

# IQ

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## SEASONS

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# Contributors

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**Rithika Merchant's** most recent solo exhibitions include *Mirror of the Mind* at Galerie L.J., Paris, France (2019), *Where the Water Takes Us* at TARQ, Mumbai (2017) and *Ancestral Home* at Galeria Bien Cuadrado, Barcelona (2017). She has also collaborated with French fashion house Chloé and received awards for her work. She divides her time between Mumbai and Barcelona.

**Ipshita Mitra** was senior editor with Om Books International. After working as a lifestyle correspondent and editor with *The Times of India* and later with *The Quint*, she joined the TERI Press, New Delhi, as editor. Her writing appears in *Scroll*, *The Wire*, *The Hindu*, *The Quint*, and *Firstpost* among others.

**Kunjana Parashar's** poems appear in *Poetry Northwest*, *Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review*, *SWWIM Every Day*, *The Bombay Literary Magazine*, *What Are Birds*, and elsewhere. Her work has been anthologised in *Watch Your Head: Writers and Artists Respond to the Climate Crisis* (Coach House) and *The Familiar Wild: On Dogs & Poetry* (Sundress), among others. She is the recipient of the Toto Funds the Arts prize for poetry, 2021, and lives in Mumbai.

**Parikshit Rao** is an editorial and commercial photographer and writer based in the Himalaya. His visual work on travel, food, people and culture has been featured in a wide range of magazines and online publications.

**Fatima Rizvi** is associate professor in the department of English and Modern European Languages at the University of Lucknow. Her areas of interest include postcolonial literature and literature in translation and adaptation. She was awarded the Meenakshi Mukherjee Memorial Prize by IACLALS in 2018 and the Jawad Memorial Prize for Urdu-English translation in 2019. *Shadows on the Wall: Pen Portraits*, a collection of Javed Siddiqi's translated essays, is forthcoming.

**Kate Sarah** is the pen name of a middle school teacher in Darjeeling who occasionally

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# Monsoon Mumbai

Arriving as the skies emptied over the streets, Apoorva Tadepalli found that the intensity of the rains was symbolic of life in the city

ONCE A YEAR, hell does not burn. Hell drowns. The girls who hate umbrellas keep their clothes and shoes wrapped in plastic wrapped in plastic wrapped in plastic in their plastic handbags, and storm with the mob out of VT station into the rain. This is not a storm, by Bombay standards; this is its monsoon routine, its yearly normalcy like a menstrual cycle, pure, filthy, obscenely beautiful, liberating.

Novelist Janice Pariat, a child of rivers: *We begin and end with water.*

It is impossible to think about the monsoon without thinking about the sea, the magnetic centre, the north to every internal compass in every Bombay stomach, the eye to which we turn in our sleep. The sea is the land here, whether it is above our ankles on Juhu beach or below our ankles in Koliwada; it splashes all year round, sometimes loud and sometimes soft, sometimes purring and sometimes menacing. In its echo are the seven islands gifted as Catherine's dowry to Charles, but seven only when the creeks fill up at high tide, merging together into five when they empty at low tide.

Colaba police station, early 2010s: writer and editor Naresh Fernandes rummages in the backyard and finds a pink plaque standing erect. The plaque marks the point where, until 1838, a high-tide creek separated Bombay island from Old Woman's Island, the lighthouse, the asylum, the military barracks. The creek melted away into a 300-yard strip twice a day, returned twice more.

Fernandes uncovers stories of ships torn from their ports by the monsoon wind, killing passersby (*Bombay really drowned that day*, wrote witnesses later). He reads of travellers, staying at the barracks, crossing the strip of

land to Bombay island "heedless of Neptune's certain visit" and, when turning again for home, finding "the curling waves beating over their homeward path". The travellers have to spend the night in Bombay or try and swim their horses across the creek. Eventually an elevated road is constructed to connect the two islands.

In Bombay, the sea's ghosts slosh under our feet far, far inland. It whispers in the seashell-studded brick and mud walls in Koliwada, in the high-tide drainage creeks of Nal Bazaar. My favourite old story of these ghosts is under the city's myriad Roman Catholic churches, under Gloria Church in Byculla, Our Lady of Salvation in Dadar, St Andrew's on Hill Road, St Michael's in Mahim. There are more churches than the Christian population at the time would be expected to need—but when the high tide fills in the creeks, a church is left on every island, allowing parishioners, Fernandes writes, "to attend services without getting their feet wet".

