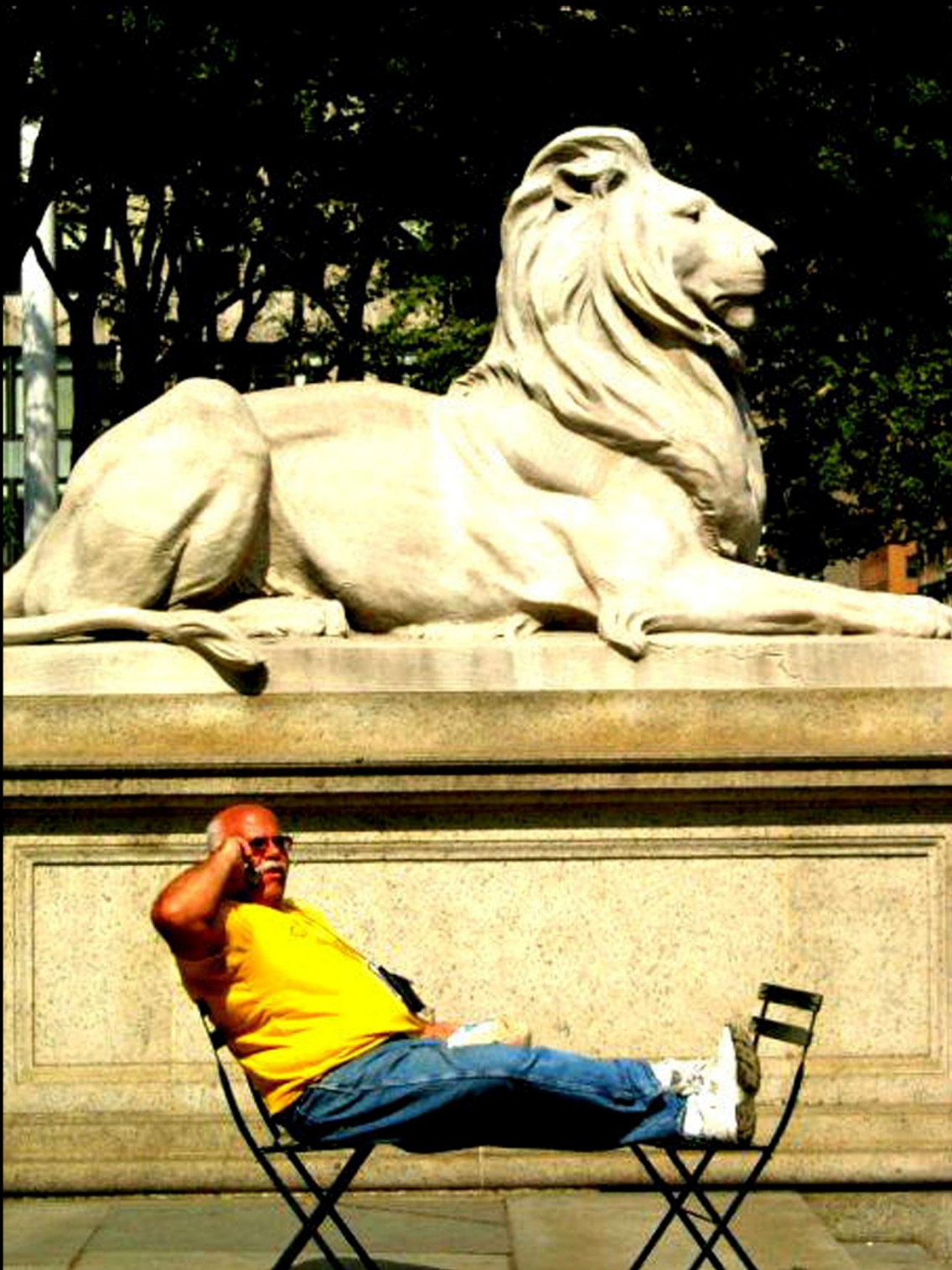

THE EXHIBITIONIST

XZBT1 | AUGUST 2012

THEXZBT.WORDPRESS.COM



THINK. ACT. XZBT.

THE EXHIBITIONIST is a monthly online magazine dedicated to the cause of creativity.

