



Sampad

south asian arts & heritage



My City, My Home

আমার শহর, আমার বাড়ি

Connecting cities – Connecting women – Connecting words

Unheard voices of women writers

My City, My Home

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My City, My Home

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Sampad

Sampad is a dynamic development agency connecting people and communities with British Asian arts and heritage. Based in Birmingham, it plays a significant role regionally, nationally and beyond in breaking down barriers, raising critical issues, amplifying unheard voices and celebrating creative talent.

Within the *Sakshi* (meaning witness) strand of programming Sampad aims to establish dialogue, develop and nurture skills and build up trust with women in South Asian communities. Believing in the arts as an influential vehicle for provoking and catalysing change, Sampad has a firm track record of using the arts to address meaningful and pertinent issues in today's world; *Anon* (with WNO - 2014), an opera echoing the universal voice of exploited women; No Bond so Strong (for Bedlam festival) a life affirming show about motherhood among others.

Continuing over 30 years Sampad looks forward to working within a strong and thriving cultural sector with south Asian arts and Heritage at its most exciting, inclusive, progressive and innovative best.

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Transforming Narratives

Transforming Narratives is a ground-breaking project that supports creative and cultural practitioners and organisations in Birmingham to engage in exchange with artists and organisations in cities in Pakistan and Bangladesh.

We offer a range of platforms for new artistic voices, exchanging narratives around contemporary lived experience across the three countries.

Transforming Narratives aims to build meaningful and enduring relationships between the cultural sectors in Birmingham, Pakistan and Bangladesh, for now and the future.

It is managed by Culture Central, supported by Arts Council England and delivered in collaboration with The British Council.

www.transformingnarratives.com

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Introduction

The theme *My City My Home* has strong personal resonance with me in the same way that it connected with many women who responded to our call for this writing competition.

The conundrum for many women to meet expectations from others and follow their fate to destinations known and unknown, to create a nest with love and care inspired the idea for this project. We posed these provocations - *Where is home? Where do I belong? What are my memories? What are my dreams? Is this city mine? Do I love my city? Does the city embrace me? Have I made a home? Who is telling my story? What memories can we make for the future? Who are the faces of our cities? Where is the soul of the cities? In its people or the buildings? Who is in the dialogue? What do we want to celebrate?*

It was greatly rewarding to receive writings from the many unheard voices of women who shared their emotions, ambitions, joys, dreams, disappointments, resentment and pain. Their words resonate with each other towards a place of strength, identity and belonging. We connect in their personal journeys and treasured memories and it is a delight to be able to share them with you. As the world is reeling under the impact of a pandemic *My City My Home* illuminates the possibilities of uniting women across nations to express poignantly that they do have the power of words that can make a difference in our societies, now and in the future.

I am grateful to everyone who became a part of this project and helped us through challenges of producing a multilingual writing competition.

We would not have been able to achieve this without our amazing team of Project Associates in Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Birmingham. Together we were able to reach, enthuse and support communities and individuals to write in their own choice of language with confidence. It was extremely important to recognise and value the diversity of languages as a critical part of our culture and identity. Accordingly, Bangla, Urdu, and English sit side by side in this publication.

Happy reading !!

Piali Ray, OBE

Director

Sampad South Asian Arts & Heritage

Adjudicators

Rukhsana Ahmad

<https://www.rukhsanaahmad.com/>

Agent: Diana Tyler at MBA Literary Agents

Rukhsana has written and adapted plays for the stage and BBC Radio, achieving distinction in both. Credits include: *Wide Sargasso Sea*, finalist, The Writers Guild Award for Best Radio Adaptation and *Song for a Sanctuary* Finalist, CRE award for best original radio drama. Adaptations for the BBC include: Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Nadeem Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers* and Molly Keane's *The Far Pavilions*. Her stage play, *River on Fire*, was a finalist for Susan Smith Blackburn Award. Other plays: *Mistaken: Annie Besant in India*, *Letting Go*, and *Homing Birds*. Fiction: *The Hope Chest* and *The Gatekeeper's Wife and other stories*. Translations: *We Sinful Women*, a collection of contemporary Urdu feminist poetry and *The One Who Did Not Ask*, by Altaf Fatima.

Rukhsana is a co-founder of Kali Theatre Company and SADAA. She has served on various panels at the Arts Council of England and The Writers' Guild of Great Britain. She was the Royal Literary Fund Fellow at Queen Mary's, University of London and is currently committed to the RLF's Social Sector projects: *Tall Stories* for Room to Heal and Reading Round.

Trisha Bhattacharjee

Trisha is a Bangladeshi background theatre artiste, musician and singer, worked in a non-profit theatre group, named 'theatrEX Bangladesh'. She is living in the UK since 2017 and exploring her artistic skills with various UK-Bangladeshi arts and community organisations in London, Birmingham, Manchester and Glasgow.

Trisha is an experienced school teacher and music performer in theatre. Her performance credits including acting of over 5 plays, music and percussion of over 10 plays, conducting workshops with school children, theatre groups and arts & community organisations of over 25 in Bangladesh, India, England, Scotland and the US.

Sudip Chakroborthy

Sudhip teaches at the Department of Theatre and Performance at the University of Dhaka and currently studying PhD at Goldsmiths, University of London. He has published in the many peer reviewed journals and co-authored a research book on the 'Traditional Games of Bangladesh' that was published by UNESCO and Tencent. His papers presented in the seminars titled 'Women in the traditional theatre of Bangladesh' at the National Academy of Fine and Performing Arts Bangladesh, 'Memory and identity' at Queen Mary, University of London, at the TaPRA conference at University of Oxford, and at the 'Iran International University Theatre Festival' at Tehran University. He is actively involved with numerous national and international theatre creations, workshops, seminars and festivals including India, Bhutan, South Korea, Iran, France, England, Scotland,

Wales, US and Canada. Sudip's directorial plays have been showcased at 'Tin Forest' during Glasgow Commonwealth Games 2014, at 8th Theatre Olympics in Delhi, and so on. Sudip has contributed to the workshops and masterclasses for the UK Bangladeshi diaspora community theatre-makers in co-operation with the London Borough of Tower Hamlets since 2013.

Leesa Gazi

Leesa is a British Bangladeshi writer, actor, award-winning filmmaker, and Joint Artistic Director of an arts company Komola Collective. She was the script-writer and performer of Culturepot Global's 'Six Seasons' and 'A Golden Age' at the Southbank Centre. Gazi collaborated as the Cultural co-ordinator and a voice artist for Akram Khan's 'Desh' and 'Chotto Desh'.

Gazi is the concept developer, co-writer and performer of the theatre production *Birangona: Women of War* with her company, which she later developed into the documentary film *Rising Silence*. The film directed by Gazi sheds light on the lives of rape survivors in the aftermath of the Liberation War of Bangladesh which has won multiple international awards.

The English translation of her Bengali novel, 'Rouroob' entitled 'Hellfire' tr. Shabnam Nadiya was published in September 2020 by Westland Books. She is currently working on her feature film 'Barir Naam Shahana' - 'A House named Shahana'.

Justina Hart

www.justinahart.com @justinahart_

Justina is an award-winning poet, multi-disciplinary writer and performer, whose poems have been shortlisted for the Poetry School's national pamphlet competition and widely anthologized. Most recently, she won first prize in the long poem category of the Second Light poetry competition (2020) and was shortlisted in the Wolves Lit Fest poetry competition (2021). She has written creative pieces for institutions as diverse as the Woodland Trust, the V&A Museum of Childhood and the number 73 Routemaster bus.

In 2018 Justina received a British Council/Arts Council Artists' International Development Fund Award to take her poem sequence about past climate change, *Doggerland Rising* (commissioned by Durham University, Arts Council England, and arts/ecological charity TippingPoint) to new audiences, writers and literature professionals in Australia, where she was also invited to read alongside the New Zealand poet laureate. In the UK Justina has performed her work at the Hay Festival, Durham Book Festival, Birmingham Literature Festival and Free Word in London.

After a career as an arts, education and travel journalist and commissioning editor for national newspapers and international online organisations, she now runs her own creative writing programmes and reviews for poetry magazines. From 2016 to 2020 she co-organised showcase events for emerging regional writers - fellow alumni of Writing West Midlands' career development scheme, Room 204 - as part of the Birmingham Literature Festival. Justina grew up in Birmingham and lives and writes aboard a former working Black Country narrowboat dating from the early 1800s, which is moored outside Lichfield, Staffordshire.

Irna Qureshi

Irna is an ethnographer and writer, often using oral testimony to build narratives linking personal stories to broader social themes. This includes documenting the development of Britain's South Asian diaspora heritage in a series of exhibitions and books including *The Grand Trunk Road: From Delhi to the Khyber Pass*. She has also written about the history of Indian cinema and curated several exhibitions on this theme for the British Film Institute and National Media Museum. Her personal essays have appeared in *Critical Muslim*, *South Asian Popular Culture*, *The Guardian's Northerner Blog*, *Huffington Post* and *New Statesman*. Irna's writing on the notions of love and marriage has included documenting her own experience, as well as gathering oral testimony from 3 generations of British Muslim women, which were retold in the form of a radio play and as a theatre show which she performed. With her upcoming work, Irna steps back in time to the early 1900s to retrace migration journeys from her ancestral village in Pakistan to cities in Britain.

Project Associates

Thanks to our Associate Partners for promoting the competition, organising writing workshops and reaching out to people through their organisations and contacts

Lubna Marium, Artistic Director, Shadhona

www.shadhona.org

Jyoti Sinha, General Secretary of Manipuri Theatre & Cultural officer,

Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy

Sharmila Banerjee, Director, Nritya Nandan, Dancer and Choreographer, Bangladesh

Shazia Omar www.shaziaomar.com [YouTube.com/ShazzyOm](https://www.youtube.com/ShazzyOm)

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Workshop leaders

Abul Momen, journalist, writer and litterateur

Nari Kalam Joddha, women's writing group

Selina Hossain, Bangladeshi Novelist

Maleka Begum, renowned women activist, writer and professor of Sociology and Gender Studies

Prof. Firdous Azim, Women's Activist, writer and Professor of English Department at BRAC University

Qurratul Ain Tahmina, writer and Senior Journalist of The Daily Prothom Alo

Samina Nazir, eminent writer and playwright

Kulsoom Aftab, writer and playwright

Irfan Ahmed Urfi, writer and poet

Wersha Bharadwa, journalist and writer

Abda Khan, writer

Overall winning entries

English language:

Ilika Chakravarty Mandal, Birmingham, UK
Famous Yellow Sweater

Bangla Language:

Shahana Yasmin / সাহানা ইয়াসমিন, Dhaka, Bangladesh
এক 'কিছুই করে না' মেয়ের গল্প

Urdu language:

Nadia Umer نادیہ عمر Lahore, Pakistan
Dil Kay Shehar دل کے شہر

Disclaimer

We have tried our best to represent the three languages appropriately but the process of transferring writings from online entries to the publication has been challenging. Please bear with us and read with kindness if we have made any errors.

The ownership of each writing is with the author.

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English Entries

Sarah Fazli, Karachi, Pakistan.

Pakistan's global happiness indices improved this year, when compared to previous years. This year has been difficult for Karachi – where all the odds are against us. Being based in Karachi, I wrote (from my heart) what it means to be a true Karachiite – despite the negativity we face on a very regular basis.

Conflicted Happiness

As a Karachiite, I know most of our celebrations tend to be loud and marked by firecrackers and occasional fireworks displays. Retail outlets commemorate events with nationwide sales, showing consumerism at its best. Rallies, parades, and ‘juloos’ are seen during Rabi-ul-Awwal and Muharram. 14th August is a national holiday, patriotic embellishments become all the rage and the media airs special transmissions. Sindh Cultural Day is a newer event celebrated every December since 2009. People adorn traditional Topi and Ajrak and play songs, dance, and attend celebratory events. A friend of mine, based in Australia, recently mentioned that Eid is best in Karachi; having left several years ago, she claimed that nothing compares to ‘Karachi Eid’. This past Eid-ul-Azha, a part of me wanted to re-live the memories she mentioned: henna application on my hands, snacks from Flamingo, and obligatory prayers on Eid morning.

Each celebration boasts unparalleled celebration: where a part of me wonders if New York celebrates the 4th of July with such fervour or if New Year in London can compare to celebrations in Karachi? 2020 was a rainy year and looking at post monsoonal footage on Instagram combined with COVID-19 related ‘issues’, another part of me wondered just how much more of Karachi’s resilience would be tested.

As I write, I know COVID-19 restrictions were eased just before August 14th, enabling life to slowly start resuming normalcy. That is when headlines read that Karachiites spent PKR 25 billion on Independence Day alone. And in a sense, that is when I realised: Karachi hasn't given up on its happy, conflicted freedom. It wants more.

Question: Are there just more people in Karachi? Is our celebration spirit a little stronger than that of other cities? Or are such celebratory displays somehow aligned with our everyday *modus operandi*?

I'm often described as the cat – which curiosity somehow missed. Living in Karachi, 2020 so far has made me question how Pakistanis are ranked as South Asia's happiest people. It seems off – because happiness is not electricity load-shedding, roadside mugging, and random lawlessness. Happiness is not the rains that kill basic infrastructure. Happiness doesn't expose basic living insecurity: a reality for many of our masses. And happiness does not witness these things.

And this is where COVID-19 held my hand, taking me back to basics. In all honesty, I am sure COVID-19 reminded a lot of us about the things that truly matter.

Following social distancing protocols, Zoom calls allow us to connect with family and elongated phone calls replaced texts. We still run into and socialize with neighbours – whilst ensuring that all requisite physical distancing measures are maintained.

Ironically, a constant pleasantry includes, 'how are you doing?' It was this one pleasantry that made me realise that Karachiites are truly a happy people if we just ask and allow them to let their guards down and engage in conversation. Interestingly, everyone

had a story. One family experienced their first true Eid-ul-Azha this year when they bought their own sacrificial goats after years of struggling financially. Somebody's sacrificial animals perished in the rains. Another family had lost somebody to illness. But their lives went on. Each shared jokes and stories about kids and jobs and asked how I had been keeping. These are happy people, I realised: affirming that people are not all bad – if we give them a chance.

This made me wonder how many Karachiites find peace despite the odds, who learn to trust despite injustice, and who maintain faith despite insecurity. They say you can find God if you try. Likewise, I believe that if I tried, I would be able to find those Karachiites who helped pushed Pakistan's global happiness Indices to the top of our region.

Sana Hafeez Taimur, Islamabad, Pakistan

Scientific studies have shown that it is not only genetics but also our environment that moulds us into who we are. Places we belong to not only contribute towards our personality building but also inspire us to achieve bigger and better things. Being born to a scientist and an educationist, critical thinking came naturally to me and it only helped that, growing up, I connected with two cities that I called my hometowns.

Contradiction nurtures the need to think and contemplate. My two divergent experiences, of an aged historic city in contrast to a new-born modern city, helped me to become a keen observer capable of understanding perspectives from both sides of a story. This polarity of environment has seeped into my subconscious and resonates well with this eternal conflict of thought process. This, in turn, generates my perfectionist trait, which is an important asset in my professional field as an architect.

Witnessing the transformation of a shrub forest into vibrant urban environment was spectacle enough for anyone to be inspired to create. The inspiration, therefore, first translated into painting and eventually into a longing to be part of a process that can create human habitats that evolve to become complex yet beautiful urban systems. This would have not been possible without my connection to these two very different cities.

Evolution of cities is a natural process that cities, planned or unplanned, experience. These changes often take away the nostalgic connection from the previous generations who experience a sense of loss even if the changes are positive and desirable. This overwhelming sentiment is felt because people feel detached from the key mental benchmarks that those places represent in their mental habitat. One way to restore those connections is to document places exactly as one remembers them.

For me, this written piece is about preserving those points of reference that I can revisit to regain myself whenever life throws a

curveball and tries to throw me off balance. Capturing my places in a memory book of words acts as my anchor that keeps me from drifting away from the path that I set out to travel as an inspired young woman with big dreams and hopes. It also helps me to stay true to myself, fighting the societal pressures that forever are at play to mould women to its will.

A Tale of Two Cities

Chua-chu chua-chu calls the old washerman, stumping clothes on a rock at the riverbank, as the first light touches the misty waters, and a grey haze covers the whole scene. Like a water painting, a stroke of orange light starts to bleed into the horizon and a hint of the railway bridge starts to appear in the background. The majestic crisscross iron bars of the bridge seem to hang delicately in the quiet misty morning air. Soon the morning train comes whistling loudly through the bridge and wakes up the sleeping city. The dozing sun suddenly remembers to shine more brilliantly, and as the rays fall on the *Darya Walli Masjid*, its mirror-laden facade sparkles with brilliance as if it's competing with the sun. The atmosphere is flooded with light and sounds of all kinds, breaking the spell of weightlessness. Now the bridge sits heavily on its piers as many cycles and tangas start to crowd it. The silent flow of river is now filled with bathers splashing noisily with their *shalwars* ballooning in the water. These are the scenes that the historic riverside city of Jhelum has woken up to for decade upon decade.

Behind the famed mosque starts a row of houses lining the road that runs along the bank. From here, many smaller streets pierce into the city maze. The maze that is topped with towering pigeon cages, uniquely sculpted water tanks, and the countless minarets competing to reach further into the sky. For every

street must house mosques, each associated with the respective school of thought, determined to proclaim their supremacy over the other.

Fridays in the city become very interesting as clerks from these mosques transform *Jumma* sermons into actual debates right over the loudspeakers. These topics, often quite trivial, become the talk of the town for the coming week, uniting the community in its own divisive way. The general population, having been exposed to critical thinking all their lives, are exceptionally aware and invested in political and religious identities. This subsequently results in the patronage of even more mosques and, as a result, the city has come to be rightly known as city of mosques.

Amid this web of narrow streets, bazars, and mosques, the main Civil Lines Road cuts through like a sharp knife. Asserting its colonial past, the road boorishly jeopardizes the natural scheme of the rustic city fabric. All along this central nave are buildings nestled in the past of particular eras, narrating the stories of the century they belonged to. In the middle of this panorama lays a beautiful Sikh period mansion. Most of my childhood holidays were spent here. It was not less than an enchanting fairyland castle to my young eyes. The colourful tiled floor, the beautifully crafted wooden ceilings, the exposed electric wiring with vintage switchboards, the dimly lit rooms with multicoloured defused light streaming in through dusty stained-glass windows, the mysterious mezzanine floor with stores and rooms at different levels and, above all, the old grape vine in the courtyard. It had crept everywhere, even at some points broken indoors through the ventilators.

The Jhelum city, like that tangled branches of my grandmother's grape vine, has a character of a labyrinth. Here, at every turn, a surprise is hidden. The city is like a living organism, with moods

and feelings. It's happy on Eid day when its streets and bazaars become carnivals. And it's sad when someone from its close-knit community dies as the same street becomes a place for funeral prayers. I have seen it angry the day two religious groups fought, and I have seen it enthusiastic during the election days.

Jhelum was a wonderland for me, something peculiar because, you see, this story is not only about my ancestral town, but also about my hometown Islamabad. In the wake of neo modernism, the contrasting clean straight design, and natural beauty, Islamabad had created a strange balance of sterility and spontaneity, much like an elegant dance between nature's rebellion and human interventive tameness.

The wilderness surrounding and even infiltrating the city was an experience very foreign to inhabitants of the traditional city dwellers of the country. To what was considered its charm by the nature-loving populous of the city appeared wasteland-ish to the outsiders, hence the city was nicknamed 'city of the dead' by the ones who misunderstood its allure. What added to this stance was the fact that any social scene or cultural identity that would develop, still needed at least a decade or two before becoming apparent. Regardless that the earliest settlers of Islamabad were older retired folks finding solace in the serenity of a picturesque environment, the fact was that the city's actual first generation was still in school. The majority of early inhabitants also belonged to middle- and upper-middle class families, associated with government services. These, unlike the people enjoying their retirement, were much younger and still building up their families. Therefore, the real-life of the city was budding in the playgrounds and streets during kids' free hours.

As the eighties were turning into the nineties, I was growing up in the newly developed capital city of Islamabad. A city that

had an appearance of a chessboard compared to the eccentric nature of historic Jhelum. What I didn't realise at the time was that it was not Jhelum that was distinctive, but it was I who was actually experiencing something exceptional in Islamabad. Roving around the quiet capital as I imagined high risen buildings on the shrubby plots along the broad avenues, I could hardly appreciate the unique privilege I had to witness the birth of my own city. As I grew and understood its dramatic transformation from a planned network of plots and roads into full-scale city, it captured my imagination and inspired me to become an architect. An architect who can create something as magnificent as a building, a building that makes nowhere a place.

Farina Kokab, Birmingham, UK

I have always been interested in reflecting on our experiences of living in a country whilst maintaining such deep connections to our background and our roots. I was inspired by the title 'My City My Home' because I always felt I had multiple options for what I considered to be my city or my home, and how I perceived them. For example, my city and home could be very Pakistani, or they could be very English – it depends on what time of the day or even which year it was! It's such a unique experience growing up like this and our reflections are rich and provide, in a sense, a study of what it means to be alive amidst all this chaos – physical, emotional, spiritual, and such.

Twin Cities, Twin Auras, Twin Vibes

I can trace my roots back to the sister cities of Rawalpindi and Islamabad, much like I can trace the lines on the palm of my hand,

These lines have been here since my beginning, and some would argue even before that,

But I didn't grow up in those sister cities, I grew up in Birmingham. Birmingham may not have had a twin city like *Pindi* and Islamabad, but for me, it has a sister spirit,

Two sides of the same coin,

The British and the Pakistani.

I grew up immersed in culture,
But from two very different perspectives –
The British, at school, in museums, on the roads and city centres
with fish and chips, teatime, playing hopscotch and listening to
B*Witched as we decorated our first Christmas tree,
The Pakistani, at home, in the local shops around Alum Rock and
Washwood Heath, the smell of samosas on Eid day, sparkling and
bejewelled outfits glistening in the Autumn sun outside clothing
stores and renting videos of Punjabi stage shows.
I never felt alone in my city, because if one sister wasn't speaking
to me, I knew the other was,
If I wasn't watching Big Brother, then I knew there was a *saas-
bahu* drama waiting for me on StarPlus,
If I wasn't picking my new summer dresses, I knew I was picking
a *lehenga* for my cousin's wedding in Pakistan.
I have lived two very different lives simultaneously, and I've
tried to weave their narrative into one,
But that felt like forcing two spirits to conjoin themselves, and I
respect each one of them for who they are.
I continue to discover that these distinctions I felt reside within
me, live harmoniously alongside each other,
That these two spaces that occupied my city occupied my mind
as well
But they no longer fight for a single territory,
They have grown out of their borders,
I no longer contain them or resign them to certain aspects of my
life,

I no longer search or yearn for labels to define my experiences.
I catch myself infusing *Masala chai* into my tiramisu,
I breathe in the intoxicating fumes of the *oud* incense, but let
out a sigh of relief weighted loftily by the bergamot scents in
the country gardens and discover they're now fused together in
high-end scents,
I drape myself in cashmere blends and veil my head in chiffon
dupattas.
English isn't just for work,
Mehndi isn't just for weddings.
These sisters might quibble and argue
But as they've matured
So, have I.
They've learnt they're stronger together than they were apart.
There's so much more to it than just being Pakistani or British.
Birmingham might not have a twin city, but for someone like
me, she has a sister who is always around for a chai or a tea.

Antara Islam, Dhaka, Bangladesh

I had once seen a woman with one hand full of bags and another clutching the arm of a child, while carrying an infant at her waist, getting onto a running bus. It was a feat that I felt I had to tell everyone about.

Us vs. the City

It amazes me that
every day during monsoon
thousands of women in Dhaka
have to shuffle through
mud-smeared slippery streets teeming with people
and hurl themselves at the oncoming traffic
with their bags clutched in one hand
and their kids on the other
just to get back home in one piece.
All I did was carry a bag full of books from Nilkhet
to Dhaka College in the rain
and yet
I feel like I've won against this city for the day.

Antara Islam, Dhaka, Bangladesh

A rickshaw puller restored my faith in humanity with his simple act of kindness. Ordinary people leave the most extraordinary impression in our lives sometimes.

Headlights in the Rain

The rain started to pour down hard after I got on the rickshaw this evening. The rickshaw wallah had forgotten to bring along his plastic sheet today, so we were both soaking in the rain for the first fifteen minutes of our ride. Then he pulled us over to the side of the road and bought another sheet of plastic with his own money.

He said, ‘*Apa apne eibhabe bhijtesen amaro khub kharap lagtese. Eta toh shudhu amar pesha na, eta amar kortobbo.*’ (Miss, I felt terrible seeing you get drenched. This isn’t just my profession, it’s also my duty.)

By this time, it had become so cold outside that I could feel the heat radiating off the headlights as the cars passed us by. He was shivering and his trembles shook the whole rickshaw. But he still kept a steady hold over the handle and peddled away. He brought me home safe and sound, even refusing when I insisted on paying him extra for his troubles.

It doesn't take much to honour somebody. The young girls I teach at a local Madrasa often help people with directions and feed beggars in their homes. Their respect for human dignity is manifested in acts of kindness. But as they will grow older, they can easily forgo these traits. For they are living in a world full of grown-ups who, instead of compassion, use social status as a metric of how people ought to be treated.

The rickshaw wallah touched me with his sincerity in a way no other human in Dhaka ever did. I wish I could display him in an art gallery as an embodiment of the extent of generosity we are all capable of. But like the warmth of passing headlights on a cold rainy night, his presence in my life had been fleeting.

Anika Anjum, Dhaka, Bangladesh

It's my failure to speak up that keeps the writer in me alive.

This poem reflects the realisation of my adulthood which, as a child, I could hardly think about. I used to believe joys and contentment are the only truth of life. Little did I see the darker shades of life among which I pass through almost every day now. Such harshness makes me desire to turn the wheels of time and go back to the times when I could inhale peace.

I have seen inhumanity, disrespect, and cruelty in the eyes of people. The dust in their mind binds me within four walls and I dread to step out. It urges me to carry a sense of awareness in my little backpack whenever I need to walk around those evils. In every step, I get to realise that an unknown force will never spare me to spread my wings and fly under the vast sky.

Among the Lives

Busy markets in the holy month,
the narrow street with a May Flower Tree,
also the little jamboree are places
Father used to take me.

Walking down through the crowds,
putting my little fingers in a fist,
he showed me the colours of life
of which bliss was the gist.

The city lights kept me mesmerised,
nodding off in an arch.
A smiling moon travelled along
even in my journey to the dark.

The life has been lost somehow,
somewhere, with the springing up of age.
Sneaky mind peeps into the memories
leaving me behind in the cage.

Something strange is out there,
that makes Father shield his dear.
The moon doesn't seem so cheerful now,
always hiding from shame and fear.

Why didn't I see, as a child,
the filth in people's eyes?
Lips remain sealed, a thousand words
burying down deep, heavy cries.

Bring my old city back –
here's an appeal to anyone who hears.
I wish to die embracing the laughs
without getting scared of tears.

Fatima Neguib, Lahore, Pakistan

The terms 'My City' and 'My Home' inspired me to write about the obstacles faced by an 'ordinary', poverty-stricken girl in Pakistan who has the desire to take her family out of poverty, helplessness, and 'lowliness' with her hard work and determination.

My Humble Origins

I was eight years old at the time and loved immensely by my parents. I was their only born. They were both wage earners from the city of Lahore, my father was a daily wage labourer who broke bricks in the sweltering heat of the sun every day to earn a meagre wage, while my mother cleaned the houses of the rich; their combined earnings gave me three meals a day but no school. At the end of each month, my mother's purse would run out of money and the gravy was bound to become watery. When gas in the cylinder ran out, which was mostly the case; we would collect firewood to get through. Collecting and bringing firewood and water from the well were jobs for the whole family; together we could carry greater quantities. Our house was actually a makeshift tent which I always thought would be blown away in a storm, but I was at peace with life and did not sense anything missing. I enjoyed listening to my father's radio, advertisements were what we mostly heard, advertisements of TVs and other luxury items, with news in between, and the rare visits we made to different parts of the city were looked forward to.

‘I have always wanted to give her at least something made of gold, even if only bangles, but I don't know how I'll be able to save that much till she comes of age,’ said my mother to my father.

‘Don't worry, we'll think of something. I can always get a loan from my master or something like that,’ consoled my father.

At that age I didn't worry about my father having to get a loan; it was too far ahead to contemplate. I turned nine, and things didn't really change a lot, but once I got closer to ten, I started feeling left out of things I saw around me.

It was a Sunday, and I accompanied my mother to clean a house she had missed cleaning on Saturday owing to extreme exhaustion. Normally, I would not go with my mother to the houses she cleaned, but today was different. I had decided to help her, as I was feeling sorry for her; she had to do so much so that I could sleep on a full stomach. I had to walk a great deal to get there, and upon arrival, I began noticing the grandeur of their house and became fixated on the comfortable life they were living – a fridge, a TV, beds, tables, chairs, sofas, and carpets – the list was endless. As I scrubbed the floor, I couldn't help but feel hurt, I had eavesdropped and become aware of the fact that my mother's entire salary amounted to the value of a single, everyday dress those women wore.

When we returned home, I said to my mum, ‘These people have everything they wish for – ample money for a car, while we have to sit on my father's bicycle to go out anywhere. They have servants to clean, cook, and drive for them, and we are dependent on them for the money they give us.’

My mother replied, ‘When you are older you will understand that God has made every human equal, and because God has decided not to give us what he has given them, it does not matter; they have other problems of their own.’ I turned mum. Then one day I asked the ultimate question, ‘Can't I go to school?’

There was silence in the tent.

My mother and father looked at each other for a while, and then my father replied, 'Of course my love, we can and will send you to school.'

After a while, when they thought I was asleep, they started arguing, 'How do you expect to pay the fees; the money for school uniform and books?' My mother asked bitterly.

'I'll think of something,' retorted my father. 'May I ask what it is that you'll think of?' retaliated my mother.

'I'll say yes to my master. Just yesterday, he was asking me if I would like to go to his house to live with him and run errands for him. He said that I could earn much more that way,' responded my father.

'What about us?' my mother asked, her voice breaking.

'He said he does not have the space for all of us as he already has a live-in cook with his family and can't keep another one.' answered my father.

My heart skipped a beat, but I wanted to go to school at any cost, saying to myself, 'I will get them out of poverty by getting educated.'

Though I saw my father seldom, the moment I did meet him, I would give him a hug and say, 'Thank you for all this.' Nevertheless, as days without him turned into weeks, I started pining for him.

It had been two weeks since I last heard from my father; concerned, my mother and I went to the nearest neighbour who had a mobile we could call from, but no one answered. A week later, out of the blue, they brought his body in a van, claiming that he had died of a heart attack. It all happened so quick, that it was only after he was buried that I released my emotions and embraced my mother and cried. I could not be with him anymore and did not want this to be true.

Years passed by, and I finally finished school. My mother had kept working all these years, and now I was persuading her to leave work, but she would say, 'Let me make sure you pass through college, then I will do as you say.'

I finally graduated from college and found a clerk's job, but all along I remember my father's words with a few tears, 'Don't worry, we'll think of something. I can always get a loan from my master or something like that.'

Asma Parveen Iftikhar, Birmingham, UK

I was inspired by an event that happened a long time ago – someone close to me left home and didn't return for eighteen years. When they did come back to their family, they said they were confused about their identity and felt they didn't fit in even though they outwardly got on. They were full of regret for having wasted precious time away only because of insecurities they harboured based on their worldview.

I'd like my writing to change the narrative, I'd like to write about hope and reunions, of second chances and reconciliations, with oneself and with ones loved ones.

Phone Call from Home

I toss onto my left side; my gaze falls on the prayer mat neatly folded on the bedside drawer. It is a gift from Mum. When unfolded, it is maroon and black with an image of a mosque on it. Cream coloured tassels adorn the edges. It's a little worn, a little tattered. It's been used by my mother. I have never unfolded it since the day I placed it on the drawer two years ago. She wanted me to have it because she hoped it would remind me to pray my *salah* – my five daily prayers. I haven't prayed in ten years. I don't know what the urge to pray feels like anymore. I prayed the day Dad died. Then I stopped praying. That day I stood on my prayer mat and held my hands over my chest. I bent and touched my knees. I prostrated to Allah. I felt nothing. I prayed because Dad taught me to pray. He expected it. Then he died and there were no expectations.

The phone rings. It's Mum.

'When are you coming home?' *Home*, she says.

But what's home? Home is here in Canary Wharf. Home is

there where Mum lives, Birmingham. Dirty, smelly, rubbish-filled Birmingham. Colourful, familiar, lively Birmingham.

Or is it Gujar Khan? Pakistan.

Home is none of these. Home is all of these.

But I am restless.

‘I can’t,’ I say before she’s even had a chance to beg. I don’t like it when she begs me to come home. I hate it when Mum begs for anything.

‘He’s asking for you, Aisha. He misses you.’ She says bleakly. Her voice is hopeless. She already knows I won’t come home but she’s asking for her son’s sake. My disabled brother. Not for herself.

‘Please explain it to him,’ I say indifferently. But I’m not really indifferent to her. I’m indifferent to myself, to my feelings, indifferent to my life which has slipped away like an ice cube from my hands.

She sighs and, in her sighs, I hear a million protests.

The call ends. Just like that.

I throw the duvet back and stand at the window. The street is empty. Most of the city lights are off, except for the occasional yellow glow from a window here or there. It sleeps, like a tamed dragon. During the day, you’d never be able to tell that this city could be silenced, but even in the silence you can hear its secrets, even in the silence, you can hear the whimpers of the lonely souls that become lost in its carnival-like clamour during the day. Only in a city like this can the stillness of the night and the din of the day show no dichotomy.

The phone rings again.

It’s my brother. He can string a few sentences together before he gets confused before he forgets who he’s talking to.

He snorts, giggles. I smile despite myself. My brother has a way of making me smile. He reminds me of home, of the smell of our cosy little living room in Alum Rock, of the musty blue

carpet and lavender Haze air freshener. His voice reminds me of monkey nuts that Dad shelled for both of us and the fight that ensued to see who'd get the peanut.

'I was about to call you, bro.' I lie.

'When are you coming, bro?' I smile despite myself at the way he mimics me.

Never, I want to shout. He babbles and the phone goes dead.

Never. But that would be a betrayal and betrayals don't go down too well in my family. Loyalty is everything for a Pakistani.

Dad said *don't leave home* and I said to him, *but you left Pakistan*.

That was different, he said.

No, it wasn't, I said.

I had to work.

So do I.

I had to provide for my family.

I will provide too.

But London? He protested.

Yes, London.

You'll lose yourself, there. It will suck you in. You will forget who you are.

No way, Dad. You're exaggerating.

I won. Dad died.

Dad died. I lost.

But maybe he was right. I haven't been home for three years, it's only two hours' drive away, but it could be on the other side of the world, like Gujar Khan, and I've been able to stay away. If they would just stop judging me then I could go back. But they will not stop judging and I will not go back, and my mother and brother will suffer. It's always the family that suffers; it's never the ones who judge. *They won*.

My thoughts are interrupted by someone singing in the apartment above. No, not singing. Someone is reading the Qur'an. It's a man's voice and he's reading loudly. I've never heard him before.

He has a beautiful, deep, full-throated voice. The gentle melody in his recitation sends shivers all over my body and, strangely, his style of reading reminds me of Pakistan – of my grandfather's recitation, of the hazy glow over the cornfields of Gujar Khan, of the dew sitting on the leathery citrus leaves in the courtyard of my childhood home. But then my mind goes blank, and the sound takes over. Now it reminds me of nothing, of a blankness that is suffocating because it has no memories attached to it. Then silence.

I miss Mum, I miss my brother, I miss Dad. I need to go home. I will not let them win. I will go back and face them, their judgements, their snide remarks, their cruelty and hypocrisy and I will kiss my mother's hands and hug my brother tightly because home is where family is. *Dad said that.*

Erin Shore Gilbey, Birmingham, UK

Although I have some Black Country heritage, I moved to Birmingham in 2017 without any particular affection for or expectations of the city or the area. Over the course of three years, I fell in love with the city from my Thai boxing gym in an old garage in West Heath to the fairy-tale Highbury Park, to the allure of the jewellery quarter, to the revolution of Digbeth. For a long time, I couldn't quite put my finger on what it was that made this ex-industrial smudge in the middle of the country my home. After a conversation with my grandma, who grew up in the Black Country and visited Birmingham occasionally, where she described to me the glittering shop windows of Birmingham City Centre at Christmas, I realised what it is. I found a home in Birmingham because of a sense of potential – of possibility.

The city is always changing and moving, and, with every movement, a space is left behind for someone new to make their mark. The glittering Christmas windows for me are filled with opportunities to make art and become a part of the story of an ever-changing city. I wrote 'Sliding Puzzle' this year as I move from being a student in the city to becoming a working artist. I take comfort in the fact that my big leap of faith in starting an arts career in the year of a global pandemic is only a small moving fragment in the unstoppable whirlwind of change that takes place in my city every day. Birmingham's motto 'Forward' is fitting – although on the day-to-day the city's changes may feel like infuriating steps backwards or in circles, ultimately, we are moving forward towards a utopia that is always tantalizingly just out of reach. I wrote 'Sliding Puzzle' to encapsulate this image of an ever-changing city that draws you into its wonderful incompleteness.

Sliding Puzzle

I found Birmingham at the bottom of a party bag in the mid-2000s. You could slide its squares around to create a picture. Each time a square was moved, creating a new gap (*you can't get through there – they're doing up that bit outside the library or the Christmas Market's on at New Street or there's road works on the A48*), the anticipation of a perfect picture grew. I sat silently in the back of the car, chewing my chapped lip as I watched the pieces move beneath my sticky thumbs. I didn't like the final picture because there was still a gap where I could slide the pieces again and so I kept moving them left, right, forward, backward, forward, forward, creating transient and improbable stories.

When it fades beneath my busy thumbs, I paint new pictures over the grubby plastic. Then I return it to the pocket of my favourite raincoat, and I rearrange it again, addicted to its incomplete beauty.

Reem Arshad Khan, Islamabad, Pakistan

I thought about the connection between my city and my home, and I realised that the two have always been very different for me. My city has never felt like my home, and I have never felt a true feeling of belonging here. I wanted to create vivid images in the minds of my readers to show them what I see when I look at my city, why I see that, and why I feel fearful of my city and its people. My work is primarily based on my memories. The scenes I witnessed unfolding before me whilst buying vegetables and naan on the street with my father, and the polluted streets and stares I felt upon me when we went out to walk every night. Those were some of the few times I actually experienced what my city is like, what its roads look like, what its air smells like, and I wanted to incorporate all of that in my poem.

My City

A city is a place full of peach-coloured buildings and soft, crushed people,

 Their juices flowing down into the earth, polluting the roads
littered with floating plastic birds and crushed chicken bones,

 Wet dirt and spit travelling with you like childhood friends,
I suppose they are, in a way.

 You take your shoes off at the door and try to wash off the
curdled custard air that touched your skin,

 Sweat and dirt and desperation mixed with a suppressed
boiling anger,

 You look at their wrinkled, inflated faces,

 Like a puri swells up when it's thrown in hot oil,

 And your skin crawls with the black solid weight of their stares.

 Black like sunflower seeds that don't bloom,

Your sidewalks are surrounded by marijuana and poppy plants
grown in the wild,

Watered by the monsoons and piss, some of it animal, most
of it human,

And you try to look at the sky for a second to admire the
tenacity of those milky pearls above,

Shining and persevering,

Despite the broken plasticine people roaming below,

But there's too much noise.

Every shop you walk into you feel exposed and jumpy,

My city and its offspring of resentment and lust.

Is it really my city?

These roads with broken glass and juice boxes littered on them,

It's all I know,

Sipping mango juice while a woman screams on the TV,

Another bomb gone off, another missing person, another
beaten girl,

Pass the packet of Lay's please, I love this flavour.

We never played on the street,

Nor in the park,

Again, the stares were too much,

Like crawling ants on your skin, biting away as your body
writhes underneath them,

Safety is a concept alien to us.

There is laughter and chaos and wonderful things blooming
here each spring,

We have festivals and we sing and dance and love,

But we do so in secret.

The world outside this brown, faded gate is scary and rough,

People walking on the street scare you, they've always scared
you,

You look at them and you see another headline, another cup
of acid hidden beneath those rose-coloured shirts,

They're reckless and fearless, and generous
With their anger,
And they feel unknown to you.
They say you hate your own flesh and blood but it's not
loathing,
They mistake your fear for loathing,
Outside these walls, it feels like you're an orange in someone's
hands, about to be peeled and silently eaten,
And your 'flesh and blood' will think nothing of it as your
sweet juice hits the pavement below.
The lines on your people's faces remind you of lines in your
school's bathroom stalls,
Where your friend's brother was forced to drop his food on the
floor and eat it,
Where his bottle was filled with tap water every day,
Alien things and alien feelings,
These people, this city, that crushed those unlike herself just
as her children crush those below them.
I trust no one but the sun shining down in conical gold apathy,
I sleep nowhere but near my mother's arms,
Shoes at the door, body poised for flight.
They say my city is safe and beautiful,
A melting pot of cultures and leaping, joyful lives,
Why, then, do I walk with vigilance in my own home?
In my bathroom, why do my hands shake while I take off my
clothes to wash away this grime?
'You have experienced nothing of great loss or devastation,'
But a little bit each day is enough to make me tired.

