

drain.

mud.

*Rice. Chicken. Spice. ~~Food~~. Dirt. Water. Salt. ~~Sweat~~. Rust. Iron. Sweet. ~~Blood~~. Smells. Smells.
Smells. ~~Smells like trouble~~. ~~Forget~~. ~~Ignore~~. ~~No attention~~.*

The apothecary is mud. The door, the walls, the floor. Mud. It soaks through the toes of my feet. I have no shoes. I feel weak. I sink with each step. Lower and lower. ~~Closer to death~~. Conscious of breath. My breath fogs in the air. The evening is cold. I don't care. Shake it off. Shake it off. Shake it off. ~~Shake them off~~. Shake the goosebumps off. Look, search, discover, find. The storekeep's medicine - it's now mine.

Dirt-stained hand swims through metres of mud. The store looked different before the flood. Something smooth, in a nook. Pull it out. Have a look. Swipe mud off with the back of my hand. Smear it on my pants - ~~is... that... blood?~~ The words on the label I can't understand.

Back in the mud. Not what I need. Different jar, wrong jar, hasten, need speed. I see a pile of mud, sticking out from the rest. Used to be the counter where he kept the best. It should be there, I think. Almost there, I think. ~~Do I care? I think~~

She won't last long if you don't hurry up. I go to move forward but my foot gets stuck. Slip, splat, ow - face in the mud. I push myself up as pain starts to bud. Mouth full of mud. I spit it all out. Look for what I snagged on - ~~there's the face of a dead man staring back at me~~. Mouth full of mud. ~~Teeth rotted away. Eyes wide in fear. Conveying dismay.~~

I stand up. I move on. It'll be here. Can't be wrong.

Jars, jars, jars. Smothered in mud. ~~I've gone too far.~~ No, I'm not done. One slides though my hand as I pick it up. Search for the label. Ask the Gods for luck. Read the label. My breath stills. Read it again. I get chills.

Is this right? Is this wrong? My unconscious conscience tries to prolong- happen, will happen, must happen, it happens that I don't have time ~~and I do not care~~ so I grip the jar and take it from there. ~~I'll finally hurt her.~~ I'll finally save her.

Wound 'round my body are thin strips of rags. ~~I call them my clothes.~~ More rags make a hollow that acts as a bag. I shove the jar in, take a deep breath, run out the twisted metal that's full of death. It once was a store, but now it's just mud. Just like the rest of the village after the flood.

Whatever, I think. It's happened before, I think. It'll happen some more, I think.

Dead people are buried far beneath my feet. Drinking in the mud like it's a treat. Smells wet. Smells damp. Smells like earth. ~~Smells like trouble.~~ Don't think about that. Not right now. Get back to your sister. Don't be a cow.

Used to be houses, lined in a row. Count distance in my head. This is all I know. Dead. Dead. Dead. Owners of that house. Sunk. Sunk. Sunk. Quietly like a mouse. Brown everywhere. Mud everywhere. Smells everywhere. ~~Blood everywhere.~~

Tin buckles easily under a flood. They blew up our mountain, only for fun. Earth slides down a hill. Washes everyone away. The ones who are injured are the ones who still stay. We are experiments, they do not mind. They kill us then come here scared by what they find. It took us one decade to build up our town. It took them one hour to tear it all down.

No hospitals in the town of the dead. You're either born on the floor or the bed. Screaming is filmed by them to show theirs but at the end of the battle nobody cares. Face some reality is it war torn or torn more scorn for gone forlorn floor-born children? That's what they do. They scorn the dead children as they pass through. It's instinctive; they try to keep a straight face. But in their eyes we can all see the distaste.

Big countries always focus the war on children. Wasted potential. Look at them suffer. They must hate the mountain they live on. It only looks like this because of big people like them. I love my mountain - it's just like my life. Everything before them was perfectly, perfectly fine.

Dirt from the mud grits in my teeth. ~~I roll my tongue around my mouth and spit the rest of the mud out. It makes me remember something...~~

Rice. Chicken. Spice. ~~Food.~~ Dirt. Water. Salt. ~~Sweat.~~ Rust. Iron. Sweet. ~~Blood.~~ Tastes. Tastes. Tastes. ~~Tastes like pain.~~ Forget. Ignore. No attention.

No time for that. Time to move on. Get back to my sister. She doesn't have long. Thieves come out when the sun sets. Robbing my sister and I is where I place all my bets. I've only had one arm since I was born. ~~She was impaled by part of a metal roof when the mudslide hit and knocked our second-storey tin house down to the first floor.~~ She survives well with the ~~antibiotics~~ I find. I keep giving them to her. Oh, how I'm ~~kind.~~

I pass a woman dressed in green. I clutch my bag closer; she'll rob me clean. The sun's almost down. I see my home. Children's crying is drowned out by the mud that they foam. Sick.

