

The Double Act of Flower-Time

Raqs Media Collective

“*Sipāhī aaj bhī koī nahīñ aayā, (na?) kisī ne phul hī bhejē*”
“Soldier, once again, no one came today, but someone sent flowers.
Or did no one send flowers?”

Iftikhar Arif, *Gumnaam Sipahi ke Qabr Par*
(At the Grave of the Unknown Soldier)¹

Prologue

A flock of starlings takes flight. Starlings mimic, they click, wheeze, chatter, whistle, wolf-whistle, rattle and pipe. They have a flock call, a threat call, an attack call, a snarl call, and a call for copulation. Starlings fall silent when guns start to speak. But a flock of starlings is called a murmuration because even when completely silent, the flapping of hundreds and thousands of starling wings makes a whoosh, a loud murmur that can be heard at a fair distance.

The First World War forced a rapid drop in starling sightings.²
War is not only about fighting.
War never is.

Someone has to clean the mess.
Someone has to touch the dead soldiers with their hands,
Someone has to cook the food,
Someone has to tend to the horses,
Someone has to grease the wheels of tanks,
Someone has to fetch water,
Someone has to carry the loads that need carrying,
Someone has to dig trenches,
Someone has to dig wells,

¹ Excerpted from the Urdu poem, *Gumnaam Sipahi ke Qabr Par* (At the Grave of the Unknown Soldier) by Iftikhar Arif, taken from *Mahr-e-Do Neem* (Pg. 79) a collection of Arif's Poems published by Educational Publishing House, Delhi / Hussain's, London, 1983/84. Freely translated.

² Food began to run out, and many of the Indian troops could or would not eat what meat there was. The defenders' draught animals, the oxen, were the first to go, followed by their horses, camels, and finally, starlings, cats, dogs and even hedgehogs.

The Tragedy of Kut, by Ross Davies, *The Guardian*, 20th November, 2002
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/nov/20/iraq.features11>

Someone has to clear mines,
Someone has to play the flute on a foggy morning.

War makes demands.

It's been heard there was a mule mutiny on the Bombay docks in the early years of the Great War. A pacifist mule, perhaps a conscientious objector or a rebel who did not want to fight the war of five kings, stood its ground and would not walk up the ramp on to the ship going to Iraq, though no mule after him dared break ranks. Some men then hoisted the beast on their shoulders and bore it triumphantly up the gangway and into the hold: that mule literally smiled over the trouble he was giving. Momentarily, the hostilities of the War are delayed because of one mule in Bombay.³

The sun is almost above.

Three women-shaped ghosts, three figures, extend their arms, turn away and towards.
A drum beats, a dozen hands clap in rhythm and the figures turn and turn again.

Who are these figures who haunt so?⁴

Scrawl-Lines to Thickets

Figuring out what is remembered of the experience of life on a daily basis, or over a lifetime, or across lifetimes, is a perplexing endeavour.

From a biological explanatory frame, forms of recollection (like other kinds of mental activity), are physical, bio-chemical-electrical processes occurring in the brain and the nervous system of human beings. Given the structure, composition, and finite capacity of the human brain, given that it is a jelly-like mass of entangled tissue encased in a bony case, it is almost impossible to visualize the accretion of individual bits of memory, of their infinite accumulation as physical units over time.

Were this accumulation to have its way, the brain would soon run out of space. Our heads would ache, and burst. No human head has room enough for all the moments of even a single day were they to be piled up as a cairn of memories. It is almost impossible to visualize memory as a 'mere' accretion of seconds, over a day, over a decade, over a lifetime.

³ Taken from the Spoken Word script of "Not Yet At Ease". The reference to the mutiny of a solitary mule in Bombay is taken from *On Two Fronts: Being the Adventures of an Indian Mule Corps in France and Gallipoli*, by Major H.M. Alexander, Heinemann, London, 1917

⁴ Taken from the Spoken Word Script of "Not Yet At Ease". The reference here is to a photograph that is treated and featured in one of the overall 9 videos that are part of "Not Yet At Ease". The specific photograph being referred to here is identifiable as *Indian Porter Corps open theatre at Kut*, taken by Ariel Vargas in Kut, Mesopotamia/Iraq, in 1918. Collection of the Imperial War Museum (Item Number: Q24576. © Imperial War Museum

Humans fumble towards the future, keeping alive a thing, a process, an accumulation so transient, so incomplete, so ephemeral. Some remembrances strive to outdo time and oblivion through marks of permanence; it comes perhaps from a recognition and refusal of this fragility. And then, it is possible too, to think of acts and ways of living with both praise and anticipation, like repeated, anonymous offerings of flowers at the grave of the unknown soldier, as in our poet's poignant epigram.