Madhumita Dasgupta, Birmingham, UK

My mother's fascinating life inspired me. She was uprooted from her home at a very early age during the division of India, depriving her of all childhood dreams and aspirations. The words 'my city' and 'my home' are very ambiguous to her. This is a story that many women from the sub-continent will be able to relate to.

Home

My name is Renu. I was born as the only daughter of my father, in a very small town called Pirojpur in Bangladesh. With many brothers, male cousins, and uncles, I lived a very protected and safe life. My favourite uncle was a pharmacist, and my father was the headmaster of the school that my siblings and I attended. With no understanding of what lay beyond Pirojpur, we always felt that we had more than enough. I still have memories of dancing in the rain, muddying my bare feet, and throwing stones at ripe mangos hanging in the trees. These are moments that I wouldn't trade for anything.

I lived happily within my bubble for many years until the riot began. We started to hear talk of the division of our beloved country by religion. Our notions of the future, our sense of peace, and our faith were stolen in one big sweep. We began to fear losing not only our earthly belongings but also our honour. My father became very anxious about his sixteen-year-old daughter in those uncertain and tumultuous times, and so he arranged for me to leave the country soon and move to India.

This was my home. How could I leave behind the place where I played with my friends, sang with birds, and danced with the

waves of the river Kaliganga? Will I not miss the bickering at the dining table? Or how about the gossip of our neighbours? Or even the pranks of my younger cousins? I must have cried all day thinking of all the things that create the different shades of life in Pirojpur. I fought tooth and nail, I negotiated, I did everything I could, but my efforts were futile. I was left on a train, alone, crossing a border tainted with blood. The Indo-Pak border was one of the most dangerous places where many people lost their lives trying to cross the border. It was heavily patrolled by Pakistani soldiers armed with guns. My fate ultimately brought me to Calcutta after crossing the border one night all by myself.

I settled well in Calcutta, in one of my wealthy relative's house. My aunt was very keen to get me married as soon as possible. With my father's permission, I got married to a man who was ten years older than me. His name was Sudhir. He was very kind and caring. He nurtured me in his own way to be able to live alongside the Calcuttans and their sophisticated lifestyle. I had private tutors for learning English, Art, and Painting and, of course, Singing. Without me knowing exactly when, I became very used to the Calcutta lifestyle. I grew to love my life with Sudhir and my son, Sunil. This was my home.

My story did not end there, unfortunately. I had to move again. The wind blew me to New York next. My husband passed away and left me under the strong wing of my able son, Sunil. He has grown into a successful young man, working with the Wall Street's finest. He gave me no option of living alone in Calcutta and so I had to follow him to America. Once again, I was taken from one home and moved to another. I did not utter a word of protest and I hid my tears from my son. I guess that he thought this was

the best option for him to look after his mother. We live now with Susan, my daughter-in-law, Sunil, and my grandchildren. I guess now this three-bedroomed flat in Manhattan is my home. I belong to this city now.

I see the same sky, the same clouds, occasional birds chirping and beckoning trees as I saw them in Bangladesh or India. I still wear my cotton sarees, I still enjoy my daal with rice, and I still chant the same mantras at dusk and dawn. Why is it not the same?

What makes a home, a home? Do I have a home where I actually belong? I grew up in my father's home, I blossomed in my husband's home, and now I spend my days in my son's home.

I overheard Susan making her future plans recently. She was suggesting that once my grandchildren go to university, they should start thinking of moving me somewhere that I can live comfortably and happily, perhaps the reputable old home down the road. After eighty years of my sheltered life, I will finally be free. I am waiting for yet another home to call my own.

Abeda Begum, Birmingham, UK

*What inspired me was growing up in the city which I call home.
My memories of childhood and adolescence helped inspire my poem.*

*I thought of all the positive support around me and remembered
the words of my parents who are my biggest inspiration.*

Growing Up

*Be the best you, that you can be
Inspirational to others, that was taught to me.
Remember your roots, don't forget where you came from
My parents would say when I returned from school prom.
Islam is my religion, it teaches you to be kind,
Neighbours from different faith share the same mind.
Good is within us all no matter the religion,
Honour your surroundings, don't make bad decisions.
Amazing is my city, Birmingham will always be
Museums, art galleries and canal boats are some of the popular
things to see.*

*I grew up on the streets, it is where I play,
Friends of all ages and they made my day.
Climbing trees and rooftops and pranking the neighbour
Whilst Mum and Dad grafted all day and night doing labour.*

*Sewing, sewing, sewing on the sewing machine,
Making clothes of all kinds for every being,
They were the real machines – non-stop and on the go,
Then they taught me to sew, as they grew old and too slow.*

It was all their hard work that gave me passion,
A hobby, an interest, an eye for fashion,
A skill that I am grateful for and I will always cherish
To remind me of how hard my parents worked, an age of elegance
that has forever perished.

The city is safe (or so they say)
Be careful who you trust, you may go astray,
Follow your culture be true to yourself.
What is my culture when I think of myself?

Birmingham is my culture, my home, and my city,
A mixed bag of skittles that represent diversity.
I am Bangladeshi, my best friend is from Lahore,
There are many different cultures in Birmingham, and you are
all welcome to explore.

Aysha Islam, Birmingham, UK

I enjoy writing and reflecting, so it was easy for me to write about something that I felt comfortable discussing.

Having lived in Birmingham, I feel that everything that I have achieved is because of what this city has offered me. However, it's important to acknowledge that I once belonged to another country where I still have good memories and love and cherish just as much as I do Birmingham.

Home is Where the Heart Is!

I am a Bangladeshi woman and I have lived in the UK for half a century! Birmingham is where we settled when I came with my mum and four brothers in 1970, to join my dad... it was an amazing journey, leaving one country and beginning a new chapter in a new environment. Of course, none of these would have been possible had it not been for my mum, who gave my dad an ultimatum – *return home to help raise our children or let us join you in England*. Hence, I wish to submit this piece of narrative in memory of two important people, my mum and dad. Certainly, they were strong and determined characters, they had our best interest at heart and for that reason alone, I feel my mum secured our futures.

I was young so was not at all phased by the journey. When we stayed overnight in Karachi, I was wide-eyed with amazement when looking out of the hotel window, at the hustle and bustle of busy city life. Moreover, my recollection of the journey home from Heathrow to Birmingham was also remarkable. Whilst looking out of the window, I gazed in wonder at the greenery, open fields, and neat countryside – truly magnificent.

Living in Birmingham has been extremely comfortable. There were many immigrant families already settled when we arrived, so fitting into the community was not difficult. However, the only barrier that I had to overcome was to be able to communicate in English. There was steady progress in this department as my dad enrolled us very swiftly in our local primary school. I remember the extra English language support we had in schools and my dad also engaged a tutor for home tuition. I still have a couple of my primary school reports and know that I was a very diligent and keen learner. I feel immensely proud that I did quite well and picked up the English language fairly quickly. The best of my school days has to be my time in my secondary school. I have many happy memories of the good times I had, my achievements, and the life-long friendship I have maintained to this day. Apart from the academic successes, I feel that being voted the Deputy Head Girl was quite an achievement, especially when I arrived eight years previously, not really knowing any English words, apart from ‘Hello,’ maybe.

I have no regrets about getting married at the age of seventeen, not finishing my A-levels, due to my dad being unwell – these are the sacrifices we made in those days. Of course, I had passion and dreams that were unfulfilled, such as wanting to do further higher education and take up a career. Not really knowing what I wanted to pursue, I chose to go into social work as it was the only course I could do part-time. Juggling family life, child-rearing, and a host of other duties, I managed to complete my studies and take up a post as an Educational Social Worker for Birmingham City Council. I enjoyed this role enormously as it enabled me to help schools, children, and families, working to improve attendance or to advocate on their behalf to find school places etc.

I feel that living in Birmingham has given me the stability I needed to feel secure. I watched how Birmingham has developed over the last fifty years, it's cleaner, there are more affordable housing and there are schools providing excellent education to diverse communities. Certainly, the Bullring facelift has attracted a lot of attention, and shopping and the eateries are drawing in the crowds. I enjoy going shopping and there is a huge choice of places to stop for tea, coffee, or lunch/dinner. I feel very much at home here. I owe the successes that I have had to living in a city that I feel safe in and have family and friends to share my life with. I know that when I was once in Bangladesh over the Christmas holiday, I missed seeing the Christmas decorations, and even the cold, wintery weather! But it was nice to see that there was the odd Christmas tree or decoration in parts of Sylhet, where there were Christian churches or missionaries living there... of course, Christmas in the heat was vastly different.

When I visit Bangladesh, I love going back to my childhood and retracing family roots, so I think that how we feel and what we love is all relative. As long as one is happy, healthy, and secure in their relationships, one can enjoy life and live life to the fullest, that is my personal view. I know too well, though, that life would have been quite different had I not lived in a place like Birmingham. I have worked hard, my children are all successful adults in decent jobs, and they are happy, hence I feel truly blessed... Birmingham has given me the opportunities to thrive and make something of my life... so it's fitting to say that 'home is where the heart is.'

Tamanna Abdul-Karim, Birmingham, UK

The memories of my childhood in Nechells, Birmingham, intertwined with the memories my siblings and parents had in Sylhet, Bangladesh.

My City. My Home.

My city. My home. But where is that?

Swirls of smoke canvas the air like veins pumping heaviness, a clouded heaviness, through the skies. Darkness hung like a stained velvet curtain, closing in. But with it came a certain softness, the promise of something more, the feeling of warmth. Whilst darkness held down its heavy hand, the city secretly sighed: despair tinged with the hope of something better.

Shards of broken glass, damaged fences, and scattered childhoods lay strewn across the concrete playground. Faded yellow lines marked out spaces and territories, created space and divisions in equal measure.

Despite the destruction that presented itself in the everyday litter of lives, there was an orchestra of laughs that pierced the shadows, thus allowing streams of multi-coloured rainbow light to fall graciously into the air. Like dancers, the children glided, tiptoeing through their childhoods, armed together in a sense of true uniformity. Poverty may well have painted across their faces, but there was a magic in their eyes, a spirit of relentless and utter joy. These spirits refused to surrender to the tyrant clouds, nor did they stay within their faded lines; they rejoiced in their unique harmony and pieced together the broken shards to mirror their innocence. They played and played oh so freely. The

train tracks became their garden and the green triangular space in the communal area, their little heaven, the mutual sanctuary. This is where the dramas unfolded: the initiations, the games upon games upon games, and the laughter of victory tinted with the silent tears of a lost game or a broken friendship.

But this joy wasn't just saved only for the children. Women congregated in kitchens all across the street, peeling, grating, binding, and frying. Their hands were filled with the bursts of colour from the array of spices, the weight of the garden-grown vegetables, from courgettes to pumpkins, and the golden bangles of their own youth from another land. Their quiet talent erupted like magic as they folded samosas, dropped pakoras in the sizzling oil or rolled out dainty delicacies. Sometimes it was spiced omelette and homemade chips, fried chicken wings, or deep-fried potato scallops. Regardless, they would be devoured within minutes. Not always by the women themselves, but their communal children and the men, their husbands, who gathered to have the spirit of sport root them, fixating their tired eyes to the screen. Bearded old men sat upon the floor discussing the routes through their new worlds, navigating from one land to another, one culture to another. If it wasn't the sport they were hooked on, it was the news, as it blared out current affairs – politics and health. The nuances not always understood, but between them and their broken English, they could each decipher some meaning and then piece it together like a patchwork blanket, a nakshi kantha.

Summer nights were nothing short of magic. The sun came down shyly, but there was no holding down the children. They could function without sleep for another game, and then another, and then one more. The raucous sound of the shuttlecock against the racket as it flew powerfully over the worn-out net, filled the evening sky. Games of Ludo, Snakes and Ladders were played

in all the verandas and porches as the ladies sang, talked, and recited majestically. Every smile, every connection, every piece of magic between the souls of the city pushed away the darkness of poverty that lurked in the background.

Trees swayed, heavy with jackfruit, mangos, and starfruit. Smell of citrus filled the air but fought against the smokiness of the factories that were determined to make their mark on the skyline. The hill into the city was a mantle to a beautiful cherry tree from which the cherries were often crushed into a chutney: green chillies, coriander, and lemon juice. Vibrantly rich saris hung out on makeshift washing lines across concrete spaces, next to hard, worn-out denim and corduroy. Trains roared passed but the train in the park, pungent with urine, stood still in time and place to allow little hands and feet to climb, hide and soak up the stench into their memories. The rickety rickshaws reluctantly pulled one family in and another out in a continuous transition of joy. Both the trains and the rickshaws became a symbol of childhood – the promise of endless play.

Like the bangles and babies, the lungis and the laughter, nothing in this city stood still. There was movement, always. There was no option to be still, everyone grafted hard: providing, cooking, teaching, playing, being. In this sanctuary, to move was to create waves of change and progress, to move was to dream, and to move was to make a difference. A foot each in each culture, this place bridged the gap and offered a reminder of a home once lost. Poverty ruled the pockets, but the communal spirit made the place and its people rich. This was a village in a city – a hidden gem – a reminder that we create our own little worlds.

Pracheta Ahana Alam, Dhaka, Bangladesh

I was inspired by the dirt and the grime my city is known for, which was twice voted the worst city in the world to live. I grew up in Dhaka so the terms ‘My City and My Home’ were easy for me to write about.

When in Dhaka

I live in Dhaka. I live in sin. Sloth is God’s lesser sin, so I live in filth. My childhood home is in one of the relatively cleaner parts of the city, but I have floated in shit-strewn Uttara floods. I swam to school once. Then my father, middle-aged, carried me on his shoulder to take my Literature exam. They sent me home because I smelled too bad. I was very prepared for it because it was the only exam I wanted to sit. But the rain came heavily that day when I decided to leave the safety of the leathery innards of my car. When I decided to float into the arms of sloth, and thus, the arms of sin.

But to be honest, my only sin in this city is that I am a girl and I want to exist in it.

If sloth is the lesser sin, what is the greater? Sloth is the materialist’s sin, of owning more than it can take care of, of housing more people than it can feed. Sloth is greed and greed is lust and lust is vanity and... you get it. There is no greater or lesser, only sin. Sin is born of mankind, sin is born of excess, so know that every dense square mile of Dhaka’s population is of the thickest sin. Sin is stories, in putrefying sloth and heinous lust. What is a story without fighting sin? Here you can toe between the line of the darkest grey and pitch black. Sin is grime. Dhaka is grime. Dhaka is sin.

Dhaka is body, soul, sin, grime, crime, and an endless sense of not enough time. Dhaka is djinns, pimps, and catty aunties. Dhaka is Gulshan, Dhaka is Jigatola, Dhaka is exactly how it is defined on a map but filled to brim and overflowing from the glass with sin, with no sense of time. Dhaka is divine. Dhaka is mine.

Ilika Chakravarty Mandal, Birmingham, UK

I read and enjoy books, but over time, I somehow lost the power of putting my thoughts into words. The years after school went towards higher education, academic writing, work, marriage, miscarriage, motherhood, moving cities and continents – the joy of writing taking a complete backseat.

The topic My City, My Home connected to my persona and identity. Having moved from a small town in the lap of the Himalayas to Darjeeling-Kolkata-Delhi-Mumbai-Peterborough, Birmingham-London, and to Birmingham again, I felt I had so much to say. I lived, adjusted, made friends, made home, and often questioned myself whether I felt entrapped or rootless or enjoyed the journey across countries and continents? What was home? Which was home?

Considering the present times, where I have been unable to travel to meet my ageing parents for so long, I decided to write a letter. This would make it more personal by adding my experiences and connecting my home and city. And, last but not the least, I have a yellow sweater knit by my mum and I am a diehard Leonard Cohen fan.

Famous Yellow Sweater

*It's four in the morning, the end of December
I'm writing you now just to see if you're better
New York is cold, but I like where I'm living....*

Leonard Cohen

Dear Ma,

Five thousand and eighteen miles lie between us – Birmingham and Dhaka – of land, water, and civilisation. I would love for you to be present on the same strip of earth and time zone as me, now

separated by the crippling uncertainty of departure. You know, I consider myself a proud citizen of both worlds in my nature. A part of me loves Birmingham's heavenly Bird's Custard, the other relishes your Bengali *payesh*. I breathe the aroma of finest Sunday roasts and puff pastry here and flatbread and traditional spices in home cooking. I soak all the languages I hear, I speak the Queen's English, yet dream in Bangla.

This beautiful duality of contrasts, rather commonplace in Birmingham (a time-wrapped Jewellery Quarter Museum juxtaposed with the contemporary Think Tank), I strive to discover by learning to love the people in this city, my home. The contrasts between Bangladesh and Birmingham are stark, if not glaring. Yet, no matter what food I eat, clothes I wear, culture or religion I practice, my conscience abides, and my soul remains constant in this algorithm of variables.

Ma, do you remember the sweater you gifted me in Dhaka, knitted intricately in mustard yellow yarn forming ornate curlicues twisting around and beneath my body, like a lattice of maternal protection? To me, Birmingham is like this sweater. Beyond aesthetics, I feel an unquenched attachment and affection, entwined in wool, a knotted mesh binding our shared heritage. You have seen pictures depicting life here. Images convey a thousand words; a monologue is a natural close, I want the words to never stop counting.

Beorma-ing-ham is where the Beorma made home and nonchalant bulls roamed down a cobbled Roman road; the now tarmacked Icknield Street which people of all shades walk today. A stagnant bronze bull stands fixed in a grimace at the Bull Ring – a blast from the past, and hotspot for tourists and residents. Beside it, silver metal discs of the Selfridges building reflecting on its orbs, translate to your hands running across the static fuzz on my sweater's circular patterns. Its colour on my skin feels like tropical sunshine ripening Bengal's golden paddy and Midland's rye.

My sweater's serpentine embroidery is symbolic of our paths crossing, if not geographically, then in dreams when frogs croak in romance to dancing monsoon raindrops on banana leaves and to your mouth-watering jaggery drenched coconut balls. So many happy memories! Climbing guava and mango trees, winter picnics over Ludo, afternoons savouring bitter-sweet oranges with black salt, Sunday radio dramas over mutton curry, and watching countless fireflies, their glow incomparable to a million city lights.

Running fingers on the phone screen, twisting random routes of the Spaghetti Junction's spreading arteries or Birmingham's canals, more than Venice, I am reminded of Bengal's countless rivers draining alluvial plains. Landlocked in the Heart of England, the Rea is our only consolation, unlike Dhaka's fuller Buriganga where steamers ply peacefully. But I believe the rivers sprawling between geographical boundaries and alien climes enmesh in their waters our cultures and language, their circling ripples uniting water hyacinths and spring daffodils in one beautiful bouquet.

Many believe that in Birmingham we are stoic, stiff upper-lipped, unacquainted with next-door neighbours – separation enhanced by detached houses and sequestered flats. When I see my city, housing diverse migrants arriving with hope in this melting pot of identity and place tied by social glue, I disbelieve such preconceived notions. Birmingham has been destroyed by fire and plagues as Dhaka has from riots and partition; yet risen like a phoenix, keeping people's tales alive, defining, and helping them to survive.

Be it food or occasion, Birmingham holds a bit of Bengal. The few Bengali shops catering for the Bengali community here may not compare with the colourful, bustling markets of Bangladesh, but they feed me the best fish (*hilsa* and *chingri*), drumsticks, gourds, areca nuts, betel leaves and allow me to practice my Bangla! My corner shop stocks Asian spices. An

English shopkeeper in the Farmer's Market gets me fresh, free-range duck eggs to cook my soul food *deem er jhol* to your timeless recipe. The Balti Triangle serves the steaming *samosas* and sweet *jilipis* in Eid and Diwali, pubs, and the best fish and chips.

On misty winter mornings, sitting at home, monastic silence is broken by a distant train's whistle dissolving in the air, I hold your sweater to hear the cuckoo's song back home. Although for you nothing can quieten Dhaka's inescapable sounds – street vendors, honking traffic, rickshaws. It has been long since I held your hands Ma, with memory-lined skin, those wrinkled fingers knitting what I carried to the 'Workshop of the World,' its industrial heritage delivering nothing as special. Outworn and old-fashioned, joked by friends as the 'famous yellow sweater' (after Cohen's *Famous Blue Raincoat*), but always esteemed for its craftsmanship.

I can see you read my letter, adjusting your Gandhian spectacles, arthritic knees tired from chores, eyes heavy from midday siesta, yet smiling conceivably in recognition of our strong roots, which no cyclone can uproot. Before I left Dhaka after marriage, you said '*Maniye nibi, kemon?*' (Try to adjust). I lived by your advice. Birmingham became home, helping me grow and sustain in adaptation, not change, in commonality, not divisions. It matters little where I live or belong. I can traipse from one home to another, interpret situations to perspectives varied yet similar. I feel at home in Birmingham, and I carry Dhaka in my heart. Home is where the heart is.

Before I end, one last thing – I will not let my sweater and myself form a rift, like the partition you witnessed. That will never happen; surely, not a second time. On homecoming, when I bend to touch your feet for the customary *pranam*, I shall wear with pride my famous yellow sweater, and carry your favourite melt-in-the-mouth Cadbury chocolates, my city's best gift to the world.

Your loving daughter.

Namira Hossain, Dhaka, Bangladesh

I wanted to focus on a memory that happened in my city and home rather than focusing on the place itself. But when I thought about 'My City My Home', very specific images came to mind which I described in my poem.

Chains of Smoke

It was the year of baggy pants and stolen kisses,
When lessons came from blackboards filled with chalk scribbles.
Days were defined by the space inside pencil-drawn lines,
Faded memories of notes exchanged in classrooms left behind.

I was riding on a chariot of privilege pulled by the blood and
sweat of poverty,
Painted with faces, in contrasting colours of fantasy.
With faces painted in hopes of gaining popularity – emulating
ideals of beauty – the cover girls of glossy magazines.
The dust was rising up from the concrete,
Sparking in the sun, filtered sepia by the afternoon heat of
summer.

Drivers were honking their impatience – at traffic cops, beggars,
peddlers, and pedestrians.
There were no rules at this intersection, no respect or right of
way,
No signs to guide me through the chaos, no lights to turn green
or red.
The wheels kept turning round and round, like hands of clocks,
Every second, to your last breath – counting down.

I am still haunted by the moment the White Rabbit appeared,
As fate beckoned me to jump right in, down the hole in the
ground.

He said to me, ‘Come on, just give it a try. Everybody does it,
it will be fine, don’t be shy – it’s only this one time.’

‘I really don’t want to, but that logic does seem to make sense.
And if I say no, they’ll all think I’m a bit dense. It’s only this
one time,’ I lied to myself, ‘the repercussions can’t be all that
intense.’

So many rules I had broken already that day, having stolen
away like a thief,

Vanished into thin air,

without a thought or a care

But Karma would bring no relief.

A curse of Murphy’s law, to pry the truth from my jaws –

Freedom came at a cost – a price that I would come to pay.

Can’t get back the time lost because of what happened, on that
fateful day.

Unaware of this unpleasant surprise,

I was welcomed home by the glare in her eyes and the stern
look on my mother’s face.

‘Where were you?’ she asked. ‘I thought you had class.’

And just like that, my carefully prepared lie fell flat.

Broke no ice or ‘No cigar,’ as they say.

‘You silly girl, haven’t I told you before? When you tell a lie,
Mother always knows. Every step you take, wherever you go.
You can’t escape, I’m your shadow.’

Too stubborn and defiant to fall for her bluff,
I stuck to my story and to my guns.
There's no way she could have found out that I had taken one puff.
She looked straight at me, and all that she said, was 'let's confirm your story.'
A rabbit in the headlights –
My heart filled with dread.
She picked up the phone and made a few calls –
Piecing together the truth that was to become my downfall.

A crossing of paths – a coincidence supreme
Or mother's intuition that worked on the same team
And all my best-laid plans and my elaborate schemes
Had just come apart, right at the seams,
As my grandmother had been parked, right on the scene
Where I had my very first taste of nicotine.

'That boy is bad news. Trust me I know. Why else did you smoke, you never wanted to before.'
'It was only this one time,' was my weak protest. 'It's only this one time,' I promised myself.

Little did I know, I had built my cage,
Mounting pressure to fit in had set the stage
For self-restraint to fly out the shelf.
What happened next isn't too hard to guess –
Played once with fire to be burnt to ashes.
An ashtray full of dreams was the price I had to pay.
'It's only this one time,' I wish I had not lied to myself that day.

Shagufe Hossain, Dhaka, Bangladesh

I have a habit of running. Having grown up in different places, I struggled with a sense of belonging. And because I never felt like I belonged, never felt truly safe, I ran from one end of the world to another. I used to equate the sense of familiarity that people often associate with safety as a threat. So, every time I found myself becoming familiar, with a person or a place, it would activate a fight or flight response and I would run. But I wouldn't call it running. I would call it 'being on an adventure'. Until recently when, while one afternoon on recovery from a heartbreak, I realised I was home. But home, to my surprise, wasn't a place. It was a moment in time. A moment where I surrendered to the moment itself. This poem is an ode to that moment.

Walking Cities

i am making a habit
of walking souls
instead of cities
now
instead of taking on neighbourhoods, or cities or countries
unexplored
i sit with myself
in a familiar pub
at the corner of a known street
and let a sparkling drink
swirl on my tongue
i taste the difference
in temperature
as it warms in my mouth
the tingle on my tongue
as it fizzles out
like unkept promises
i look at the bottle

catching sunlight
glistening with sweat
like fresh morning dew
under a pink afternoon sky
lit with love
waiting for love to see
waiting for love to choose
i could choose
to run
into the arms
of temporary comfort
the shadow of loneliness
closely following at my heels
from one city
to another
to another
an other
could spend an entire lifetime
looking to belong
i could choose
to run
away
deny
instead
i am making a habit
of picking a place
like a wound
and stripping it bare to the very depths of its soul
i touch taste smell feel
i look at it from every angle
picking it apart
until it comes undone
thread by thread
so i can see all of its colours
i am done walking cities
i now walk souls
so show me all your colours.

Rujiya Sultana, Birmingham, UK

The reflections I see trigger moments from where I come from to where I am now. It's these that I have been able to grasp and put into words. The similarities from where I come from to where I am now gives me such pleasure to speak about my tales of growing up, being nurtured. Life has surprisingly guided me to find that once again to where I reside now. Memories come flooding in when I think back to where I was and where I am now.

My City My Home

This life has been somewhat of a marathon I didn't expect to run. A race to meet people's expectations of a good life led me in the direction of this beautiful and blessed city of Birmingham.

An interesting timeline that began at the roots of my mother country of Bangladesh.

In a small village, I was the eldest born child. My birth unfolded a new generation. My grandad, Dada dearest, nicknamed me 'the moon', said I was shiny like the crescent, and I've certainly had a light to pave my path since.

I remember children gathered to play with me and to get to know me, loving my company. Dressed in warm weather clothes, dancing around pretending and inventing tools to play with. Making tea in little pots with sticks and vessels. Chasing insects and falling in water, so playful so innocent. Watching how elders went about their days so attentively – they lived well. The sun

beamed on our happy times. I was raised like a leader of a pack. I was raised to comply, whether I liked it or not. What others thought was important, so I had to set good habits and morals and uphold a good reputation.

Living amongst a family of three generations, I loved that my great grandparents were still around. I was blessed. I loved growing up with so many around me. Those were days of the British fathers who worked hard to provide for their families back home. Dad was British since he was fourteen, which meant I first saw him when I came to England in 1984. I felt valuable time was lost in my early years without him, but a sacrifice needed to be made for survival, or so I was told. My brave mother married him at nineteen and didn't see him till she was twenty-one when he returned to whisk us off to the UK. We settled in Lincolnshire. I grew up in a society of many white faces. It was very challenging trying to fit in with peers here, and adopting their styles, their speech, their hair. I tried to do the best I could in a role where I had nobody to lead by example. I was labelled a coconut but that didn't stop me, I took it well as it pointed to my diversity. I tried everything, from netball to hockey. I did what I could to help and please my parents and spent a good thirty years doing what would have been expected of me. My life took me on a journey, from a small town to a big city.

See, I've been lost for so long and now finally feel grounded again. As unsettling as it may seem, it was not that hard for me. The closeness of villagers from where I was born is felt through the many faces, I come across here in Birmingham. Friends are made so naturally and calling them sisters is done so easily. My neighbours have become my family. The key is to treat them like royalty. Such characters live on my doorstep. It feels like I've known them for an eternity.

The years spent here in Birmingham have given me such happiness and made me feel whole. Having access to a variety of cultures, foods and celebrations makes it a colourful place to be part of. I've been able to use my PT skills and do charity work. I've been part of projects and achievements – it's been great! I've come to learn that opportunities are not given but made. In such a short time I have seen, heard, and done so much.

I no longer have to tame my desires or desert my expressions because Birmingham has brought out the best in me. Finally, I feel as free as the children from my village, the best part is that I'm no longer tied down by expectations. I'm free like the kind of kids that run around content and satisfied with what they have – they are happy. I smile at every opportunity, and I am grateful for all that I have endured in my journey to live and reside in this home of Birmingham. The journey has had its ups and downs but that's what's moulded me, prepared me and guided me. This home is all I have ever needed and my personal stamp on it gives me such satisfaction. I'm surrounded by love and laughter; this city is my destiny. My city and my home is Birmingham. Yes, it's now away from my mum and dad's branches but it is close to my deepest roots.

Ishrat Hamid Ghani Lindblad, Stockholm, Sweden

What inspired me? While writing I was inspired by many memories of living in a number of different cities and also by the realisation that, in the present globalised world, so many of us are experiencing a similar feeling of belonging to very different worlds from the ones where we were born or grew up. The terms ‘My City, My Home’ immediately triggered an emotional response in me. I feel very strongly attached to India, Pakistan, England, and Sweden. At the same time as I long painfully to be in each one of these places, I feel very grateful for the enriching experience of feeling at home in such different cities and cultures.

From Home to Home

Where do I belong? *That* is the question? For me, the partition of British India meant I lost half of my heritage. Close relatives, on both my paternal and maternal sides, chose different halves of our suddenly divided land. My father was from Kashmir – a country which itself symbolises the question: where does *it* belong?

I was born in Lucknow in pre-partition India, and my father lost his home in that city when he chose to live in Pakistan. He also lost our beloved ancestral home in Srinagar, where we used to spend all our summer holidays, and which is full of precious childhood memories for me. Suddenly, in the summer of 1947, my mother was packing away all our things and we realised we had to cut short our vacation. We bade a hasty farewell in Lucknow to the relatives and friends who had chosen to stay on in India, while we caught the train to Pakistan. On the 15th of August, I awoke to the sound of festive music being played below my bedroom window. When I wondered what all the noise was about, my parents told me they were celebrating Independence, and that Pakistan was now our home.

My father was a railway officer, which meant that he was

frequently transferred from one city to another. Thus, we lived in a number of different cities, and I liked to joke that I had spent more of my childhood travelling in a railway saloon than in any home! It didn't take long before we had to move from Karachi to the railway headquarters in Lahore, and the house we lived in was swarmed with refugees and my mother ran a soup kitchen in our garden. Gradually, we began to feel at home in this house along the canal banks. It was time to go to school as both my parents believed firmly in the importance of education, and so my elder sister and I were admitted to the Convent of Jesus and Mary Catholic school. I felt a great deal of affection for the nuns who taught us and developed a passion for reading, especially Enid Blyton's books about Saint Clare's Boarding School. My elder sister and I would imagine going to an English boarding school where we could enjoy midnight feasts and meet people like the O'Sullivan twins! Unexpectedly, our fantasies were realised in 1953, when my father happened to be posted to Rawalpindi, and the government decided our school must switch from the British system to the National Matriculation one. My elder sister, who had just a year left to complete the Senior Cambridge exam, was absolutely appalled. How could she be forced to study in Urdu which she had never been taught and to replace the study of British history and Geography with Indian and Islamic history? A dear English friend of my father's, from the days of the British Raj, came up with the perfect solution: he could help us to gain admission to the boarding school where his own daughters were studying in Bournemouth, and he and his family would look after us during the holidays. No sooner said than done! When my father told my sister and me that my mother would fly with us to England for the summer holidays and then admit us to a British boarding school we were thrilled beyond words!

Arriving in England in June 1953, felt magical. It was Queen Elizabeth's coronation year, and the streets of London were decorated with triumphal arches everywhere. We couldn't believe that a big city could be kept so clean, have such beautiful parks,

and that one of them had a clear blue river running through it that people were happily rowing canoes upon! When our mother decided to take us on a tour of the Lake District, I experienced a true moment of epiphany. The poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge, which I had been studying for so many years in Pakistan, had always puzzled me. How could they idealise nature as they did, when I had been taught to look out for all the dangers that lurked in nature: snakes, scorpions, storms, and floods? Looking at the peaceful natural beauty around me, I suddenly understood what they were so lyrical about. Yes, this is where I wanted to be, this island which I had only read about, but where I already felt at home!

Then, just two years later, I had finished school, and had to leave this ‘home’, and return to a new one in Mayo Gardens, Lahore. There, I began my higher education at Kinnaird College for Women. Another place I learned to love, and which opened a world full of exciting possibilities for me and where I made some close friends who would remain true to me for decades ahead. Living with beloved my parents in Lahore is where I became ME!

Even so, within a few years, we were travelling again. As fate would have it, on a ship bound homewards, I met my true love. When I told my parents I had met a Swedish doctor who had asked me to marry him, my father asked me if I hadn’t read enough English literature to know what happened to shipboard romances! My mother wondered how I could even think of settling in a country to which I had never been. Nevertheless, when I finally arrived to live in Stockholm, I was completely overwhelmed by the love my new family showered upon me.

My mother-in-law told me: ‘I had three sons, but my only daughter married an American and lives in America—so now *you* are my daughter!’

It was as her son’s wife, that I realised it is not the *place* that matters but the *person*. I could move from home to home, but as the well-known saying goes: ‘Home is where the heart is’ and mine is his forever!

Bassama Tanvir, Lahore, Pakistan

The theme ‘My City, My Home’ inspired me to observe how women were treated in my area and how they dealt with it. I made a great effort to completely understand a woman's understanding of her surroundings. A woman's place was my inspiration behind this piece.

A Cow, Her Shepherd, and Her Owner

I had seen how a shepherd took care of his cattle. He was with them since their birth. He fed them. He bathed them. He protected them. And when he saw that his cattle were old enough to give birth and produce milk, he would sell them to their prospective owners. After separating each heifer from another, he usually forgot about them. He wasn't curious to learn how their owners were treating his cattle—whether they were slaughtering them or gently patting-their backs.

I was also a part of my shepherd's cattle. Mostly, he would gently stroke my back and feed me with his hands. On bad days, when I refused to eat, he would beat me with a wooden stick. But generally, I was happy to be with him. I never thought I was going to leave him but one day he sold me off to a wealthy man. My friends had told me how some of them were lucky enough to be sold to a kind owner and some were sold to men who were only happy when they gave birth or produced milk. I had my apprehensions. But I was lucky because my wealthy man was kind. I had adjusted easily in his house, in his life. Now my life was going to be spent in a routine for which I had been prepared. I had been told that it took some time to understand your owner's routine but once you got to know it, life was bliss. Every heifer should learn to judge what her owner demanded

from her. There would be times in a heifer's life when she might want to break away from this life, some bad eggs might refer to this life as *mundane*. These were just tests. We should not pay heed to such satanic ideas. But that was not what was written in my fate. My owner suddenly died, bringing disruption to my monotonous life. I wasn't even allowed to completely hate the routine of my life.

After my man's death, no one in his house wanted to keep me. I was sent back to my shepherd. But this time, I brought back four calves with me. My shepherd wasn't too happy to have me back. He could only afford his cattle and I was bringing back four extra calves. Maybe it was due to an old affiliation that he took me in anyway. My shepherd and his wife kept me inside the house, out of every potential owner's sight, for four months and ten days. In those four months and ten days, I listened to his wife complaining about various things – from how my shepherd wasn't gentle towards her or how I was a strain on their budget. But I noticed one thing: her protests were always silent, unheard, or a murmur. She never said any of this to my shepherd. It was always we who were at the receiving end of her complaints. Her displaced anger didn't make any sense. Why couldn't she tell my shepherd how tired she was? It was as if my shepherd played the role of an owner towards her. In a way, he was her owner. Perhaps a woman was trained from a young age to become a perfect wife. Maybe a woman was taught how her life was only divided between her parent's house and her husband's house. There was no house of her own. Possibly, a woman was told how she had to obey her husband and give him children and give him the things he desired, day and night; keeping her head low and only taking what her husband gave her, never demanding anything extra, never raising her voice in front of him and silently eating the millet he brought for her. She was his little cow. I never dared say anything like that to my shepherd's wife. She would have found

it insulting, being compared to a cow, because she was a human too. Humans had their pride, but I wanted to know was how much of a human she felt and how much of a woman every day?

I heard my shepherd wanted to sell me to a new owner. But was there any man wealthy enough to take me with my four calves? I was a beautiful heifer once, but now I was a cow. Why did my value decrease as soon as I become a mother? My owner would want me to eventually bring calves into the world to benefit him in his business. So why didn't he want to buy me with my four children beforehand? I didn't like seeing the apprehensive faces of my shepherd and his wife. I didn't like hearing their silent complaints or seeing worried wrinkles form around their eyes. If it were up to me, I would try to make myself useful in ways other than producing milk and giving birth. But it wasn't up to me. If it were up to me, I would never want to come back and burden my shepherd like that. But it wasn't up to me. It wasn't up to me because I was never asked what I wanted. I was never asked because I was only told what to do. I was only told because I was only taught to obey.

That was how our lives were usually. We came into existence and, from the time since our first breath, we were prepared to be sold to our owners, our men. Sometimes, we would ask our shepherd's wife why we couldn't only want to exist. Why was it necessary for us to be sold off to our owners? To this, she would always say, 'You are not bulls. You are heifers. This is not America. This is Pakistan. This is how a heifer lives here.'

Sarbjit Pall, Oldbury, UK

I was inspired to write my poem with it being this time of year – Christmas. I have many memories of Birmingham around Christmas time as I lived and worked in the city for many years. I have not been back to where my memories were created, but they still are very fresh in my head. I saw this opportunity at the right time as I felt I could easily put how I felt in writing. I have been following Sampad and the work they do for many years now. I am really happy to take part in this competition.

The Brummie in Me

I suppose there will always be a ‘Brummie’ in me, even though it has been years

Since I left this colourful city and her memories of dare, mischief, and memories you will hear.

A nervous me sat in my first job interview in a new crisp white shirt, going with the flow.

The stern-looking one in the panel said proudly, ‘We have the largest Council outside of Europe, did you know?’

Weeks later, a letter arrives sporting a Birmingham City Council letter headed paper!

I got the job! I was introduced to an empty dusty desk and an abundance of knowledge for years to come.-

Twenty-something, strutting my stuff in Carvela heels along Colmore Row,

After work gossip, a ‘curry in a hurry’ and cappuccinos on the go,

Passing and thanking one of my favourite places, which is Birmingham Cathedral,

Where I once sat. I would feel solace, send a prayer to many
and lose the outside world's upheaval.
Always ready to attend the 'Carols in the Community'
lunchtime service,
To sing along with Christian carols and grab a mince pie from
the person serving.

See you on the last Friday of the month, without fail!
Let's go up 'town' and find something to wear in the sale.
For it is the Bollywood night at Club DV8 – isn't that the venue for
gays?!
Oh, you must try it – who cares if anyone sees you or what the
Auntyji's will say!
The hours we spent dancing and laughing at the Custard
Factory disco nights,
We were victim to aching heels and sore throats the next day
alright!

Meet me by the ramp, I'll hop on the number 78,
The Midland Metro has broken down again and there still is no
update!
It is Christmas, listen to the steel drum's sweet sound along the High
Street,
We can get to the Jewellery Quarter in no time, to that small café for a
cuppa and a sugary treat.
Then back to browsing freely in the Oasis market and a stroll in
the Pallasades,
To pass that poor version of the Santa Claus grotto, that never
quite made the grade.

Four giggly youth sitting third row at Pebble Mill Studios,
I've bagged four tickets to watch the filming of Network East and we
might feature on video!

And how can I forget the ‘hungama’ at the Birmingham REP
when queuing to watch a play called ‘Behzeti’,
What was all the fuss about? Cannot wait to watch the play and see!
So much to join in with, Chinese New Year and Birmingham
Pride,
Who said there is nothing to do around here, and that romance
had died?

I can still smell the damp sitting in my nostrils when visiting
the Handsworth indoor market,
I am five years old, waiting anxiously to have my ears pierced
from the Indian lady fumbling with my earlobes, finding her
target.
£3.50 for the job done and sparkly red studs,
After that, I nagged my mother to give me 25p to buy a branch
of catkin Pussy Willow buds.
The Rag Market, another one of my favs! Where my posher
friends would not be seen dead in, going there was only for the
brave!
This is Birmingham and all that she gave.

