

*the flow of
emptiness
manmeet oberoi*



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by manmeet oberoï

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prologue – honeymoon with anxiety

On the surface, writing seems very straightforward – you put your thoughts into words, placing them on paper or text to share with others. But finding the words you want to say is difficult – how do you begin to express all of your deepest feelings that you’ve locked away for so long? How does one pass on all of the knowledge they’ve gained to others when those feelings are hard to express? This is why I began writing – to allow myself to find a space where myself and others could find ourselves in one another and learn to understand one another better, and express what our hearts had locked away.

Washington born and raised, I have always been surrounded by the silent evergreens my whole life, always finding space to walk through the backwoods that encompass my home. Yet I find that my favorite place to explore lies deep within my connections with others, especially my online peers who have helped shape me into the empathetic person I have become today. I believe that the mountain trek we undertake as a part of life is truly about how we can grow to become more empathetic and understanding towards others, being there for them whether they are at their best or worst.

My love for literature was born from this desire, as I believe literature is a window into the minds and experiences of others, allowing us to further our own knowledge and understanding of what it means to be human through it. As a writer, I want to bring out the feelings that well up inside me, using it as a way to process my own experiences and allow others to find themselves in my writing or something that sticks out to them, acting as a connection to myself and the reader. My biggest inspirations in the writing sphere would be Kinoku Nasu, Haruki Murakami, and J.D Salinger. In terms of my writing style and prose, I tend to follow writing conventions similar to Nasu, who favors writing prose as if it was closer to poetry, focusing on the imagery and flow of the dialogue, making it always sound beautiful to one's ears.

My focus is on writing creative nonfiction, as I want to express myself and reflect on my feelings during different experiences in my life. For this showcase, I have chosen to style the piece as a symphonic movement with titles referencing a favorite film of mine, as I grew up practicing the piano and attached heavily to this film's compositions and wanted to express this part of myself here even despite my writings for this showcase not alluding to it. I have selected pieces based on experiences that were deeply personal and laid out them in a way that allows others to see the journey I have undertaken chronologically,

with them being grouped into pairs that match one another. The exception to this is the first piece, which is included as an “intro” to the movement itself, focusing on something light as practice before getting into the true flow of the writing. The outro piece was chosen to be a denouement that ends with something hopeful, allowing the writing room to breathe during its longest and arguably most personal piece.

These pieces are revised from their initial drafts with some line additions alongside typo fixes and adjustments. The last piece has the most revisions due to its length and has changed much from its initial draft, although when I initially submitted this piece it was close to its final version. Throughout this process, I wrote about things that were happening in my life or tangentially related to them in some way, and most of them expressed my own thoughts. The exception is the first piece, which I chose to base on my own fears but write from the perspective of someone who almost sounds racially charged in a way, poking fun at my own fear of ants by alluding to situations hard for me to experience today, like what’s happening with ICE at the time of this writing. I hope that as you read this, you gain something in some way that helps you better connect with the world, even if it’s something as small as a smile.

I. intro – interference of others

the ants ruining my colony

The *Odorous House* is one of the most common species of ant, usually found either foraging around your food pantry in search of supplies, or in the soil outside your backyard as it makes the trek back to its colony somewhere under the ground you can't see. People say these little critters are cute and harmless. But when you find one as you're trying to take a quick bite of a potato chip, feeling it moving around inside your throat as you desperately attempt to spit it out and find yourself gagging and choking on it, ***can you really say that they're friendly?*** How can you feel safe in your own home knowing these little guys can interrupt even something as peaceful as comfort eating?



The *Carpenter Ant*, however, isn't as harmless, typically finding ways to reside inside the wood in your house, especially those that are water-damaged or moist. These ants are a bit bigger than your average ant, and while they may not bite, they will eventually destroy the structure of your house, almost like your house is infected with

termites. At night, you can sometimes hear them crawling around through your walls as they continue to chip away, stealing your home to make their own. How can anyone sleep at night knowing they're around, constantly hearing the pitter-pattering of their bodies inching closer and closer to your face, ***paralyzed because you'll never know when they'll swarm you?***



