Dear Reader,

Welcome to Awaaz, Brown’s South Asian Journal of Arts. In this, our sixth issue, Awaaz has grown to represent literary and visual art from Brunonians past and present, as well as artists around the world. You will find glimpses of home and homes away from home, whether in other countries or others’ hearts.

We would like to send a heartfelt thank you to the many people who help Awaaz give voice to the South Asian experience. The journal would not be possible without the generous help of our sponsors, Brown Graphic Services, and the CIT help desk, and the encouragement and guidance of our graduated staffers. And of course, there would be no Awaaz without the insightful, heartful, and risk-taking work of our contributors.

We hope the works in these pages inspire and thrill you, make you think, and make you smile. If they leave you wanting more, you can find our past issues at our webpage: http://students.brown.edu/Awaaz/. If you would like to join our staff or contribute in any other way, we welcome your e-mail at awaaz.brown@gmail.com.

Sincerely and with gratitude,

The Awaaz Staff, 2010
Awaaz Staff 2009-2010

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Laughter in the Swat Valley

When you laugh,
A cool breeze blows.
Clouds cover the sun,
And the world feels mellow.

Your every word,
Is a river of sweet water.
The freshness of your voice,
Is the first incidence of morning light.

I pray, that this country respects you for who you are,
That you receive compassion at every step,
If we learn from your enlightened views,
It is our good fortune, and nothing else.

Never be afraid of speaking your heart,
Do not hesitate to stand up for truth.
Many a sympathizer, you will meet,
Countless, ready to stand by you.

For righteousness, we will be at your side,
Against injustice, we will raise our voice.
The history of the world will bear witness,
As we change the course of collective destiny.

May your every untainted aspiration come true,
May your laughter and joy know no end.
Forever will this remain our yearning,
A time will come for justice, for equality of all.

Translated from Urdu
Corina Chase
The Boatman
Kam Sripada
Musali Avada
He had always failed Geography. When his teacher asked for north he pointed south, his mind confused the oceans with seas, and once while delivering an oral presentation he gloriously pronounced an eighth continent. Still, despite his clumsy grasp of the subject, there was one geography he would never forget: that of the front and back. He was a creature of the front, the front left to be precise. He always had been, though he didn’t notice it until she took her place in the left back. And when she did, between himself and her –self, he saw the line he could never quite spot on any world map. It made sense to him in a way that years of bloody knuckles could never teach.

She always thought more than she spoke, dreamt more than she thought, and in the back left, boy did she dream. He couldn’t have been more than five feet from her, though all she ever saw was the back of his head. Tufts of clumsy black hair without a face to match. So she picked up her palette and painted him eyes, a nose and a mouth. She gave him the kind of sideways grin that all her 3rd grade comic book characters wore. Art had never been her strongest suit, but she hung her painting, stood in front, and saw a masterpiece.

She was a portrait of sunbeam brilliance. Head tilted left, chin jutted right, both drenched in a honey warm glow. His eyes never drifted back; he focused on what was in front of him, carefully framing her reflection in his rearview mirror. With each too long look, he felt himself drift over the dotted lines, jerking back only by glaring at what lay in front. Ahead lay the exit. He turned on his blinker and took it.

