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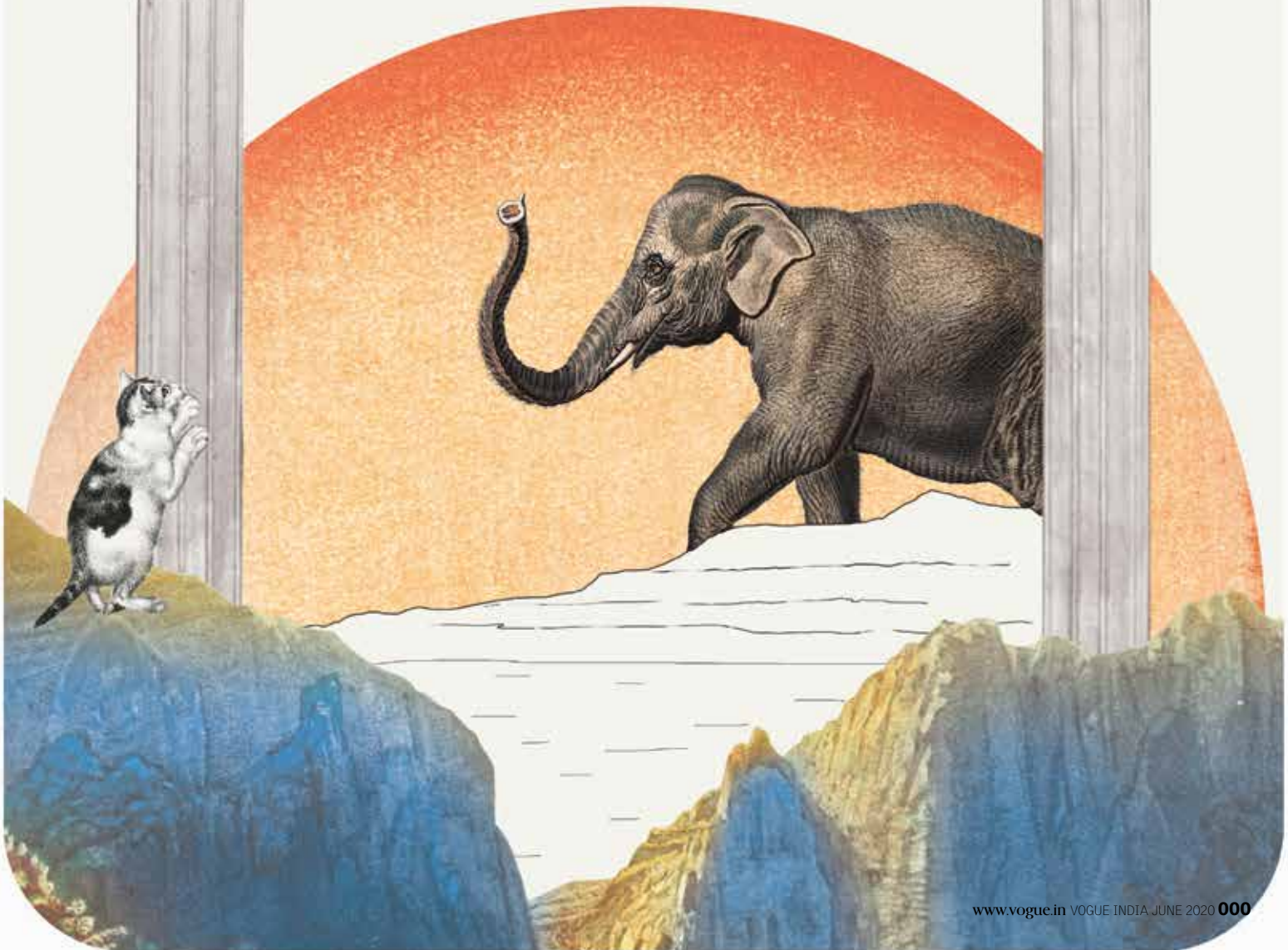
# CULTURE

ORIGINALS

## Inside story

From finding comfort in loneliness to contemplating the trials of being a good mum, and getting through the day, award-winning authors **Tishani Doshi**, **Madhuri Vijay** and **Nilanjana Roy** write on the spectrum of emotions felt during their time in lockdown

Illustrated by **ROHAN HANDE**



# IN SOLITUDE

by TISHANI DOSHI

April 2020, Abu Dhabi

**T**o those of you reading this in your rooms: you are lucky to have a room, everything will and won't be okay. If you aren't already in love with loneliness, you must learn, and it will need practice.

