



اللجنة الوطنية للشباب
NATIONAL YOUTH COMMISSION



Penned Thoughts

The Annual Ali Mehdi Young Writers Competition

———— Second Cycle 2015 ————

The Front Runners

Preface

Ali Mehdi says in his introduction of his third book In the Dimmest of Light (2008): “I once read that if you seek glory to write, then you are not a writer. If you seek to be well known, then you are not a writer, if you seek fame and fortunes from writing then you are not a writer. For a writers is heart with pen and soul that knows only the pen as their one and true love. And without such, there can be no life for either. I think I made part of that up. Point is: you’re a writer only if you write to tell the truth with all honesty even if it costs you your life. For that where the fame is”.

This second cycle of “Young Writer Competition” is emphatically intended – among other things – to commemorate the young poet and writer “Ali Mehdi” may his soul rest in peace. He sadly passed away on the 21st of June 2008 at the age of 29.

Ali’s passion was writing. He strongly believed in the power of the pen to make a difference in the world. As such, there could not be a more befitting way of cherishing Ali’s dreams and enthusiasm than to support young souls with sky-high dreams and aspirations to become published writers.

This competition aims to promote and encourage gifted young writers, to celebrate their talent and allow them a valuable opportunity to present their innovative literary work to a wider audience.

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Foreword

And strains from hard-bound brains eight lines a year

Alexander Pope (1688-1744)

I think the above line might well capture the struggle and strife, the head scratching and doubt of entrants for this year's competition. Scholars are always hymning the joys of writing, but they never say it will be painless. Indeed, Pope's own "Essay on Criticism", a model of good writing and deep well of advice, insists that success only comes from hard study and practice:

*True ease in writing comes from art, not chance,
As those move easiest who have learn'd to dance.*

The same poet would also urge our contestants to draw on Arabic literature, ferrying its techniques and flourishes into their English work. On this the growth of a distinctive body of writing critically depends – as it does for ESL and EFL writers tapping into traditions across Africa, Asia and the Americas. A Cameroonian proverb reminds us that "Young palm trees grow on old palm trees" and T.S. Eliot says: "No poet, no artists of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists."

Pope would also echo current opinion about writing that will succeed by sinking anchors in the memory. It must steal inside us with language that assaults our senses of vision, hearing, taste, touch and smell. It must privilege verbs over nouns, avoid prolixity, and render the great abstractions (beauty, love, hatred, joy, friendship, sadness, life itself) in words that, for want of a better description, are concrete. Wallowing in "isms" and "ologies" will produce neither power nor impact. Shakespeare, for example, didn't say that life is "the property which differentiates a living animal or plant from dead matter" (OED) or "the condition of being which will eventually produce our contribution to the nitrogen cycle". Instead, his Macbeth laments:

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more; it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

It is significant, then, that this year's winning poem, addressed to Sultan Qaboos, expressed His Majesty's patriotism and promise not in mere abstractions but in "concrete" images – schools crowning the hills, water seen, almost felt and tasted, flowing into homes, electricity heard buzzing along the wires, and so on. Shakespeare, Pope, and, crucially, young Ali Mehdi himself, would all have approved.

Adrian Roscoe

The Judging Panel



Adrian Roscoe

Though he recently retired to England after thirteen years' work at Sultan Qaboos University, Adrian Roscoe continues to write. His latest books include *Methodologies for Effective Writing Instruction*, edited with Drs Rahma Al-Mahrooqi and Vijay Thakur (2015); Vol.

I of *The Common Touch: Popular Literature from Shakespeare to the Restoration*, edited with Prof. Paul Scanlon (2014); and *Focusing on EFL Reading*, edited with Dr Rahma Al-Mahrooqi (2014). He is currently working on Volume II of *The Common Touch* and on a book about aspects of the Roman colonial experience in Britain.



Dr. Susanne Shunnaq

Susanne Ramadan Shunnaq is a Vienna born English literature specialist who has joined the English Department at Sultan Qaboos University in 2013 after a 14-year teaching, research, and administrative career in academia in the Middle East. She holds a Ph.D in Modern and Contemporary American Literature from The Pennsylvania State University, University

Park, in the USA where she was a Fulbright scholar. Upon her graduation, she accepted a position at Yarmouk University in northern Jordan where she continued her long years of dedication to the teaching of English language and literature and the study of Middle Eastern culture. Her research interests include eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature, modernist literature, cultural studies, teaching strategies, and foreign language education.



Dr Faryal Ahmed

Faryal Ahmed is currently working at Sultan Qaboos University, Muscat, Sultanate of Oman. She is teaching skill based courses at the Language Centre. Prior to this she was teaching Language and Literature to the under-

graduates, graduates and post graduates at Kinnaird College, Lahore, Pakistan. She was also involved in developing courses in Applied Linguistics, Management Studies, Communication and Teacher Education. She has also taught English and communication courses at the Academy of Civil Services in Pakistan.

She has a PHD in Management and a double Masters in Literature and Educational Management from Nottingham University, England. She is a gold and a distinction holder. Other than teaching she has served on several committees and was part of the committee that prepared the strategic plan for the Language Centre from 2004 – 2009.

She has devoted her career in building and developing human potential where she has excelled in utilizing her core competencies of problem solving, organizing, and focusing on quality. She has not only been a teacher, but a facilitator, program developer, and a coordinator for hundreds of students in Oman and Pakistan.



Dr. Adil Hassoun Al Khafaji

Dr. Al Khafaji is Associate Professor of Linguistics and Translation. He obtained his M. A. in English as a Second or Foreign Language from the University College of North Wales, Bangor, UK and Ph. D. in Linguistics and Translation from Al Mustansiriya University, Iraq. He has more than 40 years of experience in

ELT. He taught in Iraq, Jordan and, for the last 14 years, in Oman.

Dr. Al Khafaji is a former British Council scholar and has published on ELT and translation studies. He is the author of the *Translanguage Hypothesis* in Applied Translation Studies. He is experienced in program design and worked as a program reviewer for the Omani Ministry of Higher Education.



Dr. Chandrika Balasubramanian

Dr. Chandrika Balasubramanian is an Assistant Professor of Applied Linguistics at the English Department of Sultan Taboos University, where she has been working for the last two years. Prior to coming to the Sultanate of Oman, Chandrika worked at Western Carolina University,

in the USA. While she has published extensively on World Englishes and the changing status of English as a Global Language, her current research interests focus more on issues concerned with language pedagogy. She thoroughly enjoys working with students and enjoys the challenge of making their learning experiences more enjoyable and fruitful.

Appreciation note

“Genius gives birth, talent delivers. What Rembrandt or Van Gogh saw in the night can never be seen again. Born writers of the future are amazed already at what they’re seeing now, what we’ll all see in time for the first time, and then see imitated many times by made writers.”

Jack Kerouac.

The Penned Thoughts Organising Committee would like to extend their sincere thanks and appreciation for the invaluable support and continued commitment of our esteemed judges; Prof. Adrian Roscoe and Drs. Susanne R. Shunnaq, Adil Al Khafaji, Chandrika Balasubramanian and Faryal Ahmed. Thanks to their expert advice and invaluable breadth of knowledge this competition was able to launch into its second cycle. A pleasing number of entries were received from participants from all over Oman, and we are extremely proud of the great amount of talent of these participants. We are once again overwhelmed with appreciation and gratitude for the remarkable work and efforts of the judges who do so generously in their personal time on a voluntary basis, and yet do so with great dedication to the competition and its goals, finding Oman’s talented young writers and acting as a springboard for their recognition and further progress in their talent. For all this we remain truly thankful, and wish them continued success and ask the Almighty Allah to shower them with His blessings.

The Organising Committee and Ali Mehdi’s Family

List of Entrants in the Second Round of the Competition for 2015

Conte- stant #	Entry #	Cate- gory	Name	Title of Entry	Area	Age
1	1	SS	Abir Mohammed Al Busaidi	The Silent Love	Al Dakhliya	23
	2	P	Abir Mohammed Al Busaidi	When I am a Bride	Al Dakhliya	23
	3	P	Abir Mohammed Al Busaidi	Magical Fountains	Al Dakhliya	23
	4	P	Abir Mohammed Al Busaidi	I Admit	Al Dakhliya	23
	5	SS	Abir Mohammed Al Busaidi	Teaholic	Al Dakhliya	23
2	6	SS	Adeeba Suman Siddiq	Tears of Joy	Muscat	21
3	7	A	Afraa Al Shahi	Unforgettable Memories about Reading and Writing	Musandam	22
	8	SS	Afraa Al Shahi	Don't Resist the Devil	Musandam	22
4	9	SS	Aisha Abdulsalam Ali Ahmed	The Land of Blessing for a Struggling Family	Al Dakhliya	23
5	10	SS	Alaa Al Jamalani	Faith, Hope and Determination	Muscat	17
6	11	P	Amani Abdullah Saud Al Maashari	If Aliens Visit the Earth	Muscat	23
	12	A	Amani Abdullah Saud Al Maashari	Human Translation vs. Machine Translation	Muscat	23
	13	SS	Amani Abdullah Saud Al Maashari	Only Terrorism Can Hurt Like That	Muscat	23
7	14	P	Amani Mohammed Al Mamari	123 GO	Al Batinah	22
8	15	SS	Anisa Al Raisi	I Remember	Muscat	16
9	16	A	Ashwaq Al Maskery	We're Exposed	Muscat	21
10	17	A	Balqees Saeed Abdullah Zahir Al Bimani	My famous person and inspiration of writing	Bahla	19
	18	SS	Balqees Saeed Abdullah Zahir Al Bimani	If There is a Will There is a Way	Bahla	19
11	19	A	Deema Al Lawati	Nature of Living	Muscat	16
12	20	A	Duaa Said Al Hamdani	Blood Monitoring	Muscat	21
	21	P	Duaa Said Al Hamdani	Which Way Should I Take	Muscat	21
	22	P	Duaa Said Al Hamdani	Wicked Heart	Muscat	21
	23	A	Duaa Said Al Hamdani	Hazardous Waste Management 2015	Muscat	21
13	24	P	Dvita Kapadia	Monsters	Muscat	15
	25	P	Dvita Kapadia	Dressed At Last	Muscat	15

List of Entrants in the Second Round of the Competition for 2015

Conte- stant #	Entry #	Cate- gory	Name	Title of Entry	Area	Age
	26	SS	Dvita Kapadia	The Horrors of Pink and Blue	Muscat	15
	27	SS	Dvita Kapadia	Gardens	Muscat	15
	28	A	Dvita Kapadia	Don't (Get) Rape(d)	Muscat	15
14	29	P	Fahad Al-Issai	Everything will sleep	Muscat	23
15	30	A	Fatma Mohammed Al Lamki	Preschool Education	Al Batinah	21
16	31	A	Hajir Al Zadjali	My School	Muscat	16
17	32	SS	Haneen Ali Al-Lawati	Barking for my Life	Muscat	19
18	33	SS	Houriya Mousa Al-Balushi	I've never had a life before dying	Al Batinah	21
	34	SS	Houriya Mousa Al-Balushi	Pre- Birthday Excerpts from a 74-year-old's Diary	Al Batinah	21
19	35	P	Idris Mohammed Al-Riyami	Tips of Life	Al Dakhliya	22
20	36	SS	Khadija Sulaiman Al-Adawi	Whatsapp	Muscat	24
	37	SS	Khadija Sulaiman Al-Adawi	The Most Dangerous Thing in the World	Muscat	24
	38	SS	Khadija Sulaiman Al-Adawi	The Looney Bin	Muscat	24
	39	SS	Khadija Sulaiman Al-Adawi	The Type of Person I Want to Be	Muscat	24
	40	SS	Khadija Sulaiman Al-Adawi	Manal Al Adawi	Muscat	24
21	41	SS	Khawla Mohammed Al-Zahli	A Loosing Battle		22
22	42	SS	Layyan Al Aufi	Your brother's in trouble	Muscat	18
	43	SS	Layyan Al Aufi	Nightshift entry	Muscat	18
23	44	SS	Lugain Al Hashami	Me and My Friend	Al Dakhliya	18
24	45	P	Mahmood Al Zadjali	I can't hold the sky anymore	Muscat	22
25	46	P	Mahnoor Anees Khan	To See Her Smile	Muscat	19
	47	P	Mahnoor Anees Khan	Water	Muscat	19
	48	P	Mahnoor Anees Khan	Here Comes The Sun	Muscat	19
	49	SS	Mahnoor Anees Khan	Being That Girl	Muscat	19
26	50	SS	Marwa Al Naabi	The Silent Scream	Muscat	22
27	51	A	Meryem Abdelhamid	It is said that genetically modified foods have been made to ensure an adequate food supply for the ever increasing world population. Are these modified foods really as good as they seem?	Muscat	17