Contemporary neuro-science has an account of long-term memory via the activity of the 'memory molecule' — calcium/calmodulin-dependent protein kinase II. It is alike in rats, raccoons, and humans. This substratum of biochemical-electrical process, a charged soup of enzymes and proteins, is the travel paths of sense data — vision, sound, smell, touch, even love or danger — from one neuron to another across synapses. A re-awakened memory is the re-activation of a pathway. The more something is remembered, the more pathways become etched. When memories connect to memories, electro-chemical paths meet and fork. Eventually, what forms is a thicket of recollections within a thicket of charged pathways.

Memory, we could say, is the scrawling, hand-drawn map of this thicket. This is what a remembered life is. When memories from different lives intersect, we begin to grope at mingled webs of scrawls of lines. A small part of it is called history.

Neurobiology further goes onto explain that an activation of electrochemical signal paths necessary for memory to form requires particular enzymes. These enzymes are already present within the brain and nervous system at a cellular level, in a molecular state. They rarely last longer than a few days, sometimes just a few hours. But, for a memory to be durable, these enzymes have to be functional in a sustained way across a larger span of time. It is here that the idea of memory-chain comes in. The enzymes operate in clusters, staging synaptic relays of 'off', to another 'on', and recruiting new points, keeping the process going. Though individual molecules turn off, clusters themselves continue, ensuring that the 'path' stays open, despite a host of other biochemical storms in the brain.⁵

And so, memories endure.

This 'endurance' is accompanied by a parallel process of 'forgetting'— a pruning of neuronal connections frees up memory.

“Many of the men show a tendency to break into poetry,
which I am inclined to regard as a rather ominous sign of mental disquietude.”

*Report of Evelyn Berkeley Howell,
Chief Censor of Indian Military Correspondence in France, January 1915*

The Mnemes Dilemma

⁵ *Memory Erasure Experiments Indicate a Critical Role of CaMKII in Memory Storage*, Tom Rossetti, Somdeb Banerjee, Chris Kim, Bomsol Lee, Rachael Neve & John Lisman, NEURON, VOLUME 96, ISSUE 1, P207-216.E2, SEPTEMBER 27, 2017

Herodotus, defined what he was doing as an effort to ensure that the “deeds of men not be erased by time”.⁶ This ‘effort against erasure’ relied on the construction of structures and epitaphs that would or could act as concrete bearers of memory, an account of some humans and what had happened to them and by them, and how they would be remembered.

Herodotus’ list of fourteen of these mnemes — memory structures — in his account of the Persian wars, may be amongst the earliest objects to be recognized as ‘memorials’. These are not concrete instance of private remembrance to the deceased by surviving intimates — family and friends. Instead, the mnemes at Thermopylae that Herodotus talks about are structures dedicated to the perpetuation of public memorialisation. It is strangers made familiar, abridged and intelligible to strangers yet to come.

Mnemes become relics; relics turn into ruins and disappear in the undergrowth of time. But the pathways they activate stay open, as gesture leads to gesture, and then another, in a chain of markings through time, across generations. Like an enzyme cluster. An instance of an idea may disintegrate, but it is quickly replaced by other mnemes that etch further nervous paths through history.

Or not. Undergrowth can pull everything within it, rendering it unremarkable.

The proliferation after WWI of memorials to the ‘unknown soldier’ — the quintessential stranger of the twentieth century — is an instance of this at work.⁷ The war produced death on such an unprecedented, industrial scale, that the actual dimensions of mortality, and attempts to account for it, could be apprehended in symbolic terms not so much through the figure of the named individual but through the deployment of the figure of the statistical average of casualties — the ghostly residual trace of the anonymous and fatally injured body of an unknown everyman-at-arms.

While detailed and meticulous keeping of the records of the dead and injured, with name, affiliation, and rank, did occur (and was sometimes faithfully engraved on stone, like in the inner walls of Delhi’s India Gate), it was the unnamed, unnumbered, unknown figure of the dead or ‘missing-in-action’ soldier that came to embody the consequences of the new kind of war that had been unleashed.