Sickly. Sickness. They feel it now too. Once I was the useless child. They are now too. ~~I suppose karma is true.~~

Walk into my home that's a mud-flooded shed. Every parent on this street is now beyond dead. "Mummy?" says a whisper.

"No, it's still me." My sister doesn't understand that our parents are dead. That I'm now free. A fire that's lit fills the room up with smoke. I breathe in so suddenly I accidentally choke.

There she is, just a twig. Pale and slim. I reach out, feel her forehead, my eyes start to brim. Tears. Tears. Tears. Can't waste them anymore. I pull out the jar. Make some tea. Feed her ~~more~~.

"The medicine tastes bad," she scrunches up her nose. Her cheeks are flushed pink, turning red like a rose. I nod my head. It's meant to taste that way - that why it's called ~~poiso~~. She knows I understand. She puts down her cup, and reaches out her tiny hand.

I rest my cheek against her palm. "Thank you," she says, her voice childishly calm. She wraps her arms around my neck. I hug her back, telling myself, ~~Don't forget.~~

Splash. Sizzle. Roar. ~~Fire. Pant. Gulping. Roar. Sweat. Smack. Thudding. Roar. Screams. Sounds. Sounds. Sounds. Sounds like torture. Forget. Ignore. No attention.~~

She is so unlike our parents. So sweet. Pure. Innocent. So when I told her that I hated her, she couldn't have understood what I meant. Her eyes are dark brown, slightly darker than her skin. The mud that stains her hides the damage to her limbs. Her long, black hair is matted, much like mine. And my life long before her, was perfectly, perfectly fine.

"I hate you," I repeat.

“Why?” she asks. Her beautiful eyes are wide, confused.

“My life was better before they had you.”

Tears roll down her cheeks. She’s never seen me like this before. I’d been so nice to her, salvaging her medicine from the apothecary store. I glance towards the fire, flickering light onto her face. Sweat beads on her forehead. She can’t have known my plan in place.

Ache. Empty. Cramp. ~~Hunger~~. Hot. Sticky. Wet. ~~Sweaty~~. Sting. Angry. Pain. ~~Bloody~~. Feels. Feels. Feels. Feels like death. Forget. Ignore. No attention.

Aayush, my sister’s named, meaning duration of life. Oh if only the sweetheart knew she’d caused me much strife. Lakshay I was named, for the target on my back. When you come out with one arm, you’re worth less than scat.

“Do you know what death is?” I ask the five year old girl. I watch her fear kick in as her thoughts begin to swirl.

Flames. Browning. Food. ~~Cooking~~. Drops. Sliding. Down. ~~Sweating~~. Fists. Tearing. Skin. ~~Bleeding~~. Sights. Sights. Sights. Sights I can’t forget. Can’t ignore. Need attention. ~~Fights~~. ~~Fights~~. Fights. Fights. Fights back.

Abuse. Abuse. Abuse. That’s the love my parents showed me. Kisses. Kisses. Kisses. That’s the love my parents showed *her*. Starving. Starving. Starving. They took away all my food. Giving. Giving. Giving. They gave it all to *Aayush*.

“Aayush, can you read?” I ask, knowing full well that she can’t. If I can’t read, neither can she, but to read labels, you can look at the imagery. She shakes her head and I show her the bottle. A giant red ‘x’, a skull. My plan’s in full throttle.

“Suffering. Suffering. Suffering,” I speak my thoughts aloud. My voice has turned dark, sour. The tears in Aayush’s eyes really begin to crowd. “You’ve watched mum and dad hurt me. Ever since you were small. You cried, and cried, then giggled. Your emotions were torn.

“Between loving them. Between loving me. I hate you. But you love me-” ~~A sob escapes Aayush’s lips, stopping me in my tracks. I look down at her. I glare at her with narrowed eyes.~~

With a raised voice, I show her beneath the rags. “See that blood?” I yell. “See those scars?” I yell. Aayush whimpers. “THAT’S CALLED BEING HURT!” I scream, my face turning red. Usually, at this time, I put her to bed. “WHEN SOMEONE GETS HURT YOU’RE MEANT TO HELP!” Aayush cowers with a weak, little yelp.

The rage in my soul tears at Aayush in my screams, but it’s been tearing at me longer, deep within my dreams. My voice dies down, into a dangerous whisper, “I hate you with my whole heart, you disgusting little sister.”

Aayush bursts out in tears, howling into the night. She’s done nothing wrong, but someone has to bear the full brunt of my fight. Mum and dad are dead. They’d hurt me all these years. Aayush remained unharmed. Yet she thinks she has the right to cry about her fears?

“You’re so young. You’re so dumb. Why on earth would I help *you*?” Aayush is covering her face. She deserves to feel hurt too. I pick up the jar. I tear her hands away. I shove it in her face. I want to see what she has to say.

“Tell me what this says.”

“I don’t know,” she cries. Her voice is tiny, frail, weak. Yet she continues to lie?