List of Entrants in the Second Round of the Competition for 2015

Conte- stant #	Entry #	Cate- gory	Name	Title of Entry	Area	Age
28	52	P	Rahma Al Yahyaee	Beyond the Sensation	Al Dakhliya	21
29	53	SS	Rahma Al Mahrezi	The Pearl of Success	Al Sharqiah	20
30	54	SS	Rahma Al Lamki	A Fragment	Al Batinah	23
31	55	SS	Omaima Mohammed Al Hinai	Aysha	Al Dakhliya	22
32	56	P	Issa Al Issaei	You Are My Life	Muscat	22
33	57	SS	Raida Al Mamari	A Mirror of Myself	Al Batinah	22
	58	P	Raida Al Mamari	Few Mistakes Ago	Al Batinah	22
	59	P	Raida Al Mamari	Surrender	Al Batinah	22
34	60	P	Rana Ahmed Al-Saririya	In My Dream	Muscat	20
35	61	SS	Ruwaida Al Mamari	A Soul Mate	Muscat	22
36	62	SS	Saim Ahmed Cheeda	A Simple Man – A True Horror Story	Muscat	21
37	63	SS	Ronza Al Yahmadi	How to Bury a Young Man	Muscat	22
	64	A	Ronza Al Yahmadi	5 Friends You Should Add to your Morning	Muscat	22
38	65	SS	Nouf Al Wahaibi	I, N16	Muscat	16
39	66	P	Sahar Othmani	Shout of the Insecure	Muscat	19
	67	P	Sahar Othmani	The Doll	Muscat	19
40	68	A	Sakhiya Amour Al Mendhry	She is Gone	Al Dakhliya	22
	69	P	Sakhiya Amour Al Mendhry	A Woman of His Life	Al Dakhliya	22
	70	P	Sakhiya Amour Al Mendhry	My Name is Love	Al Dakhliya	22
	71	P	Sakhiya Amour Al Mendhry	I Wish it is Just You	Al Dakhliya	22
	72	SS	Sakhiya Amour Al Mendhry	The Test of my Melody	Al Dakhliya	22
41	73	SS	Saleh Al Hajri	Birds' Tears	Al Sharqiah	23
42	74	A	Samaa Al Adawi	The Hardest Goodbye	Muscat	19
43	75	SS	Shurooq Al Abri	Merry-Berries	Al Dakhliya	22
	76	SS	Shurooq Al Abri	Suffering	Al Dakhliya	22
44	77	P	Zahra Al Abri	Dedicated to His Majesty	Al Dakhliya	27
45	78	SS	Zahra Hussain	The Evil Shall Prevail	Muscat	16
	79	SS	Zahra Hussain	Happiness is a Bless	Muscat	16
46	80	P	Zakiya Al Tobi	Our Dreams in Our Hands	Al Dakhliya	23
47	81	P	Masooma Al Hadhrami	Homeland's Gift	Muscat	23
48	82	SS	Azhar Abdulhameed Said Al Jabri	King Tut... My Distant Relative?	Al Dakhliya	23

Penned Thoughts: Judges' Report

This is the second round of the annual Ali Mehdi Young Writers' Competition, and the fact that it has caught the imagination of so many young entrants, influenced their thinking, and appealed to their resourcefulness is most gratifying. They were not only following the inspiring example of Ali, but also exploring new horizons in their writing. This, certainly, places a responsibility on the organizers' shoulders to continue exploring ways of nourishing and advancing the creativity of both Omani youth and young writers residing here.

The organizing committee, judging panel, and editors were very pleased to receive eighty-two entries for the three designated categories – poetry, essay, and short story. Topics ranged from profoundly personal experiences and national concerns to international, social, health, educational and environmental issues. All submissions, whether in prose or verse, were insightful, thought-provoking and engaging.

The poetry was judged by its intrinsic significance, memorable diction, poetic devices, rhythm and meter, originality, emotional intensity, and by how well authors were able to manage the constraints of space. The essays were rated according to the currency of their topics, direction, arguments, focus, rhetorical devices, clarity and style. The short stories were assessed for narrative technique, plot development, characterization, structural development and suspense. Naturally, lexical richness and language proficiency were also given careful attention.

After the panel of judges consisting of Prof. Adrian Roscoe and Drs. Adil Al Khafaji, Chandrika Balasubramanian, Faryal Ahmed, and Susanne R. Shunnaq had evaluated every entry, identified the most promising submissions and shortlisted the truly outstanding ones, the editing process began. Professor Adrian Roscoe and Dr. Susanne R. Shunnaq edited the manuscripts for readability, clarity, coherence and correctness. This is a time-consuming process, requiring knowledge and experience; but, since the selected entries were of good quality, the editors much enjoyed their task.

That only three entries were selected from each category does not mean there were no other good quality submissions received. On the contrary, many pieces in verse and prose reflected potential talent and developing creativity. Expressing oneself emotionally and physically on paper can be a daunting challenge, especially for young aspiring writers. Hence, the judging panel is immensely pleased with the overall quality of this year's submissions.

Our warmest wishes and congratulations to the winners. All entrants should be very proud of themselves regardless of whether they have won or not. Sadly we cannot give awards to all. We trust that this second round of the Penned Thoughts Competition will kindle increasing interest among our aspiring writers and encourage more of them to participate next year.

Coordinator of the Judging Panel

Susanne R. Shunnaq

Summary of Results

Poems		
Rank	Name	Entry Title
1.	Zahra Al Abri	Dedicated to His Majesty from all Omanis ^{*1}
2.	Rana Ahmed Al-Saririya	In My Dream ^{*2}
3.	Abir Mohammed Al Busaidi	When I'm a Bride

Essays		
Rank	Name	Entry Title
1.	Ashwaq Al Maskery	We're Exposed
2.	Dvita Kapadia	Don't (Get) Rape(d)*3
3.	Meryem Abdelhamid	It is said that genetically modified foods have been made to ensure an adequate food supply for the ever increasing world population. Are these modified foods really as good as they seem? ^{*4}

Short Stories		
Rank	Name	Entry Title
1.	Mahnoor Anees Khan	Being That Girl
2.	Houriya Mousa Al-Balushi	Pre- Birthday Excerpts from a 74-year-old's Diary ^{*5}
3.	Dvita Kapadia	The Horrors of Pink and Blue

The new titles suggested by the judging panel:

**1 For His Majesty from His People*

**2 A Dream*

**3 Don't Get Raped*

**4 Are Genetically Modified Foods As Good As We Are Told?*

**5 Sixty Years of Loyalty*

Penned Thoughts Statistics

Fig.1 Origins of Entrants

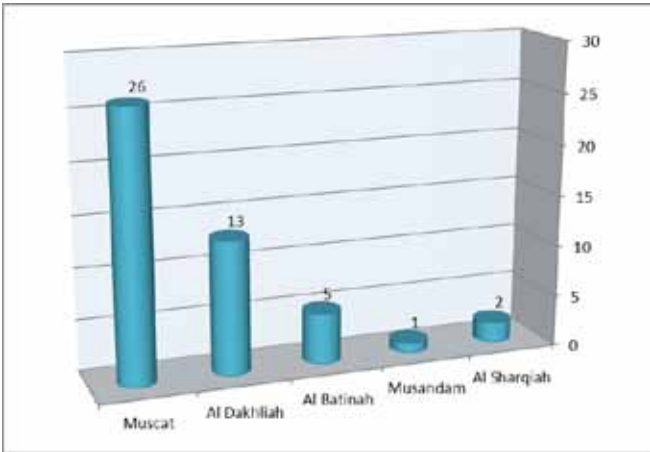


Fig. 1: Entrants for the 2nd cycle hailed from diverse areas in Oman, with Muscat participants taking the lead with 47% of total participants

Fig.2 Number of entries per category

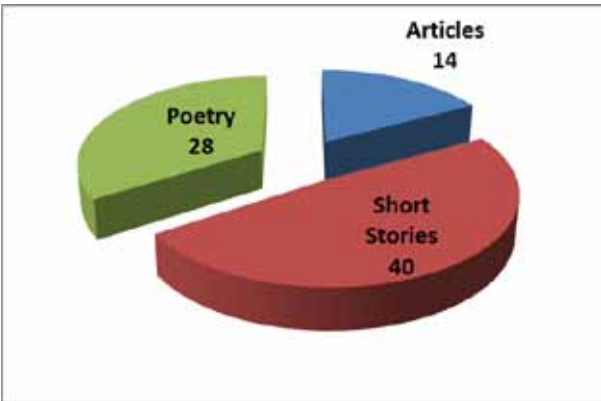


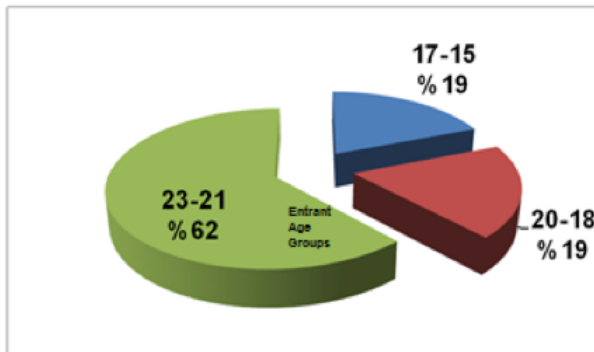
Fig. 2: Short Story entries made up the majority of contributions for this 2nd cycle, with Article entries showing an increase in comparison to last year's entries.

