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# GJLL

**Phenomenal  
Literature**

A Global Journal devoted to

# **Language and Literature**

A Peer-Reviewed Print Journal

Volume-5, Issue-2 | Jan – March 2021

Chief Editor:

Dr VIVEKANAND JHA

Associate Editor:

Dr RAJNISH MISHRA

Review Editor:

Dr CHANDRA SHEKHAR DUBEY

Assistant Editor:

Prof. SHASHANK NADKARNI



**AUTHORS P R E S S**

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**AUTHORS P R E S S**

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Q-2A Hauz Khas Enclave, New Delhi-110 016

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**PHENOMENAL LITERATURE**

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## POETRY

### 1

## Metaphysical Immigration

ALAN COHEN

At last we arrive at the border  
It took us a lifetime to find our way here  
We have no idea what is on the other side  
Another language, perhaps, another culture  
Another set of longings and laws, other promises

We only know we have lived here too long now  
Know too intimately these ways, our common ways  
And have come to dislike, or, at best, tolerate  
More than we embrace them  
We have done what we can do here

It may be our age now  
Some misplaced zeal, thrift, or disillusionment  
A passion for the new and unknown  
Why, to be frank, no longer matters to us  
We are crossing, setting out together again, starting over



## 2

**Flash Spacers****For the crew of the Challenger, blown up  
in flight on 28 January 1986**

ALESSIO ZANELLI

The countdown yet to end, the engines were  
ignited, smoke expanded. Space dreams back  
at home, secreted ones, along with fear,  
last wills, unsigned, and months of notes, a stack  
of abstruse papers scribbled on the sly

no one perhaps will ever find. The launch  
was smooth, about a minute feeling like  
the longest hour, all systems go except  
the final check. No beep, no glitch, no spike.  
The skyline bending quickly through the crew

compartment windows, stars appearing one  
by one across the vault, the daytime night.  
A few more seconds throttling up, and then  
the blast: the O-rings and the cold, the flight  
procedures and the wind shear, all of them

had played their part. Who knows if any doubts  
assailed the crew at liftoff: had they thought  
the mission was secure and they would have  
regained the surface safely? Sure, they sought  
no fame, just heaven, still the fiercest hell

burst out of SRB's. Their shreds dispersed  
among propellant spray, the boundless blue,  
and ocean waves. Star sickness branded on  
our wafting minds, lamenting seven who  
consigned their lives to OV-99.



### 3

## The Challenge

ANDREW SCOTT

How am I going to keep my self-respect?  
That is the question I constantly ask  
as this challenge has presented itself.

Like all, my world is changing.  
Consistently moving paths and plans  
causing mental fatigue.

Wish to walk with a high head,  
a pillar full of dignity  
that will not compromise.  
In my head, that is my wish.

Others are going through the same.  
Fighting an ugly transformation  
being brought by outside forces.  
I am in that battle too.

Anger is directed to the outside  
influences that are coming  
to manipulate my mind.

To stay as myself  
as this fight rages on.  
That is the ultimate challenge.



## 4

### The Sentinel

ANDREW SCOTT

Silently, I pray each and every night  
to the stars lighting up the dark sky  
that I will never see or feel your shadow,  
hear you incoming soft steps.  
You may be the enemy  
however you are a human being.

My job is to guard the sleeping soldiers,  
protect them so they wake in the morning.  
My troop is relying on me for this  
and I will ensure this does happen.

As you creep around our camp,  
trying to deceive me,  
I think you must have a family  
that you would like to embrace again.  
It is the same in our tired barracks.  
The troops have wives and children  
they wish to see and laugh with.  
My eyes will find your shadow  
and guarantee they will see their family.

Sadly, I have taken life,  
as I assume, my night crawler,  
that you have too.  
We both have a duty.  
It is not personal.

I have a duty that takes courage,  
feeling that you have the same.  
You are a person that is forced to be here.  
Remember as you sneak, so am I.  
I am the Sentinel  
that will not let you through.



5

**The False and Fake**

AVDHESH JHA

For you think, you know where you are, for you think,  
you know that you budge;  
Hey human, you are no more than a traveller, so travel alone,  
without any grudge.

For you think, you know what you are but for the fact you  
know not who you are;  
Hey human, if at all, do know yourself in the simplest way;  
to be that what you are.

Needn't bother about reputation or about what others think  
you could have been;  
If at all, think how humane you are, to help yourself be that  
what you could have been.

Praises don't add nor do humiliations subtract,  
its multiples and division are vague;  
For the fact, no one can praise, no one can humiliate,  
only if you know, it is false and fake.



## 6

**Golden Star****BEVERLY MATHERNE**

When I was in third grade, I loved Billy Martin.  
At recess, at bat, I'd hit the ball extra hard, extra high,  
To impress him. In English class, I diagrammed complex  
Sentences without a single error, and evenings, did  
My division problems perfectly, the number  
Of them more arduous than the actual solving,  
All that busy work and J.M.J. at the top of each sheet.

My little body, with all its might, wanted Billy to love me  
Back, Billy, my angel, my most golden star.

One school morning, his back toward me, Billy huddled  
with the boys, all of them snickering, not giving a damn  
about girls: girl athletes, girl grades, girl love.

Billy turned, looked me straight in the eye, then brandished  
My class photo, riddled with BB shots. The bell rang,  
A sword pierced my heart. Blood seeped through the heart  
Of my little-girl blouse, stained white roses I held in my  
hand,  
Blood, searing blood, blood of wounded Jesus, Mary, and the  
saints.



7

**Stairs**

BISHNUPADA RAY

up the hill stairs go  
in a journey of faith  
perky and obtuse  
embracing an inclusion

middle upwards narrower  
right, righteous  
and disciplining the weak  
with a fear of exclusion

near the top, acute  
in angular deviation  
requiring a leap of faith  
before the final elevation.



8

**External (Internal Thoughts)**

CHRISTIAN LOID VALENZUELA

I was just living, (but the history  
hostage us from the past; is it me  
or preserving the old ways just kept  
all the remnants of history – the pain,  
the loss, the illusionary triumph)  
am I?



9

**Undone**

CHRISTIAN LOID VALENZUELA

I repeatedly fail;  
all my blood turned into wasted effort;  
I kept on trying to be better;  
for myself and for them;  
But why do I repeatedly fail;  
hence, this is not over;  
I will repeatedly fail;  
I will repeatedly retry.



## 10

### Seaside Opus

DEBRA AMIRAUULT CAMELIN

I descend the stairs protecting fragile dunes  
and step barefoot into landscape art  
where the flat brush dipped in sea foam washes  
expansive sand canvas at low tide on Fundy shore.

I seek that thin stretch of beach cradled by cliffs  
of metamorphic rocks and impassable seaweed mounds  
and framed by undulating cobalt waves.

The persistent tug of moon creates watery currents,  
and ripples carve treed branches intricate, wild in the sand.

Elaborate imprints morph into a veiled forest:  
evoke sharp-focus landscape in Colville's style of magic  
realism.

Sage burns in the abalone shell propped on a rock,  
as I fan tendrils of smoke about my body  
cleansing away unwanted energy.

The cirrus clouds and oversized gulls eye shoreline  
akin to Michelangelo's heavenly frescos.

Whitecaps dissipate into waterlogged edges:  
rolling waves resurface into masterful blends  
of Monet's limpid blues and greens.

It is quiet here amidst the roar of the ocean  
and I pause to breathe in the fading scent  
of Indigenous medicine in the air.

The painting draws bystander's eye across the seaboard.  
I am the blotch of yellow blouse and blue jeans  
caught at the edge of the scene.



## 11

### Today and Every Day

DHRUV SOMAYAJULA

Every day, I wake up  
and stare at my roof.  
Another day to tackle,  
numerous chores to do.  
I wish I slept some more,  
I could have postponed today.  
But today would still be here,  
waiting for me to come.  
The days don't stop, the job goes on,  
It makes no sense; life won't wait for me.  
That's the way it works – this life,  
it's only my story when I am in it.  
Life doesn't go away, even if I do,  
So I may at least get to work.  
Take my place in this world and  
fight the battles myself today.  
I know this all, and I remind myself,  
Today is another chapter, one of many,  
I get to write my story today and every day,  
what more can I ask from life, than that I live it today?



## 12

### Ode to a Leaf Stuck on the Bottom of My Shoe

DONNA PUCCIANI

I discovered you late in life –  
yours and mine – after shuffling out  
to get the morning newspaper  
lounging in the frosted driveway  
like a hung-over torch singer.

We are all a bit jaded:  
you, me, the paper.  
You once shone green, then gold,  
now a dun, done-for brown,  
wrinkled and ready to become dust  
after this brief rescue. I peel you off my sole  
and thimp you damply out the door  
between thumb and forefinger,  
unwanted and unloved, a mere  
nuisance on my tragic Minnetonkas.

Oh yes, the newspaper.  
Once a harbinger of truth,  
betrayed by a circus of tweets  
and television propaganda, you are  
an anachronism, to be sure,  
and after my thirsty eyes  
drink up your vanishing facts,  
you head for the recycle bin,  
coming up next spring in sad daffodils.

I, too, am revisiting myself,  
the echo of past doings and undoings,  
a shadow-box in my inner museum  
of oddities that would titillate Cornell.

I ready myself for the dustbin,  
not quite discarded by sun, moon,  
tides and terrors, still unprepared, like you,  
to leave the bright colors of this world,  
the intimacies of friends,  
the sound of their voices singing,  
if only in my head.



## 13

### In the Woods

FRANK JOUSSEN

I needed time on my own,  
time to think my cloudy thoughts  
and smell the coming rain.

So I took a solitary walk  
in the woods.

No Robert Frost experience –  
not one horse, not two roads,  
no epiphany.

But the silently cried out wish  
that I could run,  
run, run home,  
wherever home might be.



## 14

### Deep Blue Anticipation

FRANK JOUSSEN

where are the songs  
that used to make my mind  
soar high into the sky  
or let my emotions  
sink deep blue deep  
into the sea?  
where is the book  
I can call my home,  
where's the painting  
I can walk into?

the song you sing  
may be your own,  
the book you love  
the one you have to write,  
and in the bigger  
frame of things  
you are already  
in the picture.



## 15

### Awakening

GERMAIN DROOGENBROODT

Through a crack in the night  
the first rays of sunshine peep in  
like mirages  
transparent clouds float  
along the heavenly blue  
the awakening word  
has to find shelter now  
the road to the light.



## 16

### Bedazzled

GERMAIN DROOGENBROODT

From the dawn he thieves the poppy-red glow  
and eye-blue from the ripple of the sea  
from blossom and bloom  
the intoxicating perfume  
and if sometimes the day  
leaves him with empty hands  
then he bedazzles  
with the wine of bygone days.



## 17

### Flowers and Bumblebee

GUNA MORAN

Flowers are not  
Self-promotion  
Of the flower plant

Flowers  
would bloom  
in scheduled time  
would wilt and fall  
in scheduled time

As flowers bloom  
Bumblebees turn excited  
As soon as the flowers  
Wilt and drop  
They turn indifferent

What a bumblebee  
Would understand  
What a flower actually is



## 18

### A Sonnet to the Past

JAMES G. PIATT

When memories begin to hastily fade  
Into the tedious darkness of skies gray,  
I fear sleepless nights will come to stay  
Into the absurdity of thoughts sorely mislaid,  
Erasing those prayers, I once had made:  
As hours unwind, and seem to go astray:  
As the moon spins its hopeful glow my way,  
I revel in the beauty of God's heavenly parade,  
And observe the glint of a rhyme being born.  
Oh that my mind could go back to that year  
To hear the sweet melody of that golden horn,  
Experience melodious laughter, and good cheer,  
And the euphonic sounds of mirth still unborn,  
Listening closely to those songs so dear.



## 19

**At the Beach in Summertime**

JAMES G. PIATT

I hear the ocean's roaring waves singing a briny melody as the tide's foaming whiteness visits upon the rocks climbing through the sand like ebony hands in prayer searching for redemption. As I look up high in the sky I see white clouds with beams of warmth streaking through them towards the sandy beach. Shore birds are running up and down the warm sand, digging into the mounds of kelp searching for tasty tidbits hiding below.

As I ramble slowly down the warm sand I notice clumps of twisted pieces of wood, and misshapen debris from downed ships. They were probably tumbled onto the shore by the rumbling tide, so old people like me could observe and wonder about their origin, and the reasons for their twisted shapes. There is a happy rhythm to a summer beach as the balmy breeze and heated sand warms past ocean memories into existence. There is a strange pulsation that causes me to wonder about the end of summer and start of fall, which will contain my fading memories of summer's pleasurable times.



## 20

### The Crosswalk

JAMES MULHERN

Today I saw a father and son  
stepping onto the crosswalk.  
I braked and watched them pass.  
Son on father's shoulders,  
headed to the park with swings.

I drove on, thinking of you  
and wondered why you  
never lifted me and held my legs  
or brought me to the swings.  
But you were not that type of father.

Once, we built a shed together.  
I heard you say at a family party years later,  
"Remember when Danny and I built the shed."  
But it wasn't my brother  
who cut wood and hammered nails with you.

I was bothered just a bit.  
I had other memories,  
like when you held my hands as we knotted my tie,  
how we both looked in the mirror,  
and I saw myself in your face.

You patted my shoulders.  
Someone crossed the room and paused to take a picture.  
It was on the table by your coffin. Your hands on mine.  
Proof that we had closeness for a moment,  
and that is enough.



## 21

### The Homeless Umbrella Man

JAMES RAGAN

He no longer walks his sack, hands  
wet along the bench where he sleeps,  
a hunchback, beneath a page of late news  
and a piddling hat, the odor of bird stains.

His clothes fit any season, hand-outs  
like his umbrellas, patched with oil  
cloth and grease to keep the rain out,  
to keep the smell of living

long his business at each door  
where for a dime, he begs to show his art  
of spinning parasols, of blowing up  
the ribs without a hitch or leak.

Umbrella man of a dying breed,  
His marble handles are pure antiques  
and well preserved like saddle hide  
in soap or ambergris.

Tonight at Mercy's Cancer Ward,  
he prays for the raining in his joints  
to leave his double-back and soul,  
for one embrace with a last-chance nurse

who once, for a slice of bread, he bartered  
the seduction of her middle class  
with hosiery, and with a matching  
parasol – rubbers for her feet.



## 22

**Spawn Season**

JAMES RAGAN

The light from a fire dies out.  
My girl whispers behind the doors  
to breathe in, to fall back into the stroke,  
and again the same pull of oars against kelp.  
Her same whole body rows without fault  
imagining a permanence to our embrace.

Outside, above the bin of cod scraped clean,  
a gull circles down to pick the scraps,  
crawls in, wings matted by fishbone,  
now settles near the whale's stripped spine,  
its hulk shelled like sand crystals.  
At night I dream scales around my skull.

In winter we build totems out of driftwood  
and walk the mound smooth, hands and knees,  
until we sleep alone where the ocean  
skins the corners of the boathouse.  
The jaws of dogs, barking waves on the run,  
drip with the juice of whalebone.

Even out of dreams we count our own  
body wounds, the deep blood,  
how the veins suck air into their sponge.  
We breathe fish odors, and watch  
how even mullets eat their young  
and beds we climb for leisure sound  
spooked by love-groans.

It will soon be spawn season.  
The air suffocates with flesh. It's the last  
Month of talking words still our own,  
and we celebrate with lovemaking, nearly  
out of skin, locking thighs in tune with radios.  
Soon the fish stalls will close. The flesh  
gone bone will rattle in the open bins  
like kettle drums.



## 23

### The Line

JEFFREY ZABLE

Hemingway said something to the effect that war brings out the best in men: camaraderie, courage, conviction...

Many years ago I had a conversation with a guy who was in one of my college classes, who told me he'd enlisted at 18, went to Vietnam, and fought in an infantry division.

He said that the Army, and his experiences in Vietnam, had made him a man, someone who understood life and would never take bullshit from anyone.

Believing what he said at the time, I felt that in comparison I was seriously lacking in character, confidence, and commitment, and whenever we spoke I felt envious and guilty that I'd never put my life on the line...



## 24

### What I Think

JEFFREY ZABLE

Certainly if I died tomorrow the only person  
who I think would be devastated, would be my wife.

I believe she would cry uncontrollably, and whereas  
my closest friends would be sad, I doubt that any of them  
would cry uncontrollably.

Probably, several of my former students, most of whom  
are now adults, would become teary eyed, but again I can't  
imagine that any of them would cry uncontrollably,  
though some might cry while watching me being lowered  
into my grave.

Does it disturb me that it wouldn't be overwhelming  
for others if I were no longer among them?

It bothers me a bit, ego-wise, as there are times  
when I wish I was more important to other people,  
but overall I've come to accept that I never really  
cultivated close, ongoing relationships with others,  
with the exception of my wife.

And so, I hope that I don't die tomorrow, as I think  
it would be something she'd not easily get over...



## 25

### Versified Intoxication

JOHN GREY

I sit at my desk  
like I'm up at the bar,  
disheveled. torpid,  
like I've a had a few subjunctives,  
metaphors and eye-rhymes  
too many.

And there's not even  
a bar-tender  
to tell my troubles to.  
Just a computer screen  
and it is my trouble.

I admit it, ok.  
I can't stay away.  
My name is John  
and I'm a poet.  
I've been clean now  
since...since...  
since I finished up  
that last poem  
five minutes ago.

There's no I can call  
to talk me out of this,  
encourage me to

go for a walk,  
or grab a book  
and head out to  
the local coffee shop,  
or, at the very least,  
try working in prose  
for a while.

The fact is,  
“Nobody loves a poet.”  
We lack self-discipline.



## 26

### Chaos

JOSEPH HART

“Guernica”, Christ! What can anyone do?  
Think of solutions. Get out of the fire.  
Madmen make nonsense of all that you knew  
Was probable, right. Even God is for hire.

Science reveals that the world is a freak.  
Lovable babies, endearing and new,  
Grow up to be bigots. And each time you speak,  
A man with a purpose shoots bullets at you.

The people you love are as foreign to you  
As sailors and Chinamen over the sea;  
Strangers. You talk to them. Each time you do,  
You’re holding a riddle, slippery, free.

You have no effect. And it’s useless to try.  
Nothing’s as sure as the love of a cat.  
Life is a promise. You’re starting to cry  
In futility. Nothing’s as futile as that.



27

Creation

KEITH INMAN

we drink from the same cup  
of nature's probability  
in quantum observation

an equation as beautiful as romance  
in the entanglement of what is equal  
to the square of the possible

an atom unobserved  
undeniably real  
divided by birth into existence

something born into light  
beyond conception  
a mathematics prismatic proof

life exists  
until it doesn't, a mass of force  
divided by matter



28

**Uttrayan, 2021**

**(When the Sun moves from Tropic of Cancer to  
Tropic of Capricorn; Heralding the End of Winters,  
in the Indian Sub-Continent, the Birth of Spring)**

**KUM KUM RAY**

Spiritual birth is through pangs of pain  
Sorrow aids the expression of the "Soul "  
Growth and pain go hand in hand  
Just as sorrows and joys  
Enhance each other....  
Dualities  
Both  
Essential, in the journey to the "Sublime"  
Beneath every pain and pine  
There runs a silver shining, silver line,

Sexuality and Experience:  
Progression and regression  
In a Man or a Woman's life  
Contain both Creativity and Negation  
May be even 'Destruction';

Yet Repressed sexuality fetters....  
Constrains.....  
The 'Meaning' .....  
The Purpose of the Divine  
Exuberance in the Beauty of "Union"

If, denied.....,  
May lead to destructive Ego:  
Sexual Depravity:  
Pleasure in Sadistic Delight

Wisdom, has its price to pay,  
Choices in the realities of Life,  
However refined,  
Overwhelming,  
Yet have to be defined.

Repulsion and Attraction,  
Hate and Love,  
Are, Contraries.  
Essentials; Must for Life.

Man and Women  
Have both, A Heaven and Hell, in themselves  
Each a Balance; has to find,  
For All Creation,  
Belongs Together  
Wisdom lies in that alone

The Land of higher Innocence,  
Then opens, it's Gates  
For One to dwell  
And tread gently, passionately,.....  
To the Ultimate Oblivion.  
And the Sublime



## 29

### Covenant Compass

LARAINÉ KENTRIDGE LASDON

You are trying to hold back tears.

