PERSPECTIVE

2011

artwork by Vrinda Zaveri

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Editorial

CAS can be thought of as that valiant superhero who resides somewhere deep within of all of us. 1. The boundless power and compassion of CAS just needs to be tapped, woken from its slumber and then put into its right use. So, what exactly is this super hero made of?

Creativity, Action and Service, (better known as CAS) form an integral part of the educational structure in DAIS. Although only the students of the IB diploma participate in the CAS programme (officially), all other sections of the school are indirectly involved in it. CAS symbolizes what can be referred to as the triumvirate of extracurricular activities that IB diploma students must partake of as part of the IB diploma programme. Creativity is indicative of activities that involve innovation, critical appreciation and understanding in different fields, as diverse as Filmmaking, Power Yoga (whew!) and Robotics. Action represents the flipside of the coin, the myriad of physical activities that IB students must delve into for their all round development, in line with achieving the characteristics laid down in the IB learner profile. Finally, Service forms probably the most important part of the CAS programme as IB students aim to give back to society by working for various NGOs. Service exposes students to the outside world and helps us develop into citizens with a conscience. Overall, the CAS programme proves a perfect foil for the predominantly academic IB programme and affords opportunities to build character and become truly empathetic human beings.

The middle and primary schools, although not part of the CAS programmes, are heavily involved in extracurricular activities. These are very diverse, from conventional activities like Football and Cricket to Pottery, Indian dance and Taekwondo, round square conferences, MUN's, debates, cookery, woodwork, nature club, scrabble, theatre, quizzing you name it and it's part of the array of co-curriculars offered in our school. Tuesday and Friday evenings are filled with excited students rushing to their co-curriculars, not wanting to miss out on the fun. To top it all, students are given the freedom (at last!) of choosing their favourite activities.

Just like a superhero unites individuals from all spheres of life, CAS binds students of all ages in our school into one strong thread of commonality. This cohesion draws strength from those qualities of an aware, responsible and innovative global citizen; a citizen who, in the most apt sense, exemplifies humanity. Whether it is the tiny, wide-eyed UKG children painting their favourite superhero on white T-shirts or the girls' football team dazzling in District Level tournaments or even the IB students composing a video on the CAS fete- all of it is embraced by the ever-pervasive force of CAS. CAS: Creativity that stimulates the mind to reach untouched heights of innovation, Action to work collaboratively with others and face new challenges and Service to engage in issues of importance to the global community. So, keep the spirit of CAS alive and let it flourish within you, through you and with you- that is the perseverance of a real hero.

Shobhita Narain & Riya Didwania

HA! HA!
USE
ME
Don't Throw GARBAGE
In The ROAAD
Throw It In A Bin
Do Not Use
Plastic!
Dust

The Sunshine of our School

Construct Earth

Decades of years ago, the earth was a beautiful, green and peaceful planet. But now man is building monuments, buildings and malls. The reason is that they need more place and they are cutting our main treasure: trees. Trees are helping us by giving out oxygen and taking in carbon dioxide. Trees are our life. Man is building factories and they are giving out harmful gases and we are breathing them in. We get diseases and it spoils our health. We throw garbage on the road, as if the road is a garbage bin. We throw garbage in the sea and oceans. Earlier the water bodies were crystal clear but now they are black and brown like a muddy river. The marine life is ruined. I wish we could make earth like how it was before. I am going to put posters everywhere and try to save earth. I will conserve electricity, save water and try to do as much as I can. I will do it. I'm sure.

-Sakshee S 4A

Co- Curriculars

Some people say that present-day schools stress children too much with the pressure of studies, exams and extraordinary overall performances. However, I doubt that goes for our school, because we also learn a wide range of sports and non-academic activities such as art, yoga, computer studies, music and more. Well, you might wonder when busy students like us get the time for these activities in such a short school day. We do it in co-curricular activities after school. It is not only these common interests that are provided by our school, but also unique pursuits such as cookery, archery, woodwork, quizzing and debating, Round Square and Model United Nations (MUN). These activities are not only beneficial, but are also enjoyable.

Last year, I had picked cookery. In cookery, we didn't just enjoy cooking so many dishes, but we also relished the mouth-watering food that we made along with our friends. Now we can all be Master-Chefs at home.
Among the sporting activities we could choose from, I selected Basketball and now, after training for a year I have found my love for the game. At present, I even play for the school. Another advantage is that these activities are enriching hobbies. I love co-curricular activities because they occupy our time and expand our knowledge outside the confines of books in a positive manner.