EDITOR & DESIGNER Khadija Ejaz khadijaejaz@hotmail.com

COVER PHOTO *New York Lions* Khadija Ejaz

TABLE OF CONTENTS

FROM THE EDITOR	4
An afterthought on the XZBT birthing process	
GUEST EDITORIAL	5
Fiona Poojara was the first person who was told about the XZBT when it was just an idea. She was promised the first guest editorial. The XZBT has kept its promise.	
XZBTs	
The Mean Girl Managers, and Fat Anna : <i>brandi dawn henderson {non-fiction}</i>	6
My Father at Sixty : <i>lance hawvermale {poetry}</i>	10
Children of Cambodia : <i>fiona poojara {photography}</i>	12
Just Good Friends : <i>dr. sonal mehta {non-fiction}</i>	14
Bradley Dunn : <i>kelly jacobson {fiction}</i>	17
My Right Foot : <i>khadija ejaz {art}</i>	30
Reasoning with Reason : <i>shibani bedi {poetry}</i>	32
Of Terror and Blindness and Looking Back: The Hexagonal Clutch : <i>priyanka sacheti {non-fiction}</i>	34

FROM THE EDITOR

Funny thing, this whole creativity business. A month ago there was no such thing as The Exhibitionist, yet here it is. You can see it, you can interact with it, you're reading it right now. It's a whole entity by itself. But until just a month ago, it didn't exist. At some point it was just a thought in my head, like the children I've always wanted to have. All I did was to take it seriously and give it form. I tried to reproduce to the best of my abilities whatever it was I was seeing in my head. And now it's here, and everyone can see it. You are now interacting with what once was a thought. Just an idea. Who knows what thoughts and ideas are made of? But now, this one is talking back to you.



[Listen Online](#)

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Khadija'.

Khadija Ejaz

GUEST EDITORIAL

The Exhibitionist is a stage, a platform for all of us to be creative. An opportunity to get over all those apprehensions, a chance to let those creative juices flow. It is a unique opportunity to interact with like-minded people who too have been bitten by that 'creative bug'. We cannot all be Mark Twains or Wordsworths, but we love to read, write, take photos, draw, and simply enjoy the magic of creativity and the power that comes from being free of barriers when it comes to expressing ourselves. For all those of you who know Khadija, you'd agree with me that she is the embodiment of the word 'creative'. I've been involved with The Exhibitionist since before its inception, and I'm so happy and proud to be a part of the very first XZBT. A very happy first birthday to The Exhibitionist; I'm sure all of us will eagerly await every single edition as the months go by. In the words of Einstein, "creativity is contagious, pass it on."



Fiona Poojara is a television producer at Times Now in Mumbai, India, where she also does voice-overs for shows and promos. She trained in broadcast journalism at New Delhi Television and also has a Bachelor of Arts degree in Economics. She enjoys photography, music, traveling, good food, and meeting new people.

XZBTs

The Mean Girl Managers, and Fat Anna

Brandi Dawn Henderson

When I was nineteen, I had two mean girl managers - both named Becky - at a children's photography studio in which we wore safari jackets and rainbow-colored propeller hats. Becky and Beki, actually. *The Beckys*, they liked to call themselves as they each stretched their lipsticked lips into smiles over teeth that were all slightly too large.

Both of them were big-time Christians, and I suppose I had been too at the time. A few months after I began working there, Beki took me to some Christian rock concert at which I stood next to her awkwardly as she raised her hands to the ceiling and wept with joy to the lyrics. She wore what seemed to be super-multi-layered mascara, clumping her lashes into bold-faced spider legs, and trails of it ran down her face while skinny blonde boys in *Real Men Love Jesus* shirts got boners over how hot her faith was.

The other Becky was married to a personal trainer named Dave and always tried to convince me that thongs were more comfortable than boy cut panties. I'm unsure how this topic came up or why it came up so often, but she did eventually purchase a pair for me, which I never wore, out of spite but still keep, ten years later, because they've never been worn.

Perhaps because I went to a bible study at Beki's condo once, where I busied myself by eating mini-corn dogs and shaking the hands of women dressed in just-below-the-knee skirts, I was soon promoted to the role of Assistant Manager. This meant that, while the Beckys took off their propeller hats, shook out their long blonde and brown hair, and went down to the Nordstrom Cafe to share a cobb salad, it was my responsibility to interview and hire new photographers.

This would be the first time I'd learn I'm no good at hiring people, a fact that would prove true and again in subsequent jobs and years. There's just something about a person sitting in front of me, having pressed her blouse, having taken that last deep breath before entering the premises where the interview will take place, with the hope of being able to go home to whomever her people may be and tell them of her success — I just can't not hire people.

Granted, hiring Fat Anna was maybe not my best move, since she mostly only spoke Russian, but this was not the issue the Beckys had with her. Of course, Fat Anna was not my name for her, but ten years later, it is this name — the name they gave her — that sticks in my head when I think of her. Fat Anna fit in our largest safari vest, but the Beckys thought it was too tight. "We try to keep a cute staff," Becky smilingly reprimanded me, as she took a sip of her grande caramel macchiato. "You can fire her, or we can put her back here to print photos."