Fig.3 Entrants Male/Female Distribution



***Fig. 3:** Female entrants continue to be the majority of participants in the competition. However, the Male contribution is showing an increase since last year's figures which showed an 8% contribution from Male entrants.*

Fig.4 Entrant Age Groups



***Fig. 4:** The dominant age group of entrants show to be the 21-23 category at 62% of total number of entrants, with a more modest contribution from the two younger age groups*

Feedback Survey Responses

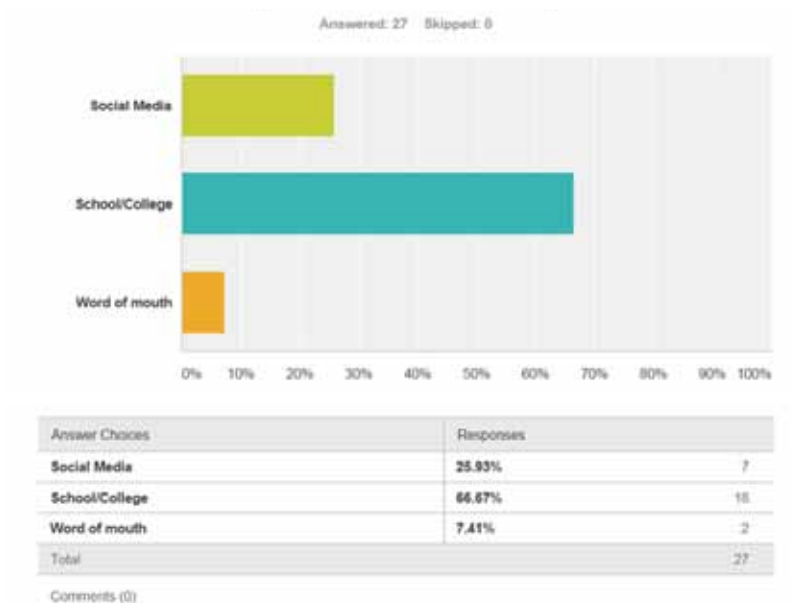
As a measure to develop the quality of the Penned Thoughts Competition process and to have feedback of the participants of their experiences, the organizing committee decided to conduct a short survey and invite participants to give us their feedback. Responses received have been modest in relation to the number of participants. However, we aim to encourage participants from this and the previous cycle to come forward with their comments and feedback through social media and other channels.

Below is a summary of the responses received to the different questions, followed by the various general comments received.

Around 65% of participants learned about the competition through schools and colleges, 25% through social media platforms, and the rest by words of mouth. The responses were generally positive where 74% of the participants found the overall competition to be well organized, while a further 77% felt they were kept up-to-date with the proceedings of the events. Another 66% thought that the context meets their writing aspirations, and more than 80% of the participants thought they were able to find the information they were looking for on the website. Some of the participants thought the submission were handled smoothly (66%), while 18% thought they had put a lot of effort to ensure their submission was submitted in the right way at the right time. The responses received from the organising committee were good to some (48%) and fair to others (40%), although it was esteemed as poor by 11% of the participants. And finally, 72% thought there was a room for improvement in the overall organization of the event. These responses were highly useful for the organization and planning of the next stage of Penned Thoughts.

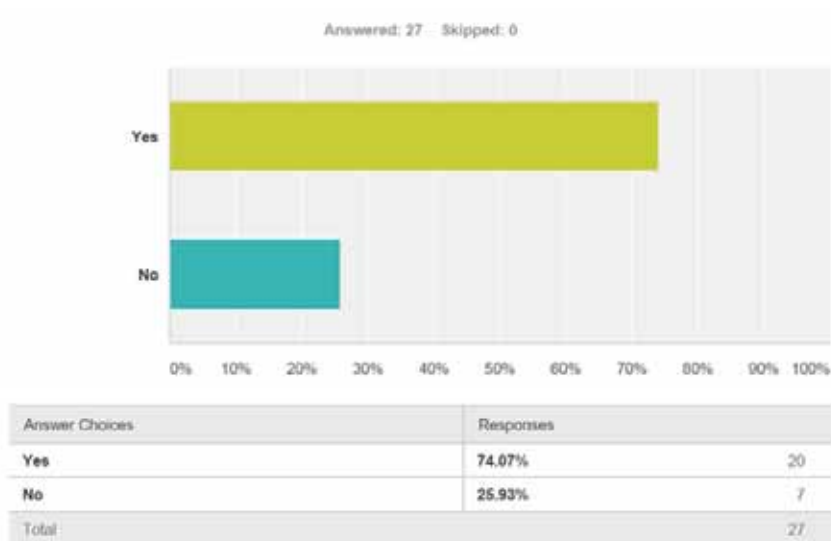
Q1

How did you learn about the competition?



Q2

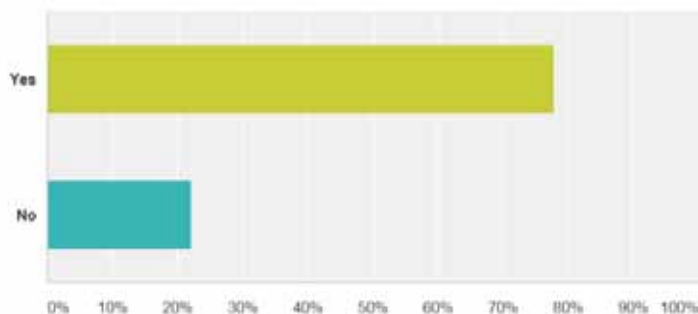
Overall, did you find the competition well organized?



Q3

Did you feel you were kept up-to-date with the events proceedings?

Answered: 27 Skipped: 0

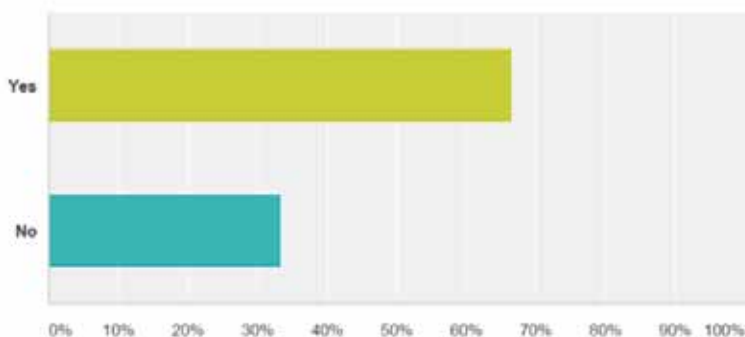


Answer Choices	Responses
Yes	77.78% 21
No	22.22% 6
Total	27

Q4

Did you see the contest meeting your writing aspirations?

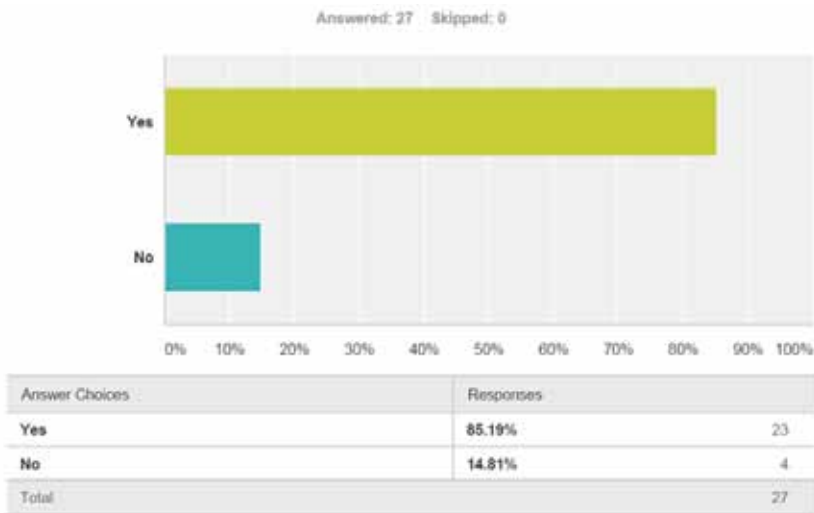
Answered: 27 Skipped: 0



Answer Choices	Responses
Yes	66.67% 18
No	33.33% 9
Total	27

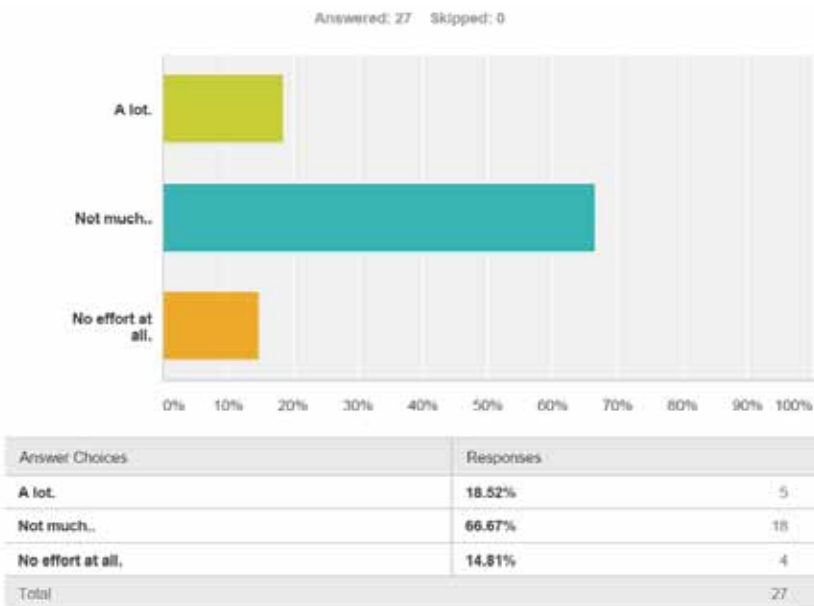
Q5

Where you able to find the information you were looking for on our website?



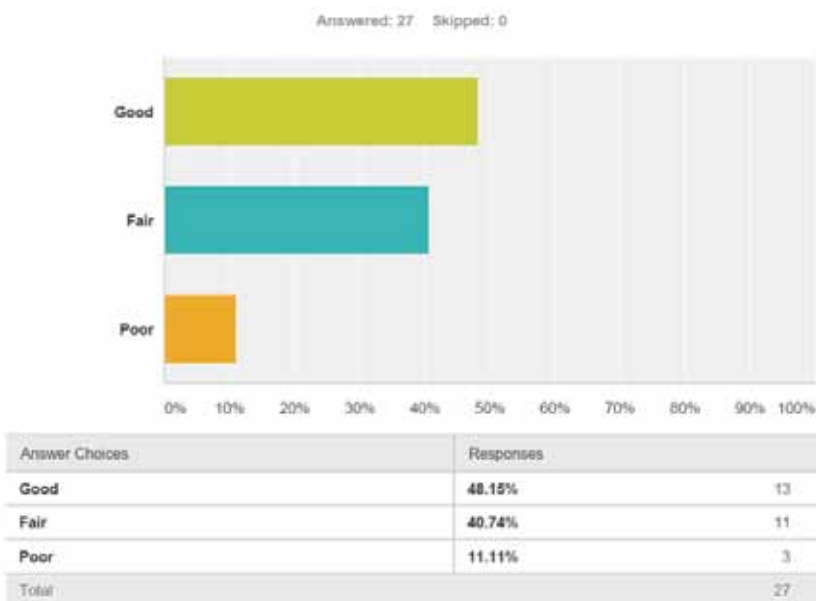
Q6

How much effort did you have to put forth to ensure your submission was handled?



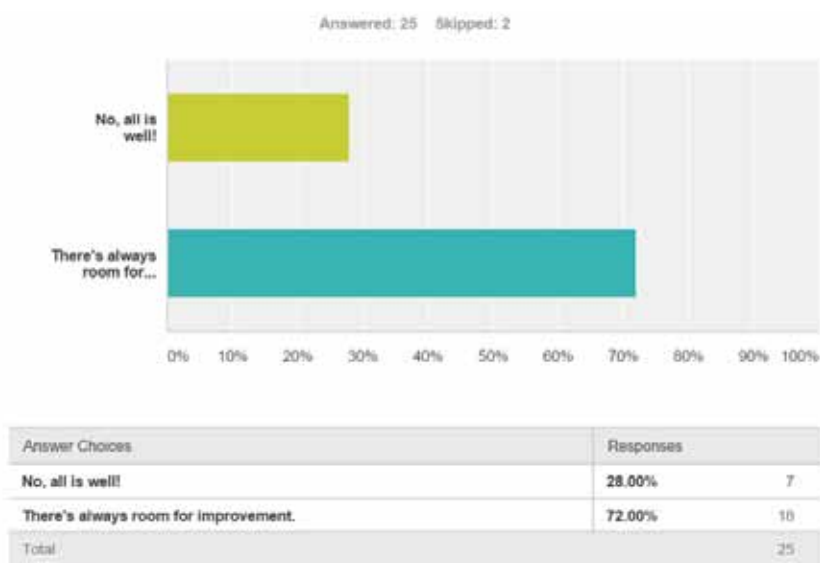
Q7

How did you find the response from the organizing committee?



