

Empire of Illusion

By

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Another night of worry and anxiety as my family, mixed American and Pakistani, desperately tries to live ethically somewhere. My husband and I struggle to fill the gap of our powerlessness over the world our children will inherit. We plod forward knowing that the climate crisis will annihilate everything about life that we believe is “normal”.

Even now, I have only feebly begun to process the existential crisis we are in. My meek plans around the climate crisis feel like cutting raw chicken with a butter knife. How do we solve the biggest problem we’ve ever faced by using the same conditioning that brought humanity to these grim predictions?

Everything that I participate in is part of the problem. Everything I love like restaurants, big city lights in the night, is part of the problem. Having children, climate impact facts convincingly argue, are an even a bigger part of the problem. I am unaccustomed to the weight of our reality and I have marginal resources to cope.

Everywhere I live I am privileged and I consume too much. I am eating micro plastics, breathing them in, and throwing plastic packaging away knowing it is going in the same oceans that have cleaned my soul and healed my broken heart.

Plastic is my obvious enemy, the part of the iceberg I can pound my hate on and feel mildly gratified when I reduce or reuse. It is the density of the unseen inadequacies in my response that I tremble and falter to truly contemplate. My weaknesses prevent the climate crisis from penetrating me and just like everyone else, whom I secretly feel superior to, I continue to live like nothing significant has changed.

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It was my third visit to Chitral when I met my husband, an American paraglider, on the side of a road that connects Chitral town to Mastuj village. Like so many of the Bollywood and Hollywood movies I was infused with as a young girl I got swept up in a surreal romance. The storyline is postmodern though - a brown girl falls in love with someone outside of her race, religion and culture. A few months after our fateful meeting we elope at the City Hall in San Francisco.

At first, we live out of our suitcases; part-time in Thailand, part-time in Pakistan and part-time in America. Soon I become pregnant with our first child. All the fantasies I obsessively harbored throughout my girlhood come to fruition within just twelve short months. I should have known though that my girlhood dreams were marketed by patriarchy and capitalism. My fantasies crumbled rapidly under the strain of a new relationship and moving around from one temporary home to another. I found myself tumbling down an uneven set of stairs and landing in a thick puddle of my unresolved trauma.

My first postpartum, thousands of miles away from Karachi, was like being ripped apart into puzzle pieces. All my limitations magnifying as I struggled to make something whole out of a broken self. My tight lips and threatening tone a sign of my hypervigilance. My terribly wrung out nervous system using the phone to keep up the flow of dopamine. I'm too tired to enjoy the simple wonder of being in the presence of my baby. Marriage and motherhood was not natural or easy like I had been told all my life.

I gave birth to my two sons, 13 months apart, while still living part time in the U.S. and Pakistan. In 2016 I unwillingly agreed to settle in Southern Arizona, in a town of 900 people, where my in-laws lived. Despite the length and expense of the

travel I felt compelled to return to Karachi once a year, each trip making it clear that my husband and I were far from finding a home we both could love.

Then two weeks before the world shutdown for the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, I gave birth to my third sweet boy in Arizona. All the plans we had made to be prepared for this new family member evaporated into a year that was both excruciating long and frantically short.

The arc of pandemic year one pushed me to only one solution for a self that had been torn apart by isolated motherhood and interracial marriage. I believed I missed Karachi. But what I ached for was a long-forgotten version of me. The person before birthing, before nursing and before marriage.

My husband and I sold everything to move to Pakistan, hoping to transition to Islamabad soon after we arrived to Karachi. We fantasized about lives closer to the most majestic of mountains where we met, of friendship and community, and so much more. There was an urgency to sow meaning and purpose into our lives with the shadow of the climate crisis expanding and a wholehearted rejection of all that is ill in America, especially in 2020, where each pro-Trump sign felt like a personal attack.

But once again we were indulging each other with another fantasy that could never fulfill its promise.

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My air conditioning is working perfectly while the façade of my modern existence is crumbling. How strange that everyone is not flummoxed and spilling alarm out of their bodies when witnessing the insanity and incongruency of our lives.

Maybe because they don't want to know that around 400 years ago we lost our way.

I feel heat in my face and under my arms as I struggle to keep up with the pace of my thoughts. I am a dam, filling to its maximum, when I try to navigate these ridiculously intertwined experiences of colonialism, capitalism and racism.