Not yet able to question authority, I moved her to the back, where, at four-feet-eleven-inches, she had to stand on a little stool to see the

touchpad on the large developer and printer. One day, she brought in homemade Russian cakes, much to the delight of me and my co-worker, Heather, but the Beckys each took bites and made faces before needing to go rinse their mouths out with more Nordstrom.

So many years later, I understand how small these larger-than-life women were. How young. How closed. I see the insignificance of their roles I once so coveted — keep your safari jackets, sweethearts — but their influence lives on, in my memory of a fat girl named Anna, whose uniform was too tight, and who made shitty cakes — this, instead of Anna the blonde, cheerful girl with apple-cheeks who told knock-knock jokes in bad English and shared with us sweets from her homeland. Anna, whom I hired for her smile, and because she'd pressed her great big shirt.

Brandi Dawn Henderson is a traveling writer from America, on regular journeys that prove truths to be no strangers to fictions. She collects cowboy boots and tattoos, has been an Indophile since 2007, holds an MA in Creative Nonfiction from Johns Hopkins University, and co-edits Outside In Literary & Travel Magazine at <http://www.outsideinmagazine.com>.



My Father at Sixty

Lance Hawvermale

He is a third of that in the jungle,
removing his stinking foot
from the swamp of a lowest-bidder
boot. They have patrolled fifty-four
hours without sleep. Fourteen without
food. He is seven clicks from the firebase
and three years from making love
to the woman who will in turn make me.

Two minutes till midnight
he is nineteen years old. The skin
on his foot is one thousand. Mummified
flesh crawls with scarab-beetle sores.
Moisture has eaten the meat. He dabs
it with his undershirt. When he touches
the place between his toes, it splits
open like a torn red page. He suspects
the other one is worse. He shoves
the foot as if it were someone else's
into his boot and ties it against the pain.
At midnight a sniper's bullet kills
the man beside him, the jungle becomes
a palace of wasps, and my father turns sixty.

He has been sixty for forty years.

Only this August did the calendar catch up.
This morning I saw him looking
at his feet, twisted with arthritic time,
calloused, curled, dappled with liver spots.
“They finally feel good,” he said,
and leaned back in his chair.

An Assistant Professor of English at Ranger College, Lance teaches film, poetry, and creative writing courses. Ray Bradbury is his spirit guide. See more of his work at his website, <http://www.lancehawvermale.com>.



Children of Cambodia

Fiona Poojara





Fiona Poojara is a television producer at Times Now in Mumbai, India, where she also does voice-overs for shows and promos. She trained in broadcast journalism at New Delhi Television and also has a Bachelor of Arts degree in Economics. She enjoys photography, music, traveling, good food, and meeting new people.



Just Good Friends

Dr. Sonal Mehta

"No, no! We're just good friends."

"Can't we just stay friends?"

"You're just my buddy."

"Let's just be friends."

I'm sure you've got what I mean, boys and girls. These (and many more variants of them) are possibly the biggest clichés ever in the English language (followed closely by, "I just want a nice guy who has a good sense of humor" and not so far behind is, "I'm sure you'll find someone special"). If I had 10 bucks for every time I'd heard these, I wouldn't be a terribly rich man, but I would definitely have enough to go for a movie and a lavish seven course dinner, by myself of course.

Now don't get me wrong, I'm not cribbing, although in my opinion, I have been at the receiving end once too many. I do understand that this is the ladies' way of putting someone they despise down as gently as possible, hence I have no complaints with this method. I think I speak on behalf of most of the guys who have experienced this when I say that we appreciate the thought behind it. However, having heard it for over half my life, I have realized that it's the tone that hurts, rather than the content. "He's JUST a friend", "NO! NO! We're JUST friends", thus implying that this chap is completely dispensable.

I guess it's something girls start learning when they're around 12 (the more attractive, the earlier it starts) when guys first begin to pay them attention, and by the time they reach 24, it's more or less a part of their system. A conditioned reflex, if you will. I also believe that the "Just Good Friends" conversation is a fairly recent phenomenon. If it had existed all along, history as we know it might have undergone significant alterations. Can you imagine Juliet telling Romeo that she just wanted to be his friend? Shakespeare wouldn't have been as famous, and Mark Knopfler poorer by a few million quid.

Every time I have one of these conversations, I begin to wonder whether every guy has been on the receiving end as often as me, or is there something fundamentally "good friend"-ly about me (ladies, please feel free to comment. Guys, get your own house in order first). I'm not the most sociable of people (unlike those whack-jobs who claim to have "making friends" as a hobby - how needy is that?!), but I have no qualms about making friends. In these circumstances, however, it's always kind of like getting "consolation prize"-never did figure out whether that was supposed to make me feel good or bad.