So, fast forward, double that twenty-something wants to visit
these haunts again,
Where do I start, as some are no more, and everything seems
to have changed?
*Can I still take that shortcut over Victoria Square to Broad Street by
foot?*
*Or shall I risk negotiating the new routes and one-way systems or shall
I simply stay put?*
You see, I will have two sprogs in tow,
And a husband who is not in the know
About the Brummie in Me and all I have to show.

Rama Rani Joshi, Birmingham, UK

I have been writing more about my life as I get older in the form of short stories and poems. This title inspired me to reflect on the period time when I first arrived in Birmingham which I learnt to adopt as my home. Recently I have had three books published of poems and short stories.

My City, My Home: Birmingham

Nearly half a century ago, I arrived in Birmingham with my husband as a newly married bride. I was full of apprehension, expectations, and terribly homesick. I arrived on a dull grey January evening, wearing a bright colourful sari.

My husband had spent two years in the UK before going to India to get married. It was an arranged marriage. He had not painted a rosy image of life here but had assured me that there were opportunities for work and further education.

I had grown up in Shimla, a hill station, where my father was a government employee. Later we had moved to Le Corbusier's planned city – Chandigarh.

I had read countless novels by writers in English, including novels by Thomas Hardy, Charles Dickens, and Jane Austen to name a few. I did not know anything about Birmingham, which I learnt later, was the city of a thousand trades. The things in my favour were my previous education and my hopes of going to university for a postgraduate degree in English. I had told myself that I was going to be here for 2-3 years.

Did all this prepare me for the stark reality of cold, dark days and nights ahead? Despite all my mental preparation, homesickness affected me badly. I shed countless tears – all the time telling my family in India that life here was wonderful. I would write about my visit to big department stores where I had gone to buy

‘imported’ lipsticks. I saw no sense in making them feel upset.

I stayed initially with my in-laws in an inner-city area where they had been living for some years. They were desperate to go back and did not think much of life here. The people around me, where I lived, were villagers from India and Pakistan who hardly spoke any English. I used to wonder how they had managed to come here.

It took me some time to realise that the work in the factories and foundries, where so many of them worked, did not require much English. Some of them had their own houses, drove cars, ran shops, and were helping other members of their extended family to come and work here. Soon I was full of admiration for them and their achievements. I learnt so much from them about life in this country. It also made me see my problems in perspective. What was I complaining about?

There was no job waiting for us and we had to struggle to find suitable openings. My husband soon realised that we needed to get out of the house and meet people. But how? The area where we lived, had a community centre and we came to know that there was a vacancy to cover the office on Saturdays, from 10 am to 7 pm. The pay for that would be two pounds and fifty pence. We accepted this because our motive was to meet people.

And what a godsend that turned out to be. We met countless people there who came for help and advice. In reality, we were the people who were getting help and advice. The other benefit was that we met people from different nationalities and backgrounds.

The people who walked through those doors did not only come for advice; some of them came to volunteer their time and services. Quite a few of them became our friends and went out of the way to help us – for instance, by making us aware of job opportunities and imparting knowledge of this country. Some of them invited us to their homes and there were opportunities to share food from different countries.

I remember how happy I was to learn about the different libraries

and parks in Birmingham. I feel pleased to say that the varied cultural activities at the Midland Arts Centre have benefited me and my family over the years.

Of course, what helped me was that I was genuinely curious and asked endless questions. It took me a long time to realise that asking some of those questions was not the ‘done’ thing here, but I am glad that I was ignorant of this protocol initially. I learnt so much. I should also say that I, on my part, was also willing to answer questions. I remember that questions about arranged marriages and the caste system in India came up a lot.

People have asked me whether I encountered any racism and was I aware of it. Initially, I was not aware of it, and I thought that people behaved like that due to ignorance. I believed that because I was in a new country, it was up to me to make more of an effort. Once they get to know me, I would think, people would behave differently – and very often they did. I know now that the problem of racism is a lot more complex.

Life did not suddenly become easy, but after a period of time, we both had jobs. I enrolled in a part-time postgraduate course at Birmingham University, we bought our first two-up, two-down house and had our first child. But all this took a good three to four years.

When I look back, I can truthfully say that living away from India, a country I never wanted to leave, has taught me so much. It has opened my eyes to a whole new world of people and ideas. It has benefited me socially and increased my understanding of the world we live in. I feel a part of the community where I live.

Yes, Birmingham is my home, as it has been for so many years. After I visit India, I feel so relieved to return to Birmingham, my adopted homeland. As a result of my involvement in the community, I was appointed the first Black/Asian Justice of Peace to serve as a magistrate in Birmingham. I worked in this position for thirty-six years and guess what? I continued to wear saris throughout my working life.

Jacky Hotchin, Birmingham, UK

This was originally written after my reading/ writing group had read Toni Morrison's Jazz, in which the city seems to be a character in its own right, and strongly supported by its music. I wanted to use that idea as a starting point for an exploration of my own city. The eponymous 'Fairy' was inspired by a Black Sabbath song. I've woven in references to other Birmingham musicians and appropriated James's 'Sit Down' from Manchester because it seemed to fit. It is my favourite song and being proud of your own tunes doesn't mean you can't welcome others.

I hoped to convey something of Birmingham's vibrancy, diversity, and feistiness, and also how change, contrast, and contradiction are inherent in the nature of cities in general and, specifically, of this city.

I'm not native to Birmingham, but I have lived here longer than anywhere else. Sometimes, if asked where I'm from, I am unsure how to respond; I don't feel that there's any place where I have 'roots'. I'm not 'from' Birmingham, but it has become 'My City and My Home' and I belong here more than anywhere else.

Fairy in Boots

I am the Fairy in Boots, and this is my city. I was young before the mounds were burnt, before the Beormingas settled, before Domesday. Twenty shillings! How I laughed. Through Battle and Blitz, gunfire and bomb blast, devilry and anarchy, dancing in the flames, I was young. I am forever young because this is my city, and I am the fairy in boots.

I am in the middle of everywhere. Come to me and go wherever you like.

Follow bright painted lines to the big red post-box for opulent dreams. Resist the silver-blue lure of the sinuous cyborg. Disenchantment lurks within. Up the escalator to be sure you're never knowingly undersold. Down the High Street for trusty knickers and sensible shirts.

My hollering markets fizz and buzz. Fine silk, fresh fish, cheap fruit and sweets, and sparkly cartoon socks.

And those who seek will find my secret enclaves for illicit indulgence of their most miscreant desires.

Listen. My city is full of noise. Preacher men and flower sellers. Repent. Turn to Allah. Jesus will save you. Last few bunches – five for a pound. Bless you, bab. Tara a bit. End times approach. A nocturne breaks free from the Symphony Hall. Sirens howl blue.

A street corner rapper beats a rhythmic vernacular. Passing conversation in a myriad of diverse tongues.

Sit astride my bull. Run your hands across his angry sculpted rump. A quickening in your belly, a chill in your fingertips, the taste of slaughter on your tongue. Pose for a selfie.

Here in my landlocked city, there are sea sharks, green turtles, and a colony of bemused penguins. My spirit has sailed the world. Beware. The piranhas snap. Step back. Sail away. Say goodbye.

My cathedral rests in a green plaza peopled by stout pigeons. Share your meal deal with them. Sit on the bench by that girl with blue hair and purple lipstick. Breathe deep the skunky musk she blows out. Go in and light a candle. Hope that God exists.

Slide onto a sofa in the backstreet cinema where once I sat alongside pinstriped men and excited boys to watch topless girls. Today it's upmarket quirky, black and white with subtitles. Text the bar for a cocktail or a bowl of jellybeans or a glass of red, red wine.

Wonder at my pagoda. Mr Wing Yip built that for me, to say thank you. Thank you for having us, thank you for welcoming us. My pleasure. Thank you, Wing Yips, for soy sauce and roasted seaweed, for Loo Choo, and Mee Goreng, and sweet Nian Gao.

Brave the sour subway beneath my pagoda. Pull your sleeping bag tight around your neck. Hope for some eye contact, some loose change for a hot drink, half a chocolate bar guiltily retrieved from the bottom of a briefcase. If you hadn't seen such riches you could cope with being poor.

Sit down, James Dobbs. Sit down, Jon Wilks. Sit down next to me. Brummagen has altered so but set aside your grief and woe. I still have Snobs. I still have rogues. I still have grime and adult shops. I'm not so clean and not so safe. I'm not so far from what you know. Let all your melancholy go.

I am the Fairy in Boots. Put down your net. You can't catch me or pin me down. I beat my wings; I rise up high. I stamp my feet. I change my shape. I love this city. I hate this city. I am this city.

Cara-Louise Scott, Birmingham, UK

The prompt made me think about what the difference is between a city and a home and how, as a university student, I feel as though I have two homes. I wanted to demonstrate how I felt living in a new place in which I had admired for so long and dreamt about living in, Birmingham, and also the way in which a city and home can feel to an individual.

My City, My Home: Birmingham

Are they the same place or do they completely
contrast one another because
my city is not my home, yet
my home is not my city,

but this city is supposed to be my home.
My new home.

Birmingham.

The place sounds foreign on my lips
but familiar in my heart,
it is the place where I want to be,
the place I
chose
for myself.

The second city,
a place that feels like a less chaotic London,
but still so vibrant
and full of opportunities,
a diverse multitude of being,
so much to see,
so much to do.

At least I have three years here,

to explore
the wondrous sights that cascade outside my flat window.
Well, there are just trees in my vision,
but they just show
how natural this city is.

Winterbourne Gardens, Cannon Hill Park,
the lake on the Vale,
the green of my campus.

Its beauty astounds me.

Old Joe, in all its glory
stands proudly.
A momentous point.
A focal point
for our eyes
surrounded by the new and the old
buildings,

a foundation for our
learning,
a place for our
yearning
for more.

And in its centre
stands the bull –
always dressed up.
Like us.

Selfies are taken and
strangers are mistaking
us for tourists.

But this is our city now.

We laugh and we stumble,
drink pumping through our veins,
the canal paves our way and
the library fascinates me.
I have never seen a library so
Funky,
So eloquent.

The lights guide us toward the eye,
It reminds me of a snake,
Grand Central –
How can a station be so big?

We nearly missed our train
but it's okay
because we were all sat
together
in our city.

It may never be like this again.

This shall just become a
memory
much like now,
as I sit on the grass
in front of old joe
writing poetry with
words spilling on the page,
on the white empty canvas,
like graffiti on a wall

and this –
this is when I feel as though
everything I've ever wanted
is here
in front of me

and these dreams
are no longer dreams,
and this city
is no longer just my city.

It is my home.

Sabahat Jahan, Dhaka, Bangladesh

As a single mother, I wear many hats – some by choice and others by necessity. Somewhere, buried beneath an avalanche of responsibilities, there is a woman – or someone who was once only a woman. What a luxury that appears to be now: to be able to be a living, feeling, breathing woman who is ablaze with hunger and dreams and longings. I wish to return, not so much to a physical place like a childhood home or a street or even a country, but to that feeling of freedom, of hope, when everything seemed possible, and no illusions had been shattered. Perhaps that is home?

Time Travel

I woke up this morning to find
two decades had passed
(since last night):
I was a mother, a father, a daughter, a son
and a million nameless things.

People had died, places had changed,
homes had shattered –
some repaired, some beyond repair –
and the dust from collapsed lives floated in the
murky air.

I woke up this morning to find
two decades had passed.
(since last night)

Sabahat Jahan, Dhaka, Bangladesh

As I've grown older, I have come to think of home, not so much as a physical space, but rather as a feeling. Often, it's a feeling of belonging; sometimes, it's a feeling of loss, longing, and nostalgia. This poem speaks to the fluidity and to the multiple definitions of home, and how they can change and shift over time.

Shapeshifter

In the many faces you now wear
It's often hard to recognise the you that's real –

The one who waited for hours on the steps of my
crumbling building
Only to catch a glimpse of me venturing onto the balcony
to dry the clothes in the burning summer heat,

The you who ran to get me a rickshaw in the rain
While I waited in the comfort of the building's shade,

The you who drove an hour each way to sneak in and kiss
me
While my parents were away at a farewell do,

The you who wrote letter upon letter and handed them
to sisters, cousins, friends, and neighbours,
Hoping that somehow they would reach me,

The you who cut his hair short or grew it long
Depending on what I preferred,

The you who wouldn't fall asleep until dreams descended
on my heavy lids,

The you who defied faith and family, religion and rituals
To follow your reckless heart,

The you who scattered petals on our wedding bed and
bought mismatched curtains
For our first anniversary,

*Where's the you who would turn off the lights as soon as I said I
was sleepy?*

I guess time robs us of many things,
Including the people we once were.

Marisha Aziz, Chittagong, Bangladesh

I focused on the idea that the city that is one's birthplace is not always their home. Rather, home is more of a collection of ideas and feelings attached to a location, and this may be somewhere far from one's birthplace. Through my work, I tried to detail one woman's journey of discovering this idea about herself and her true home.

A New Home

The chilly breeze whipped a few strands of her hair into Selina's face as she scanned the road for an empty rickshaw. The incessant rain had only stopped an hour ago, so there were few vehicles to be seen. In her eyes, Sylhet was always at its finest after a good bit of rain. The air always felt cleaner, the leaves on every tree vibrant, rejuvenated by the downpour. Even the gloomy sky added to the beauty. Yet it did nothing to lift Selina's mood today.

She gave up on finding a rickshaw with a sigh. Selina had to stock up on some groceries, and her destination wasn't too far, so she set off at a brisk pace.

As she walked, she struggled to shake away the irritation gnawing at the back of her skull. The cause of her worries was quite simple, really. She had been out late with a few friends the night before, and once she'd gotten back to her dorm, she'd pulled her phone out to let her mother know she had returned, as she always did. Only this time, in her haste to assure her anxious mother, she typed out 'I'm home' and hit send. It was only when her mother had replied, 'What? You're here?! What?' when she had realised her error.

It was only a two-word text, but it carried more weight than any ordinary paragraph. Selina had been living in Sylhet for only two years. Chittagong was where she had been born, where she had spent the majority of her life. How could she dismiss eighteen years' worth of memories with just two words?

She soon came up to the familiar shop front and entered. The place appeared to be empty of people, yet the room still felt crowded, thanks to the stacks of everyday objects piled against the walls. Selina cast her eyes around the department store, attempting to find the items on her list amongst the haphazard mess.

'Ah, Selina apa, how are you?'

A man had popped up from behind the desk on the very corner of the store. Selina's face immediately broke into a smile.

'Alhamdulillah, bhaiya, I'm good, how are you?'

They exchanged pleasantries before he snatched the list from her hands, immediately setting out to hunt down the items on it. It always amused Selina that she was on first-name terms with the owner of this shop. Had anyone at any of the big superstores back home ever asked her about her day, or her studies? Had she bothered to ask them, either?

Once she'd collected the necessities, she waved goodbye before stepping back out onto the sidewalk. The afternoon sun was peeking out from behind the curtain of clouds, casting weak rays of light onto the road ahead. The groceries had been her only errand, but she didn't feel like returning to her room just then. Instead, she walked on towards the intersection ahead, craving a cup of steaming tea from the stall in front of the Kazi Nazrul Auditorium.

The street widened as the intersection loomed nearer. Gradually, the silence in the air was replaced by a medley of sounds. Water splashed outside a fruit shop. Vendors announced the prices of their wares. At the open bazaar right before the intersection, a riot of colours bloomed against the dull brown backdrop of the road. Fresh vegetables lured pedestrians into haggling prices with the salesmen.

At the auditorium gate, though, the scenes carried a stark difference. Food carts lined the sidewalk, their eclectic menus giving rise to a heady aroma in the air. People were flocking to the food carts, their voices mingling together to create a cacophony of noise, but it didn't bother Selina as much as noisy crowds had before. She deftly avoided the clusters of people and made her way towards her favourite stall and, once there, she spotted Zarin and Ali, two of her friends from college, sipping on their glasses of tea and engrossed in a serious discussion.

'They can't just spring an exam routine on us like this!' Zarin exclaimed, a few drops of tea spilling over her cup in her indignation.

'Well, they just did,' Selina chimed in. Her friends whipped their heads around.

'What brings you here?' Zarin asked, looping her free arm through Selina's.

'Mama!' Ali motioned to the man behind the tea stall for another cup of *gur-er chaa*.

The conversation resumed, moving from upcoming exams to recent campus gossip. Selina stood there, letting her friends' words wash over her like a soothing balm as the cup of tea warmed her fingers. Even after two years, Selina still felt surprised at the ease with which she could slip into conversations, the blind certainty with which she could refer to these people as her friends.

She cast her gaze around the place, taking in the sky streaked with shades of pink and purple as sunset approached, the great tree on the opposite side of the intersection, gently swaying in the breeze. The city bustled all around her, unaware of all it had given her. She had made and lost friends at this place. There were days she had laughed her heart out, and also days where she had cried more tears than she had thought possible. Days she had been elated, intimidated, nervous, confident, heartbroken, lovesick, restless, at peace — all witnessed by the same Sylhet sky, which seemed to have just as many moods as her. If she were to be truly honest with herself, she had lived, truly lived, far more in these two years than she ever had during her eighteen years at Chittagong.

The one tie she had thought she had to Chittagong was her family, yet she knew they would be a part of her regardless of her location. But home — home seemed to have dug its roots into the last place she had expected it to.

Zehra Nawab, Karachi, Pakistan

As a journalist and as someone very fond of engaging with history found in books and those passed down through conversations with elders, I wrote my story in the backdrop of the British Raj in the Subcontinent. The story is based in Karachi, in the city I grew up in, a city that is my home and my muse. The dynamic between the colonisers and the colonised has always fascinated me. I took this opportunity to explore a scene and an interaction that is based on true facts and locations, but I have explored them through a human lens, imagining some of the emotions, sights, the pains, and the joys.

Vermillion

The day starts for the poor long before it does for the rich, for the ruled long before it does for the rulers, for the sun long before it does for the moon, for the Indians long before it does for the British.

It is a dewy morning in 1937, Sukena makes her way from the servant quarters to the main grounds of the palatial residence. The drifting clouds slice through the soft yellow rays reflecting off of the magnificent yellow limestone structure that Memsahab¹ Anne calls her humble abode. Her husband, Lancelot Graham had been made Governor of the province of Sindh in British-ruled India, a little under a year ago. As Sukena's brother readies the horses in the stables for the Governor's morning ride, she runs past him, hurrying indoors to supervise the domestic staff as they prepare breakfast. Keeping Victorian traditions alive in a land oceans away from Great Britain, the Englishmen and women do not start their day without a hefty morning meal.

¹ Memsahab: A respectful term used by non-whites in British-ruled India to address the British women from the ruling elite.

Today's selection made by Sukena includes an array of Anglo-Indian concoctions and, since this is Karachi, the city by the sea, the menu includes a lot of fish. Outside Memsahab's room, the punkah-wallah² shift is ending, and the next manual fan-operator is taking his place. The pulley attached to the ceiling flap-fan makes a swift exchange of hands.

Sukena stands outside the door, tidying her hair quickly and bending low to rotate the doorknob that is at knee level, a clever design to ensure a bow-down by whoever enters the room. There is still half an hour till Memsahab Anne has to be awakened; Sukena opens her almirah to take out the long white summer gown with red painted daisies. And to match... the red shoes, of course. As she takes these into the dressing room, Sukena glances over her shoulder to ensure the muffled snores can still be heard. She takes off her kohlapuri³ chappals to slip her small brown feet into the glistening red square heels. She marvels at her reflection: tall, regal, moneyed.

The early morning service, from the Holy Trinity Cathedral, wisps into the room as does the spiritual longings and chatter of the myna bird. Memsahab slowly begins to awaken.

Anne Graham has ruby-coloured rouge on her lips that she softly wipes with her handkerchief after finishing breakfast. The turbaned servant clears the table as she expresses a desire to have an oil head massage before her Sunday bath.

'I was planning on getting the almond oil pressed and delivered before waking you up today, but I ran late, Memsahab. I shall

2 Punkah-walla: The manual operator of the large swinging cloth fan suspended from the ceiling.

3 Kohlapuri: South Asian handcrafted leather slippers/ footwear.

just go and get it for you from the Empress Market. You enjoy the morning newspaper.’ Sukena hurries out of the dining room, ‘I will be back before you finish the front page!’ she chirps.

As Sukena prepares the horse carriage with the help of her brother, Memsahab Anne approaches the stables accompanied by a male servant holding an umbrella over her head. She has in one hand a small, embroidered purse and in the other the newspaper.

‘I want to come along for some fresh air,’ she says.

The coachman takes the reins as the two women get seated in the carriage covered with a folding top. The horse saunters towards the market.

Once the almond oil is bought, Sukena buys a rose from a nearby stall and, with the day’s purchases in the jute bag, the two women exit the Empress Market. While the coachman helps Memsahab into the carriage, Sukena runs to the southern corner of the building to place the rose on a small pile of flowers, petals, and incense sticks. Memsahab, watching her from afar, enquires about it once Sukena returns.

After some probing, Sukena says, ‘The flowers are for the martyrs, a way to tell them they are not forgotten, that they are still mourned.’

As the horse carriage moves forward, the grand limestone structure and the magnificent clock tower of the Empress Market, built on the ashes of a mutiny, fade into the background.

The Mutiny of 1857 according to the British, the War of Independence according to the Indians. Sukena’s mind drifts into the abyss of memories, her grandmother’s voice reverberating through her mind. She would often speak about the year 1857,

the year when Indian princely states and native soldiers from the British army rebelled against the gora sahab's¹ oppressive policies. The uprising across various parts of the Subcontinent was an unsuccessful one, and the agitators were duly punished.

In Karachi, those who were not hanged or sent via the port to the KalaPani² prison, were tied to the mouths of cannons and blown to smithereens on a large flat tract of land in the city centre. It was a message to anybody who dared risk rebelling again. Sukena's grandmother often recalled that, in the subsequent weeks, the massacre ground would be strewn with rose petals by the locals — the scarlet of the petals signifying the blood of the freedom fighters.

Fearing the space would become a permanent memorial to the martyrs, the British decided to build a monument on the site dedicated to Queen Victoria, Empress of India. And so, in 1858, the Empress Market was built on the ground hallowed by the blood of martyrs. The same grounds now inundated by vendors and buyers; a history rewritten; a history forgotten.

Sukena's great-grandfather was amongst those massacred on this site. Her grandmother referred to that day as 'when smoke rose from the ground in anger; the day the air above the bloodied earth felt dense' — to their family, it still does.

Perhaps this enslavement is in their blood, tied to their fate, Sukena thinks to herself. All the while helping cool Memsahab with a hand fan as they ride back to the Governor's House.

1 Gora sahab: A term used by non-whites in British-ruled India to refer to a white British man.

2 Kala Pani: A colonial prison in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in India. A prison for political prisoners, mutineers, and those of grave threat to British rule in the Indian Subcontinent.

Sumeera Wahid, Abbottabad, Khyber Pakhtoon Khwa (KPK), Pakistan

The title of this competition was my inspiration. When I read it, I felt a surge of emotions building up in my heart. For a long time, I had wanted to pen down my feelings about what I had been through after Osama bin Laden was caught from Abbottabad. Leaving the political impact of the event aside, I wanted to voice the feelings that were felt by the common people.

The human mind is amazing at forgetting negative experiences and remembering the things which make us happy. However, this particular incident stayed with me for a long time. I still remember that, at that time, I had felt myself fast-tracking through all the stages of grief in one brief moment. The denial, anger, and bargaining all melted into one amalgam of emotions shaking the core of my soul. Hundreds of fellow Abbottonians felt the same surreal emotions that were very nascent for the peace-loving citizens of this town. When I read the title of the competition, 'My City, My Home', I could actually feel all those memories coming back and I decided there and then to write.

Misunderstood

The rattling of the windowpanes was so vehement that it woke me from deep sleep!

Instantly I got up, as memories of the terrible earthquake of October 2005 flashed through my mind. My heart was throbbing hard. Barefooted, I ran out of my room.

'Mummy, Mummy!'

Frantically, I folded my stretched arms around my daughter.

'It's a helicopter! I saw it from my room!' she screamed.

‘It couldn’t be my dear! Must have been thunder!’ I tried to reason.

‘But I saw it!’

Before we could agree on what caused the noise, another rattle seared through the night sky, mocking my naivety as we stared into each other’s eyes. This time I, too, saw an extremely low flying helicopter, lurking through the darkness of the chilling night. Perhaps some military exercises were in progress. In less than twenty minutes, we heard a loud explosion, and then the sounds of a distant ambulance reverberated through the otherwise quiet night.

All kinds of thoughts crossed my mind. This was not an ordinary night!

Soon after, everything went back to normal. Puzzled by what it was all about, we had no choice but to catch up with our broken sleep.

Surprisingly when I opened my eyes again, I had almost forgotten the night’s episode. The golden glow of the spring Abbottabad sun welcomed me. From my window, I could see the endless greens of the beautiful valley. Mother Nature was bestowing upon me her magical wonders in the magical landscape of Abbottabad. What a romantic feast for the eyes!

It didn’t take us long to realise that last night was not a nightmare, but a stark reality. The press from all over was pouring out the story of US SEAL helicopters seeking to end the mystery of Osama bin Laden! Suddenly we were the centre of the world. I was shaken to the core of my soul. Surely not in my peaceful town? My home? Am I just having a bad dream?

Days passed but the dejection that had invaded me lingered on. I was hurt because this was not the true face of my city. I truly felt the urgency to do something that showed the world the real Abbottabad!

I was born, brought up, and married in Abbottabad. This was not just any place that I had chosen to live, rather it was the place that had given me respect as a woman and recognition for my work as a teacher. To be honest, it had given me all the best things in my life. My family, friends, and teachers, all the people I loved, were given to me by my city Abbottabad. It provided shelter to my immigrant father after the partition of the Sub-Continent. My grooming took place at the world-renowned Burn Hall, which was founded by highly dedicated missionaries after the creation of Pakistan. I found my life companion, my dear husband, in Abbottabad, and I gave birth to my beautiful children in Abbottabad. It was my home.

The people of Abbottabad feel proud of their city being the most peaceful city in the whole country. We can brag endlessly about our city having high literacy rates. We can tell stories about the best residential schools and the best teachers in the whole country hailing from Abbottabad.

Our charming city keeps us entranced for hours by the beauty of its evergreen pine forests that cover all the surrounding mountains of the Lesser Himalayas. Its dreamy Chinar Road is one of nature's greatest gift. Each season, the mesmerising beauty of its green and yellow and red and orange leaves casts a spell on us. Since its creation in 1853 by the British Raj ruler, Maj James Abbott, it has been famous for its snow-capped lofty mountains, its sparkling water streams, its clear blue skies, its walking tracks on Shimla Hill, its hospitable people who co-exist in exemplary religious harmony, its low crime rate, its delicious kebabs, and its central location for tourists and mountaineers travelling North in search of adventure and solace.

The speculative eyes of the world were unbearable. How could our city become famous overnight for all the wrong reasons? The love, safety, and comfort that I had always associated with my

home and my city were suddenly being questioned by the media. Didn't they know the great resilience that we showed during the terrible earthquake in October 2005? Didn't they know that poets like Iqbal and Faraz and James Abbott had borne witness to the galore and bounties of this city? Why had they overlooked the reality that it was a place which attracted artists from all over the world to capture its shades on their canvases in each of the four seasons?

Time passed as one season melted into the other. The melodies of summer remained unheard. The rustling of the autumn leaves couldn't move the strings of love in the hearts of the people of Abbottabad, and when winter set in, the melancholy of the desolated souls with the expanse of the frost became a visible reality. It appeared as if an emptiness had engulfed the whole city.

It so happened that one cold February morning the chirping of a robin in the balcony of my room interrupted my gloom. I looked at my empty hands and felt time slipping away like sand. The robin kept chirping as if calling me to itself. A golden ray of the early morning sun was peeping through a slit in the curtain. I pulled the curtain apart. The little bird flew away but only to find a spot on the branch of a nearby pink magnolia that was all covered in flower buds, all ready to bloom in a day or two. My heart skipped a beat as I realised that spring was in the air again. The shadows were moving back, and the golden sun was ready to bathe everything with its mellow intensity.

It was a new day in my Abbottabad!

Solmaz Regi, Karachi, Pakistan

Despite the current conditions of my city, I call myself an optimist.

My City, My Home

The title ‘My City, My Home’ sounds very claiming to me. It’s almost as if someone is forcing the idea on us. Or they want to make believe a thought very alien to the residents of Karachi. The thought is pretty scary for me! I live in Karachi, the city often numbered amongst the top twenty unsafe and most populated cities of the world. With this comes both good and bad.

For the residents of Karachi, the relativity is low. We are used to building our extreme homes and spaces safe with double locks and security cameras; the Elite hire security agencies to protect them. It is very common for us to block our balconies, lock all ways to the rooftop. Putting up grill bars on glass windows is the one I hate most; it robs the entire beauty of looking outside and feeling the city sky. We build barriers as much as possible to keep ourselves safe from the City. Yes, we are not free! We are caged inside our homes to be safe and separate from the city itself. My city! And the comma in the title is very meaningful.

The thought of low fence gardens, open porches, roadside playgrounds, no bar windows, and a life free of locks and guards, runs in anxiety through our thoughts. As much as it sounds normal to the rest of the world, it is an almost impossible thing to achieve, as reality, here in Karachi.

Our previously famous Mayor had to run a campaign with the slogan ‘I Own Karachi.’ This thought was new to everyone. Many were happy, for it was actually happening. Many related. We all started with thinking out our priorities. Yes, we want a clean, safe, modern, and organised city with all the possible

‘greats’ in the world. After all, we are amongst the largest cities in the world, so we need to get to the best title too.

This was our metropolitan dream coming to reality. Humans crave to be hopeful; they want to have faith in better days, better homes, and better cities. It felt like our dream was making sense. We want to own our city like our home.

We want to keep it safe, but from who? Who is the owner of this land? Trouble starts right then and there.

Karachiites are mostly outsiders. The land was developed as a hub and port trade centre and, in a span of one hundred years, it has become the largest of them all. Everyone belongs to somewhere else. Everyone has migrated. The closest to home are the people sharing the province. Yet we don’t relate to them, we obviously don’t trust them with the city that we claim to be our home. The ethnicities, the religion, the migrations, our histories, they all break us apart. Where is the solution to this all?

I’m a woman who has to walk the streets alone. I’m independent and liberal. I have my family’s support for independent living and, no, I don’t want to leave my city. Emotionally it is an attachment, an ownership we all feel towards it. Being a Karachiite is rather cool here. But in reality, does me being here or not being here actually matter? Am I safe here the way I am at my home? Do I feel free like I do when I walk the corridor of my home? If I have to face any of the common accidents that Karachiites come across, will I be helped or saved?

The city is bursting with street crime, rape cases, murders, and kidnapping – many of this is not even reported on official counts. The main reason remains the lack of justice served. This all is, thanks to the lack of police vigilance, bribe culture, corrupt systems, and divided political interests that make justice-seeking very complicated. I really don’t want to be saying all this, but fact and wishful thinking should be kept as separate entities.

A large population of our city engages in social work, of all kinds. It varies from women’s rights to orphanages, to feeding

the poor, to taking up cases of the street dancing transgender and what not. This is our coping mechanism.

We are forced to help ourselves under any circumstances because we know for a fact that no one is coming to help. There are no law implementations. There is no quick justice. So we have evolved to keep safe, play safe, put our guards up, not trust strangers, and keep our boundaries well-guarded.

Coming from all of this, and thinking of ‘My City, My Home’ is scary. Because we are not kids anymore, this is not fiction. Our world doesn’t end in the green park with swings and butterflies. The city is vast, thriving, and dangerous, but the mafias exist and also thrive.

Despite, a lot of material opportunities and good happenings for businesses, we keep our circles closed. We stay in our business only. We cannot mingle with people from all walks of life. We certainly keep the boundary between ‘My City’ and ‘My Home.’

Yes, we do want to open up, and I like we’re in a dream city. I work towards that with whatever means I have, in hopes of making a city more like a home. It’s actually not the system or them, it’s all of us! We are all in this together. I make it safe for my neighbour and he takes it forward. This is the way we want to live here. As much as it sounds ambitious, I believe we have started, as self-realisation is the first step. I see the good unfolding, but the pace is slow.

I am hopeful for the days where I’d calmly say ‘My city, my home’ with a smile, without having to compare the two in anyway. I am hopeful for the days when I walk the streets of downtown like it’s my own garden. I am hopeful for ‘My City’ to be truly ‘My Home.’

Salsabil Alam, Chittagong, Bangladesh

I came from a spiritual and superstitious city called Chittagong which is a 2000-year-old city. My city is very green and has a plethora of verdant hillsides and beaches. My hometown is famous for its seafood and mosques. I never go to mosques, but I hear the sound of the azaan. I think a lot of people in my hometown work in garment factories, as there is a myriad of garment factories. People in my hometown speak with a kind of Chittagonian dialect. My city always makes me feel special because I was born and grew up in this city. For the past two years, I make frequent visits to Singapore for my lupus treatment. So when I travel to the airport, I can see the beauty of my whole city. It makes me feel alive and inspires me to do something for my city, especially for the destitute workers. I always think about how low-income Bangladeshi workers deal with lupus. After I complete my bachelor's degree, I will contact several NGOs and hospitals. With the help of them, I will commence a lupus awareness program and provide free medications and treatment for destitute workers and folks. I am sure that I can start this program because my city my home always inspires me.

The Endless Journey of My Spiritual City

The spiritual sound of the azaan brings my consciousness back to the real, harsh world. Every time I wake up, I don't know what I am alive for; but the first ray of morning sun forces me to get up from my warm cosy bed.

As I put my warm feet on the cold floor, a burst of chill hits my body, but the melodious whistle of the winter birds makes me forget about the instant chill and piques my curiosity towards the balcony. The crispy cold and the mist-ridden morning make

the Kazim Ali High School more appealing. I have grown up seeing this 168-year-old high school: one of the oldest and most renowned high schools in Chittagong, founded by the British government.

As I walk towards the dining room, the smell of brewing tea fills me with ecstasy. However, life becomes a living hell when the medicine catches my attention. After I was diagnosed with the lifelong genetic disease known as lupus two years back, I have not been able to enjoy my scrumptious breakfast because the Lucifer inside my head never lets me forget that I have to take my medicine immediately after my breakfast. As a repercussion, I forget what breakfast tastes like.

The background sound of the kitchen brings my attention towards my mother, who says to me, ‘Eat your breakfast as soon as possible or we will be late for the flight to Singapore.’

Many people travel to Singapore during the festival time to enjoy their holidays. However, I travel to Singapore every six months only for treatment purposes. The saddest part of my life is that I never get time to travel to Singapore’s interesting and unique places.

While struggling to put my suitcase inside the car’s trunk, the driver uncle said to me ‘Let me help you.’

My mother says in an irritating voice, ‘Why do you have to carry that luggage? Let them do it.’

I say to her in a sarcastic voice, ‘Okay, next time just feed me food like a toddler.’

While the driver is struggling to get out from the narrow road, my eyes fix on Masjid-e-Siraj-ud-Daulah. It has 17th-century

architectural design and multiple domes painted in a kaleidoscope of colours which always amazes me.

As the car passes through the Chittagong college road, food vendors catch my attention – selling panipuri, chotpoti, dhup pitha, and malai tea on the footpath. I crave to eat those mouth-watering snacks, but the lost soul inside my head says to me that the physician warned me not to eat those yummy poisons.

Where do I take this sorrow? Sometimes I opine that my sorrow will not fill the Pacific Ocean. While in the traffic jam, I am struck by the angelic smile of a young woman crossing the Tiger Pass, a place where mountains and trees surround this evergreen road. This makes me forget about my sorrow. Whenever I see the two statues of a tiger at the Tiger Pass, my strength comes back immediately and I say to myself, ‘You were born to fight’.

Long ago in this location, a myriad of tigers was spotted and thus the inspired the name. The car is passing along the EPZ, the hub of garment industries, I wonder how low-income Bangladeshi women deal with lupus. Once I tried to put myself in the shoes – one of those of a garment worker who has lupus and has to do work in a sordid, small junction of a monstrous factory where she can barely afford the basic treatment for the disease with her ‘peanuts pay’. It might be hard for her to survive, let alone to think about the basic medication for her lupus. Does she curse her poverty and frown at me? Does she carry the ill-feelings that God unfavoured her by bringing upon her rotten luck and that she was abandoned both by money and a sound health?

I look at my mother and say to her, ‘Mum, thank you for everything.’

Mother asks me rather cautiously ‘What happened? Is everything okay?’

‘Everything is okay. Just chill Mum!’

‘This journey never makes me chill,’ she says callously.

Then the cacophonous sound of cargo ships which are sailing in the Bay catch my attention. This beach of my city is famous for its savoury food, stunning sunrises, and beautiful sunsets. It whizzes me back to Cox’s Bazar and I wonder how Chittagong is blessed with the world’s longest beach, founded by Captain Cox in 1798. Its golden sand, foamy waters, green and low hills make this beach exceptional. My memory flitted to and fro. Although for the past two years, due to my lupus, I couldn’t visit Cox’s Bazaar, I wonder why its melodious sound of waves is ringing my ear now.

Sometimes I think that my dream is as big as that beach and I promise to myself one thing: that after I complete my bachelor’s degree, I will contact several NGOs and hospitals. With the help of them, I will commence a lupus awareness program and provide free medications and treatment for destitute workers and folks. Recently I’ve realised that this city is the reason for who I am today and a plethora of things about the city bring me joy. Many cultural activities, museums, architectural heritage, and its glorious history make a city unique, but this city is alive because of its narrow lanes, crowded streets, and unruly traffic. It is not a big city, yet it bears the recognition of the commercial capital of Bangladesh which boasts the busiest seaport in the Bay of Bengal and keeps my country moving.

Suddenly I hear a roaring sound above. The sign of the airport on the roadside makes me alert that it is now time to deal with the luggage.

Mahabuba Rahman, Sylhet, Bangladesh

During the pandemic I couldn't stay alone at my own house because I am not married, and my parents live in another city. I had to travel from place to place only because I am not supposed to live alone. I then questioned whether I am really independent and established. I could relate myself to all the women around the world who are still manless and are considered helpless. This sudden thought inspired me to write a short prose or an autobiography.

To All the Women Who Do Not Have a Place of Their Own

I am from a small town in Bangladesh. I feel like I know every tree, every building, every season of the city. I was born at our home, my father's house if I have to be specific. I didn't know how it felt to live in rental houses. We never had to shift from one place to another. My childhood is full of memories of our home. I'm a proud 90's kid. We didn't have ips or a generator. During a power cut, we never got annoyed, rather we used to feel immense joy as there wouldn't be any studying for some time! We all would go to our roof with a mat and pillows and would gossip and sing together. Thus, our precious time used to pass.

Then, unfortunately, I grew up. I had to move to another city for my studies and after finishing my education I joined an office. After having my own income source, I decided to rent my own place. In Bangladesh, unmarried girls hardly ever get any space of their own. I had to show my parents to the owner to convince them for a space of my own.

I've been working for almost two years till now, having my own place, but surprisingly no one believes that! The first thing new people I meet ask me is 'Does your husband work here?' or 'Are you still living with your parents?' Why is it difficult to believe that I can have my own place too?

So, I asked my mum, 'What's wrong with the people? Why can't they accept an independent established woman? Why does she always have to live under someone's guidance?'.

My mum replied that, according to the beliefs of this society, all women are supposed to be men's property. Men will look after them, take care of them. Women are considered weak, both mentally and physically. They are not supposed to have their own place because they are supposed to live under someone else's supervision; a man's supervision.

Luckily, my father guided me enough to take good care of myself and the people around me. So, I continued to stay alone, at my own place, proving that I can guide myself.

Every day I maintain my office work and household. I socialise with neighbors and colleagues. I shop and cook for myself and the most important thing I do is keep myself happy. This is a letter to all the 'manless' women who are made to believe that they are weak, unable to manage themselves, and cannot have their own living place. Just believe that you are strong enough to create your own place, your own identity in the society, and do not believe anything else.

Saima Kamal, Karachi, Pakistan

My City, My Home: This theme was inspiring especially in this pandemic because I became more aware of my own surroundings and how we cannot escape what we know as home. We have to accept it with all its warts and learn to appreciate it in all its glory.

She Forgives

The ocean caresses her knees,
She dips her hair,
Just the ends,
And tastes it on the tip of her tongue.
She is sullen today,
Battered and bruised,
Bereft and bedraggled.
Her mood's no longer in her control,
How did she come to be this way?
My city Karachi!

She sashayed through the market,
Every eye on her curves,
Smiling coquettishly at all.
Her hair down to her waist,
Stars twinkling in each strand,
The moon beckoned to play.
She gave him no attention at all
For her heart only beat
With the love of the sea,
My city Karachi!

They cornered her one day,
They took away her green garb,
Their nails etched grooves across her sultry form.
She was sold for parts to the highest bidder,
No one came to her rescue
As she wailed for her life
They watched, her children, with apathetic eyes,
As they carried their mother to the grave
And even then, she yearned for her love,
The ocean, that never left her sight.

He crashed and tumbled,
He roared and raved,
He wanted her back in his arms.
It took every ounce of his mighty waves
To drag her back from harm,
And with the tenderness of a broken heart
He gathered her, and bathed her,
And caressed her wounds,
Until she sat back up again,
She yawned and stretched,
Her wounds forgotten,
She gathered her children in her arms,
They promised her attention and love
And she believed them,
Although she knew they would forget.
The ocean looked at her with love,
He knew that he would need to be here,
She needed a safe haven.
That is the tale
Of my city Karachi!

