



Phir Subah Ka Alam Kya Hoga?

I am camped out next to the sofa, waging a hopeless battle against the morning that has already laid a thick siege beyond the living room. My ears are set to tune out all frequencies save the one that heralds succour in the form of that fuzzy four-letter word chai. Presently, a cup appears before me, joining the fair company of some roses that have just peaked. Their slightly droopy profiles mirror off my dazed pupils, grudgingly returning to reality. After a few sips, I feel ready to face the day and with a determined hand draw back the curtains. Outside looms a murky morning, much as the night lingers inside (my alveoli).

Avril Stormy Unger, a talented Goa-based performance artist, arrived in Delhi at the head of this seasonal doom where unrelieved twilight passes for days and agnostic

coughs pass for punctuation. It appears that I spoke too soon when I said, "The weather is perfect! Please pack lightly." Avril currently lies curled up in bed, reeling from the city's toxic love, not unlike the waning roses before me, mementos from her recent performance at the Visual Arts Gallery at the India Habitat Centre. Titled *Unfolding Flowers* the performance was part of a queer art exhibition *Vichitra Desh*, curated by Myna Mukherjee. At its heart lay the inordinate acts of violence visited upon an unsuspecting bundle of roses by the artist, all the while as she crooned love songs thick with flower metaphors.

A flower is a lovable thing.

A forlorn voice cuts through the buzz, leaving a hushed



[Above]
AVRIL STORMY UNGER.
Unfolding flowers.
25 minutes. 2023. Performed at the Visual Arts Gallery,
India Habitat Centre.
Photograph by Arunima Rajkumar

[Overleaf]
AVRIL STORMY UNGER.
I do, do I?
40 minutes. 2022. Performed at 1 Shanthi Road.
Photograph by Navya Shah.



silence in its wake. The artist saunters across the space in her black saree, ostensibly toying with a rose in her hand. Taking her station behind a table piled high with roses and displaying an assortment of tools and objects, Avril begins by plucking petal after petal as her lips mime the age-old refrain: she loves me, she loves me not. When the last petal falls a verdict is reached and the suspense broken.

Wherever they may grow
No matter where you go
A flower is a lovesome thing

The lines are repeated; the words are held differently each time. Fresh meaning begins to seep the anachronous space that opens up between the lyrics and the action now reversed as the artist attempts to sew the petals back on. The haunting quality of the vocals combined with the systematic and purposive nature of brutality pushes its reading beyond the actings-out of a scorned lover. The gratuitous sawing, hammering, drilling, roasting, and devouring of these flowers is calculated to highlight the morbid irony of our romance where a dead flower betokens eternal love. In this manner, the performance brings to the fore an economy of cruelty behind our amorous enterprise.

You look to me like love forever
Too blue to last
But too lovely not to try

Queered through the beat of hammering this anthem of love assumes a sardonic undertone. I find myself addressed as the sacrificial flower about to be crushed at the altar of heteronormative love. I think of all the flowers whose soft bodies bear the palanquin of sanctioned love through the streets of our bazaars. Bred to beautify and enrapture, but never quite allowed to partake of the felicity they enable/solemnise. I think of all the slow deaths ordained in the name of love. I think of the recent Supreme Court verdict that withholds the institution of marriage from queers and feel the gavel dash myriad hopes, however far-fetched they might be.

During the pandemic, Avril presented an online performance titled *So the Bible Says*. Dressed as a bride she proceeded to dramatically undo a garland of roses in counterpoint to a recording of Christian

injunctions on how to be a good wife. By the end of the performance, the artist could be seen biting off chunks with vicious force. Shortly thereafter, she took to riding her scooter and running errands in full bridal garb. A husbandless bride haunting the streets and public spaces in Bangalore. Avril's defiance of stifling hegemonies, social conditioning and discrimination attendant on matrimony culminated in a performance *I do, do I?* that saw the artist pouring her rage into a hammer, methodically driving nails through her wedding gown. The performance ended with the artist tearing herself free from this virginal vestment loaded with symbolism.

On pendulous mornings such as this one, the heart rages with desires to tear off the gown, the garland, the rose and all the tokens of love that detain and debar. Looking out of the window one wonders if the smog isn't the flowers' curse riding on our love's head. I open my phone to see a notification from a New York-based friend who has recently resurfaced in my life by our shared solidarity with Palestine. She has forwarded an old article from 2010 about the suicide of Benjamin Netanyahu's psychiatrist, Moshe Yatom. The article details the ironic breakdown of the therapist's mental and physical health as he attempted to treat the Israeli Prime Minister. Evidently, the mind that he once described as 'a black hole of self-contradiction,' pushed him into despair, causing him to take his own life.

I put the phone away and gaze at the still life before me. My vision fills with red and my ears are ringing with Avril's swan song for 'Unfolding Flowers.' From roses, to girls, to young men in uniform, to graveyards, to roses again the violence loops.

Where have all the flowers gone?
Long time passing.
Where have all the flowers gone?
Long time ago.
Where have all the flowers gone?
The girls have picked them every one.
Oh, When will you ever learn?
Oh, When will you ever learn?