-Siddhant Mehta

Once you reach the 5th grade, you have long working days and they leave you a little tired, but not bored. The real bright spots of these days are the co-curricular activities. We get to choose two co-curricular activities every week: one sporting and one non-sporting. It is a bonus to us.

I chose Chess, Quiz club, Basketball, Scrabble and Cooking. I know Cooking sounds a bit silly, but it's actually good fun. We get to eat and take the food we make home! Isn't that cool? In the first term, I attended Chess and Quiz club, and now, I play Basketball and Scrabble.

Chess was really good because we had very nice teachers who taught us tricks and knew the game well. During the Quiz club sessions, we used to ask each other general knowledge questions. These sessions were competitive and fun! Scrabble is one of my favourite games and I have a regular group of friends who I play with every session.

A lot of other schools don't have time in school for such activities, but our school does. And that's great!

By Pranav Vaidyanathan
V B

The pune trip

AN AMAZING LEARNING EXPERIENCE

22nd January to be a typical Saturday, until the morning of that one December day. The registration period was the same as always until there was a knock on the class door and we got our first class trip circular. The days passed, and we were just waiting for this trip. Every phone call to a friend started with, "Aren't you just waiting for Pune?" or, "Pune is going to be so amazing!" As soon as the week before the trip started, there was a buzz of "Have you started packing? I'm starting now; I don't want to leave it for the last day! "And finally, the last day, we couldn't help but just scream, "EEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!"

Finally, the sun dawned on the most awaited morning of the month. The alarm went off I sprang up and was ready in a matter of minutes. All packed and dressed with a camera lazily slung across the shoulder, I looked very different from how I would on a normal school day.

We assembled in the auditorium at 7 A.M. sharp, tons of suitcases and bags being lugged around lazily. Everyone was brimming with excitement and were very hyperactive. We got into the bus, and chants of "Pune trip!" began almost immediately after we had settled down. The bus ride was a bustling carnival! Singing, eating, even more eating and more singing! We had the time of our lives.

We reached the Mapple Hotel at 11 A.M., and were warmly welcomed with drinks, breakfast and keys to our rooms. I just ran up and crashed onto the beds. A magic show was organized for us, bunch of sleepy and easily bored children that had just walked into the hotel, and after a lot of tricks, we got up and went to Mini-Rajasthan. We shopped till we dropped, watched some dances and sang. We saw an acrobat and also, some puppetry. We got back to our hotel after 2 hours of intense fun. We had a disco night, and we danced till our legs hurt and sang our lungs out.

The next morning we all discovered that we had lost our voices, but I pulled myself up and quickly got dressed to go to The Snake Park and Zoo. After a long bus ride we reached the Snake Park. It was huge, and had thousands of species of animals, reptiles and birds. We saw the Russell's viper and the reticulated Python. We also saw the white tiger, the sambhar, and the huge sloth bear. In the evening we went for adventure activities like rifle shooting, darts and tree climbing etc. It was a lot of fun and we all enjoyed every moment of it. In the evening after a scrumptious dinner we sat around a campfire and we were all asked to perform plays. The plays had very different themes and characters, from the Greeks to hairdressers to kidnappers! We had an amazing time, we sang and danced, and the flames rose to the sound of our voices.

The next morning we went for a hike on some hills behind Chokhi Dhani and we saw many different things, such as windmills and shades of Pune's countryside. After we came back we had a group picture taken. We will treasure this picture for our lives. We also had a treasure hunt before we left, and we all thanked our camp volunteers for giving us such an amazing time.

This memory will be etched in our minds forever. I think this was our first and best class trip ever. But, next year will have another class trip. I wait for it eagerly, wondering where we will go.

YASHWINI SODHANI
5 A

The Annual Day

We don't get called down to the assembly hall in the middle of classes often, do we? Even if we do, all that matters is missing class, right? Wrong. The very next moment, you are so intrigued in listening to the story about your annual day performance that you forget about everything else and are absorbed in dreaming about the Dhirubhai Ambani International School Annual Day. Every year, we practice for about one-and-a-half months for just a few minutes on stage. These very amusing practices entertain us. We enjoy ourselves immensely while we are unknowingly learning something that would help us in the future. We start practicing for the annual day about two months before the D-day. A week before the final showdown, we go to school in the evening and rehearse with the lights etc. Various topics have been carefully selected by the Heads, like Jivtara, We the People, The Indian Freedom Struggle, and I Have a Dream. This year our topic for the show was Christmas, and the musical-cum-charity-fair was called The Gift. The story starts when Santa is being brought up to date about modern day gadgets that children want by Mrs. Santa. Meanwhile Lucky Singh, a very lucky boy with all the things in the world is gleefully firing his servants because they served him his milk cold. This year Lucky wants to meet the real Santa from the North Pole and wants the biggest Christmas party ever. Lucky throws all the tantrums in the world and, in the end, Lucky's father gives up, makes all the enquiries possible and manages to get the real Santa to materialize at his son's party. Lucky gets the best Christmas present from Santa: the realization that one needs to be kind to the needy, to give others second chances and to spread happiness. The role of Lucky was played by Vir Khimji and Santa was played by Raj Bhuva. The Annual Day was a great hit and was followed by a Carnival. I enjoyed it a lot.

