

# Sharanya Deepak

Stillness

I am sitting at the window in my sister's room in my parents' flat in New Delhi, and there are no winds outside. I love winds, and I hate Delhi for never having any. The city lives in a pit: where dry heat, pollution, anger, and violent history, all come to settle in a murky mix it calls life. I know this house well, but I never sit at this window. My own room is a small one, enclosed with a smaller patio, with photos of my friends taped everywhere. There are unsent letters stacked in corners, which I often read.

The window has no real view, I can look out to the homes of some neighbors (whom I dislike), many small cars (mostly blue) and a tree with no leaves (yet). It is a small flat, and is surrounded by others, taller grey stone buildings, with the same balconies and grills on their windows, some have wet clothes that flutter outside them, offering a sign of life. New Delhi's skies are otherwise matted with brown dust, and grey smoke, but now, as if as a joke: while everyone is indoors, pink and blue streaks line them, parrots dart across them manically as if released from a long slumber.

A flock of the parrots lands on the tree outside, hopping across branches purposefully, breathing heavily, and preening themselves like hapless divas. I realize that the emergence of birds in Delhi skies is what people have been talking about on the internet: the reclamation of Delhi by its birds has become a way for us to perceive the powerful pandemic we are living in.

When I was a teenager in the city, we would see dancing peacocks, flamingos, and even buck beaked hornbills calling across the window — crowing for attention. I feel old, watching the birds, reminiscing a yesteryear in this city in which my friends and I fed jam sandwiches to menacing vultures. Some of us shaking with fear, and others, the daredevils strutting up to the large birds in fits of bravado.

Two more parrots arrive at the tree and nuzzle, as a third looks on, disgruntled. This makes me laugh and when I do, I think I see the lonely parrot turn to nod, and me as if we are new friends at a party.

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Before the breakout of the pandemic and lockdown in New Delhi, I was packing my bags to leave for Tokyo, a city I hadn't visited, or had any real interest in except that it held a beloved friend I hadn't seen in a long while. I was to head off for 12 days; I had saved up some money and won a discount coupon for an airline company, and was determined to make something meaningful out of my banal prize.

We planned my trip meticulously, calculating the bus fare from the airport, setting daily budgets, planning walks in his favorite spots and picnics by lakes, like we did when we met several years ago in our early 20s. He told me stories about the city that had been his home

for five years: how he felt frustrated for not being able to talk better Japanese to elderly couples, his confusion at how his partner remained calm in crowds of daunting, trendy Tokyoites; how children in colorful hats took photos, turn by turn, near a tall sacred tree.

I read his texts in his voice: quiet, sharp, Northern English, immediately critical of his own thoughts as they manifested into speech. To go all the way to see him was a valiant gesture of friendship, I thought it profoundly political to plough through visa applications and immigration offices to do something simple with my friends.

After I cancelled the tickets, the time I devoted to Tokyo loomed in front of me, a big black whole of emptiness devoid of any heroism, big romantic gestures or languid plans. This was not something I was ready for – idleness, paranoia, feeling my mother watch my back as I raked dosas on her pan. Predictably, with the lack of anything immediate to do, I drove myself mad, spending hours on the internet, walking around the house as everyone slept, worrying about writing, looking at myself in my phone camera and scrutinizing each part of my face – the slant of my nose, the hair on my left eyebrow which either grew too long, or didn't at all.

As the days grew denser, so did my rattling anxiety – I would wake up in twists, my moods dark and lunging at my father, who had always been a prime target for my bad moods. Before noon, there would be roaring arguments in our house – about a knife, money I owed them, my own complaints: that they didn't don't read enough, their pans were too old, taunts at their generation and their lack of attention to how the country was festering in hate and phobia.

It wasn't the isolation that bothered me, but the stillness. In the last two years, I had made for myself a busy life, in which I ran across Delhi working many jobs, and travelled erratically and always for assignments, thriving in the terseness of words like "Deadlines" or text templates that said "Be there in 5". I had made meaning in transit, moving across my city and my life in drifts. As the pandemic swallowed the world, I had nowhere to run to, nowhere to put my time, I had nothing to race against and thrash myself into. No trains to catch, no arguments to walk out of. I was by this window; I had nothing to distract me from being locked in on my own for days.

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In her book *Flights*, Olga Tokarczuk writes about finding herself at home in rumbles of trains, plane takeoffs, in sounds of ships setting sail, and separating from their anchors. Tokarczuk writes of how motion is embedded in her body, she in the friction that comes from movement, she becomes alive, a woman, a person, a writer. I often feel like Tokarczuk, understanding what I need and whom I love only when I have set off somewhere. But what if I moved because I was afraid that when I stopped, I had to deal with the consequences

of the movement, the things it created and destroyed in its wake? What if in motion, I was charming, effusive and intelligent but in stillness, I remained unpleasant, volatile, and a monster?

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The only other time I have been stranded in this house was when I was nineteen. My parents had gotten strict instructions from youth counselors not to let me go outside, “No drinking, no partying, nothing triggering”, they were told. Imran, someone they didn’t know at all, and I didn’t know well had taken his own life. Imran – brown eyes, unplaceable accent, and who always came into the room unexpectedly and asked too many questions to people he had just met. “The other kids may follow suit”, I remember the counselors telling them, in our living room, where I had already started acting up from moving houses into the suburbs, far from what I knew. I refused to paint my room and slept on the floor, hardly eating and guzzling biscuits when my parents were at work. I slept through my exams, bursting into tears at any mention of them, shouted at my sister as she hung up big purple drapes in her own room – sticking her tongue out at me every time I entered. I disliked the counselors, their prim shoes and careful way of speaking, and how they referred to us as “other kids” as some kind of savage clique that had no way of making their own mind.