He was a smiley kind of guy, and boy did he beam down at her. She snuggled up and watched him closely because being smiled at happened to be her favorite feeling. She stared until the rain hit the glass and washed his smile away. His eyes and nose too. Next time, something more waterproof. She took her umbrella in hand and jumped off without looking back.
Francis stood in St. Peter’s, looking at the Pietà. The influences of Muybridge and Michelangelo had been intertwined in his paintings. Francis thought of the contours of the body he had known and loved. It looked remarkably like Michelangelo’s Jesus. He pictured himself in Mary’s place, his own fleshy crumpet-face morphing into Mary’s sallow one, cradling the body. The inside of St. Peter’s, unfortunately, was no place for quiet contemplation. Francis was aware of the clutch of tourists pressed against the barricade in front of the sculpture, jostling him to get a better look. He broke himself off and drifted away the long hall, looking up to admire rays of sunlight cutting across dome-shaped ceilings crusted with jewel-like paintings. Looking at the ceilings reminded him of why he was here and not at the Doria Pamphilj. He was afraid of the Innocent X. After seeing so many reproductions of the painting, after manipulating the original countless times in his own paintings to accommodate the Potemkin nanny’s scream, seeing Velasquez’s work would be too humiliating. He could go to the gallery and not see the Innocent. No, no. Francis sighed, and climbed to the top of St. Peters. The viewing station, too was packed with tourists (why? was it the weekend?), sticking their arms out of the protective railing wrapping around it, small, chattering children chasing one another round the tight circle, everyone talking, taking pictures, enjoying the rough breeze at the topmost point of the basilica. Out of breath from the stairs to the top, Francis sat down on a small shelf sticking out of the cupola in the center of the viewing station. He always felt lonely in large groups, but today, this was a nice kind of loneliness. They were all strangers. He felt greater camaraderie with strangers in groups than with his friends in groups; he liked his friends not in general, but in particular. Francis’s thoughts returned again to George, and a similar pilgrimage they had made to the top of St. Peter’s—but no, there more unhappiness lay. Francis looked down at St. Peter’s square, enclosed between two claws like a crab. He was unhappy, but he was in Rome.
Sitangika Srivastava
Towards Magh Mela
AASHMAN GOGHARI
UNTITLED
Toto is an aspiring hippie. He lives by a no-shirt-no-shoes policy — on the beach when possible, on the sofa otherwise. When feeling motivated, he lays out his mat on the sand and opens up his overstretched plastic grocery bags to reveal a tangled mess of necklaces, earrings, bracelets, and pipes. To match his chosen trade, he matted his beautiful hair into dreadlocks. Yet now his hair is shaggy, with one remaining stub of a dread peeking out from the bottom.

Toto is an aspiring surfer. Friday afternoon will find him in his green cargo pants, surfboard in hand, trying get out of the city and to the sea by any means possible; even hitchhiking is fair game. When he is not surfing, he is religiously following elsurfero.com, a site that reloads itself constantly to reflect any and all changes in wind direction and wave sizes. His board hangs on a wall in his room.

Toto is an aspiring musician. He plays three songs in a continuous cycle, generally beginning this practice at around one a.m. when the rest of the house has gone to bed. His mistakes have become so familiar that it surprises me to hear him fix one, like an integral part of the song is missing and it is no longer his. I buy him guitar lessons for his birthday, right before I leave Buenos Aires. I will not have to hear him improve; I will be content with the memories of his mistakes.

Toto is an aspiring painter. His workspace is the balcony between my room and his sister Cata’s room. We watch him as he stands in a painter’s lunge, his canvas resting in the crook of his elbow against his forearm, his head tilted to the side, tongue slightly out as he makes grand sweeping gestures. He is aware that we are watching him and plays The Brooding Artist well.

I sneak out onto the balcony after he has finished for the night and examine his painting. I know nothing about art except that it is not good. As a goodbye present I buy him a notebook. He tells me over Skype that some unidentified “they” stole it from him on his way to Spain and he gave up painting. But he spent the whole flight drawing.

Toto is a family boy. He loves to lie on his parents’ bed between the two of them, just barely fitting. He leaves his 20 years of age at the doorway to their room; they don’t fit on the bed. Friday nights will find him there, watching his favorite soap opera Valientes before his night begins. Sometimes, they sing along to the lyrics:

“¡Qué ganas de volver!”
How I would love to return!
On November 26, 2008, India came to a standstill. I vividly remember the day. I was visiting my sister in New York City, excited to celebrate my very first Thanksgiving in America, when the news of the terrorist attacks in Mumbai broke through. Over the next few days, I sat glued to CNN, watching my home being ravaged by mindless terror. I must confess to feeling helpless, almost violated, as if someone had defiled the shrine of an old unhurried and safe Mumbai.

