

# ***Poison Berries***

**Janhavi Sharma**

Reflecting on her childhood and matrilineal heritage, the artist uses orange poison berries from her backyard, layering them over new and archival photographs. This act serves as a metaphor for the interwoven continuity of time. The inedible fruit, originally from the Caribbean region, now grows in the artist's home garden as a thriving attraction for the songbirds and a reminder of present pasts.

In this work, she explores themes of identity, memory, and the interplay between reality and fiction. Through the lens of nostalgia, she investigates the allure and unreachability of the past, symbolised by the captivating yet harmful berries.

**Janhavi Sharma** is a visual artist from India, currently living and working in Nottingham, UK.

Her work explores the intimate conflicts and intersections between gender, memory and ecology. She's drawn to the inaccuracies found in anecdotal histories, and recreates narratives that transform her understanding of the 'self', in context and contradiction to her surroundings. She often uses food as a mutating metaphor to stage personal, anatomical and systemic enquiries in her practice. Working across photography, moving image, sculpture and installation — she also traces eco-political trajectories of the materials and processes that she interacts with.

Community engagement activities like lectures, workshops, and performances that lead to collaborative research; and induce dialogue about identity and belonging, solidarity and reciprocity, are an extension of her art practice.

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poison berries?

orange diffused at the foot of the plastic chair. durable. timeless.

summer — monsoon — winter — ma's dupatta a frayed relic — a hand latches  
onto

a piece of history — orange

a canvas of leaf green. its promise: orange

a child limp on the stillness of a photograph.  
her memory: orange

before the mother that was  
before the mother that was  
before the mother that was  
their bloodline: orange

the tree promises life. timeless. enduring. its poison: orange

a desire for the tactile, the firm grasp of time within one's fingers is only  
a photograph — suspended,

a nail running through its arrested composition.  
this tear: orange

off-camera, metal scrapes the remnants of the yard, on-camera it offers:  
orange

the artist feeds on a photograph for more  
say what this memory of one's own forgone story? orange.

## what are the poison berries?

what can grow can one day turn invasive.

what suspends like a drop of orange dew from the green-lit sky is only a fruit.

what looks like a fruit, reads like a fruit, smells like a fruit, is a fruit.

*[in so far as you can eat it, in so far as I can eat it]*

what fruit eaten can kill a child is a not-fruit. call it *berry*. suffix it with *poison*.

*[don't eat it, don't eat it, don't eat it]*

what are words that a cat can't read but a song in an alien tongue.

what is song but a tongue set to music.

what is fruit of the songbird but a poison to your tongue.

what is a songbird but an alien tongue dancing.

what is an alien tongue but the unnamable grip of memory.

what is memory but a reminder that before you, there was a you, and even before a less you-er you but you nonetheless.

what is orange but a color so beautiful you drip it on your tongue.

what is beautiful will kill you. call it *berry*. suffix it with *poison*.

read it again and again. disregard its instructions, your best defenses.

bite the soft flesh of orange, let it bleed all over the archive.

what is an archive but a collection of truths left unsaid.

## when are the poison berries?

a house into which	a woman come through	a child interrupted
walls kiss other walls	young once, a flying dupatta	caught in a photo
and become home	freeze-framed in memory	unsmiling, an aberration
manufacturing isolation	tightly congealed in loose scraps	testified to story
birthing a throughline	while the body grows	enduring
one kernel	leaves a new leaf, disappears	a memory, learn
to another true	turns obsolete, in belonging	to call this evidence
algaed familia	her knowledge, in high esteem	use to prove
kinship with tools	a self, waning	time, its slippery hold
a robust engineering	restricted to recollection	a mutating grasp
stockpile for the future	to remember again and again	in image.

## where are the poison berries?

in family, native

*to Mexico, to South America, to the Caribbean*

invading room, taking up space

*naturalized in places*

in memory unspooling a flurry

*produced in tight clusters*

in likeness, in the possibility of before

*a desirable addition to gardens*

in past regurgitated as a photograph

*attracting butterflies and hummingbirds*

in the harsh erosion of cement border

*feeding songbirds without ill-effect*

in chair, left unoccupied

*tolerating light shade, though desiring full sun*

in burrowed corners of home

*grows as an annual shrub*

in living, leaving, returning

*a spreading, sweeping, evergreen shrub*

in the hallowed hallways of time

*blooming summer to fall*

in contested records

*standing upright, erect*

in stories turned gooey from oversharing

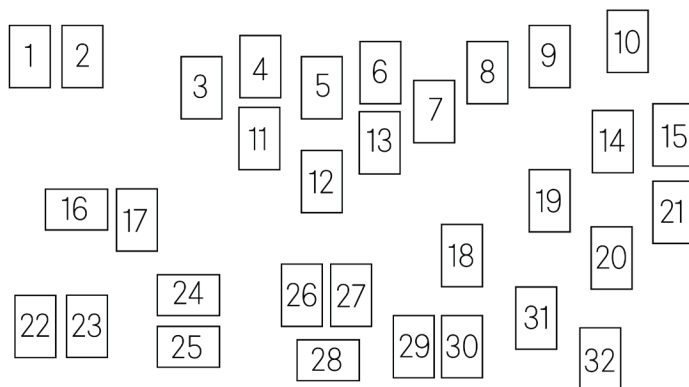
*drooping blue to violet flowers*

### **why are the poison berries?**

lacerate your own life with the needle of time and selective memory. expose its innards into a burst of fragmented optics. arrange in order of linearity. find the uncomfortable missing. scope out sadness in the camera's finitude. realize your own mind is manipulating truth which is story which is true which is also a little bit false. the storyteller in you is itching to close gaps. abandon chronology. arrange in order of movement. let leaf sprout a creeping vine. find its incessant growing a lovely metaphor to living. obsess over this representation. scourge the growth into shape. choke on the impossibility of this undertaking. discern that an analogy once made cannot be dismissed. struggle to breathe in this endless overlay of image. wisen up. recuse yourself from this dance of taming wilderness. embrace a third, living possibility. renounce order or method or form. understand no single thing can be the whole thing. allow truth to be whatever you want it to be. shape from past a meaning of your own making. stretch the elastic into a capsule. sit on it and fly away. chew yourself, inside out. lay it out to dry. hibernate.

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**Meher Manda** is a writer, culture critic, editor, and educator, fully formed in Bombay, India, though currently stationed in The U S of A. She's the author of the poetry chapbook *Busted Models (No, Dear / Small Anchor, 2019)* and her work has been published in *The Margins, Los Angeles Review, Catapult, Epiphany, Kweli, Cosmonauts Avenue*, and elsewhere. A Best New Poets and Best of the Net Anthology nominee, she is currently at work on her debut short story collection and collaborating on a political graphic novel forthcoming from Hachette India. Her writing wrestles with the tensions that splinter the self from state / woman from body / singular from spectacle / guttural from ordinary.



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