I often say that there are two things I will never figure out- computers, and the way women think. They think they're being nice to us when it's really pretty painful. They think they're letting me down gently when they actually leave me hanging in mid-air. I admit that every single time I have had a "good friends" conversation, I have deluded myself into believing there's still a semblance of a chance, a ray of hope, despite knowing that it's pretty much the last nail in the coffin. Totally my fault, I don't blame the fairer sex for any of this.

Ladies, please don't misconstrue this as a sexist post. I don't have anything against women - in fact, I really like them - hence, my getting into trouble with them so often. Here's to all the "just good friends" I have ever made. I love you all. (Call me)

Sonal Mehta is originally from Delhi and has also lived in Ahmedabad for five years where he went to medical college. He came to the US for residency training and since then has lived in multiple cities. He tries to write about life, the universe and everything, when he gets some free time from his day (very often day AND night) job as a vascular neurologist.



Bradley Dunn*Kelly Jacobson*

Bradley Dunn tended to pick up and then collect women the way most men buy new video games but keep the old ones in plastic tubs under their beds. As a well-known playwright and director for a prominent theater company in Washington, DC, he was an anomaly to most women he met yet successful enough to create a following of beautiful women around him. By the time he finished writing what would eventually be his greatest masterpiece, *Woman in Charge*, he was dating at least five different women on a regular basis and adding extras on the weekends when he felt like changing it up. His list of favorite lovers contained the following: Alison, a prominent lawyer and avid reader of classic literature who did volunteer theater on the side at a church in Eastern Market, who he took to any event that required a good education; Brandy, who he called on when he needed a sexy woman on his arm, who worked as a waitress and choreographed dance numbers in her free time for the same group Alison acted in (neither were aware of this overlap, of course, since he made sure to make an appearance at performances but leave before the last scene); Jessica, a paid actress who made a great date for all work-related events and who was well-known in his inner circle for her potential to make it in New York one day; and Sarah, an artist and painter who did his sets when his regular painter flaked on him or was too hungover to hold a brush.

Bradley had been an indecisive man since childhood, when his inability to pick a best friend cost him the favor of any of his fellow

classmates and led to his retreat into the safe world of writing. He began his college career as an International Affairs major, thus the move to DC from Ohio, but then he switched majors five times in two years: first Anthropology, then Sociology, next English, and finally Creative Writing. When he finally graduated a year and a half later than he should have, he moved between jobs like a bee between flowers as he grew famous for his quick wit and lofty ideas (but also for his tendency to miss rehearsals and sleep with his crews).

The only woman he stuck with and brought from job to job was his assistant, Jennifer, who had neither the looks to tempt him nor the attitude to appeal to his ever-seeking groins. She was five feet tall, with stringy brown hair and a mouth like a teenage boy, and though the sight of her walking down the hallway with her thin hips jiggling or chewing on her pencil made him more queasy than excited, he found himself hiring her year after year on talent alone. She could get actresses in line, convince the set designer to put down the bottle in times of crisis, remember how Bradley liked his coffee, recall his mother's birthday (and send her a card with his forged signature on it), and buy him new clothes when he had to make an appearance at an awards ceremony and had no time for laundry. When Jennifer spoke, everyone in the room would stop their rehearsal mid-line and turn to look at her, and if for any reason they disrespected her she would not hesitate to tell them in a high-pitched voice not to come back until they were ready to work.

Thus, when Jennifer stopped typing one day while they were working in his immaculate office during a late-night writing session, he put

down his pencil and waited for her to say what was on her mind. He knew it was something important by the way she had been sighing for the last hour and the number of times she rubbed her forehead anxiously, but he knew when she was ready she would voice her opinion.

“Bradley,” she began, “you’re not getting any younger.”

He wondered if she had noticed the grey hairs that were beginning to show at the crown and temples of his perfectly groomed locks, then remembered that this was a woman who analyzed details of productions for a living – of course she had noticed, and probably well before he did. He smoothed the frizzy mess down with one hand and waited for her to continue, as the patterns of their close contact predicted.

“I think it’s time you settled down. Not necessarily to get married, but at least to stop running around with six hundred women whose combined ages are still less than yours.”

“You may be dramatizing the situation--”

“Someone needs to, because you’re not taking it seriously at all.”

He knew she was right, but then again if he was being honest he would have told her years before that deep down he wanted to get married, settle down, and have children before the parts stopped working. The problem was trying to pick a girl he could devote

himself to forever... a long time, especially for a man who considered two consecutive dates a serious commitment.