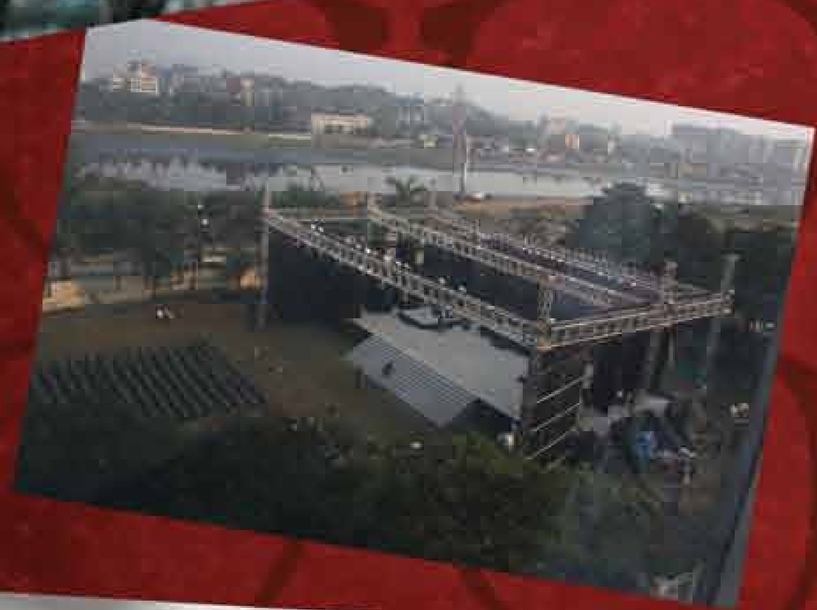
-Siddhant Mehta 5-B

The CAS Fete

For the entire first week of school this year, the only words ringing in all our ears seemed to be 'time management', 'no parties', 'sleepless nights'. And of course, we all took it with a pinch of salt, unwilling to believe such a nightmare could be waiting ahead of us. That is of course, until we started living it.

Yes, the term nightmare might be just a slight exaggeration, but none of us knew what a hectic time we were in for over these past few weeks. With lab reports and commentaries coming out of our ears, SAT Examinations around the corner, Student Council Applications to fill in, MUNs to sign up for… it's been difficult to find a moment of peace! And worse yet, our much-loved Facebook, constant procrastination and social life seem to be diminishing somewhere in the background, as the IB programme looms large over us all. You could say we were warned, but nonetheless, none of us were really prepared! However, all hope is not lost. Just when it seems that the IB couldn't get any drearier, comes around the three little letters that give us some hope, something to look forward to: CAS. Each component of the CAS is a weekly affair that each and every IB student genuinely anticipates, eagerly looking forward to use CAS to let off a little steam.

Creativity is probably the most personal of the three sections, wherein each and every one of us has the opportunity to pursue our individual talents, and engage in a broad variety of activities. Whilst some of them may be what we've been doing for years, Creativity offers a lot of new, exciting pursuits for students to opt for. Filmmaking for instance is a new option this year, teaching our students the ABCs of filming movies and documentaries. And of course the most challenging activity, Enterprise for CAS, which entrusts students with the entire organization process of the CAS Fete. So right from Perspective to Robotics, we all get one hour to put aside our textbooks and do something we're truly passionate about. Or for the most of us do something entirely fresh and innovative!



Needless to say, no IB student can get enough of the 'Action Hour' allotted in his or her schedule each week! For an hour each week, every student gets to do what they love to most - forget about the woes of the IB, and get their adrenaline pumping via a vigorous game of his or her favourite sport. Of course, whilst we have some sort of sporting hour in all grades throughout our school life, I think its only when we come to IB that we treat it more of a privilege th n a weekly routine!