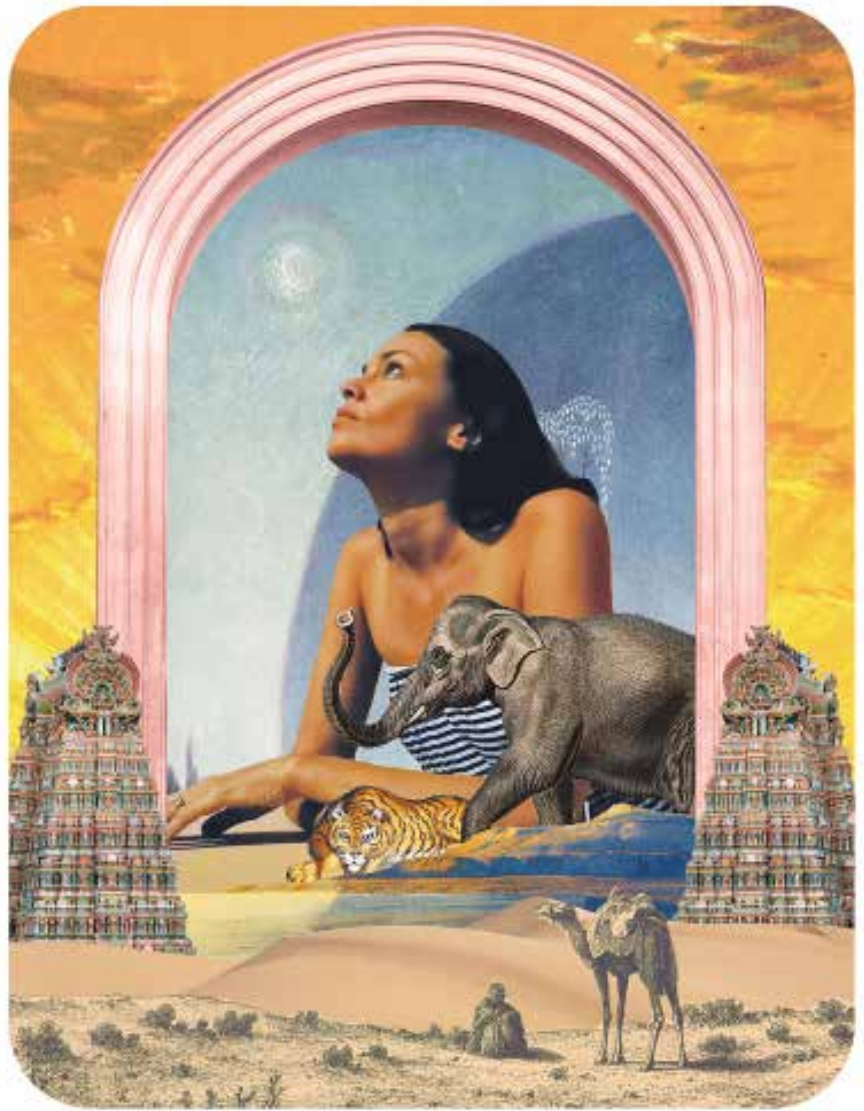
## IMAGINE THIS

I've been practising since I was a child. Whatever my sister was playing, I needed to be a part of it. She'd say, "I'm going to play my game, you go play yours." Shunned from my sister's imaginative kingdom, I turned to storybooks, to painting tigers and elephants, and M-shaped mountains with an orange sun peeking through. I wrote in leather-bound diaries that my father brought home from the office—complaints, dreams, lists, and eventually, poems. I didn't know it then, but this was world-building 101.

Over the years, my reliance on this world deepened. Theatre, dance, music, film. I thought as long as people are creating, we can never truly be alone. The terror of being alone is replaced with the terror of being forced to sit through gatherings in which you have little investment. You go because you're told this is what people do. When you are back in your room, the door closed, you feel relief.