You are afraid of being afraid

Boundaries buckle, tides suck back into moonlit shoals

Your eyes are as dry as Venus. A single lash snaps.

You are lost. Your compass has no North

The shadowed sea becomes red with an eastern sun

Your face bubbles with salt and foam

and freezes in the ice flows of the south

milk sap in your bloated breast, gently floats you to the West

You arch your back over chasms and mountains.

your hand reaches

your lips speak

no fathomless fate

at the mercy of the

serpent of Genesis

persuades your journey

Free will guides your compass

to the gleamed west sunset shards

towards acceptance and peace

closer to a faraway God



## 30

### Falling Sky

LORETTA DIANE WALKER

I watch a fat white moon hatch from an egg of darkness.  
Wonder if the air will peel the blackness from my body  
when I scrape against its invisible wall. I hear the surprised  
grass after softly landing on wild fields of bluebonnets.

A band of fire ants marches beneath the heavy beat  
of a spring sun in their red uniforms as the wind plays  
slow cadences. How far must they go before winter locks  
them below ground with its cold hands?

I want to see the day grow taller, watch spidery arms of light  
Web a clump of weeds struggling through a pile of stones  
in the back flower garden –  
pretend the horizon is a soft pair of hands like the ones  
my foremothers had before picking cotton, before digging  
into cotton sheets as cruelty was thrust into their bodies,  
and foul words tried to abolish the ghosts  
of their innocence. Am I a Falling sky?

I cry at the desperate chirping of a lost baby sparrow,  
its injured wing too fragile to lift it from fear.  
Maybe my tears are for all lost and fallen things,  
the marginalized, the troughs of hate filled with blood,  
an earth big with beauty and ugliness.  
I feel 7.5 billion bodies swelling with a desire for kindness.  
I can carry a country in my mouth.

Where shall I take it?  
I worry I will swallow the wrong flag.  
Maybe it's because I am a falling sky.

I understand the exchange between sun and moon  
each day after holding up the weight of their light.  
Even they know the mind needs rest  
from too much affliction and jubilation.  
Balance is glue, and I try not to hold  
onto what I cannot change or undo,  
dream an ocean of forgiveness.  
When I close my eyes, I am neither ocean nor a black  
woman, teacher, painter, poet – only a sky  
falling into a white so translucent there is nothing.



## 31

**Unforeseen Endings**

MICHAEL KESHIGIAN

An older man once lived here  
before our purchase.  
He was raised in this home,  
married and became a widower years later,  
self-exiled as a result of a menial pension,  
limited societal skills  
and the death of his spouse.  
It didn't end well for him,  
the neighbors say, always alone,  
downsizing to three rooms  
from eight that existed, enough to cook,  
sleep, and exercise his passion for writing  
in a six by ten area with a desk, chair,  
and computer as necessary tools  
to engage his thoughts  
between appointed meals  
that occurred at indiscriminate times.  
Dishes were piled until the end of the week.  
Stuffed in desk drawers,  
we found printed pages of returned manuscripts,  
identified with his name and address  
atop five to fifty lines of various poems,  
tri-folded, but extended flat,  
no longer restricted to an envelope,  
the second drawer, a file,  
compiling a record of those efforts

no longer imprisoned in the first level.

It seemed a lonely story

identified by isolated artifacts,

a story neither one of us considered

would become our own.

A home withered then released by time,

as if severed by an axe

from the expectation assumed

at all beginnings.



## 32

**Nights in Cummings Cove**

MICHAEL KESHIGIAN

Those nights illuminated by the moon  
whose white dagger severed the wet surface,  
highlighted the stalks upon Gypsy Glen  
which stretched off the shoal  
into the crooked air  
and the lake wore a tarnished chink  
upon its silver armor.  
The tall pines, stilled by the sheen,  
waited till their presence  
faded back to distorted disfigurements  
to acknowledge the breeze.  
The cold air was always crisp  
and smelled of wild roses  
that circled the shoreline,  
exposed as the moon's silver eye  
adjusted its stare toward the brush  
and patches of mulch  
gingerly caressing the lapping lake.  
On nights such as these,  
he would gaze at the cottages,  
nesting beachside, their lights flickering  
in night's magnificent isolation.  
Little did he suspect  
that this moment of adoration,  
the opportunity to commune,  
would become a longing  
that would follow him.



## 33

**Virus in the Air, Spasms in my Back**

MICHAEL LEE JOHNSON

There's a virus in the air, but I can't see it.  
People are dying around me, but I can't save them.  
There are spikes pierced in my back,  
spasms, but I can't touch them.  
Heartbeats, hell pulsating, my back muscles,  
I covet in my prayers.  
I turn right to the left, in my bed, then hang still.  
Nails impaled, I bleed hourly,  
Jesus on that cross.  
Now 73 years of age, my half-sister 92,  
told me, "getting old isn't for sissies."  
I didn't believe her –  
until the first mimic words  
out of "Kipper" my new parakeet's mouth,  
sitting in his cage alone were  
"Daddy, it's not easy being green."



## 34

### Leaves in December

MICHAEL LEE JOHNSON

Leaves, a few stragglers in  
December, just before Christmas,  
some nailed down crabby  
to ground frost,  
some crackled by the bite  
of nasty wind tones.

Some saved from the matchstick  
that failed to light.  
Some saved from the rake  
by a forgetful gardener.

For these few freedom dancers  
left to struggle with the bitterness:  
wind dancers  
wind dancers  
move you are frigid  
bodies shaking like icicles  
hovering but a jiffy in the sky,  
kind of sympathetic to the seasons,  
reluctant to permanently go, rustic,  
not much time more to play.



## 35

### To Be Born

NATALIA FERNÁNDEZ

I was born from moss and stone  
from salt and coal,  
while you were born from a rough land  
disdainful of your wings.  
I was born from myself with effort  
while you were fighting to be born  
from your greatness.  
Cartomancy deceived you:  
You were not insignificant as a microorganism  
but big enough  
to fit in the fingerprint  
of my emerging moss.  
I was born to welcome you.  
You were born to be welcomed  
to be called by your name  
when life entertains itself by painting clouds  
and improvising storms.  
We were born to be born.  
We were born to born each other.



**36**

**Empty bottles**

NILAMADHAB KAR

It looks like  
You are holding on  
To the empty bottles  
And standing in the rain,  
Hoping one day  
These will be full  
To quench your thirst



37

**Drop that veil**

NILAMADHAB KAR

I wish you share all your woes  
With me, but you hide away even your  
Happiness, joys and pleasures  
An iota you don't part for a moment  
All your attempts to veil your emotions  
Fail miserably, and it all shows  
Through the windows of your heart

Drop that veil,  
It doesn't help you hide anything  
As I see all your interior  
And more. The veil just exposes  
Your intentions. Drop that veil, and merge.  
Make peace with yourself, and be your  
Own natural self, and remain assured,  
You have nothing to hide!



38

**Humming Birds**

PANKAJAM KOTTARATH

Seeing the tiny bird, the tiniest of all,  
the ruby throated humming bird  
flying with wing whistles  
like a wandering vagrant,  
lapping nectar happily  
with short buzz, trills and chirps  
and vocalizing notes to attract mates,  
my nestled memories take wings.

Seeing them fly forward and backward,  
at times shifting to sides  
even stopping in midair;  
I wonder  
if I could be born as a humming bird  
I could have given slip-ups to my Mom  
while chasing me with a stick in her hand  
for teaching me strict etiquettes as a girl.



## 39

**Confession of the Poetical Firefly to  
Muse-Butterfly of Poesy**

PAWEŁ MARKIEWICZ

You must excuse me. You dear dreamer!  
I have overly felt my dreamery about Golden Fleece.  
I built my small paradise without any other ontological  
beings.

I based the dreamiest sempiternity on tenderness of my  
wings.

Thus. I painted my wings in color of an ambrosia.

Withal: I liked dew of dawns for the sake of elves.

I loved too much the wizardry of mayhap meek Erlkings.

I had to read many fairy tales of the Winter Queen.

I have enchanted your night rainbow.

I have become a magician of dawn.

I loved the Morning Starlet – the propitious Venus.

I collected all shooting stars after a dreamier night.

Excuse me. My dear butterfly  
fulfilled in same afterglow  
and bewitched by lights of moonlit and  
starlit nights!

Let us dream over night!

Unto an epiphany of first

angels of red sky in

the morning.



## 40

### A Warning for Mind

POOJA VIJAY

Always follows me without any fatigue,  
When I'm tired, becomes more energetic  
and starts scolding with blabbering words.

Hey don't you have another path?  
You will be hurt when came behind me  
Because it's a way of thorns and pits  
Where I'm compelled to walk blindly,  
And hurts by piercing with thorns.

When I'm in darkness, comes with  
The devil face to frighten me  
Not helpful in a worse situation  
And urges me  
To take a wrong decision.  
At sometimes pretty good  
At sometimes pretty bad  
Acting opposite to the situations.

Should act as positive  
And as encouraging  
To build a flowing life  
Without obstacles  
And remember this is  
My final warning to you!



**41**

**The Shakespearean Lure**

RAJIV KHANDELWAL

Holding you  
In the crook of my arms  
I run my fingers  
Over your heft and shape

Intoxicated

By your face  
Dotted by shades  
Of black and white  
And wallowing  
In the unique aroma  
Wafting from your body  
I revel  
In the prospector's pleasure  
Of owning you one day



42

**Gravediggers**

ROGER G. SINGER

soft dirt foot print  
on a fresh grave,  
a death bed  
of brown earth  
and a few  
small stones,

shovels lean  
on a wooden shed  
where inside  
two men play cards,

soiled fingers  
sweaty shirts  
the odor of work  
in their hair,  
they snort  
and spit  
rising slowly  
cursing the heat  
and the dead.



43

**Park Bench Poet**

ROGER G. SINGER

he sees ghosts  
and speaks to clouds  
while sneering menacingly  
at people and dogs

church bells nearby  
ring out praise  
and guilt

clouds knit together,  
breezes circle

salvation walks  
backwards  
sometimes  
retrieving the  
innocent while  
rejecting the  
poor



**44**

**After the Funeral**

SARAH BROWN WEITZMAN

Now going through the house  
and my parents' lives  
too revealed by what they saved

and what they left behind  
for me to find, I feel nothing  
but pain for the past

trying to understand  
how I fell so short of what I intended  
to do with my life.

How life twists and turns  
against us. How a childhood  
is not really understood

until it is lived a second time  
in memory. How wonderful  
and how terrible

it seems now  
because it is gone  
and because it was mine.



45

**Manic Adoration**

SCOTT THOMAS OUTLAR

O God, I want to be overwhelmed

by something sweeter than  
the sour grapes  
of harvests past

by a symphony sung  
from the lips of a choir  
that has cast out all sirens

by a single shot  
of adrenaline  
not manufactured in a lab

O Lord, I wish to be consumed

by the maddened cry  
that heralds laughter  
beyond sorrow's edge

by the howling scream  
of a righteous wind  
come fiercely

by the final plunge  
into a vast expanse  
promising vistas unparalleled



## 46

### Gertrude Stein, facilitator of change

SUNIL SHARMA

You heralded the experimental and radical via your Parisian  
salon, ushering the change in taste and perceptions of a jaded  
bourgeois public:  
to curate what is/will be, and, remain long; the dominant of  
the global art scene – the modern.

An expatriate, a Yankee, self-exiled woman, in the bohemian  
city, soon a centre, the centre; hosting on Saturday evenings,  
the shapers of thought –  
Joyce, Picasso, Hemingway, Pound, among many, who  
altered the way of seeing old things.

You talked art with men only, more than their equal in a  
gendered society. The sole arbiter, and, a lady oracle  
predicting trends to come,  
guiding the art and literary movements into the serious  
conversations.

Reversal of roles in a haughty male-world of writing and  
painting, with you, as the vanguard!

“The Lost Generation” christened in your home!

Wish you were reborn in this century,  
to separate the shallow from the  
substantial of the mass industry hungry for profits and  
conformism.

To inaugurate the bold, fresh and new, revive the pale-faced,  
anemic art,

Come back,  
return dear Stein – to revitalize!



47

## Unleashed

SUSAN P. BLEVINS

Will you not unleash  
your carefully hidden beauty  
for all of us?

Will you not unlock the music  
of your heart and soul to your  
fingers on the keyboard?

Will you at last untether yourself  
from your self-imposed chains,  
the expectations of others?

Just let go and fly with your heart  
as your guide, your mind un-locked  
at last from your iron grip.



## 48

### For You

SUSAN P. BLEVINS

Do not weep  
do not anguish over scenes on a screen,  
words in a newspaper

Remember only that to the extent that  
our light shines forth, so to the same  
extent is darkness vanquished.

We are all called to be bearers of the  
divine Light, to choose the path of  
Consciousness, to awaken one another.

We cannot change the world,  
we can only change ourselves.

If we can touch just one life,  
bring beauty, truth and light to it,  
then our life has been worth living.

Let us rejoice at our understanding of  
the need for peace. Peace begets peace.  
Joy is contagious. Let us remember,  
we too are the Way, the Truth and the Light.



## SHORT STORY

### 1

## The Popess of French Letters

ALBERT RUSSO

Concerning the world of publishing in Paris, I have to recount an anecdote which I have experienced firsthand. Some will find it unbelievable, even outrageous, yet it is true, and this can only happen in France, the country of *étiquette*, *savoir-vivre* and refinement, for I have never seen or heard of such a story in the other cities where I have resided for a short period or traveled for the promotion of my books.

I was invited to a Salon Littéraire in the 16th arrondissement, near the Place Victor Hugo, held in the sumptuous apartment of la Marquise de la Frangipane.

The Marquise, a handsome Lady with short-cropped red hair coiffed à la garçon, wearing a long dress in silver lamé, reminiscent of *Les années folles* (1920s), which suited her longilineal figure perfectly, greeted us with elegance and kindness. She was a close acquaintance of our dear Anne de Javel's. It was the latter who introduced us to her.

The vast lounge which was decorated with moldings, two French Empire crystal chandeliers, had two wings, separated by a long wooden panel which enclosed two magnificent pieces of stained glass, representing a hunting scene. The pannel opened like a door, so that the guests could easily pass from one wing to the other, and you could join

either group at leisure. On the walls of the first wing hung a number of small classical sketches and masterpieces, while the second wing was graced with paintings by Tamara de Lempicka (my favorite here) and those of living French artists, such as Jules de Balincourt, Bettina Rheims, or Bleak le Rat – ok, ok, he is known as Blek le Rat, here I'm not joking), a graffiti master.

We were served luscious petis-fours and warm croissant stuffed with shrimps or crab meat from Le Nôtre, along with an array of softdrinks, red Bordeaux, Bourgogne, white Alsace wine or a glass of Veuve Cliquot champagne.

La Marquise was both an art collector and an avid reader, and she deemed that nothing was too good to honor the authors of contemporary French Literature. Indeed, she didn't stint on the quality of the food and the wines she served her 'protégés' and their admirers.

What I witnessed in this salon belongs to La Comédie Française, not the prestigious theatrical institution, but the real Parisian salon life of the twenty-first century, opened to a few select individuals, whose freakery I now discovered with amazement.

When the buffet was served, an army of avid fingers flew over the croissant and the sandwiches, like a flock of scavengers, grab as grab can; people with so-called food manners, shoving each other for all they were worth, as if to forestall the Great Famine. I stood open-mouthed before that scene, and waited for all the predators to leave the table, before I went to get scraps of what was left: a couple of shrimps that had fallen from a croissant, half of a buttered sandwich, which still contained some crab meat stuck to it, celery stalks, a few cherry tomatoes and cheese cubes, scattered here and there, left as flotsam. I gathered other

jetsam, arranging it as neatly as I could on two small plates, and offered them to Margo and Anne de Javel, who winked at me knowingly. She apparently wasn't surprised at the assault.

I left my two muses, chatting and giggling, as they were watching what was going on around them, and decided to spy on some of the guests that struck me particularly by their mien or their grimaces.

Like that woman with puffed up cheeks, holding a glass of champagne, who had just spoken with an author, praising his work, and who was now re-joining her little group.

"What he writes is on the level of Harlequin, I don't understand how he got that literary prize!" she smirked.

Then that elderly 'beau' whose face was leathery and crumpled, said in cue:

"He must have fucked his editors, men AND women, to reach this status."

Another man, a well-weathered critic, added sarcastically:

"Don't worry, I'll tear him up in my next article. And he shall bleed."

But all of this I was expecting in one form or another. What left me non-plussed, totally flummoxed, was what I saw and heard in the second wing, the one with the modern paintings.

At one corner sat, slumped in a deep, round sonic armchair, a troll-like middle-aged female. She wore a greenish yellow – aptly called caca d'oie in French (goose shit) – very short sack dress, which didn't flatter her flabby stomach, as she might have expected. Her fat arms and calves were more porcine than human, especially since they were of

a light pinkish color. Her hair was sticking out every which way and had the appearance of an old and worn toilet brush, as if her hair-dresser had left his job unfinished. She had no makeup, no ear rings and no jewel, just a bracelet around her left calve. But what really shocked me was that she sat with her fat legs spread wide apart, and you could see a dark shadow, for she wore no underwear.

“Who is she?”, I asked my direct neighbor, discretely.

“Oh, so you don’t know her?” he said, looking at me, with a patronizing grin. “You don’t know, Bertha Frimont, her holiness the Popess of French letters? Where have you been educated, young man?” he added scornfully, and walked away, shrugging his shoulders, while mumbling “another plouc! (a yoke)”.

My curiosity was piqued further by what happened next. Said Bertha – she bore that name well and it reminded me of my history class, when we learned all about WWI. The Big Bertha was a huge German cannon, standing in the outskirts of Paris, and pointed at the French capital – was smoking with one hand and holding a glass of red wine with the other. She juggled with the two, drinking, smoking, then sipping again. Her gestures seemed mechanical, as if remote-controlled, so rapidly they followed each other. And from her bulging and swimming eyes, you could see that she was drunk.

A young guy of about 25 to 30 lay half sprawled at her feet. His boner was apparent through the maroon flannel pants that hugged his long legs. He too was holding a glass of wine and, every now and then, they clinked their glasses. When she opened her mouth, in between the drinking and the smoking, you could hardly understand what she was mumbling, it was so inarticulate. Then, all of a sudden, she

placed her sandaled foot on the guy's boner and, in a surge of sudden awakening, she cleared her throat and said, this time very clearly:

"You have the ambitious teeth of a real writer. I like your lupine face. Come tomorrow to my office and we shall sign a publishing contract."

"Er ... Madame," the boy said, "I haven't started my novel yet."

"Shut up and come as I said to my office, we shall arrange things. Now scam before I change my mind."

"My gosh," I thought, they have just met. "She must be an avid consumer of young male flesh."

Blushing, but excited like a child to whom his parents promised a wonderful toy, the boy got up and almost ran out of the room, lest the spell be broken. I guess he left the Salon immediately thereafter.

If all that wasn't enough, Frida drowned her cigarette butt, tossing it into the now half empty glass – it must have been her ... tenth, at least.

Her fat fingers loosened and the glass tumbled to the floor. Seconds later she was snoring and grunting like a real sow. I was about to leave that incredible scene when oops, I noticed the trickle of piss that started to flow along her left thigh, and soon, that trickle became a stream, giving a louder thud, as it reached the parquet floor.

"NO, this can't be possible, god NO!" I repeated to myself, shaking my head with disbelief, "and she is the Popess of French letters!???" I won't tell anybody about this, not even Margo or Anne; they wouldn't believe me. But some day, when that troll will have left the literary scene, for surely she won't last very long, gorging herself, drinking and

smoking the way she does, I promise to put down what I have just witnessed into one of my books. And my future readers will conclude what they wish, whether they believe it was true, or just the figment of a sick imagination. LA PAPESSE DES LETTRES FRANÇAISES!



## 2

# The Tree in My Bathtub

DJ TYRER

I'd bought one of those bars of soap that comes with beans in it, intended to massage you as you wash (and, boy, did it feel good). Of course, I'd seen those posts about the beans supposedly lodging in drains and sprouting, but hadn't paid them any attention, assuming them to be no more than the latest urban legend.