His thoughts begotten at clear sources,
Apparently in air, fall from him
Like chantering from an abundant

⁶ Herodotus, *Histories*, Book 1, Part 1, translated by Robin Waterfield, Oxford Classics, Oxford University Press, 2008

⁷ “The first ‘Tomb of the Unknown Soldier’ was unveiled on the second anniversary of the armistice, 11 November, 1920...The unprecedented mobilisation of mass armies and the quasi-anonymous character of the war and of many of the fallen soldiers made his a universally understandable and seemingly pertinent solution.” *Public Monuments : Art in Political Bondage - 1870-1997*, Sergiusz Michalski, Reaction Books, London, 1998. Pg. 78

Poet, as if he thought gladly, being
Compelled thereto by an innate music.

(Wallace Stevens, 'Examination of the Hero at a Time of War')

Typically, this spirit was kept animated by the burning of a gaslit 'eternal flame'.

A Paradox

Don't go don't go
Stay back my friend.
Crazy people are packing up,
Flowers are withering and friendships are breaking.
Stay back my friend.
O train, move slowly
You have a passenger bound for Basra
Hearing the news of the war
Leaves of trees got burnt.
War destroys towns and ports, it destroys huts
Graves devour our flesh and blood
Alas, I couldn't talk to him to my heart's content
The string flew with the kite.⁸

Every year following the First World War has seen armed hostilities between nation-states, or within a nation-state as it combats with proto-state clusters.⁹ The figure of the unknown soldier has multiplied exponentially. The invocation of this spectral body is occasioned by a new kind of war in a new century. It has left no country, no society, no culture untouched. Perhaps it is the single most pervasive figural move of the 20th century.

The Unknown Soldier is everywhere. The entire world is his shallow grave.

The rash of commemoration from the First War onwards, apart from cloning statues of soldiers at attention with their weapons presented in a funereal salute position, has laid down a template for a tone — heroic and somber — of 'public art'. It inflects murals, pavilion designs, statues of great men and some women, as well as different kinds of non-military 'memorial sculpture' commemorating atrocities and tragedies. The tone that marks also carries within it a fatigue of the count, a loss of the count.

Memory straddles a paradox.

⁸ This fragment (translation from Punjabi folk songs) is part of the Spoken Word Script of "Not Yet At Ease". Such songs were composed by women addressed to men leaving to be soldiers in the War. This is quoted in a lecture titled *How They Suffered: World War One and its Impact on Punjabis* by Amarjit Chandan. A transcript of this lecture can be retrieved from <http://apnaorg.com/articles/amarjit/wwi> (cached, accessed on March 23, 2018)

⁹ For a list of twentieth century conflicts, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:20th-century_conflicts

Inscribing a mark on a difficult and unstable surface of historical violence is always going to be tough. As time passes, reasons to remember historical violence of a not-so-long-ago war resurge if the rhetoric that had underwritten that episode resurrect in new incarnations, with new pressure points. At the same time, the ability to recall the particularity of attendant events grows weak.

This paradox of memory is a negotiation between having to remember, the obligation to mourn, the uncertainty of moments and conditions of its activation, the inability to recall, and the slow grinding requirement to forget and move on.

This, then, is the force field within which public art stands when it says it commemorates.

Hesitant Absences

Here, at present, this is the state of affairs. Men feigning and pretending all kinds of sickness and being brought before all sorts of committees, get sent back... Since the fighting grew fierce, many men who can hear, pretend to be deaf, and those who can speak to be dumb, some complain of pains in the loins, knees, or body, others they have a giddiness in the head, or something the matter with their lungs... Because the Doctors are a set of blind people, there are many diseases they cannot diagnose, so some men, feigning all kinds of illness, save their lives and get back to India. Otherwise it would be difficult, for there is no sign of the war stopping, or of peace being made, and the whole world is being destroyed.

Sadar Singh, Lady Hardinge Hospital, Brockenhurst, England, to Katoch, Ragbir Singh, Palompra tehsil, Kangra dist., Thural P.O., Punjab, India, May 1915.

If I come alive. When I come back to India,
I will rehearse to you the whole story, from beginning to end.
Like a book of the Arabian Nights.

Letter written by Sahib Khan (Soldier, Meerut Division Signalling Company, France) to his brother Abdullah Khan, (Soldier, 112th Cavalry, Shahdara, Swat, North West Frontier Province) on 15th March, 1915¹⁰

A hundred years after 1919, the centenary of World War One has occasioned a second wave of remembrance. The most important question here is how this *repetition* can avoid reproducing a set of ritual gestures fixed in habits and conventions of commemoration that were laid out in the first wave.