“WHAT DO YOU THINK IT SAYS?” I scream. I bet Aayush wishes this were a dream. So did I, once upon a time. Back when I thought my life could still be fine.

“Death,” she whimpers. I nod.

“What a smart sister.” ~~Sarcasm won’t kill her before I do.~~

I had poured death into her tea. I stirred it around. She drunk it. Drunk it. Drank it? Gulped it all down. She knew it tasted bad - she even told me as much. ~~But she believed that I loved her, cared about her. Not that I would poison her instead of mending her. That I would kill her instead of helping her.~~

Aayush begins coughing. Her body begins convulsing. It was now my turn to laugh as she is tortured from the inside out. I sit, cross-legged, watching her die. Words on her breath. Her final sigh.

“I still love you,” she says.

I begin to cry. Heart in my throat. Aayush begins to choke. No, no, no. What did I do? I leap forward. Gather her up. No, no, no. My voice is stuck. Why did I do this? Why did I do this? Why did I *do* this?

“I love you,” I sob. “I don’t hate you,” I sob. “I want you to stay,” I sob. She can’t hear me. Blood crawls from her nose. Her mouth. Her eyes. Her ears. I killed her. I killed her. I *killed* her. And she still loves me?

I killed the one person in the world who still loved me. I killed her. I killed Aayush. My baby sister. Why would I do that? My brain is a buzz. My mouth is a fuzz. Aayush rolls out of my arms. Rolls across the floor. Her hair tumbles into the fire. “NO!” I scream, racing forward as

she burns. The fire spreads to the jar. It fizzles. It pops. Glass flies everywhere, striking my skin.

Karma. Karma. Karma.

I just murdered my whole world. My beautiful, little kin.

who *am* i?

water.

Sharp. Clean. Ow. Hospital? Water. Salt. Assault. Think. Aayush. Can't.

Brown. Heavy. Slips through my fingers. Hard to tame with my one arm. Am I describing the mud that they pulled me from or the coat they had slung over my shoulders before they realised there was only one limb to anchor it to - the other, non-existent limb wasn't born when I was. They had noticed the scars, too, and wrote notes about them in their books. The way they streaked my skin, sticking out like mountain ridges. ~~Hived on a mountain.~~

“What is your name?” the white-jacket had asked when I was first removed. Here they make me feel like a tumour. I had been removed. Not rescued. Not saved. Not retrieved. Removed. I am a waste of resources, a drain to resources. I am the place where the water goes to never be seen again. The drain. They pour everything they have into me. I let it pour straight out.

“Lakshay,” I had replied. I had been fiddling with the material of the coat. It was itchy, felt foreign on my skin. I guessed I looked foreign to her and got under her skin.

“Lakshay, I need you to read this.” I had barely even glanced at the paper she had held out in front of me. My gaze had been trained in the corner of the tent. The tent they had placed me in had been bigger than my house. Whiter, too. A makeshift hospital. Hospitals only ever came to town when people from big countries felt bad about bombing ours.

My words hadn't stuck in my throat. “I can't read.”

~~“You need to read this,” her voice had dropped low, threatening me. I’d used that tone on someone before.~~ I had looked up at her, my gaze empty, blank. Every threat flows through me then straight out. There had been a rustle outside the tent. White-jacket’s gaze had flicked to follow the movement. She had cleared her throat, then continued in a more diplomatic tone. “You will make this statement in seven hours. If you don’t, we can’t offer you asylum and take you back to...” she had trailed off before she could name a big country. I think she had realised from my expression that my geography lessons hadn’t cared about where she came from. Pinching the bridge of her nose, she had sighed angrily, then said, “If you don’t do this you will go back to your village.”

My village. My flooded village, drowned in mud. My bloodstained village. It wasn’t even a village anymore. It was a gravesite.

She had slammed the paper down on the bed next to me. I had jumped, momentarily startled, and had avoided her gaze. My feet had still been coated with dried mud and blood. Cracks had been forming from where my skin had moved. ~~My heart had skipped a beat.~~

“You’ll need to read the statement word for word,” she had hissed. “They need to see you have the capacity to learn, grow and change.”

I had looked up at White-jacket. She had a name written on that coat of hers - pretty black cursive script, one of the last fonts I had learnt to read. I knew what sounds the symbols made. I can’t read them. I’m not allowed to read. I had spoken honestly. “I don’t have the capacity for that.”

A fire. A poisoned little girl. A dead sister. The remains charred, whisked away on the wind. I killed her. I killed her. I killed her.

“They don’t know that.”

I had sat up straight, meeting White-jacket’s gaze. I had gritted my teeth. She had ignored the emptiness in my eyes and had said, “You have seven hours, Lakshay,” then walked away. Seven. Isn’t that the number of sins her people had?

I had picked the paper up, read over the words, then had shoved it in the coat pocket.

I was still sitting on the bed. I think I’m now White-jacket’s pet project - she wanted to bring me back to her country. I didn’t feel inclined to go. Instead I explored.