And now I come to the most unique part of the CAS programme, the Service section. Every Friday afternoon, we split up into various groups at one, either to help the children out at Dharavi, to spend time with mentally handicapped individuals, or perhaps to spread solar lamps in villages with the aim of empowerment and progress in rural life. Be it through teaching, assisting or strategizing on how to develop an entire village, we're all working towards one common goal: to try and make our difference at some level. The change could be as tiny as lighting the face of a tiny ten-year old slum-dweller, or perhaps as large as changing the manner in which the villagers of Hassachipatti lead their lives, our aim isn't to complete a number of hours, but to make each minute meaningful. And whilst this may sound clichéd, I can personally vouch for the fact that being a part of this part of the CAS is more fulfilling than possibly any other part of the IB!

And whilst we dread every new assignment coming our way, and every new facet of the IB programme still left to rear its ugly head our way, we still have something to look forward to – the trips to Hassachipatti, the IAYP adventure camp, and all the other parts of our CAS yet left for us to experience. The IB is definitely a demanding, grueling two-year course, but ultimately stands apart due to these very programmes it urges us to undertake. It helps us to benefit from experiential learning, its whole purpose not to secure a 7, but aimed at helping us learn from the world around us. And keeping this in mind, I am definitely looking forward to the next 2 years of my school life. After all, the best form of learning is done outside the classroom!

-Isha Gulati

ROUND SQUARE
British School Conference, Delhi

Akanksha

The Akanksha Foundation is a non-profit organization with the vision to one day equip all underprivileged students with the education, skills and character they need to lead empowered lives. Akanksha works primarily in the field of education, addressing non-formal education through the Akanksha centres.
We have one such centre at Dhirubhai Ambani International School which provides school premises, resources like the science and the computer labs, as well as financial support to the students. A medical checkup is organized annually. Student volunteers from the IB section tutor some of the Akanksha students once a week, also arranging interesting and engaging activities such as football matches and dance sessions.

TAYP Reflections

Why so serious? it wasn't that bad!

SAPUTARA 2011

Bonding after a cricket match!

Time to cuddle Mr. Cute Furball

Come on don't give up, the goal is below you...

Discovering India !

paris

Paris Trip – Reflections

Being a Francophile even before I had ever set foot on French soil, having learnt the language for three years and read countless snippets of information about the lives of the French, having caught glimpses of the one and only ville lumière in magazines and in movies, I was more than ready for the Indo-French exchange, which involved students from IB Year 1 at DAIS flying over to Paris to be hosted by a bunch of enthusiastic Parisian teenagers, to see the sights of (what I would now truly call) "la plus belle ville du monde" and to immerse ourselves in the French experience. We'd already contacted our hosts over Facebook, and most of us had even hosted them on their service trip to India (me excepted – given the size of our two-person-happy studio flat, I wasn't sure whether I could comfortably accommodate a French correspondante, despite my eagerness to camp out on the couch for a week).

The trip kicked off to a start on Friday, 1:30 a.m. Sleepless in Mumbai may not have the same ring to it as the title of the Seattle-based romcom, but that's just what we were, chugging coffee after coffee so as to make it through Mumbai airport security without succumbing to our somnolence. Our flight took us to Doha, where we changed flights and boarded one to Paris (on which I indulged my French cinema obsession, thanks to the exhaustive inflight entertainment system, which only increased my anticipation). We caught a glimpse of the Alps and of the manicured French countryside before touchdown at Charles De Gaulle airport. The news of the tsunami in Japan came to us as a bit of a shocker as "les dernières nouvelles du séisme au Japon" blared down at us from airport TV screens, but our spirits rose again when we located our bus after collecting our luggage and enjoyed our first ride through the city.

Upon our arrival at the L'Ermitage school at Maisons-Laffitte, a northern suburb of Paris, we met our correspondants and toured the school, before setting off to their homes to deposit our luggage. Mine was a triple-nationality (American, French and Spanish!) IB student – Leila Welton – who happens to be a professed Indophile, owns whole trunks of bangles, bindis, Bollywood music and DVDs, and India-inspired T-shirts, and plays the violin. We spent Friday relaxing at a quintessentially French sidewalk café, meeting young people around town, walking into shops, and buying tarts and petites douceurs (sweet eats) for the family. We also journeyed into Paris on the Metro (RER Line A, as I still remember) and strolled down the streets of the Latin Quarter, finally settling down by the Pont Saint Michel and eating crepes by the river Seine.

By Saturday evening, what with the school Open House that very morning and the party one of the hosts had arranged for us that night, we knew most of the French students we would be interacting with over the next few days. They were all very welcoming and some gave each one of us their signature greeting: la bise, which is second nature to the French, can be described as a versatile and affable air-kiss, one on either cheek. As Indians, more accustomed to the hug/ bear-hug (depending on one's size and effusiveness), it took us a while to get used to the gesture, but it was one cultural insight we may not have gained on your average 5 day-4 night package tour (not that I've ever been on one of those; my personal bias towards backpacking, experiential vacations and doing as the locals do forbids me from venturing into mass-produced holiday territory).

