

A Trip To Sea View

by

Vaneeza Sohail

1.

“Karachi feeds the rest of the country and they just let it starve,” My father says on our drive to Defence. His words are mirrored all around us, in the defunct traffic signals and dug up roads, the unpleasant and sharp smells of a gutter ripe in my nose even after rolling the windows up. When I look at it from a distance, Karachi morphs into a tragedy before my eyes, its concrete ridden with makeshift flowers to mask the garishness. Not a city, no, I see an open wound at the mouth of the ocean - pricked by the salty waves, the knuckles of heat beating down on it, unforgiving. I roll his words over and over in my head: *they just let it starve.*

We’re going to sea-view together, the way we used to when I was younger. My mother would take me every weekend. She loved the beach so much and as a result, I grew up a child of the sea. Back then, the stretch of time between places felt languid and hazy. The excitement would concentrate in a pit in my stomach and palpate until it culminated in screams of joy. Now, the outside world is bleak and urgent. My mother says to my father that we have to be home before maghrib because the city isn’t safe. If I was young again, I would tell her I’m invincible with that childlike naivete I keep trying to find in my twenties. But I am tired, older and I know better.

In ‘On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous,’ Ocean Vuong writes “*they say nothing lasts forever*

but they're just scared it will last longer than they can love it." Karachi is best described this way, steadfast in the face of political and economic calamity, upright despite the wind trying to topple it, home to millions and not a home to many more - its biggest tragedy is that it has lasted far longer than anyone can love it for.

2.

When I am in the backseat, I do not wish to be a daughter. I don't want to navigate our trip and I have little patience for my family's remarks. I think to myself that the only thing worse than being in Karachi is being in Karachi with your parents. I fidget and pick at my skin until we get there. The sandy beach is peppered with garbage - ranging from juice boxes and diapers to open needles and flip flops.

When we cross the house I used to live in, I try to slip away, into many years ago. If I try hard enough, I can conjure the magic up again. I wonder who lives there now and if they love it the way I used to. Perhaps I didn't love it the way I thought I did - the years are blurry and often fictitious in my memories. I just know I miss that house, the tiny kitchen where I learned that I was not a cook. I miss all the stuffed animals I gave away when I decided I was too grown up to feel joy. I miss the push and pull and the vibrancy of it all, the sharp contrast of life against a tumultuous backdrop. Things were always happening in the first house we ever lived in. It was small and stuffy but

our neighbors loved us and sometimes we would all go up to the roof and stare at the stars. The grown-ups would discuss petrol prices and inflation while me and my brother would run around, pretending that we were both two tigers in the vast wilderness.

My parents moved to Karachi all the way from Sukkur and Jamshoro. Back then, my mother still used to dress in jeans and button-up shirts. Whenever she would come to pick me up from school, the kids would clamor around her like she was a movie-star. My father looked like her male counterpart in many ways. He was lanky and charismatic with the demeanor of a lost boy. In the supermarket, the women used to ask him all sorts of questions. They wouldn't believe he was a father of two. They were so young when they got married to each other and decided they wanted a better life.

I wonder if my parents found the thing they were looking for in Karachi - I wonder if I will find the same thing, whatever it is.

3.

Two weeks ago, I lost a friend to adulthood. It was quiet and painful and it took years off my life. I used to tell myself that the only way to survive this city was to make

friends. All sorts of friends, younger and older and ambitious and laid-back. If the city was a mouth of a shark then my friends were the safety net pulling me away from it. I only ever wanted to be saved.

The distances in the city were too big to cross so I knew that I needed people everywhere. I filled up all the corners with girls like me and girls unlike me. Most of these friendships didn't last - it is hard to build something when everyone's tired and there is always traffic. We would keep in touch and then we would stop. It was always in the background, another piece of living here that became habitual and unremarkable.

But there were a few people who stuck together. My friend was one of them. We carved ourselves a new home in each others' company and made every moment meaningful. Every weekend looked like a stroll in the park or a cup of chai and the sweet song of rain. Until the city intervened, the way it always does. She moved further away than she already was and again, the hours became scathing and the drum of dread started beating down on our heads.

"I'm too tired these days and I don't have time to meet anymore," She said. I believed her. I waited for the week where the city would decide to be kinder but that is when the rain came. The weeks turned into months, the roads turned into mudslides and

the leak in the ceiling became semi-permanent and too expensive to fix. Perhaps we couldn't love each other as much as we had to here. In Karachi, if your friend lives an hour away you enter a long-distance friendship.

When I was younger, I approached these travel times like they were a challenge. I took the bus and I used ride-sharing apps and I spent most of my money on the long stretch of commuting. At almost 25, my body was finally responding to those years of zeal with slowness. More than physical exhaustion, there was this anxiety that had never been there before. The city's safety conditions and my 10 P.M. curfew, combined with the hot and sticky weather deterred me from meeting the people I loved the most. Going out was starting to feel like an adventure quest.

I was only just mustering up the courage to make plans again when my friend left the city altogether. There was no real goodbye. Perhaps it would have been too painful.

I wanted to be happy but I kept picturing us together, the way we used to be: inseparable, smoking under the sunsets, our bodies blue and heavy with grief. We would hold hands and talk about moving in together, somewhere in Karachi. I spent those days satiated, spending my free time looking at apartments and ways to decorate them. We would have a drawing of the two of us that I made in the living room. In

the drawing, I am leaning on her. Even the cartoon version of me has eyes underscored by desperation. They stay unblinking. They are saying: *please don't leave me.*

But she did. That's the thing about Karachi. Everyone leaves. I'm happy for her. I'm unhappy for her.