“Tell me how to choose one, and I’ll do it.”

Jennifer raised her eyebrows, then put the paintbrush she was using to paint an ominous gate backdrop down on her palate and looked at him. “No questions asked?”

“No questions asked.”

“Fine. Then I propose a test.” As she continued, Bradley resisted the urge to pull out his notepad and start taking notes for a potential scene with the same first line. “Every single one of your girlfriends... uh... lady suitors is an actress or at least a would-be if a part became available.”

“Yes... What’s your point?”

“My point is that you should write a scene with your perfect leading lady in it, and then have all of them try out to see which is the best fit.”

“Why, that’s abs--” He stopped then and looked at his ingenious assistant for a minute, and inside his head the idea bounced around the cogs of his mind the way any good idea did when the seed for a play was planted. He could already see her – tall and slightly curvy, long brown hair, a sly smile, a low-cut red dress – entering a ballroom

full of extras who all stopped mid-bite as she made her way through them to sing the opening number. She would need a strong voice that could hold its own during several solos; the physical form to captivate an audience; the depth to pull off a character with many dimensions. Hard enough to find an actress in Washington with one of those attributes, let alone all three – if the woman existed, he had not seen her audition yet.

“You can already see her, can’t you?” Jennifer asked in a smug voice, and Bradley knew it was pointless to hide his enthusiasm from her searing gaze.

“I’ll take your challenge, if only to prove that a girl like that cannot be found.” Bradley put his hand out, and Jennifer took it in her small hand and shook it with more strength than he expected from such a small woman.

“Think of it this way,” she told him as she went back to her painting. “If nothing else, you’ll get a smashing success of a play from it.”

“Now that’s the kind of challenge I can appreciate.”

And so Bradley set about composing the greatest play of his career, inspired by a combination of *Anna Karenina* – beautiful heroine, tragic yet willful; he always had a thing for damsels in distress – and *Annie Hall* with her fierce New York individualism. Stroke by stroke he began to build her as an artist maps his model: first the head, then the shoulders and torso in proportions of the head and the long legs,

then the rest like clay added in layers. The woman (he called her Marissa, the name already in lights in his head) consumed him in her fiery red pull, and in her light the women who would soon audition became her shadows. She was witty when needed, such as when one love interest tried to out-talk her at a party, but she could tame her mouth and be sensitive when another deserved her affection. She was cultured and well-dressed, but with an ease that required little extra effort.

It was all Bradley could do not to stay home and daydream about her, and Jennifer took to snapping her fingers in front of his unfocused eyes when she needed a quick decision. Since she was the only paid employee during production pauses she was the only one Bradley let read his first drafts, yet he hesitated to share Marissa with Jennifer like a jealous schoolboy of his favorite toy. At one point she tore the pages from his hand so she could mark them up with her feedback, and at another she hacked into his computer and left her edits in red fonts with notes on the side and the following introduction: *“Get a grip, Bradley... I’m the only one who would bail you out of an insane asylum, and after the past few months I’d reconsider letting you back into society.”*

For the first time, Bradley stopped going to late-night parties and cavorting around DC with the hottest girl he knew on his arm. All of the adornments of high living – expensive wine, clubs where they knew his name at the door, trips to New York and Philadelphia – faded behind Marissa’s dazzling escapades. In the morning, as he sat smoking a cigarette through the window near his coffee nook, she was

there, her legs as long as playground slides, distracting him as he tried to take down his initial drafts. In the afternoon she slunk around his apartment in a long silk robe, serenading him with her thoughts on art and the political scene. At night she helped him cook meals, dressed in a vintage 50's frock and white apron with her hair pulled back in a sensible bun (yes, he did write these notes in stage directions, even though he hated writers who specified clothing requirements in their plays).

Finally, after three months of constant writing and editing, he found himself at his computer typing the words "The End." He had built New York again brick by brick: an entire society of business men and their beautiful, subversive entourage, and the leading lady who could bring it down single-handedly without batting an eye. As these last final letters appeared on the screen, he panicked at the thought of losing his beloved Marissa the way he would panic if he were Jack in Rose's last grip after the Titanic's tragic accident, and he feared he would never find a replacement as independent and at the same time vulnerable, as beautiful, as flawless... but then he reminded himself that a bet was a bet, and the show must go on. Hesitantly he handed Jennifer his final draft, and she practically ripped it from his hands before speeding off to arrange auditions for the following week.