The tent was white. The entrance, the canvas walls, the tarp floor. White. It crinkled under my feet. I was wearing boots. They rubbed against my skin. My heart sunk with each step, lower and lower as I explored the giant tent. There was no coldness here - temperature wise, that is. A heater to the left kept the tent warm. The way these people looked at me kept me in line though. It chilled me to the bone.

Look, search, discover find. Real medicine lines the walls, stacked in cabinets. The cabinets are locked. The medicine isn’t for me. My hand grips tight to the paper dress I’m wearing. The only part of the jacket I like is how it is big enough to hide my missing arm.

Something feels wrong. Something feels weird. ~~Feels like trouble.~~

A breeze blew through the entrance. The smell of smoke was on the wind. I refused to let the memories come to life. I turned from the entrance and found a clock sitting on a table.

All clocks did was sit there and tick. Constant movement. Constant rhythm. Tick, tick, ticking. I used to find clocks calming. I would sit at my desk, surrounded by others who planned their day by a clock, and watched it slowly count how long we had been writing, ticking off our accomplishments. Now it made my chest feel tight. It never stopped ticking. Constant noise, like

a hammer to the brain. I could only block one ear unless I twisted my arm over my head. Glancing at the other people in the tent, I thought that would be too obvious. I moved away from the clock. It kept ticking.

It was midnight now. The piece of paper had been running between being in my hand and being in White-jacket's for the past hour. She had been yelling at me the whole time. "Lakshay, it's four sentences! I have a record of your education, and I know you can read this. So read for God's sake!"

The anger in her tone barely affected me. I was too focused on how bright it was in the tent. This place never was as dark as the sky on my mountain. ~~I want to go back.~~ There was a noise louder than the ticking clock - a dripping tap, somewhere on the other side of the tent wall. It distracted me. ~~It sounded like the water that had dripped from the roof of our tin house after the flood, infecting the wound more than it was from the mud.~~

"Lakshay!" White-jacket picked the paper up, shoved it in my face. ~~I'd done that once.~~ "WHAT DO YOU THINK IT SAYS?" Her voice exploded from her throat, breaking with a squeak. ~~Forget. Ignore. No attention.~~ She shoved my arm.

~~Attention.~~

Sharp. Clean. Ow. ~~Needle.~~ Water. Salt. ~~Assault.~~ I hurt her. Focus. ~~Aayush.~~ Can't. I killed her.

I stood up and walked away. Not today. Not today. My hand wormed its way into my hair, tugging on the matted brown strands. Did they shower me? Did *I* shower me? Myself. Grammar. Grammar is important. Isn't it?

"Lakshay!" The call bounced off my skin. I imagined it ripping through the side of the tent, finding another Lakshay somewhere else to answer. I could hear her scrambling after me. I knew that if I didn't say something she'd touch me again.

"I want asylum here."

There was a silence in the scrambling. That was the final sentence of what I had to say, what I was supposed to read. Ticking clock. I can't read. I took a deep breath, speaking with my back to White-jacket. "Why do I have to say all this?"

I never received a reply to the question.

I'd known the whole time what I had to say. I didn't want to say it. It was a lie. ~~I'd already lied to my sister.~~

I let my head drop. I was empty. A finished bottle of water tossed away. They had a lot of those here; bottles of water. Their water came from taps, yet they still bottled and sold it. I wish they had that where I lived. Maybe then no one would have drowned if they were used to the water.

The clock ticked more, louder than the tap.

When I turned back to White-jacket, I noticed she had paused, her mouth half open, an eyebrow raised. She hadn't expected me to finally read one of the sentences. She collected her thoughts, controlling her voice. "Good." It was almost like she hadn't just yelled at me. ~~Almost.~~ "It's nearly time for the statement. Go to sleep."

Sleep is just when my brain attacks me. ~~Everything from my past has been tearing at me forever, deep within my dreams.~~ I still sat on the bed. I still laid down. I still closed my eyes. I listened to White-jacket walk away. The ticking and the dripping both buzzed in my ears.

Sleep.

The punch. This new life began and old life ended with the punch. The first punch. There was a ring on one of the fingers, and when the fist struck my ear, there was a ring in my ear. A ringing. It shook my whole soul, tore it from my body, and before I could catch it, save it with my one hand, I hit the ground. It was all over when I hit the ground.

There was so much fear in the room that day. There were screams outside - my school down the road had been attacked. War did that. My fear started with the punch.

My parents went after my education first, because if I cannot understand what is happening, I cannot fight back. That is the logic I went with anyway. Why else would they take the one thing that would have saved me from the worst kind of life? Why else would they take the only thing I loved? No, that is wrong. When I had my education, and classes, and homework, and friends, I still loved my sister. I loved my education and her. But not once the education was gone. Not once I watched them take all my books and throw them in a fire. I had to lose both things I loved that day.