The *Pavement Ant* on the other hand finds its way inside your home through the cracks on your floor and walls, entering through your garage and waiting for the right moment to strike. If it finds you by your lonesome, it will stare you down to determine if you are a threat to it, and if worse comes to worst, it will lunge itself towards you and sting you. The feeling of being stung will leave you writhing in agony, all the while it waddles away safely back to its home. People will say that the creature was trying to defend itself, asking you to put yourself in the ants' shoes...Being small and defenseless compared to the massive giant towering above it, able to crush it at a moment's notice. Yet even so, it's the one who invaded your home and not the other way around! It's the one turning your house into an unsafe mess, so ***why does it get all the sympathy?***



But then you have the worst of them all, *Pharaoh Ants*. These ants are tough and extremely difficult to get rid of, with even the slightest mistake leading to their escape. Once free, they'll just repopulate until your entire town is owned by their family. They will find their way into places you don't want them to, stealing your food while nesting themselves in hard-to-find spots so you can't get rid of them. But worst of all, they will get into everything, whether you want them to or not. Even a place as sacred as a hospital is nothing for them – they'll even try to go into an IV line and get stuck there. Can you imagine not even feeling safe at the hospital, because an ant can find its way into your body or health support system? Can you picture that disgusting, gross creature making its way inside your body whether you want it or not? The disgusting creature wriggling around inside you until it dies, contaminating your already ill body with its disgusting carcass? ***How can anyone find these things cute?!***





“It’s like when I started practicing the cello – I thought that there would be something if I came here”

II. first movement – false regeneration

drenched

On a rainy day in second grade, I skip through the rain puddles in the playground on my lunch break. I'm excited to see the splashes of water form around me. The clouds are heavy and gray, and no one else comes outside. Inside my classroom, the other kids eat their lunches and talk about their favorite shows, but I can't seem to find the words I want to say. My loving teacher who I adore so much eats outside on a table with her headphones on, her own cold reprieve from teaching. I want to stand out more than the mist that envelops me, wishing that this thick white fog will thin enough for someone to look my way. I try to make her notice me, but I decide if I'm going to play, it'll be best done somewhere she can't see.

I find a spot right next to the jungle gym, making sure the cold bars can hide me like I'm in a castle. I bend my knees thoroughly before I jump, with some hope that I will gain some extra momentum by getting as low as I can. I want to be like those heroes people keep talking about, braving the cold weather, so I can help make fun memories for everyone. I launch myself as far up as I can, staring in awe as the droplets moved across my jacket, as if I was a moving car.

With my feet in place, I'll try to land as hard as I can, so the splashes can scatter across me, as I love to see them go from one spot to another. I think it would be really special to have full control of the water in these moments, always being able to experience the rush of it against my face.

As I stand in place after, the rain runs down my face and meshes with the tears that the others will never be able to see. I try to express myself in ways that go against my nature, like the gray clouds which can only be seen for how they hide away the blue sky everyone seems to love. All that remains of my once neat clothes is the sight of drenched laundry waiting to be dried, no sight of color to be found. I know when I enter my stormy classroom again, the other students will make fun of me, and my teacher will scold me for going to play during the rain, asking why I would do such a thing. I'll simply tell her the same thing I tell her every time:

"Because of everyone in the class, I only ever want to play with you."

III. second movement – komm, susser tod

the cold that followed me home

I can feel the cold breath of the air conditioner all over my body. The IV fluid bag drips every few seconds, and the mechanical beeps of the heart monitor act as a metronome that keep my strings attuned. *If I'm uncertain and lost somewhere, I always find myself back at the same time, as if I never left that room all those years ago.* I sit on a recliner, a small distance away from your bed, watching as you recover slowly from your surgery. *"Now I have over 20 stents! I love how complicated that is, not even the best engineers will figure me out."* I could tell in that statement alone that the painkillers you were on had only made you loopier. The air conditioner seems to get a bit colder.

As I stare into your face, you look rather tired, almost as if you're struggling to keep yourself awake in a vain attempt to impress me with your determination. When I look back on it now, I start to realize the signs were already there. Your face, normally even browner than mine, looks paler than the white blanket you've wrapped yourself in. Both of us rarely spoke, but when you gaze at me, you keep trying to open your mouth to speak, a futile attempt at trying to say the words neither of us could say to one another. You began to ask me if I

remembered to check the bank account or knew where certain financial documents were, like you already know what's going to happen tonight. I shudder a bit because the air conditioner is making my spine feel cold.