Q8

Do you see areas of improvement?



[Comments \(9\)](#)



Dedicated to His Majesty from all Omanis*

Lost in the dark of history's night
Awaiting a hint of morning's light...

The sun arose, a new day dawned,
Not from the east but from the south
A man with vision and authority
Brought strength, tact, and prosperity:
True patriot and our eyes the witness.

Ah Kisra, you conquered countries,
But Qaboos has seized our hearts,
Poured wisdom into our minds
And alwaru every promise!

See now!
Great ships sail in, great ships sail out:
See now!
Those schools that crown the hills:
See now!
The water streaming into town:
Hear now!
Buzzing power the long wires fills.

You steeled us for life's blows,
Opened windows, healed our woes,
Fired our youth with love and skill,
Upheld the old, the lame, the ill,
Taught unity here and everywhere,
For every grief the hand of care.

We speak with hearts all warm and eager:
Oman's our land, Qaboos our leader!
We lack gold words to mark this day,
Keen to praise and to obey,
To paint the joy that's in our heart,
To work together, play our part.

Thank you, Sir, for all you've done;
The growth we see, the fame that's won.
With heart and soul we want to say:
A happy, bright November birthday!

Zahra Al Abri

** Title Suggested by judges is (For His Majesty from His People)*

In My Dream* (Runner Up)

I switched off the light and slept
The deepest sleep of my life –
And the dream it wrought so real
A dream I'll never escape.
I woke in it to the boom of guns
And a world impossibly huge.

I woke frantic seeking my mother
I woke frantic seeking my father
I woke frantic seeking his shoulder,
But my brother had found it first.

Oh that I'd never seen this...

I recalled how often I'd teased him
When again I'd won a race...
His legs now a site of horror...

My mother's eyes, lustrous, wide
Just stared away, as if dead...

Legs and eyes explain my tears...

I woke from my dream
And tried to scream:
A gun was pointing at my head
And then the last sad tears I ever shed.

Rana Ahmed Al Saririya

** Title Suggested by judges is (A Dream)*

When I'm a Bride

When I'm a bride I'll miss that day
And run off with my fiancé.
I'll cut my dress to pieces
And wear my pink pyjamas.
I'll use no powder and no scent,
But glow all fresh and pure,
I'll sell my gold and diamonds –
Their proceeds for the poor.
I'll think then of me only
And let the world go hang.
I'll drive my wedding car alone
To take my beloved from his home
And leaving only when I want,
Of tears there'll be no font.

My honeymoon will be in a wood;
I, venturesome, like Robin Hood
Will spend my order of the day
With my beloved fiancé.

But now I'll be quite normal;
Attend to study and books
A wondrous future await me
Me and my so pretty looks!

But why not show my whimsy now
So folk won't worry and won't fume
When suddenly I shall not wed
And flee with my lover from home?

Abir Mohammed Al Busaidi



We Are Exposed

My intensive meditation of the possibilities of life and also the novel entitled *Chaos Walking: The Knife of Never Letting Go* by Patrick Ness have made me ponder over a number of questions.

What if one day we were to get the opportunity to hear other people's thoughts? What if one day all it would take is to consume a tiny pill that would allow us to read people's minds?

What if such a day were to come when we would have to battle to keep our thoughts hidden? When we would have to force ourselves not to think what we would not want exposed? What when our thoughts would immediately expose us?

What if there comes a day when nothing will be kept private – a day when nothing can any longer be kept to ourselves? What if such a day should arrive when our private plans and ideas will be exposed? Whatever we will think is everything they will know. And everything they know is no longer ours. What if this day has already come?

What if we have already relinquished our privacy voluntarily with no need for pills that would force us to do so? What if we have already chosen to expose ourselves publicly? What if we have already taken the decision to reveal our thoughts, feelings, and private moments to the world? What if we have made ourselves transparent?

We accept terms and conditions we never read. We sign up in every popular social media platform. We make sure that the world reads and sees how we spend our days. We share our worries, our broken hearts, and our depression with our online community. We entrust our sacredly private affairs to the internet. We brag about the number of virtual friends we have. We compete to see who has more followers. We share videos of ourselves and do what it takes to make sure we reach as many potential viewers as possible. We share our thoughts in blogs with hopes of being heard. We spend hours, even days trying to decide what picture or header to choose for our online presence or what biographical information to include in our

web-based personal profile as these shape our public image.

Are these attempts at asserting our virtual presence a cry for help? Are we substituting the real world with the virtual? Will we ever regret spending long hours watching people we never met and seeking happiness from those virtual participants instead of spending time with loved ones in real life?

What if one day we realize we have spent more time in front of screens than with of humans? What if one day we realize that we have been caged by the virtual world? What if one day we forsake our language in alwar of filters, hashtags, and emoji's?

Have we ever really considered the consequences of our actions? Have we ever pitied our bodies which we force into prolonged sitting positions in wrong postures? Our eyes drift once we hear the tone of a message. Our attention span is just as long as our heartbeat. We talk to virtual friends to solve our problems, because others are too busy with their own. We google our ailments and place on-line orders for medication because we think we are competent enough to diagnose our disorders.

We are exposed.

We are slowly changing human nature by virtuality, wanting to get things done easier and faster, more efficiently, and more effectively. We refrain from protecting our privacy because we have a constant urge to speak to the world and seek popularity. We can no longer endure normalcy since we lack the courage to cope with our thoughts that we do not share. We have become more concerned with the taking of selfies and the counting of our on-line followers than enjoying a sunset or a memorable view.

Should we continue with what we are doing or stop and go back? Can we go back?

We have exposed ourselves.

Ashwaq Al Maskery

Don't (Get) Raped (d)*

I was getting off the school bus on a Tuesday afternoon in Mumbai, Maharashtra when reality knocked on my door. A schoolgirl, around my age, rushed to the bus stop where women had gathered; some shouting, some laughing, and some fantasizing as they waited for the next bus to arrive. Noise and sweat surrounded me as I stepped off the bus onto the pavement, my book bag weighing me down. I heard a girl's scream: "Help me!" Everything grew still as I spun around to see a girl barge into the crowd of women. The man following her stopped dead in his tracks, beginning to insult her verbally. He was tall, dark, and muscular. When I looked into his eyes, all I could see was anger, dominance, and lust.

All around the world women are catcalled, assaulted, and raped as they walk down the streets be it to a party, a meeting, school, or even to work. Women are a target. It is no longer possible for women to live without having to fear sexual assault. One out of six women is at risk of being raped, but only 16.3 percent of reported rapists are imprisoned. Stories from rape victims are countless and horrific, but more so are the untold stories of rape victims—whether dead or alive.

Many rapists are never convicted by law, because their victims are accused of having seduced them. Statements like "well, it was her fault for wearing those clothes," or "she deserved what she got because she shouldn't have been out so late," or "her dress was so provocative that I couldn't control myself" are commonly used by rapists as a way to push away responsibility for their heinous acts. These men showcase their incapability to control themselves and act in a civilized manner. The fact that they are not able to walk down the street and see women in their natural habitat without raping them, presumes that rape is part of their aggressive nature.

Women do not deserve to be raped. They are not wild game to be hunted. One may ask: "Would it be acceptable to hit pedestrians

** Title Suggested by judges is (Don't Get Raped)*

on their heads while walking peacefully on the sidewalk? Would injury in such a case of unexplained aggression be their fault simply because they were not wearing protective headgear?

Society teaches us that we should not get raped, because there is much stigma connected to rape. Rape survivors are considered guilty. Hence, women around the world should know that taking precautions to escape rape situations should not be our goal. Instead, the goal should be “don’t rape.” Rape, in any form, is never the responsibility of the victim. Men have no right to touch a woman without her full concession and women should definitely not be charged with the responsibility of becoming rape victims.

We must fight misogyny and fight rape culture by speaking up in a world that tends to trivialize or underestimate the seriousness of sexual violence against women. We should not have to change our alwarul, because rapists have no self-control. We have to stop blaming the victim and start punishing the rapist. Rape is to be taken seriously and if we combine efforts, we can stop it. Women deserve safety and hospitality. They deserve to live without fear of assault. Stop making women responsible for men’s violation of their bodies! Stop asking for changes in women’s alwarul to prevent rape! Join the battle against rape and help us promote gender equality!

Stop rape!

Divta Kapadia

It is said that genetically modified foods have been made to ensure an adequate food supply for the ever increasing world population. Are these modified foods really as good as they seem?*

We, the affluent consumers from wealthy countries, have always been told that the production of genetically modified foods will ensure an adequate food supply for the rapidly increasing world population; thus, it will help reduce famine. However, what we haven't been told is the fact that these genetically modified foods are dangerous, not only to our health, but also to our environment.

An important question to begin with: What are genetically modified foods? Genetically modified foods, also known as GMs or GMOs, are foods derived from organisms which have been genetically engineered by modifying their DNA. This involves altering the genetic material by transferring genes across organisms. This act of blindly modifying a living creature's genes before learning all the secrets behind genes could cause some serious negative effects on human health.

According to a study done in China in early 2012, genetically engineered foods affect human cell function. This, in turn, is being linked to diseases including cancer, Alzheimer's, and diabetes. Another study conducted in Norway and published in July 2012 shows that GM genes are transferred through the intestinal wall into the blood stream. Tests performed on animals proved that increased weight gain, increased appetite, decreased immune function, inability to properly digest proteins, as well as changed intestinal microstructures were all found in the animals which had been fed GM foods. Both these studies disproved the theory that any alteration of genes in foods is harmless.

New genes may be disruptive as they enter new organisms. As they enter the human body, they are not broken down and rendered inert during digestion as pro-GMO manufacturers and scientists continue to claim. Statistics show that the increased use of GM foods in processed and fast foods since the late 1990s in the USA

** Title Suggested by judges is (Are Genetically Modified Foods As Good As We are Told?)*

has led to the doubling of peanut allergy cases between 1997 and 2002 and an increase in food allergies by 265%. GMO's are also linked to developmental disorders. The *Journal of Pediatrics* reports a 250% increase in autism in American kids as one out of every 91 kids is diagnosed with this condition. All these statistics show that allergies and autism have begun to increase after GM foods were introduced. This confirms that GM foods affect human health.

Those who believe that tempering with an organism's genes causes an increase in its nutritional contents will be met with disappointment, since this has been proven to be a mere myth. The genetically engineered foods have altered nutritional values, but do not prove to be better biofortified foods than those produced the conventional way. As the *International Journal of Biological Sciences* revealed in 1999, manipulating a plant's DNA actually lowers the plant's nutrient content. Apart from health concerns, there are also some environmental concerns that we should reflect on.