As he sat in the theater seat dead center reserved for *Mr. Bradley Dunn, Director* by a typed sign Jennifer made, Bradley felt his heart pounding in his chest in time to the curtain as the stage hands pulled the two sides apart. Right before she came into view, he leaned over the arm rest to Jennifer, the only other person he let watch first

auditions for his shows so no outside opinions corrupted his own,
and whispered:

“For the first time in the history of a Bradley Dunn stage production, I’m nervous.” He knew he was nervous because his hands were shaking, which they only did when he was nervous or when he was dehydrated from a night on the town, and because he had avoided looking at the stage since the moment he entered the theater.

“About which part? The show? The girl?”

“All of it. What if I don’t find her in this sea of eligible young ladies... and what if I do? What then? Will I be banished to that special hell reserved for ridiculous couples who spend hours thinking of pet names to call each other and shower together every morning? The monotony of Girl Scouts and soccer practice and parent teacher associations? Is the extravagant, wonderful, exciting life of Bradley Dunn over before it began?”

He expected her to tell him he was ridiculous, her favorite line in such situations, but instead she hit him in the arm. It was not a girlish pawing, but a genuine hit that resounded through the theater so loudly that even one of the stage hands peered around the curtain to see what was going on.

“I only meant--” *Smack*. “Ow! Stop that! I pay your salary, you know!”

“I don’t care. First, let me tell you, your life has well from ‘just begun.’ You are a thirty-seven-year-old single man (if you don’t count the many interchangeable casual lovers) who has never had a successful long-term relationship and probably never will. This may be your first and last chance to find the woman of your dreams and a happiness that you cannot begin to understand the concept of because you have never taken any active steps to achieve it.”

“Okay, okay, enough with the honesty. I get your point. But tell me, oh wise one, how you know so much about this so called ‘happiness?’”

“Because I have it.”

“Oh yeah? With who?”

“My husband.”

Bradley chuckled at first, especially at the thought of a tiny man-child with an equally aggressive attitude, but when he looked at Jennifer’s face he saw she was serious. Could it be possible that his young assistant had been married the whole time and he never knew? For the first time he saw a brief flicker of the insensitive, unattached boss he probably seemed to Jennifer, but before he could ask questions, the lights went out except for the spotlight and the first woman stepped onto stage, red high-heeled foot first.

Eight hours and three coffee breaks later, Bradley was prepared to throw in the towel and call it a day. Jennifer was sitting low in her chair with her legs propped up on the seat in front of her, and Bradley had one hand sprawled over the seat next to him and the other massaging his forehead. They had seen many beautiful girls – Bradley had never seen so many long legs, so much perfect hair, or so much talent – but as each woman took the stage to read his lines, Bradley saw nothing special in any of them. Each was a stand-in for the other, and if he wanted a generic actress he would have kept one of the many he had in his little black book. He needed extraordinary, and he would not find it that night.

“I’m about to give up,” Bradley told Jennifer, and she took a look at the roster on her clipboard and then put up three fingers. “Fine,” he agreed, slouching back into his chair, “but after these three we’re done for the day. I can’t stand to see my perfect dream woman butchered by monotony.”

When he looked up, he saw the next actress, (Jilian according to the roster) take the stage. She was the first one not wearing red, the color dress the script called for; instead, she was dressed in what was probably her standard attire: skinny jeans, a black t-shirt, and sneakers.

“You may begin when you’re ready,” Bradley called to her, and when Jilian looked down Bradley made a slicing motion at his throat.

“Give her a chance,” Jennifer said, but he could see she had little hope.

Instead of starting the scene, however, the woman came to the edge of the stage and looked directly at him. “I’d like to quickly suggest a script change,” she said as she pulled her long brown hair out of her pony tail holder and let it fall over both shoulders – a nervous habit, perhaps.

“A script change?” Bradley asked, and Jennifer put a hand on his arm to keep him from leaping from his seat. “You are coming to my open auditions and suggesting *my script is not good enough for you?*”

“I’m sorry,” the woman said, looking nervously from side to side, “but I must insist.” The stage hands were probably motioning her to leave the stage, or perhaps to run.

“I see. Then please enlighten us; what part do you have a problem with?”

“The cocktail party scene.” Jilian moved closer to the edge of the stage. “When Marissa’s date brings her the fancy martini from the kitchen.”

“Of course I know the scene,” Bradley said. “I wrote it...”

“Right. Well, earlier in the play, when she first goes out into New York society, she mentions that she only drinks red wine. Then in the

middle of the play, she discusses how she wants a man who knows her inside and out. So if her date brought her the wrong drink because he didn't know her, her character thus far would indicate that instead of falling in love with him, she would challenge him in front of even a whole room full of strangers. That is the theme, after all... to find someone who truly loves you, not to settle for something less." There was not a single sound in the theater when she finished talking. Jennifer's eyes were wide and her mouth was open but Bradley detected the hint of a smile on her usually pursed lips, and he could not muster a single argument to volley back at this anomaly of an actress. Julian stared back at them from the stage, waiting for his argument or to be escorted from the auditions.