Saima Kamal, Karachi, Pakistan

The Female Jogger

She pulls her sneakers on. ‘Self-care’ was the term they were using in the pandemic. She simply picked it up to prove to herself that life had not stopped. Running was her tether to life. The aching muscles kept her alive and her growing fitness helped her stay motivated to get out of bed.

She had never truly appreciated the glory of her city until the lockdown. Until she was forbidden to go out and had the yearning to do just that. She began her jog after she had trekked down from the sixth floor of her apartment and turned into a lonesome lane that led her towards the main sea-facing promenade.

The ‘lonesome lane’ was the true challenge. There were three human forms, huddled together, their faces alight with the spark that lit the silver filament, equivalent to the rocket ship that takes astronauts into space. Here, the rocket was the chemical they ignited between them and inhaled. This morning, one of them was doubled over and retching into the gutter that ran alongside their living quarters. She averted her eyes and held her breath. She was reminded of how they tend to do that for everything in Karachi. If there is a garbage dump, they avert their eyes and hold their breath; when stuck in a road jam, vehicles spewing their toxins into the air, they need to live on, they avert their eyes and hold their breath; a heart-wrenching incident of child molestation and they avert their eyes and hold their collective breath till it becomes a distant memory.

She drowned it all out, jamming in her earphones and pushing the dial to max. She ran parallel to the Arabian Sea, and it became a soothing presence in her peripheral vision, father holding the hand of his child taking his toddling steps. No amount of prying eyes mattered once she was attuned to the rhythm of her legs.

There was that gentleman with his dog, always looking as though he would let go of the leash anytime because he just couldn't control his pet any longer. He reminds her of Karachi's daily challenges. The city dwellers are pulled in every direction as they try to manoeuvre around the pitfalls that are a metropolitan life. Survival in the city is no less than taking a huge, excited pet, on a leash that seems insufficient to keep it under check.

The lady holding one nostril at a time seems to be conserving oxygen for the rest of them. She watches her move into her usual Tae Kwan Do style arm movements. It is almost mesmerising, watching her go from extensions to bicep curls to reaching towards the sky trying to catch something imaginary from the air. She imagines her fellow citizens trying to make something special of the drudgery of everyday life. Being cogs in a mammoth wheel is not a palatable thought for any conscientious mind.

In a few minutes, she started to feel the exhilarating rush of cyclists passing her by. Their graceful, bent heads and their colourful garb propelled her to run faster. There was cockiness in the arrogant pedalling of their bikes, as though they could pedal their way out of any scrape. She realises how much of the essence of her beloved city is symbolised by this energetic troupe.

We are an arrogant lot of people, learning to work around every hurdle, finding loopholes and pushing past our own limits to be able to cycle past what is thrown at us.

Her walk back from the endpoint always makes her unstrap her phone from her arm and take a few pictures. The first few rays of the sleepy sun, the seashell – how did it come all the way to the pavement? Perhaps dropped by a collector. The waves were like a child's first stretch after being woken from slumber.

Having captured the glorious morning she turns into the lonesome lane only to find that her usual ‘companions’ are missing. Strange how she had first been uneasy due to their presence and now was finding the lane even more daunting in their absence. As she reaches halfway inside the lane, she hears the roar of a motorcycle, and it comes to an unnervingly close stop. The next few seconds are a burden that all women have felt, all over the world. It happens over and over and over again. She could be a woman in a burqa in a crowded market in Bangladesh. She might be wearing the skimpiest shorts in the middle of Birmingham, or she could be a female jogger in Karachi, she has been the target of this malice.

The motorcyclist has taken his penis into his hand in full view of her and anyone else who might be nearby and is in the process of masturbating vigorously while looking in her direction. She is frozen because no one ever expects this kind of violation.

Why did I wear this T-shirt? What will I tell my son and husband? They will be so embarrassed. They will not let me out. Were her first thoughts. The first thoughts of a 45-year-old, independent, educated woman.

‘This is my city too. I have as much right to be out here, enjoying myself, as you do. I am not a teenager any longer and I will not back down. I will not bow my head and let you go about your ‘business.’

She remembers the phone in her hands and simply points it at him. She relishes the haste with which he tucks himself inside his shalwar and kicks his vehicle into action. The phone camera is not even on. Her hands are shaking too much for her to be able to do that. It is her turn to ‘enjoy’ herself as she watches him almost topple under his bike as he makes a U-turn and makes his exit.

Mariam Hassan Naqvi, Lahore, Pakistan

The life of interior Lahore (old Lahore) is very close to my heart. The rich traditions, culture, and lives of the locals have been drastically suffered by the politicisation of religion and the state. While writing this piece, the topic 'my city my home' clearly revolves around these fragments of old Lahore's traditions and the nostalgia of a resident.

Story of a Bluebird

Bol, ke labh aazaad hain tere

People were chanting Faiz's ghazal in a disoriented chorus. The walls of Lahore's Pak Tea House were drenched in tea, cigarettes, and the sweat of progressive students. The orchestra of mall road's traffic was a piece of background music, making the air more melodious. Some fashionable ladies were laughing like free birds about some inside joke, and among all the voices, the sound of their giggles was the favourite melody for Sohni. Despite bearing Ammu's aggression every day, she manages to elope for an hour to hear the sound of their laughter, to see the wrinkles around their lips when they talk passionately about politics, and especially to watch the bluebirds in their eyes.

Qari Sahib of their Mohalla told her about those bluebirds in the eyes of modern women of the city which makes them blind to see the difference between morality and wrong deeds. According to Qari Sahib, these bluebirds will gradually turn into the huge vultures of the black playground behind Victoria School where people throw Sadqah's meat. After turning their disguise, these vultures will scratch the flesh and eyes out of these indecent women. Sohni became scared of them, and she never went back

to the black ground to grab the leftover meat even after having Ammu's fragile slaps.

She felt pity for the butter-like silky skin of these women, unlike Ammu. She suddenly recalled the freckles on her mother's skin and blemishes around her fleshless cheeks. Sometimes she wonders if the vultures of the black ground have eaten the flesh of her mother too, but occasionally Ammu looks pretty whenever she wears her best hot pink dress of jammawar. She also applies the smudged drains of her only lipstick by the tip of her finger. Those are the happiest days for Sohni because on such bright evenings random chachas, including Phuphi, Majida's very old husband, visits Ammu with sweets and chicken. These are the only days when they feed themselves fully. But Ammu never allows Sohni to meet them. After such visits, Ammu becomes more aggressive and protective. Sohni also finds scars on her mother's body after each visit as if she is secretly visiting the black playground of vultures to grab some meat.

The black ground was full of pigeons and flowers when Abbu was alive. Sohni vaguely remembers the fragmented memories of her father in their crumpled little old home which was soaked in the warmth of love. Abbu used to bring jasmine flowers from the Victoria School's garden every day for Ammu and she would wear them in her ears. Back then there were also bluebirds living in Ammu's eyes.

Abbu was a kite maker and the festival of Basant was like the event of Eid for them. Months before the event, their small house started smelling like the ointments of dyes and both Ammu and Abbu used to prepare different sizes of kites in vibrant colours. All rooftops of the interior Lahore would get booked by foreigners. The skin of the blue sky would look like the colours of the rainbow. After every Basant, there was a family

ritual of a picnic to Manto park, a movie of Dilip Kumar at King Cinema, and afterward her parent's long sitting session on an empty bench with a cup of tea from Lakshami chowk. In the meanwhile, Sohni always got the task of counting stars while Abu and Ammu would listen to Mehdi Hassan's, *Aj Janay ki zidd na karo*.

It was one of those fine days when they were returning home. A crowd appeared around their home with sticks and burners and rushed towards Abbu while chanting *gustakh* and *paleed*. Ammu clutched Sohni's hand tightly and they grabbed Abbu from his thin grayish hair. She saw Phuphi Majeeda's husband and Qari Sahib with the crowd kicking the fragile face of her father. He had a dispute with him last night when Abbu asked him to pay money for his purchase of kites. After that day Abbu never came home but Qari Sahib visited them with other respectable elders including Phuphi Majeeda's husband and he asked Ammu to recite *Kalima*. They also took away the big book of the Bible and pictures of Mother Mary, but Ammu still hides another Bible under the rack of the Quran.

Ammu and Sohni started making kites afterward until the ban by the government on Basant and kite flying. They never went for a picnic at the cinema because Qari Sahib told them it's forbidden in religion to watch indecent movies. Songs of Noor Jahan were also declared kafir. Sohni and Ammu were left with nothing that belongs to Abbu now.

The bluebirds in Sohni's heart always lured her to celebrate these infidels. She yearns to fly kites and dive into the ocean-like sky. She dreams about dancing like a peacock on the beat of Nazia Hassan's songs and she wants to embrace the bluebirds shrieking the ghazal of Faiz in her chest; *Bol k lab azad hein tere, bol, bol, bol.* *Bol* Sohni! she came consciousness from the heavy slap of Qari Sahib's scaly hands. He was asking her about the last lesson. Sohni suddenly started singing,

Khulne lage quflon ke dahaane
Phailaa har ek zanjeer ka daaman

Qari Sahib gave a strong kick on her back, *Kanjari!* he exclaimed. She started sobbing when he ordered that Sohni would stay here late until she memorises the whole lesson on one foot.

Black vultures were spreading around the ground behind Victoria School, the Moazan was giving the Azaan of Isha from Masjid Wazir Khan, and Ammu was roaming hysterically on the streets of Lahore looking for Sohni. Suddenly she saw a black vulture on her roof with blood on his jaws and a dead little bluebird in his claws. Faraway somebody in Pak tea house was singing:

Bol, yeh thodaa waqt bahut hai
Jism-o-zubaan ki maut se pehle
Bol, ke sach zindaa hai ab tak
Bol, jo kuch kehnaa hai keh-le!

Nubaha Tahannum, Chattogram, Bangladesh

Being a Bangladeshi, I see many young girls and women being married off. But some of them are confident and brave enough to stop child marriage – they run away from their old town and make a new town their own home, own city.

Divergent

A young woman, aged nineteen, is walking confidently through the aisle between the sewing machines.

Years ago, in the small village of Puthimari, Panchagarh people knew a shy, timid girl named Sumi. She was always attracted to education and was thus very studious. But her luck was not in her favour. Living in a family of seven and having a farmer father made her dreams shatter at the age of thirteen when she was just a student of Class 5. She was forced to get married which we term as ‘Child Marriage’ to a man sixteen years older than her.

Sumi was diffident at that age but the day before the wedding she somehow managed to leave all the bad memories in her house and escape to one of her closest teacher's houses. She did not know what she

had just done after reaching the teacher's house. But she was suddenly proud of herself. The teacher let her stay in her house for two days and stayed silent for those days.

But as they both knew the storm would come in a very short period, the teacher helped her to travel around 656 km and reach Chattogram, a new place for her. The teacher let Sumi stay in one of their relative's houses, which was quite a safe place to stay for some days. Sumi now is burdened with more responsibilities and knows what life actually is. With the help of the relative Sumi finds a job, a place to stay, and food to survive the starvation.

She is now a garment worker. Incidents changed her into a different person, a totally different Sumi, not the one that the villagers knew. Years pass by and she only thinks about how she came to this position, the responsibilities, the stability, and whatnot.

Now she is nineteen, walking confidently, boldly through the aisle between the sewing machines. Her big dreams to study more do not let her sleep, and she now thinks she can fulfil her dream one day.

Opshori Nondona Khan, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Durga is the goddess of womanhood and power according to Hinduism. But also, Durga Puja is one of the biggest festivals in Bengali culture. Bangladesh has always been an open-minded country and we believe in the spirit of happiness through the festival no matter what religion we belong to. Festivals are for everybody. Though I'm from a different religion, I always felt my Bengali root during Durga Puja. When I was a young girl, I used to go to visit Old Dhaka during Durga Puja, holding my dad's hand and the colours, lights, and the festive atmosphere gave me a different kind of courage and power inside. Durga Puja feels like home to me. But a few days ago, one of my close friends was sharing her horrible experience of Durga Puja – about how she was sexually assaulted and how it changed her perspective of her favourite festival. Her experience shocked me into silence, and for a while I didn't know what to say. All I was thinking about was the girls like her who have experienced this. The city which celebrates the goddess of womanhood with such devotion, will they celebrate 'us women' the same way? That's how 'My City and My Home' inspired me to write my poem.

Durga of My City

I'm Durga,
Goddess of womanhood,
Goddess of power
Hence I was named.
People worship me
With extreme devotion.
Welcoming Maa Durga,
My city

Was full of lights and joys.
Durga puja
My source of courage,
Discovered a unique inner energy.
Since I was named after her,
Goddess inside me,
I expected people to see
I was wrong –
They saw me as a mere weak girl,
I was only ten,
Screaming for help
Which I didn't get.
They gave demon looks
Their –
Dreadful evil laughs,
Bloody red eyes,
Disgusting hands,
Coming for me...
Took me and tore my clothes...
I couldn't even cry.
City lights and concretes
Witnessing the blues
Silent sighs,
Unseen tears,
Lifeless glances,
Of several Durgas.
They worshipped Maa Durga,
Her power and grace,
Yet treated this Durga with –
Their inner demons
Maa Durga defeated monsters,
However, this little Durga couldn't.

Madeeha Noor, Lahore, Pakistan

I left (ran away from), my country of birth, Pakistan, after forty one years in 2019 with two children in search of, what I had told myself at that time, a new place to heal, a new place to lay down my roots, to call home. I've lived a lifetime since, a year in isolation as it has been for most of us and have come to understand a simple truth: for us, the outliers, the rebels, vagabonds of the heart, the only true journey ever to be set upon is the one that leads back to ourselves. It is only when we find the courage to begin that, keeping our demons and fears by our side, broken, scarred, and chipped, that we truly begin to heal. When we do, we discover that 'home' is not a geographical location or a boundary to be 'found' – we carry it in us, in little buds of spring, in our hearts.

In Foreign Land

I don't know what happy endings look like.

I don't know.

I know what yellow looks like on a rain-wet day and the dance of the trees.

I know what happy looks like: my daughter skipping to the swings or a boat, not a sound but the chirp of a *mayna*.

I know what love looks like: a strand of hair tucked behind the ear, silver bangles, music turned up loud on the stereo, a breathlessness before opening the door, two cups out, a fire lit.

I know what wonder looks like: a life that holds your hands in its tiny fist, eyes that look for your voice, only yours, a body that seeks warmth, a blanket to sleep in before then awakening,

dreams clinging in dewdrops to the lashes, laughter like chocolate, your name a honeysuckle, rich with summer, ‘Mama.’

I know what an island looks like: two friends, the smell of coffee, time flickering in bursts of cinnamon, ‘hey, hold my hand, I cannot seem to go on.’ How the waves and the storm recede as they tuck the pain quietly under cushions and coasters until you can feel your legs again, your heart again a steady rhythm

Happy endings, though, I don't know much of.

I know of the glass slippers of course, and forests where nobody ever truly gets lost, and castles built to save us from ourselves, and sunsets. I know how we spend lifetimes running after them, blistered and scratched, searching for miracles in 8pms and parking lots, chasing them through corridors marble-poured, through the planets and stars, this year is the metamorphosis, you will find finally what you're looking for. Is this what you want to hear?

I know you understand the romance of bridges and the strangers one meets in black and white mists, and the thrill of take-offs, and clouds, and unknown destinations, and the possibility that you can be anyone, brand new, full, of adventures and stories.

I know you understand that it is easier to break silences than to build them. I know how you write to erase them, back into nothing, no place that can pull you in, choke them with words until all you are is a daily column critiqued by the world, but listen,

Breathe. Nobody understands any of this, I promise. We are just trying, each of us, to make it home before the dark, and even if there is no one waiting for the doorbell to ring, there is still you who was brave enough, not as afraid enough, to have made this journey. That matters. It matters.

Happy endings, though, I don't know much of.

Madeeha Noor, Lahore, Pakistan

Home, for many decades, has been a place of deep unhappiness for me – Pakistan is not an easy place to live in for a woman, especially one that does not fit into a preordained box of what one should look like or behave like. 2020 brought a crumbling of many such edifices in our personal and socio-political canvases and with it came a new beginning of sorts – of what love looks like, of what a family is, a shared connection, and of the truest meaning of ‘home’ – I have come to discover since that ‘home’ is what we build in ourselves, acknowledging all we have been, the choices that we have made, the loss and the scars and once we find the courage to lay them to rest, the demons and the past, a different blueprint of ‘home’ is born, one sown in geographies of the heart.

The Tower

I’m going to write my fears into a story and brick them into a tower – it feels like the most logical thing to do since I am running out of places to hide it in.

Drawers are full, flowerbed choking, rooftop swollen spaces under my bed have already been long occupied by ghosts which have taken to singing lullabies instead – nobody is scared of those particular scars anymore, and frankly, their tales have become trite – how many hours can one spend, anyway, being spooked to sleep by ancient bones?

On the ground floor of the tower is longing – on the left a powder room with three oblong mirrors, each a reflection of the years I’ve spent running towards distant lands of vague, undefined happiness –

I have not arrived yet.

In the room on the right, next to the TV cabinet, is loss. I've arranged it into a geometry of tablemats so I can keep track, see in a glance what has been taken, in which angular proportions and how much.

Up ahead is the stairway, a spiral of solid birch wood. It will last you a lifetime, he had said. I've lost many since but, who is counting?

It opens onto a landing whitewashed in song – there are a few framed photographs of my daughter's artwork from when she was little, before she was 'diagnosed'

Splitchy splotchy green grey fields flow into the sky that flow into the field that flow into a daisy – I see all this where you might see a blotch because I am looking for her and you, for art. I get that.

In the study behind the bamboo are yesterdays –

Afternoons hang in curtains of light by the sofa, and on the walls, silence.

I go there for conversations sometimes folded in red and white rugs on the floor and listen, listen, isn't that the sea swishing around in the corner?

All the books I have ever owned since I was seventeen, croweaters, beloved, Tower of Babel, home – all line the shelf in a rhapsody, dust-like, spine a pathway, scribble a moment inked in black – I remember more of me through words than in fact – strange – paragraphs line my hands, apostrophe breath, my skin a universe, secret codes unlocking journeys of the heart.

Beyond the window dreams a rooftop in cymbals flutes and a star

Keep this,

a teardrop, a rose, a ticket stub

Here I'll sketch you the sky

'Would you like to come home now?'

Jennifer Cousins, Birmingham, UK

Birmingham has been my city and my home for all my adult life. I am a white European woman and I share Birmingham with women from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds. We may look different from each other, and communicate only through gestures, but women share one unique thing: their connection with babies.

Our City, Our Home

Her breasts, heavy and milk-laden were demanding that she should feed the baby. But was this possible in such a public place? Was it allowed? Rodica sat quietly on the cold bench, absent-mindedly rocking the pram, watching her three-year-old happily going from sandpit to rocking horse to climbing frame. She was copying the other children, making cautious little attempts to co-operate and be friendly, necessarily without words: universal child behaviour, whatever the language or culture. Rodica caught the child's eye and gave a little wave of encouragement.

But now the baby was looking up at her from the cumbersome charity pram and beginning to whimper with hunger. There were corresponding spikes of pain from her urgent breasts: she really needed to feed him, for both their sakes. The other parents, mostly mothers, were dutifully pushing delighted toddlers on the swings and chatting; an elderly Asian woman was sitting relaxed on a bench. Rodica watched them: would they mind if she rolled up her tee-shirt and tucked the infant into her waiting breasts? How strange it was not to know the rules of this unfamiliar country.

Farida sat watching the children on the swings and sighed. So long ago, all that, and such precious memories. The little gestures and squabbles and screeches of delight, so like her own sons' all those years ago, recognisable across time and continents. She felt tears coming, and shifted position on the bench, unaware that her faded rust-coloured dupatta trailed in the accumulation of bronzed leaves at her feet, so it was difficult to see where the leaves ended and the material began. She seemed to grow out of the earth, the landscape. And what an alien landscape this had once seemed! With her husband and little ones, she had arrived here after the concrete monster had drowned their village, when the life they had built together was lost; their homeland left far away across ocean and mountains. So strange, so misty this new, kindly, country had seemed: in place of the noisy brightness of purple and red and turquoise she was used to, here the colours were muted and gentle (the browns and greens – so many greens!). And now her own autumn: husband gone, children flown, career over.

But now a toddler in the sandpit was crying – sand in her eyes from an unfortunate push from a small companion. Farida looked around for the parent and saw a young woman about to respond, hampered by a bulky pram she was trying to manoeuvre out of the way. Farida signalled to the mother, smiling, and, rising a little stiffly, she retrieved her leafy dupatta and picked her way across the sand to reassure the wailing toddler and return her to maternal safety. Farida smiled again shyly as she did so, and pointed at the vacant place on the seat: 'May I?' she asked.

Rodica nodded her thanks and moved a little to make room; the toddler, quickly recovered, wriggled away, and re-joined her new friends. Now the baby began to fret and grizzle and Rodica lifted him apologetically from the pram, beginning to panic. She still could not guess the rules, nor what was expected in this baffling new situation. She took courage:

‘Please,’ she began. ‘Please, it is good to feed baby here? Or no?’

Timidly she indicated her leaking breasts, now staining her tee-shirt. Farida looked momentarily perplexed, then smiled a wide smile.

‘Of course!’ she said, and, nodding encouragement, shifted slightly on the bench so the baby could be adjusted into place. Rodica almost cried with relief as the baby latched on, nuzzling into her warmth.

‘My babies are big now,’ Farida said.

Rodica looked puzzled and shook her head. Smiling, Farida pointed at the baby and then to her own chest. Then she raised her hand high in the air, laughing, indicating with no need for words.

‘These are my babies now!’

Rodica understood and smiled.

Darin Khair Husain, Dhaka, Bangladesh

The topic of ‘My City My Home’ has been something I often reflect on quite a bit, which is why I had a lot to say on the matter. This competition was a great opportunity to put my thoughts on paper, to truly express my experiences and opinions.

My City

As a sixteen-year-old Bangladeshi girl, when I imagine what my ideal city looks like, it's a modern city with a futuristic environment. Bangladesh is an emerging nation that has shown major economic growth with an annual GDP of 8.2%. Despite Bangladesh's economic improvements, there is room for more in regard to social norms, points of interest, safeguarding biodiversity, and tackling the ongoing environmental issues. The economic growth in Bangladesh doesn't mean much if it doesn't bring prosperity to its citizens. Home isn't what a built environment *looks* like, it is what it *feels* like. To me, a perfect city would be one that brings me joy and makes me feel safe and included.

Firstly, my city has unfortunately struggled to promote community bonding. Studies have emerged that state that social cohesion helps communities cope with difficulty and can increase an individual's happiness rapidly. However social cohesion is difficult when individuals only have exposure to people with the same financial status quo. I've had the privilege to travel to several different countries from a young age. When visiting Thailand and England, the countries I visit most frequently, I mostly remain in the most populous cities. Despite not holding citizenship, I feel a sense of belonging. This is due to the many events that the two cities, Bangkok and London, uphold such as

concerts and carnivals. This makes outsiders feel like more than visiting tourists. In these events, there are individuals of different financial statuses and cultural backgrounds. Unfortunately, in Dhaka, we lack economic diversity – it feels as though the upper class and lower class are a part of two separate worlds. Giving every citizen, ex-pats, and tourists public events to attend in conjunction would create a very joyful and inclusive experience.

Furthermore, one large issue that makes me feel like my city has serious room for improvement is the overwhelming amount of gender exclusion displayed towards women in our community. My experience alone as a sixteen-year-old girl can evidence the toxic mindsets that men acquire, normalised by South Asian societies. Recently, I have been jogging on the streets of Baridhara daily. I have frequently been catcalled by men, including the police officers and guards. It would go as far as cars speeding up behind me and my friends, to the path we would be walking on, and they would stare at us in an inappropriate way. This happened to me numerous times just this week.

In spite of facing street harassment myself, I often reflect on my privilege. Coming from a family with open views on principal concepts like education that ultimately shapes one's future, I understand how fortunate I am to be able to learn about basic etiquettes. I also understand that the underprivileged or minorities don't always have this opportunity. I was oblivious in thinking that as a sixteen-year-old girl, I should feel safe walking on the streets of residential areas in broad daylight.

Despite my several attempts to forget, I can recall one memory from my early years, from the age of ten: I was getting my eyes checked alongside my mother. After my check-up, the doctor

attempted to converse with me, and he kept fondling my arm. Even being ten years old, I understood that an eye doctor touching me was not normal and attempted to cease him from grazing my arm. I persistently pulled my arm away from him and consistently yelled at him to stop. Every time I removed my arm, he would tenaciously grip my arm even tighter than before until my indefatigable screams finally caught the attention of my mother.

She stood up instantaneously and yelled ‘Let’s go!’ and ‘What do you think you’re doing to my daughter?’

After my mother yelled at him, right before I could even have the courage to stand up, he touched my arm, again and said ‘What’s wrong? We are just talking.’

It broke my heart, so much so that I remember this story six years later. I want to live in a city where it is safe to visit a doctor, where it is safe for my mum to visit a doctor. A city where it is safe for every woman to go everywhere at any time.

All in all, Dhaka is a beautiful city with a lot of potential, and there are always ways to improve on just about everything. Dhaka is improving at a vast pace, and it is slowly becoming my generation’s responsibility to build a more desirable environment. A city goes way beyond its appearance, it is about creating an environment in which everyone feels as though they are a part of a community. An environment that treats everyone as equals. An environment that my generation would thrive in. As a proud Bangladeshi, I would like to see my city, Dhaka, flourish.

Nabila Hussain, Birmingham, UK

I have many fond memories of growing up in Birmingham. When growing up I had to face many obstacles that sometimes made me feel chained and alone. Growing up for me, as a Pakistani girl, surrounded by culture and family with outdated views, I want the readers to feel and see through my eyes.

My City, My Nostalgia

Bright lights, beautiful city, iconic buildings, Selfridges, mesmerising structures, St Philips historic Cathedral, awe-inspiring architecture, Aston Villa ground, just to mention a few. There's many more. Beautiful people and the ethereal lakes and bistros of Brindley Place.

Colours so bright, sparkling everywhere you go. The amazing canals and river running throughout the city. All so serene and welcoming. Inviting you to get lost, forget your troubles, watch the water flow, as the boats go by on the canals in Brindley Place. Taking your thoughts and troubles along with it as you get lost in the sound and sights of it all.

So many different people, so many backgrounds, races, gender, cultures from all over the world.

As a child, Birmingham, to me, was all this and more.

As I grew older, the weight of troubles and worries grew with me, changing my view of this incredible city to something much more sinister. It felt like it was becoming a large dark cloud, looming over my head and shoulders, like a shadow that's dark and menacing. My disquietude spread out like the branches of a tree, covering me with an immense feeling of claustrophobia and dread.

Being a Pakistani girl meant growing up in a culture that was oppressive and restrictive for me. Watching my friends looking

forward to their dreams and ambitions and knowing I would never be able to follow mine. My life and everything around me started to feel and look gloomy and isolating.

Birmingham started to look the way I felt. Now, where once I saw lights and sparkles before, suddenly they became dull and murky.

Instead, I started seeing tall buildings covered in scaffoldings everywhere I looked, which felt like the invisible shackles I felt all around me, tugging and pulling me down as if I could no longer move forward, as if I was held in place by scaffolding put up around me.

The mirage of the sparking beautiful city had faded and now I could see the full picture; the corruption that fills the city creating starving children, drug abuse, and poverty. How the elite live in luxury whilst the poor are struggling to even survive; all of this happening in that same charming city I saw growing up.

As a young adult, Birmingham to me was all this and more.

In full adulthood, my life became different: fighting against my oppressors and all the restrictions bounding me down. To look and find different dreams and aspirations I fought for made me stand tall and strong like all these buildings improved by the scaffolding holding them up, making them new and strong in different ways. The more I stood strong, the more I improved in new different ways.

In full adulthood being aware of all this, the good and the bad, the bright and the dull, the safe and the scary, I still feel a huge sense of nostalgia when looking and being in Birmingham, the city that taught me so much, which made me the strong woman I am today, even with all the oppressive and restrictive obligations of my Pakistani culture. It was Birmingham that gave me the strength and courage to be myself and fight for what I believed in. Birmingham will always be a part of me.

As an adult, this is how I feel and see Birmingham.

Shanjida Hossain, Dhaka, Bangladesh

I have been living in Dhaka for almost half my life and trust me when I say this, this city is filled with unique stories – ecstatic, mysterious, comedy, tragic, grief-ridden, violent – name it and it is there.

So, I pondered upon which genre of my city I related to the most, and every time my mind associated with the tragedy, grief, and violence aspects. The anti-rape protests also played a major role in generating my storyline. This is one of the many things I love about my city – the sense of unity and collective action people take whenever society gets hit by yet another disgrace of humanity.

In spite of this, no one can deny the crimes that take place every moment in buses, alleys, main roads, and even inside houses. One of the horrifying news that traumatised me significantly was that of a girl whose father died during COVID-19. She always wore a burqa, covering her face. Her mother left her alone at night to collect the dead body of her father from the hospital. A few neighbours, knowing very well about the situation of their household, broke into their house and raped the girl. The so-called pious people of society were tongue-tied as there was no way to victim-blame based on the girl's dress. Surprisingly, these people still found ways to find fault in a woman in this situation, asking why the girl's mother left her alone so late at night. Sometimes, no, most of the time, I feel ashamed to be a human in my city.

As a development journalist in the leading financial daily paper of this country, I also had the opportunity to interact with women facing domestic violence, sexual harassment at work, and roadside eve-teasing to name a few. So, one day, I decided to write my storyline showcasing the collection of individual stories and news I got to learn about women all over Dhaka and representing my city under the light of gender-based violence, highlighting how the women in this city never really possess a secure home despite

having families. One thing that is common in all these stories is women, including mothers, suppressing other women's voices. The 'Mother' in my story is not just a maternal figure but also all the women – in not only in my city but also in every society – who have justified staying quiet for centuries.

Never a Mother

Ma pours a concoction of coconut and jasmine oil on my scalp, massaging with a hint of aggression. I am twenty-one years old – apparently too old to smile. There is a charming government official, eight years older than me, full of maturity. He sent me a proposal through Khalamoni. He has a package of fifty-thousand-taka, health insurance, government-subsidised quarters, name it.

I refused.

Ma says, applying a little more pressure on my scalp, 'You will understand when you become a Mother.'

But I don't want to be a Mother. My mind automatically drifts to the days after Abbu's death, when my paternal cousin called me to a corner and started caressing my face. I shoved his hand away and ran to Ma. She pinched my mouth shut. Instead of berating my cousin, she held my hand and dragged me to our microbus in the middle of the night, assuring me that we were on our way to freedom. For the next three years, I felt a prisoner in my own mind.

I don't want to be a Mother who would make promises she can never keep to her daughter. I don't want to impose on her that her genital is the first thing to get weaponised during a war, turning her against, yet turned against by, the people she calls her own. I don't want to make her feel that she is as strong as the fragility of her femininity.

When Nanumoni kicked us out of her house, Ma took my promise to remind her of Nanumoni's behaviour towards us if she ever forgets about it in the future. The following summer, when

I refused to go to Nanumoni's house for Eid, Ma said I won't ever get happiness in life for my disrespectful behavior. My heart constricted with panic, quivered with terror. So, before Ma's sigh reached Allah, I convinced my heart to go – because didn't Allah say that no one can escape from a Mother's curse?

Why doesn't my life bloom with happiness then?

I don't want to be a Mother who would forget to water the flowers in her veranda, sucking their colour out, making them feel so worthless that they fear facing the sun. I don't want to forget telling my daughter to forgive herself first before forgiving the world.

Right before my high school exams, I needed to stay up late to study. So Nanumoni said I would not get breakfast anymore because my sleep habits were unwomanly. I thought it was just a love-packed scolding from Nanumoni because she worried so much about my health. But for the next two years, I did not get a single breakfast. Ma told me to tolerate my hunger until I become an officer one day. So I requested the pangs in my stomach to sleep. However, years later, when Nanumoni visited our own house, Ma cooked Nanumoni's favorite *Mishti kumra bhaji* and *Ruti* for breakfast, but, painfully, forgot how much I hated *Mishti kumra*.

I don't want to be a Mother who would tell her daughter to compromise between her dreams and body, who would become so habituated to her daughter's suffering that she stops loving herself. I don't want to be a Mother who would become a slave to the Jannah beneath her Mother's feet to a point where I forget to give my daughter the Jannah she deserves.

As my shoes step on the preceding day's footmarks on the muddy Satmasjid road every day, I realise how similar, yet different, the world around me is. The ever-present kaleidoscopic rickshaws. The puddle of water that never dries. The sparsely scattered trees. The group of boys who hang out in the Tong every evening. *Wafting aroma of puris and shingaras*. This is my Dhaka – the place that holds me together, but where I could never find my Home.

One day, I told Ma about the time I fell down on the ground when a boy whistled, followed by the time when one of the boys grabbed my dupatta on a stormy night. And instead of hugging me tightly, she told me that I was at fault for not telling her before, that I was shameless for having too many opinions – for having opinions in the first place. Instead of helping me take the first step the next morning, she showed me another road to our house so that the boys didn't pester me anymore, but she never tells me which road I should take to reach my Home.

When people tell her to remarry, saying how a single Mother in Dhaka can never protect her female child from the gazes of lecherous men, my back bends, shoulders weigh down, heart sinks with shame – for belonging to a gender that becomes a burden without a father.

I am afraid of becoming a Mother who would never be enough for her daughter.

I am afraid of judging my very own flesh.

So not a Mother; never a Mother.

When I tell all these to Ma, she scoffs, applies even more pressure on my scalp, and asks, 'Do you even know what it means to be a Mother?'

I remain speechless for five minutes. I think about the traumatic night where I promised myself that my younger sister would get an education even if I didn't. I rewind the days where I just lived on water throughout the day to save enough money for taking Ma to hospital. I think about the time I picked my younger sister up from school.

And for the first time in what seems like decades, my heart feels a little lighter, my smile dares to linger a little longer, and as my mind replays how I positioned my body like a shield, between my sister and the man, who was about to touch her, my head rises with full confidence and I say, 'I do.'

Because in my city, even a six-month-old girl knows what being a Mother is.

Kam Bola, Birmingham, UK

I work for a charity and I became interested when I saw the brief and was promoting it. I enjoy writing but have never really had the time or space to focus on it as much as I would like to. The lockdowns have given me time and space to put my energy into things I enjoy. So here's something that shares my experiences and tells an informal story of Brum.

My City, My Home

Birmingham, a vibrant city full of people, interesting places, and some cool green spaces

Birmingham, a city made up of a mix of old architecture and anew

Once an old town, now a city, money invested to make it modern and pretty

Birmingham New Street, once an old and tired railway station. Its' name's been changed to Grand Central, it's like we're living under the shadow of New York's Station!

A place bustling with buses old and a few new, young people sitting on the top decks smoking and hustling

Trams taking over, young people sitting under the metro stops, yet the old folks still prefer the bus and wait at the bus stop

A mixture of generations, colours, and races, going out and about frequenting places

The second-largest city of the nation and women represent 51%.

I'm a woman from the southwest of the city and it's a place that's really pretty

I have worked in inner-city places most of my life: educating, empowering, and inspiring

For ten years it felt like I was doing time behind bars, a role that challenged my delicate soul and made me tough enough to understand that some men make mistakes and don't know how to recuperate.

The Green was a huge part of my employed life - crime and a lack of education creates a barrier, and no amount of money and politics is going to correct a man who is fighting a constant battle with his own life.

As a mother of boys, I have seen with my own eyes, and experience has shown me that we must raise our children with love and patience so that they grow wise enough to be able to understand life and control their fate

Birmingham, a place well renowned for gangsters and crime, each man a Peaky Blinder of his time

Hidden meetings and secrets under the arches of the railways, they don't mind doing the stretch

A generation of young people experimenting with drugs, some turn into thugs and lose their minds engage in knife crime, listening to drill and grime.

A generation caught in a trap, going around acting all big but with no substance or education. They need to break the cycle and raise their vibes for a better, healthier, and happier new generation.

Clean air zones introduced in the city, but it's okay to light up a zoot and contaminate the air, really is that fair?

Birmingham, also known as Brum, before it was crowned a city, people from down south thought it was pretty shitty!

Over time and with money, the city has turned into a place some may say is as sweet as honey.

Museums, art galleries, the Library, and food places and fewer car park spaces

Grand hotels and afternoon tea, fancy spas and gyms, cars parked outside with fancy trims

Birmingham City, a host for sports events, Velo and Half Marathons to name some, and soon the Commonwealth

Music concerts, operas, and theatres a place to escape when life gets dim

Birmingham, my city, my home, a place that celebrates many faiths and life to the fullest

After all, we are one race

Brum in my eyes is the capital of culture

Birmingham canals, lakes and the reservoir, it's really splendid to get out in nature

Birmingham universities and colleges supporting education and inspiring a new generation

Birmingham healthcare and super hospitals serving the people of the city and beyond

Consultants and doctors from across the globe, they deserve to be adorned in golden robes

Good mental health is in itself, the real wealth

People forget to look after their heads and sometimes lose it to long term meds

Birmingham is my city, my home, and it truly deserves its very own diamond crown

I'm a queen of my home and bearing the weight of my crown makes me strong and vulnerable, and yet sometimes I still frown from the responsibilities of being a wife and a mum.

Just like the city has changed over time, my life as a mum and a wife evolves and moves with the times, learning lessons and reflecting on the challenges and experiences I encounter

A positive spirit, and in the face of adversity, my faith, my soul and my feet remain rooted in the ground, how I have grown from a humble and loving upbringing, trust the process, and always have hope

How the place has matured, and the population grown. Once a small dot on the map, a place full of good energy and good people from across the globe gathered in a place they now like to call home

Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Sri Lankan, European, African, South American, Canadian, Jamaican, Chinese, Irish, Welsh, and Scottish to name a few that live in Brum, each with a story of their own

Birmingham is a place with space for every race

Birmingham is a city full of hope

Birmingham is a city that's pretty dope

Birmingham is a city of sheer delight

And if you lived here, you would know I was right!

Magdalen Tamsin Gorringer, Birmingham, UK

I wrote this poem inspired by thinking about the two stretches of time I have lived in Birmingham: now, and when I was six years old, what I remember, what stands out, what I cherish about my city – and what makes a place feel like home.

Birmingham: 1979, 2019

I remember the trees.
My hand in my dad's on the way down to school.
I always loved those cheap, cheesy crisps at break time.

Forty years later, I returned.
My hand in my sons' on their way to school.
And still loving the trees.

I don't go to New Street if I can help it –
I map my city by its green –
Picnickers in Cannon Hill Park,
Dog walkers in Highbury,
Children paddling in the Rea.

And its people.
A lifetime ago, my neighbour's parents' parents
were in Italy. Mafia connections, she thinks
(though that may be just to thrill me).
Now she greets me across the fence
pegging clothes out in my garden.
'Alright bab?' she asks.
And I feel suddenly at home.

Magdalen Tamsin Gorringe, Birmingham, UK

As with my earlier entry, I was inspired by thinking of the two different stretches of time I have spent in Birmingham. For this piece, I reflected on how dance has been important to me during both time periods, and on how the journey in between my times in Birmingham has meant that the dance styles marking each period are very different. This piece also meditates on a rather grumpy throwaway comment made as a friend and I were dancing bharatanatyam outside the city's Gas Hall. I can't be sure of the intention of the comment, but it certainly got me thinking about what might make someone or something 'Brummie' and about who 'belongs'.

Brummie

I have learned my city through dancing. Weaving a reel through shoppers on New Street. Treading the two-step-pause of a protest march past Selfridges.

Six years old – shining in a red tutu. My grandma put my hair up in a bun. Later, gazing up at the stage, *The Nutcracker*. I remember mainly the mice.

We left Birmingham on an Air India plane, walls woven with pictures. My brother and I sobbed at the unknown. Two kind strangers promised us India as home. We went to see the pilot in his cockpit. It was a different time.

Two countries and five cities later, I returned to Brum, ballet swapped for bharatanatyam, red tutu for blue silk sari. Dancing bharatanatyam to Abba outside the city's Gas Hall, giddy in velvet flares.

‘So very British,’ someone mumbled. ‘Very Brummie.’

Days later, I climbed up to the Toposcope in the Lickey Hills (built, I suppose, thanks to cocoa from West Africa). I watched the city stretched out before me. The QE like an oversized liner in a suburban sea. The university, Old Joe, the green glint of the Serbian orthodox church.

And I saw, through time, great waves of people, going and coming, coming and going, a ceaseless dance of return and retreat, the city, generous to embrace and as ready to let go. By barge and train, coach and plane, by cart and on foot, people, travelling. From hill and valley, they came along the canals and across the oceans, going back, back to the warriors in boats from Norway, Germany, Imperial Rome, then back, back... still further back.

What would be ‘very Brummie?’ I wondered and found no answer, but the wind, the wind dancing to a rhyme that spoke of everywhere and nowhere and sped, laughing, on its way to other worlds.