The ringing grew, and I began rocking in circles instinctively.

The fire roared, the flames creeping higher, smoke replacing all the air in the room, all the air in my lungs. Once the ravenous flames had eaten all my books, it calmed down, settling back into the barrel. The fire was full. I coughed out the smoke like a dying dragon. I was empty. I was

breathless. I was left there, feeling less. Less than I was before. Something had changed. Something had broken.

There was a kick to the place where my second arm should have been. A desperate command. "You are not allowed to read. You cannot read." I was not sure how to respond, to understand, to cope. All I knew was how to obey.

Under the ringing I could hear heavy footsteps leaving. I kept my gaze down, focused on my hand. It was clenched in a fist, my long nails slicing deep into my palms to hold the tears at bay. Blood began gushing from the punctures, filling up beneath my fingernails. The feeling of blood leaving my hand to fill my fingers grounded me.

Under the ringing I could hear soft padding. Something light was crawling this way. A baby's hand hesitantly entered my view. I refused to look up as it reached out to me. I refused to look up when it took my hand. I could not look up when it took the blood in my palm and used it to draw pictures on my skin. The tiny fingers drew flowers and the sun, and a random, messy letter that I had taught the fingers to write a few weeks ago. I finally looked up. There she was. The something light.

Aayush.

She saw my pain. She said nothing. She waited for them to leave. Then she came over. Only then.

Aayush.

With her wide eyes and chubby round face. She is more than two now.

Aayush.

My gaze narrowed. I snatched my hand away. She saw my pain, and ignored it. She didn't care for it. She only cared for silly games.

Aayush.

Before her, none of the emptiness in my soul would be here.

Something hotter than the flames began to rage inside me, like a small creature had just been born and was taking over my limbs. I jerked my gaze around the house like a wild animal. The door, the windows, they are my escape. Not this little girl. This little sister. She was the cause. She was the only one still here.

She was the one who wants to watch me suffer.

I shoved her away. Why did I shove her away? I should not have shoved her away. I should have hugged her. I should not have killed her. I should have loved her.

Bright. Light. White. Aayush. I lived. She died. Why do I deserve to live?

The lights hadn't been turned off while I was asleep. I didn't even realise it was morning until I noticed how dry my mouth was. Other people who looked like White-jacket but weren't her grabbed me by the arm and yanked me out of bed.

They dragged me out of the tent while I was still blinking, trying to wake up. I passed the ticking clock. Outside was even brighter than inside the tent. ~~It was like Aayush was reminding me she'll never leave.~~ I was being dragged through a town of colourful, moving people. Across the street, I saw a flash of a woman in green, humming to herself loudly enough that I could hear.

They took me to a white room in a white building. I didn't know places in my country could be so clean, so bland, so bright. It hurt to look at.

People sat in the room. There were more people than I thought. I counted them on my fingers. When I got to five, I had to stop counting. There weren't any more fingers to count on.

White-jacket had suddenly appeared and stood beside me, wearing a red jacket now. It made her look more evil than usual. ~~Less evil than me.~~

One of the people passed her a piece of paper. White-jacket held it in front of me. Sounding sickly sweet, she said, "Lakshay, can you please read this?"

There was a hush. I glanced around the room. To me, every single person looked the same. Not a single one of them seemed to be from my country or my mountain. I wondered how they had gotten here, who had let them come here to make a decision about me. One of them caught my attention. They were leaning forward heavily on their forearms. I could see the back of their chair pushed away from them. This person was sitting on the very edge of their seat. If another one of these people's bombs went off, that person would be the first to fall to the ground.

Despite the silence, there was a buzzing, a humming, a sense of urgency. It was like the room was a heart whose body was running a race. These people desperately wanted to see me read. Wanted to hear me speak. Why? Why do I have to give a statement? What is this for? Why wouldn't White-jacket answer my question?

My eyes grazed over the paper. It was almost identical to the one from last night - claiming that I wanted asylum in these people's country. Why do they want me to say this? *Is it the same reason I wanted Aayush to read the label? To watch her expression when she figured out what I was doing?*

One thing to never forget. One thing to always remember. Remember what mum and dad told me. I'm not allowed to read. So I told the room that.

"I can't read."

The humming stopped. The buzzing ceased. The heart refused to beat. The spell was broken. I'd ruined it. *I'd ruined Aayush.*

White-jacket pushed, clearly embarrassed by me. "Lakshay, you need to read this in order to have asylum," she explained, as if I didn't already know. I met her gaze. Her eyes widened, alarmed that I'd looked at her. Where I'm from, people don't have the colour eyes she has. Her eyes are green, like greed. My people's are brown, like mud.

I don't know why she wants what she wants. I know what I want, though.

"I can't read," I enunciated, staring directly at White-jacket, challenging her. 'Enunciated' was one of the last words I learnt before my education was burnt.

