. There is indeed a special fury reserved by the judge for Ratansi.

In the judge's words, '[Ratansi] appears to be a despicable specimen of humanity. On his own admission he is addicted to the vice of a catamite. The doctor who has examined him is of the opinion that the lad must have been used frequently for unnatural carnal intercourse.' In the course of

appreciating the medical evidence, the judge notes, 'There was not the slightest symptom of violence on the hind part of the lad.'

Thus the story of an encounter between two people of the same sex who desire each other, gets reduced in the judicial reading to the act of a perverse failed sexual connection. The use of terms like 'animal like' and 'despicable' places the sexual act within the framework of moral abhorrence.

One has to read the silence in the judicial text to hazard a guess as to the nature of the intimacy between Nowshirwan and Ratansi. The two knew each other and possibly had met before in Nowshirwan's room. Nowshirwan's room may possibly have been a space where the coercive heterosexism of the outside world could be dropped for the brief time which Nowshirwan and Ratansi spent with each other. That brief time they spent together may possibly have been a moment when they imagined a world not yet born and a time yet to come, when their desire would be accepted without a murmur. This is what is rudely interrupted when Solomon spies through the keyhole.

One can guess that their meeting together may have been noticed on earlier occasions by Solomon, hence alerting him to take action on that fateful day when Nowshirwan met Ratansi yet again. Solomon stands in for the willed heterosexism of the larger world or what Oscar Wilde would have called the 'unnatural virtue' in which the world abounds which will give no space for any growth of intimacy which challenges its own laws.

It is this fragile experiment of creating this little community of love outside the bounds of law's strictures and society's norms, which is set upon by society in the form of Solomon and then given the judicial imprimatur of a 'failed sexual connection'. The tragic story of Nowshirwan and Ratansi speaks to the absence of a certain vocabulary. The language of love and intimacy, longing and desire, and the expression of spontaneous bodily affection finds no safe habitation within the terms of the law. What law seeks to do is degrade this act of experimental creation of new forms of intimacy and limit its expression. The language of law has an impoverishing effect as it strips the physical act of its rich emotional connotations and reduces the act of human intimacy to a 'perverse failed sexual connection'. By stripping

the act of sex of its multiple meanings it produces Nowshirwan as a subject of the criminal law.

One could re-read Nowshirwan and Ratansi as unwitting frontiersmen in the history of the battle against Section 377 and among its first recorded tragic victims. In another register, Nowshirwan and Ratansi stand in for Oscar Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas, with Ratansi being forced to stand in as witness not just against Nowshirwan but also forced to deny a part of his own being in terms of his own part in creating that little community of love. Just as Oscar Wilde was betrayed by Alfred Douglas, so too Nowshirwan in his hour of greatest need is confronted by Ratansi who becomes the complainant against him. The story of Nowshirwan and Ratansi exemplifies the perversities of a law which turns lover against lover and converts the act of intimacy into the crime of carnal intercourse. It is also one of the first recorded instances in the judicial archive of when fearless loving gets targeted by the criminal law.

FEARLESS LOVING IN CONTEMPORARY TIMES

The tragedy is that the targeting of fearless loving is not merely a matter of archival interest but continues to be a concern of contemporary politics. Fact-finding reports produced in the contemporary era document the savage violations of dignity and personhood in contemporary times. The repression by the law did not, however, deter the continued and determined assertion of the right to love throughout the long history of Section 377.

An affidavit by Gautam Bhan filed before the Delhi High Court in the Naz case and also placed before the Supreme Court in Navtej's case, made the point about fearless loving in the face of criminalisation:

In my personal experience, and in my experience as a gay rights activist, our democratic society is accepting of LGBT persons and it is laws like Sec 377 which are intolerant and force LGBT persons to hide and to live in fear.

While society, friends and family are accepting of my sexuality and my boyfriend, I cannot be fully open about my identity and my relationship because I constantly fear arrest and violence by the police. Furthermore, sec 377 offends me personally because of sec

377 I feel like a second class citizen in my own country. The fact that gay people, like me, are recognised only as criminals is deeply upsetting and denies me the dignity and respect that I feel I deserve.

While Gautam Bhan due to his more privileged class background was fortunate in not facing persecution by the law, many others were not so lucky. As late as 3 November, 2013, 13 people were arrested under Section 377 in a small town in Karnataka called Hassan after police barged into the homes of members of the sexual minority community and arrested them. The testimonies of X, one of the arrested, show the impact of Section 377:

I was sleeping at home when at 12 o'clock at night on 3.11.2013, police came to my house and said there is a case for which I have to come to the police station. This is the first time that I have been arrested. I have never seen the inside of a police station or jail till now. I was outed to the media and this has caused me enormous shame and distress as my self-respect has been taken away. In jail we have been teased and told that we are homosexuals. People harass me and my friends on that account.

X was a part of the fledgling sexual minority community in Hassan associated with HIV/ AIDS intervention work. As part of his work in HIV/ AIDS prevention, X was involved in the distribution of condoms in the public parks. X was also visibly gender non-conforming which made him stand out in a small town like Hassan. There was thus a publicness to X's life as a sexual minority in Hassan which exposed him to the baleful eye of state prejudice. It was precisely this public nature of his life which exposed him to the possibility of state prosecution, which unfortunately became an actuality on that fateful night, six years ago.

If one were to peruse the record produced over the last 17 years before both the High Court and the Supreme Court there are innumerable such narratives of fearless loving. Perhaps another such instance worth narrating is the remarkable petition filed by 19 parents of LGBT persons who asserted that Section 377 was a deep violation of 'family values' and a threat to the ties of love which constitute family. As Vijaylaxmi Rai Chaudhari, mother of a gay man, stated on affidavit:

My child is living with the agony and disrespect of being penalised at any point of time under an unjust law. It stopped him from coming out for long. Even after he came out, he always felt insulted since he can't live his life equally celebrated and accepted by the law and the society. The thought that Anis could for no fault of his own be harassed by the state, makes Section 377 totally unacceptable for any otherwise law-abiding, just and self-respecting citizen.

Ms. Chaudhari embodies a mother's love for her son Anis which extended to a public support for his right to life without the constant threat of Section 377. Ms. Chaudhari was unafraid to make public her commitment to a better world for her child through fighting publicly for a repeal of Section 377, thereby illustrating another aspect of fearless loving.

VINDICATION OF FEARLESS LOVING BY THE SUPREME COURT

What was extraordinary about the Supreme Court judgment in Navtej Singh Johar is that it was an empathetic response to this history of needless suffering. J. Chandrachud specifically noted that 'the law deprived them [LGBT persons] of the simple right as human beings to live, love and partner as nature made them. The human instinct to love was caged by constraining the physical manifestation of their sexuality. Gays and lesbians were made subordinate to the authority of a coercive state'. Justice Chandrachud concluded poignantly, 'Civilization has been brutal'.

He went on to ask, 'Does the Constitution allow a quiver of fear to become the quilt around the bodies of her citizens, in the intimacies which define their identities?' The caging of the 'human instinct to love' is a key part of the 'wrong of history' in J. Chandrachud's opinion. In fact in J. Chandrachud's opinion, the right to love emerges as a key aspect of what it is to be human. He cites Leila Seth to make the point: 'What makes life meaningful is love. The right that makes us human is the right to love.'

However, for J. Chandrachud the right to love has deeper implications. As he puts it, 'What links LGBT individuals to couples who love across caste and community lines is the fact that both are exercising their right to love at enormous personal risk and in the process disrupting existing lines of social authority.' In J. Chandrachud's conclusion, 'right to love [is] not just a

separate battle for LGBT individuals, but a battle for all.’

The Navtej Singh Johar judgment is a vindication of the idea of fearless loving. The Supreme Court has removed the cloak of illegality which shrouded the lives of LGBT citizens. However, the Navtej Singh Johar judgment does not yet mean that falling in love across the normative borders of gender and sexuality will automatically become an accepted part of the daily reality of Indian social life.

In this context it would be useful to advert to Dr. Ambedkar’s formulation on constitutional morality which is the heart of the judgment: ‘Constitutional morality is not a natural sentiment. It has to be cultivated. We must realize that our people have yet to learn it.’ The key point made by Dr. Ambedkar is that societal morality can interfere with the dignity of minority groups. The way prejudice on grounds of caste, gender or sexuality can operate in society can make a mockery of the constitutional promise of equality. The transformation of Indian society on the lines of a greater respect for the rights of dignity, equality and expression of the individual person is still very much a work in progress. Indian democracy in the constitutional sense of social and economic democracy is very much a work in progress.

Indian society still has a long way to go before it can embody the values of the Indian Constitution in terms of treating all persons without discrimination, especially on grounds of caste, gender and sexuality. Navtej Singh Johar embodies a transformative vision and has initiated a process of changing a hidebound and regressive social morality into a constitutional morality. In making that shift fearless loving still has an important role to play.

‘Section 377 is based on a moral notion that intercourse which is lustful is to be frowned upon. It finds the sole purpose of intercourse in procreation. In doing so, it imposes criminal sanctions upon basic human urges [...].’

JUSTICE CHANDRACHUD

Jalal

by Chintan Girish Modi

He asks me to be melting snow.
To wash myself of myself.

I heed the call,
cast off my garb,
walk into the hammam,
and wait.

The stone's hot,
my skin burns.

Aeons of tears and sweat,
centuries of waiting.

Now's the time.
He's here.
Yes, he's here.
Finally, he's here.

Cook me!
Cook me!
Cook me in your fire!
Get me ready for the feast.

He says nothing.
He smiles. Only smiles.
And asks me to lie
eyes shut, skin on stone,
eyes closed in prayer.

The hands are firm and loving.
They know what they are doing.

My muscles relax.
My nerves calm down.

His fingers make mandalas, erase them.

Suddenly, my spine is a column of light.
And he's everywhere.

I've been washed.

Shades of Love amidst Grains of Sand

by Divya Titus

‘Though the hetero/homo divide seems like an eternal, indestructible fact of nature, it simply isn’t. It’s merely one recent grammar humans have invented to talk about what sex means to us.’

JUSTICE CHANDRACHUD
quoting Brandon Ambrosino

Growing up in Bombay on a healthy dose of pop music and the general kitschiness of the 90s completely informed my childish notions of love of boy meets girl, boy woos girl, and girl then falls for boy. It took me years to learn how problematic and limited this idea of love is – not least defining romantic partnership as only taking place between a man and a woman, but also somehow seeing it as an urban phenomenon.