The production of GM foods has detrimental environmental impacts. Some of the dangerously toxic chemical herbicides that are sprayed onto the GM crops contaminate the soil. From the soil, those toxic chemicals leak into the groundwater supplies that we in turn drink. A study performed by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in March 2012 proved that chemicals used by the GMO industry pollute groundwater in alarming quantities. What's more, not enough long term toxicity studies of genetically modified foods have been carried out yet. GM foods most probably cause more health hazards than we are currently aware of. Scientists have warned that the inserting of a gene into another organism's DNA may affect idle genes in entirely unknown ways. People are gradually becoming more aware of the risks of GM foods.

Spreading knowledge and awareness about the dangers of GM foods is the responsibility of educated consumers who are concerned about the environment and human health. We, the knowledgeable and responsible consumers, are the ones who can cause a change; we are the ones who can stop the GM food disaster. The GM industry survives because of us. Let's initiate a responsible action: Avoid GMO's and turn organic!

Meryem Abdulhamid



Being That Girl

I

The doorbell sounded like a cacophony of banging drums. I turned over in bed, ignoring to respond to this disturbance. Eventually, I got up thinking about how I had complained to my father about this noise pollution a million times to no avail. Stomping down the stairs, I realized that the house was empty. Maybe my little brother, Abdullah, was out playing with his friends. My elder brother Ali Bhai must have gone to his college. Mum was most probably out shopping, and Dad would be in the university teaching.

Why am I home while everyone else is being productive in some way? I have the flu. The flushed skin, red nose, and puffy eyes were the river Nile-up-my-nose-flu symptoms. I grab my headscarf and quickly tie it trying to look at least half decent as I open the door to see the person who has disturbed my restless sleep.

“Yes?” my voice comes out all gravelly and my eyes squint to identify the silhouette, I clear my throat and ask, “Can I help you?”

“Uh, yes. Asalaam-o-Alaikum,” a male voice says. I respond to his greeting with a modest shake of the head and try to think why that voice sounds so familiar. “Is this the house where Dr. Ahmed Khan lives?”

“Oh, yes. He’s not here at the moment, though. Would you like me to pass on a message for you?” I survey him shortly and conclude that he indeed seems familiar. I might have met him in one of my father’s weekly parties he loves having at his house during weekends.

My father, Dr. Hamza Khan, is a man who can make many feel insecure. His intelligence and vast knowledge of history, books, and literature may be threatening to some. His desire to reverse chaos whenever he encounters it has made me realize just how lucky I am to have such a father, Alhamdulillah. Bhai disagrees, though. He thinks Baba should spend less time on his books and more time with his children. I never felt that way, though.

I always found it oddly funny seeing my father reading those ridiculously huge collections of Rumi, Hafez, or of Farid ud-Din with his glasses hanging on the slight curve of his nose and his cup of tea steaming by his elbow on the hand rest. Whenever he would finish his hour-long dhikr, his tea would have gotten cold and he would complain about it. He would get up and tell me, “Alia, when you get older, make sure you have a reliable cup of tea that will warm you to the bone.” I always used to laugh and tell him that it wasn’t the cup’s fault but his, because he would always let it get cold and keep on reading. He used to say that it wasn’t his fault that the book was so captivating that his eyes just couldn’t leave the page. That’s why he started calling me his page. His exact words were, “The day I laid my eyes on you, I realized you were more beautiful than any dhikr I had read and it was hard to take my eyes off you. I could be in the cold of the Antarctica, but I would still feel warm when I would see you, my child. You’re my page.” When I was young, I used to giggle and jump into his lap as he recited the works of Rumi. Whenever Ali Bhai walked into this scene, he stomped back to his room without a word.

The man suddenly coughs loudly, abruptly shaking me out of my daze.

“Oh, I’m sorry, you were saying?”

“Yes, well – my name is Hamza Imran. It would really be helpful if I could tell me when I could meet Dr. Khan.”

“Hamza Imran?” My eyes widened with recognition when I realized this was my school classmate. I don’t think he has recognized me yet. All the better for that, because I was the girl who once spilled juice all over him in class.

“Yes, so, is there a way I can contact him?” He looks different. I slap myself in thought; these rhino viruses are affecting my ability to focus. Of course he looks different; it’s been four years since I saw him last. And ten years, since we last spoke. He used to be really chubby when we were kids, part of the reason why he used to hang out with me. I used to be a real pudgy kid. But as we got into the teens, it just got awkward.

“You can reach him at the New York University. He teaches poetry there.” I was about to close the door, because I felt strangely hurt that he did not remember me. Of course I was just disappointed, because it was bad manners not to acknowledge an old friend – even if this friend was a female.

“Alia?” His voice was soft and he looked as if he was laughing. His eyes barely contained his mirth. So he did know who I was.

“Hamza?” I repeated with rising intonation. I really had no intention of standing at the door for hours with my flu congestion and I certainly wasn’t going to invite him in with nobody in the house. I just wanted him to go away and let me go sleep. Oh, bite me for being so honest.

“You really thought I wouldn’t remember you?” he said smiling attractively. “You haven’t changed a bit. You look great, MashAllah.”

“Thank you,” I said politely. What else am I supposed to say to him? Get off my property, I want to sneeze? Nope. He rocked on the balls of his feet and gave me a card from his pocket. I took it. On it was his phone number and address with his name signed at the bottom.

“Can you pass this on to your father? And could you tell him that I would like to speak to him whenever he can find the time?”

“Sure,” I said with a slight smile. As I opened the door a little more, I realized I was wearing a robe with pockets overflowing with tissues and I also remembered that my house was untidy, so I hastily almost pushed it shut and smiled at him through the narrow opening.

“So, I should get going, then. It was nice meeting you again, Alia. Please give my regards to your family and my message to your father. Allah Hafiz.”

I nodded and shut the door, holding the card he had given me.

“Allah Hafiz,” I murmured. I went to the kitchen, set it there on the counter, and sat down to remember the last time I had seen Hamza.

II

Amna and I were late. We were running to the history lab when I tripped and fell.

“Astaghfirullah, Alia! Come on, get up!” she pulled me up and was trying to hide her laughter. Amna was my best friend since kindergarten. And every time I fell, and that happened a lot, she had to laugh first and help later. I brushed the dust off my clothes, fixed my scarf, and continued to run.

“Excited for the last day, aren’t we?” I heard my history professor ask as we entered the classroom. Mr. Mikael was a balding man, who looked like he was in his fifties, but everyone knew he stopped caring about his appearance since his wife had left him. I’m not a gossip, but since his personal life was supposed to be a secret everyone knew about it, naturally. He laughed good-naturedly and gestured us to take our seats: “Get in. I can’t really coddle you kids anymore.”

Amna laughed loudly. She was so confident and brave. She always spoke her mind and I always envied her, because I was more reserved. We took our seats and were not really shocked when we got to know that we would be having a group discussion. History was a strong suit of mine; it fascinated me. I always wondered how our ancestors lived and what they would think about our present world.

“Let’s get started, shall we?” The class murmured consent and the questions began. I wasn’t really paying attention as I was staring off in space, when I realized Amna was nudging me.

“What?” I whispered to her, afraid of getting caught. She pointed to the far end of the class and I saw Hamza standing. He was being asked a question. Amna knew how I felt about him. I mean, she knew he was my childhood friend. That’s it.

“So, Mr. Imran, tell me. What’s your thought on history repeating itself?” I saw him think about it for a minute and smile widely. I guess he had a good answer.

“I don’t agree it happens.” He grinned and all the girls in the back seats sighed loudly. I scoffed and rolled my eyes. I don’t know

why it was so annoying to me when I saw girls fawning over him like he was some gorgeous male model. He had straight black hair and dark eyes. His voice had a deep tremble to it and it started cracking. He looked normal; there was nothing exceptional to drool over. In primary and middle school, we used to be the best of friends. His family knew mine, and we were pretty close.

“Is that so? Could you please elaborate?” Mr. Mikael clearly liked Hamza and his confidence. He just smiled and waited for the answer.

Hamza twitched his nose, an action I used to find cute when we were children. He said: “Looking at it from a historical and factual point of view, maybe you can find some similarities. But looking at it from a logical perspective, I don’t agree it happens. I mean, come on, how can you expect a series of events that happened a while ago, happen all over again in the exact same manner?” His answer was so smug and he sounded so sure of himself that it irritated me. So, I raised my hand.

“Yes, Alia?” As Mr. Mikael said my name, I saw Hamza look at me with a slight smile on his face, but his surprise was evident. I really couldn’t blame him. I don’t answer questions till someone asks me. “Do you have a counter argument?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Stand up, then. I would like to see where this leads.”

“Historical recurrence is an actual thing. Rise and fall of empires have been compared on a timeline for ages. I’m not saying it follows the exact pattern; I’m saying there are situations, albeit small, that happen again and again.”

“You seriously think that people don’t change over the course of time?” he asked.

“You think they do?” I alwarully countered.

“I think people can learn from their mistakes and do better,” he stated.

“What you think people can do is not something that they will do. Why do you think the concept ‘History repeats itself’ was made up in the first place?” I asked.

Hamza gave me a smile, and looked up at me with his eyebrows raised: "History does not repeat itself, but it does rhyme."

I recognized the quote and my eyes went wide with shock. He remembered? How could he remember? Everyone was looking at us, and I saw Amna chuckle. She knew the story. It was years ago, when Hamza and I sat under our mango tree, and listened to my father read us famous quotes and explaining what they meant. He left the book on the chair for a while, and Hamza lay back on the grass, while I went and picked the book up. He had asked me what I was doing, and I sat on my father's chair, and started reading Mark Twain's quotes. And I acted like I was the teacher and he was my student. He clapped after I finished one quote and then the other. Each time, he clapped. The first quote I read was the one he just said. "History doesn't always repeat itself, but it does rhyme." And he had given me a look of complete attention and adoration. The same look he was giving me now.

I blushed and sat down. Amna started giggling uncontrollably and didn't stop until I slapped her arm. Mr. Mikael told Hamza to be seated and I glanced in his direction only to see that he was smiling at me. I opened my book and pretended to read smiling to myself, thinking about the moment we just had. He remembered.

III

"I think she's asleep," I heard Abdullah say, "Should I wake her up, Ammi?"

"Let her sleep, she's tired," replied my father. It's a habit of mine to pretend to be sleeping so I can find out what my family talks of when I'm not around. It's a really good technique if you want to know what they think of you. And my mother never disappoints.

"She's been such a good girl; she cleans and works all day. It's a sad thing she's sick and couldn't come play bridge with me and Mrs. Saif. Khan Sahib, she has a really nice boy named Zain. He has been showing interest for Alia for years. She is of age now too; what do you think?"

I mentally groaned at my mother's constant, unrelenting attempts to get me married. I honestly don't know why a girl, who is 23 years old, cannot enjoy her life as it is and has to get married. I waited for my father's reply, because I knew what he would say.

"What am I supposed to think? If he's such a nice boy, why isn't he married yet?" My father said with a chuckle.

I giggled softly and opened one eye and my father winked at me. He always knows when I pretend to sleep.

"Because he hasn't met our daughter yet!" my mother said with an annoyed undertone. Oh, Baba needs to be careful now or there will come a full blown war.

"Well, I have no intentions of stopping our daughter's education as of yet. When she expresses a wish to get married, she can choose a husband and if I find him acceptable, I will say yes. Why force her when she's not ready?" I saw my father open his newspaper and look at Ammi with a small smile on his face, but his eyes were serious. He was going to let me choose? He was going to give me the option to choose with whom I will spend the rest of my life? I relaxed subconsciously. But then I felt guilty. I was being given the option many girls were denied.

"Fine, who listens to me? I'm just a wash woman and a cleaner you've hired, Khan Sahib!"