A week after I first used that soap, I went on holiday. In fact, I took the bar with me on holiday, although I guess that's not really relevant. I was away for a week and, when I came home, I noticed a couple of shoots protruding from the plughole. I couldn't believe it; I'd really thought it was just a myth. I mean, you wouldn't imagine a bath's plughole was the most hospitable of places for a seed to germinate, but...

I tugged the green shoots up, but obviously left the beans themselves behind, for, the next day, two more shoots had replaced them. I snapped them off, but they grew back again. So, I decided to leave them in situ and pour some bleach down. Unfortunately, that didn't seem to have any effect.

The shoots grew larger and gained several leaves. It was a nuisance as it was definitely blocking the plughole, the water taking an inordinate time to drain away and a small scummy ring would remain around it for hours.

I tried weed-killer next. I must have poured a dozen bottles down the drain, to no avail. I was probably endangering my life more than the plants: Who knows what toxic cocktail of gases was fermenting down there?

Well, I was at a loss as the little plant grew into a woody weed. It seemed as if I was going to have to pay a plumber to remove the section of pipe it had rooted itself in. Still, I had a business trip coming up and decided to deal with it when I got back.

When I got back, however, I was in for a shock: What had been a weed about three or four inches high was now a bushy shrub about three feet in height. I couldn't believe it; I didn't need a plumber any more, it seemed, by a lumberjack. It was ridiculous!

Not that I did anything about it. To be honest, I was too embarrassed to have anyone else see it. I mean, what would I say? "Hi, could you landscape my bathroom?" I contemplated buying a strimmer or something, but I've never had more than a window box, so wasn't sure where to start. Besides, every time I'd weeded the plughole, it had grown back, so what reason was there to assume taking an axe to it would be any more effective.

So, I left it. I started showering at the gym – for the first time ever, I was glad I still had my membership. I kept the shower curtain pulled tight across the bath to conceal it, but I could see the silhouette growing bigger every day. It was no longer a shrub, but a tree: there was a tree in my bathtub and its branches were causing the curtain to bulge outwards and protrude over the rail. Pretty soon, it would fill the entire room.

I pulled the shower curtain back and found the space behind it was a solid-green mass of leaves. I couldn't see the

trunk of the tree, nor could I actually see the bath it was growing from, branching having spilled over the side towards the floor. It was as if a hedge had been transported into my bathroom. The roots must have extended right through the building's plumbing in order to support it. Soon, it would fill the entire room and, then, it would burst through the ceiling and into the flat above.

An axe wouldn't cut it, despite the pun, so I went out and hired a chainsaw, one of those big petrol-powered monsters that sounds like a motorbike. I filled it up, then fired it up and realised there was a damn good reason you're supposed to wear ear-protectors as well as goggles, especially when you're using it in a tiny bathroom.

I set to work and twigs started flying, but it seemed I was doing no more than some basic topiary. The mass of the tree was like iron and even the beast of a chainsaw didn't seem to be achieving anything other than filling the room with the stink of petrol fumes.

It was going to take something more. I'd heard of people using dynamite to get rid of tree stumps but, well, that seemed a little extreme in a confined space. I thought about it for a while and reached a decision: it was going to require fire.

Now, you may be thinking fire was a little drastic, even in the circumstances, but it was a bathroom and what's a bathroom full of? Well, okay, this particular one was full of tree, but a bathroom has plenty of water. It really didn't seem like too much of a risk, not with water literally on tap.

I'd bought an additional can of petrol for the chainsaw, so I fetched it and splashed it all over the leaves and did my best to pour it in amongst them. Then, I fetched some newspapers, crumpled them up and pushed the wad in

amongst the leaves to act as a fuse. I took out a box of matches formerly reserved for the eventuality of power-cuts and lit the paper. The wad blazed to life with a sudden intensity that caught me off guard. I stumbled back in surprise and banged my head against the wall: I was stunned for a moment.

The paper smouldered and it seemed like I'd made a mistake. Then, there was a whoosh and the petrol ignited. I was attempting to stand and failing as wooziness overcame me, when the flames spread to the door. That wasn't supposed to happen, especially as the room was filling with smoke.

Somehow, I managed to stumble to my feet and I lunged for the basin and turned the taps on. Water spurting out and I emptied the toothbrush from the glass that held it and filled the cup with water and tossed it at the blazing tree to no appreciable effect. I tossed another and another, but the fire just seemed to grow worse and the room was filling with smoke and seeming to spin.

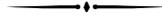
The glass fell from my hand and shattered. Then, I seemed to be falling, too, although into what seemed to be a bottomless pit rather than to the floor and, a moment later, everything went black.

Somehow, I survived. I've no idea how and nobody has been able to tell me. My flat was gutted, as was the one next door and that above. Everything was blackened and stank of smoke and was soaked from the firemen's hoses. Apparently, I was in much the same state when they found me.

My neighbours weren't happy with me. Not just those whose flats were burnt out, but those who lived below, whose homes had also been soaked. I tried to explain why I'd done it, but nobody seemed to believe me. Some people

seemed to think I'd been trying to kill myself, while others thought I was just plain mad. It seemed there was no sign of the tree when the fire investigators finally went in; I can only assume the flames totally devoured it. (They certainly seemed fierce enough to have done so.)

So, here I am in this 'hospital' undergoing assessment. But, that's what happened; it's the truth. And, to think it all began with a tiny bean implanted in a bar of soap. Still, the massage effect *did* feel good.



### 3

## What They Knew

ERIC DREYER SMITH

Mrs. Petersen knew what they were doing up the road. Mr. Baum had a good idea, too. He was the town baker and although he worked a lot he still heard the rumors. Then the people who worked up the street began ordering bread from him. He resisted hearing the rumours firsthand as fact from the people who worked there, but soon realized that listening to their stories was a part of doing business with them. He had to listen to get their money and they seemed to have to tell their stories. Therefore, it was not long before Mr. Baum really knew.

The children of the town said ghosts lived up the road. In a way this was close to the truth, but children do not know everything.

Mr. Kappel prayed for the longest time that it was not true. But when enough people said it was true, at least enough for a reasonable man to wonder if it were, then he prayed even harder that it would pass soon. When rumours blossomed, he prayed as hard as possible that they would be forgiven. Kappel worked at the church and it made sense that at least some of his prayers would be answered.

Mrs. Huber was a teacher and quite educated. She believed history was repeating itself. The logical conclusion would be that revenge would be taken. She felt ashamed, but kept teaching her lessons. She knew what was going on up the road.

Mr. Schuster pretended for the longest time that he had no idea what was going on. He knew the ones in town who liked to talk about it. The ones who bragged or condemned what was happening and he avoided both groups assiduously... He never walked up the road or looked in the sky toward that direction. When the workers from there came to town, he disappeared. The whole thing, from the very beginning, had been too big for him. He was one man. He knew there was nothing he could do.

Mrs. Koch was proud of what was happening. If anyone deserved this, then it was those people. She knew they could not get away with what they had been doing. They had been doing it for centuries and now they had to pay a little. It was only fair. What else did they expect for doing what they had always done?

Mr. Farber was more practical. He figured that it was better that it was happening to them than to people like those who lived in the town. This was the logical position. After all, there was a war going on. Something had to be done to ensure internal security. Those who were not our friends could easily become friends of the enemy. The people kept up the road were never our friends.

Mrs. Vogt was horrified by what was happening. The thought of it grew in her mind daily. Why had they chosen a place just up the road to do such things? The terribleness of it was seeping into her skin. She could not sleep. Then her daughter accidentally died that summer. Some combination of this and that wore down the thin wire that was left of her mind, and she snapped.

Mrs. Zimmermann would often ask rhetorically at coffee: who was she to care what happened? No one had elected her the boss. At times it did seem a little insane to her,

but then again so did a lot of events. All things that happened in times such as these were bad. It did one no good to dwell too much on matters one could not control. This was wise philosophy. Besides, governments were always doing questionable activities.

Mr. Meyer thought about protesting. He made inquiries of others on the matter. No one responded favourably. He began thinking of ways he could get the place up the road closed or perhaps moved. He thought for a long time, but when he got no support, these thoughts remained thoughts and never became an idea. He never did get an idea before it was all over.

Mr. Thalberg was so old when this thing began that honestly his mind did not understand it. A few friends tried to explain it to him during conversations, but to no avail. It sounded like fantasy to Mr. Thalberg – the very little bit he understood of what they were trying to tell him. Were they talking about Hansel and Gretel? Did they think he was a child?

Mr. and Mrs. Fleischer were so stressed that this was happening so close to them that they did not have sex for seven years. They could not avoid the matter since the workers from up the road relied on their goods. Those workers insisted on telling their stories. It was profitable and maybe morally necessary to listen. Someone had to attempt to absolve the confessors. Someone had to play heaven's ear.

Mrs. Brandt was certain there were two nations within the country. It was divided between those who fostered what happened and those who would never have taken part in such business. Basically, the party system in the country justified her interpretation. It was the ones with guns who

made this happen. She was part of the other group. This knowledge consoled her.

Mr. and Mrs. Henrich never favored what was happening, and especially hated those in charge. They knew justice would come. All they had to do was wait. While they waited for justice, they sneered at people who seemed to support the activities up the road. When it was over, they were proud they had kept such a low profile through it all, and they continued to sneer.

Mr. Dreher kept concentrating on the time when the rumours were merely whispers not loud enough to be truly heard. If new thoughts came, he mumbled to himself to drown them out.

Mrs. Oster knew it was all her fault. She lost seventy pounds during those times.

Miss Schreiner saw opportunity in what was happening. She made it a point to marry Mr. Burger during those times, and came up with the idea of the town specializing in new goods that the workers up the road would need. She cleverly arranged for shipments on the new trains that were arriving. She and her husband made lots of money.

Mr. Busch lived in personal horror the whole time, since he recalled a family story that some of the hated people held up the road were his ancestors. He worried that a scientific method would be developed that would discover him.

Mr. Franz ran away and joined the Resistance. Mr. Bohm wrote a book about it one day.

Mr. Weissmuller thought if he never saw the gates up the road, then no one could ever blame him.

Mrs. Ritter made herself happy by forcing herself to vomit.

Mr. Furst one night silently murdered a drunken worker from up the road.

The Barth sisters played cards so much that they had no time to think about it.

Mrs. Pabst insisted the place up the road was merely a bakery.

Mr. Gerste kept saying, "It could not be."

Mrs. Lehrer thought the workers from up the road were nice and that they must have come from good families.

Mr. Nacht tried to move away, to get far away from it, but he had so little money that he could not. He was a prisoner of those people up the road and was always angry about it.

In the end, a few people did move away. The town waited. It went on with things. Things would change since many of the old died forgetting, and the young were born before they could remember.



## 4

### Dinner by the Sea

JEVIN LEE ALBUQUERQUE

Makara had only been on land for three months, best three months of my life, and then she was gone, but I'm still dreamin', lost in my own sea, swim, snore, tongue swallow, gag, cry again wake up, front yard tangled in x-miss-tree-lights, sandwiched between manikins painted green, red, flamingos, reindeer woven in sticks, shrub yawn to the arrival of earth worms by the dozens, whiskey bottle still in hand, cold, earth worms tickle fingers, bare foot, only one, one shoe on, neighbors walk by, head shake moments in time, weathervane rooster raucous, landlady-artist "accidentally," sprays water in my direction, mirrors, make my way up, back down driveway, sea of life splash art studio where I live, suffer, but it is nearly the first day of spring: rebirth, purity, cleansing. How many chances does one get? ibuprofen, water, kombucha lemon-lime embarrassment shower. Landlady-artist, from deck of art-house over rosemary shrubs, "Don't forget Ganesh, it was her favorite. You should know that. Good luck, make sure you bring back my art!" dog of a thousand spirits at her side, bark-blessings, I'm out the door, past buddha statues, suns, bright yellow, cut out of wood, purple butterflies, made of metal, colorful fish, green-wooden-geckos-grin, prayer flags play, sage in the air, quick-eye humming bird, humming to a chorus of blackbirds, I pick up 60lb cement Ganesh, painted orange, patched in broken mirrors, pack-up-Subi, rosemary down the Big Sur coast

reflection, lost in colorful mosaics of march-on to win her back from the sea.

My hand thumps to the drum pound, boom, boom, boom, sacred three count toward Big Sur, Ganesh staring back, through rearview, I swerve, try to make statue fall to the side, cement, stares, trunk trumpet, kind of blue, at my expense, the ocean tease tantric blasts of sunlight reflect Ganesh mirrors, sharp fragments of light rotating planetary through my interior, direct ocean light glare, blinded, by a woman who somewhere in the abyss swims freely to jazzzz-whales, porpoises play, sharks, fishermen toss gold overboard for a glimpse, blond hair flow in the waves, saffron eyes change with the tides, snap-jaws, hind legs kick, splash water, peacock feathers, into the deep, my mind descends, a blind fish, only now able to see, this could be my only opportunity, harsh reality sea, a world known only in stories, pilgrimage, cemented in myth, my mind unravels, marvels, ocean slap shores, rocks rise, mountains rise, the sea rising, the highest tide of the year. Boom. Boom. Boom.

Waves, tides, currents, flow over sacred rocks where I fish for Lingcod, Cabezon, Rockfish, bottom dwellers, in the muck, green meat to white over fire, head full of words, colors of the gods. Rearview, Ganesh eyes calm, lost in the boom boom boom. I wind along coastline, nearing site of hope, Soberanes, rising god of earth, vigilant of all who pass, crush those who cross, rules of the deep, etched in caverns of abalone caves, siren centers, sinners sent to tuna nets, plastic consumption only, currents of human waste. Jazzzz-up, Ganesh's eyes open, blue, trumpet, *tah-tah-tah*, tappin' orange toes, squirm away from cement prison, red hibiscus garland, blowin' in the wind, through side-window to sea, Soberanes in the rearview, nearing my destination date with the gatekeeper.

I press the pound sign, ring the sea, restaurant below, wrought iron gate standing profoundly, guard cliffs, ocean,...and after some static, Ganesh eye roll through the rearview, "Crane?" I holler. "Yeah, is that you?" "Who else?" I respond. "Don't get smart," and the buzzzz, gate open, "I hope you brought your wallet," through speaker static, as I serpentine my way downhill to restaurant perched exotically over rock ledge, cliff, deep-green tide pools below, angelic hues of blue-water rush over rocks, spring into fresh parking lot, only one car in lot, jeep, mud on tires. "Bout time," says Crane, front of restaurant, stompin' about, sailor's hat on, checks over shoulder, out of habit. Sweaty face into passenger window, "Who's that in back?" he asks, shaking his head. "Kinda creepy, João, but hey, you are all set, I put everything beautiful in the shed, and the meals, in the freezer, you have some de-thawing to do, and don't get locked in there, knowing you. Nice dinner jacket. Didn't you wear that for your wedding?" "You know I did." "You know I dated a Makara?" He steps back: "O love of angel's tomb...land or sea." "Yeah, you read it to me." "Ok, fine, and about your six-month bar tab?" spits, looks away. I pull out plastic ashtray, stack of bills from coaching soccer, cash money, "here's your money, bar-tab, storage... And, thank you." "No problem," worn hands accept cash. He looks up to grassy hills, hovers over canyons in anticipation, "Should be a good moon, should shine," flying back, broken, "I wish you the best, drum down there, below the arch, might a played a little," he says, tapping twice on the door, on his way. "Thanks," I tell him, stop him, turns around, tears in his eyes, nods, off to jeep, kicks a tire, cranks up Opera, *La Bohème*. "Make sure you shut it down on your way out," peel out.

*Oh, to have this place to myself, alone, alone, alone, hope she will come back, on this sunset, on this moon, beginning of Spring, a*

jolt of energy up my leg to Ganesh snicker, I flip rearview up and out of view, but hear cement chuckles as I park, slam on the brakes, sending Ganesh slamming into my seat, small mirror shooting forward into the sunlight reflect, *You got this*. "Don't go anywhere," I tell Ganesh, knowing I'm weak, afraid to look in mirrors, door shut, key-beep, lock Subi, to shed, check on supplies.

Upon entering, mirrors abound in fish, suns, geckos, all from the imagination of land-lady-art-house, I begin the hike down rocky terrain, a clean trail for tourists, winding down to sketchy rocky rocks, a rope I already slung across where I can hang chimes; rock indentations for mirrored creations to be placed, lures, reflect light to the deep dimensions, demons rise up, but you fight back up the hill for chimes, mirrors, clank walk back down, decorative rope attachments for the love of wind, rocks up rise in mirrors, already clang, clank, metal shimmers, in the afternoon sun meditation, *don't get lost, keep going*. Back up the trail tuna, out of the freezer to de-thaw slowly on steel counter, spaghetti kelp with sea urchin meatballs, mussel-sea anemone soup, starfish crackers, sea snails, calamari-octopus tangle shrimp paella garnished with sea urchin, and enough appetizer *pa amb tomáquet* with herring to get the show on the road, awaiting the emergence of our table on the low tide, I take in the power of tide, turn, look at grassy hills, rising up behind me, trying to invoke the moon, over canyons of trees, fierce rocky coastline, ocean hissing back in *Dvořák* ecstasies, countering the mountains, never to be outdone, Makara, never to be outdone, *you must win her back*, I scamper back down to edge of the sea, scaling rocks through cave, to harness energy of ocean, rush up, flirt feet, a common heightened sense from years of fishing the edge; quiet tide pools behind me where we met, Makara rock, a hundred feet above, where seagull, talons clipped my hair,

near knock to my death, knocks Makara, spirit rattle rib-cage, blue eyes, hair to her thighs, in pools, gentle waterfall seduction waves, wash white skin, breasts shine in the sun, legs bare, in ecstatic feminine-divine control, controlling your every move, you move to the drum, strike, boom, boom, boom.

And back up to shed, retrieve birds, made of glass bottles, wings, beaks of metal, hang from the rope, in the arch between rocks, ready for flight, I face hundred-foot rock shaped like a Makara, pointed to the sea, a cathedral of rocks all around, caves, and the tide unveiling the surface of the table, solid black like Portuguese marble from my father's shop, through water glisten-green abalone legs, provoke tears, but I'm below the arch, back up the trail, ignoring emerald pool to the side where we swam, made love. One step, the other, to the boom boom boom, over vast metallic sheen, holding on, in fading light horizon.

Tuna de-thawing nicely on steel table, white wine, abalone, sea lion whiskers, dipped in olive oil, to sharpen the senses. "*Detallitas,*" she often said, influenced by time in the Mediterranean sea. *Ok, you got this,* walk back more items, brightly colored sun, legs like an octopus, loud yellow, smiling greeting, mirrors reflect love only, no time for rain, moon must shine and through the arch the table reveals green seaweed beards, dripping off black slab; when I scurry down rocks, step down sacred three steps, the table is silhouetted against the horizon, only visible on this tide, on this day, this is the day! Another trip, up and back, the fish: wood cut-out pink, splashed in yellow, purple, blue eye, beautiful lips for kissing, making people happy; smaller fish, rockfish-like, pink, yellow lips, expanding eyes, mirrors, and perhaps a wink.

I stand at the edge, an art shrine at my back, reflecting, the table now a foot out of water, waves splash sunlight, clouds move in, out, in the balance, strike the hide of drum, boom, boom, boom, echoes through the caves out over the sea, cries, moving life in the deep, I know she can hear me, echoes in beauty of chimes, musical notes on a line, boom, boom, boom, the table sloshes with water, barnacle beautiful, legs dotted in aqua abalones, a sacred resin holding it together, we will be together, eat like royalty, ancients, who gathered on Makara rock scale, I wind around, hand grip, and up, around on top, Makara head facing the sea, I scan, whispers of fishermen who've tossed a line from a hundred-feet up, Japanese tell stories of the deadly Habuuuu, lightened by a hook-up, glimpse of a Makara; Indian fishermen meditations Ommmmm; puffs of yellow, blue, saffron, aqua-green; Filipino laughter, stories of great boats built by hand, other stories of suicide, over a Makarahhhh; cigarette cartons from around the world in plain view, etchings, so beautiful, I smell remains of tobacco, slide into metal sheen horizon, undulating to movement of creatures from the deep, my message is being received, peek over Makara rock, the table, three feet to the world, sparkle, in sun battle with increased clouds, I see a Habu, corner of my eye, disappear in chimes, happy fish bubbles, and a cacophony of mirrors, a searing sound, cuts, ripples water, back-down, one step at a time, careful of Habu hangouts.