Rusafa Hussain, Dhaka, Bangladesh

When I was writing the piece, I had to really look inward and pinpoint what exactly made this city so magical to me. I've lived in Dhaka for twenty-two years, and despite all the good and the bad, this city has me completely enamoured, as if I'm partaking in a turbulent love affair. I hope I managed to somewhat convey my emotions and the feelings that are associated with my home, and I hope I managed to do this city some kind of justice through my writing.

Hope

Within the breast of the city, and the breasts of its people, hope is a sparking fluid igniting dreams across a landscape of burdensome ails and ancient grievances. The citizens of Dhaka are sufferers, the lines and grooves etched onto their faces, painting a portrait of perfect grief. The citizens of Dhaka are dreamers, their heartbeats spelling out inner desires, as their black and brown pupils invitingly sparkle in faith of better days. This is a city of senses, of a tenderness so potent it sinks into the greying cement — into the fine river of cracks cutting through concrete. This city — an unnatural machine, a preservation of traditions, a city of seasons, of pollution, a backdrop for weddings and funerals alike — it is one too many contradictions coexisting within the bodies of the children it raised.

Dhaka's stifling cityscape, the malls, the overhead bridges, old crumbling brick buildings, and dingy restaurants births unequivocal yearnings yet to be understood. There is a quiet tenacity echoing in the howls of the winds that carries everyone's

voiceless aspirations towards the skies, feeding and condensing the clouds until the cascading rain washes away the sorrows of the people.

Underneath the filth and plastic of Dhaka, there lies the honeyed scents of Dahlias-Tulips-Daffodils that homeowners carefully bloom. There is loss and there is romance, there is the collective experience: of labourers and bankers, lawyers, and rickshaw-pullers, all striving towards a private dream. Everyone in Dhaka nurses this resilient hope, this secret prayer that sinks into the marrows, and slips between the cracks of bones.

The true sound of the city is not the unceasing cacophony of car horns, television screens, megaphones, rather it is the silent, deeper melody that lay at the core of the souls living in Dhaka. It is a mother humming softly as she prepares Eid desserts during the new-moon night, a grandmother whispering fables of beasts and lairs of earthly jinn under the heavy winter comforters, school friends gossiping as they drink coconut milk by the roadside in scorching sunlight, the resounding crack of the cork in a late-night badminton duel against cousins, and laughter rising as a family gathers around the steaming cups of cha set on the table as twilight engulfs the city in a pink-orange hue.

Dhaka encapsulates a treasure trove of these beloved, cherished stories. Stories of families, of friendships, of companionship, stories spinning silver threads connecting the unlikeliest of people, stories inked into invisible scrolls that memorialise the hardship and the hope that emerges in spite of pain. These undying embers of hope, acting as a tangent between reality and reverie, stirs the sweet nectar of song, and like the healing hands of a saint, remedies the wounds of the city.

Zoha Jan Tagi, Islamabad, Pakistan

I was born and brought up in the capital of Pakistan after my parents moved here for a better livelihood. For the most part of my life, I have struggled with claiming my hometown, divided between two identities; one which I got from my parents and one I own. This was an attempt to claim the place I truly consider my home. It felt like an exercise to mark my own territory in the face of my own uncertainty. I truly felt proud of the poem for depicting all my emotions aligned with the landscape of Islamabad as well as the way I perceive the city. Most importantly, it articulates the idea of making history rather than claiming it and the fissures in concrete history. It is an ode to my city and an oath of locating my identity in it, despite all odds.

History, No More

This city gives, gives, and gives but we always take it for granted.

Spring sprouts like a miracle that we witness every year,
Autumn spreads all around the space as though it finally found
its home.

This city gives, gives, and gives but never owns.

This city is so fast for most people that time slips through their
hands in the blink of an eye

Yet it stops for you, early in the morning and welcomes you
With leaves slow dancing to birds humming in the background.
This city is all skyscrapers and urban life for most people,
Coffee cups brimming with the urgency of meetings,

Shoelaces entangled in the fear of what will be tomorrow,
Goals too high to reach, and hills hiding behind the skyscrapers
weaving false promises.
But for you it's the homemade out of footsteps of familiar shapes,
Every turn specks of memories,
Every road unfolds a story,
Every signboard smiles at you as it tries to remember your name.
This city belongs to no one but
There is no other place in the world that you would belong to.
This city speaks of earthquakes and bomb blasts
But deep down inside it speaks of survival.
There was a time when you'd see how the sky turned from red
to green
To the darkest shade of blue during the summer nights,
Now it only wears the light and dark, and often is engulfed in
the darkest shade of black.
This city is scared of responsibilities, yet it is responsible for all
that you are,
For how you talk and how you walk,
For how your dreams always begin with seasons of spring and
fall,
For how you appear so calm even when there are fires of rage
burning inside of you,
For how you climb at the rooftop at midnight to gaze at that one
star that dares
To shine among all the city lights and see yourself in it.
Bad news is that this city possesses no history,
Good news is that you have it in your hands to create it.

Zoha Jan Tagi, Islamabad, Pakistan

The recent changes in the environment on account of the global pandemic outbreak have most significantly shaped my relationship with the place I live in. This short story was an attempt to let out all that I have felt in the recent months. There has been less action and more thought, so the story is styled in a modernist stream of consciousness manner. It would have been nearly impossible to shape my fluid and troubled thoughts into words, but this is an attempt to put those thoughts to rest. I have spent the last few months pondering and strolling on the rooftop as my only past-time.

The terms ‘My City, My Home’ invoked in me the need to articulate how the things around me have changed recently in the background of all the significant changes I have witnessed living in the city I call my home. Islamabad has a lot of tragedies in its memory store; however, the natural landscape of Islamabad is the same as it was twenty years ago and that provides hope for getting through the pandemic as we have faced the past atrocities. I have also touched upon the inimical behaviour of the society towards women. This piece is perhaps my most spontaneous and expressive one.

The Margalla Miracle

It's March 13th, 2020. The world will never be the same again, they announce on the microphone. ‘Stay safe, stay home’, reads the biggest billboard in the city. She chuckled in her cab after making a quick trip to the grocery store, the future lay as uncertain as a woman walking on the streets of a metropolitan city in this part of the world, as they eloquently term it, like an

‘unsafe treasure box’ *Khuli Tijori*, her mother would often remind her. In circumstances like these, you must stock on groceries to better equip yourself for a future lockdown or a shortage, as you cover up as much as you can to stay safe from the virus. The cab driver was looking at her through the rear-view mirror. She took out a mask from her grocery bag and fastened it on her face to save her from the virus and the gaze that was hovering over her like a monster inside the car.

The best and worst thing about being looked at and about being preyed upon is that you can never be too sure; be it an invisible virus or a six-foot bulky man sitting in the front seat, and you must be completely sure before letting others know what just happened to you, so they can distance themselves from you. A woman who is known for shouting or slapping any man who tries to approach her inappropriately will be feared. A song here, a scrap of paper there, these are the common signs of being an object of desire, or potential attack, if you will. For as long as she had lived in this city, the city of tall buildings engulfed in hills where the fate of the whole country is often decided, men had dominated the buildings and the streets. Now it seemed like an invisible virus of hardly the size of a bean had won over everyone, including the towering men, in deciding who goes out and when. She had always hated being told not to go out once the sun set:

‘Beta, we trust you, but not the society, and the men who are out there,’ her father would often remind her while making her cancel yet another trip with friends.

We trust you but not the virus out there which is waiting to prance at you the second you step out, she thought while gazing at the pine trees lining the roadside.

She had always loved how the trees and the hills were still the most prominent part of Islamabad, despite the emerging traffic and skyscrapers. Anything else almost did not matter when you set your eyes on the Margallas reaching out to the sky among all the lush greens. It was like a sigh of relief in a city of capitalist dreams and diplomatic promises. She had always wanted to walk on the roadside, trek up to the hills without a man of the house, without any strings attached to safety. In brief moments of recognition like these, she felt like this place was her home. It always had been, despite brimming with cars and motorbikes and now the metro-bus, it's as familiar as it was during her Eid holidays back in the day when not more than five cars would appear on the scene. You can burn a home, but you can never relocate it. She once heard a story of a pigeon-house being bombed in a war zone after the owner let them free. The pigeons still came back to the rubble every day to find their home.

It was December 25th, the end of the year and the festive season, except the air did not speak of festivity, but conformity to the cold and the looming fear now fading behind the fog. The cars of the road were plenty and not a single soul was walking – December is too cold for a stroll in Islamabad, both for men and women. She went out to take a break from staring at the walls all day, and from her books. Walking to the nearby market felt like reclaiming her space that never was. She thought about how this city had grown with her, had become more vulnerable and resilient at the same time. It was the 27th of December when a popular female politician had been shot and she was in the Markaz. All people were huddled in front of the TV screen, whispering their fears and muffled sobs.

‘There might be a curfew, we would not be able to step out, an elderly man exclaimed.

Curfew, she tried to remember the word so she could tell her friends about it.

‘Would they shoot us if we step out?’ my friend asked after she broke the hot news from the mouth of an elderly man she barely saw.

‘They might,’ she replied mindlessly, while looking over the receding cars from the window, the same window which crackled when a bomb blast was heard for the first time. She stood at the same window with her cup of coffee while fearing the invisible invader which was, without a sound or a shape, looming over their heads now.

Years from now, this event would also go down under the chapter of resilience.

It was a global pandemic and equaliser that highlighted the ugliest of the inequalities prevalent all around the world.

Then it became normal once again to climb up the rooftops and look at the sun falling into the ebbs of the Margallas. Home is the place where you can be the most vulnerable and yet are the most resilient, looking for little things to give you hope to hold on to. Not much has changed, the sky is the same shade of purple just before the sunset and the perpetrators are walking on the road with masks on and eyes to the ground. She had just learned how to endure it all and never take home for granted.

Nida Malik Hussain, London, UK

The term 'My City, My Home' inspired me to really reflect on the journey of my life and share my experiences.

My City, My Home

Where are you from? Who knew that the conventional way of being acquainted would become a predicament for me? For the first ten years of my life, home for me was Chiangmai, Thailand. My parents were restaurant owners, and we were the only Pakistani family in the city at that time. Living on top of a restaurant had its own perks. My elder sister, the twins, and I would ring the intercom and order anything we wanted at any time. It was more than a child could ever dream of. Walking around the streets was exciting, the fruit was exquisite, the music captivating, and the people were absolutely lovely. I knew that I had the perfect home and lived in the most beautiful city.

One day, Mum said that we were moving to Pakistan. The first feeling I felt could be described as a pinch in my stomach that led on to tremendous excitement as we jumped up and down saying, 'We'll see our cousins!'

The only resource we had was a huge hard-cover book about Pakistan that we would flip over, amazed by the country's splendour. My favourite page was a picture of a fabulously decorated colourful truck and a group of schoolgirls with hennaed hands, wearing glass bangles. Little did we know that this move would change our lives forever. The move was exciting, and we settled in Lahore. I liked Lahore more than Karachi, as it looked much greener and had the mountains close by, the energy felt familiar, felt like Chiangmai.

My first memory of the city was being almost traumatised by a beggar who pushed his face against the window and asked for money in the most horrific way. I quickly looked to the other side to find a donkey cart driver, whipping the donkey as though all of the problems in his life were its fault. I felt the struggle, the pain, and the helplessness around me and knew that this wasn't going to be an easy ride. Dad invested his nest egg in some land that he wanted to build our house on, which was illegally occupied by the infamous 'Qabza group' at the time. I saw it slowly taking over his zest for life.

Mum became the bread earner of the family which led to many more problems in their relationship. I saw the same struggle, the pain, and the helplessness in their eyes. It felt like life had just stopped for us, but I found solace in being with my siblings as we desperately held on to each other for reassurance. We soldiered on, moved from house to house with big smiles on our faces, hoping that things would come around. We travelled in rusty old cars, whatever we could afford, without any complaints. We saw our dreams being shattered but funnily we were still happy, because we had each other.

When I turned twenty-five, I was approached by a family with a marriage proposal. They seemed like nice people, so my parents agreed. It was an arranged marriage; another step I was taking that would change my whole view of life. After my marriage, I moved to Luton, UK. Everything that was promised was a lie, he didn't have a flat of his own, he didn't have a job, and he wasn't a decent human being. My abusive marriage lasted nine months.

My mother said, 'You've tried everything to make this work, now it's time to come back home,' but I couldn't go back broken and frail.

I had seen the ugliness of life too closely and needed time to heal and process everything. I had no choice but to become strong and needed it to make me, not break me. I became

independent, got a job, and lived with my dear friend in her council flat. Feeling all that pain but being away from my family taught me so much about myself. My horizons broadened, I wanted to see more and that's when I found London.

I loved all the monumental sites but, more than anything, I loved how ethnically diverse it was. I formed beautiful friendships with kind-hearted people who showed me love and appreciation, it felt like home. After two years I said my goodbyes and marched back to Pakistan holding my head up high. Being back with the tabooed word 'divorce' was interesting. I saw pity, judgment, and fear on many faces, but my family helped me through it. I was living the way I wanted, and with their support, I was doing my best to just be me. I found myself disliking confinement more than ever, so what better time to explore the picturesque valleys of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, surreal plateaus of Gilgit Baltistan, and the dense mountain ranges of Kashmir.

Seven years had passed, and my parents needed me to believe in marriage again. My father found a match for me and after a lot of shilly shally, I finally agreed to meet. But this time round I didn't leave any loose ends, I spent time getting to know him and finally felt that I had found a companion. We were married and moved to where he lived, in London.

It's funny how life begins, takes you on a roller coaster, and gives you a different aspect on its every bend. I feel like all of my experiences were necessary, like it was a course of action that had to be taken for me to be where I am today and who I am today. I turned forty last month, am a mother of two wonderful children, and have a husband who is first my friend. We love travelling and experiencing new countries and cultures. When someone asks me where I'm from, I like to say, I'm a citizen of the world, my city is the state of mind I'm in and my home is where my loved ones are.

Lovely Home, Dhaka, Bangladesh

The grief and sorrows of women followed by present social evaluation of the role of women, and violence towards women, have taken an unbearable turn. I let my pen speak in favour of them.

Pen, the Power

I need a pen,
Whether it is blue or black,
I need to write
The present and past
Which will help the future
To know itself.

I need a pen,
Whether it is pink or red,
I need it for bread!
It writes for those
Who are the deprived citizens.

I need a pen,
Whether it is green or brown,
I need it for writing,
For the hidden stories
Which a woman bears in her brain
Though it makes her pain!

At last I have a pen
It is black,
As life is like white paper
The black pen writes on it.
It always writes about its pain
And through it love is gained!

Jarin Subah, Chittagong, Bangladesh

The deprived transgender community and their struggle to lead a normal life inspired me. I want to be their voice and speak up for them. I hope Sampad will help me achieve that goal.

Hijras

Bangladesh, an overpopulated country with immense bravery. People from all castes, religions, races and genders live under this sky with huge hopes. Some become famous while some wait for their time to come. Because we know that if you suppress us, hide us, ignore us, we will gleam even more. Nobel laureate Dr. Muhammad Yunus is the glory of Bangladesh. But do you know that people like Ananya Banik exist in Bangladesh too? Unsurprisingly you don't.

Ananya Banik is a brave transgender who lives openly as a hijra with pride. Usually, hijras are persons who are born a boy but later identify as female or neither of the genders. In short, they are the third gender. Let's read out her part of the struggle.

Ananya was an exceptional sixteen-year-old. Her struggle was real. She fought for the rights of the transgender community and came to this honourable position. Yet many of us don't know her. Like other South-Asian families, Ananya was also rejected by the people who surrounded her. She loved dressing up and felt the necessity to prove her thoughts and feelings.

'A female was dominant in my body and mind,' implored Ananya.

People started denying her existence. Her mother was her only support but after her father's death, her brothers disowned her.

She wiped her tears at the struggle. She left home at the age of sixteen and fought for the rights of people like her.

Bangladesh has more than 15,000 hijras and sadly, they are the most marginalised group despite being officially recognised as third gender.

In a society like ours, transgender people aren't given jobs easily. They live in slums and face difficult circumstances. They beg and they try entertaining passengers in order to collect money. They are misused in different sectors for personal gains. How long? How long are they going to be suppressed like this? They are humans too and they have the equal right to live like all others. Ananya fought alone for her rights. Huge support grabs more attention. If we stand together, all the transgender community will be able to have a perfect family, acceptable job, and equal status.

Ananya: a fighter, a warrior, and a proud citizen of Bangladesh. She didn't have the comfort of family. Her home rejected her, but her city accepted her wholeheartedly. She had the opportunity to highlight her talents. She performed classical South-Indian dance, sang Bangla Folk songs, represented her community on national television and worked with a non-government organisation to uphold their dignity.

So, I come from a city and a home where Hijras aren't considered as a burden but rather treated with pride. My city, my home, belongs to heroes of this kind. Ananya dreams of a society where even a single transgender won't be discriminated against. Some parts of the world don't give due respect to them. As black lives matter, women rights matter, privilege for transgenders matter too.

Tehmeena Malik, Lahore, Pakistan

I sometimes write for myself but never get to share it. When I heard about this competition, I wanted others, especially the ones who do not know about my city Lahore, to see it through my eyes and feel what I feel. Thank you for this opportunity.

Lahore is Lahore

My relationship with Lahore started back in 1991 when I arrived in Lahore with my husband and my four children. We had been residing in Chiangmai, Thailand for nine years, running a restaurant. Previous to that, I had lived in Karachi and grew up in England. Being Punjabis by birth, it seemed like the right place to bring up our children so that they become familiar with their roots.

I had my reservations about settling in Lahore because whatever I had heard or known about this city was said to ‘not be my cup of tea’. Twenty-nine years later I am smiling as I say that I wouldn’t at all be embarrassed to admit that I was way off the mark, and over the years I have learnt to love this quirky city called Lahore. Over the years my relationship, my bond with this city has become stronger. Lahore is not just a city – it’s a pulsating entity with its strengths and weaknesses, its beauty and ugliness, its kindness and wickedness and most of all its ability to share the laughter and grief of its inhabitants with equal fervour and passion.

Lahore is the second-largest city in Pakistan and capital of the Punjab Province. Its existence can be traced to around 5000 B.C. Originally a Hindu stronghold, it has seen and borne the reigns of many heroes and villains from the Hindu Maharajas to the Mughal Emperors, the Afghani Chieftains, the Sikh Rajas, and the British Colonial masters. Today, as it stands, it boasts the conquest of the negativity and animosity and the ravages of various wars upon its land.

The city is a wide spectrum of the lifestyles of the very diversified peoples who have resided here over the centuries of its existence. The interior Lahore, (a much smaller area as compared to the present city) houses many ancient architectures, such as the Lahore Fort, the Shalimar Gardens, the Badshahi Mosque and Chawburji. The Lahore Fort and Shalimar Gardens are both UNESCO world heritage sites. The Lawrence Gardens and Aitchison College, and many such sites, remind us that even the negativity of colonisation can leave some beautiful memories of people who loved this land and made it their home.

In 1947 when India gained independence, so did the Muslims, and Pakistan came into being. Lahore at that time was the host to the historic declaration of India's independence and to the resolution calling for a separate state for Muslims. A monument called Minar-e-Pakistan stands tall at the site of the meeting. Lahore warmly welcomed most of the refugees from India and gave them shelter until they moved on to other cities.

From the richest to the poorest, the most educated to the most illiterate, Lahore treats its inhabitants and visitors alike, showing its warmth in its hospitality. Today it is a socially liberal, progressive, cosmopolitan city of Pakistan. It is often referred to as the 'Heart of Pakistan.' Not only has it preserved its colourful, vibrant past but has continued to flourish as the major publishing centre, and home to many leading universities. It is also the breeding ground for many academicians, poets, writers, Sufi saints, lawyers, doctors, actors, musicians, and sports stars, some known worldwide.

Although there are many local stars in the Pakistani sky, there are some that are recognised internationally who I am proud to say shared Lahore with me, calling it their home. Sir Henry Lawrence, Sir John Lawrence, John Lockwood Kipling, Sir Ganga Ram, Rudyard Kipling, Allama Iqbal, A. R. Chughtai, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Dr. Abdus Salam (the Nobel Prize winner), Sadequain, Bapsi Sidhwa, Imran Khan, Waseem Akram and the list goes on. Since

1947 many presidents, prime ministers of the world, the kings and queens of the Islamic world and even Queen Elizabeth II have made Lahore an important stop-over in their visits to Pakistan.

A city is the body and the citizens its soul. The soul of this city is full of life and whoever lives here or visits it cannot but praise its nurturing customs. Just as any other place in the world, it has many faults and weaknesses in its infrastructure or lack of civic sense, but Pakistan is only seventy-three years old – a toddler in the lead of nations, therefore a lot can be overlooked, when you feel the positivity emanating from the people.

This city, throbbing with activity, is famous as it openly celebrates its traditional culture with the newly acquired Valentine's Day and New Year. Lahoris are by nature fun-loving and 'foodies'. Our entertainment starts with food and culminates with food. The hundreds of restaurants and food stalls all over the city are ample proof of our love of eating and feeding others. Even the very elite malls, cinemas, theatres, and parks are incomplete without the culinary layout to suit an array of palates.

Some may refer to Lahoris as 'laid back' but I prefer to call them 'chilled out'. The extreme -2 Celsius winter nights or the 44 Celsius summer afternoons are not an obstacle in the routine activities. Come rain, come shine, Lahore with its gutsy persona faces all. Even COVID-19 has not been able to dissuade its spirited soul.

So much to say, so much more to explain, but the rules confine me to end the story of my relationship with Lahore. It is a place that has shared, like a friend, my initial struggle to blend in and find a livelihood: my immense joy at the weddings of my four children, the wonder at the birth of my grandchildren, the tears and heartache at the loss of my loved ones, and the hope and prayers for the betterment of humanity all over the world. Yes, today I can shout out confidently that Lahore is Lahore – My City, My Home.

Muhsena Nasiha Syeda, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Home is a place that offers warmth, affection, and acceptance. For me, my home resided in my grandparents who were always there to shower me with their love. Ever since they passed away, I have been feeling like a part of me is lost forever. My home will never be complete without their presence. Unfortunately, it is the memories that act like my shelter and remind me of how empathetic they were and how love is the only truth that exists on the face of Earth. Love is the only feeling that sets us apart from robots. The warmth that I feel every time I think about my grandparents or the place they lived in, is what truly inspired me to write this. Hearing someone going to Barishal makes me yearn to pack my bags and go there. Based on this feeling of running to Barishal to be surrounded by the memories that they made inside that house, I poured out my heart into this writing.

A Lost Soul

Does your heart ache at the thought of not being able to return home because it no longer exists? My soul gets crushed to pieces every time I am reminded of my haven. My heart is engraved with the town of Barishal city, the place that never fails to welcome me with warmth and a sense of familiarity. Growing up in Dhaka felt like a nine-to-five office job, while visiting Barishal felt like returning home after years of battle. Despite being miles away, the sense of belonging was eternal whenever I inhaled the scent of my city.

As I strolled through the walkway, my heart skipped a beat as if falling in love with the house all over again. I spared a glance at the spider web on the wooden door before sitting on the concrete bench, which was right outside the domicile.

‘Why does my wandering soul keep stumbling upon this place to look for myself?’ I asked under my breath.

Closing my eyes, I paid attention to the sound of the birds chirping and the leaves rustling in the trees. Little did I expect to be hit by a wave of cherished memories and strong emotions. I witnessed my nine-year-old self impatiently sitting on the sofa. My eager eyes were looking at my grandfather who was opening a packet of chips for me. As soon as he handed me the packet, I ran to the kitchen to watch my grandmother cook mouth-watering dishes for lunch. At the sight of me eating right before lunch, instead of lashing out at me, she gave me a serene smile. I let out a grin and my eyes twinkled at her. She extended her arms to welcome me for a gentle hug but when I tried to reach out the scenery shifted to the dark night where I stood in front of her cold body with tears rolling down my eyes. I shifted my gaze to look at my grandfather who sat there grieving the loss of his dear wife. When I attempted to step forward, the setting changed again and this time I was standing outside the ICU where he was declared dead an hour ago.

Hot tears were streaming down my face by then and I forcibly pulled myself out from going down memory lane. Wiping my face with the ends of my sleeve, I got up to look around the city only to realise I do not know the roads well. I chuckled at the irony of fate and the city for fooling me to think that this city was mine when I do not even know it properly.

I ended up walking to the soul of the city – the graveyard where my two most beloved people lay in the harsh cold ground. I smiled at how even death failed at keeping them apart. My mind was reminded of the respect they showed, their compassion, kindness, and love for their family made them absolutely perfect for each other. Unfortunately, after sixty-five years of

togetherness, my grandmother left the love of her life alone in this harsh world. The void that I saw in my grandfather's eyes then was like the silence that haunts a graveyard.

My intention to visit my hometown was not to grieve over their death again after all these years but it was to help myself look for a new home. But how can I possibly do that when a part of my soul will linger in this city forever?

Ambling my way out of the graveyard, I looked around to imagine the affection this city offered my grandparents to make them start their family here. Like the brightly coloured leaves descending down from the trees, my mind will come to this place to coat the city with warmth as a sign of celebrating eternal adoration right before the winter visits with its cruelty to immobilise people's hearts.

Esha Aurora, Dhaka, Bangladesh

I have been thinking lately of how my city, my home has become a lost city, a lost home, and how that change gradually took place, and what took the place of my city, my home. While thinking about writing this essay, I was inspired to look deeper into why I have been having these feelings. What is it exactly that has been bothering me? How do I fit into that narrative, or do even fit in anymore?

A Dream That Never Was

She can't sleep. Every morning at 5 am. Every afternoon at 1 pm. Every evening at 5 pm, and then again at 7 pm. Each night filled with anxiety, 'Will I get a full night's rest?', 'Should I wait till it's over and then go to sleep?', 'Will a sleeping pill help to get through it all?'

There are microphones downstairs, they are also mounted on the roof of the building across the street, six more in one square block. For five times a day, they compete to be the loudest, longest call to prayer in what once used to be a quiet middle-class residential area.

She once asked them to turn it down, but men dressed in Saudi Arabian garb came to break down the door for hurting their 'religious sentiments.' That's her country's unofficial blasphemy law for you and me. Her city, once a cherished secular dream is now crawling with holier than thou fundamentalists, hell-bent on a theocracy. They will impose their will onto everyone and slit your throat if you beg to differ.

Her home was once a sanctuary. For years, it was calm, children of all genders rode their bikes down the street. They wore whatever they wanted and played with whomever they wanted. Nobody told them to play with just boys or just girls. Nobody grabbed the vulnerable kid and indoctrinated them slowly. Nobody said, ‘go pray.’ Nobody morally policed them. Now these people are gone. Where? Nobody knows, some of them suddenly began to don all the symbolisms of Wahhabism while the others have just left. Leaving behind a vacuum to be filled with the dubiously rich whose easiest path to respectability is religion. The louder the better.

Her city no longer feels like home. Perhaps it never was. It was an idea of a home; a dream she was sold when she was young of a diverse, accepting, intellectual culture. Everyone celebrated each other’s events. Now the haram brigade has moved in, making memes (it’s the 21st century after all) about not wishing ‘Merry Christmas’ and how going to Pujas will strip people of their faith. There are people morally policing, proactively indoctrinating, canvassing the streets every day, saying things that will easily land anyone else in jail.

Yet, movies, books, articles, songs, anything with an iota of criticism of the state machinery are deemed provocative and will be used to prosecute their makers. But not the hardliner saying women should not be educated beyond grade 5 or that their place is at home being a second-class citizen – only alive to be an empty vessel of passage for a man’s desire and unpaid labour. This messaging, it seems, is completely fine. That toxicity is even allowed to be broadcast on hydraulic microphones at all hours of the day.

Her home, her city, the one she remembers smelled of desert marigolds (bailey flowers) in winter. It’s a bittersweet nostalgic

smell. A smell that takes her back to many winters spent on the roof rubbed down with olive oil in the sun while her grandmother stood guard. It's a smell of Pahela Boishakh, women clad in colourful saris, their arms glistening with glass bangles, singing Tagore songs at the break of dawn at Ramna Park.

This home, like a mythical beast, no longer exists, and neither does the city she knew. An ocean of change, of intolerance, has washed over it and with it has taken all her hopes of it ever realising its true potential.

Her home makes her anxious, she can't sleep. Her city makes her angry. It is a physical manifestation of crabs in a bucket (with skull caps). Her country no longer makes sense. There are Chanel bags traveling down the same streets where people making less than \$5 a day literally live in (sometimes still inside garbage bins).

Nothing about her home feels like home. Nothing about her city feels like home. This city no longer belongs to her. This city, in perpetual flux, has now been delivered to someone else, a different thought, a different culture. It smells different, it tastes different, it speaks different, it's even taken the language and turned it on its head. The bhais have now become vais.¹

1 The word 'bhai' means brother in Bangla which over the past few years have become colloquially spelt as 'vai'

Huma Bibi Khan, Gloucester, UK

I was inspired by the journey taken by many Pakistani women to the UK after marriage and the sense of longing they must have felt for home. However, over time, home changes as humans are creatures of habit and familiarity.

Home

*December 1985.
Birmingham, England.*

From the airport to her new home
strips of amber
provided by the passing streetlamps
illuminate her henna-stained hands.
Her husband and his cousin talk in the front seat
but she is lost in the patterns
that her sister only painted a few days ago.
So this is England, she thinks.

Later that night,
she undresses and peaks out of the window
at a row of houses jumbled together
just like the one she looks out from.

From her suitcase she extracts
her mother's scarf and wraps it around her.
She dreams of home, of fields and space.

April 2020

Islamabad, Pakistan.

The virus has delayed her journey back home.
She longs for cuddles with her grandchildren,
Dairy Milk,
The Bullring,
Barbara from next door's apple pie
and the cosiness of small houses.
Home.

Reba Khatun, Birmingham, UK

The brief 'My City, My Home' inspired me to write about how Birmingham became my home. People are constantly asking me 'Where's home?' When I reply the answer isn't satisfactory and they keep asking. Even after forty years, I'm still asked the same question. When will they stop asking? Will my daughters still be asked the same thing when they're forty years old? I hope not. I hope we've learnt to get along better with everyone by then.

Although there are many differences between Britain and Bangladesh the one similarity that stays with me is the rain! So what better subject for a poem than the weather? It's what we love to talk about in Britain apparently and funnily enough it's a good subject for small talk on international phone calls.

Rain, Rain, Go Away

Pitter, patter. The sound of raindrops trickling down the double-glazing
Puddles forming everywhere, umbrellas turning inside out

Incessant drumming of downpour, hammering on the corrugated tin roofs

Sylheti rice fields overflow, flooding roads and villages

Rain seeps into collars and down backs, into shoes, soaking socks

Sending a cold shiver down your spine and a craving for hot delicious soup

Dirt roads turn into muddy streams, sucking your Bata sandals down
Boats are needed to cross the flooded roads

Peel off wet clothes, drop into a pile,
Dry yourself off with a fluffy towel and slip into dry clothes

*Hang up the wet clothes on a clothesline in the veranda
It'll take a day to dry in the monsoon*

Run a hot bath that fills the room with clouds of steam
Submerge yourself in bubbles with the aroma of lavender and
rose

*Grab a bar of soap and head to the fushkuni
Lather up your body and wash it off amongst the fish*

Fill the silence with the television or your phone
Grab some food from the fridge or cupboard

*Family milling around in every room: aunties, uncles, cousins and
grandparents
Subdue the hunger with a glass of water collected earlier from the
tubewell*

Switch on the kettle, grab a mug, teabag and the biscuits
Add a spoonful of sugar and dollop of milk

*Boil the water in a handi over an open flame, pour into a jug
Add loose tea leaves, plenty of sugar and a sprinkle of Dano milk
powder*

Sweet hot tea glides down your throat
Bangladesh and Britain, maybe not so different after all

Reba Khatun, Birmingham, UK

I was born in Britain, grew up in Birmingham, currently live in Birmingham but Birmingham is my home because I love it. I've glimpsed London, Wales and Bangladesh but there's no place like home.

London boasts the underground, but Birmingham buses are good enough to travel all over to places like Small Heath, Sparkhill, Digbeth, West Bromwich, and the City Centre.

I wanted to write about what Birmingham means to me, my happy memories of it and sad.

The Oxford Dictionary Definition of 'Home'

The Oxford Dictionary definition of home is 'the place where one lives permanently, especially as a member of a family or household'. Well, the first part could apply to a prison, boarding school or even an orphanage but that doesn't make them a home. A better explanation of home would be the second half of the definition because wherever my family are, home is there with them. They do say 'home is where the heart is' and that's definitely true. Birmingham has been the home of my family ever since I was a little girl.

My dad was born in Bangladesh and lived there until he came to work in the foundries in Britain in the late 1970s. He settled in Birmingham and called my mum over to join him. Home was a two-bedroom terraced house with flowery wallpaper, swirly carpet, polystyrene tiled ceilings, and a garden swing. Our house was home to five siblings and our parents. As kids, we played out the front with our neighbours and explored the local area. Our

dad took us to the park and relatives' houses at the weekends and holidays. Once a month we would catch the 74 bus and go to the city centre where we'd spend the day window shopping. Lunch would be fish and chips from the Bullring market followed by buying fruit and vegetables from the outdoor markets. If we caught the 74 bus in the opposite direction it would take us to the wonderful Dudley Zoo. So Birmingham was the perfect place to grow up until my dad passed away when I was just thirteen. His body was flown to Bangladesh like many elderly Bengalis that die here but when my sister died twelve years later, she was buried in Handsworth Cemetery.

My earliest memory of Birmingham is school and the library. Unfortunately for me, school wasn't the best years of my life. I was bullied relentlessly in primary school, but the school library saved me, literally. It was the place I took sanctuary in, away from the bullies. It was crammed with lovely books into which I could disappear and find solace in for a bit.

Our house was not short of books. My parents took us to Handsworth Library every Saturday. Afterwards, we'd go over to the laundrette and read the books while my dad put the wash cycle on. We'd walk down Soho Road to get home and see an assortment of cultures and their effect on the surroundings: the Bangladeshi fish shops, Pakistani greengrocers, Indian sweet centres, Halal butchers, Afro-Caribbean hair salons and bakery, gurdwaras, churches and house-converted mosques. Walking down Soho Road didn't make you feel different, it made you feel as if you belonged. My best friend was a mixed-race girl who joined my school during the academic year. Our best neighbours were Jamaican on one side and Indian on the other. We would be in and out of each other's houses all day long.

There are tainted memories of Birmingham amongst the good, the ones where racist people shouted obscenities at us in the street; people in authority spoke down to us presuming we couldn't speak a word of English. And when they discovered my English was fine, it was followed with 'your English is very good, where are you from?' and when they weren't happy with my answer that I'm from Britain they asked 'But where are you really from? Where's home?'

And that's the million-dollar question, where's home? Is it Bangladesh, my parent's birthplace? If home is your birthplace, then Bangladesh is not mine as I wasn't born there. I've been a few times and love aspects of it – the greenery, deserts, hospitality of the people, family, but even there I'm an outsider. We stick out like a sore thumb, and they call people like me 'Londonees'. Even the beggars beg for British currency from us.

Home doesn't have to be my birthplace or the country where my parents migrated to/from. It's the place where I belong, or should I say, where I feel I belong the most. Birmingham is where my parents put down their roots, where I've put down roots. Birmingham is where my dad and sister died, where I gave birth to both of my beautiful daughters. Birmingham is where I went to school, college, got my first job. Birmingham is where I spent weekends in the precious libraries, visiting the beautiful parks, the Sea Life centre, and the farm with the one pony. So the next time a racist shouts 'Go back home' to me in the street I might reply with 'Yes thanks, I am already home.'

Nazifa Afsin, Dhaka, Bangladesh

While writing this literary piece, I was more inspired by the words 'my home' and 'womanhood' than the word 'my city'. Our home is where we live, where we are the most comfortable. As a wanderer since childhood, I felt as though I didn't belong to only a city. I connected with people from all around the globe. About the theme of my writing, our body serves as the home of our soul. I think that a lot of women face body image issues and thus feel it hard to love themselves. I have dedicated this writing to those women, as I explored my home and how it made me what I am. In a few words, I have tried to sum up the struggle I faced while trying to love myself as a whole.

This Home That I Live In

*This home that I live in,
was once just a dot.
A tiny, little blood clot
in the womb of my mother,
so little, that you might not even bother.*

*This home that I live in,
I wear it as my first skin.
Instead of cracks on the wall,
you would see stretch-marks everywhere,
as if home is full of love,
and all of it doesn't fit inside.*

*This home that I live in,
has a lot of stories to tell.
But words don't flow in my windpipe,
so, I often keep quiet
and let it be.
But once in a while,
I reminisce,
when I come across a photograph,
a glimpse of what I have been.*

*This home that I live in,
has two water taps that
over-flow when least expected.
Thus, I keep having
unintentional floods
at the most inappropriate moments.*

*I often keep my windows open,
I accept all the light and changes that it brings.
But if you ever peek through the glass
you could see me
hiding just beneath the surface.
And I have ceiling-high curtains
around my heart,
that are usually draped gracefully.*

*But how graceful can a woman be
when she is being herself?*

*Despite the open windows,
My majestic gates are painted black.*

*So you know,
Not all guests are welcomed home.*

*I let in only the few
that know how to behave,
how to be kind,
how to love and respect.
'Cause, honestly that's what we, as humans, need.*

*This home that I live in,
has a hidden library,
an archive of memories,
of the knowledge I have gathered,
of the lessons I have learned,
of the advice I have been given.
It's where I mostly dwell,
It's where I find myself.*

*In the living room of my home
rests a fireplace
that keeps me warm
on my coldest days,
when the thunders and snowfalls
don't seem that poetic,
when I open my arms wide
just to wrap them around me.*

*'Cause, sometimes the comfort a woman needs,
is within her arm's reach.*

*Shielded by the walls of my home,
I often dance around
in the sanctity of my bedroom.
In my reserved solitude,
I laugh out loud.*

*You must think that
I love my home
And I do.
But this journey was never that easy,
I didn't always love me.
You haven't yet heard of
the basement,
the roots that make me human.*

*This home that I live in
has a basement full of thoughts,
some packed, some wired, some irrational and odd.
And there were a whole lot of boxes
that needed to be arranged.
That stench of ugly little thoughts
needed to be changed.
I tried not to dwell there,
but it wasn't like I could resist.*

*There was once a time
when every time that I descended the stairs,
I could feel the dark thoughts prey.
They made me hate my home,
this body I've been given.
For a long time, I let them haunt
the essence of me
so, one day, I decided
that enough was enough,
that the elephant in the room needed to be addressed.
It wasn't easy,
but I had to do it.*

*Unconsciously enough,
I was taught to be a girl,
I felt the need to be pretty.
But only is it now, gazing at the departing sun,
that I realise, it's my home
and it forever glows.*

I am a warrior, a rising woman.

*I may not love certain parts of me,
but I do accept them now.
Because these are the bricks
that have made this home that I live in.*

*I love who I am
and
Every soul should love its body,
Every woman should love herself.*

Wouldn't the world be a better place to live in then?

Manar Toufique Chowdhury, Sylhet, Bangladesh

As the name of the poem indicates, this piece was written to highlight the beauty of a small city that often many people overlook. Moonlight helps us find our way whenever there's a power cut. The terms provided gave me all I needed to know, as I had to talk about how I embraced my hometown despite the lack of many things it is my home and I have embraced it and I had to be the one to tell my story.

Moonlit Sylhet

Home; I had no idea what it meant
Until I set foot on your soil, Sylhet.
Now permanently settled in my heart with your tent
Equal to my mother who I always visit when I need to vent.

High-status rejection and social awkwardness,
Isn't it time we raised awareness?
Do we really need to be a victim of the wealthy's vex?
When we have our motherland all ready to bless us.

So long living like a coward
Plenty dream of leaving this simplicity behind
As that is what they consider moving forward
It is the opinions that are travelling backward.

Men and women cannot tolerate injustice
No one takes the side of the accomplice
Where passion is something no one will compromise
My hometown where nothing is as strong as the Sylhetees
alliance.

Your enchanted starlit night skies that have me hypnotised
Firefly chases on your green soil leaves me tranquilised
Cool of paddy fields on summer nights that beat many
foreign beach breeze
Rather than a stroll between skyscrapers, I'd take a walk in
my home, moonlit Sylhet.

Mandy Khan Sikder, Dhaka, Bangladesh

My grandparents and their unconditional love inspired me.

Home, Are You Still There?

I'd like to believe I'm a resident of the world, for nearly three decades now I've been struggling to find my true niche. The city itself has played an integral role in shaping me into the woman I am today. My early memories of this city were confined to my family home where I lived in pure bliss with my family. Our house still stands strong with its red coloured bricks and the giant mango trees that stand before it. My nanu had planted these trees in 1960, soon after the house was built. My nanu clearly had a premonition of the generations to come and to eat stickily sweet ripe golden mangoes every summer. It has been a staple of my life and it's the most comforting feeling because when we drive onto the old 15 road in Dhanmondi, you can see the massive branches and leaves, it could only mean that I'm home.