"Well, that's not true at all. You cook too." I saw my father grin at my mother and that resulted in me laughing and my mother discovering I was awake the whole time.

"Aliaa!" Abdullah screamed in delight and jumped into my arms. I hugged him and kissed his forehead. He is ten years old and although he is almost a teenager, I cannot help but pamper him. "Alia Api, are you going to marry?"

"Why would I marry, when I have you, Abdullah?" I asked him and tickled his tummy, causing him to erupt in giggles and my mother to huff and leave the room.

"Your mother means well, Alia," my father said, straightening his paper, "she's a mother; that's how they are."

"I know, Abbu. It's just, I don't want to get married till I can stand on my own feet, you know?"

“Meaning?”

“If something bad happens, I can be independent.”

“I see, so what did you do all day, page?”

“I was resting, Abbu. Oh, I almost forgot. Do you remember my schoolmate Hamza Imran?”

“The boy who liked my poetry collection?” he asked with curiosity clear in his eyes. “What about that lad?”

“He came over, and gave me a card. He said he wanted to speak to you.” I shrugged, implying my nonchalance at the matter, yet I was so curious. I really wanted to know what Hamza wanted to talk about with my father.

“I do miss his father. He was such a nice man. I will contact him soon.” My father resumed reading and I resumed thinking.

It was already dark outside. I pulled Abdullah with me and took him to his room, which he shared with Ali Bhai, who was three years older than me. Bhai never got along with Abbu, because they were exactly the same. Bhai always thought Abbu should spend more time with the family and not read so much or spend too much time in the University. Ironically, he spent all his free time in his room. Bhai always kept to himself. This annoyed me, because we were really close when we were young.

I knocked at the door and waited for Ali Bhai to let me in. When I didn't hear anything, I peeked inside and nobody was there. I walked over to Abdullah's tiny bed and tucked him in. I loved that little boy with all my heart. He always managed to make me laugh. When I started University here, I never thought of how mean the girls could be and I always came home upset. Then Abdullah used to do his funny faces or dance just to cheer me up. He was the universal charger to my dying battery. Ali Bhai used to be my best friend till he changed so much that I couldn't even have a straight conversation with him. I had two brothers who were polar opposites.

“Is he asleep?” Ali asked. I nodded and alwarul him to come outside to the hall. I quietly closed the door and looked at him in anger.

“Where were you? Mom and dad were downstairs trying to fix

me up getting me married and whatnot. Why aren't you ever there when something is being discussed in our family?"

"You're only twenty-three. Dad won't let you get married so young. And I'm not there because nobody takes my input on things anyway, Alia. Twenty-three years in this house and you still don't get how you're the favorite and I'm the good-for-nothing son?"

"Oh, don't you dare put this on me! I am not a favorite. You just don't show your face and blame dad for being an "absent" father. How can you say that, when you're the absentee yourself?"

"Alia, enough. It's late, I'm going to bed and you should go use a tissue paper." He walked off and shut himself in his room. I just stared after him, irritated and a little ticked off because of the tissue paper comment.

I went to my room and just sat on the bed, thinking about Hamza, Ali Bhai, Abdullah, and Dad. A bit about Mom as well. What could Hamza want? I remember Amna telling me in school how she was sure that Hamza would marry me someday. It seemed like a pathetic notion at that time, but now, it didn't seem so extreme. Hamza is a nice man, mashAllah, and I have known him since childhood. But I know Ali Bhai will not agree. He always thought that Hamza was proud. But why should I care what he thinks? Isn't it my life and won't he be my husband? But his opinion does matter because he is my older brother and I love him despite his flaws. I remember the days when we used to sit with each other and read books aloud. He used to make fun of me when I pronounced something incorrectly. And then he used to hug me. That's it. I am going to talk to him. I removed my headphones and paused the music. The house seemed eerily quiet. I got off of my bed and went to their room. I knocked on his door and peeped in when there was no response. I saw Abdullah's and Ali Bhai's empty beds. Then I saw the scattered papers and the haywire bedsheets. The table was a mess and the cupboard looked as if it had been thoroughly searched. I could feel my heartbeat in my ears. It was nearing midnight and I heard a small noise downstairs and almost screamed. What was happening? I ran to my room and got my headscarf. I saw the fruit bowl and

knife on my table. I picked up the knife and held it firmly. I went downstairs very softly while my imagination was going haywire. What if there is a burglar?

I reached the last step and saw that the living room was dark, but someone was speaking very softly. I murmured bismillah softly and switched on the lights.

IV

“Alia?” I heard my husband calling from downstairs, “Alia, where is my tie? I threw it on the sofa last night!”

“You threw it, darling!” I replied with sarcasm dripping in my voice, “That is the perfect way to keep something and to find it later on!”

“Stop kidding around, love,” I heard his voice coming closer until he showed up at the door, “I throw things around because I know you will clean up after me.” He grinned. I have known him since I was a child and he has not changed at all. He took my hand and sat next to me on the bed. He was wearing his depressing suit. The one he wore to the funeral. The one I cried on uncontrollably. I don’t know why he kept it, but it’s a miracle it still fits.

“Are you okay?” he asked me with concern obvious in his eyes.

I sighed. It’s been ten years. And it still hurts. Everything had changed that night.

“No. I miss them.” I did miss them. I felt guilty too.

“We all do. Come on, we should be leaving now.” He pulled me up and kissed my forehead.

“I’m ready, I just need to call Amna and ask her if Raiya is alright.” I took my phone and called Amna. She had flown in from Pakistan and had taken my daughter with her. Raiya was only two years old and she didn’t understand much of what was going on, but she did know that mummy was sad.

“Hello, worried mother. Stop calling your best friend, because she can actually take care of your little baby girl!” Amna always managed to make me laugh. Even on a day like this. She got easily

annoyed with my worrying habits.

“Funny. I am just calling to ask if she is okay.” My voice faded into a whisper at the end.

“She’s fine, Alia. Stop worrying. We are going to Roshina Ammi’s house now, okay? See you there soon, InshAllah.” She always called my mother Ammi. She was like the sister I never had, but always wanted.

“Okay, tell Raiya I love her and that I will be there soon,” I said.

“Here, talk to her,” Amna said exasperatedly and after a few seconds of explaining who was calling, my baby started talking.

She giggled as she said, “Mama!”

“Asalaamo-alaikum hayati, are you having fun with Amna Khala?” I asked, knowing the answer already. Raiya had good vocabulary considering her age; however, she was very selective with her words. She used “yes” for everything. Even if asked her if she wanted vegetables, she would say yes, but she would look like she was being tortured while eating them.

“Yes, Mama! We go to park and eat many ice creams!” she sounded so jubilant, I couldn’t scold her about the ice creams. I could hear Amna exclaiming: “I told you not to tell mummy about ice cream!” in the background. Realizing her mistake, she corrected herself and said: “Mummy we didn’t have ice cream. Ama Khala gave me vegecables.” Her baby talk made me laugh out loud.

Hamza came in and alwarul our departure. I gestured him to talk to Raiya and he came.

“Hello, page! How are you?” he asked with a huge smile on his face. He called her page now. Like Abbu used to call me. I felt like crying. I got up to wash my face. I could hear Hamza saying goodbye as I fixed my scarf in front of the mirror in the washroom.

We got in the car and I was unnaturally silent. I closed my eyes and the memories of that horrible night became alive.

V

I saw the guns first. Then I saw the neighbors standing over my parents, kneeling on the floor. I saw Ali Bhai, tied and gagged next to the television. Then I saw Abdullah, struggling in the arms of a man with a mask covering his face. My heart was beating sporadically as my brain tried to make sense of what was happening.

“Welcome to the show, Alia!” the man with the mask shrieked, “this is all for you, every bit of it!”

“What?” I managed to mumble. I felt numb. I couldn’t understand.

He took off his mask. It was him. Mrs. Saif’s ‘nice’ son. I didn’t remember his name.

“Surprised?” he laughed and kicked my father in the back, making me scream. “Don’t be. You destroyed my dreams about us, Alia. Now I am destroying yours.”

I looked to the right and saw Ali Bhai trying to break free of his bonds. He alwarul me to keep the crazy stalker talking. I remembered his name now. Zain.

“Zain? Why are you doing this?” I asked feebly. My voice couldn’t accept the urgency of the situation. I understood now how I could never survive in a panicky atmosphere. My senses completely dulled down.

“To prove to you that I am still ready to be yours! But first I must free you from everyone else that you love. So you can love me and me only! It’s so poetic, isn’t it? You love poetry, don’t you? I remember you walking down the street to the bus stop carrying your poetry books. We could be in them one day, Alia. Our love story can be one everyone yearns to be in.” He said all of this so earnestly, I found myself feeling sorry for him.

Zain was looking at me. I was looking at the ground crying and shaking in fear. He was a monster; the kind of monsters no fiction book can describe. Monsters in Greek myths or the Lord of the Rings have vulnerabilities. Monsters like Zain are of an unpredictable kind. One could never guess their true color. Their vulnerabilities

made them monsters. But these monsters can be distracted.

“What if I ran away with you? Will you let my family go?” I asked him. “Please let them go. Please, let my family go!” I could see my father shaking his head and my mother crying. I turned my eyes towards the monster. I could see how he liked the idea of running off with me, but then the woman who was holding my mother down coughed pointedly. That reminded him of their original plan.

“As much as I wish I could, Alia” he said with some rising tremble in his voice, “it is all done now; I will have to go with the plan.” He continued to address me as he motioned to the man and woman next to him. “After all, I cannot defy my parents’ wishes.”

Mrs. Saif, that traitorous monster-mother, had been pestering my mother for my hand in marriage for ages!

“You’re blind, Roshina!” she cackled like the witch she was. “My son is perfect for any girl and you say no to him?”

Her husband did not say much. He was my father’s associate in the department. I could see the jealousy in his eyes whenever Abbu carpooled with him on meeting days. Now, I could see that jealousy transformed to murderous rage and confusion.

“Let’s get this done with, son,” he said with a sense of urgency and determination. The monster’s father was no exception to the family’s character.

The next few minutes many things seemed happened at once. Ali Bhai broke free of his bonds and kicked Mr. Saif who was standing next to him and Abbu to the floor. The gun he was holding fell out of his hand when he hit the ground. Mrs. Saif screamed and rushed to her husband’s aid. Ali Bhai jumped at Zain, with a guttural snarl. I rushed to Ammi, removed her gag and pulled her behind the sofa. She couldn’t stop crying and I tried to calm her. Abdullah ran towards us and I told him to take care of Ammi. I got up and saw Zain reaching for the gun as Ali Bhai tackled him to the ground. I ran towards Abbu to help him as I heard a shot ringing out and something heavy falling hitting the ground. My heart seemed to stop and I turned only to see Zain clutching his leg, screaming, and blood dripping onto the vinyl flooring. I heard Mrs. Saif scream

some more, completely incapacitated by the injuries to her family. Maybe she was not such a heartless monster after all. Ali Bhai ran towards us and started helping Abbu get to his feet.

“Alia, take them and run! Call the police and don’t come back!” He was out of breath.

“I am not leaving you, Bhai,” I said impulsively.

“I have not done much to make this family proud, Alia. But I will not let anyone get hurt,” he said. “So get out, now!”

“Are you crazy? This is not the time to be a hero when –” Before I was able finish my sentence, I heard a bang and saw my brother Ali Bhai drop to the ground with a red spot spreading on his white t-shirt. He did not move. I heard a gut-wrenching and blood-curdling scream. It was me.

