

ESSAY

You Can't See Me but I'm in the Frame

by Nandita Dutta



"Metropolis" by Vian Borchert

My huge bay windows frame the constant flow of traffic, the blood gushing through the veins of the city, up and down, in all directions, oxygenating, polluting. I am inside, well protected, my shutters are closed and the pollution can't touch me, even though I can smell it — like someone left smoldering cigarette butts everywhere, without the smokers' etiquette to stub them out.

This movement, as long as it's just outside the lines of my comfort zone, comforts me. I am a raging introvert, my boundaries are invisible yet solid, intractable, like the rays of a laser, not retractable. I throw my thoughts at the wall and see what will stick, the walls of my cozy box. I have no need of going out, facing animate objects. Someone in a movie had a phobia like this. She never went out, even to get her milk and newspapers from her porch. I don't have that though; just a really worn out social battery that doesn't charge all the way, and drains fast.

I live in tropical climes — humid and sticky, but this house is finally one in which I don't feel snowed in anymore. I don't feel claustrophobic, nothing's coming to get me, the walls are not closing in on me, and I'm not stuck forever in a nondescript corner of the world, only getting smaller, where no one knows where I am.

Even big, beautiful houses, with huge rooms, breezy decor and sizable balconies and decks, would feel like institutionalized padded rooms, unless I could see either the sea, or the traffic. No halfway views like trees or forests or mountains — nothing that stands still, no static forms. No reminders of the fact that those things took root and stayed where they had been for centuries, and that was their whole flex, their persona, that they were able to grow and flourish right in the exact spot where they were born. So snugly wedged inside it, that nothing outside of it attracts you away. Everything is almost tetris-like, fitting neatly into available free spaces, inside the box, but once wedged in the right place, the whole line disappears.

From within my four walls that intersect at four corners, I need to look outside. I need an ocean. Endless waves, running from me and coming right back and running away again — the ever-stretching canvas that does not end no matter how far I look, from side to side, bottom to top, it begins at my feet and keeps going like the iOS Freeform* app. An infinite canvas. Even though I accept my tininess, insignificance, my cell-like inconsequentiality, I am still in the painting, a black dot somewhere in one corner, but I am there, very much a part of it.

It is like being a part of that infinity, something bigger, deeper and more than myself, zoom in and there I am, but zoom out and you can see what all the smaller parts add up to and how it becomes greater than the sum of its parts — even when I don't fully understand it; a sense

of belonging to a greater plan, to the universe, to the galaxy, to the entirety of everything we know, and are yet to learn. A part of the mysteries of the universe, a part of physics, biology, astronomy, nature studies, and everything that the universe has to offer. All this in your own company, this limitlessness, this transcending the end.

One was the sea, and the other was traffic. There's nothing complimentary to say about Mumbai traffic, especially when you are on the road, a part of it. Any city dweller would agree. But looking down upon highways from a 27th story flat is heaven. The cars zig and zag like zooming toys, the trains wail from the tracks from time to time, annoying yet welcome reminders of the blood gushing through the arteries of the city. Monsoon winds howl often, because there are fewer highrises here, they can be heard with Dolby Atmos** clarity. Sometimes they sound scary, like they could sweep away the whole building like a tornado. But in broad daylight it feels like a friend constantly talking to you, or like the ASMR*** of keeping the TV on in the other room just because you need to feel some proof of life. But in the other room, not the same one. The elements should not enter, touch the lines, of the tenement.

Homes are not for movement. Home is where you put your feet up, connect to the wifi automatically, and rest. When home, you don't want movement. You want stillness, calm, peace, stability. It's why millennials still feel like they need to buy a home. Not rent one. Renting is a state of impermanence, a state of movement. Buying is when you can claim you own your little corner of the world, and no one can take it from you. Once it is paid off, of course.

My bay windows are in a rental. It's always been a rental. It's always had that feeling of flexibility, fluidity. In my newest rental, I finally feel like I am not cornered into one space that is choking me, that is pressing down with its fingers on my neck, and I can't breathe. Even with highway traffic pollution, I don't feel the lack of air. Maybe that's why, as a kid, I slept best in moving cars. This feeling of being boxed in, where even the air is still, this motionless tranquility can feel scary, literally the calm before the storm, but not when the outside is visible. Boxes are so easy to be in when transparent. A clear, solid, non-invasive, non-intrusive border.

One of the first homes I lived in, with a family of four, was an unconventional two-storey structure, with strangely placed rooms, one slant-roof attic-like formation jutting out of the top floor, almost like the top of Rapunzel's prison tower. These rooms were boarded up in haphazard ways to mark boundaries, carving out separate spaces for three families from one big house. The families had four kids in total, one couple was childfree. The kids wove in and out of all of the ill-planned, irregular spaces, like threads on a murder timeline board.