Our family business is a hospital that was established in 1992 and is around as old as I am, and I have spent the majority of my life in the private estate tucked away in Rayer Bazaar. It's not a glitzy neighbourhood with kids playing around, I was accustomed to slums and sick people. It's no surprise I have grown up to become a doctor, now able to work in the same space I used to goof around. Once I started kindergarten, my school's campus shifted to Gulshan and then Uttara. As I grew older my horizons expanded, Dhaka seemed to age at my pace. The ever-changing zip codes only added to my story, I grew up watching the seasons transition from the unbearable sticky humid heat of the summer to the heavy monsoon rain. My grandfather, whom I lovingly call Bhaiya, has been imperative to my upbringing. It was his

unconditional love and support that gives me the strength and courage to keep going. We are blessed to have visited many countries in our respective lifetimes, but my grandfather had a special bond with the city. He valiantly fought for liberation of the country in 1971 and he worked passionately to improve the lives of thousands.

I was always fascinated with the love he had for this country although, like the majority of the citizens of Bangladesh, I too am guilty of being too harsh on the city I call home. My grandfather made me feel accomplished and worthy. It was with him that I truly felt safe and could laugh my heart out. It's so easy to point out what's missing and how difficult it is to get mundane tasks completed. I owe it to Dhaka that my life was every bit meaningful, and one could never say my life was monotonous.

I've spent a great chunk of my life in airports, going from one end of the world to the other, and for the longest time I used to dread thinking that I have to go back to the dull life that awaited me in Dhaka. That's the funny thing about maturity, you eventually stop caring about shiny new things and high-paced city life, you end up craving for something familiar, for comfort and the reassurance that you will be okay. We've had an ongoing tradition in my household now for over a decade now, every time I'd land in Dhaka my nanu would be sitting on the green couch right across the main entrance door. Sometimes I'd come in while she was praying but she would quicken her speed of reciting all her duas to finish and come and hug me. No matter the time of day, whether it was 7 am or midnight, she'd prepare my favourite meal Murogh polao with extra potatoes just for me. The aroma of the polao rice and ghee would permeate the entire room and I would dig in right away. My nanu would ask me questions about my flight, how I was doing and, of course, most importantly, was I eating enough?

Bangladesh is a beautiful, strong, innovative, and young nation that continuously improves over the years. We lavishly celebrate every occasion in Dhaka. Whether it's Eid, Pooja, NYE, or even Christmas, we go big or we just don't bother at all. I truly feel I inherited my mum's ability to make the most out of any occasion. She is the personification of the colour red, and her kindness is what inspires me to ascertain my life's purpose. My favourite holiday of the year is undeniably Pohela Baishak. It marks the first day of summer in Bangladesh, and people go all out to celebrate. One of the new traditions that is very close to my heart are alponas¹ that are painted all across Manik Mia Avenue in front of the National Parliament building. In a span of just one night, people from all walks of life step out together and paint the streets every colour of the rainbow. It is truly a remarkable sight to see.

Due to the recent COVID-19 pandemic, life has drastically changed all over the world. One thing for certain, it has made me learn to appreciate all that we have in the country and value my loved ones even more. I lost my dear grandfather earlier this year and I'm not sure how I will feel walking back into the house without his booming voice and infectious laughter. I would poke him when he was lost in his train of thoughts or mess his perfectly combed hair. It's hard to believe I won't hear him calling my name or singing his old Bollywood tunes. Things have definitely changed, and I feel like I've become a muted version of the happy child I was. Over the past few decades, new additions of sleek new floors and shiny windows have been added to my beloved home. Despite the sleek new makeover, I'm not sure I can call this house my home anymore.

¹ alponas - colourful motifs, sacred art, or painting done with hands and paint which is mainly a paste of rice and flour

Anjum Azadi Nakshi, Dhaka, Bangladesh

I always find women living in some kind of limitation, it doesn't matter if she keeps up with the pace of the running world, changing herself into a modern woman or holding onto her traditional values. I agree that everything of this universe has a limitation, but women are unduly limited. Every conscious or unconscious mind forces a woman into an unknown limitation. Even in language, feminine words represent a fragile, weak, and insecure identity. As a woman, and being in a country like Bangladesh, I often find myself in hard situations. Women are victimised in a number of ways in my home, my city.

I just wanted to portray a woman who almost loses herself under the heavy weight of being a woman.

The Darkness of Her Dark Circles

It has been quite normal for Ana to lose herself in bleary thoughts, just thoughts? Or what can be said hiking in the wood of her scattered thoughts? She loves it anyway. Before her marriage, she loved making trips across the wilderness, stepping close to nature, and hearing it breathe is something beyond tranquillity. Nowadays she loves hiking through her thoughts, thoughts that give a touch of warmth in her coldly pleasant life, at least she finds her lost freedom here, her unuttered words and her faded feelings find a shade here. Her sister-in-law Nil gets mad at her; she said beauty sleep is important for girls and sleeping late could make her age fast.

When your soul finds its true colour of happiness in those numb musings why waste it on beauty sleep? Yes, sometimes, for some girls, beauty sleep has no meaning and for Ana the darkness of her dark circles bears more meaning in her life. Both of them are women, but life ties them in a different manner.

Today a dark cloud is rolling across Ana's mind. It's all about Rebi. She has known Rebi for two days. It's not like Rebi's situation thrills her, but there is something like a hidden mystery inside her that urges Ana more to know Rebi's world. She found Rebi senseless, lying beside her car. Ana asked her a thousand times why she left her home like this, what's the reason. She looked like a married woman, did her husband torture her or cheat on her? Rebi never answered any and denied all suspicions. She just asked for some money to return to her town. Ana wonders how obscure she is yet holding herself rigidly, *maybe she is not in a state to trust us? But then she could lie, at least give some fake answers, so why this stubbornness?* She wonders, *what is she doing leaving everything behind?*

Ana's Mum had always learned to be a compromising and understanding person in every step of life. It could help her to achieve inner peace. She also believes it. She has a very pleasant family life. She loves cooking; every day she cooks different dishes because everyone has different needs, you can't give rules to children when adults also act naught for a little food. She takes a little time for this cooking mastery, and now she is an expert in everything, even in managing her peace. Her husband is a responsible man, he strictly maintains his duties for family and his privacy even from Ana. Ana respects his privacy issue and also makes her own spaces to hideout. Everything is actually fine, and their sweet home almost looks like a palace. Ana polishes every corner here.

Ana cannot help thinking about why Rebi leaves everything behind. What could be the reasons to push herself to do so? There must be a solution for her, why this decision when she has no serious reason to answer.

The only thing she answered, 'There's no problem, Ana, yet I can't breathe there.'

‘Then tell me something, I don't mind helping you out here.’

‘You can't help me, you are a happy soul here, happiness veils your eyes of sorrow.’ Her rootless talking gets no meaning in Ana's eyes, or maybe somewhere it mirrors a bitter meaning that Ana wants to suppress.

Sometimes it seems like Rebi is more interested in Ana's marital life, as if she wants Ana to violate her husband's privacy. Ana had no idea what to say to her. Ana suppressed all her anxiety; no, she never wants to know about anything of her husband – who texts him at night or with whom he stays at night for business purposes. She is happy with herself and trusts others. In fact, she is happy that Rebi is gone now because her words sound so creepy.

The last thing she says before leaving, ‘I left my home because there was a giant and the same giant is living with you, just make an escape, the giant has almost got you.’

What kind of giant? Has she gone insane? How does Rebi know so many things about her husband? her scattered thoughts are rolling around.

Ana holds onto her belief, it is firmly murmuring *everything can be turned into a beautiful ending, I just have to work harder for my peace, I just have to plant some new flowers in the garden and paint my wall into a new colour and cook some new dishes. I'm able to turn my insomnia into my pleasure hour, so how can I give a chance to those weird thoughts to doom my inner peace.*

Ishmam Tasnim, Dhaka, Bangladesh

I believe I have always wanted to write about this magnificent city of Dhaka. As I learned about the local craftsmanship and how it built the city brick by brick, I wanted to capture the beauty, arts, and histories of this city through my writings.

But as I came across the 'My City, My Home' competition, I realised this city is far more connected to me than I could comprehend. Yes, Dhaka is a beautiful yet crowded metropolis, but what makes it 'My City'? How do I find my home here? Then one day I was walking across the city and realised how I have slowly made a home here. This city has shaped me, inspired me, and let me bloom. All of this was done by the people of the city – people I can relate to. This city and its stories are something I have been a part of.

What is art, music, and history but interpretation of different stories at the end of the day? As I indulged deep into the stories of this city, I could realise the unheard stories of this city. I could feel the stories lying within the art, culture, and music within the city.

Most importantly, it's only our home where we can feel safe against all struggles. Home is where we draw our energy from. This city and these people have been an inspiration for me to stand up against all struggles – both internal and external.

The city of Dhaka thus made me stronger. Dhaka enabled me to reach my dreams. The stories of Dhaka surround me, empower me, make me feel alive – just like a home should.

Hence, I wanted to capture this side of Dhaka, where it feels like home. We always have hundreds of memories and stories about our home. This time, I am sharing the stories about my home, my city.

Ode to the Unheard Stories

Returning to my tiny, congested flat after an eight-hour-long shift always feels like a breeze of fresh air.

Home is magical like that – where you're familiar with the smell of the air, you're comfortable with the chair, and you have your favourite snacks stored!

Similarly, we travel and live across different cities in our life, but we have a specific picture of our own city in our mind. This city is where we find a sense of belonging, an identity.

My city is where I know the stories of the people. The city full of people that inspires me to break barriers, the city that lets me outgrow myself.

I find my sense of belonging in a city of nine million people, with people of different cultures, lifestyles, and struggles. I can feel the dreams, heartbreak, and emotions of human relations in this city. This city stands by a riverbank, the river flowing with stories of the ancient land. Here, ancient landmarks stand with the memories of a king's beloved wife. This is also known as the city of mosques – where the mosques are designed as historical architectural sites where passers-by can spend the night. These mosque cultures bear the stories of the nomads of the land. The ancient part of the city still carries the stories of people who stayed and made a change, people who left with their dreams – these stories make me realise who I am. To me, this city is a city of all these stories and dreams.

Then the city developed over time; the stories changed. I found myself in a metropolitan area of diverse people. This diversity inspired my identity, taught me the dynamics of human relations. Nine million people living in a 119 square mile city – making these diverse stories colourful and full of life. Most of the people here are living below the poverty line, living here from some distant village where there is a struggle for survival. The amazing

part that inspires me is how these people still make their lives festive out of the little moments of joy. This crowded city is still a city of celebration, a city of dreams. Even the *rickshawala*¹ who barely earns four USD in a day paints his ride in the most festive colours. To me, this is also the city of colours. Women in their colourful sarees and men in their *lungis*² celebrate their life, their culture. *Mangal Shovajatra* – the celebration of the Bengali new year is done with colourful vibrant festivities of all sorts. The middle-aged man, who never touched a paintbrush in his life, joins the street painting in the celebration. These spontaneous stories teach me to continuously rediscover myself, celebrate my existence.

This city is the home to many, but home is often just a five square foot wooden room or just a polythene camp for an entire family. Over six lakhs slum dwellers live in this city. Women in these slums provide domestic service worth millions of BDT in order to keep this city running. Our *khala*³ doesn't know how to read but still manages to do online banking by her sheer willpower to provide for her family living elsewhere. All these *khals* are breaking new barriers every day and creating their own identity against all odds.

Among all these lights and festivity, this city sometimes feels so frightening. Shadows lurking in the dark want to hold me back. Similar to many other parts of the world, this city is yet to be a safe place for girls. Sometimes, I am scared when I am alone in a dark street and keep wondering if anyone will be able to hear my cries for help. Then I remember how against all these odds, young girls and brave women thrive in this city, making the city thrive as well. Three million women work in the ready-made garments sector in the city, the highest-grossing export industry.

These girls leave their families, their homes, to make their own

1 *Rickshawala* – driver for a bicycle-like ride for two persons

2 *Lungis* – men's traditional cloth

3 *Khala* – housekeeper

home, own identity. These fierce women sew through all the fears of harassment and discrimination day in, day out. The stories of the girl who worked regular twelve-hour shifts to buy her family a home, inspire me to reach new heights. The woman who works for the entire day and still attends night school inspires me to break my own boundaries, to take higher education, to do something for people around me, for the people of this city.

My city is the dream city of the girl who found a home, created her identity in this city. Their dreams and hard work contribute to the sustainable economic growth of the entire country. To me, the face of the city is the garment worker girl who stood up against a bus full of men who were harassing her. Against all the shadows and fears, they are the rays of light who teach me to dream higher, to break free.

My city, Dhaka, is the stories of these unbreakable women. Dhaka is the combination of stories of these women who wrap themselves in beautiful sarees after a long day of work and brighten the city with their presence. Their contribution to society inspires girls like me to celebrate my existence, my womanhood, my identity and to be invincible.

Life can be indeed difficult in this metropolitan city, but this city still feels like home because it teaches me to believe in myself. I can dream comfortably about my future in this bright city as these women are tirelessly making this city better every day. As the city gradually develops and improves as a result of our sweat and effort, my dreams surrounding this city also develop. As I grow and rediscover myself, I feel the need to make positive changes to the city. I dream to make this city a safer, sustainable place for the upcoming generations.

I sing, laugh, love, and dream in my Dhaka, wearing my colourful saree. I breathe in the beauty of the city of dreams and stories.

Ayesha Tasnim, Sylhet, Bangladesh

Being a booklover, I always wanted to write something. For an introvert like me, writing is the only way I can express my thoughts. Though I couldn't express myself completely in my work, this initiative has inspired me to write again after a long break, about my city about my dreams, about the light I have found in this very city.

My City, My Home

‘Home is the place that, when you leave it, you just miss it.’

Sitting by the window seat, while enjoying a view of the little piece of blue sky and cotton candy like clouds, Tasnim was suddenly reminded of this quote and thinking about her destination, her home, her Sylhet. Sipping her bitter coffee, she tries to control the butterflies in her stomach, but it seems like nothing is going to work today. The clouds look extra fluffy today, even the regular air hostess seems way too friendly and lovely.

Taking a mental glance at her journey of life, Tasnim opened her diary and started to write, ‘Look how far you have come, Tasnim. The shy girl who once suffered from an inferiority complex, who used to stutter due to her glossophobia is now teaching thousands of students regularly in medical school. Maybe that's why life is called dynamic and unpredictable.’

‘Things have never been easier for me. Growing up in a normal conservative family and studying in a super restricted school in this conservative city for about ten years, I really didn't know if I would be able to achieve my dreams. Things might have been easier if I were a boy, but as a girl I wasn't quite sure about what awaits me in the future. But I have to admit, Sylhet may not have offered varied opportunities as the capital city would have, it allowed me to find my dawn and my shooting star. This city

has seen my first steps in my home, my further stumbling steps in my academic life, my self-doubt period during the medical admission test, and my transformation from an ugly duckling into a confident and beautiful swan. I remember being tired of exams and late-night shifts, and then escaping to the nearby tea-garden tranquil place in the midst of greenery with mountains as the backdrop.

As the first-born of my parents, I was given enough liberty to chase my dreams and take risks regarding my career. And probably that's why I could dream of something big in this city. This Sylhet is a city of chaos and echoes, a city where religion is a prime factor of life, but people are still so amicable towards each other, a city which is a heaven for foodies and a city where the dreams meet the final destination, a happy horizon. I could follow my dream of studying in the UK and being a resident doctor there because the people of this city lauded me, appreciated me in every single step of my life. Though current situations regarding rape and molestation deeply hurt, it had been a safe city 5-6 years ago. Once it felt like going out of this city would make my feelings for it fade away. But the roots are still deep inside my heart and that's why I am coming back today, here.'

Tasnim closes her diary hearing the announcement of the flight landing in Dhaka. Thirty minutes more and she will be there in her city, Sylhet. The journey starts again. As it is night-time, all the lights look like little stars from the plane. Tasnim eagerly kept looking through the window and till the journey came to an end, kept humming the song with happiness,

'City of stars
Are you shining just for me?
City of stars
There's so much that I can't see
Who knows?
Is this the start of something wonderful and new?'

Salwah Chowdhury, Dhaka, Bangladesh

The title reminded me of how, despite having multiple homes in multiple cities, I never got to own mine. I had to share my bedroom growing up, and now that I am married, I still have to share my bedroom with my husband and daughter. The term 'my space' is something I had to find within myself rather than finding it in my city. I wanted to jot down my dilemmas in the short poem, expressing how I am still on the lookout for a home I can call exclusively mine.

Sanctuary

I was reminded by her that it wasn't my home,
I was ensured I will have mine too someday,
If getting married was the only way
I preferred not to.

She understood I was reluctant,
Nonchalant of my room and belongings,
My father's house was the only sanctuary I thought of –
But she, my dear mother, reminded me every time it was not.

My Holy Book reminds me that my grave is the only home,
Knowing that too, I was told how an 'apartment' should be my abode,
I got married and went to live in my husband's home –
But I was told by my friends, it wasn't mine after all.

Months later, I rented an apartment for us,
Just for the three of us –
Us and our daughter,
Again, she reminded me 'paying rent doesn't make the walls my own'.

Tanzia Tasnim Usha, Dhaka, Bangladesh

I have been studying abroad for three years now and every time I come back to Dhaka, I feel welcomed. It feels as if I have returned to the land that has always accepted me. There are so many memories that I had to select only a few to write in the story. I grew up here and I realise that I am what I am because of this city, and I need to write the good it has done for me. It will always be my home, no matter how many times I leave it.

Memories

I lazily walk alongside busy pedestrians, their destiny unknown to me. Wintry air is stabbing my lungs and my nose almost feels violated as it stings every time I breathe in. I ignore this slight pain and enjoy the atmosphere around filled with age-old magic. The fog is making puffs of smoke come out of my mouth while I observe the people around me. Some have adorned woollen shawls with beautiful ethnic designs; kids are wearing sweaters and stylish hoodies. There are teenagers who are giggling amongst each other with their designer bags carrying badminton rackets. A few years ago, I was one of these teenagers loving the winter in Dhaka city: the land of stories, the land of hope and love and dreams. There are so many memories tied to every corner of this city and they always make me smile.

Like that one time I had skipped class with my friends, and we all decided it would be fun to roam around Dhanmondi Lake. We were fifteen and the rush of defying our parents was too much to ignore. I was not wearing a sweater and constantly shivered against the cold wind. My crush had sneaked to my side and decided to help by wrapping his arms around me as I heavily blushed. I was too young and naïve to notice he liked me back then and

considered his gesture as being a good friend. For two successful hours, my friends and I enjoyed the wintry air, ate ice cream that had our teeth chattering, and decided to take a boat ride on the lake. I was (and still am) hydrophobic and while I wobbled harshly my crush rushed to my rescue, helping me get on the boat. I was extremely shy that we were going to have an intimate session and scared of making a fool out of myself but the ride, itself, was fun. He had joked with me, asked about my likes and dislikes. We spotted people draped in shawls starting a fire, elderly couples jogging around the lake, and stray dogs wagging their tails as the vendors tossed food at them. At the end of the night, before I travelled home, he had asked me to go out with him some other time. Quickly, I said yes and left the lake with a smile the size of a crescent moon. I had felt like a beautiful goddess blessed by this city and my heart had started to fall in love with it.

Or, maybe that time when the city's magic was ruthless, and heat seeped inside my body while I searched the busy streets of Dhanmondi for my best friend. I was worried about her safety, desperate to find her. People in colourful clothes looked at me, judged me as I breathed heavily asking anyone if they had seen her. After a half-hour search, I found her near Jahaj Bari, a big, monumental building inside the lake, with her eyes red and face sticky with dried-up tears. She had run away from home because of the rumours that circulated in our college and somehow she had been dehumanised by people with bare minimum knowledge about her. I had allowed her to cry on my shoulders while others passed on looks. That day she told me about her newfound addiction to cigarettes, the depression, and that rumours about me circulated as well. With the fresh information, I sunk next to her and listened to all the bad things people had said behind our backs, how people who once were my friends said I was a bad apple because I came from a broken family. That day, until the sunset, my best friend and I had passed our time walking down

the alleys and eating street foods. Amongst our journey to support each other I had realised, the city sometimes harboured evil spirits that only wanted to hurt others. This was why it was pushing me to become stronger.

I take turns in Dhanmondi area, crossing road number five and then road number six to finally stop at road number seven. The vendors of Lover's Point – the famous street food stall that garners more attention every day – are selling freshly baked cakes. I stand near the area, ignoring wide-eyed looks and the occasional bumps as people pass me. I never realised Dhaka city as my true home once I left it for higher studies. I constantly compared the air of the foreign land to my home and missed the bitter taste of dust, scorching heat, and icy winds. This city has taught me many things. It has made me the woman I am today, proud of myself for all the beauties and flaws just like it. The beauties that shine from its cold fogs in winter, thunderous skies during the summer, and gentle breeze during the autumn. The flaws of when the cold left others to shiver mercilessly, when the storms destroyed homes, and when the cloudy skies only dampened one's emotion.

In the end, even when this city pushes me away it calls me back. I have realised that Dhaka city has engraved itself in my blood, with a whiff of its wind I remember all the things it has done for me. My identity, my childhood, I owe everything to this city. The times I danced in the streets as traditional Bengali New Year's music blasted through speakers, got chased by a group of eunuchs who demanded a hefty amount of money, journeyed by bus and rickshaws while hawkers took their turns on advertising products, these are all memories I cherish. With memories of this city flooding my mind I walk near the fried food stall where my friends are now loudly laughing with each other, all of them grown and now finishing their bachelor's degree. I join them, creating more memories for the future.

Promila Bittu Safaya-Thomas, Birmingham, UK

For a migrant one never knows where the travelling will end, and which place will ultimately be called Home. Having said that the journey never stops. It's an ongoing pursuit but with age and maturity, one realises what counts in the end is that home is where the heart is!

'Home Is Where the Heart Is'

Where do I belong?
Which city do I call home?
Himalayas are where
My ancestors rose,
Descending to its foothills,
So I am told,
To this place of immense beauty,
Spiritually uplifting,
Where serenity unfolds,
Land of Saints home to
A nomad, the reluctant messiah
Inevitably taking on a soldier's role
Battling to protect his land...

Many many years later
The same blood is shed again
But in Modern times
Only to protect the 'line of control'
Giving birth to
A new entity... Pakistan
From where my parents,
The newlywed, were
Forced to flee in deep distress

Leaving behind a world
And much else.
Hard to comprehend
British rule drawing an end
Saw India divided & hard to mend,
Parting a part of their motherland
As soul-shattering as can be,
My friend!
Seeking refuge across in Srinagar
A stopgap...
To breathe, reflect, reconcile, regenerate
And not in the least, to procreate!

Hard times come knocking again,
Parenthood sees a migrant phase
For a decent family to raise.
Yes for me, the middle of three,
Life full of mischief so free,
A long haul it was this time
In a place of intrigue & food divine
Well suited to spend one's prime.
Hardly surprising if I fell in love
With the 'City of Joy'
Calcutta of my yesteryears
I raise a toast to say... Oh Kolkata!
You were born much later than me.
For I grew up in the shadows of
Your Anglo cousin
Her head forever tossed
With an air of arrogance!
All I reveal here about you is true
Many more memories lurch
in this scanty heap of my silver hue
Only but to mention a few...

Durga pooja's glittering *Pandaal*¹
Drums beating hard afar...
Diwali, Eid, Holi, Navroz
String of celebrations of course!
Park street's X-mas display
Firpose hotel's Jazz play...
Marbled Victoria memorial
Boasting its grand state,
Horse-carts ready to go
Always waiting at its gates.
World-class Zoo in Alipore
Eaden garden in Cricket downpour,
Birla Planetarium & its silver dome
Felt nothing short of being in Rome!
The Racecourse,
Botanical Park,
Shyam Bazar,
Esplanade...
All set in periods before.
Not mere tram-stations galore,
Buses grinning lopsided,
Weighing heavy at the doors.
Stories about these & many more...

Gauriyahatta, Ballygunge,
My school Shiksha Sadan,
Principal Pushpa Mai Bose
A statuette of disciplined love
Honest & straight as her backbone,
Getting out of there,
Might have taken me a while...

1 *Pandall* – marquee

I'm kind of still stuck somewhere
In those Republic Day parades,
Nostalgic National Anthem
Reviving Independence's tantrum
Not to forget a havoc arose
When East Bengal took a pose
As Bangladesh...
Under Pakistan's very nose!
Our shared history, beliefs, and stories told,
Gave us many reasons to hold.
Childhood memories to
My budding adulthood...
All splashed in pure gold!

Sixteen years whizzed-pass
As I was essentially having fun,
Schooling & learning languages
Other than my mother tongue,
Hindi mastered, English in my backpack,
Bengali a bit underdone
Career path had to be chosen
Or even shown.
For me, it came to mean
Not a change in Geography alone
But to learn a new lesson in History
And this time all on my own!
Slaving away ten years or so
Learning Punjabi on the go
Gave me a degree & a chance
To try and explore...

History was to repeat itself,
This time my son's parents were
The migrants...
Sailing to greener pastures ashore,
A long leap it was alright,
Lots of apprehension, a bit of fright
Being tossed up in air thousands of miles
Touching down at Heathrow safely
Did bring about a smile...

Toiling was to be entered again,
As they say, 'No pain, no gain.'
Adjusting, integrating for a while
Made the barren land fertile,
West Midlands it had to be
Where all dreams did come true
Birmingham in particular
Was to be home...
Indefinitely & forevermore
Here I learnt to cook
Something other than my own,
Full English breakfast at times
Or just humble beans on toast,
Fish & chips went down pretty well
As did Sunday roast so swell.

More than food it was the culture,
Many rich heritages mingling Set off my nerves
tingling.
Fusion arts, craft & music
Enriching my senses & soul,
This land, the people, their generous ways
From raising a family to serving NHS
Made everything I did, worthwhile!

Forty years it has been since
I first set foot on this soil,
Coming off the plane at Heathrow
Clinging on to my humble show
It did feel very hard at first
To navigate the professional maze
But once I proved my mettle to them
It helped clear the purple haze.
I remain in awe every bit
Of this city that's given me
So much to gauge,
Known to me now like
The back of my hand.
Home is where the heart is,
And rightly so it is said,
I did fall in love a second time
Where at stake is so much of mine
A true companion for my coming of age
White Christmas, Snowman & Elf
A proud Brummie I call myself!

Jahanara Tariq, Dhaka, Bangladesh

As an aspiring poet and writer based in Dhaka, I continually tend to be inspired and moved by certain happenings in this colourful city. This writing competition was the perfect opportunity to jot down my thoughts. Everything starting from the hours I have spent commuting in this city, to the stories I have heard from my loved ones, to scenes that I love to detest about Dhaka, shows up in this work. The poem is an amalgamation of bliss and misery, revolution and corporation, reunions and heartbreaks because I believe it is the cesspool of these jarring ideas which acts as the defining elements of my home, my city.

Few Notes on Home

Dhaka is drunken serenades of Arnob's *Neelche Tara* and Ahmed's tragic tropes of eighties middle-class anxieties.

Dhaka is a conversation with Buddhadeva about the need for larger horizons, celebration of solitude, and assertions on Art for Art's Sake.

It is Marx-like beards, whips of cream shawls and fuming youth drunk on crafting protests down Kahn's Magnum Opus.

Dhaka is the last condiment needed for romance — Krishna on the flute and a whole lot of empty bellies sprawling through the streets spilling rose petals and spirited profanities.

Rezwana Karim Snigdha, Auckland, New Zealand

This story isn't only a narrative of my life, it is the tale of most women in Bangladesh. 'Me' in this story is not the sole precedent of this entry; rather, it is an account of each untold chronicle of almost all women's lives. Speaking of mine, even after accomplished adequately in academic and professional spheres, I am recurrently advised 'you are a woman, be gratified with what you have effectively achieved; how many young ladies could achieve what you have already accomplished? Be content with that!' As if questioning the triumph of all my achievements, how could it be plausible that I voyaged that far as a woman! Nonetheless, I am constantly reminded that a woman's success is virtually uncelebrated compared to a man's. Yet nobody came to recount the narrative of the lost self of a women's life. Following the pattern, from childhood, I was never given any chances to ask you any questions about stealing my individuality away from me. I have not been given a choice to have you express regrets for the loss of my eccentricity; I have not even been given the opportunity to ask for an explanation when you have snatched myself away from who I am which encouraged me to compose this entry.

My Entirety

If I am asked who I am

On the off chance that I was posed an inquiry... Who am I? What am I? What city do I live in? I was not offered any choice to respond to these questions. I was never asked as to why I resulted in this uncertain world from the womb which was encompassed by security or whether I was keen on being conceived by any means. While most female foetuses are not given a chance to see the light of this Earth, and often get terminated before they

get to know and understand the significance of their gender identity or the costs of being female, thankfully my parents were not among those who did not mean to bring me into this world. Therefore, in line with it, I can compose an account of my experience as a woman today. However, at birth, I had no clue about what skin colour, what gender, and what name I would be depicted as. What I should do or what I should not, how I shall behave and how I shall not – all my performance, my role, my duties and responsibilities, even my own name, and the entirety of this is an assortment of orders in your psyche.

After birth, I was told that my name is Snigdha. Even my name has me figured out before I have. The meaning of the name reveals to me that I am a girl. The denotation of men's names is not given in this consideration because this society does not permit men to be delicate, tender, sensitive. Still, my name instructs me to be gentle, to be soft, and it further teaches me that the sole purpose behind my life is to spread the fragrance by dispensing myself. Therefore, I was unceasingly taught I must be delicate, mild, and gentle. I was advised rudeness, sharpness, and laughter aren't for me because I am a female. I was taught that I have the sole responsibility to ensure all the happiness of the family. Eluding all that I am, at the end of the day, I was simply summed up as a woman, leaving me as an empty body. Whether I understand womanhood or not, I was forced to accept that I am not permitted to fly like a winged bird, I am not allowed to loosen up when it is sweltering hot, it is not acceptable to speak loudly, I am not allowed to be ambitious, I am not allowed to speak freely. I am forbidden to have sexual urges, even not allowed to choose the clothes that I wear.

My modesty, the beauty of my face and body, is the first identity that society would esteem. My acceptance is objectively trapped in my adornment, on my decorated body, the social and cultural

construction of an ideal woman's chastity. I was frequently reminded that I am a woman, and my responsibility is to dazzle others. I should not commit any errors. I shall not cross my line, not to willingly and truly fall in love. For that, I should be completely controlled by conditioned grownups who haven't had the inner need to question the alleged reality and society. I was trained by the social and religious values that my virginity is only for a man. I have no other choice aside from recognising him as my significant other; my body won't be mine any longer, yet he will entirely claim it. He will consider me to be a premise of his amusement.

In this manner, I never get an opportunity to acknowledge why I should be his entertainment source. Once more, I question why I have no rights over my body, sexuality, or even myself?

Although many women have access to formal education nowadays, they are never appreciated for their knowledge or wisdom, nevertheless. In addition, the knowledge contribution of women is not given any place in the intellectual arena or at the talk of logic and argument stage of scholars.

Along this line, if we close our eyes and look at history in search of wise men, countless names will be revealed, but there is no trace of wise women in our observance in this subcontinent. Therefore, from the page of history, the name of *Khona* from our subcontinent and *Hypatia* from the western world don't get their permeability, and in the long run, these names seem to be lost due to the absence of endorsement. In the same way, women are never applauded for the intelligence, quality of their talent, knowledge, or creativity, never enlightened at any communal affair. The hopelessness of the life of a learned woman reminds me of the account of taking away *Khona's* tongue and consuming *Hypatia* with the label of a living witch.

To you, I am the annihilator since the outset of the creation through the story of Adam and Eve. In the scriptures, my birth is exclusively rooted in the service of men and for the endurance of human progress. The holy books have additionally given me the legitimacy to lay hands on me, and I had to jump into the fire like Sita time and time again to prove my chastity. Disgraced, I have repeatedly taken refuge indoors, and even there I am a 'sex slave' or simply a 'slave'.

Thus, this evening, sitting in tranquillity far away from the county, thinking on the off chance that if I am asked, 'Who am I? Where do I belong?' Would I be able to respond to this? Since I was never allowed to know who I am or what I am. At that point, for what reason is this me again in your male-dominated pride, scorn, and disgrace to know who I am? What am I?

Fazila Nowshin, Dhaka, Bangladesh

My life itself inspired me when writing this piece. I have always liked writing, and this allowed me to write more. Family support is also a reason for me to pursue this passion.

Leaving Behind

Was I leaving behind everything? Or was it a step of going forward? But life was going to change anyways. Did I want this change?

When there were too many questions, the answer was none. Holding the pen, my hand stuck over the piece of paper, eyes looking outside the window and mind elsewhere. It was getting too hard to decide whether to leave or stay. The thought that troubled me the most was of leaving behind this city, my home. But right the next moment, a strange, persistent will was telling me something else.

Everyone dreams. A traveller dreams of wandering, a bird dreams of being free forever, but a commoner dreams of staying onto the ground, gripping tightly to the ground. At a point in time, the fear of losing what we already have overpowers the zeal of what we want. Being an exception is what everyone prefers, spotlight and attention, since for a commoner it's impossible to ever be heard in a crowd of anonymous souls. And sometimes, such a dream comes at a cost of happiness. But I was a commoner, why did I care about this? Why did these thoughts pester me? Countless evenings were spent, distinguishing between wishes and dreams.

The cloudy light, bluish skies, birds chirping around, the still, transparent waters of the river always gave me a sort of calmness. The distant hills, crisp air, and the lovely fragrance of tea leaves would lighten up my mood whenever I felt down. There, I used to spend endless mornings observing everything intently. And with this, a pen and paper would always accompany me. The liveliness in the neighbourhood was warm and genuine. There were countless friends, caring neighbours, and a strong grip among the relations. Sreemangal, a small town in Sylhet, was the best place for leading a life of good health and joy. But suddenly, life changed its course and I soon found myself leaving behind this precious place.

We moved to the megacity, Dhaka, for the sake of good education. I was too small to miss my hometown then, but gradually that feeling came up to the surface. The urbanisation in the lifestyles of Dhaka was far-reaching and at times, really difficult to cope up with. New city and people, new school and all the friends left behind, life had become weary. The monstrous buildings blocked the sun, the skies were cloudy, air was dusty, and neighbourhoods felt lifeless. But back then, I couldn't say what I felt as I myself wouldn't know. The change was big, but life taught me to adjust. But now, I feel surprised how my perspective towards Dhaka drastically changed with the course of time. The neighbourhoods I once found lifeless, dazzled me with the diversity of festival celebrations. Many new friends were made, I found lovely teachers who sharpened my knowledge, and I learnt a lot of things. Hundreds of happy memories of childhood were made right here that made me start loving this city. However, life again put me at the crossroads of choosing ambitions over home, dreams over happiness.

The memories of Sreemangal and Dhaka had occupied me, and I kept looking outside the window. The worry of leaving behind my city, family, and this country was too heavy for my mind to carry. Right then, my mum entered and patted my back as she sat down beside me. She held out a piece of paper to me. It was a child's scribbled handwriting.

‘You wrote this when you were only six,’ said Mum. She continued, ‘we chose to shift to Dhaka when we learnt about your liking of writing, to provide you the best of opportunities.’

I read it. The very first essay that I wrote. I looked at the paper again. Amongst the silly grammar mistakes, one line caught my eyes and I read it aloud. ‘I love my home because I am happy.’

Now, it didn’t take long for me to sign the paper, as those unanswered questions had left my mind filled with determination. I thought, *if my parents could live against the odds for me, then why can’t I? Happiness isn’t something to be afraid of losing; there’s always a scope of finding more of them.* Though leaving everything behind is difficult, for this, it is fruitful. I finally understood home isn’t bound to one city. When truly felt, home is where happiness and freedom lie.

Anushka Hosain, Karachi, Pakistan

Italo Calvino said, 'Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears.' The fears and desires of Karachi and its inhabitants are starkly visible. Karachi is one of the hottest, driest, most polluted cities on the planet. This year's monsoon, which should have brought relief, instead caused overwhelming damage to an already broken urban infrastructure, leaving most of the city flooded. The massive inequality, the absence of urban planning, greenery, and sustainable living, are glaring. All these types of factors — gender, environmental, economic — go hand-in-hand. The horrors that Pakistani women face (the Global Gender Gap Index report of 2020 ranked Pakistan 151 out of 153 countries) cannot be underestimated. Yet women of every level continue to fight against their oppression. In writing this piece, I was thinking of the mother goddess (Kali) and the mother as founder (the Mai Kolachi legend), of Indian classical dance (which I learned under Sheema Kermani), and the female power these devotions allow us to claim. It is to the bravery and courage in the survival of Pakistani women that I wish to dedicate this writing.

A Dark Light Stirs

I live in a city that is drowning in light.

We live under open skies, without trees to shelter us. The light is merciless. It beats down, blow upon blow. In summer blinding bars of sunlight strike every surface, forcing us to walk around with eyes half shut. The light breaks through windows and doors, finding a chink, an uncovered corner, forcing its way inside our homes. We carry the weight of light on our heads. We walk with heads bowed.

We live submerged in light and smoke. Our skies are brown

and grey, and our houses are painted to match. House dims into sky, house fades into earth. House dissolves into cloud, house mingles into ground. A dun haze: from heaven to earth, a blended expanse, a muted palette, this vast city unfolding.

I live in a city that shrouds women.

On smoky streets women walk in ones and twos amongst throngs of men, effacing themselves, erasing themselves. Camouflaging to escape predators. Sober faces hiding shining hearts. A woman with a soul of light, a woman with the character of water, a woman shrouded in black.

I live in a city that is drowning in water.

Summer rain and the streets dredge up our shame. Flooding everywhere. Rain falls from the ceiling, water flows through windows, under doors; the courtyard becomes a lake, the street becomes a river. Rickety shacks and one-room homes wash away. The city, ashamed, effaces itself – an urge to return to the primeval. The city dreams of disappearing into the sea.

In the rain and in the sun, women are busy. Burying secrets underground, trampling underfoot what was promised and never given – losing, discarding, forgetting. Shadowed hearts, drowned hopes, submerged dreams.

I live in a city on the frayed edge of the world.

The koel cries, portending rain, flies from its tree, and then! One drop, then another. The parched quench their thirst, swell with gladness, and for a moment it seems we can start over, all shall be mended — but the rain continues. It soon overfills the scanty earth, it takes to the streets, collecting as it goes the scraps and swill that form our lives, the muck and mire that hold up our

dwellings, making a wake of remains, scouring the underworld, and spewing the refuse of bodies and minds now clotted and curdled and condensed into something vile and vicious, our rot laid at our feet, this fouled world we have made.

Water used to flow freely here, not long ago. Much of this city was seabed or marshland or mangroves; rivers, canals, and streams ran through it. We pushed back the sea, cleared the mangroves, drained the marshes, stole the land; we covered, clogged, and blocked the rivers and canals. The water swirled in rage at our profanations. Livid, furious, the sea returned to reclaim what once belonged to it.

Women used to walk freely here, not long ago. On the streets, on buses, on bicycles; in skirts or shalwar; shouting, laughing, dancing. We took away their right to move and maunder; we forbade, restrained, shackled; we coerced and compelled them into shrouds. This is a city of silenced, swallowed women, heads bowed with an unnameable grief.

When I was a child, the city was a mass of blocks, houses of modernist white standing stark amidst the brown swirling sand blunting, sharp corners. In those days we had the blazing red, pink, orange, purple, magenta of bougainvillea, its papery delicacy and colourful profusion in counterpoint to the blocky white houses. The colours of dawn and sunset, of fire and sunlight. Amaltas trees with their radiant yellow flowers shaded the streets, lining the roads with their flower carpet: yellow the colour of joy itself. Gulmohar trees with their flame-red flowers stood like glorious sentinels at street corners: red the colour of our gladdening hearts. The flowers feasted on sunshine, softening the light so that it fell on our heads like halos of golden dust.

Against all that white and those brilliant colours was a blue sky: not the clear laundered blue of the new world, not the deep blue of the old sea, nor the temperamental skies of unknown, far-off places. This sky was a worldly, dusty sky, one that had seen history, that had beheld misfortune and misery but had

also seen splendour and immensity. This was an ancient sky, one that had witnessed the rise and fall of many peoples, that small portion of a history that contained the rise and fall of mountains and the movement of continents. In this ancient sky, eagles shrilled and soared.

A few hundred years ago or a thousand years ago or never, a woman from a fishing village lost her husband in a storm, and despite the danger, went into the heart of the tempest to rescue him. Or she lost one of her sons to a crocodile, killed the crocodile, and saved her other son. Or she lived in a fishing community in which the men stayed out on the seas, the women were at the centre of village life, she was the head of the village, and the village took on her name, a sign of the respect in which the people held her.

Mai Kolachi: Respected lady, fisherwoman, fighter, leader.

Mai Kolachi: founder, mother. Kolachi, Kurrachee, Karachi.

I live in a city that dreams of a world that once was. I live in a city that dreams of a world that could be.

A dark light stirs. In a shining heart, a thrumming fury grows. Fury swells in the throat — song. Fury swells in the hands — music. Fury swells in the feet — dance. Black fury, whirling with garlanded arms, points of light gleaming above her head. In her black braid, a brilliant, sparkling, blood-red jewel. Song breaks like waves on dark shores, music claps asunder dark air, dance crackles dark earth. Something ancient awakens to reclaim what was once hers.