Sun beginning to go down, worn arm to the boom, boom, boom, I step down sacred rock steps, stare, sexy-red-backed chairs in sunset splendor, walk plank, reefy, toward table, ankle deep in water splash; whole tuna presented proud on table, seaweed dotted with sea urchin meatballs, herring, whiskers dipped, in olive oil, *de Andalusia*, displayed on pa amb tomáquet, paella in the breeze, current, tickle the

senses, invoke Makara mantras, to cloudy skies splashed in sunset magnificence, await super-moon, lit-travel trail behind, to pools where we loved, rebirth, childbirth in the air, table, legs now exposed, abalones like spicy high heels, splash, sexy-sophisticated, silhouettooos, once a year at best, this my best, mirrors flicker across sea, reflection to all who can see, feel reverberation art, love, the love I miss. Step, splash, step. Boom. Boom. Boom.

“If you want me back, wait for the low tide, create, something of my ceremony, and maybe, just, you will be lucky, but the sea, it’s always the sea, identity is our challenge, who are we really? right now, I’m going back to the sea, but my heart was with you, until it wasn’t,” as she rushed out the door, leaving a peacock feather behind, I twirl in hand, scratch face, a sunset now blunted by clouds, a desperate moon, trying to create. “If the moon is right, I will join you, I have no choice, such are the wishes of the cosmos, now pour me another cosmo,” memories, delight spirit, only communicate in spirit, sip-wine, and she is gone, waves splash red chair where I sit, dampen black velvet coat, satin red interior, red-grey collar pop, champagne ready on ice, flutes, mighty table set, sunlight over ocean, feast, direct, laser show of mirrored light at my back, lures of seduction, for my goddess of the sea – Makarahhhh.

Retreat. Lapse, laps of waves, rush over sacred steps, block access to green bearded table in tears, tuna burnt by the sun, crabs, scaling abalone legs, to feast, at first I fight back, but hope is fading with the light, moon refusing to shine, darkening sea, sunset relegated to distance, far right, trying to hold on, trying to help, herring picked off by seagulls, who dip off Makara rock, opportunistic, eyeing my hair, spaghetti wilted, long gone, gestures of whiskers, anger sea lions who swim by, show teeth, splash whiskey, splash tongue, touch of

waves, crush red chairs, low tide a blessing in hell; I will not have joy, deprived in the very sky that offered promise, a day now, without the sun.

Tide slide up feet, I'm drunk, think of slip into the sea, bonk head on submerged table, instinct, is to control death is to...back away from wave, frightened, I scramble to remove green geckos, mirrors minus moonlight, suns, chimes, slung over back, the weight of art! up the trail, flicker, light on in the restaurant, seagulls, gull overhead, out of sight, no moon in sight, I step, one, the other, sad eyes swollen, stop, whiskey out of backpack chimes over shoulder slung, slugged, toward dark hills, candlelight, inside restaurant, fire-hazard, I didn't see; shed art-items, run toward the flame, door locked, through back door, past freezer door, to the sight of Ganesh smothered in seaweed, belly filled, laughter, mirrors reflect light through the interior, speakers, blue train jazzzz, sea water on floor, Makarahhhh in sequin gown, fit body, blond hair flowing...turquoise eyes, to dance of peacock earrings, entice, click abalone heels, glitter in fractured mirrors reflect: "You should have known it was my favorite," she says, Makara sliding smooth hand over Ganesh, trumpet, belly, feet, and after a breath, red-gills exposed, "lots of things you should know, this is not easy for me, you don't understand, but you will... I love you, on land, in the sea."



## 5

### A Long Fall

JOHN ANDREINI

*Rock a bye baby, on the tree top,*

The pediatric ward was in emergency mode trying to save the life of three-month old, unresponsive Kendra Schwarz.

*When the wind blows the cradle will rock,*

Kendra's parents were already at the hospital for their daily visit with their baby who was being treated for a heart deformity. They stood in the hallway clutching each other and crying amid the blizzard of activity.

*When the bough breaks, the cradle will fall,*

Twenty minutes later, a sweat stained, somber doctor pulled down his mask as he approached the parents. He asked if they would like to be with their baby one last time.

*And down will come baby, cradle and all.*

Four bedrooms, two-and-a-half baths, renovated kitchen and finished basement. Brianna Lundberg repeated the details in her mind like a child's poem she'd memorized as she pulled up in front of the two-story Craftsman in the pricey Laurelhurst section of Portland. She turned off the engine and stared at the immaculate house with its precisely coordinated yard of colorful flower varieties and mature roses, a large maple on one side and three birch trees on the other. The siding was red with extensive white trim and an arched portico leading to the front door. It was all so perfect

and inviting, and Brianna envisioned herself opening that front door to friends for holidays, summer parties and meetings of the Rose City Run Club. After an ugly divorce from an abusive surgeon, depression and six months in an apartment complex of screaming children and dish-rattling hip hop, she deserved something good in her life.

It took three tries, but Brianna managed to punch in the lock code the realtor had given her and retrieve the front door key. Taking a deep breath, she unlocked the door and walked into the house. The beautiful wood floors immediately captured her attention, and then the openness of the living space and the cutest fireplace and.... She twirled in place like a ballerina as she felt herself falling in love. The kitchen was next, with new high-end appliances and then the two main floor bedrooms, finally hopping up the stairs to take in the master bedroom and bath and the other bedroom. It was all as perfect as Brianna could imagine and she regretted not having the realtor with her so she could start the paperwork. Once more through the main floor rooms and then down the stairs to the finished basement. She inhaled the lingering aroma of paint as she descended and was instantly impressed with the neutral colors and freshness of everything. On her left were two doorways, one to a small room that could either be an office or guest room. As she stood in the threshold, Brianna heard a toilet flush. Then, the door at the top of the stairs shut. The bathroom door opened and a woman came out, freezing when she saw Brianna.

“Whoa. What...are you a realtor?” asked Esme Alvarez, a Latina with obsidian black hair draping over her shoulders.

“Uh, no. I came to see the house. My realtor had an appointment and I wanted to check out the place so badly I came over by myself. You?”

“Same, only my realtor said his baby was sick. Wow, this is kind of weird. Huh?”

Brianna looked up the stairs. “Well, what’s even weirder is that someone closed the door up there just now.”

“What?” asked Esme, with a mixture of bemusement and irritation. She brushed by Brianna and hiked up the stairs in her pencil dress and heels, the runner Brianna envious of her sharply defined calves.

“Jesus Christ,” Esme shouted from above.

“What?”

“Look. There’s no doorknob. What the fuck is that all about?”

Brianna shuffled quickly up the stairs and was confused by what she saw. “What the hell is this? Why isn’t there a knob here? There’s always a knob. Right?”

For the first time, the two women really looked at each other. Brianna, a baseball cap on top of her shoulder length brown hair, wore an old boyfriend’s Beatles, “Yesterday and Today” T-shirt, jeans and lime green Crocs, and Esme, in full make-up, a clingy, satiny red top and short skirt, both of which Brianna could tell were expensive, and three-inch heels. The situation had them both temporarily at a loss for words, but that didn’t last long.

“Hey,” shouted Esme. “Open the fucking door.” She pounded the door with her fists, and Brianna followed her lead and pounded too.

“Open the damn door,” screamed Brianna. The women gave the door a few more smacks and stopped to listen. “Anyone there?”

“Help. Let us out of here.”

They stopped again, their ears to the door, but heard nothing.

"I can't believe this," said Brianna.

"What's going on here?" Esme asked, but Brianna could only shrug.

"Come on," said Brianna. "Let's see if there's any other way out."

The women stood in the middle of the main room revolving like slow motion dancers.

"No windows," declared Esme. "How can there be no fucking windows?"

"Why is this happening?" pleaded Brianna to the ceiling, arms up and beseeching. "Phone." She pulled her phone out of her back pocket while Esme went to her purse. "Fuck me."

"What?" asked Esme, as she rummaged through her large bag.

"No bars. No connection."

Esme tapped on her phone with perfect red nails and an annoyed expression. "How is this possible? I'm supposed to be back at the firm for a two o'clock deposition."

"I've got a pre-op for a four-year old at two-thirty. People will wonder what's going on. Did you tell anyone you were going to look at a house?"

"Mmm, no. Just took a long lunch hour." Esme dropped her phone back into her purse. "You?"

"My sister in L.A. That's it."

"This is whacked, for sure. I need to sit down. I'm feeling overheated."

“Who is doing this?” demanded Brianna. “And what the hell are they doing it for?”

“I’m a criminal lawyer and I don’t have a clue except that people are hell a crazy. Who’s your realter?”

“Jerry Overstreet.”

“Jesus Christo.”

“Really? This is too freaking weird. Jerry couldn’t be doing this. He’s not....”

“Listen, too often it’s the ones you least expect.”

Brianna fell back into a chair, put a hand to her mouth trying to hold back tears. “What’s he planning to do to us?”

“Nothing, if I have anything to say about it. You’re a pediatric nurse. Right?”

“Yeah.” Brianna was confused by the quick topic change and not remembering she’d said anything about paediatrics. “Why?”

“That has to be a tough job. I mean, seeing babies in pain and...dying. I couldn’t handle that. Not in a million years.”

“Well, you don’t really ever get used to it, but you find ways to cope, and we help so many children it’s really rewarding in the long run.”

“But the ones you don’t....”

“Don’t what?”

“Help.”

“What about finding something to hit the door with...like a battering ram? Two of us might be able to do it.”

Esme nodded and the women began pacing around the den, when Esme called from a far corner.

“Hey. I didn’t see this before. There’s a door here.”

"A door?" Brianna went to Esme, who stood with her hand on a brass doorknob. "Who has a door in their basement?"

"Sometimes there's a door leading out to the backyard. Let's see where this one goes."

Esme took a breath and pulled open the door. Brianna got shoulder to shoulder with her companion, who was radiating an unusual amount of body heat, and looked down a dark flight of stairs. Brianna found the switch and lights popped on. The women leaned in, straining to see where the stairs lead.

"Down? From the basement?" asked Brianna. "To where?"

"Only one way to find out."

The two women cautiously descended the stairs and at the bottom found themselves standing in a long rectangular room with floor to ceiling shelves of food and supplies on the left wall, a kitchen area, two beds and a small bathroom. There was also a folding table with chairs, and on the table were two glasses and a full bottle of vodka. Brianna looked at the room like a little girl on Christmas morning.

"Wow. A bomb shelter," she said, verbalizing her thoughts. "Who has a bomb shelter in this day and age?"

"Oh you know, the survivalists. The ones worried that the government they voted for would come and take their guns." Esme walked to the long shelf of food. "This one is very well stocked. Mmm, Deviled ham."

"Look at this," said Brianna pointing to the table. "They must have known we were coming. Join me?"

"I'm there, Chica."

Drinks were poured and glasses raised and the women grimaced at that first harsh gulp of reality. Brianna shuddered.

“Whew. That was...harsh,” whispered Esme.

“Gets better after that first shock.”

“Does your religion help with your job?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, when a baby dies, does your religion comfort you?”

“Not trying to be rude, but you seem very interested in dying babies.”

“I am. I mean, I’m interested in how you cope with such tragedy.”

Brianna took another drink. “You come up with ways. They are such precious little things. Warm and sweet smelling and so completely devoid of evil or hate. They are literally angels. I’ve asked myself a million times why God made babies so vulnerable, so delicate, when there is so much disease and violence and ignorance in the world. It’s not right. Not at all.”

“It isn’t easy to accept. I know. Sometimes, don’t you want to end their suffering?”

Brianna set the glass down hard on the table and frowned. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Can’t drink on an empty stomach. Let’s see if they have any crackers.”

Esme went to the shelves and ran her index finger along each row, checking labels, while Brianna watched her, feeling unnerved at this point.

“What law firm do you work for?” asked Brianna.

“Ah. Here we are. Sesame seed. That okay with...” Esme’s attention was drawn to the far end of the room. Walking a few feet in that direction, she stopped and examined something on the floor.

“What is it?” asked a now flushed Brianna.

“Just a minute.” Esme bent down and picked up a handle, then pulled open a door in the floor. “What the hell?” she asked.

Wozy Brianna got up and went to investigate this new mystery, standing next to Esme and staring down a black cement well with metal rungs descending into the darkness. “Nope. Not going down there. Uh, uh.”

“Wait. It might be a way out. Stinks, doesn’t it? To me, that means it goes down to the sewers. The sewers could lead us out.”

“But this...wait. Sewers? Big enough to walk through? In the suburbs?”

“No telling where we are now, Nurse Brianna. Right? Come on.” Esme kicked off her heels and started descending into the abyss, but Brianna went back to the table and took a deep gulp of vodka from the bottle. She looked back toward the hole and knew something was wrong, the earth was off kilter, but took another drink instead of further scaring herself. “Hey,” shouted Esme. “You coming?” Brianna considered for a moment shutting the door and locking it, ending the very odd partnership once and for all, but there was no other way out. Bottle in hand, she wobbled to the portal and looked down. “Hey,” shouted Esme. “I see a light. Hurry up.” Another drink and she set the bottle on the floor. Does Esme really see a way out or is she lying? The darkness called to her, invited her in, and knew her secrets. Drunk and afraid and tired, and having no hope for redemption in this

world, she stepped on the first metal rung and then eased herself down into the void.

The air was cool and putrid, like rotting things worse than garbage. Brianna tried to hold her breath as she went, but the odor seeped into her pores and forced her to gag. The physical task was not complicated, one foot down, let go with opposite hand, repeat, but her perception was off and she had to go slow to keep from missing a step and falling. It was like she was descending into a pool of ink, darker than with her closed eyes, and frightening not to know if she had feet or miles to go. Tears escaped as the uncertainty of it all became too much, and she stopped, using one grimy hand to wipe her cheeks.

“Hello?” she called out, her voice echoing up and down the hard-sided tube. “Esme? Where are you?”

“Keep going. You’re almost there.”

Esme’s voice was comforting, but it was disembodied and sounded far away. Brianna moved at a quicker pace, concentrating on her coordination as her arms began to tire from the exercise. She stepped down once more and her shoe met solid ground.

“Esme? Where are you? Little help here.”

A light burst on nearby, a spotlight from the ceiling opening like a white cone over the floor.

“Over here, Brianna,” came Esme’s voice from the darkness.

Swaying now, her vision blurry, Brianna held on to the last rung of the ladder for stability. “What’s going on, Esme? Where the fuck are we?”

“Come over here. Then talk.”

"I can hear you fine from here. There was more than alcohol in that vodka."

"Helps you forget, though. Doesn't it?"

"Forget what?"

Esme's voice seemed to be coming from different directions, as if she was moving through the darkness or part of the darkness itself. "The babies, Esme. The babies."

"Babies?"

"The ones that died."

"Show yourself, coward."

"The ones that died under your care."

"Shut up, bitch." Brianna wobbled toward the chairs, fight in her eyes. "You don't know anything about it. No one knows."

"I know it's complicated. You thought you were helping. Doing good."

Brianna stopped at the chair and gripped the back angrily. "I was! What is this? Where are you. Stop hiding in the dark."

"We're both in the dark."

"What the fuck does that mean? Is this some kind of You Tube bullshit? And what's wrong with helping them get to heaven? Some would have died anyway and the others would lead horrible, sad lives. I did the right thing. Doctors make life and death decisions like that all the time...and, and dying people's relatives. Why can't I?"

Black silence. "No one gave you permission."

“Stop it,” shouted Brianna, putting her hands over her ears. “Stop it. God gave me permission. You can’t judge. Why am I here, you sadistic bitch?”

“You’re home now, Brianna.”

The ceiling light went off. The emptiness was complete and suffocating. The sound of bare feet on cement. A door closed.

“I’m sorry?”

“She’s gone. I’m calling it. Time?”

“Three Twenty a.m.”

“What a mess. Poor thing.”

“Falling 23 stories will do that to a body. Okay, let’s go people...”



## 6

### Sanctioned Tyranny

M SHAMSUR RABB KHAN

I am in an inferno, dark, dingy and dreadful: day and night, every minute, I sense I am descending down to the invisible darkness, double punishment and the grave injustice; though mosquitoes are many they just sting the inflamed, bruised spots. In just three days, I have lost my world, and here in this dungeon, I writhe in pain, unbearable pain, but I feel my pain is the pleasure of the world. Are we Homo Sacers to be killed at will? I weep at my bruises and wounds, my loneliness and helplessness; I remember abuses, slaps, hits and hatred, and then frustration and fury. No one listened to the voice of sanity; I cried out but not in a loud voice since a loud cry means an equally severe slap, vengeful torture; so, I must suppress my pain within me like a boiling volcano. I squat, my elbows upon my knee-joints and hands upon the head, teeth squeezed, shivering to feel the parts of the body that was not smacked with a hardrod or rough stick.

Our brave police officers, even of higher ranks, were active participants, encouraging cruel crowd to fire more terrible missiles, kill more innocent humans, and now in this dimly-lit cell, they are authorized to unleash the brute force upon a normal human like them.

“Where did these savage beasts come from?” I asked the concrete wall.

“Are they protectors of the citizens?” I screamed at the floor.

That was the night with so much terror, explosions, gun shots, arsons and cries, and I had to abandon my aged parents who got suffocated in smoke and fire. Where is my little sister? In fact, so many sisters? When the dust settle and smoke subsided, vultures perched on the dead bodies, dogs began to bark and flies swarmed on heaps of corpses; the desolate streets were so haunted, and then came the police force with a dizzying rapidity and with a fresh countenance; now victims are accused and perpetrators are free; that was the terror hunt with which we have been attacked, and I boiled with fury when one villain-looking policeman dragged me out on the road, not paying the least attention to my monumental losses, and my cries and pleas.

“These mother-fuckers need tough treatment”, one of the officers hurled abuse with hatred.

In the darkness I see devils and witches of terrifying bodies; I see the head of the devils, Yahuda, sitting in the middle of the ocean surrounded by millions of his followers like obedient apparatchiks. This Yahuda, the ugliest of all, the meanest of all and the cruellest of all, is a born genius, an impromptu orator, player of words, brainwasher and wily enchanter. He speaks too much, and this time he spoke thus:

“This race is our arch enemy, and so we are theirs, and we will not secure redemption unless we destroy this race, kill them wherever you find them protesting, kill them whenever you spot them begging, and kill them for whatever they speak against us”. In quick time, all the devils, pregnant with new missionary zeal, fly towards different directions, towards human dwellings and societies. A sudden thumping echo alerted me and put me back to my present woes.

There is a bomb in my mind. How has a bomb taken shape in my mind? Innumerable questions have coiled into

an oval form while the voids were created via unanswered spaces. Only questions! Whole night, night after night, the nervous agitation or suppressed fury and the lone cell – these are the new colonial isolations, the tyranny of the new fascists. The wounds and worries get multiplied by the middle of the night: so many innocents are no more; there were young, old, men and women; houses were gutted and precious goods were robbed or burned. At the peak of worry, the mind boils: encounters, arrests, suspects, terrorists, jailed, lynching, thrashed, nabbed, gunned down, missing, traitors, threatening or savage, brute or molesters – these are the words, the troublesome words on a daily basis. Now I experience another set of words: helpless, hapless, defenceless, powerless, leaderless, luckless, and directionless; the burden of such words gave birth to protest, to reject and to oppose. Can anyone feel our misery? Perhaps no one; only the hungry can experience the hunger and naked of clothing. Our young lots are in irreparable depression, our ladies undergo psychological tremors, and our children remain sick and silent. Where shall we go from here? Isn't it so heartening if the neighbours are hostile? I hear voices, simultaneous voices 'unwanted'; I cleared my ears.

"Do you hear dear Prime Minister?" I cried at the top of my voice. I stood up in the invisible darkness and addressed the void. But does he listen? Whom does he listen to?

"Those were the ladies you turned your back upon them; they were like your mothers and sisters, and you remember you projected as their champion, but perhaps when someone toes your line you give your ear and smile; else, you act like a silent enemy".

Simmering anger pushes for revenge, but then I gulp the fury down to my stomach; the heart burns and anger tastes bloody and bitter, and the sleep fights the multiple injuries.

