

REVIEW

A Poetic Voyage of Conscience through the Maze of Memory: A Review of Ankit Raj Ojha's "Pinpricks"

by Pritikana Karmakar



Ankit Raj Ojha's debut poetry collection *Pinpricks* (2022) is a memory work in three undefined acts. It begins as a collection of family vignettes, gradually branching out into the everyday quirks and the unnamed humbug of the social collective, and finally emerges as a quiet meandering reflection on personal gratifications. Unabashedly personal, the poems in the collection hint at a powerful, existential isolation, resulting from having one foot rooted in the past by the weight of absences and the other sinking-slipping-sliding in the yawning, labyrinthine caverns of the present.

The first act of *Pinpricks* is coloured sepia, awash with longing for what time has stolen away so unobtrusively. "Palate," a worthy initiation to this memory palace, is suffused with a grandson's quiet regret at not fulfilling his promise of sending his grandpa his favourite kimia dates in favour of revising a paper, as his grandpa unexpectedly passes away:

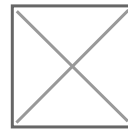
I have a boxful
of original kimia dates
and a paper in Routledge.

This poignant moment of grief, born not of any dramatic instance of carelessness but of the inevitable way life interrupts and hinders care and duty towards loved ones, is breathtakingly familiar in its intensity. It returns with a vengeance in the poem "The Man Who Appropriated Death to My Convenience" with the realisation that the process of losing a loved one to time is trivialized in favour of a singular explosion of grief at the point of loss.

Life hinders time devoted to family again in "The Boy Next Door," in which job requirements enforce separation from home even during cherished festivals. Despite the pragmatic process of creating a homely niche in an alien place with fireworks, dinners and friendly acquaintances, the choking feeling of being exiled or *unhomed* never really leaves:

When dinner arrives I have a heartfelt,
my neighbours never suspecting how
the boy next door has
smiled his way through his
second dinner of the evening.

The hollow feeling brims over with a visceral sensation of unease upon a chance encounter with a digital picture of a photograph of the narrator's grandmother, "twice removed from reality" ("Portrait of a Lady Taken Too Soon"). The sense of



Ankit Raj Ojha © Dhingra Studio, Karnal

being unsettled gives way to anguish at the sudden perception of an insurmountable stretch of the material universe from those old, familiar faces: "One point five millimetres of tempered glass / was an ocean."

Distance is not only measured in terms of space and time, but also in the outlook across generations, which is demonstrated with a startling dash of humour in "Generation Gap": A father compares a famous musician's voice to that of "a clear stream through / a meadow" while the son thinks of a similar comparison "featuring quite another tract / and diarrhoea." It only accentuates the undercurrent of the ludicrous in human life and its exaggerated profundities.

The note of the absurd is a significant flavour in the next course of *Pinpricks* concerning the human situation within the social capsule, seasoned liberally with satire and pathos. A bridge between the two acts, "Essential Services" reminds us of the farcical nature of the 2-year-long COVID-19 lockdown restrictions through a montage of scenes from a humble neighbourhood. The circular narrative serves to emphasize the peculiar rhythms to which human lives are bound, whirling on despite the pestilence's invisible sword dangling above.

The Sisyphean tone gains strength thereafter: "And in yearning to restore / what is long gone, / I tend to do stuff I did back then — /... / all vain efforts at recreating / what time has

stolen from me” (“Supposedly Stolen Lives”). However, hope blooms amidst this despairing futility:

But what if I break the jinx?

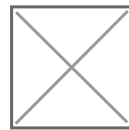
What if I refuse to age?

Let us say that I plant my blatant denial

to listen to the cautionary tale. (“No, Thanks!”)

There is no easy resolution in this harsh tale of life, for the balance swings whimsically between life and death (“The Barrel”), or human dignity and wretched animality (“A Dog’s Life”). But when every last hope of salvation is gone, the desperation for survival is all that remains.

In his prize-winning essay “Becoming Poetry,” Ojha wonders if “people deemed ‘a joy to be with’ ... are like poems” and expresses a desire to weave the random strands of the person and the poetic



"Pinpricks" by Ankit Raj Ojha © Pritikana Karmakar

expression into a single, all-encompassing tapestry. The short-lived crops of beauty, meaning, and hope — the hues of redemption in a monochrome world — can only be harvested via our affinity for reminiscence, as indicated previously in “Supposedly Stolen Lives,” and materialise further in the final act of *Pinpricks*. In “The Life and Times of Suku and Dukhu,” a fashion designer stitches “memories of yore” on the dresses to be showcased in a fashion show. The merger of art and artist assisted by the technics of memory is a raw, honest masterpiece and, therefore, most precious of all:

And oft she wondered how to make a pretty gown.

She went on tweaking until the day it dawned —
the key was the village by the river
that held her memories fond.

Reality and imagination nurture Ojha's artistic ventures equally as his pen flits back and forth across the axes of space and time. But it is personal experience that foregrounds his creative psychology, not inked in with swords but noiseless rambles absorbing characters, incidents, animals, and water bodies into homemade melodies:

This morning in Cuttack is no different as I sit on
the back seat feeling second-hand wind kissing
the Mahanadi and in turn rustling my hair that have
long stayed their welcome. ("Mahanadi")

Imagination is a trickster in Ojha's poetry, the tendrils of murkiness that soothe and stab. The "dreamy Mahanadi road" twists into a realistic description of an author's 'lifelong dream' of signing copies of less-than-bestselling titles coming true, until an ambiguous ending: "I am a writer who has never / written a book in his life" ("I frequent the less-frequented bookshops"). Was it real then, or was it a dream? The deceptive quality of imagination is further illustrated in how imaginary homelands are built away from where they are, although it appears to be nothing but "a conscious effort / to keep yourself / thinkingly occupied / for life" ("Endless Picaresque").

Pinpricks binds together minuscule installments of life, bringing to mind Walt Whitman's "straw-color'd Psyches," fluttering along the surface of our humdrum existence. Their simplicity, fragility and peculiar gyrations offer a different kind of awareness of life, if not with the sound of thunder, then with the persistent wind's whisper.