The first log in the fire is that the climate crisis is caused by emissions from the richest nations in the world, their material empire built on the exploitation of countries still entrenched in a postcolonial extractive economy. The second log is that it will affect the poorest people of the world the most. The third log is that when disasters happen those who are most responsible will still have more resources to cope with its impact while billions, already in the margins of a wretched world, will be the ones who are mercilessly lost.

This reality, this sickness, is not new. Climate crisis is not new. Climate racism is not new. Ask the indigenous people who are four percent of the world's population and caretaking 75 per cent of the world's biodiversity. The cancer of colonial ideology that has led humans into a state of consumption, greed, disconnection and imbalance with the earth has metastasized to humanity's lymph nodes.

We've reached this apocalyptic world because of compounded undigested trauma. Inter generationally the chains of pain have solidified because we are addicted

to gaining control over our environments. In the illusion of control, we have lost and forgotten what it is to be human. We are numb, floating in protective spacesuits in our manufactured homes, separated from one another and coping with a smorgasbord of systemic, structural and identity related pain.

The modern, industrialized human, including those who have embarked on decolonization, is continually conditioned to see 'nature' as separate and earth as a mother whose resources are inexhaustible.

We paint over our impending death with illusions like insurance, banks, governments, and the news media. We want to bask in the misdirected glory of our superiority when in fact we are just another form of life. There are millions of other miracles in creation, miniscule like the enchanting ladybug and kindred like the large elephant faithfully carrying her baby for over a year.

For what makes humans so exceptional, like our languages and our desire for purpose and meaning making, when we are now collectively diseased? Our humanity is perishing with the rivers, streams, forests, and millions of species of life. Our capacity to behold beauty is diminishing with every pile of garbage that will likely outlive generations of our progeny. Our ability to love is being destroyed with every additional inequity and injustice that we rationalize for personal gain.

The world, you may argue, has a built-in hierarchy but can disparity be justified at this alarming and crushing degree? For the bloody violence on millions of brown and black bodies, for the billions of animals sacrificed to fill my appetite...my body rebels with a silent cry.

The earth will recover.

But us?

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It is our last night in Patagonia, Arizona, the only home my children have known. The sycamore trees have shed their leaves to gift our yard with compost. Save our toothbrush and overnight kit, all the things we had collected to make a life have been packed or given away. I feel like a vulture, circling over my about-to-be past life.

We lose the ground under our feet in the uncertain corridors of transition.

I step into the cool night as my children sleep and say goodbye to everything too big for me to carry with me in our suitcases.

There in the neighborhood park my oldest son, wearing a yellow sweatshirt, took his first steps. Left from my house is the dirt path I walked on most mornings when pregnant with my third. First birthday parties and my last baby shower immortalized in my neighbors' yards. Here, in this small town, I have friends who walk a pace that most Americans can't remember. A pace that most Karachiites cannot fathom.

The next morning, we arrive at the small airport in Tucson and find out that each piece of our luggage is overweight. My seven-month-old son is crawling on the dirty carpet and my other two boys are proudly carrying their bag packs, wearing new Paw Patrol face masks. We still had each other even if nothing worked out the way he hoped. And of course, nothing did.

We arrive early morning to Karachi, with its perfect December weather. After months of holding my breath and sleepless nights I am home. I want to gloss over my doubts and avoid the cognitive dissonance of leaving clean air and safety for returning to this singular wild, unmanageable, and incalculable place in which my heart feels alive. But I can only extend the honeymoon period of my odyssey for a few short weeks.

I am a product of deeply dysfunctional paradigms, growing up rich, in the mega-metropolis of Karachi. The view from my childhood home in Karachi is still, forty years and counting, a pile of garbage. To find my way to adaptability and resilience during this climate crisis is not straightforward. I have no living examples to help navigate living without reliance on the diseased systems in place.

Despite living in one of the best neighborhoods in the city I must dull my sight, smell and sounds to live in Karachi. I must skip over the constant presence of plastic bags that are in every speck of the cityscape. I want to avoid going out in the polluted smog. I dread getting stuck amongst crammed cars, drivers honking as if the obnoxious sounds will make traffic move. The sewage lines outside my childhood home have been open for the past fifteen years. Every year it gets worse.

One day I wake up in my parent's home and feel nauseous. How is it that my first family, who are fastidious about cleanliness, live in denial about their home morphing into a human disaster zone? Every day the water supply, the electricity, and physical safety become more exclusive and more expensive. Looming cyclones, summer monsoons that are stretching until October, and the prediction of rising sea level have still not created any alarm, personal reflection, or desire to change behavior.