Noise walked back into the room dancing around as chaos. It bounced off the door, the walls the floor. It made itself known, and it told everyone that it was here because of me. It told everyone that if I had done what they wanted it would be more ordered and less of a disaster. The pinch on the back of my arm from White-jacket told me that too.

The room spoke and it was decided. They weren't offering me asylum. I didn't want asylum anyways. They were going to send me back to my shanty town. That's where I wanted to go.

They thought they were punishing me. I was already punishing myself.

White-jacket was mad at me when it was over. Her eyes were flashing, her mouth was set. I could tell she was upset. *Do I care?* I think. The look she gives me says I've pushed her to the brink.

“What did you do? Now you have to go back!”

I don't deserve for them to cut me some slack. I refuse to speak. My mind no longer feels weak. She glares, then walks away.

Asylum with them is not for me. Back on my mountain is where I deserve to be. ~~*I want to go home to Aayush.*~~

They send me back there. Leave me alone. I walk to my home. Beneath the mud, I can still hear the moans. The wails, the pain, there is nothing to gain. I'd left for a while. It is still the same.

Find my home. Walk inside. Still filled with smoke. Nowhere to hide. Her body is gone. It didn't take long. Somewhere in the distance is the fading of a song.

It's freezing cold. I can't see the sky.

I sit.

I breathe.

It's quiet.

I cry.

who *was* i?

air.

Up in the clouds there is nothing to fear. Down on the mountain nothing is clear. She's in the sky, she deserves to find peace. I'm on the ground; I deserve to burn.

Up in the stars beautiful people dance in the warmth, bask in the bright light, soar across the sky for all of us to watch. Down on the mountain we pray for them to forgive us.

Not all of us can go to the stars. Only the pure ones. Only the innocent. Those who have hurt us beyond repair are not allowed to go up there with the Gods. Those who have hurt others beyond repair are supposed to suffer the sins they committed.

The sky is clear. The horizon, the moon, the stars. Perfectly clear. I let the moonlight soak into my skin as I walk up the mountain. The grass caresses the soles of my feet. I sink with each step, deeper and deeper into the dark green. I wonder if I am close enough to her yet. My breath fogs in the air - the air is thin, cold. The mountain is very high. Scattered with cliffs.

Look, search, discover, find. There's no need for medicine if you end your life like mine.

I hold my hand out, wriggle my fingers in the air. There's a rustle in the grass. I glance over there. In the dusky light it appears there's no one to see. I wait a moment and a woman reveals herself to me.

Frowning, I glanced around. What was she doing here? It took me a long time to walk up this mountain, and no one was to be seen as I did. She wondered the same.

“Why are you here, young one?” Her voice creaked like a boat. It was gentle, crafted by age, calming to the ears. I paused, feeling my thoughts still and slow at the sound of her talking. Instead of replying, I waited to see if she would talk more. If I could only listen to her long enough, maybe I would stop making the same mistakes. ~~Maybe I'll stop going insane.~~

She looks at me - I see her head turn - but I can't see her face. The sun as it sets only lights up the sky. Everything else is dark unless you look hard enough. The most I could see was that the old woman was dressed in green. She sat down where she was, on the side of this little hill on this giant mountain. I think I've seen her before.

Someone in my head told me that this woman wouldn't hurt me. I sat near her. The white-jacket people had let me keep the brown coat. It helped me hide what was missing from me. I think the woman still noticed, though, because she turned her head to look at where my arm was supposed to be.

“You lost something,” she states. I keep my lips closed. I look away from her at the setting sun. The sky was still clear. Deep purple and pink. Silver stars started streaking the sky. The woman didn't seem upset by my silence. She kept talking in my place. “What are some of the things you lost, hmm?” I hear her shift, and quickly glance to see her pointing down the mountain at brown stain on a plateau. Her voice is soft as she starts. “It used to be the village where they kept the best.” I freeze. ~~I once had a thought like that.~~ She continues, her voice slowly hardening beneath the creaking. “The best people, the kindest people. The best education that this area had. The best medicine we could afford. The best parents, the ones who tore apart everything that made you happy.” In the corner of my eye I see her turn to me. My eyes are

trained on the village. I wish it had burned the way my eyes were burning. Drowning in mud is too quiet. Too tragic. Too small for the karma it deserved.

The woman stood and gestured for me to follow her. I did, without question. I only wanted to obey. We wrapped around the hill, the top of this mountain. Soon, we were almost directly above my village, which slept several hundred feet below. There was some stone, poking out from the greenery in front of us. It was a wall we walked around.

The path we were following had come to an end. I knew, because the woman stopped walking and started staring. I did as she did. My eyes slowly adjusted to the darkness. I began looking hard enough. I realised what she was looking at.

Something was missing from this part of the mountain. I could feel it as I looked over the giant scoop in the earth. I could see a wide path of dried mud snaking down the mountain. A brown serpent. Eventually, I saw where it ended. Right on the village where they had kept the best.