The first sense of dissonance with my preconceived notions of love came during my early 20s. At the time I was living and working with migrating communities of Maldharis (traditional animal breeders) in the Banni grasslands of Kutch in India while assisting them on a campaign to be granted land rights by the government. My time in Banni led to my own personal awakening of the intersections between power and companionship, and the role of gender in the realisation of these dynamics.

The lives of women in Banni seemed excessively constrained to my eyes as an external observer. Both purdah and polygamy were widely practiced. But spending an extended amount of time in this region made me uncomfortable with the simple act of ticking off boxes and passing judgement. As an inquisitive 21-year-old woman that had arrived in Banni with no family in tow, I always felt I puzzled the Maldhari men I interacted with. I bore minimal or almost no similarities to the women they were

raised or surrounded by. In the face of these differences, they defaulted to treating me as one of the men.

I clearly remember travelling to the home of one of the heads of the 23 tribes that live in Banni. As my NGO colleagues and I drove to the tribal chief's home, we were surrounded by expansive desert on both sides of the road peppered with the occasional sighting of a herd of camels grazing. When we arrived, we were seated in the main reception room in front of the chief. After the primary business we had come to discuss concluded, conversation shifted to how this man's legacy would be passed down in the absence of any heirs, as he and his only wife were childless.

Flippantly, one of my colleagues brought up the idea of marrying a second time. Through this whole conversation his wife had remained veiled behind a curtain at the far corner of the room. But as the topic of remarriage arose, the chief turned to her and she shot him a look of such intensity that even as a casual observer I could feel her anger, hurt and jealousy at the idea of being replaced. While maintaining eye contact with his wife, the chief cautiously replied he would never marry a second time because of his affection for his wife. Here was the leader of a community effectively bowing in acquiescence to a woman that I would have previously in my ignorance deemed completely powerless.

At other times as I travelled through Banni I would find myself in conversation with young men who would talk about how they had been married to 'girls from Calcutta'. It was weeks later when a colleague explained to me that this was a euphemism for Bangladeshi refugees being bought as brides and moved to Banni on account of the severely skewed sex ratio in the area.

With this new-found nugget of information, when the 'girls from Calcutta' came up in later conversations, I would push these young men on how much they had bought their new brides for. I'd see sheepish shamefaced smirks cross their faces as they replied with the paltry sums they had parted with for their wives. This was a region where the prized cattle these men and their families reared sold for at least \$1000. And here they were confiding in me that they had paid a fraction of this sum for their new brides.

I often wondered how these women settled into their new roles and lives

in Banni, almost 3000 kilometres to the west of their home. In the few conversations I did have with some of these women, across the language divide between us, they reported settling into their lives in Banni well.

For me the strongest indication of this came while I was walking through a village at the western corner of the grasslands in Banni, when a young couple came running out onto their courtyard. Neither had caught sight of me and were completely oblivious of my presence. I saw such tenderness as the man grazed the woman's face. As I remained invisible to their gaze, they continued to playfully chide each other. It was the first time I had been witness to genuine physical affection being displayed by a young couple in Banni. In my naiveté I had always assumed tenderness and physical affection to somehow be an 'urban' occurrence. This incident became an important reminder of how limiting and misguided my notions of love had been.

Up to that point, in my ignorance, I had confined the mysteries of love to a narrow ideal I had built in my mind that was bound by the walls of gender and class. It took being immersed in the rugged beauty of Banni for me to genuinely appreciate the purity that lies within the human ability to offer and accept love.

Adam's Apples

by E. Koyote Millar

'India's anti-sodomy law was conceived, legislated and enforced by the British without any kind of public discussion. So abhorrent was homosexuality to the moral notions which he espoused, that Macaulay believed that the idea of a discussion was repulsive.'

JUSTICE CHANDRACHUD

Nothing sells fruit faster than a big red sign
pronouncing it forbidden.

A locked glass case,
high shelves displaying it
just out of reach of hungry mortal hands.

New, fresh, just arrived from Eden.

Smooth, crisp and glistening,
dripping with promise.

Yum!

*‘What’s in a name? That which
we call a rose by any other
name would smell as sweet.’*

CHIEF JUSTICE MISRA
quoting Shakespeare

Careless and Brave Love

by Gro Skottun

She had just met him at the conference they both attended. At first, she thought he was quite full of himself. But later she could not get her eyes off him. It was unclear to her why she was so fascinated by him. They talked during lunch and she took care to sit next to him when the next session started.

She had no plans to look for a man when she went to this conference, she was married, had children and was quite safe, if not happy, in her relationship. What was she looking for? She let go of her thoughts and looked again at the man. He was looking at her and she just looked back. All her normal shyness melted, she felt soft and on an impulse, she said, ‘Do you want to go for a walk with me? In Norway it hardly gets dark in the night and there is a viewpoint I would like to show you.’ She held her breath, her heart was beating and she tensed up when waiting for his answer.

He was for the first time in Norway. His boss had told him to attend the conference to meet an American colleague and here he was standing with an unknown Norwegian woman he had met the day before. She seemed a bit hysterical but quite attractive and somehow he knew that if he answered yes it would have consequences. He was Dutch, newly married and about to become a professor. He answered yes. This walk was the beginning of a very special relationship and indeed had consequences.

They set out a few hours later and walked the trail up to the viewpoint. The sun was still up even at ten P.M. On the way up he walked behind her and saw how she moved her body, her hips and bottom, and he could not stop himself from embracing her and kissing her. She responded and sunk into his arms. For a long time, they were just kissing, embracing each other, looking into each other's eyes, forgetting time and place. They sat down, she on his lap and he caressed her body gently. Her heart was beating, she felt joyful and excited, it was like she had never kissed and been kissed like this before. Her whole body felt electric and she realized she had fallen in love with this unknown guy. He kissed her tenderly and told her how beautiful she was, how much he adored her.

After some time they realized it was getting darker and the mosquitoes were quite aggressive. They agreed to walk down before it was totally dark. They held hands and found their way slowly down the slope, while kissing, talking and laughing. They walked to a small boathouse by the sea where they sat down on a wooden bench. The sky was dark blue with stars shining down on them. They told each other about their lives, their dreams and challenges. The mosquitoes were biting them, but somehow it did not matter this evening.

Over the next two days they spent all their free time together in the beautiful surroundings of the conference venue and they got to know each other in many different ways. When the time came to say goodbye, they did admit that the flirtation had turned into deep and serious emotions of love and care for each other even without having had sex. Sitting together on the bus to the airport, they agreed that they should never see each other again. Both were in a life situation that had no room for affairs. They cried their eyes out when they said goodbye, he went home to Amsterdam and she went home to Oslo. At the airport in Oslo she was welcomed by her three children, dog and husband, and life continued as before. He met his wife, went with her on holiday and pretended everything was fine.

The summer holiday felt long, she thought about him every day. She could hardly sleep, felt sad and happy at the same time. She said to herself, 'At last I know how it feels to be in love. I am happy for this experience.' But then she thought she would never survive this pain and loss. In the end

she could not bear it, the longing and not knowing if he still loved her, so she wrote him a letter where she opened her heart. She wrote how much she loved him, how important he was to her and if they could perhaps keep in touch even if they had agreed not to see each other. A few days later his answer arrived. He told her how much he longed for her, how he had cried on the plane home and that he missed her every moment of the day. She was so happy for his answer and wrote him back.

More than thirty years later they are having a cup of coffee in bed one morning, talking about how they met and their first walk. He stresses how brave she was to invite him for this walk and also to write him the first letter. She did not feel brave, she felt careless, as if nothing else mattered. He was the brave one, realizing the consequences by saying yes, to answer her letter and to come to Norway to see her again. She first felt brave when she said yes to his suggestion to establish a gestalt therapy training institute in Norway together. He was convinced that if they wanted to be more than just lovers they needed a shared mission to make their relationship grow into real love. Instead of having children together, they could create a therapy training institute. She was afraid and excited about his suggestion, realizing that this was a new step in their relationship. When they look back today, they are both happy for their brave decision. They talk about the cost this decision has had for them and their surroundings: They both divorced, he moved to Norway and gave up his job, and they both started a new business teaching people gestalt therapy. The gains are obvious: They are together, married, have a good relationship with their children and grandchildren, and the therapy institute is blossoming.

Our Hearts Wrapped In Rainbow Candy Floss

by Hansika Jethnani

*'Denial of self-expression is
inviting death.'*

CHIEF JUSTICE MISRA

i remember the way we fell in love by accident
our hellos entangled into conversations that did not stop
as the sun rose our words melted
into the lining of our beds
yellow linen trickling down our bodies
as we sank into their depths
wrapping ourselves in newspapers
all the headlines we ran away from

i remember the way your lips slipped into mine
sharing secrets our mouths carried for years
unspoken sentences stitched onto our tongues
finding solace within our songs
spitting labels sprung our way
for we always knew where we belonged

A version of this poem has been previously published in the Lihaaf Journal.

*'I am what I am,
so take me as I am.'*

CHIEF JUSTICE MISRA
quoting Goethe

Just a Little Lovin' – Living Queer History

by *Hilda Levin*

4th of July 2016. For a few days, a guesthouse in the south of France is getting transformed into a luxurious getaway just outside of New York 4th of July 1982, 1983 and 1984. The influential Mr. T has invited everyone to celebrate Independence Day. Artists, politicians, writers, journalists, drug dealers, students, performers; influential or networking people from the queer communities of New York.

I come to France as myself. For a couple of days, I will use my mind and body in collaboration with the other participants to try to come as close to the role-playing world and my character Santiago, a strong-willed lesbian artist from Puerto Rico, as possible.

Just a Little Lovin' is a live-action role-play (larp) for about 60 people, created by Tor Kjetil Edland and Hanne Grasmø (Nordic Larp Wiki: *Just a Little Lovin'*). It was played for the first time in Norway in 2011, and has since been organized in Sweden, Denmark, France, USA, Finland, and latest in the UK in 2019. Within the ambitious movement of Nordic larp, it is considered to be the most well-designed larp so far. Through collaborative improvisational acting, the participants explore the characters and their lives. Using one's own body as a story medium has its limitations, but through representational techniques we may go deep even within stories about intimacy and death.

The larp is taking place during the years 1982–1984, when HIV is spreading throughout America. Before the disease has been properly identified, the newspapers report about ‘the mysterious gay cancer’. President Reagan ignores the epidemic for far too long. After the sexual liberation of the 70s, the virus is spurring on a moralistic backlash. Maybe, people ponder, this is a punishment from God. Maybe the gays have deserved this with their sinful ways. While the politicians look the other way, young people fall ill and die at a rate unseen in the world’s wealthier countries since the Spanish flu. We are told that in certain groups of friends it wasn’t uncommon to forget what funeral you were attending this time. There were so many of them.