*We begin and end with water.* My relationship to the sea has always been defined by fear, the fear demanded of us by gods and kings. In the beginning, my real interaction with the sea is only in the daylight; but in my dreams it is always in darkness, submerged by the full moon. The darkness is intoxicating, the fear addictive.

Then I arrive in Bombay, and the sea becomes almost human—touchable and sensitive and petulant, as gods tend to be. I sit on Marine Drive in the rains, taking photographs of the grand office buildings at Nariman Point. The sound of the sea in the rains is a strange sound, it reverberates like an echo, except each sound is original. The sound of the sea is like this,

when I hear it, inexplicably, walking across the Matunga Bridge or through the Sion underpass. It seeps out of walls.

In Bombay, I am asked how I ever survived without the sea until now; I am asked what one does in a city without the sea. *Whatever one does in a city with the sea*, I respond, insistently, defensively; but I am unconvinced. Do we also wait all year for the monsoon, not just for walks in the rain but so that when we dangle our feet over the edge of Marine Drive, the high tide swims through our toes; do we also take our books to Carter Road and daydream while the pages flutter and become dotted with sea-spray, only remembering once or twice to push our windswept hair out of our eyes?

I have never been a stranger to the desire for showers. During my landlocked childhood, long before my arrival in Bombay, I waited for the rainy season, writing aching, longing love letters to the monsoon, who in my stories was a handsome boy with grey eyes and pitter-patter footsteps and a thundering heartbeat. He brings with him the warmth of chai, the fresh smells and new shades of green that accompany Bangalore rains.

None of this could prepare me for monsoon in Bombay, for the rains that dance with the sea. This monsoon is not the same kind of lover I once knew, mostly absent and when present still gentle, somewhat detached. My old monsoon was fresh; this one is overripe, not soft green but stained dark orange. The wetness is under my bra and between my toes, and scratches like sand. The chai is not warm, but boiling hot. The air is alive, a tangible body made of water droplets; it smothers, but that is the way of love here, and every other feeling: the whole world or nothing.



Photograph: Yang Dong

My first arrival in Bombay was in the monsoon. The wetness was everywhere; in the laundry that could never be hung out to dry, the mattresses that felt damp all day, the cigarettes that developed fungus. I learned early on to tuck my phone into ziplock cases sold on the locals, to buy rubber ballet flats instead of regular chappals because chappals splash mud onto the back of my churidar as I walk.

**This is what the wet monsoon often feels like: often too intimate, a little embarrassing, somehow warm. *She's fine*, says the Sion Bridge chaiwala every night to the truckers who ask him why I am hanging around outside in my nightshirt at 3am**

It is not until later that I realise that the seasons are *seasoning* me, adding taste to my body, giving me life and sentience through their life and sentience, preparing me for consumption. Some of my strongest memories of Bombay are of those early days—of the Sion Bridge chaiwala who let me sit with him all night when I couldn't sleep, the bhaiya at the pharmacy in Chakala Market who gave me chocolate when I came to buy sanitary pads, the Dharavi dhobiwala who laughingly forgave me for forgetting to take my blood-stained underwear out of my laundry bag.

This is what the wet monsoon often feels like: often too intimate, a little embarrassing, somehow warm, both public and private at the same time. *She's fine*, says the Sion Bridge chaiwala every night to the truckers who look at me and then ask him why I am hanging around outside in my nightshirt at three in the morning—and this is what the Bombay seasons seem to do to transplants like me: place me in situations of warning, of exhaustion or discomfort or danger, and then say, not to me but loud enough that I can hear, *she's fine*.

The air is like hanging curd, waiting to thicken; and then it stops thickening. Everyone complains about the humidity, but then the tone changes, and you know it's pre-monsoon season when you can tell that people are only pretending to complain, that they're doing it with hurriedly stifled joy. You gripe to hide the excitement, as the air that has parked itself under your nose all year begins to move and your daily walks from Matunga West to Dharavi Bus Depot and back no longer feel like you're walking through honey, or sand.