On Sunday, most of us went shopping down the ever-romantic Avenue des Champs-Élysées, some climbing the Arc de Triomphe, others hounding the flagship boutiques of French fashion heavyweights or (in my case) popular department stores like H&M, and finally giving in to our inner gluttons at La Brioche Dorée, or the infinitely more sinful Häagen-Dazs (insert satiated grin here).

Reporting at the IB building, Monday morning, was easy for me (we lived only a two-minute walk from school, so I could afford to crawl out of bed at a luxurious 8:00 a.m., compared to my 6:00 a.m. alarm and one-and-a-half hour commute back home). Our group from India, accompanied by a (mostly) cheerful Australian gap-year student, took a train up to the Louvre that day where we spotted classical greats (notably French and Greek sculptures, Italian renaissance paintings, and Sumerian wall frescoes and artefacts) and marvelled at the architecture (the glass pyramid at the Carrousel mall and entrance, the lavish private apartments of Napoleon III, and the outer facade). A much-awaited lunch was followed by a visit to the Cathédral de Notre Dame, which stunned some of us with its arches and stained glass glory.

paris

Tuesday witnessed our visit to my favourite museum (the Musée d'Orsay) which is actually a converted railway station and where I came face-to-face with some of my favourite impressionist and post-impressionist pieces, including those of Van Gogh, Edgar Degas, Claude Monet, Alfred Sisley, Renoir, etc. I found myself buying posters, fridge magnets and books (all featuring some eminent masterpiece or the other). A refreshing walk up the stairs to Montmartre soon followed. We lunched at a small cafe near the square where all the street artists display their work and the caricaturists work their magic. I vowed to put my language skills to use here, as we relished our daily quota of window-shopping, even bargaining (though giving up on) a promised self-portrait. Most intriguing however, was the Romano-Byzantine architecture of the imposing and emblematic Basilique du Sacre Cœur (as awe-inspiringly beautiful on the inside as on the outside). In the evening, a group of us went out for dinner to an Italian restaurant.

Wednesday morning started with a bang as we were to give the primary schoolers of L'Ermitage a flavour of India, with an action-packed Bollywood dance session followed by individual presentation in each class (with one of us sent to each class to answer the kids' questions about life in India). I had to satisfy a bunch of second-graders in their thirst to know more about "how my dress was made" (we were dressed in our traditional costume, and gave out bindis to girls who wanted to wear the shiny accessories for the day) and "what kind of food we eat" and "what the bindi really signifies" (the profoundness ofthis last question, I admit, stumped me slightly). They were all surprisingly attentive, eager and disciplined, and as a treat, I even wrote down all of their names in Hindi. After a heavy three-course lunch at the Pur Sang restaurant, we trudged on through nearby woodland to be introduced to our next challenge: a tepee building competition. We were only allowed to use sticks and branches we could find on the forest floor, and were confined by a time limit and group size restrictions. To everyone's understandable disbelief, ours won (despite looking no better than a stack of oddly-aligned sticks, it more-than-fulfilled the functionality angle – keeping rainy weather, threatened by signature grey Paris skies, out).

Thursday came, and the weather suddenly became very chilly, after days of comparative sunshine. Today, we visited the Palais de Versailles, which was opulence itself. The free audio guides, the endless corridors, swoon-worthy grandeur, extravagant styles of the day and ample furniture, every aspect of the palace was a visual/ aural treat. Not to mention, of course, the pocket-drillingly expensive hot chocolate (which was, rich and decadent in the spirit of the royal abode, well worth our Euros) we sipped at the cafe. The gardens, however, were the gem of our visit – the icing on the cake, and a photo-shooting session here was inevitable. Our afternoon was spent shopping at Parly Deux (a shopping centre near Versailles), which, to me, meant bagging more books at the bookstore and a coat or two at H&M.

Friday was unforgettable, not only because we visited and climbed the Eiffel Tower (and exhausted our cameras' memories in the process) to the second level and viewed Paris from what was once the tallest structure in the city (a breathtakingly beautiful vista), but also because it was our last day in the city we had all grown to love, among the people we had become so attached to. It was off to the Champs-Élysées once more, for nostalgia's sake, to spend our Euros on some typically French fashion, art, curios and food for the last time that week. In the evening, I packed hurriedly before my host family took us out to the neighbourhood crêperie, to feast on that well-beloved Breton dish once more. We ended the night at my host's friend's house, where a couple of us had gathered to spend a few last memorable moments The next morning, during those painful goodbyes we all come to hate at the end of a good trip, invoked the traveller in me. I've promised myself to come back to this city, whose charm has unfathomably worked its way into me, and taken my soul by the reins. Next time I'm back in la ville d'amour, I'll be here for a good while longer than ten days. Till then, this first journey will serve as a shining reminder.