As I saw Ali Bhai’s lifeless body on the ground and my father trying to revive him, I felt my throat close up. I looked up to Zain with the gun in his hand now aiming at my father. I took the first thing my hand could find and ran towards him hitting him as hard as I could. Even though the object I had grabbed was only a sofa cushion, he fell to the ground and the gun fell out of his hand and skittered across the floor. I started punching the brute’s face. I reached for the gun and hit his head hard with its butt. He dropped to the floor unconscious.

With the crisis temporarily halted, I ran back to my father crying over Bhai. I was shaking and crying, but I knew I had to do something. I went to see Ammi behind the sofa clutching the crying Abdullah. I told her to stay there. I saw Abdullah had a cut on his forehead and it was bleeding. Ammi got up and screamed when another shot rang out and a body thumped on the floor.

I got up just in time to see Mrs. Saif standing with the gun in her hand, smoke rising from the barrel, and my father lying next to my brother. Dead.

VI

I opened my eyes. We had arrived. Hamza got out of the car and opened the door for me. I saw the house which memories I had just relived. It was just a lot darker and bloodier in my head. I don't know why they still lived here. I kept asking them to move and live somewhere else, but Ammi wanted to stay. She couldn't bear to lose the connection she felt here.

I got out and rang the bell. The door opened to show a strapping young man standing with Raiya in his arms. The concern on my face changed into a smile of evident relief.

"Abdullah!" I hugged him and started to cry. Raiya got worried and she pulled away from her uncle and called: "Mama! I want mama!"

I wiped my eyes and kissed her cheeks. She saw Hamza coming in and started jumping out of my arms: "Baba! I want baba!"

Everyone laughed. I heard a very masculine laugh from the corner of the room. For a second it felt like Ali Bhai. This laugh belonged to a tall young man, almost as tall as Abdullah, standing with a woman. I felt I should know who this was.

"Alia Api, you remember Asad my classmate from school? And this is his wife, Irum" Abdullah said. His friend got up and shook hands with Hamza. He looked at least two years older than Abdullah. I now remembered him clearly, because he was one of the few friends Abdullah had retained over the years.

"Asalaamoalaikum, how are you?" Irum greeted me. Her hands were very soft. I had half a mind to ask her for moisturizing tips.

"Alhamdulillah. It's very nice to meet you. Abdullah has been talking about you both a lot recently," I said. "I think he's hinting at marriage."

Everyone laughed at this and Abdullah squeezed my arm. Asad started teasing Abdullah as I saw my mother coming down the stairs, greeting me with a smile. I ran towards her to hug her. I helped her to the sofa in the living room. Everyone came and scattered themselves on the available seats.

“You’re fine. We are fine,” Ammi said.

Her words brought back the painful memories. She had said the same thing when the police was standing over the criminals and were handcuffing those monsters. Ammi was then standing next to me and Abdullah. I also remembered the days we had to make the funeral arrangements. I remember Hamza condoling us and looking at me with great concern. I remember him sitting next to me during the sermon and holding my hand. I remember how I cried on his shoulder uncontrollably and he not saying a word about my tears wetting his suit. I remember Amna sitting to my left, crying and holding the book of proverbs my father had given her. I remember everything as if it had been yesterday.

“It’s been ten years,” my mother said holding my hand. She was not just addressing me, but was speaking to everyone gathered there. My husband was holding my other hand, looking at me lovingly. Sitting next to him was my baby brother with the scar on his forehead from that night. Asad was sitting beside Abdullah, looking at me with a brotherly smile. Irum was playing with Raiya, making her promise to never say vegecables again and Amna was standing under the arch with her arms crossed, holding the same book she was holding ten years ago when we had to bid farewell to our loved ones.

“And we are okay,” I finished for her. I was okay. I did miss them every day. I did miss my father calling me page. I did miss my brother teasing me and being annoying. I missed everything. Missing was a part of it. The worst part was thinking that I could have done something, but knowing that one cannot defy fate. Life had been hard. I lost half my family when I least expected it. My happy life had been shattered by insanity and I had believed I could never be happy again. But I have a new life now. I had to experience the worst kind of pain imaginable to become stronger. Eventually, I married the man whose path had crossed mine and with whom I had felt a strange affiliation since schooldays. Life is good this way. Life is good being that girl.

Pre-Birthday Excerpts from a 74-year-old's Diary*

1st Jan 2001:

Hi, I am Judy. I am seven years old. Mama told me that if I wrote in this diary, she will buy me a princess dress! So, here I am.

Tomorrow is my birthday. Yay!

Bye bye.

1st Jan 2002:

Hello!

Mama said that I became taller. It must be because of the candies my math teacher gave me when I answered correctly. I am coming Mrs. Candies!

Bye bye.

1st Jan 2003:

I don't like science classes. There is a girl who is so mean to me. I took her notebook and threw it in the trash. I hope her mom will punish her.

Did I do something wrong?

1st Jan 2004:

Hi! Finally, my birthday has come! I am so curious what my father bought me from his last trip to Japan.

Ah! Also, I've never thought that Sara and I will end up as BFF after the many troubles I caused her by throwing her notebook into the trash last year.

1st Jan 2005:

My parents are getting divorced...

1st Jan 2006:

Tomorrow is my birthday. My mom is throwing me a very big party! Yay!

1st Jan 2007:

I hate school!

I hate going to school with old dresses!

** Title Suggested by the judges is (Sixty Years of Loyalty)*

I hate my mom and her silly job!

I want to be rich. I want to wear pretty dresses and have funny friends!

This life sucks!

1st Jan 2008:

Even since I moved to live with my father two months ago, I feel emptiness.

Do I regret the huge fight I had with my mother?

Yes, I do.

1st Jan 2009:

How come do I have an exam on my birthday? I don't like to study!

I don't know where my father is.

I don't know what the worst thing is: being alone in a huge house for a week or having to please my father with grades for extra money.

1st Jan 2010:

So, 2010 wasn't the end of the world.

I received a call from my mother yesterday. She's getting married.

High school is my worst nightmare.

1st Jan 2011:

Tomorrow is my birthday. I invited the whole school. I'm so excited!

I will surely be the prettiest!

1st Jan 2012:

The worst day of the year is coming tomorrow. Everybody will remember January 2nd, 2011 as the day when the ugliest and silliest girl in the entire universe was abandoned on her birthday party.

I'll never forget that I became the school joke for months until they found another topic to give their attention to. I'll never forget the hatred I felt and the tears I shed when they abandoned me, leaving me alone with the food, games, and music I spent so much money and time to prepare.

1st Jan 2013:

My father is getting married. So, I'm moving to my grandmother's house.

I'll start going to college from there.

1st Jan 2015:

My last semester was the best! I got three As! I'm so proud of myself.

1st Jan 2017:

Grandma came to my graduation ceremony. I was very happy seeing her tears of pride while I was delivering the speech.

I'll work harder!

1st Jan 2020:

Her death was like losing the last trace of hope in my life. Every time I walk around this empty house, my heart bounces painfully out of my chest.

Grandma ... I miss you.

1st Jan 2021:

I feel like I am working 24/7!

Well, it's not that bad. It's a good distraction from thinking how my life sucks, or how my stepsisters are having the perfect lives while I'm still stuck with my past, especially after grandma's death.

1st Jan 2023:

I guess every rose will blossom sooner or later. I'm glad that I can show off my engagement ring in front of my stepsisters.

1st Jan 2024:

Isn't wonderful how I've used the same diary for the past 23 years! Tomorrow is my 30th birthday! As a married woman, the idea of celebrating this day is somewhat embarrassing!

1st Jan 2028:

He is a boy. His flowery cheeks make my day. I've always wanted my own child to fill my life with happiness. He and my work will be my only concern.

I chose the name Jaid; he has the same letter as me "Judy". He'll be as great as his mother.

1st Jan 2031:

It's driving me crazy. Trying to strike a balance between Jaid and my job is just impossible!

Should I quit?

1st Jan 2032:

If grandma were here, she would have tapped me on my head saying, "You're built from fire, Judy. There's nothing you can't do."

1st Jan 2035:

Jaid is going to school tomorrow! It's as painful as it is wonderful watching him grow independent.

Strangely, I met Sara, an old classmate. Her vibe is scary as usual.

1st Jan 2036:

Something I realized in my thirties: I grew up without having friends. I know I'm stating the obvious. I mean, my company has never been enjoyable.

When I saw Jaid's friends at his birthday party, I was proud of him of course, but I can't deny that there was a part of my dark heart that envied him.

He didn't become like his mother He's greater.

1st Jan 2042:

Finally, after what seemed to be a million years, I got promoted! I am travelling abroad!

The happiness of achieving what I have wanted my entire life is incomparable to anything else!

Be proud, grandma.

1st Jan 2044:

Jaid is never listening to what I say. He's so strongheaded! His friends are making me worry even more!

1st Jan 2045:

The previous year was so horrible! Repeatedly fighting with Jaid who was home coming late every night with bruises on his face.

However, the worst was when the police called me telling me about the fight he was involved in. I stopped talking to him for two weeks.

It was a nightmare.

When he came to me with his teary eyes apologizing and repeating, "I love you, mom," I realized that my life was worth living because of this moment.

1st Jan 2050:

She's pretty, the girl my son chose to spend his life with.

1st Jan 2051:

Hilarious. I tend to forget a lot recently.

1st Jan 2053:

- What color is the sky today?
- What am I going to have for dinner?
- Will our alwarul shout at his son again today?

It's interesting, how I'm paying attention to everything after retiring.

1st Jan 2061:

A heavy sigh left my throat leaving a small trace of pain in my chest. The doctor was telling my grandson, "She doesn't have much time." My grandson was sobbing, but I was delighted because I felt how much he cared about me. Because I had thought about this moment my entire life till I felt it meant nothing and because I was satisfied with the 67 years I had lived.

My life wasn't the perfect life, but I lived it to the fullest. There is no regret.

I wonder if this would be my last time holding this diary.

Thank you for 60 years of loyalty ...for being my secure zone during my hardest times.

Thank you.

Thank you for preserving my life's unforgettable moments.

Bye bye.

Houriya Mousa Al-Balushi

The Horrors of Pink and Blue

The flowers in the jungle on the outskirts of Khotumpoor dropped their silent tears as dusk laid her loving arms around the small village. The first signs of life emerged from still cottages as a rooster perched on top of a scarecrow let out an insistent morning cry. The inhabitants of these cottages slowly began to leave their homes and make their way to River Santhandarmi.

River Santhandarmi, the pride and joy of the villagers, flowed beside the village, separating them from the horrors of the jungle beyond. Every morning, at the crow of the rooster, all the villagers would walk to the river to pray to the Goddess who resided there, Goddess Santhandhi. First, they would fall to their knees on the banks of the river, bow their head, and in unison sing their daily chant. Then, they would arise, scoop a little of the sacred water into their hands, take a sip of it and quickly let the rest of the water fall back into the river.

When this ritual completed, the villager's resumed their daily chores. The farmers returned to their farms, milked their cows and harvested their crops. The blacksmiths fixed broken utensils and made shoes for the horses of traders. The cleaners, commonly known as "dhobiwallas," would take the dirty clothes of the villagers, wash them in a designated area in the river, apply a little soap and then slap the clothes against a hard rock until they were dry. The children would all gather in the Maidan to play endless rounds of cricket. All children except Ritika.