The woman bent down, picked something up, then placed that something, cold and sharp, in my hand. In the remaining sunlight it glinted.

“Part of a bomb,” the woman informed me wearily. I gritted my teeth and gripped the shrapnel tighter in my hand, letting it pierce my skin. The pain reminded me of the way I used to stop my tears.

The woman brushed her fingers along the stone wall, turning her back to where the bomb had exploded. I watched her, curious. As my eyes adjusted, I could see she had long grey hair, twisted up and held into place with plain pins. Her fingernails were also long. She started tapping a finger against the stone. Tap. Tap. Tap.

I gripped tighter onto the cutting metal piece of the bomb.

She tilted her hand and started clicking a fingernail against the stone. Click. Click. Click.

With her face masked by tendrils of matted grey hair, the woman asked me, “What do you get with a tap and a click?”

There was a tight burning across the back of my shoulders. I could feel it trickle down my entire back, melting into my muscles and drying, hardening. “A tick,” I answered, my throat as tight as my back. They were the first two words I had said to her. My voice was raw, weak, straining to work.

She kept tapping, clicking, alternating between fingers. Lightly, she queried, “Did you know that bombs tick? Just. Like. Clocks.” I drew a shaky breath. I started feeling dizzy, and crouched down, closer to the ground, the mud, the lost dirt that trailed down the hill and took my village and helped me end my sister.

She wouldn't stop ticking.

The noise was drumming in my ears.

Over and over and over.

It's over, it's over, it's over.

It has to be over. Over. OVER.

“STOP.” I said it once. I said it firmly. I said it loud. She was hurting me.

The woman stopped.

“So you lost something to do with a clock.” She said it once. She said it simply. She said it quiet. I felt sickly.

I dropped the shrapnel from my hand. It landed with a soft pat on the ground. Holding my hand out in the same spot, I could vaguely see it was darker than usual. I could feel the blood draining, staining, warming, grounding. I am bleeding.

Press my hand against my shirt. Lie down gently on the dirt. I stare up at the stars, watching them blur and spin. I hear a shuffle, and feel the woman sit beside me. She took my hand in hers, and I felt her wipe something that felt cold and sharp on it. She then wrapped something itchy around it and pinned it in place. I heard a chuckle, and the woman say, “For a girl with one arm, you don’t seem to take good care of it.”

I laughed. I stopped. I frowned. I never laugh. Why would I laugh?

A warm hand placed itself on my one bandaged hand, a reassurance. The sun had finally set. It was too dark to see. I heard the sound of a match being struck. I glanced and watched the woman light several candles, placing them between us.

When the stars stopped spinning and settled into place, I sat up. The woman sighed and a gentle breeze passed through, stroking my knees before leaving us in peace.

“You came here to finally lose yourself,” the woman commented, her eyes downcast, watching the candles. They lit up the deep valley lines in her face. She seemed as weary as me. I nodded. “Those with violent starts do not need to have violent ends.” I pause. “Those who have lost so much do not need to lose themselves too.”

The woman looked up and met my gaze. It took me until this moment to finally realise the woman only had one eye. The other was light blue glass. She held her hands out, gesturing to the delicate, flickering candles. “Fire does not need to rage. It can exist in peace. As can I.” She looked at me with her one eye. “As will you.”

The burning in my back soothed. The hardness turned to cool liquid again.

She smiled softly. “As much as I love to talk, I believe it is your turn.” I stared at her with wide eyes, my heart beating steadily in my chest. “You have lost something to do with a clock.”

Tick.

Tick.

Tick.

An emptying classroom. Each day one less girl shows up. It is ticking, ticking down, counting down, the clock is counting down. It used to count up and show us how long we had been learning, achieving. Now it counts down to how long it will be until we all stop.

The last girl, before me, who had stopped had been the one who sat next to me. The last day I saw her, she had come to school shaking, checking over her shoulder every few seconds, checking, checking, ticking.

By the middle of the day I realised why.

There was a huge tremor, the desks shaking, pencils skittering. We all heard the landmine detonate somewhere nearby. The clock fell off the wall and broke on the classroom floor. The tremor stopped. The clock stopped ticking. The room stilled, processing the loss of our clock.

A big man burst through the entrance to our classroom. His eyes turned to the desk next to mine. He crossed the entire classroom in three steps, grabbed the girl who sat next to me by the arm, and ripped her out of the classroom. We were all still in shock from the tremor that knocked the clock.

No one stopped him, but we all remembered what we saw.

There was a gun on his back. Maybe it explained the sounds that occurred next, right outside our classroom. Shrill screams that exploded, and exploded, and exploded, turning everyone into ice sculptures. The sound of a bullet stopping someone from ticking, ending the screams.

After then, I knew it would soon be my turn to stop.

School had been closed early that day. My parents came to pick me up, walk me home. Aayush was clinging to my dad's back. We couldn't walk out the main entrance of the classroom. Someone had put tape up. Everyone had to climb out the back through the gaping hole in the bricks that marked the time a shell hit the side of our school.