As the monsoon approaches, it seems as

though the fans are on wherever I go. It takes me a while to figure out that it is the new-season breeze. Two days before it happens, bhaiyas and didis move quickly through the train compartments, selling plastic covers and attachable hoods, and as you walk home from the station down the road in front of Star City cinema, the chappal stalls have been reversed, the camel leather jootis are now all at the back or have disappeared entirely, while the waterproof rubber and plastic are in the front, as though there is such a thing as waterproof in this city. People buy them anyway—the old Bombayites for whom plastic actually works, the new arrivals who don't know any better, and the ones in the middle who know enough to know they will get wet anyway.

In *Maximum City*, Suketu Mehta, returning to his hometown from New York, writes that "the only event in the Bombay weather is the monsoon". For Bombayites, the breeze smelled different just before the rain. The winds "came up suddenly, stirred the sleeping dust, and carried it away in little whirlpools". In Bombay I would watch the clouds come in over the sea; watch the boy's grey eyes darken. It was the pre-monsoon tango, an almost delirious dance of waiting, of ignoring warnings of the chaos to come. The crows know it, too. They gather on power lines in long rows, restless, seeming always on the verge of taking off into flight, their cawing cacophonous. And then, Mehta writes, is the moment of release, the end of anticipation, that first drop "so light you might have imagined it. It might have been an air conditioner leaking. The leaves and branches were in a fine frenzy. Windows slammed open and shut, and there was the sound of breaking glass."

In the little Uttarakhand hill station

where writer Anuradha Roy lives, a grandmother with a sharp tongue and, despite her slim means, plenty of food in her house to feed anyone who shows up, warns her granddaughter not to bring in the clothes or the red chillies drying outside when the clouds turn dark and stormy. "Her notion of rain," Roy notes, "was that it was a sentient creature that enjoyed wetting things put out to dry. It would lose interest and saunter off if the clothes and chillies were moved to a sheltered place."

Then, suddenly, I have lived in Bombay for one year. My Bombay turns one and, as if on cue, the city bursts. I walk to the station and the sweat is actually rainwater, and I am smiling at passersby, as they are at me, because we all woke up this morning with the same feeling that the gods had arrived. And in a moment we become too preoccupied again, trying to keep up with this crazed city, knowing that if everyone just slowed down and stopped pushing then nothing would make any sense, not the rains and not Bombay. In America they say *rain*, just one in a list of weather phenomena that they can predict and 'explain' on their shiny screens; in Bombay they are plural, rains, like there are many of them, because one single entity could not possibly be so powerful, could not possibly own an entire city, could not possibly be everywhere at once.

The seats on the train are empty for once, everyone crowds at the door for a taste of the wind; across the tracks, we can see the train opposite, whose doors are crowded too, the carriage saturated like the skies. In Jeet Thayil's city of drugs, Dimple and Dominic make their final escape in the shadow of the

monsoon. Jeet Thayil's Bombay, like my most thundering, furious, broken, tender Bombay, is at the mercy of the sea and the skies "The city claimed seven islands from the sea," Thayil writes. "In the rainy season, the sea claimed them back."

Dimple loves to read, especially about the sea; when someone says to her that the only beautiful thing about Bombay is the sea, she insists that there are other beautiful things about Bombay, but she can't think of any. She reads poems and songs, chants and stories that have a hundred words for the sea. She is reading when Dom comes to say goodbye, and she comes to him in her sari, holding her Air India case, and asks him to take her away; they speed away from Shuklaji Street in the rain, pass Chowpatty in the taxi and double back. They look at the sea "swollen with waves and rain". On the shore, they crouch down, looking towards the horizon, at a ship in the distance, "a lost junk with tattered sails that seemed to have travelled a great distance of time, from the past into the future, with too few stops for refuelling and repairs".

No matter how cruel Bombay is—both Thayil's and mine—it is here where everyone is most recognisably human; it is here where Dom has his "moment of clairvoyance, a feeling of longing and anxiety", it is here where he feels Dimple's sadness "settle into my chest". The kindness of strangers is cheap in Bombay, because everyone is raw, and at the mercy of the sea and the skies we are even more fragile, more legible. Under this city's skies there is no room for shame, because there is no room for propriety. The dignity is in the indignity, the energy in the exhaustion, the safety in the danger, the comfort in the newness, the sense of home in the unknown. ■