The devils are so colossal and ruthless; guns, goons, mobs, chairs, rulers, killers, rapists, police, army, judges, courts, and media, the intellectual terrorists – all are on the other side, the power side. So, I tried with my hands in the air to measure the balance; it sounds, I argue, fair if a tiger fights a bull, but does it sound just if a tiger attacks a lamb?

“Dear President Slump, your predecessor did not act like that. Can you go for an adventurous attack on Moscow or Beijing? Your Trush knew Kabul was so feeble and Baghdad was blabbering. In all your sound and fury Mr Slump, you acted like a nervous racer before that short, bespectacled Kungfu”.

But why go far? One boy cries and cries but no mercy, the crowd hits and hits as if he is an invalid object, devoid of flesh and blood, even though he is dead, the savage vultures caned, smacked and kicked. Is this our proud culture? One man on the road screamed like a slaughtered goat when monstrous beasts rained nonstop hits on his frail body as if they were thrashing paddy on a rocky platform.

“That was terrible culture, my Lord! That was cowardice, dear countrymen. We are human, dear Prime Minister! Don’t you think so? Your men, dear sir, speak foul, emit poison and hurl threats, and you stay silent, and they are safe in x, y and z security while innocents are slapped with draconian laws”.

I hear someone speaking: where are we? Not in Parliament, not in Cabinet, not in Assemblies, not even in offices; we are on the road, which is the most unsafe place on earth. I was in my room that was burned down. So scary, so demonic that I still feel shiver down my spine; those terrorists, horrible men, many of them came like cheering devils, or a curse from the sky and the police behind them

and they thundered lightning and explosions. The hellish noise, the death bells, and the whole night macabre dance continued.

“God! How can you be so cruel? Cries, screams, shrieks, wails, sobs and tears; the monstrous laughter, cries of victory and barbarous fanaticism. Aren’t all this enough to move your benevolent Self? Frail and ailing elderly men and women howled for help; children hid under the bed, young and middle-aged on the roofs and young girls in fright to save their bodies, but the mysterious neighbours turned hostile, took to firing while many broke the weak door. How can a hen escape when surrounded by a dozen marching cocks?”

I turn to the houses, the dwellers and their families and relations on the other side. I spoke to the countrymen thus:

“How can you live with murderers in your homes, my dear brothers? Your sons and brothers are killers; they escaped the law, they have friendship with the police and they have higher connection grid. Your sons and brothers are looters, my dear sisters; they snatched gold and money, they robbed cells and watches, and they carried goods and grains. How will you live with such loots? Is this the war booty that you think legally and morally usable? How can you turn blind eye to the citizens burning houses down, my dear leaders? Your citizens are arsonists and you speak of development. How can you wait and watch shops turning into charred nothingness, my dear policemen? Your inaction was crime, and later, what you did was even a bigger crime”.

Some days of heated debates, accusations and counter-accusations, some promises, more threats, a few statements and the final report. Well, I forgot the inquiry, the files in rakes and dusts stamped on them like a forced cover on the

deliberate inertia. I moved my palm on the dusty floor as if cleaning the whole dirt of my country.

Shouldn't I tell the tales of media men, the intellectual terrorists? In the art of simulacra, they go about inventing the enemy, work relentlessly to prove right wrong and wrong right. Thank you very much Umberto Eco for showing in *Faith in Fakes*. Such loud-mouthed anchors know what to say and how and where to watch out and why. So, we are the troublemakers. So, we are the actions who must face the reactions; and the reactions are always larger than the actions, the intellectual terrorists argued. You dig history, the long tormenting saga of torture, rape and subjugation; we were like the lustful Turks then and we are the heartless terrorists now. Thank you very much John Bunyan for *The Life and Death of Mr Badman*! We have enough propaganda to make us evil, devil, villain, savage, cruel, lustful, rapist and assassin. The gruesome pogrom is well justified and the rest is omission and commission.

"But how can the same crimes be justified right when you do? You became I; you are my past in the present in pursuit of the golden future. How can Jews to be so inhuman who underwent the most inhuman treatment themselves?"

What is our future? Perhaps, jail: but that's also not safe. Three nights ago, two men, no, two masked men, entered my cell in the silence of the night. But how could they unlock the door? Insider's game, this I often read in newspaper. Had I been sleeping I would have been smothered to breathe my last share of air on earth. But this is no time to sleep; sleep in such dangerous time is actual death; we must be alert all the time. I cried at the top of my voice; that is how I fought back. It was followed by many different horrible cries. You know two is not a crowd, and the cowards need a crowd who have no gumption to face the protests. So, enemy is everywhere

like invisible virus, in every office like well-dressed gentlemen, and every places like common people. coloured with one colour; different colour of corruption, unprecedented corruption where everyone – from top to bottom – is corrupt, yes corrupt in faith, corrupt in speech and corrupt in deed. And those who investigate corruption are more corrupt.

“O God, save my country! When will the long dark night end?”

The bomb in mind is still ticking; I twist and turn on the rough floor: what should I do? What should we do? Lawyers, courts and judges – all are coloured with one colour, the colour of hatred; and then we don't have money to fight cases in the court of law, the long corridors of corruption, or the hostile officials and antagonistic media. The apex court is coloured as well.

“The biggest casualty is justice, my Lord! Where shall I go with this unwanted figure full of unlimited pain, misery and frustration?”

Two officers arrive with a fresh zeal.

“He needs intellectual torture”, with this ugly sentence, the fat-bellied monster asked for a copy of the holy book and asked the other to unzip his pant who took out his sleepy thing and began urinating on the holy book. That is terribly outrageous. They know I am a bearded-man of literature.

“Is the religion of the other so nasty? Or are the faithful so hateful? So mean?” I cried and cried, clutching my head in convulsive fury. But then begins the laughter, sarcastic laughter, and collective laughter on the face of my injured misery. I joined the laughter, broken laughter, weepy laughter and spiteful laughter. They get offended. Why? Is

my laughter anti-national? Or should I learn how to laugh? How many things should I learn to please you?

They changed the gear: now I have to urinate upon my faith. The gun is out, three steely pistols pointed at me. Will the world ever know the official secrets? I lost contact with this world. From hospital to court to jail to again court, a full three months passed. I just watch men in black with expressionless eyes and feel how lies are sold and bought in the full view of the temple of justice.

“Are you real men with flesh and blood? Do you have families, houses, siblings, feelings, and emotions? Do you have guts to guide your daughters to speak the truth?”

All through the court ordeal I spoke nothing; it was futile, I replied nothing, and I cared nothing. Finally, the judgment, but before, the honourable judge pressed me thrice to speak.

I raised my face, looked around, and then to the man on high chair.

“Am I among humans?”

I fell down and I am dead. The light is gone, and I am being lifted up through the patches of clouds and I see the whole country plunged into darkness.



## Judgment at TS9

MELANIE FLORES

Wickyd Rivers nods to the woman overseeing the check-out terminals. Norma Jean had been a beauty ever since he'd laid eyes on her years ago, but something's different about her today. The bounteous lips only rise up on one side when she smiles like she's had a stroke. "You ok, Norma Jean?" "Just as fine as an orgasm, Wick. Always happy to see you!" That odd stiffness vanishes and she's back to her vivacious self. Wickyd can tell that he should get moving because his pet beardle, Damiano, is tugging at him and snorting, the way he does when he's about to have a dump. There'd be a pretty pile next to his shoe if he didn't leave soon.

With Damiano relieved, Wickyd makes his way to his living quarters (LQ) in a large dilapidated building complex that looks like it had been built around the time of the Great Implosion of 2020. It was a miracle this building was still standing, considering the paper-thin walls and flimsy structure. On the way to his quarters, he hears that Tesla and Edison are fighting again. Why does Tesla bother letting Edison into his LQ? They hadn't agreed on anything 150 years ago, why would they now? Tesla's voice is straining to be heard over Edison's bellicose pontification. Just as Wickyd Rivers is about to knock on Tesla's door to ask them to tone it down, John Lennon emerges out of his LQ with Jesus Christ. They're immersed in conversation and look more like long-lost twin brothers than murdered musical artist and the Son

of God. Wickyd hears John say something about peace, as Jesus nods.

Reaching his door he eyes the retinal scanner. The door slides silently open. He wasn't expecting to see Leonard Cohen reclining on his chaise lounge. Through a cloud of smoke, Leonard says, "They're looking for you." Wickyd hasn't seen Leonard for a few years but every time he does see him, it isn't good news.

"Leonard, they've been looking for me for next to forever. They'll never get me. They don't know who to expect."

"Look – just because you're a shape-shifting sensomorph it doesn't mean they won't find you. They have your DNA and they're constantly revolutionizing their detection capabilities."

"I just have to stay ahead of them – like I've been doing all this time. And besides – I've been making some changes." Wickyd grins.

"What kind of changes?" Leonard is intrigued because that could mean anything, coming out of Wickyd. Wickyd picks up his mister and begins spraying his marijuana plants. "Let's just say I've done a lot of contemplation here in TS9. I've had fascinating lives, but I felt like something was missing. Caligula – Attila the Hun – Genghis Khan – Vlad the Impaler – Ivan the Terrible – Robespierre – Hitler – The Moghul. I've had all that money could buy, women and people at my disposal, along with the luxury of knowing that no matter what, I would live. Live forever! No consequences for my actions, so I took them to extremes. Torture, mass murders, heinous destruction, and terror. I fed on the terror. It fueled me and drove me. And you were there all along, playing your role but, never interfering."

“Everyone has their role to play, and mine was “the bard” – in all my incarnations. It’s not my place to interfere and yet for some reason, our lives have been perpetually intertwined. Your actions throughout the ages have saddened my soul and brought me to the deepest, darkest despair.”

“Life-long colleague I’ve turned over a new leaf. Three years of abstinence from killing has made me realize that sobriety comes with its own hangovers. I lost my thirst for destruction. I need something different, so I’ve changed my ways.”

Leonard stubs out his cigarette in an empty glass, taking his time then, he looks at Wickyd. “Do you expect me to believe that? After all you’ve done? And – it was all done without a tear, a morsel of regret, a glimmer of hesitation. The billions of lives you destroyed, all the pain and suffering you were responsible for – and now you say you’re stopping? Cold turkey – just... like... that?”

“I know it’s hard to believe. I didn’t believe it myself.” The high-pitched doorbell signals that someone is at Wickyd’s door. Damiano cocks up one ear but no other part of him moves. “Enter.” orders Wickyd. The door silently slides open letting in a slight girl of 14 or 15. She smiles when she sees Wickyd. Her shoulder-length, dark hair lies loosely and she wears a 1940’s-style dress.

“Anne! Meet my – what would I call him – he’s not really a friend – he’s someone I’ve known for a very long time, though. His name is Leonard, and among other things, he’s a writer, like you.”

Anne turns to Leonard and smiles the most genuine of smiles. Leonard stands up and looks at Anne bemused. “Not Anne *Frank*?”

“Yes – Yes – I am Anne Frank. How did you know?”

"I've seen some pictures of you, and I've read some of your work."

"I didn't realize I was such a celebrity. I just came over to drop off some more words – for Wick. He enjoys my work and is always asking for more."

"Her connection with the human soul is astute. What she lacks in years she makes up with in experience." For a split-second Anne appears as she must have in her last days, dying of typhus, emaciated and frail. Then she is again, Anne.

"I have to go, Wick. I will bring you more words tomorrow."

"I would appreciate that," says Wickyd. As soon as the door closes behind Anne, Leonard lashes out at Wickyd.

"You're a parasite feeding off the emotions and the pain of others. I knew you couldn't change, and you cannot convince me that you ever will change. It's who you are!"

"Leonard, I know extreme emotions nurture me. It was that realization that enabled me to make the adjustment. For the past 3 years, I've stayed as Wickyd Rivers, without taking on another murderous incarnation, because the words have been enough."

"It's just a crutch – you weak little monster!"

"Isn't it better than killing countless innocent souls?"

"If you put it that way, I guess it is. But does she even know who you were?"

"I haven't told her – but she's clever – she may have surmised it."

Suddenly the door implodes. A troop of government goons, attired in identical grey coveralls storms in armed with laser guns, set on "Disintegrate". They part to let their commander enter from the center. Ronald Reagan strides

through the residual smoke and debris and announces: "This is your last hurrah, mister. You've been caught, whoever it is you want to call yourself – Hitler, Dracula, or Beelzebub himself. The world's had enough of you. Take him away!"

"Wait!" protests Wickyd. "I've reformed. I haven't done any killing for over 3 years. I'm not the creature I once was."

"That doesn't take away the fact that you killed and tortured billions of people throughout your lifetimes. You have to pay for that. And you're going to pay for it – NOW!"

"I demand a trial. You can't be sole judge and jury!"

Ron thinks briefly then says. "Alright, Wickyd Rivers, you'll get your trial, although, you're the last being in the world that should expect one. You will present your case to three of your peers and they must unanimously agree upon a verdict." He turns away and says something into his comm device. A few seconds later in walks Wick's judge and jury: Mahatma Gandhi, Joseph Stalin, and Eleanor Roosevelt. They settle themselves in around Wick's dining room table, surrounded by the marijuana plants.

Ronald addresses the triad: "This being is accused of murdering billions of people while in his various entities. We have undeniable proof that this entity, known as Wickyd Rivers, is culpable – that is not in question. What is in question is what type of punishment he should suffer, if any at all. He claims that he's changed. If he has changed, does that mean that all of his acts of mass annihilation should be forgiven? That is up to you to decide. Wickyd, tell us why they should have mercy on you?"

Wickyd stands before the triumvirate. He looks human and vulnerable. Not at all like the soul-less megalomaniac he's been for centuries. He clears his throat and bows his head, ever so slightly. An act of humility in front of his peers?

“Judges – I stand before you a broken man. A man who has spent centuries murdering and plundering, and as many centuries regretting his actions. Every evil deed plunged me deeper into my abyss as I continued to amass my victims. I’ve remained in this transitory station now for 3 years, longer than any time before. Here I have befriended many, as they will profess.” He shows a vid-stream on the wall – Norma Jean and countless others give him glowing character references. “I have tenderly looked after my beloved pet beardle.” As if on cue, Damiano bounds over to Wick and knocks him down, licking his face with his monstrous black tongue. Wick gently carries off his pet to his pet bed and continues.

“Probably most telling of all is that I have been forgiven by those I have wronged.” Victim after victim appears. Each victim offers words of pardon for Wickyd Rivers. Then, finally – Anne Frank. Her dark eyes glisten with a blend of palpable sadness and youthful hope. She speaks softly. “Wickyd Rivers is a good man. His actions as Hitler should be forgiven for all the love and humanity he has shown.” At the sight of Anne Frank, Leonard shifts uncomfortably in the chaise lounge and his reproachful eyes meet Wickyd’s, only to be dismissed. With Wickyd Rivers’ visual display over, he faces the judges and says “Something else you must consider is that I did not act alone. In every incarnation, I had aides to assist in the misdeeds. I am not solely culpable and I can change. Mr. Gandhi wasn’t it you who said: *“An eye for an eye only ends up making the whole world blind.”* Don’t seek vengeance instead, embrace forgiveness.”

Mahatma Gandhi, wearing a simple dhoti and a pair of round-framed glasses, addresses his fellow judges: “A man is but the product of his thoughts; what he thinks, he becomes.

And so, it seems that Wickyd Rivers has changed his thinking and, in doing so, has changed his ways."

Stalin chimes in. "A man cannot change his ways, like a leopard cannot change his spots. In my incarnations, I have massacred my share of humanity and I enjoyed every minute of it. I cannot turn my back on the "thrill of the kill", how can Wickyd Rivers?"

Eleanor Roosevelt adds "Maybe that's why he wants to stop. He's had enough. He can't live with himself anymore after causing so much pain and destruction."

Stalin rebuffs her "You obviously don't understand the satisfaction of supreme power. It's invigorating and enlivening. What would the chairman of the United Nation's Human Rights Commission know about the pleasure of watching hundreds of degenerates get their lives sucked out of them in a gas chamber?"

"Only too much, Mr. Stalin, – from the family members left behind to mourn them and from the accomplishments and potential, forever lost to humanity. We may have been so much farther ahead as a race had all those lives not been destroyed. There could have been another Einstein among the victims, or a Tesla, or a Gandhi."

"I agree with Mr. Stalin that a leopard cannot change his spots. I wrote to Hitler twice pleading with him to cease his abominable actions but my words went unheeded. Some say the British intercepted these missives, but I have my doubts, just as I have doubts as to the credibility of Wickyd Rivers' testimony. Mr. Rivers also said that he did not act alone, but I wonder – is it the puppet master that should be called up for his misdeeds or the puppets? The puppet master, after all, directs the actions of his puppets. Enough musings – my

colleagues and I will confer and we will return a verdict shortly.”

A sound-proof dome drops from the ceiling surrounding the judging triumvirate as they begin their deliberations. Wickyd Rivers smiles at Leonard and winks, then he goes over to Damiano and smacks him gently on the rump. He turns to Leonard and says “I have this one in the bag.”

Through the rubble at the front door walks Anne Frank. “No, you don’t Wickyd. Those were not my words that my image spoke. I don’t know how you falsified my image and words, but if I can attest that I did not say them then I would probably be safe in saying that your entire presentation is a sham.”

Wickyd hasn’t noticed that the judging triad had removed their screen of silence and is raptly listening to Anne. He is absent-mindedly petting Damiano when the judging triad gives their signal to the waiting government goons who aim their lasers and shoot. Within seconds there is no sign of the man that had been Wickyd Rivers – having been killed and cleanly vaporized. Damiano remains in his pet bed unperturbed, licking the spot where Wickyd had just been petting him.

The living quarters soon empty out with only Leonard, Anne and Damiano remaining.

“Somebody’s gotta look after that orphaned beardle.” says Leonard.

“I’ll take him. I’ve wanted a pet for a long time, and I’ve gotten attached to Damiano over the past few years.” Anne reaches out for Leonard’s arm and adds: “Leonard, I couldn’t let Wickyd get away with it. I kept seeing all those broken people at the concentration camp and smelling the stench of

death. All those lost lives, all the fear, and despair. I thought Wickyd was a nice man but he fooled me. He fooled everyone."

"Yeah, kid. He's done that since the beginning of time, but now he's gone and there's one less monster in the world."

Anne picks up the beardle and carries him to the door. "It was nice to meet you, Leonard. Best of luck to you."

"It was nice to meet you too, Anne. You are truly inspirational. I wish you as good a future life as you had a bad previous one."

"Thank you." She says, walking out the door with Damiano in her arms. Damiano winks at Leonard and disappears from view. Leonard looks at the empty doorway, baffled, and mutters under his breath "That beardle just winked at me." Instantly he knows and follows Anne to her quarters. All the way there she's whispering something to the beardle who looks at her with eyes of love. Whatever she's saying soothes him, he's obviously content. By the time they enter her quarters, the beardle is nearly asleep. She puts him down on her cot and pats him gently, lovingly. Then she turns to Leonard and puts a finger to her lips, as if to say "Quiet. Don't say anything." Anne picks up a syringe from her side table, turns back to the sleeping beardle and plunges the syringe gently into his fat rump. Damiano/Wickyd flutters his eyes for a second, perhaps at the prick of the syringe, perhaps as a final attempt at life. Then – stillness.

"You knew?" asks Leonard.

Anne nods, with a tear at the corner of her eye.



## 8

### A Lesson

NELS HANSON

As holy scripture tells us the good Siddhartha Gautama achieved in a blazing instant His Buddhahood and later taught others 40 years to guide those seekers on the path revealed one day beneath the Bo Tree, the fig like Jesus struck dead in his hunger when it offered no fruit as we read in the Christian gospels.

Where Our Teacher sat seven years until the stark flash of enlightenment, he remembered in a second vividly each of his more than 500 lives.

In this life I live now I can remember only one before, holding that hour the Master and my fellow weary acolytes approached a river, one of countless rivers we met and crossed on our one journey toward one end.

His Grace the Bodhisattva first spied an empty boat I'm certain he knew was waiting tethered to the muddy edge.

As we boarded there was one disciple whose name I won't speak to mar his present name, happy in his growing powers, "siddhis" the Wise One often warned us to ignore, who pranced easily on the blue waters and didn't sink and waved from the distant bank.