Ideas in a Jar

Silence resounded in that cubbyhole of a room, where twenty of us fidgety twelve-year-olds had filed in early that afternoon. On a whiteboard, slightly stained with the vestiges of pre-algebraic calculations, circuit diagrams and Cartesian planes, were scribbled the words: "Write down a few lines that you think would make a fine start to a story." The buzz of twenty busy pens permeated the sultry, mid-October air ('cause ACs never work when you most want them to). And I had come down with what seemed to be my most common affliction at the time – the most contemptible cliché of them all, writer's block.

It wasn't something to be proud of – this sheer loss for words and ideas – especially when I was probably the only willing volunteer at that Creative Writing workshop. A writer, I was sure, had his fair share of ups and downs, of floods (characterized by the typical shower-time Eureka moments that the likes of Archimedes and Einstein grew famous for) and droughts (times of notorious mental blocks). But I seemed to have reached my literary doldrums, and this stagnation had been plaguing me for quite some time. If only I could keep ideas in jars, to be stored and used like pizza toppings, to liven up the elemental wheat base that was my writing. I seemed to be starved of any creative juices whatsoever, and every time I picked up a pen to write, just because, I was forced to abort the mission in a bid to save my ego from self-destructing. The workshop was my last-gasp attempt to get my wavering mind back on track.

You see, I wasn't always like this. My childhood had been inundated with Roald Dahl and Anne Fine novels, plays at the Lionel Wendt, thrice-a-week visits to the British Council Library in Cinnamon Gardens – all genres of stimuli that promised to ignite the mind of a budding novelist/ journalist/ playwright/ whatever it was that I wished to be. Over the years, however, I'd been led to believe that I'd lost my touch and my spontaneity. That "precocious flair with words" my onetime English teacher had raved about (which, I later discovered, was common to the overwhelming majority of primary-schoolers she'd taught), those fingers that once tingled with spurts of creative energy every time I picked up a (horribly chewed, I concede) pencil, my passionate liaison with the only language I'd ever known at the time. And I'd given up too soon – closing doors on what I would have previously called "sources of inspiration" and allowing cynicism and scepticism about my abilities to seep into and fill out the sore gaps.

The day before I'd looked to the troves of paperbacks and hardbacks that had gathered over the years (an accomplishment of my inner packrat, to whom every little trinket and Bananas in Pyjamas videotape was assigned a sentimental value of immense proportions) in the hope that the nostalgia would spur a renaissance of sorts. I had imagined this revival of memories infusing into my writing a sprezzatura that had been eluding me repeatedly in that plateau I was stuck in. My searching fingers dragged themselves listlessly over sheets of yellowing paper and monogrammed exercise books. All of a sudden, my eye caught a little scrap of notepaper covered with my idiosyncratic scrawl in faded pencil. Creatively titled "Believe", it was a little tanka, a kind of Japanese verse (like the more popular haiku) that my fourth grade teacher was particularly fond of for its simplicity and, at the same time, its effectiveness.

When tales are woven
The teller, yarn spinner, needs
To believe in his
Power to spin. The force will
Then guide and shape the magic.

Those lines had had quite an impact on my nine-year old self. I remember copying them down excitedly in a library during a free hour back in the day when the hardest choices in life were which book to read on a sunny Colombo weekend and what kind of yarn to spin.

They had inspired and fuelled me then. After all, the writing I produced in those formative years was amateurish, even shallow in retrospect, evidence of a writing style that had yet to develop and mature; it was cute perhaps, but there were certainly no elements of J.K. Rowling or Anne Fine. But as I knew then, it's the firm self-belief that keeps you going when the world looks the other way. And writing itself is a means of self-exploration, an expression of the mind and the soul. As George Elliot once quipped, "There is a great deal of unmapped country within us." Writing is all about discovering those hills and valleys, the gusts and storms, the rivers and seas and believing that there's a lot more to discover. Why then should we care about the critics?

I spent the next few hours that evening poring over my previous "masterpieces", trying to relive the pride and satisfaction that overcame me every time I finished a piece. Yes, they were juvenile and whimsical. But today, I could learn from them and the confidence contained in their words.

