

Natasha Ali - Entry (Anamnesis)

Swallow, says the hawk. She gestures at the plate in front of me. It is grey, but then the plates are always grey. Our clothes are always white and starched and uncomfortable. Our stools are always cold when we sit on them, our feet grazing the colder floor. Variety is a rarity and yet it persists quietly, like the shafts of sunlight that crawl their way past the metal slabs covering the windows.

It still exists: today the pills are a lurid pink. Arranged against the dull grey of the plate, they look like the petals of spring flowers I haven't seen in decades. Yesterday, they weren't pink. They could have been tangerine or, perhaps, cobalt, but I cannot be sure. I never can. This is the problem.

I know that two hundred years ago, they believed our solar system played host to nine planetary bodies. I know that the old world collapsed a hundred years ago. I know that I wake up every morning to swallow pills that put me right back to sleep and that I have never been awake in the in-between.

What I do not know includes the following: what my parents look like, and whether they are alive or not; what month I was born in or, for that matter, what year; and whether or not I owned a cat or a dog or angelfish when I was a child, or if I ever was a child – I must have been, once, but I have possessed these aged bones and this paper-thin skin

for as long as I can remember. (There is a joke to be found here, if one looks hard enough.) – at all.

What I do not know also includes my name, although I do know that I have one. It is printed in block letters on a badge fastened to my lapel. I want to know it, but I am held back by knowing that only a fool would forget his own name, although that would mean that all here are fools.

Except for the hawks, of course, who are not bird-like at all except in their shrewdness. Officially, they are known as the Memory Keepers, but Francesca (or Francine, perhaps) two rows down used to say that it was a conspiracy. She swore that they knew nothing, just like the rest of us. She didn't say it quietly, either, which is why they took her away. I don't know where they went. I tried asking Alvin-on-my-left, who watches the hawks the way they watch us. Don't know, he whispered. That's the problem.

(That's the problem.)

You, says the hawk. She taps her nails on the tray, making a clicking noise. She sounds and acts like a robot and if I squint, sometimes she looks like one, too. She never smiles, at least.

Swallow, she repeats, and her voice is as detached as ever.

Emboldened by my memories, or by my lack of them, I hesitate. Why?

I told you yesterday, she says, and the day before. A sudden bark of laughter. I flinch. The others clutch their pills. Her palm sits on my shoulder, now.

Swallow, she says yet again. Calmly. It unnerves me. I am suddenly aware of sharp nails poised by my jugular, and so I do: I swallow.

I feel them slide down my oesophagus. I feel the sunlight recede, defeated.

Writer's biography: Natasha Ali was born in Karachi, Pakistan, and raised both there and in Brussels, Belgium, but currently lives in Riyadh, KSA. She is about to start her last year at a sixth-form college. The trials and tribulations of scientific research have always fascinated her.