

IMPROVISED EXPLOSIVE DEVICE

Arji Manuelpillai is a poet, performer and creative facilitator based in London. His poetry has appeared in magazines including *Poetry Wales*, *The Rialto* and *bath magg*, and his debut pamphlet, *Mutton Rolls*, was published with Out-Spoken Press. Arji was shortlisted for the Oxford Prize, the Live Canon Prize, the National Poetry Prize and the Winchester Prize, and was runner-up in the Robert Graves Prize. He is a member of Malika's Poetry Kitchen and London Stanza, received an Arts Council England award to develop his creative practice, and worked with Hannah Lowe as part of the Jerwood/Arvon Mentoring Programme.

ALSO BY ARJI MANUELPILLAI

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*Improvised Explosive
Device*

ARJI MANUELPILLAI

Penned in the Margins

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The poems in this book explore the effects of hate crime, extremism and war. Together they ask a simple question: what drives a person to commit a radical act of violence? During the writing process the author interviewed a range of people with differing political and ideological views. He could not have written these poems without them.

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‘Consider the subtleness of the sea; how its most dreaded creatures glide under water, unapparent for the most part, and treacherously hidden beneath the loveliest tints of azure. Consider also the devilish brilliance and beauty of many of its most remorseless tribes, as the dainty embellished shape of many species of sharks. Consider, once more, the universal cannibalism of the sea; all whose creatures prey upon each other, carrying on eternal war since the world began.

Consider all this; and then turn to this green, gentle, and most docile earth; consider them both, the sea and the land; and do you not find a strange analogy to something in yourself?’

Herman Melville, *MOBY-DICK; OR, THE WHALE* (1851)



watch it swim
down into the
marrow of us
down so we
raise our heads
our chins kiss
the ceiling
gasping like
blood bags

the city's full
of broken doors
routine searches
putting a
proverbial
hand around
our proverbial
neck and telling
ourselves to
speak our truth

there is nothing
anyone can do
but watch
a teen roughed-
up walking
from school

when they ask
you where it
all began you
will say you
have no idea

Portrait of a Man Fitting into a Fake Suicide Vest

This story is a star shooting dead across the sky —
a cliché, I know, but by the time you see a man

slide polystyrene into the pockets of a vest
he is already dead. By the time the journalist

sees *maniac* trending, a jaw's swiped left.
It should feel snug, almost impossible to remove

the political from a message of condolence,
from the two seats lying empty beside me.

A Tesco bag is shaken across the bedroom floor:
a route marked black, a maggot-pit of wires,

Sellotape, clips, a pair of red-handled scissors.
It wants to be below the arms, flush, like a carrier.

A reporter's up all night collating material to stitch
this story: a displaced family, high school dropout,

prison stint, Mujahideen, on tag, the packaging
spits pebbledash across the carpet, a snow globe

cracked in a tight fist. It has to seem realistic,
like he grew round the back of an army barracks,

listening to boots chug, the slow ease of velcro straps.
It should feel like an other's skin until this story's in bits

spread across a bedroom floor. In this light it could
be an office suit, an armoured vest, a life jacket.

Rapid Eye Movement

Slapping a newsfeed from a daydream, a hundred pointing fingers, pushed from cars, hung from balconies, shouting *bloody hell look at that fucking guy* and I am trying to write a text, *hey babes how was the* — but it snatches an iris, the phone lit by a man made lunatic, a blade like a toothpick in the stomach of a spider, a can of scarpering legs, the figure swinging his chest like his heart is trying to speak, *we interrupt this broadcast* — pixels lather hot from a van, officers pouring into the road, passers-by covering their eyes with holy hands, nails in teeth, phones up, trending: ATTACK, trending: Prayers For — *what I can say with certainty is that no one had the slightest inkling that he could or would do something like this* — all the while, that song, a man wrestled to concrete, a knee on the vocal cord, I cannot stop hearing that tune, the crack of jaw, the pop of rounds in the closed mouth of a man that looks so much like me, that tune, I have to stop texting my girlfriend, feeding off the live feed, marvel at the blood flowing into the snicks of the pavement. Listen, that song, *life, it's bigger than you and you are* — not this body tightening, reaching for meaning but where is the meaning in Michael Stipe writing a song on religion when really it's a song about love and loneliness?

He says it comes from an old Southern expression for being at the end of one's rope, but it can feel like a calling: being tugged at the end of one's rope.

The Mother

Everyone was far away enough to be so close to being
two handshakes away from a hand waving *hi mum I'm*
on TV a man is describing what happened

isn't what happened to a girl who saw the whole
thing walking into Pret for a toastie sharing the body
how it jerks like it left the house and forgot its keys

in the doorway of a block of flats a woman crumples
when she sees how lost her son was wandering furious
in the morning after her firstborn is shot dead twice

once by a bullet second by a neighbour shouting
KILLER scratched on a car disappears in her head
aches when she sees her boy in the newspaper barely

man oh man her knees buckle soft into the holes
in his face look how they made a monster
of her baby shifts cold as steel under mortuary

light still lives with a mother in his bedroom
exactly how he left it, there, on the edge of a bed
she rocks like a hook through the cheek of a fish.