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A wistful smile, the kind that is rooted in reminiscence, flickered across his lips. Keith Butler, the Australian author who was conducting the workshop, had picked my opening, among several others, to read to the rest of the group.

"'If I could keep ideas in jars, I wouldn't.'

That's a powerful opening, young lady. A powerful opening. It's the shortest one I've got here, but there's some real deep thinking there." Ideas in jars would be limited, curtailed and confined. They'd be static, bland, material objects writers like me wouldn't be hungering for. And why, now that I've opened up to myself, do I need those jars?

So buckle up, beloved readership. The journey's not over yet, and the way things are going, I guess it will never be.

Ungodly Hour

-Sohini Choudhury

The little girl sat up straight and cold, her shoulders trembling with the weight of her world. A bloody, mangled corpse in a densely wooded copse, not far from where she lay, and she prayed. She prayed with all her might that it was a dream, just a foolish nightmare to punctuate with screams. Dark dreams for dark days.

She went down the creaking stairs to her grandmother who trembled too, and in their silence a millions words passed, unsaid but not unheard. Both of them dressed in shawls of green, and both of them cloaked in misery. Death was a friend and enemy to them.

Whatever horrors in her life, they culminated then and there in that shack. Her father left for the war. He was gunned down while trying to bravely take a bunker on a hill.

Her brother joined the army. Only bits of him were ever found.

All she had left was a senile grandmother driven insane with loss. The iron bars of her prison closed in on her and she was all alone.

She walked down the frozen path, shawl discarded, in a pearly grey alpaca dress. No scarf, no gloves, no boots to ward off the cold. Her step weighed down in sorrow, her heart beating slower and slower as time moved to a standstill in the blood splattered snow.

She clambered up a pile of ruined buildings, a fading pile of rubble in the dimness. Her hands scraping against the rock, she stumbled upon a loose stone, and half-ran, half-rolled into an alcove made of two pieces of wall and a corrugated sheet.

"I won't do it!" She sobbed to herself, eyes distended in madness, "I am not a murderer! I won't!"

She kept mumbling and murmuring to herself in a high muffled voice. Her eyes, so warm and bright and strong before the war, were flat and empty, pallid and grey, like her sallow face, draped in grief. She kept crying and sobbing, her voice growing softer and softer, paler and paler. The she saw me, and the tears stopped. She was afraid but in a stronger voice than before, she asked me, bravely I concede, who I was.

"Hi," I said, smiling grimly, "How are you." It was, I admit, a pointless question, but then again, pleasantries had to be maintained.

"Who are you?" She asked again.

I smiled at her, no doubt that scared her worse, and pointed to the sky, "So my dear, what will you not do that you were so emphatic about?"

"I don't s-see how th-that has anything to do with you."

"But it does. As an eavesdropper par excellence, I insist on knowing all I can about as much as possible."

"I was asked to knife the old man living in the mansion of 3rd Street, so we could steal his money and you know, actually eat a real meal."

"Oh my, that's a rather extreme course of action, wouldn't you say?"

"The old man there, he's a rich fool who's deluded himself into believing there's no war. He treats his servants like shit, and roams about town spraying his cash about. Just because he can, damn it."

"Pleasant fellow. But my dear, you don't seem prepared to, ah, "knife" him."

"I'm no murderer."

"Quite. But tell me, are you sure about where you are right now?"

"Why?"

"You aren't really here, you must realise. Observe the snow around us. The rather delightful shade it has taken, to be precise."

"What---? You don't mean---?"

"But, a digression if you please. Would you like to know what really happened to your father?"

"Eh? Yes. Yes I would." She kept her tone level. It still amazes me how she could be so desperate one minute and so calm the next.

"Very well, I'll tell you."

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Dear Mrs. Merkel,

I regret to be the bearer of bad news and even more so when I pass on my words of condolence. Your son was a good soldier and an honourable man. He did not fight with a desire to manipulate, but merely an honest desire to protect his country. I enclose some possessions of his that he held very dear. I hope that they will be a comfort to you.

Sincerely yours,
Leutnant
Rudolf Hermann

The lieutenant finished his letter and sighed. He hated this menial task and its horrors. Picturing the relatives of these casualties huddled together reading the letter made him queasy in a way all the blood never could.

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"Father...?"

"He was so afraid, I can't tell you how much."

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Dear Mother,

I write to you to just tell you once the horrors of where I'm stranded. If I hadn't joined the battle, I'd be a coward, but sometimes... no, what am I saying. I'm terrified. Any moment now, the shells will land screaming down on us all. There will be deaths, there have been so many, I don't know how to face the families of the ones who passed away under my command. I'm not fit for this. I, never mind, it's not important anymore.