It might be tempting to write off *Just a Little Lovin’* as just another sentimental piece of work where a queer life ends in nothing but tragedy (TV Tropes: *Bury Your Gays*). But even though the fear of death is a distinct part of the larp, it is the queer lives that we devote ourselves to create. During the first two acts, taking place on the 4th of July in 1982 and 1983, the disease is slowly making its entrance. All the while, we develop our characters and their world. The love between and towards the characters has time to grow strong. They become living and dear to us. Of course we mourn when they are taken from us. But their deaths never feel deterministic, never as a predictable consequence for poor free-spirited souls. Today we know that there is nothing predetermined about dying of AIDS. The research that led to the efficient treatments of today could have started earlier. Our characters and the real victims of the epidemic could have been informed about how the disease was transmitted and started to protect themselves earlier. Even before there was a treatment, the ill and their relatives could have been treated with greater care and respect. More than deterministic queer tragedy, we are playing our characters’ fight and frustration in the face of history’s most predictable feature: The ability to look the other way when it comes to the struggles of marginalized groups, even during the most serious of circumstances.

Curious and nervous, I dive into the larp. I get to know Santiago, her girlfriend Pen, and their close-knit lesbian circle. It feels like a punch in the stomach when Santiago spots the lean figure of her ex-girlfriend Sam crossing the courtyard. At the parties, we are surrounded by the larger

gay community. With half an interest we watch drag queen after drag queen perform at the evening show. We cry out with euphoria when the experimental female dancer Chantelle enters the stage. We write poetry, we dance, we love, we perform. We always have each other’s backs. We have vicious fights. Santiago and Pen drift further and further apart. The last argument is had and the dust settles. New connections arise and new initiatives are taken. Morgan. Dawn. And finally, finally Santiago and her beloved Sam are taking tiny steps towards becoming friendly again. Two fiercely independent souls that never fully dared to be vulnerable enough to love each other.

Santiago is mine for two days before she dies. In two days, I get over my shyness of her ego and learn to love to be her in all her assertiveness. She is taken too early from me. The grief is not predictable. I have larped for many years. And yet, when I cannot be her for just a little while longer the loss I feel is beyond my every expectation.

But we are not allowed to get lost in sorrow. I get a new character for the third act, 4th of July 1984. The community leader Mr. T enters the party supported by his staff, braving us with a smile from his frail, spotted body. The last act carries the theme of community, and so in our sorrow we turn towards each other and try to keep on living. Our grief is not fateful. Our grief is angry, angry with the injustice, with the unfairness of death, with lost possibilities, over the loss of the characters that we wanted to keep loving. The drag shows are followed by memorials. When the disease is at its most present, the grief turns into defiance in our eyes. We sing. ‘No I won’t be afraid, no I won’t be afraid, just as long as you stand, stand by me.’ While we still know very little about how the virus is spread, how many more of us that will be affected and when, if ever, it will be taken seriously, we choose each other over fear again and again.

This sense of community lingers well after the larp. I met another participant a year after the experience. ‘Do you still think about Just a Little Lovin’?’ she asked. Yes. Both of our characters were among the hardest hit when the story unfolded. Starting out as the disillusioned poet Abner who found love and much-needed ease in his carefree boyfriend Eli, one by one all of his loved ones fell ill and were lost. Even though we had never met

before the larp, and had barely seen each other since, we could talk about anything. 'It feels like we have been to war together,' she said. Our fictional connection had been transferred to reality.

Just a Little Lovin' is based upon real events from queer history. Performance researcher Rebecca Schneider suggests that historical reenactments may be seen as a form of performative documentation. As other types of media, our bodies may carry information from one time to another by once again performing actions that have been performed before. *Just a Little Lovin'* does not strive to be a historically correct document. Had she been real, my character Santiago would not have been the most likely victim of AIDS. The organizers very clearly instructed us not to view it as a documentary experience. The aesthetic of the larp was more of an 80s dream than strictly realistic. Instead of being preoccupied with how to act correctly, we were encouraged to create stories that were interesting and meaningful to us. Because no matter how historically convincing the larp had turned out, it would still remain a fiction drawn forth from our shared imagination. The hard facts are found elsewhere.

In a Facebook group for earlier participants, we share thoughts, historical documents and news with each other. Articles on progresses made within AIDS research. Inspiring essays on queer life. The shooting in Orlando. Persecutions in Chechnya. Many participants get politically active.

According to Rebecca Schneider, a reperformance of a historical event is an action aimed as much forward as backwards in time. When we bring history to life, information is transferred to us today so that we may remember it tomorrow. Experiences such as *Just a Little Lovin'* affect our understanding of queer history as well as how we relate to the queer future. We cannot enter history through our performative actions. But we can enter a historical movement.

With an increased sense of belonging to queer history, our ownership of queer spaces and queer conversations in present-day also changes. Even though the role-playing is fiction, our explorations and personal discoveries are our own. With the alibi of being somebody else for a while, we try out who we could have been, what we are, what we aren't and what we could

be. We carry our insights with us into our own lives and keep exploring them. Among us are participants with new understandings of their gender identities. Participants questioning the firmness of their sexual orientations. Participants that had barely made themselves acknowledged before are making themselves more visible. For many of us, *Just a Little Lovin'* is the experience we needed to seek out a community we had always known we belonged to.

Both participants and outsiders have questioned whether there even are queer participants at the larp, or if we are at risk of being a group of straight participants appropriating queer history. But even though the larp is open to anyone, its theme has always attracted a considerable amount of queer participants. It just doesn't always show. After *Just a Little Lovin'* I get more and more explicit about who I am. I carry my identity with growing pride and ease. I find others like me. Friends. Family. The silence that kept us hidden from each other is broken.

I start inviting myself to queer events. I walk in the Pride parade for the first time. With me I have the loose connection to my fellow participants, a queer community that transcends fiction, nationality, identity, sexuality. We will always hear hits from the 80s as anthems of queer love and sorrow. We carry the memories of people that never existed. We know that there were and will be others like them. Like us.

One of Santiago's closest friends is a photographer. In a fictional 1983, that took place in 2016, Pen is wrapping her arms around me. I carry a smile that is not mine, a strength that is not mine, that I found in me. I came to France as myself. The guesthouse was never really New York. Santiago never existed. And yet, I carry her and my queer history with me home.

A version of this text has been previously published in the Norwegian queer culture magazine MELK no. 5 2017: FUTURA.

*'From the wars against disorder,
from the sirens night and day,
from the fires of the homeless,
from the ashes of the gay:
Democracy is coming [...]*

JUSTICE CHANDRACHUD
quoting Leonard Cohen

My Republic

by Kevin Fernandes

In the morning
I
picked up
the soiled orange condom,
(Did it have a streak of dried blood?)
my fingers faintly smelling of
Orange and latex.
I
knotted it,
trapping its translucent soul
In.
I
gazed at
my sleeping lover,
While I threw
the rubber in the bin.
As
I stirred
Green tea
in my

White coffee mug,
the
shaved follicles of my pubes
saluted
the winter cold.
I
Had
committed crimes
all night.
Watching the pompous
Imagined Community
parade in misty Delhi,
I
paid
Homage to
My Republic.

*'The Constitution protects the
fluidities of sexual experience.'*

JUSTICE CHANDRACHUD

A Handsome Boy

by Kiran Bhat

A handsome boy at the bar approaches me and asks: What is the kind of guy you like?

Kiran faces him and responds:

A lotus flower has petals dimmer than the luster of his smile,
a dragon fruit imparts a lesser taste than the thrust of his kiss.
He might be short, he might be chubby,
but he asks me about my favorite books,
he forgives me when I say something wrong.

Some call him Krishna,
some call him Rama,
I call him my habibi.

Is he handsome?
Just okay.
Is he smart?
Relatively so.

But, while we make love,
and our skin rubs against each other,

my skin darkens,
his skin lightens,
we become the same shade of brown.

The handsome boy at the bar scoffs.

He asks why I do not want
someone who is handsome, or smart.

Kiran's answer is simple.

Because when a waterfall flows,
with the full vigor of the cascade,
it needs to drop down,
into the most stolid of ponds.

A Chinese version of this poem is/will be published by White Elephant Press in Taiwan.

*‘Citizens of a democracy cannot
be compelled to have their
lives pushed into obscurity
by an oppressive colonial
legislation [...] [I]t is imperative
to “confront the closet” and,
as a necessary consequence,
confront “compulsory
heterosexuality”.*

JUSTICE CHANDRACHUD

I Have a Name

by MaBi

I have a name

You call me Joan

It fits my ethnicity, my tone

It's a fighter in a suit of armour

A name from which I've grown

You call me Joan

A mistress of finesse

Like a lady in a dress

An outfit out on loan

You call me Joan

Shaped like an hourglass

Waist, tits and ass

A silhouette not my own.

You call me Joan

Against my skin

Against my will

A cage from which I've flown

My name is John

'For years now I have heard the word "wait." It rings in the ear of every Negro with a piercing familiarity. This "wait" has almost always meant "never." [...] [W]hen you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of "nobodiness" - then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.'

JUSTICE CHANDRACHUD
quoting Martin Luther King Jr.

Dear Ali

by Noman Mubashir

When I talk to you on Facebook, Ali, I feel that time is reversed. I am you. You are me. I'm in the closet again. I am 16 years old. I listen to sad Indian songs and pretend I love girls. When I read your long messages, I feel your pain, the desperation, loneliness and tears that fall on the pillow every night, silent yet painful. I am back in my youth, a youth I would rather forget.

Dear Ali, you would like to come out of the closet, and you say I give you hope. In the beginning you did not even use the word. That you are queer, gay, faggot. But after we had talked for several months, you finally dared to acknowledge that you are queer. You like to use the word queer. It sounds better than gay, you think, and that's okay. No one should define who you are. That choice you should make yourself.

Recently you have even admitted that you are in love. Not with Adriana in the B-class but Adrian in the A-class. You glance over at him in the school canteen and hope he looks at you, maybe for a second or two. You look at his Instagram every morning, afternoon and evening and dream of walking hand in hand with him down a deserted beach where nobody can judge you or spread rumors. But the dreams come to an end. Then you are ashamed of yourself. You cry. You want to delete Adrian from your friends list. Change

schools. Hide even further into the closet where neither Adrian nor Allah can see you. But your mom says that Allah sees everything. And Allah hates gays.

Dear Ali, I have been ashamed too for many years. But eventually I found a way out of the closet. I did not break it open suddenly and loudly. I spent a long time. For me, it was important to get a certain recognition from my family. I wanted them to love me for who I was and not what society around us expected me to be. I reconciled with Allah. For Allah has said that He loves me, in his own way. Eventually I got a boyfriend.