Images of each terror site ignited a flash of memories. Each grenade blew apart a certain way of life, destroying the innocence of just another era. Leopold Café, where I spent hours with my friends, drinking frothy coffee shakes over plates of hot, spicy Reshmi Kebabs; Colaba Market, where in the congested lanes you find the best street-food in the city like the paani-puri, ragda patties and wada pav; Chatrapati Shivaji terminus, the most crowded place in the ‘maximum city,’ which left you awe-struck with its sheer size; and of course, the Taj, where I spent the night of my high-school graduation, talking about life and the future, with two of my closest friends. We sat in the Shamiana restaurant, overlooking the harbour, with the ‘page three’ regulars cackling over the latest gossip and investment bankers discussing deals over a glass of gin. We were impressed, even taken aback by the opulence of the hotel, and I had the most expensive cup of coffee in my life that night. But as the sight of Shami-ana engulfed in flames was shown on repeat on television, it seemed as though in the space of 60 bloody hours, an entire world of memories had been shaken, perhaps irrevocably.

Sadly, Mumbai is not a novice to these attacks. Serial blasts in 1993, 2002 and the train blasts in 2006 left us all dazed and fearful. However, this attack was different. It unfolded in slow motion, holding the entire world media as witness, making for maximum psychological impact. The terrorists who carried out the attacks were well-supplied, armed to the teeth and extremely well motivated. However, this crisis revealed the strength, audacity, and tenacity of Mumbai’s heart. In 2001, a day after 9/11, journalist Nancy Gibbs writing the cover story for Time magazine made a significant observation, “On a normal day we value heroism because it is uncommon. On Sept. 11, we valued heroism because it was everywhere.” Almost two years ago, on 26/11, that heroism was a contagious blessing across Mumbai. It had infected people everywhere the AK47-carrying killers went.
Mumbai!
by Vasundhara Prasad

The entire ordeal claimed almost 200 innocent lives. Among those who were killed in the attacks, I did not know anyone personally, but I still feel as if there were so many among them who were close to me. One of my good friends and classmates from high school lost her aunt and uncle in the ordeal at the Trident hotel in South Mumbai. Her three year-old cousin could not even understand the gravity of what had transpired. The nation was under attack, and the little boys’ parents had now become the latest victims of faceless terror. Heart wrenching stories like these put one thing beyond doubt: India was at war and it had deadly enemies in its midst. We needed to win this war, and we, including the politicians, security forces and ordinary people were in this together. It was time to move beyond pointing fingers at one another, or basing one’s stand on terrorism on the particular religious affiliation of terrorists, because terrorists have no religion. I refuse to believe that any religion in the world can dare to hurt another man in the name of God. Hence, political bickering on this issue was only divisive; what India needed was unity.

The city did not waste a single day pondering over its terrible fate. Mumbaikars went ahead, picking up the pieces and rebuilding a sense of normalcy with every passing day, all the more resolute to never let those heartless terrorists have their way again.

This 26/11, I was not in Mumbai. But Mumbai was in my mind and my heart. The city has taught me the real meaning of resilience and the importance of self-belief. With utmost pride and teary eyes, I salute thee, Mumbai!

Jai Hind!
To the surgeon: Warning.

When you cut me open, you may find my heart in pieces. Please do not mend. Unlike the many medical conditions your far too precise hands make right, this is not a problem for you to fix. This is not a broken organ. Listen. Put your ear to my open chest cavity and listen because your heavy anxious breaths aren’t the only white noise in this room. Please do not call the cardiac surgeon; I fear his needle and thread. He will sew me together with the same thorough hands that finger the cunt of his ten years too young wife. Clean stitches are such a bloody awful mess.

I am not the dead corpse you practice on; not all cuts require your suturing. Some things are meant to be fractured, to be kept in separate pockets of my raincoat in that cavity under my left breast. Patch me up and I’ll never again know that slice of heart with the cherry red scar. The moon-shaped flesh won’t ever rub against my rib cage and send tingles down my spine. Fix me, as you fixers will likely do, and I’ll wake up with the dejected look of a birthday cake whose candles have been melted into one waxy chunk.