"Jennifer," Bradley said, not moving his eyes from the woman on stage, "It's *her*."

Kelly Jacobson is currently pursuing her MA in Writing (Fiction Concentration) at Johns Hopkins University. Prior to her studies at Johns Hopkins, she graduated from George Washington University in 2010 with a major in Women's Studies and minors in Creative Writing and English. She has been a ghostwriter for a psychologist, an editor of a school magazine, a political writer for a DC activist, and an English tutor, and currently she volunteers for OAR of Fairfax County and writes their employee newsletter. One of her poems, "Out with the Recycling," was published in *Wooden Teeth*.



My Right Foot

Khadija Ejaz



Khadija Ejaz is an internationally published and translated poet and has also written four books. She was born in Lucknow, India, raised in Muscat, Oman, and lived in America for 10 years (and had a brief stint in Toronto, Canada, and New Delhi, India). Khadija's background includes IT and broadcast journalism, but she also

dabbles in filmmaking and photography. To learn more about her, visit her web site at <http://khadijaejaz.netfirms.com>.



Reasoning with Reason

Shibani Bedi

For once we won't think of tomorrow or sorrows, of broken heart
and suffering lungs, or of mistakes that can't be undone. For once.

Nor for once will we be killing ourselves over not living up to our
potential, or giving up too easy or losing too often.

Rejection, dejection, scar tissue and all.

Tonight we make peace with failure, with disappointment. Tonight
we will call ennui over for a drink and laugh till tears show up

Tonight we will make love to gratitude. We will forgive ourselves for
being less than perfect, children of bodom, victims of wisdom.

Difference will be held in the taut arms of reflection. And tonight we
shall sleep on time.

For it is tonight that we shall lay blame to rest and embalm the pain.
It's driven us crazy thus far.

Tonight we will accept defeat, tonight we will end the chase, tonight
we stop interpreting coincidence and fate. Tonight.

Shibani Bedi is a Delhi-based daydreamer and borderline cynic who,
having dabbled in journalism since the last four years, has discovered

she has a knack for assimilating, hoarding, and sharing wisdom and information in the form of talking, listening, reading, and recommending books, music, movies, and life experiences. A closet rebel and wannabe wayfarer, Shibani credits her instinctive restlessness as her sole motivator which pushes her to try new things and chase creative stimulus, even if it leaves her panting for air.



**Of Terror and Blindness and Looking Back: The Hexagonal
Clutch**

Priyanka Sacheti

The diamante-ringed clutch is in the shape of a hexagon: a flattened hexagon, actually, as if someone had taken a rolling pin to it with the intention of making a chapatti out of it. Leaving its shape aside, what first attracted my attention towards the clutch on encountering its image upon a page of a fashion magazine was the aubergine hued antique colonial photograph of an Indian woman which emblazoned its surface. On initial examination, the subject of the photograph appeared to be affluent and privileged, judging from the richness of her costume, jewelry, and her surroundings although one could debate whether it was her home or a studio in which she had been photographed. Was she aristocratic? If so, would she presumably not have been in purdah and veiled from alien gazes, including that of the doubled seeing of the camera and the male photographer? Alternately, perhaps, she was a singer or a nautch girl or a courtesan even, and could therefore afford to circumvent her social status with panache by being photographed. One could also ask as to for what purpose the image was taken: an orientalist insight into that otherwise impenetrable, inaccessible world of the zenana? An exoticised interpretation of a kotha? Was this image to be consumed in newspapers and magazines back in the metropolitan, photographic offerings of the female Other shipped out for display? Nevertheless, whatever the purpose for which it had been taken, I could not help wondering whether it had been consciously styled to present a performed spectacle, not unlike to that of a fashion magazine shoot.

Of her personage, it was only her face which was largely visible and that too her eyes, in particular, which stared into the camera with unrelenting terror: was she terrified of being photographed? An enormous nose-ring emerged from one nostril, the other end meeting her cheek at a point where I imagine the constant pressure of metal against skin would have formed an artificial dimple. Apart from those two highly conspicuous aspects of her face, the rest of her body was hidden and submerged beneath a dense convolution of drapes. Only the hand rested languidly on her thigh, the sole part of her body presumably embodying and performing the role that she had supposedly cultivated for the purpose of this photograph: louche, lazily elegant, merely concerned with dispensing instructions and receiving luxuries that were hers by privilege. Yet, how deeply in contrast was the relaxed hand to the terrified eyes. I could hazard a guess that early days of photography necessitated a long period of time for an exposure to occur and that technical detail could be responsible for the unwavering nature of her gaze. Furthermore, perhaps, she is being photographed for the first time and still to comprehend the significance of this looking-glass of sorts: a mirror that permanently captures the reflection within. Nevertheless, one cannot help but negotiate with the terror and bewilderment that the woman radiates for it is the most striking aspect about the image. A woman looking back, an otherwise forbidden gesture she seems ill-prepared to execute when struggling to integrate the various roles of a woman, courtesan/singer, and a native subject that she occupies into the contemporary social matrix that she inhabits.