Then came the final turning point. My boyfriend already had two children, so I have become a bonus dad. One day my bonus daughter said, 'Today we learned about different families at school. Some children have only one mom or dad, others have a mom and a dad, or a mom and a mom or a dad and a dad. And if you have two dads, they are gay and it's okay, it's not wrong or stupid, the most important thing is to love one another.' I was totally dumbstruck, looking at the most beautiful creature in the world, my beautiful seven-year-old bonus daughter who removed my shame with a few sentences, 'it's okay', 'the most important thing is to love one another'. That day I became whole. Even though I had been queer and honest with my family and friends for many years, I was still a little ashamed. That day I became free of shame.

Dear Ali, believe me, one day you will love yourself. There is hope.

Perhaps your mother knows that it will never be you and Adriana but rather you and Adrian. Your mother has carried you in her womb. She has nursed you and comforted you. She has loved you and worshiped you. Maybe she knows but does not dare to ask. Maybe you should let her know. She will probably cry. A lot. She will kneel on the prayer rug and plead with Allah for mercy. But your mother loves you. She wants your very best. Just as you need time, your mother will need time before she can embrace the real Ali.

Maybe you can study in another city now that you are soon finishing school? Then you can be yourself. Nobody knows you. You do not have to pretend that you are interested in Adriana anymore. Perhaps they have a queer student group you can join? Perhaps you get a boyfriend. One who

really loves you and wants you. One who is out of the closet and can give you strength and hope. One who can help you out of the closet and wash away your shame.

I am free. I do not act anymore. I can breathe. It's called happiness.

Dear Ali, I hope you will be happy too.

Meanwhile, I'm here for you.

A Norwegian version of this text has previously been published in the anthology iLove - seksuell helse (Minotenk - minoritetspolitisk tenketank 2018)

Movements in Love

by Rahul Sen

‘What links LGBT individuals to couples who love across caste and community lines is the fact that both are exercising their right to love at enormous personal risk and in the process disrupting existing lines of social authority [...] [T]he right to love [is] not just a separate battle for LGBT individuals, but a battle for all.’

JUSTICE CHANDRACHUD

if only
courts could redress
'curative petitions'
of lovers
and repair those
miniscule hurts;
hundred heartbreaks
and a few thousand envies,
and more than 377 letters
unsent and unrarrived!
if only.

Genderqueer and Proud

by Sabrina Mazzoni

'History owes an apology to the members of this community and their families, for the delay in providing redressal for the ignominy and ostracism that they have suffered through the centuries.'

JUSTICE MALHOTRA

'Is my zipper down, or what?' I ask myself.

Everything seemed to be in order earlier as I quickly glanced in the mirror on my way out. The suit, back from the cleaners, was pressed and spotless. I was sporting a brand new tie, a recent Christmas gift from my mother-in-law; and my wingtips had a fresh coat of shiny black polish. The barber had trimmed my hair just a few days earlier. I admit to feeling a bit apprehensive, as anyone would before a job interview; but I had learned not to show it too much, and was beaming with confidence.

So why all these blank faces staring at me, as I move through the BART station, waiting for the next San Francisco-bound train?

'I better make a quick run to the ladies' room to check,' I thought to myself, just in case I spilled coffee on me. As I opened the door, more stares greeted me. This time, the blank stares are visibly filled with contempt. I finally realize what's happening. Suddenly the little plastic emblem on the door looms larger than life, flashing like a strobe light: 'LONG HAIR and a SKIRT, you dunce!' This is what the world expects you to look like, everywhere, even in the San Francisco Bay Area. Instead, I am a gender-ambiguous entity: a woman with a crew cut and in man's clothes; a man with a high-

pitched voice and rounded hips. I am fucking with people's notion of sex and gender, and they DON'T like that. Things are much easier to deal with in binary modes. Right or wrong, black or white, male or female. Even computers process things faster in terms of ones and zeros. They resent me for not being easily and accurately identified, for falling somewhere in the middle.

My smile and extreme courtesy, however, disarm them. 'Have a nice day,' I say, as I hold the door open to the woman whose earlier stare made the halls of hell seem a winter-mint commercial. See, I'm not taking testosterone, (for now), so my voice cannot be mistaken for a man's. And although I am a full-blooded Italian, thick dark fuzz around my lips never has been a trademark in my family. I'm a bit bummed about that, actually. My big smile projects a warmth that keeps me safe most of the time. 'Guerrilla smile,' I call it. But the cold breeze still hits me hard, icy stares always surrounding me anytime I'm in public spaces. The fear of what could come next always haunts me.

Things seemed easier in the little town at the periphery of Rome where I spent the first 14 years of my life. People of all ages would come right up and ask me explicitly: 'Ma tu sei maschio o femmina?' ('But are you male or female?'). Mom's warm smile always accompanied her calm response, 'she's a girl', never looking offended or ashamed of me. I liked that.

If anything, I felt ashamed of being a girl. My demeanor at school, my hobbies and sports, my gait, my strength, as well as my clothes and hair, never matched what society expected from a little girl, especially in Italy. For a while I felt that it was the inside, my notion of what being a girl should be, that did not match the outside, what I was told girls should be like. The misogynist world around me had taught me that girls were weak, dumb and too concerned with looking pretty to be able to play sports. No wonder being perceived as a boy by everybody on the outside, by me included, was not a problem. It is the culture that is gender-dysphoric. I was really upset when I bled for the first time, and mortified when my breasts began to grow. I would stop being seen and treated as one of the guys, and lose the freedom to be me. Up until that moment, I was allowed to be a 'maschiaccio' (a far more derogatory term than the English 'tomboy'). Once I realized I was

stuck with being a girl, internalized misogyny made it hard to like myself as a teenager. Moving to a foreign country at 15 did not help either.

Then feminism came into my life and reminded me I could be a strong, intelligent, active woman and find other women like me. I began to feel the inside of me again and started feeling good about it. Now I felt contempt for those who still mistook me for a boy. It didn't last long, however. I still felt different. This time, internalized homophobia kept me from feeling good about loving other strong women like me. Struggling through high school and college, once again at odds with a one-sided notion of identity and attraction. So I kept that part of my identity hidden deep inside.

Gradually, and by moving to California's San Francisco Bay Area, I started exploring this other layer of myself, and re-embracing with pride the strong lesbian, butch by birth, gender bender I had always been deep inside. Being surrounded by others who had a much more complex notion of sex and gender felt like coming home again. Or so it seemed at first! Before too long, I felt myself going against the grain all over again. The more comfortable I was feeling with myself as a lesbian woman, the more I was feeling a need to rediscover my masculine side as part of my gender identity, independent of my sexuality and attraction. I started reclaiming the ambiguous gender identity I had always had, and feeling more and more comfortable being in the middle. Not easy initially. When I started exploring this four years ago, not as many transgendered lives and experiences were as documented or visible as they are today. My own internalized transphobia and fears of being the only one were still there. I found resistance to anything male-identified from some members of the lesbian community. Initially, I was particularly wary of being perceived as transgendered for two very divergent reasons. On the one hand, I did not want to come across as superficially usurping trans identity without serious consideration; at the same time, I was clear that my trans identity was not a means to becoming something else, a transition into a man. I was not interested in going back to binary options. It took a few years of self-empowerment and supportive tranny/fag/lezzie/queer friends around me to find my Multi-Gendered Self and others like me, and being content to be somewhere in the middle, the genderqueer immigrant that I was.

Now I look at myself in the mirror, once again, and everything is just fine. I walk out of that bathroom and into that train and think to myself: 'I will get that job, I will succeed, and the world better learn to deal with it, because no matter what they may choose to see me as, this multi-talented, multi-gendered person is not intimidated by your icy stares or verbal abuse. I take them all in and spew them back out with pride.'

'The offence would be investigated by searching the most intimate of spaces to find tell-tale signs of intercourse. Civilisation has been brutal.'

JUSTICE CHANDRACHUD

The Last Word

by Sachin Jain

What I remember most is holding his head up. He had, has, the most beautiful head in the world. When we made love, I'd hold it up in my hands, and he'd let me, mindful of his slender neck and the potentially awkward angle to his prone figure. There I would be, breathless, contemplating the beauty of his face. His eyes would meet mine, my hot fingers would dig into the unexpected coolness of his curly hair. Overcome, my heart beating fast, I would lean down to kiss his lips. Just before I did, his lips would curl up into the most delightful half-smile and meet mine, tenderly sealing of a moment that would be forever ours.

~

Everyone watched silently, seemingly transfixed. His silent presence in the center of the room seemed to have given it a dimension, a new depth, absent during all those times that he'd exchanged lively insouciant banter with his sister, as they bellowed at each other across rooms. He was wrapped in white.

~

We'd gone on a group picnic to a waterfall during the monsoons. We'd found a little cove, silent, where the cascade's raging waters, now bound

by the natural boundary of an arc of rocks, calmed, and pooled still. The reflection of the dense green foliage made it seem as if the water held a dark, deep secret. As the laughter of our friends, retreating towards the main waterfall, tapered off in the water's unceasing roar, we held hands under the surface of the still water. Wordlessly, he plunged down into the deep, and pulled me in with him. My eyes bulged in surprise, and my mouth opened to let out a cry, but he put his forefinger to his lips. As we navigated the profound silence of that underwater gloom, he placed my hand on his heart, and his on mine. As the cold water flooded into my ears and tingled eerily against my eardrums, I heard it. The distinct, unmistakable beat of my own heart, proof of my innermost life force, echoing in my ears. He tapped his forefinger, ever so lightly, against my chest, mimicking the beat, delighted at my entranced expression, at having yet again broken through the chaos of the moment to feel something profound. He taught me to hear my heart beat under water.

~

The smell of incense wafted through the air. I looked at his wrapped feet, up his shroud-encased slender body, to his head laying there peacefully on the living room floor. His head was at the exact spot on the living room floor where, forsaking the spanking new glass-topped dining table, we'd sat on the floor, cross-legged.

~

We'd eaten off shiny stainless-steel plates that glinted in the fluorescent tube light and drunk water from a large jug. I'd never been happier in my life. I wanted to hold his head up and tell him that, and everything that I hadn't, and that I never could.

~

His father lifted the earthen pot as the priest ceased to chant. The moment of departure had come. His mother's and sister's wails rent the room as the other women surged forward to hold them back.