Imran and I hadn’t been friends. But I sat next to him at parties – in which I smoked cigarettes slowly and he guzzled bottles of vodka on the roofs of rich friends we had in common, other teenagers talking over each other, invincible, sure of themselves. “He took it into his own hands” I wrote in my journal that night, my young brain indignant, angry, eager to give him the agency adults had taken away from him. “What’s wrong with that?”

A month after he passed, I threw myself out of my parents slow-moving car on a driveway in the city. I planned it for an hour, and opened a door on an empty road and tumbled out, landing on my back. My father walked straight up to me as I lay on my back, picked me up, and with his hands in his face, said. “You are weak.”

“How did you turn out weak?”

They did as the counselors said, and barred me from leaving my room, checking on me once every hour. I stopped eating, and stayed in bed, watching the days pass by outside the window, views of the buildings and the sounds of 8 year olds playing hide-n-seek became the only way I perceived there was a world outside.

I think about that evening now, and about Imran as I still do on most days, more than a decade later. Even today, my parents and I do not speak of it, not once, not ever, since.

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Most days at the window are fruitless. I try to study French; I scour through my phone, writing notes or looking at old photographs, sometimes ravaging social media profiles of people I don't know, my brain turning into a paralyzing mush.

I find that I am trying to bury time, forcing it to pass. To look time in the face is frightening, and I quickly distract myself from it: texting, scouring YouTube, reading old emails. I realize this is what everybody else is doing as well, on the Internet, where cat videos, endless rants, Zoom sessions, Twitter rambles become a way to beat time.

I read about writers in France escaping to second homes, chateaus in the countryside, and imagine their gardens with whims like apricots dripping from trees, the sun flimsy and elusive as it shines in the first of worlds, not scorching and brutal as it comes through the window I am at. I think that if I was a well-endowed writer; my stillness would be different prettier, and unchallenging, taking shape in crumbling libraries, in European motifs for solitude like bottles of half-drunk wine.

I tell my sister about the chateaus, and she shrugs, watching a green-bodied kingfisher make his way to a branch. I am jealous of her aloofness to other people's fortunes, her own acute awareness of our own: as we sit by windows, thousands of migrants are stuck homeless in transit, other Indians, homeless and without shelter are beaten and attacked by a callous, indifferent nation-state.

The kingfisher at the window is chased away by pigeons, as I look on, irked by the evident and inscrutable systems of power that govern even this tree. The stillness comes with challenges: to join myself into a moment that presented itself to me had become almost alien, something I had forgotten to do.

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In the countryside of West Scotland, my friend and I would drive near his hometown, circling around small hills he climbed as a teenager, his hand on the wheel relying on instinct to take us to places he knew. He would contemplate where we could stop for a meal, and I, in turn, would wonder if I was in love with him.

Our routes were mindless, I would point to a place on the map and we would go, with boxes of red-beans and rice, and two albums in two a compilation of Iraqi wedding music from his father's apartment, and Outkast's Speakerboxxx, which we listened to a lot, knowing we couldn't anymore in public. Both our outward personalities were animate, crowd pleasing, we talked too much at parties, told too many stories to people we didn't know. In each other's company, we would collapse into a stolid silence; from tiredness or the liberty to be within ourselves. We existed in a vacuum, which I would try and escape, finding something to fret about which he would interject, telling me to "stop it, you don't

have to find something to worry about” or at other times, “Just look outside I don’t need to be entertained.”

In one of these trips, I sat by a cold roaring ocean, as I watched winds sweep across what would be the most beautiful landscape I have ever seen. The stillness would come then, as if the winds brought me within the landscape, so I couldn’t see it anymore but was inside it, I could hear my friend pick seaweed, hum, or rattle sticks for a fire he would build and proceed to spend the evening with. I would watch, knowing that soon we would return to the world outside our capsule, our real lives, where we would talk over one another, compete for our friends attention; begin a hustle for work, visas, money, unable to exist in the outside world as we did as in this one, peacefully, in automatic symbiosis.

Even as I would leave, and return to my own life, the moment would stay with me, as if time itself had stood still, stretching out longer and clearer than most years.

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My window is no Scottish coast, but time has begun to stop in similar ways, even as I battle roaring fights with my parents, and the cobwebs in my own head in specks, I feel some kind of strength, as I see my life pass by like a montage, the nice bits coming to life, and the bad ones entangling themselves. I hear laughter. I see the details on my friends faces, I taste sweet coffee and stale bread, I rethink times I wished I stood up for myself, and witness traumas I have buried and memories that have cruelly stored themselves in my bones.

I watch my father from the window, who, for the ban on going outside, goes under the building, his foot in a cast, with which he hobbles, talking to a neighbour, waving frantically as he mouths practicalities, standing more than six feet away.

Soon, he disappears from my view and appears near me at the window, I see his face creased into softness with age, his temperament easier, goofier, as if he thought he had to work fifty years before he afforded himself the luxury of humor. He is often confused by how we spend days, perplexed at the floozy middle-class privileges my sister and I have that he never did to read by a window, to dwell on ideas of meaning within ourselves.

“*Dekha?*” he says. “Did you see?” he says, pointing to the window. “*Shikray*” he explains, using the Hindi word for Kites. Sure enough, a large bird sits on the tree and looks at us, wide-eyed, beautiful, full of memories for us both of Delhi and electric childhoods; of clean, sunny winters; of a time in which our city was less monstrous than it is today.

I grin at the *shikra*, and then at my father, I imagine that I have never seen him pause at anything his whole life, until now.

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**Sharanya is a writer from New Delhi, India. Her work centres on issues of justice, identity and conflict with a focus on food. But she is currently transitioning into writing more essays about selfhood, and the ways bodies move through the world. You can read more of her work on her website: <https://www.sharanyadeepak.com/>**