Apart from the woman reclining on the richly upholstered divan, there are two other significant entities in the photograph that justifiably demand their share of the viewer's attention. The first entity is a silver huqqa, its pipe sinuously curving and doubling on itself, like a DNA helix molecule. The effect of its presence is to presumably create the impression that the woman is about to reach for the huqqa any minute, the huqqa functioning as a prop which too participates in further constructing the spectacle of luxury and indolence. The other entity, or person rather, is another woman, who sits at the foot of the reclining woman's divan; she is draped in a dark diaphanous material, her feet upturned and baring their soles to the camera. Yet, we cannot see her face for a large curved black and silver beaded and crystal studded paisley has been affixed to the clutch surface at a point which entirely obscures the face of the sitting woman. All we are permitted to see of her in the end are her feet and hands, the latter rather purposefully clasped together.

When I first saw the clutch, my attention had been both doubly ensnared by that of the paisley embellishment as well as the image; at that time, I had only been aware of the woman lying on the divan, unaware that there was another woman present in the image. However, it is only when I examined the photograph in further detail did I realise the presence of the other woman, who having been rendered faceless was virtually excised from view. It was apparent that the handbag designer considered it more important to singularly draw notice to the woman reclining on the divan, rather than the one sitting by her; the woman on the divan was the one who wielded the power, the privilege of reclining on the divan, while the other one

sitting on the ground was clearly of lesser rank and class. While the sitting woman was nevertheless still photographed, her social status notwithstanding and therefore, escaping being airbrushed from history, the primary focus of the photograph was unarguably the woman on the divan. In the photograph's handbag avatar, though, the sole focus of the photograph was the woman on the divan; it was only she who was singled out to be visible, permitted to articulate her identity through the language of dress, gesture, posture, and expression while the sitting woman was thrust into the twin prisons of invisibility and silence having been shorn of a face: a purdah of sorts imposed upon her. Contemporary fashion aesthetics had denied the sitting woman a visual agency that history had not done.

In the end, I imagine the clutch being carried by a woman to a party: the woman, affluent, privileged and eclectic, this whimsical marriage of prosaic historical documentation and contemporary kitsch a perfect style statement. The woman will have to carefully decide what it is that she chooses to wear in company of a clutch that has been made to be seen and will undeniably seek to do so. Will she wear it against a monochromatic backdrop of plain white or black, thus allowing the clutch to become the sole actor in the performance of her costume? In the party melee, a friend will sidle up to her side and compliment her on the clutch. "Where did you get it from?" she might ask, her eyes darting towards the photograph and back. Some will notice it from a distance, their gaze resting upon the studded paisley that will glitter beneath the lights. If the woman chooses it as a lunch accessory, though, the clutch will be more visible: one woman's terrified eyes burning the photograph's magenta air while another

woman's eyes blinded behind the paisley, yet still there nevertheless. In a Russian-doll like moment, the woman carrying the clutch might be photographed at an event, carefully positioning herself in the eye of the camera, ensuring that she is as much the focus of attention as the accessory itself: for the woman, the clutch is simply a clutch, not a crutch by any means. If she is accustomed to being photographed, she will segue into a practiced pose, eyes, lips, cheeks winningly curved into a parabola of prettiness; even if she is not, she will still nevertheless attempt to posture for the camera, intent on performing.

Meanwhile, the women on the clutch will continue to stare ahead, doubly terrified and blinded by that nuclear moment of flash, when all becomes burning white. It is as if you have foolishly decided to glare at the summer noon sun only to become oblivious to your existence – so subsumed in the sun's fury at having been looked back at.

Educated at Universities of Warwick and Oxford, Priyanka Sacheti is a journalist based in Muscat, Oman; her articles have been published in various regional and international publications. She also published three poetry collections during her school-years and recently had two short stories published in international anthologies, *Indian Voices: Volume 1* and *Word Masala 2011*, along with publishing short stories and creative non-fiction pieces in literary journals, *Cerebration*, *Paradigm*, *DesiLit*, and *A Tale of Four Cities*.





XZBT