~

He broke up with me by the sea. An airplane rose high up in the sky, brilliantly golden as it caught the light of the setting sun at that very

moment, an unmistakable metaphor for his freedom from the prison of our togetherness. He looked at it, pointed and smiled, as he prepared to tell me that he was breaking up. With every word, I felt like my heart was being grated, the little slivers wriggling, then hanging limp from the apertures through which they passed, shredded. That tiny speck of an airplane seemed to be he, flying away to an unknown destination, its brilliant gold, the pure joy of his uninhibited smile. Even the waves hadn't dared crash against the rocks that evening. The sea had ebbed, tiptoed back into its deep home behind the mangroves and listened to his words, fearful, from behind the muslin veil of a low tide.

~

Jai ram. Shri ram. Jai ram. Shri ram. It was only men now as we descended the stairs to the waiting ambulance. The men took turns holding the bamboo stretcher on which he lay, a stoic, loving way to say goodbye. I thought I'd never do it, but in that whorl of movement, I found myself inexorably guided to the front right-hand corner of the bamboo stretcher on which he lay. I gave him my left shoulder, the strong one. I stumbled a little, but caught my stride and took deep, rapid breaths. That was my last intimate moment with him. I felt the weight pressing down on my shoulder start to lift, and realized that another relative had slipped in, and with the slightest of nods of acknowledgement, replaced my shoulder with his.

~

We'd fight, and I'd fear losing him. I'd stop mid-stride and demand, 'Tell me that you will love me just as much after twenty years.' To which he'd smile slyly and say, 'Hmm... twenty years later we'll be walking just like this, you and I, passing funny comments and laughing at the people around us.' Though completely unwilling to accept his seemingly tacit negation of everlasting love, I couldn't help grinning back; couldn't help but kick the can of my unresolved future a little further down the promenade.

~

His father placed his body on the pyre, and lay logs of wood across it. Then they poured ghee on it. I watched from behind someone's shoulder. My ego, his reasons for loving, his reasons for not loving anymore, his curling smile, his head of curls all

now soon to be a speck of dust in the immutable, vast cosmos to which he was being returned.

~

We loved candles. We'd make love in their soft glow that had accentuated the angles of his beautiful, chiseled face and had made the single teardrop falling down my cheek sparkle. My heart was the gradually pooling molten wax, a chalice for his love.

~

His father lit the pyre with a grass torch. Slowly, the flames rose, and the smell of his physical being reducing to ashes made his going real. My trembling hands, of their own accord, rose up to my chest in a namaste. I could see his smiling face, his slanted, glinting eyes appeared before me. I cupped his head in my hands, in my mind, one last time. I could feel his beautiful, cool head of curls in my warm hands.

~

Each time we said goodbye at the train station, one of us would begin,

"I love you."

"I love you so much".

"I love you more."

"I love you most."

"I love you always."

~

As always, I never knew who'd had the last word.

Read Me Anyway

by Samsaya

*'[L]ife without dignity is like a
sound that is not heard.'*

CHIEF JUSTICE MISRA

Drops of us
Drunk of lust
I wait around for us
Feel our pulse rising
It's a total rush
Nothing comes close to us
Nothing comes close to us

This is that post trust
Where love becomes hopeless
Can't you find a way for us?

Even If I try not to show you
But you could read me anyway

When you left me you cut me so deep
Never thought my way back would be this steep
Lust turned to liquid
Blood in my love
Coagulating every slit wrist in my heart

You're the clutter in my brain, the pink matter keeps sane.
You know how to tame my anger my pain
So, so insane hard to explain, but you could read me anyway
But you could read me anyway, but you could read me anyway, but you
could read me anyway.
When It all becomes hopeless I need you at the mostesses
I don't know why I lie, see I don't know why I lie
When you left me you cut me so deep.
But you could read me anyway, but you could read me anyway, but you
could read me anyway.
When it all becomes hopeless I need you at the mostesses.
I don't know why I lie, see I don't know why I lie.

These are the lyrics of a new song that will be released as a single in October 2019.

*'What makes life meaningful
is love. The right that makes us
human is the right to love.'*

JUSTICE CHANDRACHUD
quoting Justice Sheila Seth

377

by Sandip Roy

Kolkata, 6th September 2018.

This revolution was televised.

I watched on TV as friends of mine huddled together in a café in Kolkata as the Section 377 verdict came down in India. They had come with rainbow flags and hope but until the last minute there was an air of nervous expectation as if waiting for board examination results to come out.

Until it happened I had been blasé and cynical, I felt I had been there and done that. I'd written so much copy about it, said my piece and said it again.

Section 377, we told ourselves, was outdated anyway. It had not prevented us from living, loving and marching. Gay life is stubborn. It exists despite any Section 377. I knew no gay person who had not had sex because of Section 377. I knew no gay person who had not fallen in love because of Section 377. I was over the angst. I was done with the coming out stories.

But when the news finally came, I felt a lump in my throat. 'It's done,' texted my partner watching the news in another part of the city. 'I am what I am,' said the judge. This simple truth is something profound, something so many of us have struggled with all our lives, trying desperately to be what

we are not, to fit into boxes that we were never meant to inhabit. We can say we are proud. We can say we are out. We can say we are comfortable. We can say our families support us. But somewhere we all bear the scars of coming to terms with being different.

On television I saw friends, tough-as-nails activists suddenly tear up on camera. Someone talked about calling her mother who said she had never considered her a criminal anyway. Someone talked about getting calls from friends scattered all over the country. Congratulations they said. I wonder what we are being congratulated for. I didn't do anything. Except try to be what I am. Imperfectly. But I tried.

But it has been the longest examination of our lives for so many of us. And while we think 377 does not really affect our daily lives and loves, it does matter to hear our lives affirmed by the highest court of the land, the same one that had once tossed LGBT Indians aside as a minuscule minority in 2013 when it let Section 377 stand as law.

In many ways perhaps that 2013 verdict, a slap in the face as it was, was necessary to remind us that rights do not come easy. Until then it felt like some lawyers and activists would ensure it happened while the rest of us, especially those in metropolitan cities, could party and plan gay tours. English language media was anyway overwhelming pro-LGBT. 2013 burst that bubble. And it made people aware of how vulnerable rights can be when left to the whim of majoritarianism.

That is what Justice Dipak Mishra reminded us today when he said, 'Majoritarian views and popular majority cannot dictate constitutional rights.' And that is a view that should resonate far beyond the LGBT population of India.

In the days to come there was analysis of the fine print of four judgements from four justices, what they said, what they did not say, how far the ambit runs, what got left out, what doors were opened, which ones were left shut. Section 377 was never the end of the journey but always the first step in demanding respect. That journey remains. Decriminalizing gay sex does not mean decriminalizing discrimination. And for thousands of LGBT Indians in small towns and villages, Section 377 does not even figure in

their daily struggle to survive. A friend wrote on Facebook that a young gay man in his village asked what 377 even was. Some had never even heard of the law until it got read down. However, that did not mean they had not known of the stigma.

But for now for so many Indians, it's time to pause and rejoice because we get too few opportunities to do that. It's time to remember that a Supreme Court judge said, 'History owes an apology to members of LGBT community and their family members for ostracisation and persecution they face because of society's ignorance.'

Whether that apology comes or not, it matters deeply and profoundly to have it acknowledged. I am one of the luckier ones, loved, supported, sane. I have friends who did not make it. But none of us came through unscathed. Some of us just learned to disguise our scars better with better accessories.

Already the Bollywood stars are tweeting, Karan Johar says, 'FINALLY! The country gets its oxygen back.' Perhaps finally one of them will find the strength to also say 'I am gay.' We will look for the celebrity voices and the celebrity petitioners to fill our news shows.

But let's never forget this. This was done by ordinary people who dared to say that change could happen against all odds. This did not happen in two years or five. It happened because young people came together in cafes, in parks, in dingy offices. It happened because Indian engineers in Silicon Valley printed and photocopied the world's first LGBT South Asian newsletter in their office afterhours just with hope in their hearts. That first issue was like a note in a bottle put out to sea in the hope that someone would find it. It happened because a young advocate from Kolkata, who died too young, pushed for a little pink citizens' report called Less Than Gay in the early 90s when the issue was not Lutyens-chic. It happened because of the lesbians who committed suicide in Kerala. It happened because a man training to be a monk at Ramakrishna Mission decided that he would be open about his sexuality, Section 377 be damned. It happened because of a young filmmaker who filmed himself coming out on camera to his mother. And it happened because of his mother who joined the voices against 377 in court after he died much too young in a car accident. And it

happened because of my Maharashtrian friend from San Jose who married his Vietnamese boyfriend in India because he wanted to be married just like everyone else. It happened because of my Indian friend and his American partner raising their twins in India surrounded by family.

It took much too long but eventually it did happen. And for now that's enough. Tomorrow and the year after and the year after that there will be other battles.

When I sit down to write this, MS Word said, 'Roy_377.doc already exists. Do you want to replace it?'

I checked it. It was the copy I had written when it was recriminalized in 2013.

Yes, I replied. It was time to replace it.

A version of this article originally appeared on Firstpost.com.

‘Above All Else, to Thine Own Self Be True!’

by Sanjay Kumar

*‘The State shall not deny to
any person equality before the
law or the equal protection of
the laws within the territory of
India.’*

JUSTICE CHANDRACHUD
referring to Article 14 in the Indian Constitution

Having recently returned to the bustling chaos of Bangalore from a few serene days in Auroville, a utopian village near Pondicherry in Tamil Nadu, South India, I realise the Matrimandir, a unique architectural marvel, a shrine right at the very heart of the township surrounded by a man-made forest, has become to me a symbol of my coming out story. The golden spherical emblem of light, bursting forth as it were from the earth in suspended animation, to me stands proud and resolute as an emblem of peace, a beacon of hope and a vivid reminder that one must shine ones light as purely, authentically and sincerely as humanly possible. My coming out as a gay man – arguably the first I reckon in my entire conservative evangelical Christian community comprising of neighbourhood, church, school, university and social network of my birth and upbringing – is an ongoing, challenging and exciting journey of self-discovery and learning what metal all the myriad relationships and connections are really made of. I have experienced how being open and proud of my truth has repercussions not just for me but also for all who know me, especially my family and friends. It’s a coming out for all of us!

My first sense of being different was very early on in life. It was not so much just being gay but also being effeminate. By the age of seven, I was made

aware by those around me that I was different from other boys. This usually took the form of teasing and bullying. I didn't like the rough and tumble of the playground, I preferred the company of the girls of my age and older. I preferred being creative, participating in domestic things like interior decorating, flower arranging, tidying up, and intellectual and spiritual debate. I ran my first "church" group when I was just out of kindergarten! In private, I used to love dressing up in my mum's saris when no one was home. For being effeminate and sensitive I was teased and bullied, verbally, sometimes physically, by boys and girls and adults alike. The taunting was not just in the school field, but also in church, the neighbourhood and sometimes even at home. 'You should've been born a girl,' was often shouted out, as though that was a bad thing. And that was just my own mother!