I took an oar, my good friend another, as Our Guru watched from the prow.

After we reached the river's far side and left the leaking skiff for future travelers crossing the strong current he spoke

in rarest anger, informing the proud failed saint that his miraculous display had not aided one creature's progress or his own a single step toward transcendence.

With a look he sent the boat sailing swiftly back across the river and led us into jungle for the place arranged to lay our mats and I set the kind fire for rice.

## 9

# The Mysteries of Water

PATTY SOMLO

The water began leaking in June, though no one saw it start. Several days later, a wide muddy stream began flowing down the block. The sudden appearance of a creek rushing past the front of her house struck Sarah as odd, given that there hadn't been a drop of rain for over a month. Even though Ted had left her seven months ago, for a woman hardly old enough to legally order a cocktail, Sarah figured this had to be her ex-husband's fault.

After Ted moved out, Sarah started dating Darrell, who she'd met online. The last time she saw Darrell, they were sitting on the back deck of his condo sipping wine.

"Tuscany," Darrell announced.

He raised his glass and forcefully swirled the contents around.

"Tuscany," Sarah echoed wistfully. "Staying in one of those old villas."

Sarah leaned back and closed her eyes. She pictured herself looking casually elegant in a white ankle-length linen dress slit up the side, sitting next to Darrell in a loose, tan short-sleeved shirt, on the porch of a burnt orange Tuscan villa. She'd never been to Italy before but had seen the movie *Under the Tuscan Sun* and read the book, which helped her visualize the vineyards, drenched golden in the late afternoon sun.

Sarah's reverie was interrupted by Darrell's cell phone playing something New Age-sounding. He jumped up and jogged inside.

Sarah frowned as she stared at the water flowing by and wondered if she would hear from Darrell again. In the two weeks since he'd mentioned Tuscany, Darrell hadn't texted, emailed or called.

*Like water*, Sarah scribbled in her journal, then raised her head and once again studied the muddy flowing stream out front. She understood that a relationship needed to keep moving forward or it would die. Before Ted announced that he no longer loved her, Sarah had done her best to ignore how stagnant their life had become. Married nearly two decades and childless, Sarah and Ted had uttered every single thing they had left to say to one another.

Sarah's next-door neighbor, Alan, said that he would notify the city about the water problem. A week and a half later, when the creek alongside the curb appeared to have gotten even deeper, Sarah ran into Alan on the sidewalk.

"Did you call anyone?" she asked, trying to keep the annoyance she felt out of her voice.

Alan sighed. "First, I called the water department. The woman who answered told me I needed to contact sewers. The guy in sewers claimed this was the street department's problem. I've left a bunch of angry voicemail messages with every city department I could think of, but no one's called or showed up."

But the following Tuesday morning, Sarah noticed royal blue lines spray-painted on the street, close to where water was spilling out. Someone had even painted the Hosta she had planted the previous spring in the parking strip.

“The guys from the city did that,” Sarah’s neighbor, Mary, said, when she saw Sarah looking at those blue lines. As usual, Mary was walking her short fluffy dog Herbie up the block. “They said they’d be back to fix the water problem later this week.”

The week ended, though, without a thing being done.

The following Monday morning when Sarah returned home from yoga, she tried turning right on Elm Street, but an orange *ROAD WORK* sign blocked her way. That forced her to make a U-turn and drive around the block.

Dressed in dark gray knit pants and a black hooded sweatshirt over a sleeveless tee-shirt, she stretched her leg out from the car and planted it on the curb, to avoid stepping in the deep muddy creek. This brown stream, she told herself, might be something she’d just have to get used to. Like being alone after Ted moved in with his girlfriend.

As she walked from the car, she noticed a white van and a bulldozer. A man in a white shirt that contrasted nicely with his walnut-shaded skin was standing a few feet from the curb, next to a white city truck. He looked down at the pavement and jotted notes on a yellow paper attached to a brown clipboard.

About to step up to the porch, Sarah suddenly gasped. Her heart started to pound, as she suddenly remembered what she’d done.

She had turned the engine off and made the extra twist for the ignition lock. Stepping out of the car, she pushed the lock down on the driver’s side. The car was almost twenty years old and needed to be manually locked.

Her heart was beating fast and high in her chest and throat now. She reached her right hand into the pocket where

she normally kept her keys but found nothing there. Then she ran her fingers underneath her wallet and along the bottom of her purse. Wind rattled in the trees. A bird twittered the same two-note song. She struggled to keep from crying.

Preoccupied as she was, Sarah had failed to notice that the man with the clipboard had moved closer. He now stood on the opposite side of the parking strip and caught Sarah's gaze.

"Is something wrong?" he asked, his wide, kind-looking, deep brown eyes resting on her face.

"My car," she said, barely above a whisper. "I locked the keys in my car."

"Is that all?" he asked, the words drifting into the air with a lilting beat, sounding almost like a song. His eyes made her think of melted dark chocolate. From India, Sarah surmised.

"I would be pleased to help you get them out. This is something I have a great deal of experience with, you see. I have locked the keys in my car more times than I care to count."

The wooziness left Sarah's head and her breath calmed. Even with a pair of oversized sunglasses burying his eyes, the man's face was a delight. He grinned, as if he and Sarah shared a secret. His teeth were exceedingly white.

"Let's go take a look," he said to her now.

Sarah led him down to the corner and up the next block. She was grateful that she hadn't replaced her old Toyota, with its manual windows and locks. She was also thankful that her car hadn't budged, with the keys dangling in full view inside.

After easing up the lock and opening the door, the man leaned in to pull the keys out. The pockets of his pants were stuffed, as if holding tennis balls. The fingers of his left hand balanced on the back of the driver's seat, while he reached in with the right. *No wedding ring*, Sarah noted.

"I've taken you away from your work," Sarah said. "You're here to do something about the water?"

She noticed then that the bulldozer had begun moving, beeping every time it backed up.

"Yes, yes," he said. "To fix the water problem. But oh no, you didn't take me away. I was actually finished here. Ready to take a break."

"Could I buy you a cup of coffee?"

Sarah stopped and looked at her watch.

"Or lunch?"

The man smiled and raised his right wrist to consider his own timepiece, a gold watch that winked in the bright light. He nodded to his wrist, then lifted his head.

"Well, I suppose I am a bit hungry. Is there a café nearby?"

At a table next to the window, sunlight caused the silver napkin holder to shimmer. The man's name was Falguni, and he explained what had caused the asphalt to tear apart and the water to bubble up. He mentioned hydrostatic pressure and cubic inches, and gravity, of course. But most everything came down to the fact that the water pipe was old and shot. A small tear had developed over time, pressure being what it was inside the pipe. Eventually, the weight of all that moving water caused the pipe to bust.

Falguni's soup grew cold while he talked. Sarah hardly ate a bite. She clutched the barely eaten turkey sandwich, as

Falguni revealed the secret to keeping rushing liquid in check, so it would cause no harm. He didn't tell her she'd been stupid, as Ted would have done, nor did he waste time scolding Sarah for locking her keys in the car. Instead, he invited Sarah to partake of the mysteries of water, without ever bothering to check the time on his watch.



## 10

# Punching Holes

SCOTT LEVY

The latte did its job and helped Meg get through the first half hour. Now that it was finished, she was once again on her own.

After triple checking the reports, she dragged herself to Stacy's office, the caffeine from her morning coping mechanism transitioning its effect from energy to jitter.

"They're still not right," she informed her new boss. "I'm used to the old system. I thought I had finally wrapped my head around the new one. I thought wrong."

"Don't sweat it. We told you there would be a learning curve," Stacy said.

"It's already been a week."

Stacy laughed the laugh of happy hours and lunch breaks gone by. Meg was momentarily transported to the pre-promotion days, when learning curves were for the people down the hall.

"A week is nothing! I was still having anxiety dreams two months after my last bump up."

"So, I have at least two more months of insomnia?"

"You'll do fine, kiddo. And look at the bright side. You're only a couple of card punches away from a free latte."

Meg could still hear Stacy's chuckle as she approached her desk and prepared for her fourth attempt at navigating

the winding loop that challenged her job related comprehension.

That was when she saw the sticky note on her computer screen.

*So glad to see they moved your desk close to mine. I've missed you. Maybe we can pick up where we left off.*

*Fondly,*

*Dean.*

Dean?

Meg looked around the large, cubicle-crammed space. In spite of the promotion, she had landed in a far more populated area than she previously occupied, as if the escalation of responsibilities coupled with more pay somehow correlated with an increase in work space population. Most of the faces thus far lacked familiarity--those few that rung the memory bell were attached to other names.

If there was indeed a Dean nearby, it was a mystery to her regarding the all-important 'who.'

She returned to the reports, her learning curve now further twisted by the post-it note.



Two days later, Meg turned in the fully completed reports. Stacy confirmed that yes, they were indeed done correctly. Meg's buoyant sense of accomplishment lasted a full minute before Stacy shattered the bliss by saying, "And now comes the hard part. The front office has upgraded that system again, which means you need to re-learn it. Not the entire thing of course-just somewhere in the eighty percent range."

Unmoved by her friend and supervisor's statement, "I know you can do it," and craving the world's biggest latte, Meg returned to the monster that was her desk.

She had forgotten about the first one, until she was greeted by the second sticky note.

*I don't hold it against you that you didn't reach out to me after my last message. I guess I was hoping that there were still a few smoking embers in our now extinguished fire. If you feel any remaining heat, you know how to find me.*

*Very fondly indeed,*

*Dean.*

She did not, in fact, know how to find him. And she wasn't at all certain that she wanted to do so.



Meg calculated that she had mastered roughly fifty percent of the new learning curve that Stacy had presented a day and a half ago. With approximately thirty percent remaining, she decided to reward herself by paying a visit to the coffee stand on the first floor. At one in the afternoon, she guessed that the line would be minimal. It was a large building with a proportionally sized lobby, but she hoped that the lunch crowd was interested in forms of refreshment other than her steaming energy drug of choice, which was to be served free of charge, thanks to the card that had attained its required maximum of punched holes.

She had the sensation of eyes beaming in her direction. A quick gaze to her left confirmed that she was indeed the target of a stare.

He was of medium height and weight, dressed in the business-casual attire that was the norm on her floor. His unfamiliar face smiled at her.

Carrying her still hot coffee, she quickly walked away. Although proof eluded her, her gut spoke the name, 'Dean.'

The remaining thirty present now felt like a thousand.



After a mostly sleepless night, Meg was greeted by a larger than usual sized sticky note stuck to her screen. Once again, the sensation of unwanted focus prickled her skin. She scanned the room, and found, four desks over, the man she had seen the day before. He smiled and nodded. Ignoring the gurgle in her belly, she turned to the note that blocked the visual path to the work that required her attention.

*Meg,*

*I'll come clean. I owe you that much.*

*It is technically true that, other than the moment we shared yesterday in front of the coffee stand, we have not actually officially met.*

*But technical truth is one thing-emotional truth is quite another.*

*I believe in our connection. I believe it with all my heart.*

*For several months now, I have suffered through my time on this uncaring Earth as a single man. Causing me soul crushing pain, my now former love Martha chose to leave me. After weeks of unreturned calls, and post-knock unopened doors, I learned to accept my cruel fate.*

*Then I saw you take up residence at the desk space which I now revere as a sacred shrine.*

*And while I am certain that you and Martha have never crossed paths, I can assure you that you are linked by matters of the soul. In terms of bone structure, height, weight, eye and hair color, you are strikingly similar. But of course, your*

*corresponding qualities run so much deeper. Your bearing, your vocal mannerisms, your very essence; all are part of the genuine kindred link you have with her.*

*Martha-Meg. Meg-Martha. Even in alliteration, you share a bond.*

*It is with great hope that I beseech you to find it within your heart to explore the direction that fate has offered you.*

*You and I are meant to be. I urge you to trust this truth.*

*With fondness and hope,*

*Dean. your vocal*

Meg took a deep breath and opened her top drawer. Packets of sticky notes of various sizes were contained within. Choosing the largest selection, she peeled off the plastic shrink wrap, tore a page off the pad, and walked in the direction of Dean's desk.



As she stood before him, Dean's eyes widened. He smiled. He looked as if he were about to speak. Meg's action cut him off.

She held up the single sticky note and tore to pieces, showering the scraps upon him.

"I have work to do," she said. "I have a difficult new job with many new responsibilities. Your little notes may not take much time to read, but they scare me and piss me off, and I don't have the time for *that*."

Dean's widened eyes grew even more agape.

She followed her fury and continued.

"I am not Martha. I have absolutely zero interest in bone structures, hair, alliteration, or whatever it is your disturbed little mind deems my 'essence.' I am completely myself. I am

not some former, present, or any damn other object of your twisted notion of love. Had you wished to have learned my reality, as opposed to some fantasy, you could have actually spoken to me, and then listened when I spoke back. But you chose instead to assault my brain with a one sided attempt at what you may think of as communication but was in fact harassment. And yes, emphasis on *was*. Because you're never going to do it again. If I see you so much as peel off a sticky note, I will throw my stapler at you, run not walk to H.R., report you, and then slap your stapler-injured head on the way back to my desk where, I repeat, I have *work* to do."

His widened eyes filled with tears.

"And it's time I got back to it. Yours not at all fondly, Meg."



That evening, Meg and Stacy reverted to an old habit and attended happy hour at their regular spot down the street from work.

As Meg continued to devour the lion's share of their order of nachos, Stacy said, "I guess you've earned your gluttony, kiddo. Those reports were perfect. You're killing the learning curve. Keep this up and you'll make the rest of us look bad."

Swallowing, Meg gave her friend and boss a smile before quickly lifting another cheese-goo'd chip to her lips.

"I guess those lattes are doing the trick," Stacy added.

Meg managed to speak through a mouth crowded with her bar food reward. "I'm actually thinking of taking a break from those for a while. I believe I've found another source of energy."



# 11

## Fisherman's Catch

TIKVAH FEINSTEIN

We eight children with our disabled mother Ruby had fled a dangerous neighborhood in Pennsylvania to join a cult in Michigan where we had been living as refugees in a headquarters meeting house.

It was on a rural one-lane road a quarter mile from the lake and our mother didn't drive. She made arrangements with other mothers to shop for groceries, about the only trips out of the house that I recall. Religious services were held in our living room. Older members would come to teach us Scripture on Sundays. So naturally we kids loved company. Sometimes one of the cult's men would show up for a visit in the evening without his wife.

Corney (our name for Rev. Cornelius Simpson) came to the door one rainy evening. But when we kids looked for his car, after all, he lived miles away, it was not there. When we questioned him, Corney said he had walked. That he loved to walk. We noticed it was raining and he was not wet. "Rain doesn't fall on me." We kids knew better but he kept up the ruse.

Then one afternoon toward winter, Corney appeared unexpectedly at the door dressed in a plaid woodsman coat of wool and a warm leather hat. He had a surprise for us, he said. Corney was a mature man. His children were grown, but he was still a vital outdoorsman and loved to fish. Us kids and Mother donned our coats and went happily with our

visitor. He opened the back door of his gray automobile and motioned for the family to get in.

“Ruby, you and Mickey can sit in front,” he said. He shook his head and raised his eyebrows as he led our mother and brother around the car to the front door. A faint trace of humor appeared on the older man’s cleanly shaven face, as he calculated the size of his Ford and the number of passengers loading into it. It was December 1952, and he could see by our flimsy outerwear that the family clearly was not prepared for the cruel Michigan winter. We were eight children ranging in age from sixteen (Mickey was the oldest) to barely five and a mother who was frail and visibly overwhelmed. We all were wearing light threadbare coats – feeble protection from the icy wind from Lake Michigan. We entered the snug warmth of his car as silently and as orderly as possible. He turned the key in the ignition. The car started immediately and began to hum in a steady idle, not like the Studebaker our family had left months earlier stalled on the lawn of the home we’d vacated in Pennsylvania. That’s where, from my point of view, we had also left our Dad.

“Hazel is waiting for us,” Corney smiled. The warmth from the heater overtook us, making us drowsy. The car pulled away from the white building with the sign that hung high between two poles in front advertising in large letters Divine Faith Headquarters. The home was a temporary one, but there didn’t seem to be any plan for the future. So for this afternoon, Corney had offered the family a respite, a nice lunch in his and his wife’s home in Grand Haven, a town several miles from the headquarters. We seven children in back squeezed together, younger ones on laps or just barely on the corners of the seat, where the older ones by crossing their legs had made room at edges for our skinny hips.

The car passed by the icy shore of Lake Michigan. Out of doors without real protection the bitter winds could lift under our oversize coats, but we children now were in a snug car. Still the coldness at the perimeter of the lake always penetrated, seeking marrow of young bones to chill it seemed. Adults either didn't feel the cold as much or didn't complain about it.

I am eight and all my life had been spent listening to grownups talk about God and Jehovah and Jesus and salvation. The cult's leader, David, was in direct contact with God. When we needed anything, we were told to ask God for it. And what we did not have we did not need. Since I am a girl, I get a message that I am considered not quite a person. This is perhaps, I feel, because though I am a responsibility I will someday marry and take a husband's name. I will not carry my father's name nor will my future children. My four brothers will always bear our father's name and will bring his "real" grandchildren into the world.

It puzzled me that names mean more than people in a world where children were regarded as possessions. I was given the name Hope at birth by David. He reminded me of that often. There would be such pride in his voice when he said it, and he would smile at me, place a hand on my head tenderly and tell me I should never forget that whatever I did not have I always had hope. That *hope* was to prove to be something intangible but real to me as music in a world without much else. I had learned the alphabet and read a lot. I also learned to keep as quiet as possible. I would not mention to Corney's wife that he'd been out to visit our mother several nights ago, being careful to park his car away from the house. Then I almost believed him about the rain. After all he was an officer in the religious movement of which

we had moved here to be part of and I had been made a symbol of and that made us children feel special.

The three-mile ride to Corney and Hazel's took about ten minutes. We children were quietly watching the ice and snow along the lake until the scenery slipped into the bay. The lake area in the summer was like an extended beach with light tan sandy soil. The trees were smaller than the ones in Pennsylvania, thorny pines mostly and sparse shrubs. Holland, Michigan was a mile from headquarters with millions of tulips of every color blooming in the spring, but we had missed that festival arriving in late summer. Mother and Corney in the front of the car talked of religious and political things. The car rounded a bend. Corney applied the brakes and pulled the car into a gravel driveway.

We kids clambered out of the car and up the six or so wooden steps into the bright kitchen. Hazel was a round faced pleasant woman. She was slightly older than her husband, we were told, although it was none of our business and meaningless information for children. We liked Hazel. She had the table set with a vinyl red and white checkered tablecloth and paper plates with plastic forks. Hazel gave us each a paper cup of soda pop after we approached the table having taken off coats and piled them on the floor in a corner of the hall.

"Welcome," Corney said. "I caught these fish in the bay yesterday. It was a good day for ice fishing. Those others are from last week that I had frozen There's way more than we can eat ourselves," he boasted.

Corney gestured toward the counter top near the white kitchen stove. There on newspapers were two piles of whole fish. Their scales had been removed, but their heads were still on their bodies with eyes wide and staring. Two black iron

skillets were waiting on the burners spluttering and spitting hot grease. Corney picked up a fish by the belly and tossed it into a skillet to a rush of sound and spluttering grease. He continued to do this. The fish were too small to fillet. Three fishes fit easily into each skillet. I didn't like to see the fishes' eyes melt during the frying so I turned away.

My mother uttered the blessing. We all said Amen. It was unusual to say a blessing before being served, making us aware that poor children must always be grateful. Corney was placing the small cooked fish on our paper plates. He turned back to the piles of raw fish on the counter and filled the skillets once again with their smelly bodies. I sat looking at my plate, then at my siblings. They seemed just as confused as I, poking with plastic forks into white fish flesh surrounded by sharp bones. How to get the little bit of meat away from bones that stabbed our fingers as we did so? Were we supposed to know how? I was afraid to ask. The bones scared me. A piece of bone that was in the flesh that I was chewing stabbed the inside of my cheek and I almost swallowed it. I gagged, removed the bone and just gave up.

"I don't like fish bones," I said. My mother was busy helping the two youngest children. Hazel had left the room.