We walked quietly through the village, sticking to the back streets to avoid anyone who was fighting. We reached our home, a war-free shed. Climbed up to the second floor.

I started a fire while mum and dad argued, pointing violently to my school books stacked neatly in the corner. I didn't want to listen to what they had to say. I listened to the roar of the fire instead. I listened to Aayush crying because mum and dad were being loud. They had frightened her. I could tell my parents were frightened too.

I interjected. "I want to keep going to school."

There was a hush. Mum's shoulders tensed, dad started rubbing his thumb along his wedding ring. They told me I couldn't keep going to school, not after that girl was killed for attending.

I stood up, flames dancing in front of me. "I'm going back to school." Before I could walk out the door, dad stood in my way. He was listening to something outside. I heard it too. Something about books, something about girls, something about my school.

I didn't care what anyone was saying.

Slipping past dad, I felt him fumble for the arm that wasn't there then quickly grab the one that was. He told me I couldn't go out there or the big people would kill me. I told him I was still going out there regardless. I was the strongest in the family - even with only one arm - and dad knew I could overpower him and leave.

So he punched me.

That's what wars do. They scare people. That's why my parents made me stop. They were scared that if I kept learning, I would try to resist. To fight back. To get myself killed, like that girl who sat next to me. The only way they could make me stop was to force me. To... physically, force me.

Starving. I was always starving. Everyone was starving. The only reason my parents took my food from me and gave it to Aayush was because she was so little, so frail, so weak, she would have died without it. They gave their own food to her as well. Giving. Giving. Forever giving. Why did I always blame them? Why did I always hate them?

It wasn't my parents who made me suffer. It wasn't my sister who laughed in my face.

It was the war.

Hot tears boiled over from my eyes, streaking down my cheeks and puddling in the corners of my lips and line of my mouth. Some of the salt-taste slipped through no matter how tightly I pressed my lips to stop the sobs.

Abuse. Pain. Protection. That's the love they showed me. My parents loved me. They saved me. And I killed their youngest daughter.

Anger. Anger. Anger. That's the love I showed them.

A howl burst from my lips and I keeled over, screaming into the night. I pressed my fists into the dirt, pounding on the mountain, beating it for taking my parents from me, for giving me the tools to kill my sister.

My wails echoed down the mountain. I could feel it. I could feel it blanket the night sky and rain down on everyone who caused this hurt. Everyone who failed to help. Everyone I wanted to feel hurt too. This mountain will shake because I want it to. Not because someone from another country dropped a ticking bomb on it. This mountain will shake because I told it to. Not because Mother Nature stretched out and moved. This mountain is my home. This mountain is mine. I will never leave it. It has my family buried in it.

I felt the hate in my body drain away as everything became clearer. When you want mud to become clear, you turn it into water. When you want water to become clear, you turn it into air.

Taking deep breaths, I let the thin mountain air fill my lungs up, clearing out all the smoke of the past. When I breathed out, I let myself relax.

“I felt the way you do,” the woman told me once I had calmed down. I looked up at her. She looked back and gestured to her eye. “I lost things I never wanted to lose.” She gestured to the hole where the bomb had hit. “I lost people I never wanted to lose.” I slowly sat up, feeling less empty than before. Feeling more. The woman leaned in and whispered as if telling me the secret of the universe. “I made the mountain mine.”

This mountain. This horrible mountain. This mountain was the place the big country chose to bomb in their war. This bomb cause a mudslide that knocked our second-storey house down to the first floor. This mudslide caused more mudslides and floods that drowned my parents, my parents who had ~~abused~~ hurt me to scare me away from my education, the education that would

have killed me during the war. This education taught me how to poison. Poison minds and little sisters, even if the little sisters were already dying. This infection of her body and my mind let me kill my sister. I wish I'd never done that. This mountain's bombing attracted people from the same big country to come and remove me from my village. I still don't know why they did that. Why they wanted me to beg for asylum. Why they wanted to take me to their big country. So I threw it away, using the lessons my parents taught me as my excuse. 'I can't read.' The perfect lesson to save me from the big people fighting in the war. Not that I am illiterate, simply that I am not allowed to read. I never wanted asylum. I climbed this mountain to reach the stars. To reach my sister. I don't care about reaching my parents - they had still hurt me - but I want to reach my sister. This is the closest I'll get. The top of this mountain.

My mountain.

The woman leaned back again, looking out into the darkness. She folded her hands in her lap, nestling them deep in the green of her dress. "I will not ask any more of what you lost, or what you want." The woman watched me for a moment longer, her eye adjusting in the candlelight as she read the distress in my face.

I remained silent.

With a deep breath, the woman concluded, "All I ask, little girl, is that you never lose yourself." Her gaze flicked to the bloody shrapnel. "No matter what you do."

