

CORRODED STAGNANCY: A LITERARY TESTIMONY

NAYANTARA ALVA

*B.A. Candidate in Economy and Society
Sciences Po Paris, Class of 2026*

In South Asia, the prevalence of reported acid attacks – or the throwing of concentrated acid on another person with the intention to disfigure or kill – remains high, despite strict penal codes against the crime. According to Acid Survivors Trust International, 80% of globally reported cases have been against women.¹

I had the privilege of speaking to a remarkable woman who survived one of these attacks in India. The physical, psychological, and social elements of this piece come from her story.

*

Farah didn't know what the overhead banner read. She did know it was colored a dull orange, for she had seen a flash of it through the corner of her functional eye while she was getting off the bus. Or perhaps it was a bright tangerine. She had gotten used to colors being subdued by the pink shawl wrapped meticulously around her scars. And besides, despite everything the doctors had said, the colors she saw were not nearly as vivid as they used to be. Of course, there were other things that prevented her from reading the words, like the fact that she was bowing her head down low – low enough to be fleetingly glanced over by a passer-by – or that her other eye had been corroded shut.

Farah wondered whether the school emblem above the archway still reflected the image of the students who passed through. Or perhaps it had rusted over, and perhaps that was what Farah hoped for. Perhaps a part of her wished that the place where she was educated had changed as she did, developing enough kaleidoscopic fractals to alienate itself from her past. A past that was still uncorroded by the concentrated vitriol that had been thrown across her face by two strangers on a bike. A past where she was beautiful and aware of it, and would glance up at that very emblem to make sure that each strand of her plaited hair was still in place. If she could go back ten years, she would have relished her attention to detail while it was still appreciative instead of self-concealing. Or perhaps, *perhaps*, she would have left her plaits in the state they were, valuing their disarray while her hair still remained in its entirety.

¹ "ASTI | A worldwide problem (Acid Survivors Trust International, n.d.)."
<https://www.asti.org.uk/a-worldwide-problem.html>. Accessed 15 Aug. 2023.

She had wanted to come back. Hadn't she?

She walked over to a corner of the pentagonal field, reasonably concealed behind the garish streamers on either side of the banner. She had arrived a minute early, exactly as planned, before the others could start filtering in. She badly wanted to see her classmates again, just as much as she wanted to remain unseen by them.

She heard a vaguely familiar squeal and looked up to see Sushmita scurrying in. Farah had heard that she had built up a clothing company for herself, and that it wasn't doing too well this year because of a labor scandal. A few seconds later, Nicole and Hardik – imagine! – joined her with a baby in Nicole's arms.

Don't look here. Don't look here. Please don't look here. And they didn't.

People kept flooding in. Kajol the lawyer, Afroz the government official. Raazia entered with a man she had apparently met in Singapore. They had a sense of unease between them; she could gauge it from across the field.

Oh to be in an unhappy marriage, or have acquired losses for a new brand. To have given the medical entrance examinations for which she had studied for years and years. To have lived, and loved, and been loved. But along with her smooth skin and half of her hair, the acid had eroded Farah's life away too. Looking around, she realized how much of a husk of a person she had become. As if her potential had been flushed away along with the ice-cold water that bystanders poured over her wounds until the ambulance arrived.

Her classmates were animatedly talking in a circle now, catching up on all the years they had missed. She watched the tones shift and merge from afar. Nostalgia, pride, awe. And then alarms went off in her head, for she had caught sight of him. Kasim.

Farah had avoided thinking about him for years, and his presence here disoriented her. She had heard that he had decided against becoming a doctor. Now, she saw the confirmation in the black briefcase he carried, still holding airplane tags on its handle. A businessman.

Suddenly, Farah wanted him to see her. She wanted to question why he'd never visited her at the hospital, why he'd never proposed to her as soon as she turned 19 like he'd promised he would.

Look here. Look here. Please look here. He didn't.

Instead, he gazed down at his briefcase, as if he were reading the tags for the first time. There was something particular about his countenance – a certain shock in his fidgeting fingers, a certain guilt in his slumped shoulders. He seemed to neither hear the bustling around him, nor sense his classmates turn their attention toward him. With a jolt, Farah realized what was wrong. He had already seen her.

Yet, he remained frozen in place across the field. His eyes shuffled around for what felt like eons, reading and re-reading as if he was chained by his avoidance of her stare. Farah freed him by looking away.

With nothing else worthwhile to see anymore, she finally glanced up at the banner.

She needed to take the bus back home. Those words were not for her.

*

By the time Kasim arrived, there was already a significant number of people on the school grounds. His eyes skipped around the grounds, over the circle of his classmates, landing on the electric yellow banner across the archway. “WELCOME BACK, WE ARE PROUD OF YOU”.

He felt a rush reading those words. He could see his briefcase reflected in the school emblem above them. He had kept his luggage tags on – business class! – hoping that his classmates would see the life that he had made for himself. He smiled as his eyes traced the golden streamers that reached the ground, emblems of pride and esteem. He almost didn’t notice the bright shawl behind them, wrapped like a niqab atop clothes that blended with the shadows of the trees. The combination of colors seemed intentional, as if the woman bearing it was warding off attention yet craved it sub-consciously – as an afterthought, perhaps.

Amidst the pink cloth, he could see the woman’s left eye, swollen shut, the skin around it ragged and mauve. Yet, behind the scarring, her features held a familiarity that took him only a second to place.

Why was she here? He hadn’t even considered the thought of her attending; in fact, he had avoided thinking of her for years. And yet, there she was, opening the floodgates in his head to the happenings of that day and everything that came after. Her mother’s voice on the other side of the phone. Quavering, fearful, angry. “The license plate said UP. Can you believe it? They were not even from our state. *They didn’t even know who she was.*” A fun gimmick that lasted two seconds for them, and a lifetime for its subject. Kasim had stayed silent. He had meant to walk her home that day – Delhi isn’t safe for a female pedestrian – but it was in broad daylight, on a busy street, and their medical entrance examination was the next day. She was smarter than him, and he had needed to stay longer at the library if they were to go to the same college, as they had planned.

He couldn't bring himself to go see her at the hospital that night. Along with her smooth skin and half of her hair, the acid had corroded away his plans of marrying her. And seeing her that way – the beautiful woman who would have been his beautiful wife – it had been too much for him. Sure, it was selfish, but he had to think of himself too. What would people say if Kasim, the firstborn of the family, had married a girl with a disfigured face?

He hadn't given the exam the next day, nor the next year, nor ever.

He pulled himself back to the present, shifting his eyes downward to the briefcase in his hand before she could catch his gaze. Now, the airplane tags seemed to bring more shame than glory. Dubai, Los Angeles, Johannesburg. He wondered if she had traveled anywhere after the incident.

In that moment, he knew that he didn't want to know the answer. To look up was to meet her eyes. To be forced to juxtapose the life of a woman who stayed stagnant in time with that of a man who moved miles away.

“Kasim! Long time no see, man. How's your mother?”

Kasim turned toward the people behind him. “Afroz, my brother! And Nicole – oh! – what's the little one's name?”

He didn't approach her, and didn't intend on doing so. He never turned back around, and it would have been pointless anyway.

The Farah he once knew and the Farah he just saw — they were both long gone.