"You don't have to eat nothing," Corney answered, placing another fish on Louise's plate. Louise was twelve, a hungry age for kids. She was eating eagerly, prying the flesh from the bones with her fingers and putting it directly into her mouth. "Your sister here eats like a man. She will eat yours too." He laughed. Louise lifted her head and while still chewing smiled at Corney. He had turned away and was again filling the two skillets with fish.

Suddenly, she started to choke. Louise gagged, pointing to her throat. She got up from the table and spun around

wildly, making sounds like a cat hissing. She was turning blue and red in the face and looking frantic.

“Oh God!” Our mother got up from her chair and grabbed Louise, pulling her into the bathroom. There were more sounds of choking, gagging and bodies bumping walls. We heard cries and mumbles and more “Oh Gods.” Corney continued to serve fish, not noticing that his guests were too frightened to swallow what was in their mouths.

“You can take the rest of the fish home,” Corney told us. No one answered. All eyes were on the door of the bathroom where inside the choking and crying continued. We looked at each other, frightened to death of the fish on our plates. “I told you kids to be careful of the bones!” We looked at our plates in silent horror at what was going on in the bathroom.

After what seemed like hours, Louise and Mother came back to the kitchen. Louise was wet with perspiration and flushed, but she had stopped choking. There was blood on a tissue she was spitting into. Our mother was ashen.

“I think we had better go home now,” she told us, avoiding the eyes of our host.

“All right, I will drive you all back,” said Corney, wrapping what was left of the fish in newspaper. “You kids get your coats.”

Once home, the newspaper with the fish was tossed into the garbage can before entering the house. Our mother was silent. She had been silent all the way home. Louise went directly to the bathroom mirror and opened her mouth to look at her throat. I followed her. I sat on the edge of the bathtub, shaking.

“Are you all right?” Tears welled in my eyes. Louise looked at me. There was emptiness in her direct stare.

"I guess," she said.

"What happened? Did you swallow a fish bone?"

"A bone got stuck in my throat and I couldn't get it out," Louise said. Her words were said flatly, without emotion. "Mom couldn't get it out. I couldn't breathe. I thought I would die. I thought I was dying."

"What happened?"

"Well, Mom told me right there in all that horrible confusion that she couldn't save me. She told me this: "If you want to live, you have got to save yourself." So I put my fingers down my throat and pulled that damn bone out. It ripped my throat up good. But I'm alive."

I shook with emotion, recalling the invitation to a nice lunch by a friend who preached to us about being tough. The rain did not fall on him. I wondered what our dad would have done if this had happened were he there. I wanted to go back to Pennsylvania. I was feeling confused about something that was supposed to be nice being scary. "What do we do?"

Louise sighed. Then in a flat tone that would from then on always be her voice repeated the words I recognized at eight would be my own fate: "I can't save you. If you want to live, you have got to save yourself."



## 12

# Old Pete

VERN FEIN

When I was a teen, our *nouveau riche* tavern-owner Dad, who also raced thoroughbreds, won a huge bet on his Anniversary with our Step-Mother. He used the *gelt* for a down payment on a horse farm and my brother and I, kicking and screaming, were spirited away from our safe, friend-filled neighborhood to isolation on that Farm.

Apart from our friends, our seclusion was somewhat relieved by several farm hands, mostly Black men, called by the nicknames our Father gave them – No Talk and Buck, the ones I remember most. But Dad also employed an old, Czechoslovakian man who we called Old Pete, because he was old and because we never asked for his last name.

He spoke with a thick accent and always called us Wern and Wic because he could not pronounce the V in our names. He lived in a broken down trailer on the property that was as filthy as he was. To our knowledge, Old Pete never took a bath in the three or so years he lived and worked there. The trailer did not have a shower and I don't think our Step-Mother would ever have allowed his fetid self into the farm house and, shy as they come, Pete would never dare to ask.

His job was to clean the stalls, his age and clumsiness barring him from working with high strung thoroughbreds, that work left to Buck and No Talk. My brother and I cleaned stalls too and did some of the feeding, a job we shared with Pete, a friendly and lonely character, who also, in my

memory, never changed his clothes, always wearing stained overalls.

Pete would try to talk to us in his broken English, neither of us much able to understand what he said. Hard to talk to and smelly, with the tobacco he constantly chewed staining the corners of his mouth in a disgusting way, we avoided him as much as possible. But, because of our extreme isolation, especially in the summers when we weren't in school, we would deign to sit at a distance outside ( I think we braved the interior of the trailer once for a reason I can't remember and left as soon as we could) to listen to him. It has been over fifty years for me now, but I recall he did come from Czechoslovakia when a child and mentioned that he had been married, but had no children.

Our Father, who employed a number of people with down and out circumstances because they were cheap and it was hard, disgusting work, – (one of them a Viennese horse trainer, who was not that at all and lied to get the job and lasted two weeks, dismissed when he was kicked and almost killed by a stallion; another a poor, late teen Mexican boy, who took such advantage of our house that our Step-Mother let him go after he asked her to pull his muddy boots off, but was like a happy, lost child when we let him watch horror movies and eat popcorn with us late on Friday night TV) tolerated Old Pete, despite his physical appearance and odor, and, partly because he felt sorry for him. I do remember Pete saying a lot: "Keep me, Mr. F. Don't let me go; I have no place else." And, indeed, we could not imagine anyone else hiring him. He worked on, slow and sporadic, realized in hindsight that he was in a lot of pain from arthritis, which he complained about but could not name.

But, sadly, Pete was his own worst enemy. Besides the filth, smell, poor working habits, often sleeping in, Old Pete

had a drinking problem, which was not discovered for some time. He was able to buy his own food because the grocery store was a short walking distance away and he was adamant about doing it himself, despite my Step-Mother's offer to shop for him. Later, we found out why.

When the verdict was all in, it appears that Pete drank about two six-packs a day. He drank openly at first, must have been drunk all of the time. Probably it was his antidote for the arthritis and the loneliness. But since he always did his work, methodically mucking the stalls, there were no complaints at first.

But after a time, it began to affect him and his work. You cannot drink such a prodigious amount and not be negatively affected. Eventually he began to oversleep more and finally, totally drunk, he had a serious fall, cut his head badly and had to be hospitalized for a few days.

That was it for my Dad, who regularly fired his help in both his taverns and the Farm when they screwed up. It was the way it was back then in the post-Depression world. If you did not do your job, you were gone. We had not yet begun to understand that alcoholism was a sickness or that mental health issues were real or that sometimes humans had bad circumstances they could not overcome.

I was there for the firing. When our Dad brought Old Pete back from the hospital, he told Pete that he had to move out in two weeks because of his drinking (a warning he had been given over and over for some time) and that he would give him a month's pay. Pete wept. He wept and begged: "Please Mr. F. I haf no place ta go. Don't know what to do!"

It touched our Father. He wilted before this pathetic man and gave him another chance, with one stipulation – no

more drinking. Pete vowed over and over and wept in gratefulness at the reprieve.

But you might as well tell Jimmy the Greek to stop gambling. The grace did not work although Pete managed to hide his addiction for some time. But Pete continued to buy six-packs and hide them and, for a good period of time, hid his malady well and things went on, as Pete stayed on his feet mostly and turtled his way through his work.

But all things are eventually revealed – for good or ill – my own life has taught me. One day Pete did not come out of the trailer for a whole day. This had happened before on occasion so we would knock on the door, he would groan he was sick, but he'd be up the next day.

One day in the Spring he did not emerge on the second day. My Father pounded on the door, part out of anger, part out of worry. No answer and the door was locked.

More pounding. Our Father shouted he would call the police or an ambulance, threats bouncing off the door like his fists.

Finally, Pete opened the door. He was clearly very sick and very drunk, everything about him reeked. But, sensing his danger, when our Dad accused him of drinking, Pete began to cry and protested he was not drunk, just sick and our Father, partly because he did not know what to do and because he did not want to fire Pete, relented again.

For some time, Pete seemed to recover, do his work reasonably, and not appear to be drinking, but, in the end, it was a horse that did him in.

Our thoroughbred horse farm had stalls for about 25 head, mostly full of horses from the local race track that needed to rest and heal. Also, it had a torpedo sand training

track, the kind of footing the real race tracks had, replete with a starting gate for getting horses back up to speed. Coming when needed were a variety of what were known as “bug boys,” young riders who were too inexperienced to ride in regular races, but eager to apprentice and earn some cash. They would come down for a day and work out the horses that needed it.

Therefore, on that fatal day, two significant events happened – cataclysmic for Old Pete. It was a bright, sunny day and the current bug boy was out in the track area with my Father and some other horse owners to watch several horses work out to see if they were ready to return to the races. The bug boy mounted the first one, guided him into the starting gate, which even had a real bell, and took off around the sandy oval when that bell pierced the summer air. Because of the short distance, the horses would traverse that oval several times and this particular horse was flying. I well remember watching him with the same awe I always had when these magnificent creatures displayed their unique beauty and power.

And then it happened. Old Pete’s world came crashing down as the horse, with no warning, stopped suddenly, reared up, and threw the rider over his head. Fortunately, the bug boy was shaken, but not hurt seriously.

“What happened?” our Father called out as he and his cronies sprinted to the jockey, helping him up and dusting him off as the horse continued to run wildly around the track before he came to a natural stop.

The bug boy spoke in a breathless, halting way: “Something spooked the horse, Mr. F. A flash of light hit us both in the eyes. A glint. It caused the horse to rear. I couldn’t hold him.”

“A glint?” Everyone just looked at each other.

“It came from the infield,” the jockey said, pointing to the interior of the track, which was covered with high weeds as it always was in the summer. “That flash came from over there.” He pointed toward the center.

It did not take long to find Pete’s folly. Our Dad and the other men ducked under the fence and walked toward where the bug boy pointed, kicking the tall weeds aside as they scoured the area.

Nor too far in, the mystery was solved. Covered by the weeds were scads of empty beer cans, which Old Pete had stashed to cover his addiction. Evidently the sun had glinted off one of them and struck the horse in the eye, causing it to buck the rider off.

It was a long, sad walk back to the barn. And Pete cooperated in the way he did not want to. He did not respond when our Dad called out his name. He was passed out dead drunk near a far stall when Buck found him.

Despite my clear ability to remember all of this so many years later in graphic detail, I confess I do not remember Old Pete’s dismissal. Our minds allow us to block some memories.

Now, I am just sitting here at my computer, penning this, with no memory of a good-bye. All I can see is the old trailer, that, for some reason I can’t recall, burned down during the next winter, no human able to live in it even though I am sure our Father hired a replacement for Old Pete.

Not every story has to have a moral. Sometimes they are just sad.

## NOVEL EXCERPT

### 1

## The Marchioness

(From the novel, "Pursued: Lillian's  
Story")

FELICE PICANO

Miss Harriet B. Elder  
The Daily Mail & Times  
Ulvertston, England

December 5<sup>th</sup>, 189 –

Dear Miss Elder,

You called upon me yesterday eve with the news that my father-in-law, the former Earl of Ravenglass, had arrived at a peaceful end, at long last, in the prison chamber where he was kept for the past seven years. You asked if I might be able to add to the obituary of this former Lord of the British Exchequer and low-fallen great man for your readers by giving some personal anecdote or other that might serve to make him more sympathetic. I find that I am not able to do so without further tarnishing his name, but upon reflection I recalled –indeed I had never forgotten and had written down in my girlhood diary –an incident regarding his wife, when she was Marchioness, from some years ago that you might find revealing.

It was in the year 184 – and my Aunt Blassage from Lancaster, visited my family in the rectory here, upon the Ravenglass Manorestate. After she had gone, she left my mother as a gift, a lovely lacework collar, made in the Isle of Man, where Aunt had recently journeyed. My mother declared it beautiful if a great waste of money. She went out insufficiently to wear it, and anyway a Vicar's wife, as Aunt B. should well know, oughtn't to display such Vanities upon her Person.

I suggested that mother give it to Her Ladyship, the Marchioness Bella of Ravenglass, who, though she went out even less than mother, we both knew, wore such collars, and who would thereby be particularly obligated to us by its receipt. I think my mother was so surprized I did not ask the collar for own self, that she assented to my plan.

The following afternoon I took it wrapped in fine piece of slightly used muslin up to the Manor House. Mrs. Ounch, the housekeeper, sought to take it from me, promising to pass it on, but I wondered if it would ever get past the servant's hall, and I reminded her that at Her Ladyship's last birth day celebration she had particularly asked me to pay her a call. It was therefore with a rather poor grace, that Ounch agreed to convey my message to her mistress, and a few minutes later I was ushered upstairs and into the winter garden, albeit it was only November, and still inordinately temperate out of doors.

I would have been amazed to see the Marchioness out of her mechanical contraption of a movable wheeled wooden chair and she was not that day. She was in fact, sitting amid its surrounding pillows, and had been placed in a pool of green filtered sunlight, surrounded by oversize *dracenas*, colossal rubber plants, jungles of

orchidaceous vines and lianas, giant pink *amaryllis* and other flora and vegetation of a tropical nature that I was unfamiliar with then but have since come to know. Somewhere above us, a skylight window must have been left ajar as three quite large, iridescent, brilliantly coloured, bottle green horseflies slowly swirled about the vicinity, shaping unhurried figure eights in the pollen-mottled air.

I thought the Marchioness asleep, since she was silent, unmoving and her eyes shut, but I curtsayed anyway and went up to her as close as I dared and laid the muslin upon her lap and opened it up, and quietly whispered, revealing and explicating the fineness of jet-work inter-stitched with the inky lace.

Although she could be no older than five and thirty, from this near, she revealed a face covered with strangely old looking skin and a meshwork of fine lines, especially around her pursed mouth and the almost bruised, dark looking undersides of her eyes. She smelled of Lilac Water yet also, like an older person, rather musty in fact, and there was also another, sharper and somehow Asiatic aroma from nearby. A moment later I was able to trace it as deriving from a narrow violet coloured glass vial with a carved glass stopper and also from a slender, chased silver chalice that could hold no more than half a draught of a drink. Both items were placed upon a wheeled wooden slatted table evidently constructed to complement and accompany her movable chair.

I was about to stand up and go over to the vial for a closer look at the writing, which appeared from this angle to be medically prescriptive, when I felt her hand upon mine and looked up. Her great grey eyes opened slits, then wider, albeit without anything like recognition of me

even though her mouth became more wrinkled as it *opened slightly* in an approximation of a moue.

"How charming!" she hissed more than whispered.

"My Lady? Ma'am? I've taken the liberty of... ? And I've brought you a gift my mother... ?"

I touched the muslin and her large, veined hands lifted the collar before her eyes.

"From the Isle of Man, my Lady. Hand made by the inhabitants, of course."

She held it up to the light. "How very intricate," it now came out a whisper. "I accept it, yes. It will go with my... jade taffeta bodice."

She returned it to its muslin bed, where a horsefly landed upon it.

She made no effort to brush it off and when I did so, she stopped me.

"Don't you like Nature, young Miss?"

"I do My Lady, very much so."

"Very much so?"

"Yes, My Lady, unlike most girls I am unafraid of animals or... anything in nature. Our dear father lectures us that we must share the world with our animated brethren."

"Yes. So we must," she whispered hoarsely. "And if you really like Nature... ?"

"I do."

"Then you will very much like my Precita."

So saying she moved a hand to her throat upon which she wore a large, deep-green malachite locket, almost square, set in gold, and hung by three strands of gold beads.

No sooner was the locket opened, than I saw it held some white furry object. One of her dried-blood red fingernails gently probed the centre of the locket and on the instant several limbs jumped out around it, grasping the nail closely. Immediately the large furry white thing crawled out of the locket and across her hand, and almost too quickly to follow, rushed onto her throat, crossed onto her long hair, and stopped only when atop her head where it rested long enough for me to fully make it out.

I'd been greatly surprised, for it moved in a fashion unlike any other creature I'd ever seen except perhaps a spider; not quite scuttling as crabs and lobsters do upon the strand yet similar to them; unlike them, it didn't locomote sideways and yet it went so very quickly. I could now see that it *was* some species of spider, though very large, quite furry and the colour of clotted cream, with a beige hue only upon its head and what seemed to be the curved gripping claws of its front arms.

"You do like Nature," she now hissed at me. "You haven't fallen back, screaming and rushing out of the room on your hands and knees like most of the fool girls in this house."

"It's remarkable," I said. "In truth, My Lady, what manner of animal is it? It seems an arachnid in shape and limb but it's so large! And furred like a mouse or..."

"It is an arachnid, as you say. A subspecies called a tarantula. But while related, it is not a whit like those of that name we know here in the old world, those black and ugly brutes with their bags of gut and blood red stain. No," she went on, "It's from the Sonoran desert. Do you know where that is?"

"In North America, I believe, My Lady: In the north-western part of the Mexican Empire."

"So you are intelligent after all. Do you know what it likes to eat?"

"I should think," I said, "other creatures from that locality: insects and small rodents and lizards and suchlike."

"Yes," she hissed, "And not little girls, which is why you did not flee from it." She paused. "Would you like to touch Precita? To pet her?"

Though subtly horrified, I was most curious. "May I? I'll be very gentle."

With a single hand she lifted the tarantula which covered the entire back of her hand and brought it down to the muslin and slowly petted it, until I swore I could hear it purr like a kitten.

"Now you may," she said and I followed suit, amazed at its silk like fur and its little movements as though coming closer into being caressed.

"You came here not merely to call, nor simply to gift me, you're far too intelligent a girl for that merely," she said, as we now took turns with the spider.

"It's true, my lady, I came to ask a boon for my dear brother, Rudolf whom you may remember."

"How could I not remember him? For of late he is to be found all over this house whenever my son, Roland, is here."

"I hope, My Lady, that my brother does not displease you."

"He neither pleases, nor displeases. He is Roland's after all and no business of mine."

I knew neither what she meant, nor how to take it, pro or no, so I went on, as we doubly caressed the furred, cream-colored arachnid.

"He is of age to continue his schooling. To a college of some sort he must go, yet my father has not lifted one finger to make it so."

"He is not a good scholar?" she asked.

"Quite good, My Lady. Yet he is in want of... " I knew not what to say and settled for, "in want of .... Patronage."

"I have not held in my hand even one shilling in more than a decade," she said sadly, an admittance that I must say amazed me.

"Even so, a word or two from Your Ladyship on the matter. To your son, Roland. Or better yet, to His Lordship. A scholar's stipend after all, although immense to such as we, is but a pittance to ..."

She stopped me with another hiss, and I thought my mission lost.

"He is afraid?" she asked very quietly yet very clearly.

"My brother, Ma'am? I think is afraid of no one alive!" Then I understood, "You mean my father, the Vicar? Yes, he is afraid! And especially to ask anything of Lord Ravenglass, no matter how much it is needed. He fears him greatly, I believe."

"And rightly, too. For Lord Ravenglass is powerful and thus much to be feared," she added and I thought my cause a lost one.

“Still,” she went on, “It’s true that I may now and then wield an iota of influence. If only because he wishes no possible... “she sought for the words, settling upon, “possibly solid, *provable* grounds of dissatisfaction.”

“Ah, My Lady,” I almost cried, lifting my hand off the creature. “My entire family would be so utterly obliged to you.”

“But on condition,” she stopped my effusions. “Only that you will join your brother in attending a college. For if he is as intelligent as you are, he would want it. And your parents too.”

“I would like that very much, since indeed my parents do believe in girls being educated and have helped me to advance this far in the cottage-school.”

“Then I shall have a little project,” the Marchioness said, and for the first time I heard a smidgen of pleasure in her voice. “Wherein I may somehow alter the way things are.”

Precita suddenly moved forward from out of her caress. And I couldn’t help but notice that one of the bottle green flies had landed nearby, as before, on a particular weave of muslin.

The Marchioness lifted her hand lightly and very gently lifted mine away at the same time.

Precita slowly stood up and I could see the hair on its limbs stand up too. Still, it didn’t move. Before it and thoroughly heedless, the bottle green fly turned about upon the spot of muslin, its feelers and antennae immersed in some area therein from which it hoped to gain sustenance. Precita meanwhile waited, and almost thrummed like a purring cat, but remained utterly

unmoving the longest time. I was almost about to look away when Precita shot forward and in a half second had the fly caught between its longest palps, had turned it about, thrust out of some openings a network of glistening thread and had wrapped the fly in wet netting.

