

SUMMER 2022

EVOKE

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ECHO

LITERARY MAGAZINE



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“Evoke and Echo”

Summer 2022

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And Then a Bird: Quarantine Diaries

Kamalini Natesan

“To survive, one must tell stories”

— Umberto Eco

I’m doing just that

Day 1

I never imagined myself elated at entering a hotel room- a room that would imprison me on arrival. The thought ensnared me like a lightness that spelled freedom. It’s that feeling of not having a clue when you will go to the city you now call home and are hanging between two worlds, quarantine is the first step to freedom.

After my mom’s passing, all I wanted was to be soaked in a homely ambiance, and nurtured by the familiar was all I wanted. Tall order, said the cosmos. I spent far more time in Gurgaon, India, than I had imagined. While it gave me time to meet friends and connect, a period of mourning was denied. The rushes of grief coming at me without warning, in tenacious holds, left me depleted and confused.

Here I give myself permission to feel what I had been denying myself—the permanent absence of my mother. It was harder than I knew. It is still hard but in solitary confinement, I am more able to manage myself.

This period is giving me the loneliness needed to reacquaint myself with the girl whose mother is gone, and won’t be visiting anymore.

I am grateful to be where I am at this time.

Journaling kicks off my day.

I sit in a prayerful posture, while Indian Bollywood songs pervade a comfortable room. While the space is well-lit, it isn’t well-aired. Bummer!

I have a general outline for a routine in mind. Tomorrow I will turn back and revise to see if this forced quietude is suiting me.

May the days ahead be filled with gratitude and wonder.

Day 2

Watched a beautiful Bengali film (perchance) on Netflix last night: *Shonar Pahad* (the Golden Mountain); a touching story about relationships showcasing an unlikely friendship between an old dame and a young boy of six.

I wept copiously at the finale, using the emotions evoked to pour out my own. These were tears that arose out of a sense of compassion; toward the world and toward myself.

There are many stories with tearful endings that don't necessarily hurt. I curled up and slept peacefully later.

Claps of thunder reminded me of a world outside my window- sounding the knell of a life that awaits me and embellished the interiors of my room.

The orchestral symphony was followed by rain dancing on its toes, like ballerinas. I stared at the now-familiar names of the tall buildings—reading and rereading Indra Regent AIS 5G, and Long Live the King. I wonder why the hoardings never stop showing off their wares such as yellow dresses on young girls and men with zooming cars. They are insatiable in their greed to attract customers.

The billboards outside my window are from a different time, targeting audiences of the past. Or am I so far gone that I'm now in the future that was predestined, which morphed into my Present?

Further down the skyline, I felt the distant rumble of the sky train, too far away yet to feel its familiar rumbling motions in my traveler-bones. I sat sipping a strong Moccona coffee, tranquil and alive. Day two is beginning to release its hold on me. The ac whirs in notes that make me want to sing.

Perhaps I'll sing the song of dusk.

DAY 3

I tried to hasten my exercise routine this morning, excited as I was to begin a book left by a dear friend at the reception of this hotel yesterday: *The Vanishing Half* by Brit Bennett. It began with an air of mystery. Promising start.

I rest my appetite on the solid principle of 'eat when you're hungry' and definitely no snacking. That's how I am hoping to sustain myself. I've been trying to clock in at least 5k steps is probably the biggest challenge I have faced in this small enclosure.

Long conversations with friends lend much pleasure and happy thoughts to my days.
Back to my book.

DAY 4

Today started off with a long spell at the laptop. Some pending work, and before I knew it, the morning had passed me by. I was content.

The sky is particularly blue and sunny today, and it made me yearn for rain, so I sang Raag *Malkauns in Tarana form*. This *Raag* is typically sung late at night.

My days and nights seem pretty seamlessly intertwined so the 'mistiming' didn't bother me. The *Tarana* form of musical expression is melodiously strung in rhythmic harmony to musical sounds, not words. I recorded my singing against the backdrop of the sunny skies. It was exhilarating!

Roots this deep cannot and will not be yanked out of my soul.

Earlier I was directed to a 'relaxing area' for a quarter of an hour around 12 noon when I asked for my bedside lamp to be replaced. I had reported that the rogue lamp ignited one minute and died, the next.

They had me 'relax' in a different room of similar proportions. At least I had walked out, even if I moved back to my assigned room, within a matter of minutes. Too quick, alas. Back to my book.

DAY 5

What if time stopped in its tracks? A thought that woke me up today. Would I be stuck in this room forever? I abandoned such morbid thoughts before they grew roots in unhealthy soil.

DAY 6

Time is moving.