Shanty Begum, Birmingham, UK

I feel that the terms My City and My Home inspired me by making me think, feel, and ask the question ‘Does the city I currently reside in actually feel like home to me?’ I guess the next question would be, which is equally as important, ‘What would qualify as my home, and do I feel I am at home yet or not?’

My City... My Home?

Gazing intently out of my bedroom window, I look up towards the darkness...

Once again to be reunited with the sparkling jewels of the dark sky...

Hello again stars, my companions, my confidantes, keepers of my innermost thoughts... Let us pick up from where we left off... I have an important question to ask, and I know that you will answer me truthfully while shining your light across the city landscape...

From Manchester to Birmingham, Birmingham to Manchester and now Manchester to Birmingham again... I have settled now in this ‘city of thousand trades’ but have I accepted this city as my home? Has the city taken me in and accepted me unconditionally?

Friendly faces greet me in the streets, talking and laughter echoing in the parks, music, culture, food, the rich history embedded in the fabric of this magnificent city... So much to see, hear, and feel... yet why, at times, do I feel so disconnected, so lonely, and like my voice, goes unheard?

Can you answer me stars, my companions, my confidantes, keepers of my innermost thoughts?

‘You will find the answers to your questions from within, where lies the truth and your light... Only then will you look up towards the dark sky and smile contently in silence...’

Nusrat Tabassum, Dhaka, Bangladesh

The terms 'My City and My Home' brought out a heartfelt complicated confession, an unrequited love for my city's past, fearful hope for the future and much more. Above all, it brought out the truth and a vulnerability, feelings that I never thought I could articulate... Dhaka is my muse, but I hate it sometimes with disappointment and intensity, but I always go back to loving it with a confused heart as cosmopolitan cities tend to play with our conscience. My writing was inspired by recent real incidents, and in the end, the poem became something very close to my heart.

To My Daunting Muse

Dearest Dhaka, I would happily give up
this mortal petty frame,
Dissipate my being into your alleyways and chaotic lanes.
I would restore the mourning Black Buriganga
into its glory days,
With crystal clear water, not a drop of malice,
corruption, or selfishness in its veins.
I wouldn't let them cut down those bloodshot crimson
Krisnochura blooms;
Nor the glorious Radhachuras that reminded me of the
promised Golden Bengal;
Not the violet Oporajita, Jarul, nor the white Kodoms
Of vehement clouds that brought the rains so sound
That it would make everyone gush over the dazzling
Dhaka's beautiful shroud.
Strangers would fall in love with each other in that joyful
ambience of an otherworldly crowd.

But now the dirt of Dhaka is dying with thirst
Because they can't soak the rainwater to clean the rust.
The ground is covered up with concrete
and pitch-black asphalt
By bulldozers of forced development and disgust.
The vast horizon has shrunk so much
That even up above an ugly elevated construction,
you can't see so much.

Dhaka I've seen you through child-like amazement,
I've seen you with teary-eyed teenager's angst,
Through the busy practical business lens,
Through the starving eyes of a street flower vendor,
Through the wrinkled skin of
an old woman bangle attender.
I've enjoyed you, decorated and colourful,
In festivals, in Pahela Baishakh,
Until some hooligans decided to tear apart,
The beautiful red-white saree of a young girl.
I've seen you in revolution, in flood,
in countless other avatars.
You see, I've witnessed it all, the good, the bad,
the mediocre overalls.
A necessary evil, you might be to some,
But to me, you're the forbidden apple of Adam,
And I prefer to gulp down my Hemlock at once,
Drown in dreams of your glorious past,
And hopelessly admire you in whatever state you are
Because I believe,
soon bees will reincarnate you in spring buds.

Faria Rashid, Dhaka, Bangladesh

I got excited about the 'My City and My Home' writing competition from the time I first heard about it from a fellow Bangladeshi woman writer. As an aspiring writer, it inspired me to think about the topic and write a piece on it. It is a great honour and pleasure to share the same platform with women writers from two other different countries along with Bangladesh. I considered this as an incredible opportunity to express my feelings and emotions about my city. I tried a new style of writing for this piece. This writing competition certainly provided me with a platform to express my truth.

Here, I Never Feel at Home

Dhaka - a city that never made me feel home - neither as a little girl nor as a full-grown woman.

It is dangerously unsafe, where I can never freely roam.

Not only for the muggers but also for the strange gazes.

Dhaka is a compact concrete jungle that constantly suffocates me, makes me yearn to go find a space to breathe.

The energy here is so toxic, going inside is your only refuge.

It is a place where my senses are overloaded – not only with the noise, the traffic, the pollution, the beggars, the hawkers proudly occupying the sidewalks, the uncomfortable lighting, the overcrowded spaces, the unplanned urbanisation, the piles of overflowing dirt, the stray dogs, the honking of the vehicles;

but also, with the indiscipline, the crime, the corruption,
cruelty, violence, intensity, and the ruthless people.

Dhaka makes me feel *fernweh* – the self in me that wants to feel
appreciated, rather feels criticised.

Dhaka will never let you hide to find yourself or to find solace.

It is a space that I have outgrown, certainly not where I belong.

Too much is happening, but I am still not growing.

The feeling of disassociation is always there.

It is not the home where you find your tribe.

In Dhaka, I am alone. I go alone. I do it alone.

I want to go for a long walk home.

Nayeema Nusrat Arora, Dhaka, Bangladesh

I have witnessed so many women around me living such different lives than me. Nothing is common between me and them except the city we live in. I guess we all have built a love-hate relationship with it. We get mad at it, frustrated even but in the end, we don't know any other place to call ours. It is a kind of relationship you have with your loved ones. And sometimes when human bonding is too much to deal with, the city is the only thing that lets you get lost in it.

Belongingness

The smell of freshly applied henna is my favourite. It has a festive vibe as if something very auspicious is about to happen. A very happy beginning. But today the smell means much more to me than just festivity. This henna on my hand is the mark of my womanhood. I am getting married today. Finally, I will have a home of my own. My mother, I think, was not that happy with my birth as she was so sure she was about to have a boy. The light bearer in her darker than a winter's night life. But she had me. My father however tolerated me kinder I would say. I think my mother's harsh comment made him pity me. When I was three years old, I had a sister with whom I shared my misery and my mother's wrath. But she however didn't have to tolerate it for a long time. How lucky! When she was three and I was six years old we welcomed our third sibling and the oldest brother, Badshah. The torchbearer of my mother's life. She wanted a name that suited aptly to her 'rajputra'.¹ Hence, the name. Oh, I so wanted to hate Badshah, but I couldn't. How

1 *Rajputra* is a prince or son of a king. Bengali mothers use this word to affectionately describe their sons. In this story, it is used to give an equivalent sense of the English phrase 'apple of my eye'.

could I? Badshah was the humblest, kindest child I have ever seen. Full of love, full of empathy. When my mother used to beat me and then punish me with the ‘no food’ rule, he would always sneak some in his little pockets and feed them to me when my mother was not looking.

I was ten when we had to evacuate our old house because of river erosion and move to the city, Dhaka – a place larger than life where movie stars and famous cricketers live. We were going to live in the same place as them. But the city had its own cruelty under its glamour. Me, my sister, and Badshah would roam around our new home after eating anything in the house that could be passed as lunch. I had made a new friend, Rahim Chacha. He would let us ride his rickshaw and show us the city life. Somehow, that moving vehicle of a stranger always felt more like home than where I lived. I don’t know if it was the absence of my parents’ control or the love of Rahim Chacha, or the sweet symphony of my siblings’ laughter, but I felt that I existed and that feeling was never of guilt or a burden like I felt when my mother used to scold me for doing something she did not approve of – which was most of the time.

She would say, ‘This is not your house where you could do whatever you felt like. Do this when you have your own house, understand? I would not tolerate any of such nonsense.’

I used to get so confused after hearing this. I mean if that was not my home and then what is? But then I learnt, you get a home after you get married. Your husband brings a home along with him. And when you marry him, you marry the house too. Finally, the day has come. Now the happy feeling of existence won’t last for just a splitting moment of a rickshaw ride. It will last for eternity.

Waiting is exhausting. He always takes such a long time in the shower. The food will get cold and then he will get mad. If he wants to eat hot food, why can't he just come in time? Again, I have to reheat everything, and he will get mad anyhow for the food being late.

'Bring the egg curry.'

'I didn't make any.'

'What do you mean – you didn't make any?'

'There is no egg in the house, so I made a vegetable curry instead.'

'What do you mean there is no egg? Didn't I just buy eggs yesterday? How could you finish them so quickly?'

'The women from downstairs borrowed some and I made a curry yesterday.'

'How dare you distribute my things which I buy from my hard-earned money in the whole neighbourhood? Did you ask for my permission? Look, this sort of things might have been okay in your father's house, but I won't tolerate such stupidity in my house even for a second. Do you get that?'

'Yes.'

'Now go and buy some eggs for me. I want to eat egg curry today. Take this money. And don't you dare waste my money in stupid things.'

I took the money and went out. Called a rickshaw and asked the rickshaw-puller to take me to the furthest shop in the area. I am in no hurry to go back and live in a house that is not mine.

I guess some people are not lucky enough to get a place in this world where they can enjoy their existence and experience a sense of belongingness for eternity. Some just get a fleeting moment in the rickshaw of a stranger in a city they call their own.

Adita Afrose Hasan, Dhaka, Bangladesh

For the many years that I lived abroad, whenever I thought of home (which was often), I thought of my paternal grandparents' house at old Elephant Road in Dhaka, Bangladesh, where I had spent a large portion of my childhood and formative years growing up in a sprawling, joint family property. When I read the brief for My City, My Home, it was the first place that came to mind and that I had the urge to write about. It embodies a golden part of a childhood and time in Dhaka in the 1980s and 1990s that can never be returned to. The house, built in 1960, is now soon to be demolished, its glory days long past, and only my paternal aunt still lives there. Elephant road, once a stretch of land with far-placed bungalows and large residential homes near the sprawling Dhaka University campus, gradually grew into a very busy shopping district quite at odds with the old family homes hidden within its interior 'golis' and bylanes.

Elephant Road er Basha (The Elephant Road House)

Sometimes I miss home. Childhood. The old house with the forest garden. Untangled, wild, coconut and mango trees; unkempt except for the once a year 'picnic' in winter under the lychee tree, where we made a stove out of mud and cooked khichuri. The three of us, Amita, Anik and I. We never even took a photo. I remember every detail, the sun barely filtering through the thick foliage of the big tree above our heads, mosquitoes occasionally biting our bare legs as we crouched, waiting, sometimes sitting on little *piris*; the smoky smell of the khichuri as it cooked for what felt like hours on the little handmade clay stove built out of the soil, fire burning with dry coconut and banana tree leaves.

Banana trees. I had forgotten about those.

The sour mangoes we would climb on the giant roof of the house to pick, using whatever we could find, long sticks, tugging branches to pull them closer to our hands. Edging precariously close to the flat concrete edge with no railing, a free-fall straight down two floors to the garden below. Just close enough for one brief moment to pluck the mango off, and then the branch would swing back, unruly. The smell of those green mangoes, the thrill of our success, anticipating marching down to the kitchen to peel and mix with crushed dried red chillies and salt, mouthwatering. A life-long love of *kacha aam makha*.

I loved that wild garden. I used to like to pretend that garden was a magic forest. Somedays, exasperated, I would wish that the grown-ups would tidy it up, plant some grass or flowers so it would not look so unkempt. I would ask my mother. She would say she had tried; the grass would not grow because there was never enough sunlight. Why not? There were too many trees. They blocked out the sun.

Except on the veranda. Those hours spent on that veranda. The sunlight tracing diamond-patterned shadows over the white mosaic floor; the view of the hammock strung between the mango tree and jackfruit tree right in front. Me sitting cross-legged on the cool white floor, basking in the warmth of that sun. Playing. Singing. Endless hours reading books lying on the bamboo couch in one corner. Eating fresh boiled peas straight out of the pods. Eating juicy pink jambura in bowls. Happy whiling away time alone, yet never really alone in that great, sprawling house full of people. Eating every meal there when we moved the dining table. All the furniture changed around every few years.

The time when we were very little, and a toddler Anik decided to pee through the bars of the upper floor balcony, jetting forth a thin arc of golden streaming water; I watched, fascinated, standing next to him as it made its way down, glittering in the midday sun, where it landed straight on our Dadi's wild head of

grey hair, her having chosen that exact moment to step out into the garden from the veranda below. Some shouting about unruly children ensued, and it cannot be said that she was best pleased as realisation gradually dawned. And Anik's mother, who for some reason we all called *Bouma* (daughter-in-law), standing hidden in the shadows behind us, trying half-heartedly to contain her unrestrained guffaws with hastily pressed hands to her mouth, against the rising crescendo of shrieks coming from the garden. A childhood story to be re-told over and over again until it made even Dadi laugh.

But always, the memory of the sunlight filtering through the trees, streaming through the netting and the square grids of the veranda grill, making stretched out, sun-filled diamonds on that cool stone floor. For years, whenever I closed my eyes and thought of home, that was what I saw. To this day, large white mosaic squares with those little dark stones are my favourite type of flooring. Funny, how long it takes you to understand how much childhood influences your choices. Your favourites. Your joys. Your harms.

I miss you, home. So much moving around since; so many places to call home. None that invoke that first confidence imbued within a beloved childhood. Where you felt like you were Boss. That you were important, and you were loved. I wonder, did we all feel that way? Amita, me, Anik?

All those years distilling confidence, slowly eroded – I wonder now if there was a correlation between leaving home and the loss of self-assurance, the beginning of self-doubt. The irony though, for surely somewhere in those memories, childhood is where it all begins. The making of you, the beginning of you. Of who you are, and what you might become.

But for now. I have sun-warmed memories. I was content. I felt loved. And for that, as for those memories, I am eternally thankful.

Zarah Alam, Birmingham, UK

The term ‘My City, My Home’ raised questions in me which I sought to answer in my poem, for example ‘How can I describe my city?’, ‘What stands out to me in my city?’ and ‘Does my city feel like my home?’ The fact that the words ‘city’ and ‘home’ are separated suggested a central tension which encouraged me to also explore some of the negative aspects of my city and to grapple with the question of whether my city truly felt like my home.

Burminum

Birmingham, no, *Burminum* – it tastes salty sweet on my lips –
The rumble of an industrial past held captive in its name.
It tumbles out of my mouth, all frothy and green grey.

I snail through its spindly streets
And marvel at the bus driver’s skill,
Not one car hit nor angry beep heard.

I’m all too aware of my dust-glazed eyes,
A symptom of overly familiar sights,
The magic of the minutiae lost in a concrete blur.

I rub my eyes, determined to truly see my city,
When, suddenly, I’m jolted by the tumultuous branches battering
the ceiling.
Trees announce their presence, demand to be seen,

Twist and turn to rebel against their linear formation.
I smile at them, who knew a city could be so green?
It seems I pass a park after every two streets.

Colours spring between concrete slabs coming apart,
I used to hopscotch the dried weeds,
Too afraid to stomp out their wild beauty.

As we slither through the city centre
My breathing is stifled,
I feel simultaneously seen and unseen.

A cacophony of claustrophobia and competing voices –
The smooth saxophone – cheerful *a'right bab* – too-loud-to-
understand preachers –
But the chaos of life on full display makes me proud

I imagine what fresh eyes might see: every race, religion, culture,
Every person I pass sings in a new tongue,
I contribute mine and know I'm always welcome.

Only two and a half lifetimes travelling these streets,
My parent's heavy long-haul journeys, leading to *me*.
They tell me home is not where your roots lie, but rather, where
you plant your seeds.

And I know it is my home
Because whenever I hear *Now leaving Birmingham*
A part of me lingers behind, refusing to budge, refusing to leave.

Sana A. Rashid, Walsall, UK

The open-ended questions included in the writing competition brief made me feel relieved. Our stories and our voices deserve to be heard; however, significantly more effort has to be put in, especially for a South Asian to share this voice with the wider world.

When reflecting on the questions, I quickly realised it is best to write with my own voice, rather than that of my mother's. If I did write from her perspective, I felt it would be like stealing her voice and her story, so therefore the best way of expressing my own feelings and emotions as a second-generation child, with the big question of 'home' hanging over me, was to be my own voice. I was able to connect with the question 'Where is home? Where do I belong?' quickly and therefore wrote my initial thoughts on it. When exploring the question, 'Do I love my city? Is it mine? Have I made a home?' I needed to think a lot more. Luckily, through writing several drafts of my competition entry, I unearthed the answers to these bigger questions.

Thank you once again for reading my work and thank you for creating a platform where women's voices are elevated.

I Know From Where

Allama Iqbal had said, '*Beyond the stars, there is another place.*'

Then I think, *What am I? Which place do I belong? From here, or there?*

When I ask my mother, she says, 'I have become a lost country.' What could she mean?

I know

I can see this town. It has rows of semi-detached houses and busy roads and lamp lights which shine bright even under the moonlight. And the rain, its pitter-patter, and the bitter cold air

and the warm smell of fish and chips. Salt and vinegar. And the local hot spot where sweets like rasghulleh are tucked in boxes. Sweet. And the array of colourful suits decorate shop windows to celebrate my culture. So it exists. This town, this place, but at the same time, it doesn't.

I know

I am able to sow my seeds in this town. I can breathe out the monsoon of my heritage and grow something new from its soil, but I halt. My attempts to reach my hand out into the mist of somewhere makes me feel like a trespasser. This town stings and doesn't exist as my own anymore. When I walk across the paths, I steal my reflection from the eyes of strangers and see how I'm drifting towards somewhere else. That I'm foreign when I'm not supposed to be.

Ammi said, 'I'm a lost country.'

What do you mean? My eyes glance at her, yet my eyes are met with silence, so I search for the answer within.

Somewhere in the ocean of my mind, something is shifting. Rattling. My history is whispering into my small ears where I am learning. I'm parted by a sea that is filled to the brink with bodies of travellers, who were in search of a better home. I let the tides of distant pain swim through my bloodstream, for their echo exists in ancient stories. Of sacrifice. Of my Abu and Ammijee, who were stripped away from their first home in Pakistan, and then they embraced the arms of this home in England.

I know, I say quietly.

This paradox grows into a strong beam. Where the 'I know' becomes 'I don't know'. When the quiet of the night morphs into nostalgia. I've seen how my long fingers have carried the imprint of Potha village on its skin. I inherit their nostalgia. Across the night's long back, I can sometimes hear the fruits of this motherland say, 'Come! Come!' And when I enter her valleys and streets, every window smells of some unbeknown putrid smell.

‘Foreigner, foreigner!’ they exclaim. And at times this is what it feels like being a part of two lands and having to choose which one is home.

Mother says I’m a lost country and I nod like a body rooted away from her soul. Like a country floating across space. Like a loud noise that is drifting into silent decibels.

I know

when the light of my local town dims and the space of the night becomes never-ending, I will see. The glittering lights of my town will dance with the drizzle of activity. I live in the English country my body has bathed in. I have stolen her sky’s light and she still has let its sun kiss my skin. Am I a thief? No, she calls me her own. I roam the town that has wrapped me with the fabric of its lessons. The kindness of some of its people oozes out from my eyes. The essence of its soul sways. I feel the rhythm of its song making my heartbeat in melodies of reassurance. I can feel this home ripening. This must be my home. Is it?

I may not be over there. And maybe I drift away in thought when I am here. I open my eyes, and in the day, I dream in the scents of these two homes. The ocean of blue swells in the sky and makes me realise what a beautiful place it is to exist in. I open my arms wide to embrace a town in the Midlands and a village in Azad Kashmir. Two identities melt in unison and create a blend. My town’s beat chimes in my heart, the blend of a Pakistani village taps in my mind and I take a long loving breath in and say...

‘Allama Iqbal had said, *‘Beyond the stars, there is another place.’*

I am from here and from there.

From the stars above in the sky,

From this soil. Within that ghazal.

I am everything, my heart understands to be its

I am this moving, travelling home.’

Ishrar Habib, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Being a working woman, stepping on twenty-five, life has never felt so puzzling. Career, marriage, etc., where can she find herself? Where does she truly belong?

Belonging

The wooden bridge across the rushing tributary of the Brahmaputra lay almost broken. The villagers had somehow mended it using a single bamboo and were quite gracefully riding on it to cross the river, some were even carrying small children, some of them were children themselves.

Standing in front of the crumbling bridge, Shoma wondered how the lives of the inhabitants of North Bengal had remained so much unchanged throughout the years, and how they had learned to fearlessly co-exist with intense flood coupled with the lack of proper infrastructure.

With the pair of her shoes in one hand, clutching the dangling lower portion of her kamiz in the other fist, Shoma gathered the courage to cross the river after watching the villagers cross it with smiling faces that showed that they, in fact, were enjoying the ride despite the dangers of it.

She crossed the bridge and reached her grandmother's place, her native home, a small village named Brishtipur. Crossing the dangerously poised bridge felt like a big accomplishment to her. At this stage of her life, while going through a quarter-life crisis, this experience felt like a small proof of her own ability to deal with the uncertainty that life had laid out in front of her.

Her grandmother stood at the porch and welcomed her with arms wide open. She had cooked all that Shoma loved to eat. At lunch, Shoma ate with contentment, as a strange comfort began to settle in her mind; away from her own four-wall enclosed flat at Dhaka, here, it felt like home.

It started raining after lunch, Shoma laid herself on a soft, dampened bed and listened to the raindrops pattering on the tin-made roof of the house. The sound soothed her aching heart and slowly she drifted into her childhood memories- how she used to come to visit this place on the occasions of Eid-ul-Fitr and would never want to leave. Yet, after spending only three holidays, she would go back to Dhaka with her parents with teary eyes and a heavy heart that never used to settle in a city of thousands of running and rushing people and cars.

During the Eid holidays in this small village of Brishtipur, she would play with her cousins, and the children from the neighbourhood, who were always available to play with, unlike the children in her neighbourhood at Dhaka who seemed to lack the time or the enthusiasm to even show their faces to their neighbours.

Shoma had always questioned herself about where it was that she belonged. Was it Brishtipur, where her extended family lived, or was it Dhaka, where her parents had settled to build a fortune yet could never set roots?

And now that she had become a woman, she knew that she, like other women, would be pushed towards marriage, which for a woman here, means being transported to another family. Shoma wondered whether the ‘shoshurbari’ or the house of the in-laws is finally the place to belong as a woman in Bangladesh...

At night, Shoma was staring at her phone's screen, at the last thread conversation with Rashed who told her 'I know you have other priorities in life, but my priority is getting married and having my own family. Do not rock the boat: get married, and have kids, that way all problems of your life will be settled.'

'Can you give me some time to think about it? You know, Rashed, maybe, I need some more time to discover myself, my abilities, realise my own dreams, first.'

'I do not know what you mean. Cut to the chase, please' had been his cold reply which intended to overlook her feelings.

'Sure, I do not think I want to be with you anymore...' Shoma replied.

There was no use in explaining things to someone who did not intend to understand her or honour her feelings. Rashed's reply crushed her delusion that he was the person who would acknowledge her feelings and who she was meant to be with. And so she quit. That was when Shoma started looking deep inside herself.

Shoma, a woman in her late twenties, was having to deal with a lot of questions at once, questions that never arose before, but now they were everywhere, cornering her from every possible direction. The next morning, after a sleepless night, she rose from her bed and walked up to her grandmother's room. As she stood at the door, she found her deeply absorbed in Namaz, praying in a pure white shari. Shoma was about to turn and walk away, as her Nani called out, 'Shoma moni?'

Shoma sat beside her, and her torrid mind blurted out, ‘Nani, where do you think I belong?’ Shoma asked her grandmother. It startled her a bit, but maybe, she understood what Shoma was going through. She gracefully replied, ‘Jonmo hok jotha totha, kormo hok bhalo’ (It does not matter where you are born, what matters is your actions.’ The age-old Bengali saying seemed to make sense for the first time to Shoma. ‘Look, my dear, why can’t you think that it is the world you belong to?’

‘Then, what about ‘shoshur bari,’ Nani?’ Shoma questioned again, worriedly.

Shoma’s grandmother laughed a bit and then answered, ‘Nanubhai, the most important thing is to consciously choose your happiness over compulsions. Life: it is like that Brahmaputra that runs wild. Build a strong bridge to cross the wild river of life. Sometimes, that bridge will be shattered by sudden rushes; but what matters, is that you mend it, build it again. Every time it shatters, build it again with whatever you have got. Do not give up. Just like the people of Brishtipur, live courageously. And remember, womanhood is a gift; it itself is sufficient to endow you the courage to withstand the journey of life.’

Sahna Iqbal, Birmingham, UK

The inspiration for my work is my mother. I have written this on behalf of her in first person. After listening to her tell me about how she had to leave everything behind to start a new life in Birmingham, for a better future, has made me think that where we are today is because of them and their parents. So this is just a way of saying thank you.

It bought a tear to my mother's eye whilst I was writing and researching, she connected with the memories again and appreciated me writing this piece.

LHE to BHX

Is there a *Darji* tailor? Just like the ones from Lahore.
Who will stitch my heart together after the migration?
All I remember was the made-to-measure chequered coats
Gifted to us as they said, 'It will be cold.'
We slept in them, as we held onto our Homeland.

No one mentioned anything about Halal,
So we ate like the British, Angel Delights and Bacon crisps.
I recall our daily trips to 'Victoria Wine' corner shop,
Fascinated by the Cadbury's 2p chocolates
As we walked back with them wrapped in our shawls.

We bought cassette tapes with our pennies from Sound & Mag,
Listened to Mahendra's songs to keep us sane.
The smell of samosas that were sneaked into cinemas,
As we watched '*Mera Gaon, Mera Desh*'
We caught a glimpse of our heritage.

We wore crimplene bell-bottoms to our Ladywood School,
And ring belts on weekends too.
Chip butties for lunch and crusty rolls,
It was time we accepted Birmingham, to be our home.

My mother, the seamstress, stitched dresses and gowns,
So we didn't have to eat on loan all the time.
Keeping warm with our paraffin heaters,
We kept change for the electric meters.

Sometimes we'd sit in the dark with a candle flicker,
Sharing our stories of our bygone era,
Of how we escaped the war of 1971,
To have a better life for us and our children.

It has been that long that it feels like a dream,
A memory that has almost faded away,
We have made Birmingham our culture and our home,
But our Motherland will always be what we are made from.

Alishae Abeed, Lahore, Pakistan

The city of Lahore inspired my poem, in all its beauty, history, and pride. My city is my home, but it is also an enigma to me, an ever-shifting canvas of green and gold.

Sunflowers for Lahore

The city parts her lips and whispers to me
‘What do you know of me?’

I close my eyes and think deeply
Of a flash of light, a quickening
Heartbeat punctuated by birdsong.
I dip my pen into the ink of the *nehr*¹
And map out a city of green and gold,
Covered in the dust of a thousand years,
Lahore.

The soul of the city calls out to me,
Peeking through a curtain of moonlit clouds
She asks,
‘What do you know of my memories?’
I sing to her of kings and poets,
Of warriors and princesses and mystic hearts.
I hum to the tune of the monuments of the city,
Every curve of marble immortal.
They are the bones of this city,
Remembered not only by its people,
But by the very air itself.

I sit in the sun on a winter afternoon,
A precious few hours of gold in my eyes.

1 *Nehr* – canal

Lahore stretches lazily, yawning,
'What do you know of my dreams?'
I know that whoever leaves this city,
Whether for a month or a decade,
Never forgets it, even for a second.
Their hearts yearn, their minds replay
And rewind every moment, honeyed
By hindsight's forgiving sighs.
I know the city dreams of its yesteryear,
Blue skies and a kite on every roof.

I ask Lahore if she speaks to others too.
She smiles and shakes out her hair,
Long and dark and strong,
'Only to those who wish to listen'
I rest my chin in my hand and wonder
Who could ever ignore this city?

I have spent my life to and fro,
Wings yearning to soar high,
The sun of Lahore always guiding me back
When the loneliness of 'abroad' becomes a violent thing,
Folds upon paper folds
Of multitudes within me
Draw me back to the city
Like an infant bird longing to burrow in its home.

One evening I am reading
And the city lays down next to me.
'What do you feel for me?'
And I tell Lahore,
*'Even in the winter,
When the air is the deepest blue
My heart is a field of sunflowers for you.'*

Mantaha Kishwar, Dhaka, Bangladesh

I was inspired by the loneliness people face in big cities. Especially the immigrant population. Some people feel that they have two homes, but some feel they are a stranger in both places. I tried to figure out if the latter group ever figured out where their city or home was.

Authentic Bengali Chicken Curry

What is ‘Authentic Bengali Chicken Curry’? Is there a correct version? Looking at those words plastered in the glass window of the tiny Bengali restaurant she found while roaming mindlessly, Sumi realised she didn’t know the answer to that. All she knew was that every single curry that she tasted after moving to England tasted wrong.

Wrong. Yes, that was the word that would pop into her head. They were delicious and one better than the other. But it had tasted wrong to Sumi’s tastebuds.

Was it because of the culture? Curries made in England are meant to be different than the ones made by her mum in Bangladesh. But her mother wasn’t necessarily a skilled cook.

Sumi never learned to cook. Not properly at least.

It was not that her mother hadn’t tried, or Sumi was a rebel. She tried cooking a few times and decided she was so bad that she would rather just eat takeout almost every day.

Bashir never minded because he wasn’t a fan of Sumi’s cooking either.

‘She can’t make fried eggs properly without saying every surah she knows. I can’t expect Sumi to put herself through so much anxiety every day, can I?’ he would say at family gatherings. It would always draw chuckles.

She never told him, but those remarks stung a bit. Sumi was never a homemaker like women in her culture were expected to be. She didn't know how to cook, she was messier than her husband, and couldn't keep a plant alive. Sumi was the opposite of what a proper Bengali woman is supposed to be like.

Uncompromising was the word her mother had used to describe her. She always said that word more than selfish and ill-tempered.

'Uncompromising girls suffer. You must learn to adapt with your future husband and in-laws. Look at me. Did I ever do any of this when I was unmarried? I had to learn everything. Nobody except me would survive with your father's temperamental nature. I compromised.'

'Ma, your rage is just as bad as his,' Sumi would smirkingly reply, *'And no man would've put up with your unsalted food.'*

Her mother would pretend to chastise her, but they always ended up laughing. They used to gossip for hours. Moments like these were where Sumi felt her mother was her best friend.

Then there were those moments. The ones where her mother would actually insult her. Whenever her mum would make a snide remark about her weight, skin colour, or intelligence, Sumi would feel like her mum was her worst enemy.

They had a relationship that was between good and bad. Just like every mother-daughter relationship. Some days they chatted until day's end and Sumi would tell her about the most mundane things. But the bad feelings never left her heart.

She knew her mother was disappointed in her. Disappointed about her career choice, her husband choice, the fact she still isn't becoming a mother even though she's in her 30s. But the thing that she knew her mother absolutely hated about Sumi's life was that she left Bangladesh for England.

'You're leaving your family and you don't even feel bad. Is this really necessary? You can be happy in Dhaka.'

But she couldn't be happy. Sumi never felt like she belonged there. Dhaka was her address, but it wasn't her home, her city. She was rarely allowed to leave the house unsupervised. She never knew the streets properly. She never knew what Dhaka was.

She roamed a lot in London. When she was studying, she used to sit in cafes or visit bookstores. After she met Bashir, they went to see plays or eat at fancy restaurants. Most of the time, they went wherever he chose to go.

London started to feel like home. She found her Bashir here. She thought she found her city. A place without her mother's judgement.

It was also without her warmth as well. When she was anxious, she used to go to her mother and just sit near her. The closeness made her feel safe and secure. Sumi always thought she would receive that love from Bashir. Even more than that love.

Bashir was careless. Some days he loved her so much that she felt all her insecurities burning away. Some days he was cruel. He forgot her and spent his days alone. *'I am an independent and honest person, so are you. That's why we clicked. I don't know why you want me to lie to save your feelings. I am disappointed in you, Sumi. I really am.'*

Those words used to send back Sumi into her childhood. When her mother used to say them to her. But that's how relationships are. With good and bad.

So, Sumi compromised. For Bashir. For London.

'Here is your chicken curry, ma'am,' the young waiter broke her reverie.

'I'm sorry, what?'

'Your curry. The one you asked for? Authentic Bengali chicken curry?'

'Right, yes, thank you so much.'

The curry smelled amazing, and the meat looked tender. The spice combination was just right. It tasted delicious.

However, it tasted wrong. The meat was supposed to be overcooked. There would be no salt. The curry was not watery. It did not taste authentic. Like the way her mother used to make. It didn't taste like home to her.

What would her mother say if she saw this?

'You wasted so much money behind another useless thing. I am disappointed in you. You're always so headstrong and stubborn. Why did you come to this dingy restaurant? Why do you do the things you do? Why did you ask Bashir for a divorce? And now you want to be back in Dhaka?'

Would her mother say that? Or would she understand? Sumi paid the bill and left. She picked up her phone to make that dreaded phone call.

Sumi never felt home anywhere. Not in London or Dhaka. Where was her city? Where was her place of comfort? She was a stranger everywhere.

Roulla Xenides, Birmingham, UK

I was born in Birmingham and have always lived here with the exception of my four years at university in Brighton. Officially British, with a Brummie twang, I nevertheless feel strong ties with Cyprus and particularly Katodrys, the village where my maternal grandparents were born as well as Famagusta, my dad's hometown which we have been unable to visit since the Turkish occupation of the north of the island in 1974. So, although most of my memories and my life story are set in Birmingham, it's all linked to my Cypriot heritage, and I wanted to weave that in.

My grandparents came to Birmingham in the early 1940s following a few years' stay in Glasgow where other fellow villagers had gone in search of a living. I'm fascinated by stories of my gregarious grandfather and the International Restaurant in Birmingham City Centre which he ran for two decades before his premature death at the age of 58 and the restaurant's demolition for the building of the Inner Ring Road and the Queensway tunnel. I think that if he hadn't died when he did and if he'd continue to run a restaurant there's every chance I may have followed him into the business.

There are no surviving photographs of the restaurant (except one exterior shot in one of Carl Chinn's books) so the fact that a significant item like the ornate cash register has remained in the family has always inspired discussion and nostalgia. Thinking of the journey that the cash register made from Birmingham back to my grandfather's homeland, made me think of my grandmother's wedding dress that had remained in Cyprus for decades but which I'd brought back to Birmingham after a holiday in the mid-1990s. The two items crossed the Mediterranean in opposite directions years after their owners' deaths but their survival and the fact that my cousin and I will pass them on to future generations, means that my grandparents' journey for a new life and the link between my hometown and the place of my heritage will always be told.

The Cash Register and the Dress

Birmingham, England.

A 1930s ivory silk wedding dress with its iridescent, tiny-beaded fringe hangs in the wardrobe of a Bournville bedroom. It is hand-sewn and fragile, made from threads gathered from silkworms fed with mulberry leaves by the children of Katodrys village in Cyprus and woven by their mums, aunts, grans, and neighbours.

Nicosia, Cyprus.

An antique cash register, purchased from Stevensons of Digbeth in the early 1940s, takes pride of place in a living room in the district of Ahlanjia. All ornately patterned, polished metal, marble, and glass with red and white keys, it looks as if its true purpose in life is to play you a fairground tune rather than hold the ha'pennies and half-crowns of pre-1971 Britain.

In 1995, the cash register travelled 2669 miles in a shipping container to its Mediterranean home, having lain in storage since 1964 when the International Restaurant at Horsefair, where it had spent its working life, was demolished to make way for Birmingham's Inner Ring Road. The wedding dress flew economy in my suitcase in the opposite direction around the same time after a holiday to the island of my ancestors.

My cousin, Athos Angelides, born in Birmingham and who moved to Cyprus, is now custodian of the cash register which belonged to our grandfather, Michael Nicholas Angelides, known to his restaurant customers as Nick. The wedding dress was our grandmother's, Fostira, known by the Brummie market traders she visited daily as Mrs Nicholas. The miles of silk thread, the finger-numbing hours, days and weeks of weaving and hand-stitching it took to make it, all coming together for just a few hours of nuptial celebrations in the village surrounded by olive and carob trees

before it was left behind by its bride as she joined her husband for a new life abroad.

Born in 1902 and 1906 respectively in the mountain village of Kato Drys, Cyprus, Michael and Fostira Angelides came to Birmingham via Glasgow where many fellow Katodrytes had gone in the mid-1930s in search of an easier, better life than that afforded by the scorched earth of their homeland. My grandad earned a living by selling ‘Lefkaritika’, intricately embroidered lace linen napkins, tablecloths, and bedcovers brought over from Cyprus to well-heeled Scottish ladies whose doors he knocked.

After several years of door-to-door selling and tenement living, my grandfather was lured to Birmingham in 1942 by his ‘koumbaro’ and fellow Katodryte, Nicholas Koutsakos. Apparently, with WWII in full flow, Lord Herbert Austin was in need of workers for the factory’s munition work.

Somehow, the factory job never transpired. Instead, the two friends ran a fish and chip shop in Balsall Heath, where fights broke out most Friday nights as the locals spilled out of the pubs after closing. After a year of fish-frying and self-defence, my grandfather opened the International Restaurant at Horsefair. More precisely, the restaurant stood on Bristol Street exactly at the spot where a car enters the Queensway Tunnel and every time I drive into the darkness, my mind fills with thoughts of the people that lived, worked, ate, laughed, and argued, right above my head.

The cash register took the hard-earned cash of customers for just over two decades, pinging for the four-shilling (£0.20) three-course lunch or the most expensive item on the menu, steak at seven shillings and sixpence (£0.38). The menu included Moussaka alongside Vienna Schnitzel and Roast of the Day often accompanied by an exotic side dish like koupepia (stuffed vine leaves) which would then be followed by apple pie or jam roll.

During WWII the restaurant drew American soldiers who would bring my mum chewing gum whose flavour she remembers as smoky because of the cigar boxes it was kept in. The International

was popular among immigrants, such as Italian hairdresser Bruno, who couldn't get spaghetti in any restaurant at the time and who'd often ask if he could order whatever Greek dish my grandmother had made just for the family.

Within walking distance of both the Alexandra Theatre, Old Rep, and Birmingham Hippodrome, it served pre-theatre diners as well as the artists and crew after curtain down. Although a gregarious host, my granddad, a stickler for timings, turned away Cliff Richard and The Shadows after the first night of their weeklong run at the Hippodrome because they were five minutes past last orders. My teenage mum's consternation was aggravated nightly by the sight of them going to the Chinese restaurant across the road.

The International Restaurant was my first home. My sister was born there, and we lived there in the flat above the restaurant until we moved to Quinton Road. We may have gone suburban, but the city centre and particularly the roads around Bristol Street, Hurst Street, and the Hippodrome remained our stomping ground through our childhood as my grandmother ran a fish and chip shop in Hurst Street (demolished for The Arcadian) and my mum ran the Candy Box on the corner of Hurst Street where we spent all school holidays playing in the streets with friends who still lived in the Back to Backs. I remember the coach station on Inge Street and the theatre tailor Harry Cohen who was our next-door neighbour, a chain-smoking, wise-cracking man. When I went to work at the Hippodrome as Press Officer in the late 1980s it was as if I'd stepped back in time to childhood, finding some of the same staff that had been there twenty years previously.

These memories and more come back whenever I visit my cousin's house and see that beautiful cash register or open my wardrobe and tentatively take out of its plastic wrapping, the nearly transparent and remarkably tiny wedding dress. These two things link all the generations of our family past, present, and future who will hear the story of our grandparents and how they came and made a life in the city that I was born and is still my home.

t. jahan, New York City, USA

To whom it may concern:

Thank you for building 'My City, My Home' to focus on the stories of women writers that have a connection to Bangladesh as well as Pakistan and Birmingham. I have been connected to this opportunity through a mentor who is helping me to find opportunities for emerging Bengali writers.

The piece attached is one of longing for the homeland and the people we leave behind in pursuit of our diasporic dreams. As we progress and evolve, our cities and our homes also seem to grow with or without us. Sometimes, we are unrecognisable to each other. Sometimes, our homes no longer exist. This is the case for my motherland in rural Barisal in Bangladesh. Our time there can only live in our hearts and memories as these locations have been physically erased by the effects of the climate. Our birthplaces, our ancestral homes, our schools, our graves, seem to have been eroded by the rushing tides of time.

I grasp at a sense of permanency; I grasp at a sense of home... through writing. I write to express our migration history to our future loved ones. Because so much of my life, the trauma of war, migration, diaspora, partition, and climate change, has never been spoken of due to the lack of psychological safety. Even now, my life abroad is constantly threatened by the political tug of wars which makes me want to put a blindfold on myself. But I won't. Instead, I write to take the blindfold off of others. And for my fellow migrants, I write to connect with those who feel so, so isolated.

I appreciate you for taking the time to read and honour one of the most vulnerable aspects of my identity and history as I reflect on My City, My Home.

Namaz¹

The thick, golden slumber of sorrow
Seeps into the delicate folds of her eyes,
Settling into a tattered heart of indigo blue.
As the dark night's wind caresses her freckled face,
She is tucked into old sari turned quilts.

Morning waits patiently for her to pray *fajr*²
With inaudible counting and swaying, her eyes quiver,
She prays for those who are rising from *asr*,³
Whose sun dips into the waters to greet their sister.