Somewhere deep down, I felt I wasn't good enough as I was. So guess what? I did my best to be 'the good boy' everyone adored and loved and quickly learnt to do that very well. It became a lifestyle. It became me. The realisation that I was attracted to boys and not girls happened much later when I was 16 nearing 17. This realisation was very private. I was terrified. I was confused. I didn't feel like I could trust anyone with this truth. Even though I was surrounded by many pastors, teachers, elders, counsellors and mentors in the Christian community, it felt paralysingly unsafe to go to them, to talk about my feelings and yearnings. The 'good boy' bubble was in danger of being irrevocably burst. The messages that I grew up with was that being gay was sinful, disgusting, dirty, unacceptable, against nature, God and society and that gays went to hell. Shame and fear resulted in guilt and pain. A silent pain. Anger was to surface only a decade later! Using my own initiative, I went to a psychiatrist who I found in the newspapers. He said that he could perhaps help me become bisexual; even at that young age I knew he was wrong. So was science also not on my side? There were no affirming messages anywhere to be found. There was no loving arm to hold me. I hadn't met another gay man yet. There was no reassurance from anywhere. So I did what I knew best, I put my energies into excelling at being the good boy and went into the church to train as a theologian. I hoped religion and faith would cure me. I fasted and prayed as earnestly as

I could. It only made matters worse. The isolation and confusion worsened and there was no one I felt who would listen, understand or support me in this struggle.

Quite by chance while in seminary, a senior told me that his organisation was going over the weekend to a certain central park to distribute Christian literature and copies of The Gospel of John to gay men who met there. Everything changed from that moment on for me. What? Who? When? Where? It was like an explosion had erupted in my head! There are other people like me? And there is a place where I could go and meet them? I can't tell you how fast my heart beat! The excitement was overwhelming! Sure enough, I mustered all the courage I had and went to this park the following week. It was March, the *Tabebuia Argentea* were in full bloom. I nervously sat on a bench. Within five minutes a man walked past me and sat on the bench next to mine. My heart pounded. 'He is looking at me,' I thought to myself. He then came and sat on the other end of my bench. I was sure my heart would jump out of my chest. He subtly stretched out his hand to touch mine on the bench. That first touch changed everything. Nothing would ever be the same again. For the first time ever, I met other gay men; even to just hold their hand and look in their eyes was like heaven. After a month of these clandestine park bench encounters, I soon met a man who told me about Good As You, an organisation set up to support and advocate for the queer community. It became a weekly support for me on Thursdays. I would sneak out of seminary and drive a two-hour round trip just for this much-needed interaction. After leading Sunday evening service, I would race to the park to meet my gay friends before heading back to seminary. I began leading a secret double life.

Being this high-achieving good boy, however, had its uses: I was sent to Cambridge, UK, in 1998 to do an internship by the seminary I trained in. While in Cambridge, I had the opportunity to talk to the greatest minds and scholars in Christendom, both from the conservative and liberal schools of thought, to make up my own mind about what the Bible had to say about being gay. I had to find a way to reconcile my faith and my sexuality to be able to accept myself and come out. It was not an either/or option. It had to be both/and or suicide. I realised in a very profound way that the Bible does

not condemn me for who I am. I came to understand that each reference to homosexuality in the Bible actually was prohibiting men from raping other men. I found that Jesus very much included people who didn't marry the conventional way for being 'eunuchs'. Jesus even recognised there were different kinds of 'eunuchs', the original word could easily and readily be translated in today's language to include people from the sexual and gender minorities (Matthew 19:11,12). I found a Jesus who kept the company of and was very much on the side of the socially marginalised, the fringe, the condemned. I was greatly comforted. I could finally be me.

Immediately I came out first to my one and only older sibling, as I thought I would get a sympathetic ear. I spoke to her over the phone while I was in Cambridge. I was overwhelmed. I was in tears. She categorically told me I was making a choice and that my choice was wrong, against God's will and that I should never tell my parents as it would kill them and that she would never support this. I cried even more. It tore me apart.

Three years later, I did tell my parents. I had kept saying no to the many proposals of marriage that were coming my way. Finally, there was a marriage proposal to end all proposals that the entire family deemed perfect in all respects. I was living in London training in psychotherapy at the time, and these matrimonial conversations were happening in Bangalore. I was coming home for the Easter holidays. I was expected to bring with me my consent to the wedding. I was dying inside! How was I going to say no to this proposal that from all angles and perspectives seemed right? Right except for one thing! That one thing! That one thing, of course, was everything!

It was Maundy Thursday, a special day in the calendar of my life. It was on that day I was miraculously saved from death as a three-year-old child who had accidentally fallen off the roof of his house, twelve feet into a newly laid granite stone rainwater gutter below. This miracle was commemorated every year by special monetary thank offering, for of course God had saved me for a special purpose! For that is what I was told again and again over the years. I sat my folks down around the dining table, my sister knew what was coming. I told my folks that I couldn't marry. I couldn't and wouldn't marry this girl or any girl for that matter. There were no words, suddenly no vocabulary sufficient to put the point across effectively. The words 'I am

gay' felt blank and meaningless and would be pointless to use and there would be no context. So I had to take the long route saying, 'I'm not attracted to women, I cannot make women happy, etc, etc.' It was excruciating. Tears everywhere. Mum and Dad suggested medical treatment, thinking I was impotent. It was a betrayal, condemnation, and crucifixion of my own. Slowly over the next few days, the penny dropped for them too to a certain degree.

Over the years that followed, the coming out kept happening to the wider community. To me it felt like the good boy gradually had become the great disappointment of an entire community, and a cause for gossip from schoolteachers to shopkeepers. People who really didn't know me took on the right to condemn me as a person of bad character. Me being gay made moral perfectionists and judges of those around me. In the Indian context one doesn't have to explain the impact of such a 'fall from grace' on friends and family. So it was easier for me and them that I be as far away from it all as possible. London became home to me for the next 17 years, where I was free to be me, explore who I was, make my own mistakes, achieve my own goals, have my relationships and break-ups, even a marriage and a divorce – yes, to a man. There was not even one person in my entire network there who didn't love the gay me and accept me fully and wholeheartedly.

Seventeen years later I have returned from London to find that much of what I ran away from is still very present. There's much work to be done. I realise and accept that I am not in control of the journey of acceptance, understanding and love that others have to go on. What I am in control of is me accepting them for who they are, and love them even though they may not accept me, yet. My father, on the other hand, has indeed worked very hard in understanding. He has listened to all the debates on TV when back in the mid-2000s the Delhi High Court had ruled against Section 377. He made a scrapbook of all the newspaper articles on the subject, saying 'Son, all the arguments you have given us, they are also giving.' Bless him. He and I have since become friends. I know he understands. He shows it in his own way, and that is enough for me. He wears my hats and suspenders in solidarity!

Since then some members of my extended family have come to understand

and support me, albeit privately. At least I have not experienced violence or hostility from any of them. My sister still will not budge from her bigoted conservative Christian stance. Other childhood friends from school, college and even a few from the church community have shown support and acceptance, which is truly wonderful. Things are changing for the better ever so slowly. I am overjoyed that the Supreme Court of India has now read down the offending Section 377 and has decriminalised consensual, adult, non-vaginal sexual intercourse. Which means I am no longer a criminal in my own country for loving another person of the same gender as me. I look forward to the day when our relationships are validated by law and society and that the queer community has the same rights as our heterosexual brothers and sisters. To those still thinking of coming out, I would say as a gay elder once told me, 'If it is truth you have to suffer for, then that suffering is worth more than anything else in the world.' I would say work on your love of yourself for that you are truly in control of and the love you have for your family. Trust your love. I believe love conquers all. 'Where there is love, there is no fear!'

Yes, it can be very lonely at times being the first in the community to come out and be an activist for gay rights. However, as in the words of Polonius to his son Laertes in Hamlet, 'Above all else, to thine own self be true', to live the authentic self is worth all of the hardship. To live one's own life to the full as Jesus wanted us to, to love unconditionally, selflessly, fearlessly, wholeheartedly, above and beyond the viles and traps of ego. To shine one's own light, like the beam of light in the Matrimandir in Auroville, which is to know, love and live out one's own truth. What value can one put on that?

Somewhere between the infinity
That reaches out from my physical being
And the one that radiates into it, is me.
That sacred, unidentifiable,
Untouchable, unfathomable Place.
Like a flowing river, that me has already passed,
Presenting a new one in this moment,
That too passes and lingers not.

For nothing in the universe is stagnant and still,
The universe itself ever expanding.
Then why, oh mind of mine, do you stay put at times,
Holding on to those things that bind and weigh heavy?
On past memories or on fantasies of things to come?
Why, oh dear heart of mine, do you hold on
To pain or pleasure, hurt or humour, serenity or sadness?
For holding on is to strive against the flow of the universe,
And who am I to stand up to her?
Hold on to nothing, dear traveller,
Keep moving, linger not, stay not, stagnate not.
Like the planets and stars, like every minute cell,
keep on moving on, shine your light,
the reflected glory of the Sun.

We are That

by Sheba Remy Kharbanda

'[M]embers of the affected community, in their move to build communities and relationships premised on care and reciprocity, lay challenge to the idea that relationships, and by extension society, must be divided along hierarchical sexual roles in order to function.'

JUSTICE CHANDRACHUD

*And so states Hesiod's The Theogony,
In the beginning there was Chaos, the starting point.
Out of chaos came Gaea, dark Tartarus, and finally, Eros.*

Did you know: a pearl begins its life as an intruder.

A grain of sand or floating food successfully makes its way into the well-guarded mantle inside an oyster shell and can't be extruded. To protect itself from irritation, the oyster reacts by covering the intruder with layers of nacre, or mother of pearl. Concentric rings of nacre build up layer by layer around the intruder until it is eventually fully ensconced.

The pearl is born.

My mother's once smooth hands, now wrinkled and arthritic, wipe the kitchen countertops in the flat she now lives in by herself. She rinses the rag under a tap fed by Thames water.

She and the flat have been home to my brother and I for decades. And she has been cleaning countertops, our own and, while we were children, others', for much of her life. If I didn't have school or was skipping because the constant bullying was sometimes too much, I would tag along. Most of her clients were English. In the case of one family in particular, my mother also took on child-rearing duties, a little girl who became more attached to our family than to her own.

I've never been as efficient, as adept, at these functions. I don't know if it's an innate lapse in skill or a mental barrier. How many centuries has this been the primary work of our people?