As artists we were invited to undertake the making of a work during a remembrance in the UK.

¹⁰ Both these letters, are included amongst the letters (and their translations) that can be found in the files associated with the Reports of the Censor of Indian Mails in France, 1914-1918 held in the The British Library's collection of military materials which are a part of the documents of the India Office Records.

A total of one million ninety-six thousand and thirteen men (1,096,013) from the Indian subcontinent were sent overseas to different theatres of the First World War — in Europe, Mesopotamia, Africa, and the Far East. Six hundred and five thousand and sixty-two (605,062) of these men were soldiers. Four hundred and seventy-four thousand and seven hundred and eighty-nine men (474,789) were non-combatants called followers (labourers, cleaners, animal keepers). Seventy-three thousand and nine hundred and five (73,905) of these men (soldiers and non-combatants) were killed in action, and sixty-nine thousand and two hundred and fourteen men (69,214) came back from the war with serious injuries.¹¹

Among Troops and Followers admitted to Kitchener Hospital with respect to various types of Insanity
145 Mania | Case Admitted 15 | Fighting Men 14 | Followers 01
146 Melancholia | Case Admitted 05 | Fighting Men 04 | Followers 01
133 Hysteria | Case Admitted 02 | Fighting Men 02
— At the time of writing this report (15/11/15) there are 10 cases remaining under treatment.

A Report on Lunatic Asylum, Kitchener Indian Hospital, from February, 1915 to November 15th, 1915 by Lieut. Col. J.M. Crawford, I.M.S

We went into archives and repositories spread across Europe and India, building on previous material in our earlier work of an extraordinarily rich corpus of haunting words left by the men who were taken to distant battlefields in the war. We have made work in the past that was occasioned by a close reading of letters that men from the Indian sub-continent wrote from distant battlefields, hospitals, and barracks to wives, family, friends, comrades, and lovers back home (or in some cases, in other theatres of war).¹²

This time, we encountered the report of military censors who examined these letters and the medical reports that looked at the bodies and minds of these young men.¹³ Also, two images from the war front deeply struck us: one was an image of men dressed up as gods and goddesses, the other of four figures dancing, dressed as women.

Doctors were trying to understand what was happening to the bodies and minds of these soldiers. We read letters written by soldiers early on in the war, in 1915, the contents of which suggested that something was going wrong with their minds. One of the military censors wrote that the letters display a tendency towards an excess of poetry, which he saw as “an ominous sign of mental disquietude”. While there was an awareness of psychological trauma, the authorities didn’t want to give it a name — they denied the diagnosis of shell shock that was clearly a widespread condition amongst soldiers, both from the sub-continent and the island of United Kingdom.

¹¹ *Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire During the Great War, 1914-1920* : His Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1922

¹² “The Surface of Each Day is a Different Planet”, Raqs Media Collective, 2009. First installed in Tate Britain, 2009. See also <https://www.e-flux.com/program/65364/raqs-media-collective/>.

¹³ *Not Yet At Ease* by Raqs Media Collective, opened at First Site, Colchester, UK in September 2018 <https://firstsite.uk/whats-on/1418-now-not-yet-at-ease/>

Shell shock assumes that the person who is shocked has a mental life, an inner life, and the army doctors were only willing to give that diagnosis to officers — men like themselves. The common conscripted soldier — the vast mass of fighting men from both the United Kingdom and Empire — was not seen “fit” to have an inner life.¹⁴

It is in the terrain of inner life that singularities emerge and out-step generalities. In transcripts of letters and diaries, in close readings of medical records and official dispatches, in extracts from novels and poetry, in accounts of dreams and nightmares, in fragments of archival film & photography, and in spectral snatches of voices captured in hundred-year-old sound recordings in a prisoner of war camp in Germany: in all these we sensed a range of experiences, testimonies, dreams, and moments of lucid sanity amidst the burning fog of war.

The photographs of cross-dressing soldiers dancing in the middle of a bitter siege in Iraq, and of a group of men arranged in a tableau — in the immediate wake of a folk performance in a prisoner of war camp — as beasts, divinities, dancers, and clowns, offer themselves to delineating an imaginative expansiveness, of embodiments of *jijivisha*, a word in Sanskrit evoking the intense desire to live in the midst of shock, injury, and death.