When the nurse comes in, she tries to give you a cracker. You politely decline her offer and say you aren't feeling up to it, especially with the room as cold as it is. It's only the size of your finger. You turn your head and start looking to my side, but I know that you aren't staring at me. Your eyes are looking far away into the distance, even though the only thing to the right of me is the gray paint on the wall. The nurse asks you if you like staring at your son, but you quietly reply to her, *"I'm not, I'm staring at my mom, she's standing right there waving hello to me."* *Why didn't I realize sooner that all the signs were there?*

I walk over to you and decide to hold your hand, recalling a long time ago when your hand was larger than my own. I would grab your index finger with my full hand and stare in awe at how tall and gigantic you were. Even though I'm 25 now, your hand is still larger despite the fact I've grown up so much. The touch of your palm feels as cold as snow, a detail I overlook because I don't think there's anything strange about that. Your skin feels moist even though there isn't an

ounce of sweat on your body. The air conditioner feels the coldest right next to your bed.

As the night comes to an end, I get up from my seat to say goodnight to you and start heading back to our home. The cold of the air conditioner has bothered me long enough, and I want to get into my own bed and feel warm. I tell you, “*I love you*” and that “*I’ll see you tomorrow*”, and you say quietly, almost like the breath of the air conditioner, “*I love you too, see you tomorrow bacha.*” I’m 25 now, but you still use the Punjabi and Hindu word that means “*my young child*”. I feel the air conditioner’s breath on my back as I close the door to your room.

I’m woken up late by the screams of my brother. “***He’s gone.***” *I realize my room doesn’t feel any warmer than the hospital’s – the cold breath of the air conditioner stayed with me.*

IV. third movement – substitute invasion

interest rate increase

"A mortgage is a loan a person takes out in order to acquire funds to pay for a property, primarily some form of housing for either oneself or a family." I stare outside the window that's placed in front of the small leather bench where I'll be sleeping. I can see my community college through it, dyed in a dim orange, the sun being blurred through a hazy gray cloud. I know this means it's getting closer to the time when the tapping of my keyboard will be the loudest. *"Let me know when you're ready and I'll continue"*, the voice beside me says. Mechanically, I turn downwards and begin to click, all while hearing the fluid dripping on my left. The keycap's iced touch is something I've gotten accustomed to, but today it feels a bit unusual.

"Regardless of one's circumstances, a mortgage loan is typically 'secured' by a process called origination, which allows the lender to take possession or sell the property if someone defaults on the mortgage terms." I input the words with certainty across my laptop keyboard, like a boss would order their secretary to do. *"Most families survive through mortgage repayments, just as how we repay our own loan company–"*

I know this, you've told me it over a hundred times when you ask me for money knowing that I don't have much to my own name.

"Our loan is currently at [X]. That means we have [X] years to pay it off. Jot that down." My fingers click, outputting his words onto the cold screen that can't convey the calmness in his voice. "It's not something you need to worry about, but I think it's better I tell you now."

My fingers begin to hesitate while waiting for instructions I haven't received yet.

"My heart has some blocked arteries."

It's 2018. I'm sitting across from my father while trying to figure out how I'll find the words to leave his hospital room and walk to school tomorrow in the freezing November cold.

"A 401K is kind of like an employer-sponsored savings account. Think of it like a benefit for working more than anything, and a good way to get some retirement money." My fingers glide across my father's laptop. Unlike my old laptop, this one has much thinner keycaps and feels weightless in my hands. The keycaps feel a bit warmer than my old ones. I turn my gaze to a window outside, noting that the sky is unusually gray today.

"I also have my own 401K account of course. I haven't really spoken about how much it's worth, so here's what you need to know." My father never bothered telling me about finances when I was younger. Whether it's because of complacency or some misguided effort to protect me from the harsh realities of life is something I've always been uncertain about. As I input the information he told me, I think about which of the two it might be.

"My 401K is worth [X]." I'm uncomfortable, but I type it out anyways, since I prefer focusing on the feeling in my fingers than the hard leather seat I'm sitting in. "Your mother doesn't know about it, so make sure that you have all of this down."

My fingertips start to feel icy, as if stuck in that cold memory.

"When it's all over, you need to be responsible and make sure she can live the rest of her life on this."