Shimmering, glimmering with traces of light bursting and disappearing as they zoomed in and out of all the rooms, closets, kitchens and pantries. They had a village to raise them. The couple was very fond of them and spent more time with them than the original owners. The chaotic, disorderly, moving flow of life in this higgledy-piggledy house granted everyone what they wanted: alone time, company of kids, dotting adults, nooks and corners for constant exploration, life — throbbing and pulsating in the veins of a weird little fairytale house. This chaotic life, contained, channeled — almost organized, by the orderless lines of the boarded-up walls.

For the formative years of my life, I lived in a different city. A city of grabby hands, devouring gazes, obscene sentiment. Now that I think of it, a girl moving through the stages of growing up in that city with the desirous eyes, I shiver in pure terror. Not that I left unscathed. No girl leaves that city unscathed. The city leaves its paw prints on their bodies, their souls, that never seem to come off. In innocence, the evil of the city was blurred, the edges looked safe. In innocence, you never think that you will ever leave, or that you will even have to. Leaving, in those days, sort of felt like quitting and you are taught to never quit. You can't just give up on a place that nurtured you, that you have called home. You learn to love it — scars and all. But you know you will never heal if you don't move out of those geographical squiggles, and define your own boundaries. In fact, it's a place where you learn that no is a complete sentence. You learn to recognize, then resize those squiggles.

In first year of college, my dorm room was on one corner of a short corridor, only four rooms to it, overlooking the quad and the cafeteria. It was the place where everyone congregated to meet up to head where they were going, to catch a breather after every class, to grab a bite, or to get some fresh air when you had very little time between engagements. It was a swirl of motion, the flaming nucleus, the Shibuya scramble****. It was only in this room I could be still comfortably, right in the middle of the hubbub, my mind completely quiet in the buzz of the quad that I could hear, but only faintly. I just needed that fleeting thrum of the string to feel pure peace. The second year I was relegated to a higher floor, a room in the middle of a long corridor of 12 rooms on either side, far from the madding crowd, the perpetual quiet flooding me with the insidious horror of drowning loneliness. Were the lines too far away? Did I need a view of the lines and the lives just outside it? Was this my need to have the TV on, but in another room?

I help my son with his history homework, and am reminded over and over, how tribes move - bag and baggage - to new pastures that have more to offer, to river banks with more fertile soils, they move away from arid ground, dense dangerous jungles, lands of constant inclement weather, and into loamy soils, temperate climates, manageable vegetation and live

there only as long as it suits them, with a clear *out*, an option to leave whenever they need to, roots taking only to the extent that can extract optimum nourishment but also where they can be fully uprooted to be replanted somewhere else - safer, warmer, drier. Greener pastures and all that.

I have moved so many times in my lifetime, and I'm still not done, still blissfully in a rental, refusing to tie my life down to bricks and fossilize it under dying concrete and settle in one place, as those who came before us keep advising. My own peers are starting to plan for retirement and beginning to think about preferred locations where they would like to live out the rest of their years, read as, *where would they go to die?* There is life in motion, death in stillness. When we start to die, we go look for a place to be still. Looking for our little cocoons, our coffins, to finally contain us.

We are all just nomads, and nothing spells a clean slate more than an empty apartment, when moving out — bare walls, stripped floors, like you wiped your mistakes clean - your bad decisions and lousy behavior. Or when moving in, a blank page ready to be filled with neat days and aligned lines and colors in between those lines, yet another chance to fill it up with your version of right, correct, comfortable and eclectically elegant. We were designed to move, we move from one version to another, one life to another, our souls constantly in churn, in flux, in flow. Not flowing feels like a quagmire, standing still feels like quicksand. Our planet moves constantly, we are but homeless, stranded, shifting molecules in endless motion, our bodies temporary homes that we rent for a bit. We were not meant to be contained, yet our rental bodies constantly look to be contained in safety, stability; be comfortable, be looked after.

I comfort myself in my 27th story box, the swirls of pollution not touching me, big, scary hawks gliding almost into my bay windows but not quite; soaring and plummeting. I can see their beady eyes whooshing past me, judging me in my inertia as they fly by. As long as they're judging me from the outside, I'm OK. *You can't touch me*, I think, retreating into the blast of the air-conditioning, while the outside burns up in flaky, summer heat.

Footnotes

* Freeform is a digital whiteboarding application developed by Apple and boasts of an infinite, boundless canvas that can be maneuvered in multiple ways for creativity, brainstorming and collaboration.

** Dolby Atmos is a surround sound technology developed by Dolby Laboratories. It expands on existing surround sound systems by adding height channels, interpreted as three-dimensional objects with neither horizontal nor vertical limitations.

*** Coined in 2010, ASMR (autonomous sensory meridian response) is a relaxing, often sedative sensation that begins on the scalp and moves down the body. Also known as “brain massage,” it’s triggered by placid sights and sounds such as whispers, accents, and crackles.

**** Shibuya scramble — The busiest crossing in Tokyo, just outside of Shibuya station. During its busiest times, it sees an estimated 1,000 to 2,500 people forge their way across this intersection every two minutes, enough to quickly fill up a football stadium. The phenomenon gave rise to its nickname “scramble,” as pedestrians cross from all directions.