



SIYAHİ STORIES · 6 POEMS · A CEREBRAL DETOUR

# Proof of Life

*Six attempts to answer a simple question – what exactly makes you you – each one failing more interestingly than the last.*

SIX POEMS · ONE INTERROGATION · FROM THE SIYAHİ ARCHIVE

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“Proof of life” is a bureaucratic phrase, usually needed for a pension form or a hostage negotiation – some third party demanding evidence that you are still, in fact, you, and still, in fact, here. It turns out to be a surprisingly difficult thing to prove on your own terms, without a form. This is a walk through six poems – almost all of them English, almost all of them closer to prose than verse, which feels right, since this isn't really a mood you sing your way out of – that keep trying to pin down what a self actually is, and keep, admirably, failing.

## The first mistake is trying to become someone else

Before you can even ask what defines you, you have to catch yourself doing the thing that makes the question urgent: quietly filing yourself down to fit somebody else's finished shape.

In quest of trying to be like somebody, we always forget that eventually we were made unique. This quest takes us away from our own identity. When we completely transform and reach our destination in that quest,

become somebody significant — congratulations, your own self isn't left much now.

So try to grow as a unique identity,  
not to mold into an already developed stature.

— chasing someone else's finished shape is its own quiet erasure. By the time you arrive at “successful,” there may not be much of the original left to congratulate. Read “In Quest” in the book →

It's a clean warning, almost a public-service announcement. But it assumes you know what your own unmolded identity even looks like — and that's precisely where things start to unravel.

II

## Because the moment you go looking, nothing holds still long enough to be the answer

What follows are two poems that read almost like a stand-up bit and a checklist, back to back — one glib, one methodical — both arriving at the same wall.

The language you speak? I don't understand!  
The voices you hear? Make it more clear!  
It's just the gene bruh? But I'm wearing shorts!  
How true one is? Oh I lie a lot!

Well then the interaction? Ah that might be it...  
Oh the present emotion? That actually sounds lit...  
Hey, the current moment? It's passing so quickly...  
You're just an abstraction! That explains it pretty neatly!

— language, genes, honesty, interaction, emotion, the present moment — every candidate for “you” gets floated and shot down in the space of a breath, until the only thing left

standing is the least satisfying answer of all: you're just an abstraction. Read “The Language You Speak” in the book →

What defines "you" exactly?

Is it your body? But it ages everyday...

Is it your brain? But it develops everyday....

Is it your mood? Oh varies by minutes...

Is it the heartbeat? Oh rises in seconds...

People around you? How's that possible...

Place where you are? Come on, impossible...

What about your dreams? Those aren't real though...

And your past? Well that's dead no!

– the body ages, the brain rewires, the mood shifts by the minute, the heartbeat spikes by the second. Not the people around you, not the place you stand, not even your dreams or your past survive as a stable answer. Everything offered up gets disqualified for the same reason: it changes. Read “What Defines You” in the book →

Read together, these two poems form a pincer movement on the same target, from two different tones of voice – one playful, one clinical – and neither one lands a hit. Which raises an uncomfortable possibility: maybe the question was never going to have a stable answer, because the thing being asked about was never stable to begin with.

III

## Which starts to make sense once you notice what's actually in charge

If nothing about the self holds still, the next suspect is the thing that keeps everything moving in the first place.

The amount we are happy or sad about something, is all decided by time!

What a fucking insane power for a stupid construction that just knows one way to go, literally doesn't even know how to stop.

— how happy or sad we feel about anything is, in the end, a function of how much time has passed. An absurd amount of authority to hand over to something that only moves in one direction and has no idea how to stop. Read “Time” in the book →

This is the shortest fuse in the whole set — genuine, almost comic exasperation at discovering that the dumbest, most mechanical force imaginable is quietly running the emotional weather of an entire life.

#### IV

## And under time's rule, there's actually a shape to how much say you get

Just when the interrogation threatens to spiral into nihilism, one poem steps back far enough to offer something almost like comfort — not an answer, but a pattern.

We have the least control over our lives and the world around us before our birth and after our death. That part is obvious.

What's not so obvious is that even within life, this pattern repeats. When we are born, we have almost no control. As we grow up, our control over our choices and surroundings gradually increases, reaching a kind of peak somewhere in mid-life. Then, as we age, that control slowly fades again.

It's like a curve that rises from helplessness, peaks in self-determination, and then gently returns to surrender.

— no control before birth, none after death — and inside that span, a slow arc: helpless as a child, most in charge somewhere in the middle, and gradually surrendering control

again with age. A single curve, rising out of helplessness and quietly returning to it. Read “We Have the Least Control” in the book →

This is the calmest voice in the whole essay, and it earns that calm honestly – not by solving the identity question, but by reframing the whole search. If control itself is a temporary loan, maybe the self was never supposed to be a fixed thing you could locate and hold onto. Maybe it was always meant to be read as a curve, not a coordinate.

## v Which brings the whole search back to where it started, only wiser about it

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The closing poem doesn't answer anything either. It just widens the original confusion into a full inventory of human contradiction – and somehow that feels like the most honest ending available.

So easy to forget, but difficult to remember.

So easy to let go, but difficult to hold on.

Why are humans like that?

It's so easy to ask,

But difficult to answer!

So easy to speak, but difficult to listen.

So easy to interpret, but difficult to understand.

So easy to enact, but difficult to behave.

So easy to follow, but difficult to lead.

So easy to make a mistake, but difficult to forgive.

So easy to justify, but difficult to accept.

– forgetting is easy, remembering is hard; letting go is easy, holding on is not. We speak more easily than we listen, judge more easily than we understand, err more easily than we forgive. Why are we built this way? Easy to ask. Difficult, as ever, to answer. Read “So Easy to Forget” in the book →

*Six poems in, and the identity question is exactly as open as it was at the start – which, by this point, feels less like failure and more like the actual finding. The self isn't a fact you dig up and present as proof. It's a curve that rises and falls, an abstraction that keeps outrunning its own definitions, a contradiction that would rather be lived than solved. That's not a disappointing answer. It might be the only honest one.*

The Warning → The Interrogation → Time's Verdict → The Curve → The Honest Shrug

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**Siyahi** by Saumitra S. Phatak

Original poems in Hindi, Marathi, and English.

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