For my mother, these are acts of love.

I call her *budhi*, old woman. Her mother, my grandmother, died at the age of fifty, eight years after leaving the Punjab for West London. Both departures were unexpected. Like many Punjabi families, mine didn't realize that their flight out of Lahore in 1947 would be permanent. After a recent visit to a spectacle shop where I tried to convince *budhi* to buy a new pair of frames for her post-cataract eyes, hers having seen decades more of the world than any of the other customers: Biji seemed fine in the morning. Not a couple of hours after my mother left for work, Biji collapsed behind her closed bedroom door. The fire brigade was called alongside the ambulance. And my mother took to saying that Biji died of a broken heart.

Her ashes were eventually returned to the Punjab and encased within a brick that was later added to the wall of her uncle's home in New Delhi.

All this I knew.

What was new was the information that Biji slept in the room downstairs, adjacent to the kitchen.

When she has shown herself to me, Biji is in a kitchen, the smell of food enveloping her, a smile on her face and words of admonition about not eating enough coming from her lips. I have seen and felt her (and others)

for as long as I can remember. When I was very young, I took her ethereal presence for granted. It was only in adolescence that I realized it wasn't considered normal to connect so seamlessly with those who had passed on.

The other day, on our way to her 69th birthday lunch, my mother spoke her thoughts out loud. 'I never thought I'd reach this age!' I told her that my grandmother had been laughing for the past hour but I wasn't sure about what. In that moment, I knew and conveyed as much. My mother laughed, too. She had raised us to be ready in case she too died at the age of fifty. It was upon her 50th birthday that I took to calling her *budhi*.

After three days Nanak came out of the river. People were surprised to see him alive. They thought he had drowned. He looked full of light, and he didn't talk much. After a long time he finally spoke. He said "There is no Hindu, there is no Muslim. Everyone is the same." Then he spoke the Mul Mantra and the rest of the Japji Sahib. His work had begun. He, Bhai Mardana and Bhai Bala started travelling together to teach. Guru Nanak Ji's wife, Bibi Sulakhani, began to cry, "Don't leave me alone." He touched her on the forehead and her third eye opened. She saw how the world was in pain. She understood what Nanak had to do. She said, "It's true, you must go. The world is on fire and you must put it out." So they left to spread the message of the One in everyone.

(Gurumeher Kaur)

I grew up hearing stories of how Guru Nanak Dev Ji roamed the Middle East, India and points further east in the company of his childhood friend Bhai Mardana, a Muslim *rubabi*. Companion for over thirty years, Bhai Mardana would play the *rubab*, a lute-like instrument originating from Afghanistan, while Guru Ji sang the *bhajans* that are the heart and soul of Sikhi.

Legend has it that was for the ever-hungry or thirsty Bhai Mardana that Guru Ji turned sweet the normally bitter fruit of the *reetha* (soupnut) tree.

For centuries after, Muslim *rubabi* were tasked with the responsibility of performing *kirtan* at gurdwaras across the Punjab.

This tradition – like so very many others – came to a screeching halt in 1947.

Until Partition, my father's family belonged to Afghanistan, the battleground of empires. Specifically Kabul and Peshawar, capital of the Northwest Frontier, the region once conquered by Alexander the Great.

To this day my father still talks of a childhood shaped by living in close proximity to Muslim neighbors, of breaking bread and laughing together, of how his father wore his *dastaar* like the Pathaans. So in the wake of Partition, when said neighbors suggested my family briefly leave the area, my grandfather is said to have locked the doors of the dry fruit and nut warehouses that were the family's trade, handed the keys to a trusted

employee with the promise that the family would return imminently. My grandfather died some ten years later in Shimla. My grandmother, some 40 years later, in New Delhi. My father, now 81, flits between the two.

He has never returned to Afghanistan.

The *Tawarikh-i-Punjab*, written in 1848 by Bute Shah, suggests that it was the revered Sufi saint Mian Mir who, at the request of Guru Arjan Dev Ji, laid the foundation stone for the Golden Temple in Amritsar. Earlier versions of history seem to exclude this key detail, with some suggesting its inclusion later on was an effort to repair relations between Sikhs and Muslims. When I first learned of this story, I instantly felt in my bones that it must be true, if not exactly then certainly metaphorically. What is well documented is the life-long friendship between the saint and Guru Ji and of their shared respect for the Sufi doctrine of love for all.

The blood of the covenant is thicker than the water of the womb.

Prior to Partition, my mother's family were living in Lahore, home to the shrine of Hazrat Mian Mir. Located in a densely populated section of the city, the shrine offers free shelter to the poor and, on Thursdays, a Mubarak day for Sufis, food as well. This is when local and visiting musicians will come to the shrine to sing *Qawwals* about unity and harmony, as acts of devotion and signals of belonging. Even today it is said that the *kalaam* of the much revered Sikh poet and mystic Ravidas resounds in the grounds of the shrine.

There is no conclusive agreement or evidence on the origins of Lahore. Some say the name of the city derives from *Loh* or *Lava*, the son of Rama in the Hindu epic poem, the Ramayana. What we do know is that the city is a mere 24 kilometers from the fortified border that separates India from Pakistan.

Or 15 miles.

The Raavi, one of Punjab's namesake rivers, forms a natural boundary between the two brother-sister countries following part of the course of the long barbed-wire covered border.

It is the river into which Guru Nanak Dev Ji sprinkled the ashes of Bhai Mardana.

The Greeks called this river *Hydraotes*. In ancient times, this part of the Punjab belonged to the Malavas, a warlike tribe that Alexander the Great confronted and successfully defeated. On the other side of the Raavi is Amritsar, home to the Golden Temple. On the other side of Amritsar lies the Beas, known by the Greeks as *Hyphasis*. The Beas marks the easternmost border of Alexander the Great's conquests. It was here that his troops mutinied.

It was here that my mother sprinkled the ashes of my papaji and mamaji who died within a week of each other and almost exactly 23 years after Biji.

All four of my grandparents would have crossed these rivers on their way into India. I don't know that any of them realized it would be their last time, that they would live out the rest of their days so far away from this original 'home'. It is something I think about often as I flit between three continents, occasionally quite confused about where my roots belong, at other times with a lucidity that suggests the Gurus have been talking directly to me and that I too am the one in everyone.

Punjab's five ancient rivers are tributaries of the great Indus, for which the founding civilization of the region was named. We forget this at our own peril.

Every Punjabi knows the tragic love stories of Heer Ranjha, Mirza Sahiba and Soni Mahiwal. Today, the region's namesake rivers, like these lovers, are rend asunder.

Until the 19th century it was common to see the *Platanista gangetica minor*, the Indus river dolphin, in Punjab's rivers. A freshwater version of our great ocean-dwelling friends, the river dolphin with its strange and almost prehistoric appearance, was known to swim the length of the Indus basin, from the delta to the foothills of the Himalayas, gliding seamlessly between the brother-sister nations. Known colloquially as *bhulan*, thanks to the millions of years spent in silty Himalayan melt waters, they are blind, relying upon echolocation to navigate, and find food and mates.

The Greek word for dolphin is *delphus* which sounds a lot like the Greek word for womb, *delphys*.

With Partition came dams and barrages which sliced and diced what were once free-flowing waters and consequently sightings of the dolphins became fewer and fewer. With the slicing and dicing came pollution. These once revered waterways that served as inspiration for some of Punjab's greatest writers have become mere receptacles for the effluents and sewage from the cities and factories along their course. Some rivers are not even fit for bathing, let alone drinking.

Today *bhulan* are considered to be the most endangered of all river dolphins.

*Having crossed the river,
Where will you go, O friend?*
(Kabir)

The Quran tells us, *we made every living thing of water.*

Science tells us that 70 percent of the Earth's surface is water, that this same water makes up to 60 percent of the human body and comprises 92 percent of human blood.

For all the ways we cleverly cleave to *our own*, we are all drinking from one water, the same carrier of our memories.

In still waters, I see my face reflected back to me. In my reflection, I glimpse the faces of my people. In my face, I see into antiquity, to that woman from whom all living beings are descended.

In my face, I know *my own* which is to know the All.

As much as water is a giver and sustainer of life, polluted water can kill.

Just some weeks ago it seemed that the continued tensions between India and Pakistan might explode into another war. It would have been the fifth between brothers, sisters and cousins in about 70 years.

Disaster has been averted. For now.

In the meantime, dolphins have been sighted again in the Beas.

It is said that unlike their marine cousins, river dolphins are less ostentatious and therefore not so easy to spot.

There are somewhere between five and 17, their continued existence squarely resting on human shoulders.

Over a million years ago, mammals evolved the limbic brain, affording homo sapiens the gift of emotionality and relatedness. Limbic resonance tells us that we have the capacity to share in deep emotional states, which can leap between minds. Feelings, therefore, are contagious.

In my dream, I am in London visiting my mother.

It is raining outside, that soft almost-nothing rain that creates a thin veil of moisture, a wet, watery separation between us and the air.

It is not cold but she has the heat turned up high. Since returning from a visit to India, she says she can't get warm enough.

She tries to convince herself and me that Great Britain is home. We both know we are rootless souls.

She opens her time-worn hands like an oyster shell and within them sits a shimmering pearl.

*'1279 persons in 2014 and 1491
in 2015 were arrested under
Section 377.'*

JUSTICE CHANDRACHUD
referring to the National Crime Records Bureau

Contributors

Ahmed Umar

I am an amateur writer, a visual artist, 31 years old, gender non-conforming, Sudanese and Norwegian.

Akhil Katyal

I grew up in Lucknow and Bareilly and currently live in New Delhi, where I write and teach poetry. I was a member of the Nigah Queer Collective in the late 2000s in Delhi. My second book of poems 'How Many Countries Does the Indus Cross' won the Editor's Choice Award from The (Great) Indian Poetry Collective in 2018. I was the University of Iowa International Writing Fellow in Fall 2016.

Akshay Sarkate

I am an amateur writer, HR by profession, dancer by passion, 32 years old, gay, Hindu by birth and belief, Indian by nationality, an emotional rationalist looking to set myself free and out of the closets.

Arvind Narrain

I am a human rights lawyer based in Bangalore. I am currently with Arc International. I work closely with human rights groups including the Peoples Union for Civil Liberties-Karnataka and Alternative Law Forum. I was associated with the Section 377 litigation since 2000 both as a lawyer and an activist.

Balbir Krishan

I am a New York and New Delhi-based multimedia artist and queer activist. My canvases, drawings, and new media work explore societal and personal themes that include race, gender, sex and sexuality, freedom, equality, love, hope, desire, pain and struggle. My work is informed by my autobiography, Indian mythology, human rights and social issues.