These trenches are like Hell on Earth. What kind of God would allow such abomination to occur under his nose? And it's so cold. My fingers are like swollen lumps of wax; my feet stopped feeling weeks ago. We've lost soldiers due to, not daring raids, no, but to gangrene! How this is possible, don't ask me. Morale is low here; I don't see how we can survive for long. If hunger doesn't kill us, those shells will. There!

One just went screaming by. The commotion outside is frightening. I'll have to take a look.

We lost half the regiment today in that shelling. Then the Enemy came again. They swept through right into a hail of machine gun fire. They fell like ninepins... not a good analogy, but to describe it is agony for me. I can see my face in the mirror and I'm a pale ghostly sheet. My eyes stare widely into nothingness. I need to let it all out, but I'm stuck here. I want to run away so much, but I cannot. My duty lies here, and I curse it. Fate that led to a foolish Kaiser destroying our peace and leaving us lost in this mire. If I could, I'd change things.

Your loving son,
Rudolf

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"Did you know, little Arie, that these ruins were your family home?" I asked. She shook her head numbly. "After a clichéd fall from grace, your family, having squandered, like any good novel, the family fortune, were left to fend for themselves. The building was left in disrepair. An earthquake knocked it down to the rubble you see right now."

Arie did not answer. She just stared straight ahead, looking hard at an interesting hole in the wall opposite her. The hole, if you're interested, looked like a decapitated man if you squinted for a few seconds. However, as fascinating as these holes are, she eventually exhausted the imaginative possibilities within it and looked back at me.

"Go on."

"It happened in the last war, you know, three decades ago. Your grandfather was a general in the army. I believe he was involved in embezzlement; something regarding army funds that were intended to supply baked beans to the front line." The whimsical quality of the offense was enough to make her lips twitch slightly, but she motioned for me to continue.

"So he ran away, and left your family. I met him out in the northern wilderness, and that's how I know the story."

***

The Lieutenant picked up his pistol and walked up slowly to the British carrying a white flag. The 4th division of the Army had finally broken under the strain of the constant vigil. With most of it dead, the lieutenant chose to save the ones who were still alive. But as he walked, one uncompromising fool had the last word, as he led the division to its death. He took a pistol and 'CRACK', shot the lieutenant in the back. The body crumpled under the bullet and lay there like a macabre puppet lolling with its strings cut to shreds.

*

Arie kept staring at me.

"And that poor sap who used to be your brother? Mister Gatrie was killed, oh so tragically, in a pub, chopped into little pieces for extra value, after he heroically stabbed a townsperson in a drunken fit of rage. Rather inglorious, wouldn't you say?"

"No. No. You're lying."

"I wish I were. I really do. I derive no pleasure from relating the tales of these travesties."

"But there is one thing. You know way too much."

"Do I now? That is one way of putting it, I suppose."

"The reason you know these stories... you... you're Death, aren't you?" At least she was quick on the uptake, not to mention brave. A previous 'victim' of mine who had reached this conclusion had screamed until her dentures popped out and hit the wall, terrifying her grandson who thought that the old lady was possessed, but that's another story.

"Well, no," I replied, "Call me Ishmael. Or don't, seeing as I lost my name several centuries ago. I'm merely an assistant. Death itself occasionally takes a break." I laughed bitterly, "I'm just a Wisp; I collect dead souls to pass them for judgement. It's a little joke Death has."

"And if the soul fails this 'judgement'?"

"Oh that? Well, I eat it. Figuratively speaking, of course," Arie blanched at that, "You may note that Death has been refining this method for a while. Too many methods can be distracting, so he meshed together a few of the more efficient ones. And fresh soul is delightfully nutritious for my kind." I continued.

"Ugh, I did not really want to know that, Mister Wisp. But tell me, am I dead?" She hazarded to ask. I simply smiled at her. She looked down at her chest, at a dark blotch, and sighed.

"Is that how it is? Grandma will be all alone won't she?"

"I'll come for her soon enough."

"Say hello to her for me, would you?"

A letter came to sad house the next morning. The black army seal on it told the true story. The old lady did not open it, just stared into emptiness. She couldn't comprehend it; she was too far gone. And Arie didn't cry anymore, all her tears had vanished, along with her warmth.

On a final note, they did write her a pretty obituary with flashy words of kindness and love. About duty and family, and the way she would be missed, because hypocrisy has no limits. They gave her a nice grave as well, carved granite with flowers as timeless as she wasn't and an epiphany talking of hope, which was ironic, since she had none.

It had been a cold night, and I was tired.