Ritika, a tender young girl at the age of ten, returned with her father to the house to help clean and set up everything for the day's meals. She took up the empty space her mother had left, cooking all meals, taking care of her younger cousins and keeping her house spotless. Her mother's disappearance two years earlier had forced her to grow up fast and so, being the eldest of her cousins, she was expected only to cook, clean and care.

Her days normally consisted of waking up at the crack of dawn, finding her way through the crowd to the river, praying, going back

home, milking the cow, cleaning the house, and then preparing the meals for her extended family of ten. Every time she saw the ball fly past the window of her cottage, her intelligent green eyes would light up with excitement and for a minute she would forget about the ache for her mother that nestled in her abdomen. On a normal day she would be done cleaning and cooking by noon, take care of her cousins when they took their lunchbreak from cricket, and then, at about five o'clock every day, she would pick up the clothes from the dhobiwallas, carry the baskets home and finally go back to get water for her family. However, December 3rd was not a normal day at all, that's how she met the Genies in the first place.

Ritika awakened with a beaming chest that morning. She had prayed at the river, made a beeline for home, completed her tasks as fast as she could, dressed in her prettiest salwar, tied her plaits in her prettiest ribbons and then headed straight back to the river.

If there was one thing Ritika loved, it was flowers. The first thing she remembered about her mother was her delicate hands that had quietly woven alwarul flowers into a wreath with Ritika watching her. Ritika had been sitting in the corner of the room eating a fruit that stained her face purple. When her mother finished, Ritika had padded up to her curiously and watched as those same hands softly placed the halo of flowers on her head.

"Phool," her mother had said, pointing at the flowers. That was the first word Ritika had learnt.

Ritika knew where Khotumpoor's most beautiful flowers grew. When she walked straight from the door of her house, she would reach the River. If she walked parallel to the river up to the single banyan tree on the first hill, she would see a bulky log spread across the river forming a footbridge. Now, if she would tiptoe across the log, just as Ritika did that day, she could find the prettiest flowers one could imagine.

Ritika sat on the bank of the river, playing with the flowers on December 3rd, her birthday, when everything changed. She sat right opposite the Maidan so she had the privilege of watching the current cricket match live. Her face was alight with happiness. She felt a raw kind of bliss and so when the ball flew her way a few

minutes later and fell into the woods, she did not think twice about getting up and retrieving the ball.

The villagers avoided the jungle like the deer avoided tigers. They believed that all the world's horrors resided in those woods and if one would go inside, he would never return. It was the Devil's habitat and he devoured every soul that passed through the single ring of banyan trees that flanked the outskirts of Khotumpoor. It was common knowledge that if one went in, they are not wanted back in the village because of the irrational fear the villagers had of the demon that would have fused with the trespasser. Ritika had conveniently forgotten these fears when she entered the dense banyan boundary on December 3rd.

She passed through the close-knit clump of trees to find herself in an open space, encircled by trees. The ground was parched and famished and longed for sunlight and water. The air was thick with humidity and Ritika scrunched up her nose at the smell of the mugginess.

The bright red cricket ball lay precisely in the middle of the circle. Ritika walked toward it, oblivious to the sense of supernatural around her. She was about to bend down and scoop up the ball when suddenly the ball rolled with full speed toward a huge tree. Ritika stood stunned for a moment, reckoned it was just an odd gust of wind that had moved the ball and followed the ball farther into the woods. Having arrived at the tree where the ball lay, she reached down for the ball again, but this time it flew into the air. She stood up straight and took a nervous step backwards. She watched as the ball flew through the air to the other side of the clearing and then flew back, as if game 'Catch the Ball' was being played.

"Wh-who's there?" her voice was so tight and soft as if she was speaking to herself. The ball continued to move to and fro as if throwing itself from one side to the other.

"Who's there?" she asked again, louder and clearer, her voice at the edge of shouting.

"Tell me who you are!" She trembled with fear.

"It's only us silly!" a melancholy voice called out seemingly from where the ball was. "It's just us."

Ritika's jaw dropped as two figures materialized in the thin air. Both figures looked identical, both fairly human shaped, tall and plump. They wore what looked like jumpsuits with stripes on them. Both wore sock hats that looked like a nightcap and floated just an inch above the ground. The only difference Ritika could find between them was that the one with the ball breathed out blue smoke and the other one breathed out a light pink smoke.

"Well, you found us. Now we have to make two of your wishes come true," said the one breathing blue clouds showing a surprisingly sarcastic voice that was deep and manlike. *Whatever do they mean?* Ritika thought.

The blue one threw the ball at Ritika. "We're Genies silly. You can't leave until you ask for your wishes." *Genies?* Thought Ritika. *Genies are good. They help make your dreams come true. There's no reason to be afraid.* Her thrashing heartbeat slowed.

The Pink Genie cleared her throat loudly. "Well...?" she asked in a husky voice. Ritika looked at them both blankly, nervously twisting the ball in her hands.

"Your wishes?" prompted the nicer Pink Genie.

Ritika thought for a moment; she squinted her eyes as she remembered the things most important to her. There were only two things that she really wanted.

"Well, my first wish is that I want to play cricket," she said dubiously.

The Genies' eyes shone looking expectantly at Ritika as she gave them another blank look.

"You sure do specialize in blank looks, don't you?" The Blue Genie laughed haughtily in his deep voice.

"What position, silly?" The Pink Genie prompted.

"I want to bat," she continued, her excitement finally jumping into her lap. "And my second wish is to see my mother." She said this so fast, that she had to repeat it again for it to make any sense to the Genies.

"Your wish is our command." Both the genies bowed gracefully and disappeared as unexpectedly as they had appeared.

Ritika walked back to the village wondering if she had imagined the entire encounter. *Maybe it was dehydration causing hallucinations*, she thought to herself. Soon after, she saw a big smile floating in the air at a distance, which she swore looked exactly like the smile of the Blue Genie. She pinched herself to make sure she wasn't dreaming as she crossed the log footbridge.

You are not dreaming, silly. The voice of the Blue Genie filled her thoughts.

All of a sudden, she couldn't control herself. Was she really going to be able to play real cricket? And what about her mother, would she really meet her? She couldn't stop the excited squeal that left her lips. She hadn't felt this hopeful for a long time. She skipped all the way to the *Maidan*; not noticing the change that had occurred between the time she had entered the jungle and now.

Ritika sprinted back to the village excited and waiting to tell the others about what had happened. Her plaits flew behind her as she ran in to the *Maidan*. But, when she got there, she skidded to a halt. She looked around her. The *Maidan* was completely empty; not a soul in sight, nor a bat or ball. The grassy *Maidan* was so silent that it seemed as if the entire village had gone for vacation. Ritika walked near the cricket pitch. *Where was everyone?* She stood in front of the stumps, the highest point in the *Maidan*, and strained her neck, trying to see if the children were messing with her. All of a sudden, she heard a rustle in the bushes near by.

"Koi hai kya – is anyone here?" she called out. The bushes began to shiver. *Maybe it's just the wind.* Then, from behind the bushes, she heard a strange sound. A sound she had only heard once when her father had taken her to the city – the sound of a machine firing up. Instantaneously, a cricket ball shot out of the bushes right towards Ritika.

"Ahh!" she screamed, ducking as another ball flew her way. She ran to the side, away from the balls, but it seemed like they were following her. *What was happening?* She had no bat to defend herself from the berserk balls and she was about to reach the bank of River Santhandhi. She skidded in the fertile muck at the edge of

the River, both her legs in front of her. If the balls hit her head with such speed, she knew her skull would crack. She fell onto her back, covering herself and her favorite alwar with black, wet mud. She continued to slide, the mud taking her away on its path. Then, she was violently thrown into the river.

No one was allowed in the river, especially with mud all over them. These rules existed for two reasons; first the River was the holy residence of the Goddess. Second, the River was so strong with the power of the Goddess, that once inside it would push one away from the village into foreign lands.

Ritika shut her eyes as water splashed onto her face. She tried to open her mouth to call for help but the current pulled her back into the water the moment she managed to get her face away from the rushing rapids. The currents shoved her across the river away from the village. Now even if she did manage to call out for help, there would be no one to hear her. Her shoulders were sore from battling the waters. She could hardly breathe and could not hear a thing as the water filled her ears. She tired quickly and stopped resisting the pull of the current that was sucking her down the river, threatening to drown her. As she sank deeper into the water no longer able to breathe, she suddenly felt everything become calm around her. As she surfaced gasping for air, she gradually realized that the river had emptied into a lake.

Ritika managed to drag herself out of the water. As she reached the bank, she collapsed there onto her back and waited for her breathing to slow. She tried to rub her eyes in a vain attempt to stop them from burning, but her hands were too heavy and fell to her sides constantly. The water dripped off her clothes wetting the soil underneath her. She closed her eyes in exhaustion, letting her long eyelashes rest on her cheeks when all of a sudden she heard a barely audible rustle.

Not another machine, she thought. Opening her eyes, she looked to one side. In the distance, she saw someone sitting under a banyan tree, seemingly fast asleep. *Help!* She thought. *Help was here.* She got up instantaneously in hope for assistance. She walked towards

the slumbering shape under the tree, her back sticky with mud and her head heavy with the weight of her wet tresses. Suddenly, something caught her eye: Slung around the neck of the person under the tree, was a thin silver chain with a half-heart diamond locket. Ritika brushed her muddy fingers across her neck. There dangled the other half of the same necklace.

“Ma!” she screamed, running towards her long lost mother, her heart pounding with excitement. Her wet feet imprinted the ground as she ran her fastest, forgetting about the heavy plaits. She did not notice the foul smell that filled the air as she inched towards the resting figure.

“Ma!” she crouched in front of her, reaching out to shake her awake. Her mother’s body, limp and lifeless, crumpled forward, falling face down to the ground with a heavy thud.

“Be careful what you wish for, silly”.

Divta Kapadia

The National Youth Commission

Brief Description

The National Youth Commission was established in accordance with the Royal Decree No. (117/2011), pursuant to the wise vision of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said emphasizing the vital role of the youth in building societies and with the aim of achieving important objectives and targets that benefit both young citizens and the country. These objectives and targets include: opening channels of meaningful dialogue with the youth, promoting their sense of identity and citizenship, increasing their awareness toward various national and international laws and legislations, investigate their needs and aspirations of for the present time and in the future, and develop/promote their skills and talents.

NYC comprises of 28 appointed members representing different sectors in the Sultanate as follows: 12 members representing the same number of government entities, 5 members from the private sector, 6 members affiliated to private colleges/universities, non-profit entities, and 5 members with competent backgrounds and an interest with youth issues.

Over a period of time, there was joy and pain. There was laughter and vain. There was the loss of friends, loved ones, and those whom you could say you would not have lived without. Yet, alas, all was gone. The point of no return had been passed and it just was – no going back.

Regrets at this point matter not. Nor do memories do you any good. But the focus on the present and firm hands on the steering wheel of the future is where it all lies now.

Do you believe in second chances?

In the past I have been resistant to fate's crashes and sub-crashes of life's systems from illness, studies and work running me into the stone wall of the depression phase.

Now, there's a new me that's looking to pop out.

The one that takes every disadvantage possible and turn it into an advantage. One where there's no agony or pain less than that of suffering and disease. The child-like adventure are over and it's time to get serious since time is running out on our beloved youth in realization of the fact that we're not getting any younger any time soon.

Smiling when it hurts the most.

Gripping onto faith in the utmost darkest corners of a lost and wondering soul.

Celebrating the success and defeat – each in their own way by trust one's self in success and applying confidence to one's morality while learning from the mistakes that one makes on this long journey we call life so that we may not repeat them again in the near and far future.

Ali Mehdi