Finally, after much back and forth, my window was pushed open- unlocked as it were. I instantly felt the rush of warm air meet the cool air of the ac, and what a holy union! I'm hugely relieved and my breathing has acquired new depths.

Very spicy curry with rice for lunch, for the very first time. So far, the food has been tasty but under-seasoned. I made a fuss today- after all, I'm COVID negative. I am allowed to throw my weight around a bit.

Day 7

Sunny morning with songs.

My co-passenger, a young, newly-married man, on the Air India flight home, popped into my head a short while back. He had been summoned to sign a form because his baggage would not arrive at the Bangkok airport when he did. Why? They found a power bank in it! He was devastated

I hope it reaches him soon thereafter.

Thought before hitting the sack: *rising in the morning is often the most difficult time of day. I am still not used to a soundless zone with not a human around.*

I wake up with a jolt and need a few moments to come to terms with the emptiness. I must remember to remember.

Day 8 & 9

Food is now secondary, as my work catches fire. A new story gradually moves along its plot; classes have recommenced, and a poem on my love of fresh herbs and food has inveigled its way out of me.

New correspondence has begun. A story I submitted to a magazine, which will soon be published. My cup overflows. So much to be joyous about.

I am certain I observed little of the outside, as the inner world continued to wage a war between sanity and insanity in our world.

The time spent outdoors on the beautiful patio was refreshing today; followed by a 20-minute vigorous workout in the room.

DAY 10

Unbelievable, but we've arrived at day 10. Double digits mean day 14 is now tangibly within reach.

Woke up, struggling to extricate me from a Norwegian play I had committed to performing in my youth, in my debut novel. Waking up to this reality is so much more pleasant!

I slept exhausted, after a good day's work. I wandered outside onto the assigned patio, whether I should sit still and allow the gentle breeze to wrap me in its embrace and flirt with my tresses, or, a walkabout in a frenzied rhythm. I was traumatized by the inability to quickly make a decision since time would run out. Ultimately, I indulged in both activity and inactivity.

The rest of the evening indoors was a pleasant enough affair and wore on without much ado. I slept like a six-monthly (they do sleep through, do they not?)

Day 11

I've been editing since 8 am, almost non-stop. Sitting for as long as I had was guilting me up, yet I was back on the laptop at 13:00 hrs after a nice, long shower: some of the luxuries offered by time during a quarantine. BBC World news was dismal. I watched it as I consumed my fried rice lunch from a box, and fearing it would affect my digestion, switched channels after a few bites.

I await the evening's outing. My mind is made up to use the entire length of time, to walk vigorously around the water fountains. It doesn't sound very relaxing, does it! But it will be. It's better for my mental health. I can lounge around within this enclosure late

DAY 12

Again, I'm astounded at how quickly I've arrived at this day. My 2nd and last Covid swab is done!

Half of today has been spent on editing. Gratifying work. Rereading one's stories after a few months helps inject freshness into the writing. Editing is hard work, but terribly satisfying. Annoying too, when I noted how awful some of the phrasings now read. Aargh!

As I head toward the finale of this solo show, I find that many questions that plagued me over the years have received succor in the silence of my room.

Most answers lie within us, and within our reach. Whether we allow ourselves the quietude to hear them, or whether it is a question of receiving knowledge when we are ready for it, is a choice

I never imagined myself in quarantine alone. I did not think I would ever need to go through it, and if I had to, it would be with my partner. That was a given.

Nothing's *a given* anymore.

Every day has been a pleasant surprise. I have flowed with it. I do enjoy my own company a lot

I have rediscovered, those who know me well, know that I am as happy in fine company as I am

on my own—I need both, unequally.

DAY 13

I am so looking forward to going back home. It's all ready and waiting to welcome me back.

I woke up confused. Even after thirteen days in captivity, mornings in this hotel room emit a sense of – “oh! What am I doing here!?”

I am learning that the relationship I'm developing with myself is healthier than the earlier one. I am less likely to delude myself perhaps. It is to be seen.

Finale (14)

I'm still struggling to believe that my door will be flung open at 6.30 tomorrow morning, and I'll shut it behind me with my two bags. They carry remnants of these past two months and are far more precious now than they were when I left this country. They shrunk willingly to hold my world together.

They finally allowed me in the gym during 'relaxing hours'.

- Quarantine turned into a gift because of the uncertainty of life, and the painful awareness of the lack of predictability of it all.
- Quarantine was transformed into a 14-day phase that helped me retire within, and led me down a path that has carried me home.

The construction site is now ready, and a rough frame has been put in place. I've repurposed the masonry to have a versatile and durable foundation for the place I am about to style into a fresh, new form.

The rest of the year will be spent carving my life onto this sturdy foundation.



Neural Network by Catherine Yan