Please heed my warning. The dentist did not. He drilled my teeth to fill the holes and now I have no cavities.
KAM SRIPADA
PANJRM LO PAKSHI
Francis got into the lift at the Ritz, catching a glimpse of himself in its burnished copper walls. His hair was coming out of its slick, his drainpipe tie was slightly askew, but his suit was perfectly respectable, thank you very much. A small, exquisitely dressed old man got into the elevator after him and turned to face the front. He was clutching a bulging brown bag in one age-spotted fist, the top folded over twice. The footman gave the lobby a quick once-over and closed the lift’s door. Francis felt the familiar jump in his tummy as the lift hitched itself off the ground and began to rise. Its interior was pleasantly dim, the buttons glowing pale orange rings beside the footman’s arm. As they passed the third, fourth, and fifth floors, Francis looked at his two companions, considered the top of the old man’s collar. Fine white hairs were sticking out over it. The old man slowly lifted his left hand to press down the hairs at the back of his neck. He shifted the other hand as he did so, and the straining paper bag in it tore. Loose peas shattered over the floor of the lift; new potatoes fell thump, thump on top of them. The footman jumped back, startled; Francis retreated to the back of the lift; the old man moved to one side to enjoy the fun, looking down at the mess. “Oh, my goodness,” he said, not as an apology. He bent his old knees in a downwards motion, as if he was going to pick the peas up himself. The footman, young, eager, immediately threw himself on one knee and applied himself to the peas, scooping up a handful in one hand and a spud in the other. The bag was useless, so the old man offered his pockets; the footman obligingly poked the peas and potatoes into them. This kept them occupied until the twenty-first floor, where the man got off, the pockets of his trousers and coat fat with vegetables. Francis imagined he had a little oil stove in his room, where he was going to cook the potatoes and peas. That, he supposed, was luxury for a rich man.
As Paul opened the glass door, a bell tinkled, and the aroma of frying onions and spices filled his nostrils. He convulsed slightly with a half-sneeze before taking a few steps in. Paul had never been to the Ruby Peacock before, but he heard it was a decent restaurant. When he asked them where he should take his date, the men at his new paper recommended it unanimously.

“Definitely the Ruby Peacock.”

“Yeah, Priya loves Indian.”

So here he was, Wednesday night, eight o’clock. Paul was ravenous as he looked about the place. To his side, a deli counter hummed with light. Behind it a door—to the kitchen, he imagined—swung shut. “It’s nothing too fancy,” one colleague had told him. “Real homey spot.” And so it was. Beyond the counter, the walls were covered in wallpaper, white with bluebells, and eyelet curtains hung at the windows. He sensed a stab at normalcy, fifteen years out of date, as well as an effort at practicality. Vinyl tablecloths covered wooden tables surrounded by wooden chairs. Paper napkins lay neatly folded at each place setting.

There were a few diners, but no sign of Priya. She said she’d be late. Henry, one of the fellows at the paper, who actually introduced the two, had known her quite well once. “I bet you she’ll be twenty minutes late. Minimum. Don’t rush yourself getting there, mate.” But he did, of course. Who was late to a first date? So he’d thought. He stood awkwardly by as a family passed to leave.

As the bell jingled again, he said to the man behind the counter, “I’m just waiting for someone. She’ll be here soon.” The man raised a hand obligingly and shook his head once. He was a small fellow, but when he shook his head, his ample belly jiggled with it. A small television beside him flashed images of women with bare bellies and hips clad in lurid shades of pink. They waved their transparent stoles in the wind as they swayed their hips on the hilltop. The volume was set so low Paul could just barely make out a lively tune. But the man behind the counter was not watching the television. He fingered his bushy salt-and-pepper mustache as he looked down his nose at Paul. Paul looked down at his phone.

