What I Was Making When I Didn't Know I Was Making It

by Sarmed Mirza

I killed a sparrow when I was twelve.

I had grown up watching Westerns, Monument Valley the silent witness to it all. I played cowboy and Indian games alone in our garden in Rawalpindi. Then came an airgun, a summer to myself, and the particular certainty of a boy who has never yet done anything irreversible.

The sparrow was in the branches above. I turned the gun upward, held my breath, fired.

It dropped in stages, branch to branch, until it landed with a soft thud in my mother's manicured garden.

I walked to it. It was beautiful. Perfect. Except for the small hole in its head.

I didn't know the word sin then. Or karma. But I knew I had crossed a line I hadn't seen until I stepped over it. The rush of precision was already rotting in my chest. I buried it in the backyard. No witnesses. No mourners. Just me and the garden, and the quiet realisation that I was capable of extinguishing something that had asked for nothing, that never saw it coming.

I met regret that afternoon. The kind that follows you around like a loyal stray dog, always sniffing around, hungry for something. It will chase until you're out of treats, and it will still keep coming.

Years later I visited Monument Valley itself. Standing in it did something I hadn't expected. I came back and painted it obsessively

on small panels. I painted in realism, zoomed into the stone's own language, painted abstract movements with a realist's precision. Until something on the other side of that stone started pressing to get out.

I was a singer first, then an IT engineer who secretly wanted to write detective novels, then a BAFTA New Talent Award nominated filmmaker, then someone who fell asleep in his studio for three years, woke up on the floor, and found himself surrounded by hundreds of tiny oil paintings on two-by-three inch boards.

That is how ReGenesis began. Not with a concept. With a compulsion I couldn't name.

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I have undiagnosed ADHD. My brain does not move in straight lines, does not produce work on schedule. It produces work when something urgent and unnamed starts knocking the door from the inside, and the only way to relieve the pressure is to pick up a brush, wield a palette knife.

For three years I journaled obsessively. Wrote a book. Painted in the late hours. Slept on the studio floor when I ran out of energy to drive myself home. Not knowing what you are making is an honesty you cannot manufacture. No performance is possible in that state. Only the thing itself, coming through.

The micro-paintings came out of that period. Each one is two-by-three inches, oil on gessoboard, impasto, thick paint pushed and folded until it rises off the surface like something alive, something trying to escape or visit.

I painted a thousand of them. Each one a separate organism, each from the same inexplicable urgency. I would grab them before they fully appeared, in case they might disappear irreversibly.

When I arranged two hundred and four of them into a large grid on the wall at the RSA during SSA's 127th Annual, something happened that I hadn't anticipated. Viewers started to see creatures. Speculative life-forms. Landscapes from planets that don't exist yet.

Some saw paint before it has become anything, a blob on an ultrasound screen. They leaned in close to examine individual pieces, then stepped back to watch the whole field pulse. They stayed. They came back. They photographed it from multiple angles. One reviewer called it an attention magnet, and The National put it on the cover of their arts review. People told me it was their favourite piece in the entire exhibition. Others didn't give it a second glance.

I stood beside it and thought about the sparrow.

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I don't think art is made by deciding to make it, though I have tried. I think it is made by the accumulated pressure of everything one has carried and not yet resolved.

The sparrow I killed at twelve. The father who shot down my academic award by an American University because the certificate was for English literature and not the business degree he was paying for, and from whose suffocating certainty I eventually walked away, trading comfort for noisy roadsides and drenched monsoon beaches in India with nothing but clothes and a family photo album so I could miss everyone on my own terms. The wife from India I wasn't supposed to love. The brother exiled for protesting with a constitution in his fist. The Pakistan I left. The Scotland I landed in.

ReGenesis is not about any of these things. But it is made of all of them.

The title comes from a private language. Zero ground is the place after something has been destroyed and before anything new has been named. The micro-paintings are life-forms at that stage, not yet categorised, not yet named, still in the moment of becoming. Viewers project onto them what they carry. That is not an accident. It is the whole point.

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What I have come to understand, slowly and reluctantly, is that the work I make when I don't know what I'm making will always be the most honest. The sparrow taught me that you only begin to understand what you've done after you've done it. That the line becomes visible only once you've already crossed it.

ReGenesis was made by someone who crossed a lot of lines, buried a few things in the backyard, and eventually stopped trying to control what emerged.

And somewhere, a stray dog keeps following me around, well-fed and grateful, not realising it was never welcome.