4.

“You haven't been eating properly,” my mother says.

We are in the early part of the morning, where the sky is still in slumber. I look at the bowl of food under me and try to make sense of it. Mangoes and rice, a Sindhi speciality. Dubbed a culinary crime by a lot of my friends, I feel only nauseated looking at what I once vehemently defended in the past. The mangoes are not at fault, neither is the rice. This is just the way things are now.

“I want to leave,” I tell her. “All my friends are leaving.”

She disappears into the kitchen and returns with a mango smoothie. Where language fails my mother, food takes its place. I love the fruit juices and the homemade bread and the South Asian style pasta that always has a bit too much ketchup - but I feel the

most loved when she just sits and listens. We are getting better at it, the two of us.

Being resigned to my new life indoors has brought me closer to her.

“You always say you love it here,” she replies after a while.

“It’s not special anymore. It’s not like it used to be.”

My mother nudges the glass full to the brim and I lift it up and take a sip. I take a few more, until I know she will stop worrying. It can be a difficult thing - seeing the person you love the most become smaller and more timid in front of your eyes. I wonder if she ever felt this way.

“Let’s go to Sea View tomorrow,” she says, “I remember how it used to cheer you up when you were younger.”

The simple suggestion twists something in my stomach. I don’t know why my eyes are pricking with tears. Perhaps it is because my mother still wants to make the city brighter for me, when I no longer know how to do it on my own. When I was younger, I didn’t need to make life special, it just was. Now I have to piece Karachi together with my own hands and make something worthwhile. Still, it breaks.

5.

My makeup no longer looks right on my face. I don't know what I am getting ready for. The sea does not care if I am beautiful, it will take me as I am.

6.

Everyone keeps saying to me: "I don't know how you make the city look so beautiful, Vaneeza." On Instagram, people from all over the world tell me they want to visit Karachi because of how I make it look. My algorithm shows me posts like mine, heavily curated photographs of cities prettier than this one. I look at my page - the color coded and carefully chosen pictures of the best parts of the city. My purse on a park bench inside a gated community. A photo of the sky I took with so much urgency in the middle of the road in an "unsafe" area.

I don't know what to say to these people. I could say that the city doesn't need me to make it a thing worth loving - but I don't know if that's true. The city needs us all, doesn't it? Documenting, curating, fixing it with our hands. I could say that it needs us to stay behind and bring the magic back to it. I could say that it needs everyone to see it the same way: not beyond redemption or forgiveness but a makeshift home for whoever chooses it.

I could say, “Well, the city just needs people to choose it. It’s beautiful on its own.”

I don’t. I just say *thank you for following me*.

7.

When we finally reach Sea View, the sun is setting. My father does not get out of the car, neither does my brother. They both believe it’s too sandy and their shoes might get ruined. The air smells bad in a way that is growing on me. My mother rolls her eyes at them and we make our way to the beach. The clouds are sparse and fragmented and the sky looks how it does in paintings.

We walk in silence and I let myself learn this place from scratch. It is so alive. It used to make me angry before. It would irritate me, how congested it was. Now I look at all the people who choose to come here and I feel hopeful again. The corn sellers, the camel riders and the snack vendors all crowd us the moment they see us. In the distance, a young couple is gently putting their toddler’s feet in the water and laughing. A teenage boy is asking people questions, presumably for his social media. My mother gets us both corn and I look at the seashells peppering the shore. I open my camera and take a photo of the pin-holes in the sand.

“You know, someday you will leave too.”

I look at my mother but she isn't looking at me. Instead, her gaze is fixed on the farthest point in the sea, a blurry silhouette of a boat on its way back to land.

“It feels like I'm outgrowing this place,” I say to her. It's hard to admit but it is true. I have spent my entire life here and watched people come and go. Everyone is always going somewhere far, far away. My own stillness has started to make me feel resentful. It's all too familiar, always the same. I wonder if the more you know something, the less you can love it with fullness and sincerity.

“I used to come to this beach with you every weekend when you were a child,” my mother says, “I know you think it's because I loved the beach as much as you do. The truth is, I hated it. We were very poor and this was one of the few places I could afford to bring you. I used to despise coming here. I hated the sand! I always needed to shower for two hours to get it all out of my hair. But you loved coming here so much. We took you to parks and malls but you would always clamor for the beach.”

I picture this: my mother in her button-up shirts, sighing as she brings me to the beach. Me, incessant and steadfast in my love for it. How strange that I was the one

who loved it all along. How strange, I made it beautiful for her.

“Nothing will ever stay the same. It is easy to be resentful. Try to be kinder - to yourself and to Karachi.”

8.

On the ride back home, we stop for a shawarma somewhere. I feel calmer. I don't even yell at my brother when he plays his music at full volume. My father says *you've been suspiciously quiet today*. I don't know how to tell him I gave all my anger to the sea.

9.

I am looking at the friend who is no longer my friend on Facebook. She's smiling ear to ear in a photo with a lot of different people in it. I want to tell her I miss her and that she should message me whenever she's back. I comment: *You look beautiful. Karachi misses you*. It's the truest thing I've ever said.

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