Chintan Girish Modi

I am a writer and peace educator. I love hugging trees, laughing with abandon, and contemplating the teachings of the Buddha. Reach out to me if you are in India.

Divya Titus

I am a writer, activist, and gender policy consultant. I identify as a cis-hetero progressive Indian woman. When I am not buried in a book, I spend my time speaking truth to power.

E. Koyote Millar

I am a semi-feral, genderqueer and trans-activist singer, poet and occasional writer, who works as a Gestalt Therapist in private practice and as a Senior Advisor/Director of Dragons at the University of Oslo, Norway. My sexual orientation depends on who is asking and ranges from very enthusiastic to politely not interested, but still friendly unless pressured. At the ripe age of 42, I have become less fixated on the answers to life, the universe and everything, and more interested in the questions. I celebrate diversity in love and connection, frequently howl at the moon, cry over sudden beauty and laugh disturbingly at random silliness. To find me online and on YouTube, search 'Ellen Koyote'.

Gro Skottun

I mostly write about gestalt therapy. I have published one book and several articles, and am the editor of the Norwegian Gestalt Journal. I am a co-founder of the Norwegian Gestalt Institute, where I currently teach. I am 73 years, straight and married. I have children, bonus children, grandchildren

and bonus grandchildren. I enjoy spending time with my dog and family in my free time. I also love cross-country skiing and swimming.

Hansika Jethnani

I am a poet, visual artist and queer body-positive femme based in Mumbai. I have previously lived in Jakarta, Shanghai and London. My work explores a variety of themes, including sexuality, trauma, healing, mental health, body positivity, and migration. I am interested in decolonisation and the dismantling of oppressive structures institutionalised within wider society. I have previously performed at the Crystal Palace Festival and the Battersea Arts Centre in London, and am currently working on my debut poetry collection.

Hilda Levin

I am a dramaturge, working with storytelling in the theatre and with teaching young playwrights. I wrote my master thesis on self-reflection and immersion in participatory experiences. Growing up on a remote island in Sweden, I spent many years longing for queer role models and adventures in space. At 30 years old I am (among other things) identifying as bisexual and queer. I live in Oslo, Norway, and enjoy authenticity, poetry and endless cups of tea.

Kevin Fernandes

I am 27. I write to remember and to forget. Less to remember, more to forget. On empty spaces in my daily planner and mobile phone note-making apps. A proud wholly roamin' Catlik from Mangalore who can't speak Konkani, I earn my keep teaching, or attempting to teach, English to undergraduate students. Apart from being a huge fan of handloom fabrics and silver jewelry, I am often found cooking, baking, quilting, embroidering, stealing plant cuttings, living in double entendre and picking up matchboxes from the side of the road. This obsession, together with that of stamps and postcrossing through postcards makes me the cheapest friend to shop for on a holiday. When I am not doing them, I am busy adding 'men' or 'bugger' (intensified by 'bleedy') to the end of every sentence. You can say 'wat men,

what-chew doin' bugger?' to me at kev.fernandes91@gmail.com or at kev.fernandes on Instagram.

Kiran Bhat

I was born in a suburb of Atlanta to an Indian family. While growing up, I spent formative time in Mysore, India, and spent a year studying abroad in Madrid, Spain. These and various other life-shaping moments have inspired me to believe in a literature that can replicate the way that the Internet and increased global communication allows any person at any place to connect to a person from any other nation or land. I have grown obsessed with the literary representation of this new planetary soul. Towards this end, I have spent the last five years teaching English both online and in-person so that I could work on my fiction, travel to 124 countries, live in 16 cities around the world, and learn how to manage in eleven languages. During my year in Shanghai, I spent my spare time learning the language, and towards the end of my time, I found myself suddenly able to shape language beyond simple communication using pinyin. I decided to kiss the country of China behind by writing a collection of poems called 客然挠语. I wanted to take the 论语 as my example, but to infuse the language with the metaphoric vision and rich language of the 15th century Bhakti movement of India. The translation of my poem 在酒吧很好看的男进了客燃脑问; 你怎么男的种喜欢? has been included in the Fearless Love anthology.

MaBi

I would not call myself a professional writer other than that I write as often and as deeply as I can. I work with body art and I am studying to be a therapist. I am genderfluid and queer. I am inherently spiritual and believe everything is life and has energy. We are all stardust. I have one book that I carry with me everywhere I go and I just randomly open to a page that gives me some words to carry through the day.

Noman Mubashir

I am a triple minority in Oslo – gay, Muslim, Norwegian-Pakistani – a writer, journalist, TV host, globetrotter and father of two.

Rahul Sen

I am 28. I am a student and teacher of literature and queer theory. I identify as queer, and take queerness wherever I go or whatever I do! I take interest in reading and writing about sexualities in popular culture, art, and politics, and love watching cinema. I can be frequently found at food-joints in the city, or in my kitchen, as good food is the other thing I live for.

Sabrina Mazzoni

Born in Italy, currently based in Portugal and Norway, I am committed to being an active member of a green, diverse and socially responsible community, locally and globally. I hold a PhD in Eco-informatics from the University of Oslo, previously studying conservation Biology in California and Costa Rica. Most recently working on modelling the socio-environmental impacts of Climate Change, I've worked on other cross-disciplinary nature conservation research, including community participation and food sustainability projects. Passionate about queer history and photography, I have also curated several LGBT history collections and exhibits, and organised pride events. 'You are what you eat,' they say. Well, having lived in three continents, eight different countries, and a smattering of cities big and small, I sure have soaked up the rich colours, flavours and sounds of all those wonderful places: a real rainbow of experiences. My Italian olive oil soaked skin has turned brown in the California sun; bright oranges and yellows from all those Southeast Asian curries eaten in NZ and the UK; sprinkled with Norwegian salmon and Portuguese Azuls! As gender-queer and feminist on the inside as on the outside, I respond positively to any pronouns or appellation so long as it's done with a smile. From her to sir but never 'signora', Sabrina is best!

Sachin Jain

I am a Spanish teacher at an international school in Mumbai. I am also the founder and Artistic Director of Anekant Productions, based in Mumbai, dedicated to developing queer themes and talent. I wrote, directed and produced the Hindi-language play 'Bhasmasur' in 2018. It wove a modern story of same-sex sexual harassment in a corporate office with a well-known

Indian mythological tale. My second production 'QStory', consisting of live, true, first person stories by queer storytellers in Mumbai and Los Angeles, opened in June 2019. I have written the chapter on Jainism in *I Am Divine, So Are You* (Harper Collins, 2017), a book about how Indic religions affirm the dignity of queer identities and sexualities. My long-form essay 'Not His Master's Voice' was published in *Queer Potli: Memories, Imaginations and Reimaginings of Urban Queerer Spaces in India* (Queer Ink, 2016). I was invited to speak about LGBT Hindi writing at the 'Queer Asia Conference' at SOAS, London. I am the Hindi editor of *Gaylaxy Magazine*, for which I have also written in Hindi and English. I am the co-founder of *Gay Bombay*, one of India's oldest, grassroots gay social and support organizations. I am the founder of the one-of-a-kind *GHAR* (Gay Housing Assistance Resource), a free, online, pan-Indian bulletin board for queers to find safe housing.

Samsaya

I am an Indian-Norwegian singer, songwriter and composer.

Sandip Roy

I am a writer, journalist and radio host in Kolkata. I am a middle-aged gay man. I won a Good Conduct medal in school and have been trying to shake it off since. I wrote a novel called *Don't Let Him Know*.

Sanjay Kumar

I'm an amateur writer and psychotherapist. I mostly spend my day contemplating theology, philosophy and the miseries of the world today as a result of the male ego. I am male with a very strong female spirit. I love binge-watching period drama and crime drama.

Sheba Remy Kharbanda

I am an autodidact visual artist, filmmaker, oral historian, storyteller and metaphysician. Born to Sikh immigrants from the Punjab, I bounce between my hometown of London, Brooklyn, NY and across Northern India. My approach to life is multidirectional, inspired by the different dimensions of

human experience and rooted in the magic offered by the liminal space. As a proponent of unity consciousness, the fundamental goal of my work is to offer a bridge between the seen and unseen, between the tangible and the intangible and in so doing, reassert the value of balance and harmony in the world. I regularly commune with unseen beings, human and otherwise.

Stefan Storm

I'm a white, gay, queer cis-man, copywriter, writer, editor, co-founder of Mohini Books, boardgames creator, conlanger, and wannabe designer who dreams of retirement in a queer village somewhere way south of Oslo.

Vikram Kolmannskog

I am a queer man of dual heritage, born to an Indian mother and a Norwegian father. I was born on 6 September 1980, the Indian LGBTQ-positive verdict now giving me extra reason to celebrate that day. I am a gestalt psychotherapist, human rights lawyer, writer, editor and publisher. I am the author of *Lord of the Senses: Stories*, *The Empty Chair: Tales from Gestalt Therapy*, *Poetry Is Possible: Selected Poems*, and *Taste and See: A Queer Prayer*. Stefan, friend and colleague in Mohini Books, describes me in the following manner: 'Vikram is an ascetic hedonist, a disciplined eccentric, and a subversive worshipper. Fuelled by chocolate and protein bars, and inspired by an entire global pantheon, he explores life in raw, yet beautiful poetry and prose.' More about me and my work at www.vikram.no

Mohini Books

Mohini Books takes its name and inspiration from the Indian myth of Mohini, a queer story that celebrates the diversity of genders and sexualities, a playfulness, and a subversive spirituality. We are an Oslo-based, queer-operated micropublisher. In addition to the present book, we have previously published *Taste and See: A Queer Prayer*, which Kirkus Review described as 'a lyrical study of passion, both religious and carnal.'

www.mohini.no

On 6 September 2018, the Indian Supreme Court delivered a verdict on LGBTQ+ rights. In celebration we have created this anthology with poems, short stories, essays, letter and song lyrics.

Ahmed Umar
Akhil Katyal
Akshay Sarkate
Arvind Narrain
Balbir Krishnan
Chintan Girish Modi
Divya Titus
E. Koyote Millar
Gro Skottun
Hansika Jethnani
Hilda Levin
Kevin Fernandes
Kiran Bhat
MaBi
Noman Mubashir
Rahul Sen
Sabrina Mazzoni
Sachin Jain
Samsaya
Sandip Roy
Sanjay Kumar
Sheba Remy Kharbanda
Stefan Storm
Vikram Kolmannskog

Download this anthology for free – or order a printed book – by visiting our website:

www.mohini.no

ISBN 978-82-93637-03-5