It's 2023. My father is sitting next to me in the waiting room of a hospital an hour away from my old college, knowing he probably won't survive the next week. September feels unusually cold this year.

"I need your help taking a look at our mortgage payments. I want to make sure we can meet it properly going forward." My mother asks me rather coldly, unusual for her. I'm typing across my phone – the lack of

keycaps doesn't stop me from always feeling fond of the way I can type with ease with my thumbs. I've gotten used to the way the frosted glass feels, so I can text as fast as I can type with my computer. *"I need to make sure that we'll have enough for this year at least. I just want to be sure."* I can feel the cold leather seat of the car starting to hurt.

"I haven't told your brother yet."

My fingers are freezing again.

In a chilled whisper, she softly says, ***"My arteries are blocked."***

Today, it is January 28th, 2026. My father passed away on October 6th, 2023. *On my way to college, I can see the cold gray sky once again.*



“But that’s just a pretense. A selfish Belief. It’s like a prayer – it can’t possibly last forever.”

V. fourth movement – thanatos – if i can't be yours

it's all just a dream

We live inside a dream...

The words reverb inside my head like an echo that never escapes. I can feel the emotions back and forth – one moment a desire to dream eternally of what I long for, while another begs for the return of those ocean eyes that comforted me away from the dream.

Maybe I just want to be able to change it? I wanted to keep the dream going in the way that eternity could be within my own hands. Your face was always far away, but you felt so nearby that I felt like I could keep on grasping tightly.

But a dream is just fleeting after all

It's a momentary happiness that isn't deserved. Yet I still did wish to attain that frozen desire at one time, even though your ocean eyes can no longer gaze back at me. My heart has always been desperate to warm, but when I sink into someone's eyes, I can never handle the weight of longing that enters my heart. But even so, I wish I was able to.

I think about you often –

the way you smiled at each me

the way you would pout when you were upset

the way our eyes would lock and both of us would be stuck in
place

the way we both tried to reach out and touch one another

the way we so desperately tried to hold one another

I can't escape the feelings of that dream no matter how much I
try to run away from them. There is a part of me that will always still
care for you dearly even though you're no longer here. I wish it would
leave, because our dream that we shared is long over. I wish it would
leave, because I know that the person I cared for wasn't real.

I know –

*that you never cared about me enough, even though we
both dreamed of the same thing.*

*that you only cared about the feelings I could offer you to
help you escape your own dream.*

*that everything you did was in service of yourself,
disregarding a mutual interest entirely.*

I just so desperately wanted to stay with you and be cared for by you – I just begged so badly that the dream we shared was genuine, and not something that could be dried and tossed away like an apricot without its seeds. I no longer feel that desire – only the hollow sensation and ghostly touch that it left behind. But there is one thing I still feel, even so far away from your eyes as I am now –

The words, “I’m sorry” –

I couldn't save you

I couldn't make your wish a reality.

I couldn't truly free you despite everything.

*In another time, in another place, I would've tried to do
it all over again in a heartbeat.*

But I can no longer do that, so I'm sorry.

I'm sorry

It's all just a dream...



“If you have the will to live, anywhere can become heaven. After all, you’re alive. There are chances to be happy anywhere. As long as the Sun, Moon and Earth exist...it will be all right.”

VI. outro – the end of midsummer

ninhursag's warmth

If I eat anpan, I wonder if I will be able to see the dreams of Lemuria?

I first saw you in April at the opening of a poetry seminar, inside a classroom that emanated no sound or thought. People were seated across from one another, idling as if it was another day in obstinacy. I took my seat, and the instructor began to list off the names of everyone inside the room. The moment they hastily said my name, I saw you lift your face and turn around – our eyes met briefly and you waved. Unsure how to process you noticing me, I awkwardly nodded back.

If I take a small bite of French bread, will we meet in Atlantis?

As you read your poetry out loud, I was surprised at how personal it was. You instilled each poetry with blues that define both your passions and your inner melancholy, expressing the parts of you that you were afraid to share but still did anyways. I knew I wanted to talk to you straight after as I tend to surround myself with people who

can feel the same shade of blue I feel. Even if, inevitably, our paths part once you no longer need what I can provide you – a space where you can support yourself. If I could describe it, I would describe myself as a small fire on a beach that people can warm themselves with before they return to their long swim.