## LONE COMFORT

This is not to say loneliness won't ever debilitate you. Cities can be particularly merciless. I remember America as a 17-year-old, a whole listless year of being homesick and marooned. Two fragmented years in London, where I went from work to the gym to run on a treadmill, looking at all the other workers panting over their machines, and what I saw was not a sense of solidarity, but how we were unable to



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offer comfort to one another. These days of self-isolation in Abu Dhabi have been hard, even though I should be used to it: the Zoom classes and masks and moving six feet away from someone on the walking path, when what you need now is to be close. That's the hope, you see, that if only you found the right person, something will be magically resolved, you will find your place and it might happen. If you're lucky to have friends, partners, lovers, who understand your worlds, it will be a comfort to see their footprints in the sand beside you.

But there's always a day when things change, or stranger, when they're in the same room as you and nothing is broken, but still, you must withdraw into the chambers that are yours alone and you understand that this is the project of your life, to excavate these layers, to cultivate the bliss of your own loneliness. >



# BABY TALK

by MADHURI VIJAY

April 2020, Hawaii

**M**y daughter, six months old, is chewing on a pink toy parrot and frowning at me. “What are you doing?” I ask. I’ve been told I must talk to her constantly, say whatever is on my mind. Hearing my voice supposedly stimulates her capacity for language. I’m worried about failing at many aspects of motherhood; chatting with my child has never been one of them.

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## THINGS TO SAY

We are three weeks into isolation and I’m running out of things to say. “Does your parrot taste nice?” In response, she flings it aside and gazes up at the fan.

Tomorrow, I’m going out in search of face masks. If I can’t find any, we’ll have to cut up T-shirts. Babies are not immune to this virus. A nine-month-old in Chicago recently died of it. “That’s the fan,” I say. “It goes round and round.”

As far as she knows, no humans exist apart from her parents. I can’t remember the last time she saw another adult. She pulls her foot to her face and goes to work on her toes. “That’s absolutely true,” I say for no reason at all.

## AS IT IS

Before she was born, I envisioned taking her to the beach and the park, pointing out butterflies, waves, trees, dogs, telling her stories about the world she was born into. The last time we went out as a family, we wandered the main street of our little town. It was dusk; people were doing their shopping. We ran into some friends, bought a few things and I narrated it all for our daughter, watching with pleasure as her brown eyes took everything in.

Now I carry her as far as our gate, where I point out the occasional car that drives by. “There are people in those cars,” I tell her, and she seems content.

But I’m painfully aware of all I cannot show her—the places I love, our friends, her grandparents, the world as it was. I’ve long resolved never to be the kind of mother who covers her child’s ears when there is something ugly to be heard. And since she can’t understand, it would likely make no difference if I said what was really on my mind: I’m scared that one of us will get infected and that we’ll infect you. Thousands died today. Hospitals are recycling face masks. You have no idea how lucky you are. Yet, I do not want the first language she absorbs to be so apocalyptic, so tinged with death. I cannot bring myself to tell her those stories.

So we stand in silence—she chewing on her pink parrot, me watching the sky—waiting for the next car to pass. >



# WRITER'S RETREAT

by NILANJANA ROY

April 2020, Delhi

## CONTAINMENT

From the Latin *continere*; *con* (together) and *tenere* (to hold)