1 *Namaz*: prayer

2 *Fajr*: the dawn prayer

3 *Asr*: the afternoon prayer.

Iqra Naseem, Smethwick, UK

I was inspired to write 'Terminal' by the theme both because of Birmingham's rich history as an industrial city and the railway that played a significant role, and the level of community in its diasporas. 'Terminal' was always a story that took root in drawing from how people are willing to share, and the character Noor helped to break the cultural and age barrier, much like what citizens of my city actually do.

Having Noor be a patient in end-of-life care allowed me to explore the quest of uncovering a woman's deep history, her experiences, and how people come together to grant her last wishes – the selflessness I find in ordinary people.

I wrote the story to represent finding common ground and to accentuate that a woman's role in her story does not have to bend to a certain narrative. It can steer away from home-building and adopt a tale of world and life-creation or be both simultaneously. The independence that women can have in a bustling city is thrilling, yet it does not have to be solitary.

A large part of what makes Birmingham special is the amalgamation of culture and how it is certainly not a dividing factor. Rather, it is a diverse experience that makes up the face of the city and this is what I was inspired to exemplify. The community does what the community does best.

Terminal

Before the dying, came the wait.

That first day, I saw Noor fiddle with the hem of her clinical gown and pull thread after thread, the only movement we had seen from her in hours. She watched us lovingly as we took our places around her, palms flat against the faded linen. She wouldn't speak until we had grown comfortable with the chill of plastic chairs and the faded walls covered in stickers of paper moons. I wondered if the inhabitant who had once laid here had people come to warm her feet or listen to her stories or polish her foreign gold.

'She is at rest,' Noor told us, and we did not ask about her again.

On the second day, the people asked Noor to tell them about how she had come to be a city girl, how she had left her faraway land for a gasping city. How we had both expected to find ourselves waiting there. I avoided her eyes, but she knew her tale was mine. Noor said she left for a family. She had found one and more. The day she hopped off onto the pavement in the train station, the city had stopped with gaping mouths at her brown skin (once unearthed) and blinking in the strange, timid sun. They circled like hungry seabirds, and she paused to give them what she had brought with her, a smile, a shake of the head. She had to make do with what she had, and when that fell through, she took their tongue as her second one.

Sometime later, she set up a shop. That was where we had first met, a small off-licence near the station, where customers left with a taste of the east and the earth in the bowels of their mouths, the breadth of the unknown glinting in their oily paper bags. The shop was renowned for its eccentric owner, her stories of old and new. The fish tank she kept was never made to last

longer than a few months but sat comfortably in a thick skin of dust and stray cigarette butts. The inhabitants, bulbous with heads like ten pence coins. On the third day, we visited the shop and its new owner. Noor bundled in swathes of silk and linen, a plastic label around her wrist. The fish tank remained. We stood by her, a group of eight, maybe nine of the city's lost souls, patient as she placed her mottling skin near the polished glass and breathed the saline that had never left her clothes.

The fourth and fifth days were spent in her memories, stories of her love for the winter and her friends overwhelming the thin patterned ceiling.

'I was your age,' she gestured towards where I was sitting with her other hand cupped, 'but I still snuck out of my own shop like my mother was standing there, shaking her rolling pin.'

We laughed, each of us imagining Noor and her friends in their twenties, thriving in the winter with chips in newspapers warming their fingers. Once they finished, they fashioned train tickets into floating crowns of gold and watched as they sailed peacefully in the stream up to the old canal line. Noor had known my mother longer than I had and said her boat would sail further than all of theirs. The scramble of limbs and flying headscarves as they would flit between sights was immortalised in memory.

On the sixth day, Noor seemed spirited, bored with the skeletons of our conversations and the pastel walls. Her room was surrounded by greenery as far as the eye could see, exotic pots and houseplants strewn with false care. Noor felt as strange here as she did where she had come from, a starved seal who cared more for chimney smoke and tiny bones of living infrastructure than she did for orchards. The sixth day, she told us to steer her to her first love, the train station. Once demolished more than half a century prior, rebuilt before Noor arrived with her dreams and trinkets.

‘Well don’t just stand there,’ she said with her mouth pursed in a smirk, the lipstick I had applied that morning creased. She was feistier than ever. ‘I can’t feel them yet.’

It was true, we were too far from the trains themselves to feel the ground's vibrations as they ravaged through the city's insides. So we ventured and took our seats in one, then another and another until we were so far from home, we must have brought whole buildings with us in our pockets. Soon we returned and sat at the nearby benches, its nailed wood growing patches of green like stubble, waiting for her to move.

‘My name means light. Illumination, to some.’

We stopped to see where she would take her mind next. This time, eyes drawn to the blinking lights and signs surrounding the station like mechanical fireflies.

‘I never liked it, even when I came here. My friends called me Nora.’ And she chuckled to herself, as she always would. ‘For the first few months, that is.’

We were silent because we knew; she found herself waiting at the platform like all strangers did.

‘I like ‘Noor’ more anyway,’ I said to lighten the silence. She held my hand, the two of us close like sinking islands.

Today is the seventh day and she is sleeping with the box of trinkets gathered over the years at her feet, my hand in the other, leaving behind the city she had adopted, smoke trails away from where her life was once born. All that is left of it glints of gold. When I am forced to leave the room, a blur of blue uniforms swarm to her bedside. Once outside, I open my palm and find a crown, black and white, crisp with age and damage—too far gone for the eyes to see.

‘This is our last stop,’ I say, and I am not sure she hears.

Iqra Naseem, Smethwick, UK

I was inspired to write this poem based on a BBC article on how hospitals were overwhelmed and as my city, Birmingham is severely affected, the grief is all the more personal.

Wrong Number

Excerpts from a BBC article, 'Covid: Royal Glamorgan Hospital staff 'broken' by pandemic deaths'

*'It's tragic having to do this by telephone or Skype,'
she said, explaining that family members were having to be
at their loved one's death bed via a video call.*

I'm awake when you are not,
fastened in skin. I'm awake when you thumb
the couch's opening and stare at a spot past my head,
palms opening north to sit beside your thighs.
The laminate of your eyes swarming
into the bellies of pools.

*'We've had to take the place of the family,
hold the patient's hand,
talk to them, and communicate with the family,
and there's been a lot of tears.'*

I'm awake at the brink of dawn
when the slaked cup teeters in your thumbs
and you smile because what are teeth
but a promise that a house will withstand
its burning? Will fling you to a river's bedside
and swallow the mourning whole.

'Everyone's exhausted.'

I was awake the morning you stole the phone off
its counter so close to your chest,
then began digging a shallow ending
and you found yourself trembling
in the warm of earth.

Anam Hussain, Birmingham, UK

This competition was sent to me by a friend. She had said it perfectly matches my cross between two separate countries and cultures – Birmingham and Lahore.

I was born in Lahore, Pakistan, and live in Birmingham. On Instagram, I go by the name Bham To Lahore where I upload photographs of my hybridity – a cultural mix. I often creatively place the two countries into one photograph, either through fashion or literature.

The terms ‘My City’ and ‘My Home’ often run through my mind. These words carry a very wide and complicated meaning for me. They create a feeling of bewilderment. I was born in one city and live in another. I have two homes, one in Birmingham and one in Pakistan. So, my city and my home are terms of belonging and acceptance for me, a product of the fusion of two places.

Birmingham to Lahore: Between My Brogues and Peshawari Chappals

Wearing Brogues on one foot and Peshawari Chappals on the other, I stand in-between.

When fashion designers sent models down the runway wearing two artfully different sandals, mismatched shoes became a trend. But for me, it has been a symbol since childhood. I have always walked in an odd pair of shoes, not physically, but mentally.

I am a Lahore-born, Birmingham resident, and just like these shoes, I am unsuitably matched. But I assure you, still stylish.

The footprint from each of my shoes is different, one belonging to Birmingham and the other to Lahore.

Travelling back and forth, living in both countries, I am fortunate to spend a few months each year in my Lahore home, while the rest in my Birmingham home.

Entering and exiting, between cities, one rainy while the other tropical, my set of footprints go in two directions at once.

Through the chaotic, narrow winding streets of the Rang Mahal bazaar with dazzling stalls, and along the vibrant towpath of the Gas Street Basin Canal-side, crossing the footbridge offering delightful views of the Regency Wharf.

Down the old city roads that form the strange intersection between Mughal and British Lahore, and past Broad Street, towards the path of the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery.

But, I wonder, where do my footprints belong?

Neither in Birmingham nor in Lahore, they are somewhere in-between.

My every step builds a bridge, creating a new track, and connecting the impressions of two different cities and cultures.

As I continue walking down the ramp, with identity as the theme, my shoes leave two blurred footprints, mixing with each other.

Sumera Saleem, Faisalabad, Pakistan

The terms, ‘My City’ and ‘My Home’ inspire me to think of memory and amnesia as the embodying experience of ‘homing’ and ‘unhoming’ history in ourselves.

My Home, My City: Faisalabad

After the government compels my university to shut down its onsite classes and work, I pack up my bag to travel back to the city, Faisalabad, where I could stay only on weekends for the last eight years due to my professional obligations. I had seen no change in my routine: a life lived in classrooms, offices, libraries, hostels, rickshaws, taxis. I used to have a subconscious murmur in mind that the world is for those who are fond of non-intermittent work, a modern form of love. All of a sudden, Covid-19 has placed the world at a standstill and life is anything but calm. On the way back to my city, I realise how much its landscape has changed, so have our selves, souls, and sense of order. Change is constant and as essential to our existence as death is to our lives. Believe it or not.

I consciously sketch the places I could visit in my teens in the middle of my journey to Faisalabad, filling the belly of time with the leftovers of the past, sweet, sour, sad but not necessarily bitter. It feels how we ‘home’ and ‘unhome’ our lives with the notion of memory and amnesia. Alive in my memory is our family visit to Gatwala Wildlife Park, known also as a botanical garden. Playing in swings, throwing tea on each other’s frocks just so our faces glowed with our mother’s slaps until Chachu (uncle) came to our rescue.

‘*Baji bacchay hain.*’ (Sister! Children are always this way).

This is a local way the relatives used to get the children released from the scolding drubbing of parents and elders. I wish he could

be here with us in this absurdly changing world to give me the same ruffle of peace. More importantly, how can we really forget our sense of ‘homing’ life in our bodies, the shapes of ideas flowing through us every nanosecond?

For me, memory is a way of conjuring up the spirits of the past, that keeps us conscious of what ‘to home’ and cherish in our mindscapes. Sometimes, amnesia wards off the haunting spirits to keep us unmindful of the absurd cycle of the history our lives are wheeling on. Other times, a few chips of history keep our sense of self patched up, tucking our belongingness in the fabric of a larger orientation of nations. It was in my teens when I was surprised to know that the map of my city, Faisalabad, shows the impressions of what can be called, colonial and postcolonial shifts of power.

Every time we visited Jinnah Garden to celebrate the holidays, we wondered why we, the common people, did not have an entry into the spectacular building structure of Chenab Club, standing quite close to the public garden we visited. Spread on an area of 72 Kanals in the heart of the city, Chenab Club still stands as a symbol of high social order for being the hub of relaxation for government officials, diplomats, and the elite class. It was established by Mr Henry Cues (1904–1906), the first deputy commissioner (D.C.) of Lyallpur (now Faisalabad), so that the British officers serving in ‘Sandal Bar’ could gather at their leisure, barring the contact with ‘the lowlanders’ in Jhumpa Lahiri’s words. It seemed to be rather an attempt to ‘home’ Englishness in an alien place, tamed as the controlled territory. Still, a norm preserved though not as strictly by the local elite now as was by the British. Boundaries are there as the remnants of history and colonial rule. Believe it or not.

Before every Eid and festival, it was almost a ritual for my parents to take us to the City Clock Tower, a distinguished architectural example of the colonial era that entails the history of the industrial city Faisalabad is. I remember how I observed in

the bazars (markets) the women of every kind, wearing dresses along with dopattas, burqas, and even without these headpieces. The same can be said about men with the exception of their wearing burqas though traditionally turban, cap, saafa (a short piece of fabric used as headpiece) are also the types of clothes men wear to cover their head, not out of a religious attachment but for various other reasons like weather, prayer, habit, comfort. As soon as we get into a bazar, grabbing the purse in her hand, my mother started scanning through the lanes of items, ordered and piled in shops, on the vendor's baskets and trays. The eyes dazzle with the flashing of a vast range of goods available in eight bazars in the centre of which stands the clock tower. From books, pottery, clothes to 'Khussa' (hand-crafted shoes), furniture, electronics, and whatnot. Everything is available easily only if you do not get lost, the characteristic of the labyrinth of the eight bazars.

'Why eight? Why not nine or ten or more or less than eight?'

And my mother read for me the words carved on Qaisery Gate, the central gate for the eight markets and she tells me about its construction by Sir Charles Pewaz completed in 1903, under the commission of the British Raj. It was a gift for the commemoration of the long reign of Queen Victoria of England. The history is as quizzical as the visit to the bazars of this clock tower, surrounded by the hustle and bustle of urban life, especially when grand stories of the colonial empire flash before our eyes to the extent of dazzling them to see the truth. We home the history just the way we home the city in us. Believe it or not.

Jane Flint Bridgewater, Stourbridge, UK

Inspired by the workshop with Polly Wright in which I reflected upon my acquired home from my student/junior doctor days in the 1970s/1980s and my final destination.

Birmingham: My Home City

Wondering medical student of 1969,
I wandered from vale site Wyddrington Hall
to a first damp terraced house in Harborne,
an intercalation within my degree
before a more tarted up townhouse
near a psychedelic-fuelled corner boutique,
long disappeared from North Road.
Returning from my American elective
To Obs and Gynae in the beginning of final year,
dreaming on the rebound,
I stayed in bonny Bournville with friends.
After my Paeds exam, I rushed to help turn
Selly Oak red, ferrying folks to the polls,
it was 1974.
Acute medicine at The General Hospital was
marked by the impact of the Birmingham Pub bomb.
Psychiatry residence at John Connolly Hospital,
where a court case followed diminished responsibility,
one patient having set fire to another's bed with him in it,
he knew what he was doing.

Surgery finished my training,
with a plastic surgeon like a Chicago gangster (called me ‘Toots’),
who, a decade later, blew his brains out.
Amid the drama, I sang at the Town Hall
and listened to Ravi Shankar once.
My junior years around the city’s hospitals fixed
my loyalty, labelled me as a Midlander.
Representing my region, Consultant on the national stage,
Birmingham stated after my name,
I questioned health resource decisions
for our people, my house in a satellite
of Symphony Hall City,
Library City,
Repertory City, my home.

Refa Begum, Birmingham, UK

Memories of when I was little. How I grew up.

My Childhood Memories

Birmingham is my home and my city. To say I am a born and bred Brummie is an understatement, I have lived here for the past forty years. Throughout this time, there have been many changes to the city, many of which are memories, some good, some bad. Growing up in Aston, a deprived and disadvantaged area, my family and I grew up in a council estate, but it is there that I had the best years of my childhood. My parents provided us with the best they could, even though they had no English and no work, they did their utmost best for us.

I have very fond memories of what has gone past, like the time when Prince Charles visited Birmingham and came to my Primary School, Aston Tower, this was between 1986-1989. I do not remember the exact date as I am going back quite some time. Throughout the years we have lost many known buildings, such as the HP Sauce factory in Aston, it was a memorable building and takes me back to when we visited the factory with my primary school. When the building was demolished, it felt a part of Aston was also gone. As I entered my college days, we took a lot of time out in the city centre, the famous Pallasades shopping centre was a great meeting point with friends. The Pallasades was fantastic, great for shopping, you would enter and go all the way through to the Bullring

and finally end up at Mark One retail store. Outside you had the old Rag market, where inside you could get loads of bargains from clothes to threads to household items. Another well-known shop that I remember going to regularly with my mum was Big Deal in Newtown shopping centre, it was amazing on price and goods. We would buy our household essentials from this shop which my mum was in love with. It isn't there anymore, even though there is a shop with the same name, the owner is different.

We grew up playing outside with friends, pegs, and rounders and we did so until sunset. It was very safe for us back then, outside my mum's house we had a massive playing field where all our neighbours would come out and the kids would just play, play, play.

Even though I am now a parent myself, I take a look back in my rear-view mirror and when I close my eyes, I can still hear the sound of us playing as kids, I can still hear the ice cream van driving up. To sum it up, if I were asked if I would ever leave Birmingham, the answer would be no. I have too many ties here which I would not change: my family, friends, work, and my children have their connections. Overall, Birmingham has had a great deal of impact on my life, it is where it all started, and it will be hopefully where it ends. Birmingham is my city, my home.

Anadil Shabana, Karachi, Pakistan

As someone who wasn't born in the city I call home, Karachi, the city presented interesting discourses on identity and ownership. Part of these debates always came from the point of view of your ethnicity. Despite my ethnicity not having roots in the city, I still connected to the city's past and communities.

When I moved to America to study. I saw Karachiites based in the US missing Karachi through expensive lifestyles, wanting to see the city develop in unsustainable ways so they can match with the elites, and the TV shows constantly representing the city in black and white.

There is a part of me that wants to talk about the city in very realistic terms, talk about the non-elite, the non-desirable places where breathing humans live. I loved the city, but I spent most of my time being upset about not having enough respect. I don't want other girls to think that they don't belong to the city if they lack the 'high standard', or that their voices are not significant enough. In other words, I wished someone had told me these things when I was growing up in that city. I wish I could go back and fix those discourses and fix my broken teen self. After all, for many Karachi residents, ownership and identity are important aspects of life.

I worked as a journalist in Karachi, but I really want to be a creative writer. I would have written this prose in Urdu but due to lack of Urdu typing speed, I chose English.

A Letter to My Beloved City

Dear Karachi, my beloved city,

I have been missing you lately. Being away from you has let me reflect on our relationship. I wonder, why did I associate with you

through your depiction and presentation by the elites in the city? I wanted to seem to be respectable by knowing the expensive neighbourhoods, the places that elites considered worthy, and markets that catered to rich people trying to save money.

Calling you home despite not being born in you was sometimes difficult. I commonly hear that I don't have my roots in you, but I still cared for you. I learned of your history, your diversity, but I still had to look for other people's way of loving you, which made me hate you in the end. When I moved to live in you at the age of eleven, I was so excited. All my life in the Middle East, I consoled myself that I was one day going to my home, Karachi, you. I loved the first year I spent with you. I liked the less modern aspects of life, the rickshaw rides, going to markets, having a big family here, having more fun activities to do than in Saudi Arabia. But then finally, as I entered my second year, I realised how unappealing my neighbourhood was in the larger imagination of the city. I learned that even the neighbouring town where my school was based was made fun of by the rest of the city.

I started reading an English newspaper whose story of art and culture always made sure that my *mohalla*¹ was invisible. I just lived with those complexes somewhere in the back of my mind. I started realising that maybe I was of low status. Over the next few years, I managed to live with the complexes of your richer neighbourhoods, but I did wish desperately to leave my own area and the uncool life. When I went for my A-levels to a school in Saddar area, that is when major complexes began to surface. Now spaces in Saddar are a nice mix of people from very rich to lower-middle-class families. So I, being deprived of all cultural capital, was faced with a loss of identity and association with you.

1 *mohalla* – immediate neighbourhood

Now see, Karachi, when people are of low status, they have to make up for that by having talents and skills. I had nothing, so I slid into the shadows. My time was spent mostly daydreaming about escapes. Escape from my *mohalla*, from the city, from the family, and sometimes even from the country. It all had to do with trying to earn a respectable status.

My relationship with you was wanting to escape, even if only temporarily. One day finally, to my own surprise, I was able to escape. I moved to another country. But I wasn't sure what I escaped from. Was it you, was it my family, was it the societal judgements, or was it my own perceptions of my status?

As I happily left you, for months I never missed you. I did try to show off my new life in America to those back in Pakistan via Facebook. A part of me felt like I was finally able to secure status among all those people who made me feel so low about myself back in you. Now I could look them in the eye with my raised status. After all, I was on American soil.

Within two years, I started forgetting the names of your roundabouts, streets, and areas. Why should I remember them? But then why should I forget them? I still visit the city. My knowledge of the city makes the non-elites like me. A lot of Pakistanis assume that I am from the elite area in Karachi. I used to take that as a compliment but now it just comes off as an insult, to you, to me. Why should people who love you and look successful be only associated with a particular class of people or neighbourhood? Don't you ever felt insulted at how the people who exploit you for their personal gains also claim ownership of you?

When I lived in America, I realised that cities are best explored on foot. I never explored you alone on foot but when I did so

with others, I always connected so well with the people and their problems. Why did the rich people get to decide what my city could be when they couldn't even be bothered to walk casually on streets even within their areas of residences. They sit in their car, go to fancy places, and step inside the fancy places, cordoned off from the general public. That is how they see and own you, and that is how they developed their control of you to benefit themselves. The Karachi that elites represented through the media, through popular events, through their imagination, through the imposition of consumer cultures was not one that suited me or a majority of residents of the city.

As time passed, I gained more respect in America, and that built my self-esteem. That made me realise how much I had wrongly blamed you for problems I created myself. Why did I hang out with the elites who tore me down? Why did I not protect myself from them? I had watched how the others created the perception of loving you through the ridiculous constructions of malls, shopping centres, places aesthetically pleasing, places that needed to remove poor people to feel safe, clothing not suited to local culture. I did argue with some aspects but still felt my status never added any weight to my voice.

Maybe home isn't just the city where you live, but also the city that loves you back and embraces you. You never embraced me but maybe I should have protected you. I think I have found new places to call home, but you will forever be where I trace my real home back to.

Love,
Your hopeless beloved

Sidra Aslam, Birmingham, UK

In a unique year of sitting with my feelings and discomfort, I have started journaling a lot more. It is a practice that I find very healing, and this is what inspired me to contribute to this piece, as I believe healing and activism go hand in hand. Moving from a narrative of ‘Why is this happening to me?’ to ‘What is this teaching me?’ We are all interconnected, irrespective of race, religion, ethnicity, and all the beautiful intersections that make us unique.

For me, the ‘My City, My Home’ writing competition made me think about how I have come to find myself in a position of social mobility and how I need to use this to continue to do the work. I look at Birmingham and see how privilege and power can oppress marginalised communities. We must advocate for one another, use the arts, use social media, integrate with others, venture out into new experiences, and to do all that we must to feel emotionally safe and look a little deeper into our souls. In a year where physical safety has been prioritised, I believe similarly our emotional safety needs to be something we continue to honour. I feel so safe in Birmingham and yet this year has taught me that loss can happen instantly. This is what ultimately inspired me to write this piece.

Unapologetically Me

Now this an untold story all about how I am honouring my multiple identities as a Brummie Pakistani Muslim woman. A story that isn’t easy to tell but one that is part of my healing journey because it is when stories are told that shame dies.

Born in 1985 in Sparkhill, into a large family, I am one of nine with six sisters and two brothers. With two younger brothers,

I always had the privilege of finally being able to sneakily ride their bikes, play football, and challenge the ‘good girl’ narrative. My mum and dad came here in the 1970s from Pakistan. They didn’t speak much English; my dad was a taxi driver and my mum – well she had her hands full nurturing us!

I knew I wanted to work in a field that amplified the voices that have been continually silenced, it is on me to be a good ancestor. Being in a primary school where 98% of pupils were Pakistani and all the teachers were white, I began to become astute to noticing inequalities based on privilege and power and always challenged things so as to do what was right and just. I remember being nearly permanently excluded for challenging a teacher, something she was not used to. I remember being labelled as having ‘ADHD’ when in fact I was bubbly and energetic, and this wasn’t something that was embraced by others.

‘Pakistani girls are quiet,’ they said.

It was these types of examples that shaped my intrinsic motivation to becoming a psychologist. I have always strived to remain unapologetically and authentically myself and, in the process, inspire others to do the same.

Yet, I grew up watching and learning in this sea of white faces – at times resisting the temptation to emulate them. Choosing myself has meant rejecting oppressive systems in society. Growing up in Birmingham, studying here to become a psychologist, and then deciding I wanted to work for Birmingham City Council. I have worked here for nearly a decade, and in that time I continuously ensure that as a minority in a white middle-class profession, I represent and advocate for the multicultural and diverse communities within my city. I have had to have courageous conversations, moving away from ‘people pleasing’ and feeling

like an imposter. It is growing up in Birmingham that has led me to see how I can be curious in challenging systems that are oppressive at a strategic level.

I am courageous in raising issues at a strategic level as I did when this year unconscious racial bias took place in a team meeting through a case allocation process whereby Psychologists volunteered to select a case from a list of names. Just that – a name. The only non-white-sounding name was not picked. A child that was vulnerable, marginalised, and required a psychological assessment was not selected – that could have been me, that could have been my daughter. For this to happen two weeks after the murder of George Floyd and a time when people were not willing to sit with discomfort – I called them out. My healing and my activism can happen at the same time. Why are we picking and choosing who to assess based on a name? Does a doctor look around waiting room and decide who to see and not to see? So why are we allowing this at a governance level? I raised the unconscious racial bias, and it was at that moment I felt liberated, I was being a good ancestor, encouraging the leading and learning for all. I am proud that now there are stronger governance practices in place for this allocation process.

In my city, we are all capable of learning and unlearning. We do that by venturing out of our comfort zones and honouring our worth and boundaries as Pakistani women. Not only in our professional roles but also our personal identities as sisters, daughters, mothers. Breaking intergenerational cycles of trauma is something we need to do and reclaim our multiple identities. They can co-exist. Use that sadness, use that rage, for anytime you have been made to feel uncomfortable to be seen, heard, and connect with all parts of yourself. We can be vulnerable and strong at the same time.

Dina Choudhury, Birmingham, UK

I understand the importance of the culture and religion I come from which has been given and passed on to me by Mum and Dad. The home I come from and the family I come from. And how it is a real part of who I am. As it passes from generation to generation. And I love seeing it in my home city, Birmingham. My mother country is Bangladesh, my faith is Islam, and my destined birth is Birmingham.

Home is where the heart is.

My City, My Home

Sitting serenely, as white clouds float and gently pass in the sky,

I am composed.

Contrasting the vivid green grass.

Birmingham has plenty of quiet,
Reflective seats to be introspective.

As authentic thoughts trail through my mind,
And sail out of my mouth to smile at a stranger.

A friendly chat,
A friendly heart.
A friendly city.

I meet people as if by a divine plan,
Human speech the invisible gift,
Connecting the various facial features and skin colours of people,
Co-existing with a rainbow of love.

Women in black veils greet one another and look into the eyes.
To understand the soul,
A mysterious covering protecting a pure beauty.
A hidden femininity stored with flowery dresses, gold bangles,
and a proud handbag.

Hijab sisters covered in cloth and non-hijab sisters co-exist
wisely from the same community, sharing the same faith and
bowing to the same God. With a bilingual tongue.
As generational differences exist to discuss and harmonise.

British born South Asians wear western clothes,
Transforming on Eid.
Saluting the mother country,
And hugging one another with an impressive table of dishes,
On our sacred merry day.
Relishing the blessed banquet,
In homes all over the city of Birmingham.

Bengali and Pakistani women attentively shop for melons,
mangoes, jack fruit, and lychees,
Bringing the sweetness of South Asia to Stratford Road.
Okra, aubergine, tomatoes, onions to be cooked with
confidence,
And heated up with red chillies awakening the senses to a
flaming alertness.

The spectacular shalwar kameez is displayed elegantly on
mannequins promising a beautiful feeling –
Dazzling, shimmering, finery,
Refreshing the eyes to rays of colour and mirrored glassed
patterns.
The textiles of the East dress a woman's heart as the trader calls
the customer 'sister'.

The halal butchers trading the sacredness of sacrifice to feed life itself.

The chopping thud on the wooden board echoes in the air, integrating the Muslim men inviting the public to the light of Islam, With nearby historical churches in praise of God, too.

Friday congregation begins with the azaan, calling the believers to a merciful God,

To enter the mosque,

As the soul of the city comes alive.

People from diverse areas pray in an organised, unified manner.

Encircling the ummah and anchoring a spiritually dynamic feeling.

The Birmingham mosques are sanctified spaces contrasting with the secular cosmopolitanism.

The azaan becoming distant,

As the buses of Birmingham take over,

A collection of people heading to the city centre.

As passengers gush out the door to speed past each other

And step into the city centre. A world within a world.

The city aspiration soars high,

With glossy structures,

And manicured advert women

Selling an illusion of perfection,

Retail therapy.

As crowds swarm by,
Heading where?
Is the city centre the heart of Birmingham?

Or a transaction?

Food is where the heart is,
A universal love.

Birmingham brims with many meals,
Healing a hunger for more,
Diverse languages are spoken and eaten on a plate.
Feasting on flavours,
Cultural conversing on the palette of the tongue.

The city centre with its travelling trains
Coming from everywhere,

To the heart of England.

A pulsating heartbeat,
To the Birmingham blood of life.

My love, my city, my home.

Maliha Khan, Dhaka, Bangladesh

This is a fiction piece but is loosely based on some experiences my mother had on moving back to Dhaka in the early 2000s with two teenagers. It reflects some common experiences single women still have in renting a place in the city, encountering awkward personal questions, and moral policing.

The House on Rd. 2

On the first call, she was hung up on with a brusque ‘We want a family.’

She sighed, going to the next number scribbled under *rd 2, 2 bd + 2 bth* from her rickshaw ride around the neighbourhood an hour ago.

As she dialled, she tried to remember what this one was like. Right, the whitewashed three-storied house with the large balconies and the front-facing first floor to be let.

It was the nicest place she had seen that day which was also affordable.

The children were too old to share anymore. That would mean she’d have to share with her daughter, her 11-year-old already pulling away from her.

Hello?

I’m calling about the flat to rent on road 2.

You know how much it is?

Yes, that’s fine. But I would like to see inside, no one was there when I visited earlier today.

He would be at home the next morning, he lived on the top floor.

She replied, I’ll be there at 11.

Who’s coming with you?

Just me.

Uh, what does your husband do?

He works in Dubai, she says, hoping he didn't ask more.
In a stronger voice, she added, *it'll be me and my two children*.
Okay, he said laconically, *come see it tomorrow*.

On the rickshaw ride over from her sister's house, she took in the neighbourhood.

She had never seen streets like these in Dhaka— moving to the Gulf in the early 90s, the Dhaka she had left behind had still been bustling, but not like this. Now it was just more – more people, more cars, more horns, those blasted horns.

This neighbourhood, however, was secluded and quiet. The streets were modern, clean, and orderly, not a pothole in sight.

The children could walk the beautiful tree-lined streets to their school, it wouldn't even take five minutes.

Getting off at the house, she dismissed the rickshaw wallah, who offered to wait. *No, it'll take a while*.

The house was as nice as she remembered it, with pink bougainvillea overflowing from the roof down both sides of the top balcony.

Her own parents' house was a sprawling one-storied house, with a rudimentary second floor just being added when she left.

It was partly to escape her parents' house that she had settled on the other end of the city. It was so she could run away again, *being this close to the airport*, she liked to joke.

She had had enough of the conversations that stopped when she entered a room and the smug looks her brothers-in-law exchanged when they visited. Her mother and sisters had all thought the worst when she came back on a month's notice, saying she and the children were here for good.

A collective *I told you so* seemed to hang over her head for the month she stayed there while looking for a good English school for the children. Instead of helping, all five of her sisters kept

individually taking her aside and asking why she didn't stick it out, *what about the children? Why did she have to divorce him and not just move back here in a genteel separation? Why had she married him in the first place?*

There was a reason she had dropped out in her second year and ran away from that house, even if it was at twenty-one to marry a senior in engineering who, on graduating, had them both on a plane to Dubai. Too many people in that house, too many voices ready to drop an opinion on her life choices.

So, how old are your children?

He's trying to guess how old I am. *I have a 13-year-old son and an 11-year-old daughter.*

And their father doesn't live here?

No, we just moved from Dubai where they were both born.

What does he do?

He's an engineer at a construction company there.

You don't have family here?

I do, her own parents' house was in –

Why aren't you living there?

Oh, my children have been admitted to the school here.

The one by the park?

Yes, it's a good school.

Still, don't you want to live near your family? Since you'll be all alone here?

Well, the children's schooling comes first.

He changes tack.

What about your in-laws? You don't live with them?

It's like you don't want a tenant, she says.

He doesn't crack a smile.

No jokes.

No, they don't have a home here.

That was only partially true, they did live in the city, however, with their eldest son.

They wouldn't take in their daughter-in-law?

She resented that question. Even if all that had happened hadn't, she still wouldn't have gone there.

It's not that. I just want to live in this area, is all.

Well, this building is very tightly knit. It's my family upstairs, my mother lives with us. And the rest four are all families.

Great, we'll fit right in, she smiles encouragingly.

We're very careful about who we rent to.

She could see it coming.

So, I'll need to speak to your husband on the phone.

For what? She asks, gearing up for the inevitable fight.

Well, since you're renting on his behalf and he's paying, I'll need to speak to him.

Yes, he is paying, but I'll be the one dealing with everything.

He says nothing.

We're divorced, she says.

He sits back and says after a while, *then I'll need to speak to your father.*

He's dead, she says, trying to hold in her seething.

Then, I'll need to speak to someone who can vouch for you.

A man, you mean.

I can bring my sister, the next time. She lives over in –

Please have her husband call me then, he says, without looking at her.

I see, she says, standing up. *I'll let you know.*

You can keep your flat.

Downstairs, the rickshaw wallah was still there waiting, chatting with the darwan.¹

Want to go back?

Yes, please. Back to where we came from.

¹ darwan is a doorman

Afshan Mehmood, Islamabad, Pakistan

My love for mother nature and passion to preserve and conserve it particularly with regards to my own city and conservation of its greenery and scenic beauty inspired me to write this true story.

From Inspiration to Pursuing Passion

Every place has its aroma and a special feel to it. While not every place is welcoming yet some leave heavy footprints on the heart. You feel a sort of connection with them. That is the special connection I used to feel with my city Islamabad whenever I used to visit it in my childhood. Having spent my early childhood years in Lahore, I used to come to Islamabad in summer vacations every year and the magnanimous mountains used to fascinate me. I felt that the mountains were calling me... little did I know that they actually were! At the age of eight, my family shifted business and we ended up moving to Islamabad.

AHHH... The lush green beauty of Margala Hills and the pure pollution-free air; living away from the hustle-bustle of a pollution-hit city like Lahore to experience the serene magnificence of Islamabad was like a dream come true for a nature lover like me. I remember my science teacher telling me in one class that plants too are living beings; they too can feel and breathe and – gosh, I was fascinated! From that day on, I vouched never to pluck leaves or flowers but to admire their beauty from a distance while taking care of them. As they say, when you love someone, you let them live! That expression stuck to my mind and later I understood its actual meaning. Trees and greenery are the real assets bestowed by God as the free oxygen providers. What they ask in return, just a little care and preservation.

Since the essence of Islamabad is its grand mountains, hiking on different trails is a common practice. People mostly go from trail 3 or 5 up to Monal restaurant, at a height of about 1173 meters above

sea level, which is the right point from where the exquisite beauty of Islamabad can be enjoyed. The view in itself is just breath-taking! You see greenery and mountains everywhere. Even the waters of Rawal Dam and the grandeur of Faisal Masjid, the epitome of grace, are visible from the top. Not just the view but even the journey itself – whether through hike or car – is worth it. Even while going via road, it has its own twists and turns. The first entry point is near Islamabad Zoo which in itself is a remarkable place to visit. After the zoo, there is a long road of about 9 km, that, although marked with splendid Margalla hills on both sides, makes you remember God with its twirls and curls. However, the journey is worth it when you reach the top where the visitors enjoy traditional cuisines at restaurants along with fresh air and exquisite views.

As I was growing up... little did I know that love for trees and nature and conservation of trees and environment was something in-built in me as I started working on it voluntarily. I took a degree in electrical engineering and wondered how to make it useful to follow my love and passion for mother nature. I heard about sustainable development goals from a university teacher, and I remember coming back home and searching for the term, and then it was like a whole new chapter waiting to be opened. I studied SDGs and learnt that climate action and the provision of affordable and clean energy are part of these goals. Finally, I got the loose end I was waiting for. However, things were still not crystal clear; one has to find one's way through life...

At university, as a starter, I began working on tree plantation drives with my university friends. Hiking was my hobby since childhood, so I said to myself 'why not hike with a purpose?' So I started gathering my friends and cleaning trails as we hiked over them. But the plantation drives and cleaning were never enough – it still isn't. Something needed to be done for environment conservation as Islamabad, being a metropolitan, has been becoming a victim of commercialisation for the past few years. The so-called 'master plans', in the name of development, have ruined the real beauty of

Islamabad; its trees are being demolished and green belts are turning into concrete, the temperatures are rising while the society has been watching this eradication dumb-founded.

Realising the role of community in climate change, energy conservation, saving of trees, and waste management, I decided to raise awareness among society and peers. I had to save my city, my home. This led me to initiate my platform ‘The Rising World’ with the purpose to help in the implementation of sustainable development goals. I conducted seminars in schools of twin cities (Rawalpindi and Islamabad) and conducted various activities to indulge civil society, especially with the youth, to fight for climate change. Climate March Islamabad was organised last year in collaboration with people from all walks of life – the local community, students, engineers, and professionals came out to raise demands for safer environment and cleaner city. The March in itself was a huge success as many new initiatives were taken on governmental level for the said cause. The Government of Pakistan recently launched the ‘Green stimulus plan’ to encourage green businesses and nature-based solutions to fight poverty and nature degradation. Since climate change is a global issue, the marches were conducted all over the world, not just in Islamabad.

Yes, my city is my home, but my planet is also my home, and we need to save it because it’s now or never. Realising my purpose and passion, I aligned my career as an engineer with my passion and now I am working as a solar engineer and a trainer-academician as well as an activist – collaborating with different platforms like Women in Renewable Energy Pakistan, Rastay, GIZ, and more to promote women participation in the energy sector, to develop innovative solutions and to create awareness in masses regarding environment conservation, climate action, clean energy, and green entrepreneurship via activities like seminars, trainings, webinars, etc.

As they say, do what you love, and you won’t have to work a single day.

Saman Mehmood, Rawalpindi, Pakistan

I lost my dad. I saw him in my dreams in our old house in Lahore. It is more about sharing my memories.

My Memories

I was born in Lahore, Ganga Ram hospital. It is said, ‘One who has not seen Lahore has never been born yet.’ This statement is by Lahoris. I have seen every nook and cranny of Lahore. Being Lahori, I am a foodie. We used to live in the factory area, Jail Road Lahore. It consisted of twelve kilometres of land. We had three big playgrounds. My father was a businessman. He was a philosopher too. He used to quote poetry by Allama Iqbal. He used to love history and read books of warriors. When I think about my childhood, it is Lahore, my home, and my dad I think about. But life is tragic. We had to leave Lahore, we had to sell the factory and house and recently we lost dad too.

Visiting the same city again is pain now, it’s cold and my heart says that:

The road to a friend’s house
Is never too long
But friends are not there now.
I miss the anchor, I miss the hold,
Shelter by dad is no more,
The same house is not warm,
Seems there is nothing to belong to.

My City, My Home.

Epa Barua, Moulvibazar, Bangladesh

Women's rights inspired me to write.

My Biography

It's me, Epa Barua, telling my own story. My home is in Sreemangal. I belong to Bangladesh from the Chattogram district. Some memories are still fresh in the folds of thousands of memories throughout my life.

I vividly remember the time my first daughter went to Dhaka to take part in the admission test. A tired, horrified mother in a huge city like Dhaka carrying a bag on my shoulder, another bag on my arm, and holding the other child tightly with one hand. It was very difficult for us to get the proper direction of the city by ourselves. But we didn't give up. Dreams must be many times bigger than reality. I was blinking, my eyes were wet. I felt very alone in that huge city. I wiped away the tears so that they couldn't see. Both my daughters were young, I shouldn't make them afraid. Picking up myself again, I continued to move forward, forward, furthermore. Stage plays, recitation, acting, drama, all my dreams with them remain unfulfilled. The way I have left society and my family behind and haven't bowed down in front of anyone, I want my daughters to grow up that way. I want them to be good people with a lot of self-esteem, not a lot of riches. I want them to take part in the welfare of the country.

This city is mine. My shelter of peace my sanctuary. I do care for my city. We need to know how to organise ourselves efficiently in a team. It's our responsibility to build our city better for tomorrow. 'Home' to me means the place in which one's domestic affection is centred. At the end of the day, at the end of work, that is where I go. I get a lot of love, endless peace. Yes, I have made a home.

The question I ask myself each and every day is 'When I am going to change the world?'

To make memories for the future we have to develop our world. First, we need to start from home. I want each and every woman to get their freedom of speech. Regardless of who they are. Let every man and woman both learn to defend their rights as a human being. The soul of the cities lies in their people and their culture. They inform and are encapsulated in how we walk, sit, carry ourselves, and interact with others. Culture also includes how we express identities among others. Culture is composed of the things that we make and use. Without it, we wouldn't have relationships or society. We learn from each other both directly and indirectly. We learn our personal strengths or weakness and able to develop skills in leadership, communication, and working well as a team.

People say, 'Many a little makes a mickle.' We want to celebrate our lives, our successes, our failures. Every day and every moment of our life we want to celebrate.