Ephemeral Intensities of Public Art

¹⁴ Several studies of the psychological impact of the experience of combat in the First World War were written both during and in the aftermath of the war by medical officers in the different armies that fought the war. Amongst the texts which reveal a differential attitude to the distress of officers and soldiers are: Montague David Eder, *War Shock: The Psycho-Neuroses in War Psychology and Treatment* Published by Heinemann, London, 1917. Montague David Eder was Temporary Captain, Royal Army Medical Corps, and Medical Officer in Charge of Psycho-Neurological Department, Malta. Montague David Eder, *The Psycho-Pathology of War Neuroses*, *Lancet*, August 12, 1916, p. 168. Charles Bird, *From Home to the Charge: A Psychological Study of the Soldier*, *The American Journal of Psychology*, xxviii.3, July 1917, pgs. 323-4. G. Stanley Hall, *Practical Applications of Psychology as Developed by the War*, *The Pedagogical Seminary*, A Quarterly, xxvi, 1919. pgs. 83-84

Specifically, Indian soldiers, were seen as suffering from an ailment termed “trench back”, which was ostensibly, a result of physiological stress, not psychological distress. This thesis was advanced by a John D. Sandes, a medical officer who treated Indian soldiers. He published his findings in the paper ‘*Trench Back*’ Treated by *Sodium Salicylate Ionization* by John D. Sandes, Captain I.M.S, Officer in charge of Electro-Therapeutic Institute, Kitchener Indian Hospital, Brighton. *The British Medical Journal*, Pg. 215, August 7, 1915



WaikhaaN Chaar Chofairay, Jaani Nazzar Nah Away, Sāda Sabbar Farang'ey Nu Maar'ay
(I look all around but can't see my darling, my patience full of suffering shall destroy the Empire)¹⁵

In “Not Yet at Ease”, the voices of soldiers crackle and loop, merging and colliding with readings of reports and fragments of letters, into a labyrinth of whispers and dreams confronting statistics and animals, ghosts and field dispatches, the goddess Kali and a shipwreck, a soldier’s spinal column, the constant act of cleaning blood and flesh from a terrain amidst changing seasons, the intermittent laying and sundering of railway lines, and the murmur of starlings.

These thickets, these scrawls and faint traces of a forgotten world, are unresolved and discontinuous, part in hibernation and part in flow. They cannot be brought to life in the present by an act of mere recall. That will not suffice to steer us into an awareness of the contestations, the allure, the density of an inner life battling for a hundred years. These are ephemeral intensities, traveling in time, layering, leaving, leavening, obscuring, and smudging entanglements. They seep into our time in conversations when we remember and commemorate.

The density of inner life is where large battles — of territories, of production, of disobedience, of bonding, of intimacies, of other worlds — live, thrive, probe, thwart, divert, combat, mask, sediment, and detour. This surfacing stands in discomfort with the public art of the last century, and confronts meta-narratives of affirmation, victory, or surrender.

¹⁵ This fragment (translation from Punjabi folk songs) is part of the Spoken Word Script of “Not Yet At Ease”. Such songs were composed by women addressed to men leaving to be soldiers in the War. This is quoted in a lecture titled *How They Suffered: World War One and its Impact on Punjabis* by Amarjit Chandan. A transcript of this lecture can be retrieved from <http://apnaorg.com/articles/amarjit/wwi> (cached, accessed on March 23, 2018)

Public art in our time needs to do memory work that is tuned to the difficulty of recalling a force of a presence that dwells in a thick web of living. It needs to be alive to fluctuations of intricate inner worlds, and aware that contingencies will make some thickets give way, even as other thickets become expressed. Life continuously contests its own memory work, through claims on the conventions by which mnemes travel in time. Art, then, has to inspire acts akin to the offering of flowers to unmarked graves of its unknown strangers, ephemeral in their mark and enduring in their compassion.

Not Yet Diagnosed Nervous
Not Yet Discovered Dead
Not Yet Produced Alive
Not Yet Recalled To Active Duty
Not Yet At Ease'¹⁶

¹⁶ The phrase “Not Yet Diagnosed Nervous” (usually abbreviated as N.Y. D.N.) is a quotation from *A Contribution to the Study of Shell Shock* by Charles Myers, *The Lancet*, 185, 1915. The phrase ‘*Not Yet At Ease*’ echoes the second of the twin commands” ‘*Attention*’ & ‘*Stand At Ease*’ used in military drill.