I would like to think my family is an outlier, but it is my green friends in Karachi whose efforts to tread lightly that remain in the margins.

My mother complains that things are so filthy on the road outside our front gate. In the next breath she confirms that it doesn't matter because it is not hers to fix and she can easily avoid it by not going out. There is no pathway to acknowledging that we are the ones making the trash that is plugging up the sewage; that we are the ones buying Tetrapaks of industrialized milk, plastic bottles, and cigarettes to satisfy our cravings.

My denial is connected to hers and all the others that I belong to. I'm also dependent on everything that is killing the earth and I use "things" to access my humanity. I can't live outside, I can't grow my own food, and I can't teach my children any trade.

I can watch, like a reel of a dystopian film, how these empires we have built will decay and fall into nothingness.

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Some days I tune in to a frequency of awe and witness the spectacular beauty of an ordinary day. Some mornings I remember to take off my shoes and walk with bare feet in the garden I grew up with. I feel my feet press and release the ground to enter an embodied reality. I see earth sharing her abundance. I feel the earth's consistency, offering us everything we need for our nourishment and healing: the miraculous grain of corn, the refreshing stream, the fragrant forest, the majestic snow-capped mountain peak, and the joyful birdsong at dawn.

Other days I can't digest the grief of losing all the ways of living that are luxurious, familiar and yet predatory. I wake up like I have run through my dreams. My muscles ache, my eyes are small, and my body is the kind of tired only a breastfeeding mother understands.

When hope charges my landscape, I feel like the new whole we are building can only come from this needed death of our old ways of coping and living. There are days I get to dance in the grand space of reflection and creation, I see how everything fits, and how what the world is going through at the large scale, I'm witnessing it in my micro scale.

There remains the option to disassociate from everything and continue on with rinse-repeat, watching the toxic shampoo suds go down the drain and into our Arabian sea. But that option has passed me. It is messy and uncomfortable to tell the story of our annihilation but I have to try. I need to pierce the consciousness of my children about the world that they are being given.

How can I use this crisis to change my impulses, my habits and my behaviors to remember my primordial connection to nature? How can I become present to the beauty that I am fortunate to witness in the shape of old trees and rain falling from the sky?

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My boys, husband and I are on an accidental hike in Hunza valley, searching for a greenhouse we had visited five years ago.

We naively embark on a narrow twisting trail made by the irrigated canal, taking breaks all along because my twenty-pound baby insists that I carry him. The sound of the river is in everything, and I feel anxious one of us will get hurt.

After about two hours, in which I feel every single moment expand, we arrive at a tiny wooden bridge to cross the river. I freeze. There are no side railings. The wooden planks are closely packed together but the bridge is barely three feet wide.

I have to hold my baby and walk across.

I'm sweating despite the cool weather. We came through a lot to arrive here, and I know there is no turning back. I feel the tiny soft body of my baby pressed into my chest. The summer river is moving faster than a car, grey with white tips, and falling in is a death sentence.

My body inhales—its trained to slow down the breath when I feel fear—and then exhales. Life is more than the mistakes we make or the grief we endure. Life is also the hope we gather, the love we restore, and the journeys we make together.

I had to trust my feet would carry me. I had to trust that I would find a way to walk across to the other side.

We arrive at the greenhouse and climb up a ladder to a flat open patio built in a tree. Our host brings us spring water and red, ripe cherries. My sons' fingers are stained dark purple and they are teasing me, pretending to swallow the cherry pits. My baby has finally fallen asleep. My husband's face is etched with a sadness that nothing seems to penetrate. He used to paraglide amongst the birds, above and around Duran

Peak, Rakaposhi and Ladyfinger. Five years ago, just 10 weeks into my first pregnancy, we had flown together near the Ultar Glacier and then landed by the riverside.

It is our rite of passage to lose our innocence, even as we have given life to it in our children.

The sunlight moves down and I instinctively begin to gather us for our long walk, this time on a road, to Karimabad.

There is no turning back for me—or for humanity. I step into the unknown with an irrational and unverifiable trust of what may come to pass in this little and large life of mine. I tell my anger, my despair, and my grief that this is hard and unresolvable. I tell myself, slow down and hold whom I love close, while we live among the majesty of our earth.

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