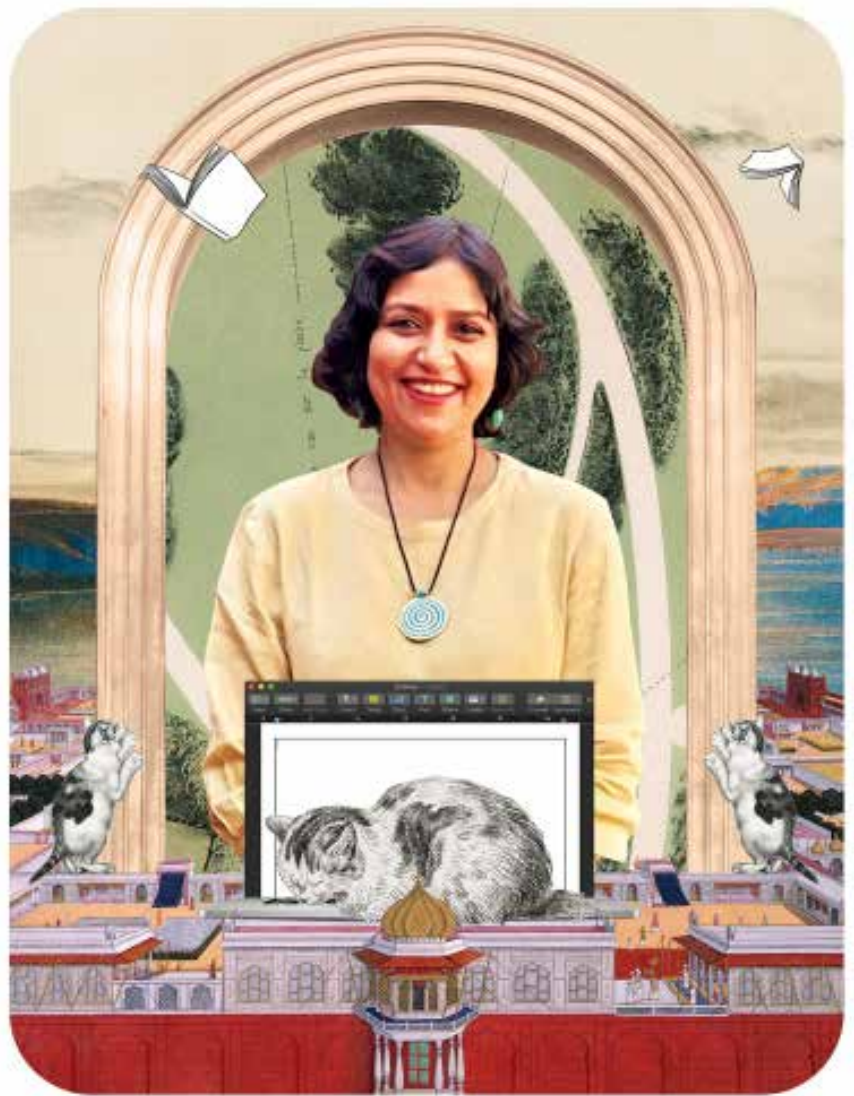
The neighbourhood has never been so quiet. Some of the peace is blessed, the abrupt and welcome cessation of the continuous whine of construction. The dust settles, revealing skies of astonishing blue that transports me to a Delhi long vanished. Some of the peace is uneasy. I miss the vendors, even the cheerfully noisy construction crews who used grubby gamchas in lieu of N95 masks. How will they survive this sudden joblessness?

The kulfi seller calls. He's on the road. Couldn't get a train, got past the borders before they were sealed, is walking 400km back to his village with his family. He is stoic, but when the call ends, I look around at my quiet writing desk, the cats draped over my keyboard, the fresh vegetables in the fridge. Another friend on the phone: we are so lucky, she says, to have all that we do. I hear wonder in her voice, as if she's just discovered this fact. To be contained within your home during a time of lockdown, to hold all of it together. The gratitude spreads and stains the air all through the next few weeks.

## CONTAGION

From the Latin *con* (together) and *tangere* (to touch)

I duck the Zoom invites, the pressure to read together, learn Malayalam or Spanish, become Van Gogh. No one actually has free time between housework and anxieties. The edits to my novel remain undone. The cursor unmoving on the blank screen, the words unwritten on the blank page. I fold my anxieties small with the laundry, the fears for the brother and



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sister-in-law in New York, for the friend undergoing chemo in Paris, for the father with the bad lungs, all those who might be touched by this modern plague.

I don't write at first. My partner and I move around the house working in separate rooms, having conversations we never found time for. Slowly, something in me settles. I write a sentence. Then a paragraph. The cats complain when they are shooed off the keyboard, they resettle at my feet and in my lap. The hours pass; when I look up again, the day has disappeared. The birds sing their hearts out. The loudspeakers tell us to stay indoors, mind the curfew.

The world swings crazily on its axis. Nothing will ever be the same again. I finish the dishes, prep a salad for dinner and return to the page. This is how everything gets done, in the middle of a curfew and a pandemic. I am writing; I am home. ■