*If I fill my mouth with chocolate bread, will our sun –
and you – begin to smile?*

I first saw you display true strength during your final poetry reading in the spring. The seeds of this were clearly sown in how your writings themselves had changed throughout April and May. You're always the quiet type who keeps to themselves, but in that moment you bravely expressed yourself with such certainty and confidence, like you were always meant to do so.

*If a yummy koppepan is baked golden brown, will this
gentle planet feel comfortable?*

For your last read, you chose to recite a piece about your relationship with a person close to you, not at any point holding back despite them being in the room and letting the power of the words you so elegantly wrote hit everyone in that classroom all at once.

When you returned to your seat, I glanced over and saw tears in your

eyes and a smile on your face and theirs. It was a moment that felt like it came out of a movie, as if you were the narrative's protagonist, and I was nothing but just some passing person in the crowd, watching in the background at the beauty of your spectacle.

When tomorrow's gentle song comes, will you rest so you can sing it?

You first shined brightly in June, when I invited you to go on a hike with myself and some of the others from our poetry seminar. I had wanted so desperately to hold onto the connections I had made. Everyone walked around together laughing and sharing pleasantries, but it was your face that brightened the most throughout. You responded to everyone with such radiance and pep that I can only describe as so earnestly innocent. The energy you enveloped us with re-ignited my drive, allowing me to feel more confident in myself and present in the moment. I knew then I was truly happy to have met you, even though I knew eventually my flames would likely fade away.

Even if tears come the day after tomorrow...

I first saw your tears inside my car late in July on an evening overwhelmed by the sea-breeze. A text you received from a dear friend

was confrontational, and each statement they made about your character plunged a knife so deep into your heart that the look of grief on your face would never escape my eyes. As your tears continued to fall, the courage you had so desperately built up washed away alongside it, like it was nothing but a small dream left behind in that classroom.

...since the time of Sirius, I've known the smiles that will exist three hundred years from now.

Each time your tears fell, my own heart sank alongside it. In that moment, all I wanted to do was protect you and your smile that had already reached its way into my core without me realizing. I promised you that everything was going to be okay, no matter what, because none of those words spoken to you were true. I knew each word caused you to break, and that it would take you long to heal. My own flaw is my ability to only express myself through words – but even so, I wanted to add more embers to the flames inside me so I could continue to warm you before you swam. I wanted you to be safe and for your smile to return once again.

So much that it goes beyond even love and gratitude – may this planet grow clear and bright?

You first saw my tears in October, all the while navigating your baggage from July. I knew that your heart was pained, but I wanted to rely on you because I could feel my own luggage was starting to wear me down. I never show the depth of my loneliness and desire to feel needed, nor express my truest wish of leaving this cold place behind, sinking into the embrace of the motherly ocean that calls for me. But instead of the apathy and disdain I anticipated, you held my hand tight and laid my head gently on your lap. Your fingers soft, warm touch glided across my forehead, calming my heart into nothing more than a still peace. All my burdens vanished because of the safety you enveloped me in, and I wanted nothing more than to stay in that moment for as long as possible. I couldn't even feel the cinders of whatever flames I had left warming you – instead, I thought to myself that maybe this warmth is really what I've been searching for. I still wonder if this is what it feels like for others to warm themselves by my own fire.

In the new world of artificial intelligence, shall we go to meet Ninbursag?

You last cried in February, after I had noticed your apathy had grown even stronger than before. I realized that the burden of what

you've carried extended longer than July, and had likely never left you – now, more issues began to return it to the surface. As I tried to comfort you, promising you of your own agency and right to exist as yourself, I saw the look on your face that said that my words couldn't reach you – as if you could no longer believe anything but your burdens and uncertainty. I know that there are only small cinders left, and your heart is already charred, meaning our parting may be inevitable. But even so, with the leftover embers that have remained, I will exhaust them so I can keep warming you for as long as I'm able. I want everyone to see that same courageous and bright person I met all those months ago, whose radiance shines so brightly that it warms everyone who encounters them. And more than anything, I want to provide you with the same warmth and protection that allowed me to feel so safe, so peaceful, in that small brief moment...

*So much that it goes beyond even love and gratitude –
may this planet grow clear and bright?*

*In the new world of artificial intelligence, shall we go to
meet Ninbursag?*