Priya Venkatesh seemed a nice girl. Painted her face a bit much, true, but simple other than
that, and sweet. From what Henry said, she swore like a pirate, and drank like one too. But Paul knew Henry stretched half his stories. It was why he was such a sensational writer. Priya worked in the labs at the Royal Hospital, very serious stuff, and she was one of Henry’s contacts during the big DNA testing scandal a couple years back. Henry had made quite a story of that too. But Paul would make up his mind for himself. As the latest opinions columnist at the *Ealing Gazette*, he was paid to do as much; Henry was originally hired for the society pages.

“The girl I’m meeting,” Paul said finally. “I think she comes here often, d’you know her? Her name’s Priya. She’s, ah... she’s Asian too.” The man sat still for a few moments.

“What’s her last name?”

“Er... Venkatesh?” The man’s eyes widened. “You know her, then?”

The man coughed. “No, I only—I only know a Priya Venkatram.”

“Ah.”

“Mm, no Priya Venkatesh.” Paul glanced at his phone again as his stomach gave an audible rumble. It was twenty past. If Priya Venkatesh wasn’t here in ten minutes, he ought to call her. He looked up again to see Potbelly still watching him. The fellow leaned onto the counter, sideways on his stool to accommodate his gut. With his lower arm on the surface like a barrier between them, he beckoned Paul closer.

“Watch out, young man.” He spoke quietly, conspiratorially. “Indian women, they are crooked. Like that *jalebi*.”

“Sorry?”

The man pointed his chin to a paper plate on the counter, where semi-translucent tangles of orange glistened dully. The plate underneath was spotted with grease. A note card suspended by a metal wire read:

TRY IT! FREE SAMPLE!

(JALEBI 50p/pc)

Paul raised an eyebrow at the man before reaching a hand out to the plate.

“You can try it, but you won’t like it,” the man sang, turning to the television. Paul broke off a piece of an orange knot anyway and stuck it in his mouth. The sweetness seemed mild for a moment, but then his tongue seized up.

Paul chewed bitterly, noting the damp crunch of bad chips, before swallowing the sickly sweet mess down. A sticky glaze remained on his fingers.

“The new fellow only made it,” Potbelly said, before adding, “Her idea, to put ‘FREE SAMPLE.’” He pointed a thumb over his shoulder at a young woman sitting alone in the corner. Her thin face was a sunburned red, and she was dressed as though she’d just come from a hike. She read intently from a book held open on the table, a pen clenched between her teeth.

“American,” the old man pronounced. “You know how I can tell? Her shirt. ‘Life is good,’ it says. Land of the free, ah? Here, you take my card in case you like anything else here. I promise you, you will like something,” he said, and swung his head like a pendulum.

“Mm, thanks.” Paul brushed his hands on his pants absently before reaching out to take the
card. The old man turned back to the television, and Paul to where the hiker sat in the corner. Over her head hung a poster of a goddess suspended in a sea of blue, purple, red, and yellow, with her many hands up, one spinning a toothed disc, one gripping a trident, and one raised in blessing. Her round face shone smiling and cherubic, from her perch atop a tiger’s back.

Paul looked down again, only to see that he’d left a yellowish residue on the black corduroy of his pants.

“Fantastic...” he groaned softly, as the bell tinkled again.

“Paul!” It was Priya. She looked well kept as usual, but her rouged face was not smiling. “I’m so sorry, were you waiting long?” The time was eight forty. “Got stuck in traffic.”

“Not a problem.” With a sound like the drop of a guillotine, they looked up. The door to the kitchen was swinging. Potbelly had disappeared. Paul looked back at Priya, who raised a brow. “Let’s grab a table,” Paul said. “Hey, you ever tried that orange stuff before?”

“Yeah, love it. My dad makes it all the time. At home.”

“Really. Bad traffic, though?”

“Yeah, I tell you....”

Paul glanced down at the business card before slipping it in his pocket and ushering Priya forward.

The Ruby Peacock
Fine Indian Cuisine

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