It worked so quickly, now using several of its legs, that though I observed most carefully I could not make out, how the fly became so mummified. Then Precita stopped, held the fly just so before its high placed little head with five black eyes. She thrust out a single tiny near-invisible needle into the mass, and stung again and again until the fly went still, its alarmed buzzing silenced.

“Now Precita shall dine at leisure,” the Marchioness said, slipping back into her languid hiss of a voice. I watched the tarantula hold the wrapped fly in front of itself as though admiring its work, then crawl up her Ladyship’s arm, onto her breast, and from there into the ajar malachite box, where it settled in as though into a nest.

She shut the box, then reached over for the purple glass vial and let several thick liquid drops slowly descend into the chalice, where she indolently swirled the liquid.

Before she could bring the chalice to her mouth, I curtsyed, and began to withdraw.

“You won’t forget my brother!” I dared to remind her, suspecting what Lethe was contained in that draught she raised to her lips.

“I assuredly won’t forget neither you nor your brother,” she softly said, then tossed back the liquid and I could smell it fully now and identify it as Laudanum from its bouquet like rotten almonds and overripe peaches.

Having sipped, she went very still, although her eyes remained open, staring into some baroquely fanciful Beyond, as I slowly backed out of the winter garden.

The Marchioness was as good as her word, and both my brother and I attended college. I until completion of my courses, and he for two years, before he left to obtain a commission in Her Majesty's Imperial Navy where he has served ever since.

Signed, Lady Lillian of Ravenglass



# PLAY

## 1

### Chance of a Lifetime (One-act play)

DAVID JAMES

#### Characters:

- Roger: an obsessive director  
Sharon: his wife  
Lily: their daughter, about 10-12 years old

#### Setting

Family is in the living room. Roger sits in a “director’s” chair.

- Roger: Okay, people, let’s take it from the top. And give me your best, will ya? Five, six, seven...(*points at Sharon*).
- Sharon: I don’t believe you. Not again.
- Lily: Come on, he’s only trying to help us.
- Sharon: How does this help? He never moves out of that chair.
- Roger: Stay in the scene. Lily, comfort Mom. (*Lily walks over, give Sharon a hug.*) More empathy, please.
- Sharon: Stop it!
- Lily: But Mom, this is my big scene.

- Roger: Look shocked, Lily. Good.
- Sharon: No, honey, this is your Mom and Dad's scene. Please go to your room.
- Lily: But Dad says I'm a shoe-in for an Oscar. Right, Dad?  
(*Roger makes the sign to stretch the scene.*)
- Sharon: Lily...
- Lily: Ever since I was a little girl, I've dreamed of being a star. From the time I uttered my first word, I've been practicing for this very moment. And Dad says if I say my lines right and give you this look (*makes an exaggerated sad face*) the critics will be calling me the next –
- Sharon: Up to your room! Now! I need to talk to your father. Alone. (*Lily pouts, exits.*)
- Roger: That was brilliant. Beautiful, baby. You nailed the whole desperate mother/wife emotion there. This will blow. People. Away.
- Sharon: You're sick, Roger. You need help. Let's call Dr. Thompson.
- Roger: The pity, the concern. Your tone of voice. It's all there. It's hard to believe you're acting. I've never –
- Sharon: This is not a rehearsal. There is no play. This is you, me and Lily. Our life. Every night, we go through the same damn argument. It's got to stop. Come back to us.
- Roger: You keep this up, you'll be in major films by the end of the year. (*To no one.*) Okay, everyone, cut and take. That's a wrap.
- Sharon: Listen to me. I'm taking Lily and we're moving out, going to my mother's in Bridgeport for a while. You

need some time. I'm tired and I can't put up with this. (*Sharon kisses him on the cheek and leaves. Roger pauses, thinks.*)

Roger: Improv, yes! Taking it in a whole new direction, I love it. (*Calling out.*) Baby, that's a great idea. (*Long pause. Looks around at no one.*) Sharon? Lily? (*Long pause.*) Help?

LIGHTS OUT.

## 2

# Tennis Dad

GARY BECK

Pre-show sound track – recorded sounds of warm-up rally. At curtain, official's a junior tournament.

Preliminaries: linesman ready, players ready, play. Sound track of tennis match during the match. Mom and Dad are watching a match between their son and his opponent.

Dad: Why didn't he rush the net? God damn it! He ought to be putting those hangers away.

Mom: He was right to stay back. He's got to build sound ground strokes.

Dad: There you go again. As if I didn't know that! But if he hangs around the baseline all the time, he'll get to be one of them specialists, and they never make it big.

Mom: Borg did.

Dad: That was long ago and he was an exception. He was relentless on the court. He reminds me of this movie I saw once. It was a foreign picture in another language and I couldn't understand a word of it. It had English words at the bottom of the screen that didn't make much sense. It was real boring....

Mom: Then why tell me about it?

Dad: 'Cause just as I was getting ready to walk out, this army started to march towards these other guys, who were waiting for them. They had these big old-

fashioned guns with bayonets, and they were crossing a field to get at the other guys. These other guys were shooting the shit out of them, but they just kept coming. They didn't look around, they didn't look scared, and they didn't curse or yell or anything. They just kept getting closer. And when they got close enough for the other guys to see their faces, the other guys started running away, 'cause they knew these guys were animals and they were just gonna keep coming until they stuck their bayonets in them real deep. They were Swedes. Real brutes.

Mom: So what?

Dad: Borg's a Swede.

Mom: What does that have to do with anything?

Dad: I don't want my kid being an animal on the court.

Mom: You're the one who's always telling him that he's got to be a killer out there, or he won't get anywhere.

Dad: Sure he's got to be a killer. But not an animal.

Mom: What's the difference?

Dad: There's a big difference. A killer wants to win at all cost and does everything he can to beat his opponent. An animal won't stop until he grinds the other guy into the dust.

Mom: They sound exactly the same to me.

Dad: No. They don't.

Mom: Yes. They do.

Dad: Aw. You don't understand.

Mom: Then explain, mister tennis expert.

Dad: There you go again.

Mom: What?

Dad: You know.

Mom: No. I don't.

Dad: Being sarcastic when I'm trying to have a serious conversation with you.

Mom: If you didn't yell all the time when I disagree with you I wouldn't be sarcastic.

Dad: Ha. You admit it.

Mom: What?

Dad: You insult me, instead of being reasonable.

Mom: I can't be reasonable with you. Every time I try, you either yell at me or call me names.

Dad: That's not true.

Mom: Yes. It is.

Dad: No. It's not, you dope.

Mom: See what I mean.

Dad: What?

Mom: Name calling, instead of discussing.

Dad: Aw. You twist everything around. I was just trying to make a point.

Mom: By insulting me?

Dad: I was talking about junior's net game, when you started this argument.

Mom: You mean I dared to ask a question?

Dad: It's how you ask it. You've always got an attitude.

Mom: I wonder who I got it from,

Dad: Well, you didn't get it from me. (He ignores her disbelieving stare.) Can we get back to junior's game?

Mom: Yes. Can I ask a question?

Dad: Yeah.

Mom: Why do you think you know enough about tennis to coach junior? You never played.

Dad: I watch it on TV all the time and I'm reading a strategy book.

Mom: If you're serious about his becoming a tournament player, shouldn't we get him lessons from a tennis pro?

Dad: I know enough to start him off. If it turns out he has talent and the will to win we'll get him some lessons.

Mom: Are you qualified to judge those things?

Dad: Why not? I'm as smart as the next guy.

Mom: Shouldn't a professional assess his potential?

Dad: I can do it.

Mom: Well I guess there's no sense going further with that.

Dad: What does that mean?

Mom: Your mind is made up.

Dad: What's wrong with that?

Mom: Nothing. If you know what you're doing.

Dad: Well I do.

Mom: Did you ever ask junior what he wants?

Dad: What would he know? He's only a kid.

Mom: It's his life you're deciding.

Dad: You're blowing this out of proportion.

Mom: Am I?

Dad: Yes. It's only a game.

Mom: But you behave like it's life or death.

Dad: It is, if you want to be a champion. You gotta steam roller anything that gets in your way. Crush it. Pound it into the ground....

Mom: Like an animal?

Dad: Whatever it takes.... Aw. You know what I mean.

Mom: Yes. Now let's sit down with junior tonight and find out what he wants to do.

Dad: Aw.... Alright.

Mom: And don't try to influence him.

Dad: I wouldn't do that!

Mom: (She ignores his indignant protest.) Then it's settled.

Dad: Yes, dear.



### 3

## The Reality that Questions itself Deep down inside

RENÉ VAN DER KLOOSTER

Scene: a rowboat in the centre of the stage. This rowboat turns slowly around, as if it was bobbing. All around the rowboat a mist arises. There are no oars present.

Characters: two castaways.

A: Mo Hamlet.

B: the bartender.

Playwright: the playwright.

Director: dr Mess.

M.: spectator.

(note: these characters are present in other works of the author as well)

A: how do we start?

B: with what?

A: ha, unnoticed, it has already happened, the beginning has started by itself.

B: the beginning of what?

A: the beginning of the game.

B: the game? I picture our circumstances somewhat more desperate.

A: that is the game.

- B: evoked drama, now, even now, in these dire straits?
- A: as in a play, I want to use our circumstances to translate it in such a way that it questions itself deep down inside.
- B: seriously?
- A: yes, and I want to do that through improvisation.
- B: and do I have to participate in that?
- A: as soon as the beginning started, you started too, there is no way around it.
- B: is that so? And if I go on a strike?!
- A: but you don't have a cardboard sign to write something on. And you can't walk around here in circles and be angry and shout out that you want this or that.
- B: well, suppose, I am willing to participate in this bold plan, how do we question this deep down inside? Or is this yet another attempt of yours to explore the boundaries between the real and the unreal? Because I think it is real as hell that we are lost, floating around in this immense sea.
- A: that is why we need to do this, to verify whether we can escape, to save ourselves by the imagination, the idea that all of this is not what it seems to be, and that the play that we are performing now will be our salvation. That we are not here to drown, but to ask the question: where is the earth, where is the solid ground?
- B: your imagination is so ridiculously large, you lose yourself in it; I regularly jump back into reality to prevent a total embedding.
- A: but we cannot do anything else, can we? Our situation is quite hopeless. And is it really that absolute? I mean the boundary between reality and unreality?

- B: you have to determine the boundaries within which you operate, outside of them chaos reigns.
- A: but yet it is possible that something appears first in a dream and only afterwards in reality, and then you have to ask yourself the question what is more real, which appearance was more real.
- B: well, I believe that you can overcome certain barriers through the imagination, but with the new imagination acquired through these actions you are actually throwing up new barriers.
- A: in order not to be blinded, the last imagination is that what is left for us; I try as long as I live to depict, between myself and the Great Imagination, with her unbearable light, a hint of opacity, indeed, drawing on the same Great Imagination, to restrain her inevitability...
- B: the hint of opacity, this mist, which you invented?
- A: and the boat.
- B: also the boat?
- A: and our characters.
- B: you invented me?
- A: and myself, that was much more difficult, almost impossible.
- B: and why didn't you invent the oars?
- A: because I didn't invent the sea either.
- B: but this boat you did invent? And why the hell are we spinning around?
- A: for the effect, the spectator's view of our faces, our gestures, changes constantly after all, as if we are a film projection incarnated, or, as if we are standing still and a camera is circling around us.

B: and how is this going to end?

A: with the mist clearing and the light getting brighter.

*(this happens)*

B: we cannot escape it?

A: we cannot escape the end, this play has to stop at one point.

B: and we cannot escape the real end either?

A: the real end is the last barrier, the demons are waiting for you there, the demons that have been in sync with your intellect inside your head, but now have rushed ahead to outsmart you.

B: my demons? But what about your demons?

A: that is you.

*(B becomes indignant, stands up, A follows his example, they grab each other by the shoulders and start to push each other (in slow-motion), the boat wobbles, the mist clears even more, the light gets stronger)*

B: I have to ... I have to push you, my best friend, over the edge, so that you will not overwhelm me, because if I am your demon I must surely die before I see the light?

A: which you cannot bear, the light, I can, if I push you over the edge at least, you, my last barrier.

B: it is so hot, suddenly all around the boat these flames, as if we are bobbing in a sea of sulfur, do I have to go under in that?

A: that will be your new reality.

B: my demons, I see them in the flames, they reach out their hands to me...

A: but above me, in the light, the hands of my angels reach out to me...

B: fortunately it is not real.

A: I am real, because...

'Stop stop,' the playwright suddenly shouts, 'that was very good, but I lost the ending, I don't know how to end it, I don't know how to put one in the light and the other in the darkness, I cannot and do not want to make that choice! Let the light get brighter, (*the light gets brighter*) so bright that we cannot bear it, let heaven and hell scorch us, stir up the fire, (*the flames are stirred up*) so that the stage goes up in flames (*the stage goes up in flames*) and all the spectators will flee the room (*all spectators (i.e. M.) flee the room*) and we also, (*the four men flee the room*) back into the intolerable but precious reality, this street full of permanent mist and obscure neon light!

## ESSAY

### 1

## Heart Connections

SUSAN P. BLEVINS

As an ex-pat Brit for the past fifty-five years, I have led an interestingly peripatetic life and made emotional connections with many of the lands I visited. The trouble with being an ex-pat is that we belong everywhere and nowhere. We are betwixt and between, always.

I used to travel to India frequently, just for the love of it, and the minute I set foot there, every time, I felt a sense of belonging, of having come home. My travels on that wonderful sub-continent have always been happy, peopled by friendly and helpful locals, and the intense colors that assail my eyes and the pungent odors of food and early morning dung fires never fail to thrill my senses. Although I always traveled there alone, I never felt alone, and never racially discriminated against, even though the British ruled India for decades, sometimes with a less than gentle hand. I was always welcomed and made to feel at home. That feeling of mutual respect and affection persists to this day in the several friendships I have with Indians living both in the USA and in England. They are always ready for *chai and chat!*

Another area of the world where I feel a deep connection, is the Middle East. Egypt in particular feels like

home to me, especially ancient Egypt. When I visited the pyramid of Cheops on my honeymoon and went down into its dark depths, I felt I had been there before, and my guide was startled by the knowledge I seemed to have, which I could only explain as a prior knowing from a previous lifetime.

On another, later occasion, when I was visiting Egypt for the second time with my God-Mother, we attended a Sound and Light performance on the Giza plateau. We sat on tiered seats beside the sacred lake of Karnak, with the towering pyramids, the sphinx and other monuments towering in the background, brilliantly illuminated in different colors, while the story of ancient Egypt was narrated. I was delighted and awe-struck in particular by the barges being rowed across the lake, with the oarsman standing in full regalia, and a seated woman in the prow of the vessel. I commented afterwards to other tourists on how amazing it was to see the barges slowly moving back and forth on the lake. I was given startled looks and told there had been *no* barges on the lake. Just the narrator telling the story. Evidently, the veil had been pulled back briefly for me and I had glimpsed ancient times. What I saw was as clear as the people sitting around me, but from their expressions I could see they thought I was mad.

In September, 2010, I returned yet again to Cairo for two months of intensive Arabic language studies. I was too swamped by homework to have past life visions, but I did feel at home hearing the muezzin call the faithful to prayer five times a day. Here too I was always welcomed and treated respectfully, and felt safe walking around on my own. I was there just before the Arab Spring erupted in December of that year, so things are probably somewhat different now.

Basically, I find that though the whole world fascinates me, there is only one place that has my heart forever, always has and always will, and that is Italy.

I could not wait to leave England, and left as soon as possible, in 1965, when I was twenty. I had been working at an opera house, and met many Italians, and I fell in love with them all. When I arrived In Italy I knew I had *really* come home. I could stretch freely, breathe deeply, and finally be myself. England was suffocating me and slowly draining me of life, and Italy restored me to a fullness of life I had only dreamed of. I just knew from the first minute that that was where I belonged. And the Italians I met all told me I looked like a portrait by Botticelli: the high forehead, the heart-shaped face, the classic Florentine noblewoman. Well, I drank all that up, of course, and was in heaven.

But I had to leave in 1991, to be with my American husband, who by this time was ailing and needed me to be with him in the USA. Leaving Italy was like cutting my umbilical cord all over again. It was painful, but I knew I had to do it.

When I hear Italian music today it brings tears to my eyes and my heartbeat races. When I have the joy of speaking with an Italian I am transformed. Language shapes people as well as the other way around. I lived there for twenty-six amazing years. I arrived when I was twenty, going on twelve in English terms of those days, and I grew up there, I was formed there. I still speak to myself, and to my cat, in Italian. Which reminds me: after I had been there for perhaps three years I had a health crisis and had to be rushed to hospital for an emergency procedure. While in and out of the anesthetic the ER surgeon had given me, the surgical staff told me I had been babbling in Italian. When I learned that, I knew I'd

*arrived*. I had to have surgery to remove a ruptured ovarian cyst and I recovered well.

As long as my husband was alive I refused to go back to Italy. I told him I was afraid that if I went, I would not return to him in the USA. So I didn't go, and although he died fourteen years ago, I still have not returned. Perhaps at this point I am afraid I will be disappointed, because I know it has changed greatly, how could it not? I keep telling myself I will return. One day.

There is just so much to love about the Italians, but I think what stands out most for me is their intense *joie de vivre*, their total commitment to living in the moment. Not to mention, of course, their incredible food, their magnificent landscapes, and their central location in Europe that makes travel to all points of the compass so easy. Italy is where I feel most at home, most *me*.

I realize also, intellectually, that home is mostly a state of mind. Home is where our love resides. Home is seeing the divine in all places and peoples. Home is the feeling of inner contentment with being just who we are and where we are. Home is that ineffable feeling of being home to oneself.

But platitudes aside, my place on this planet where I resonate and feel joyful, is Italy. I carry that feeling with me wherever I am, including here in Houston, where I currently live. The world will always fascinate me and draw me out to new adventures, but my compass always reverts back to Italy. I have the definite feeling that when I do finally return, I shall feel the overwhelming urge to do as the Pope does when he returns from a trip abroad: fall to my knees, kiss the ground and give thanks.

## ARTICLE

### 1

# Return to Nature: An Ecocritical Study through Gita Mehta's "A River Sutra"

DR. SUBAS CHANDRA ROUT

### Abstract

The current state of the world is inflicted by the dreadful infectious ailments like SARS, MERS, ZIKA, Ebola and COVID-19. Such health hazards seem to be obvious as the contemporary humanity, being materially swallowed up, has made the earth 'a grocery store of wastes' and the carbon economy rewrites the fate of the universe. The problem of the environment springs from the insatiable desire and unconquerable mind of human beings making derangement and deterioration of ecosystem. Their aggressive capitalism and rapacious commercialism sabotages both biotic and abiotic. Corollary to this, vehicular emissions, industry-discharge biocide, 'depletion of green cover', increasing toxicity, nuclear hazards, and population explosion etc. rupture many times to the planet. The upshot of this, the present world is increasingly lost to the holocaust of global warming, appalling climate change, hole in the ozone layer, melting of glaciers, potential danger of landslides, transmittable viruses and shortage of life-supporting clean air. Besides, consumerism constructs a great divide between man and nature that makes the earth inhospitable for life of any kind. Pollution-free ecosystem has been the greatest challenge in twenty-first century as air-borne transmissions and pollutants spread their network and threaten to the existence of life. Such ecological threat operates from the flaw in man's

anthropocentric vision. But Gita Mehta makes a holistic approach to biocentricism. In her unique creation *A River Sutra*, she presents the sensory vision to locate the importance of nature through aestheticism and asceticism. Instead of revealing the compulsion to conquer and exploit over nature for 'greed economy', Mehta narrates the mode of living harmoniously in the soft, tender lap of nature.

Keywords: capitalism, consumerism, biocentrism, anthropocentrism, biomes

Presently, everyone is in search of life-sustaining air as the emergence of pandemic corona virus has been the dreadful threat to the survival of mankind. In spite of these entire terrific crises, it is a matter of irony that man feels proud for his modern culture which is defined by its quantum of pollution and waste. This sense of oppression to nature damages the planet's basic life support systems. In such context, Timothy W. Luke's opinion assumes significance:

Nature is turning to 'Denature'. Much of the earth is a 'built environment', a 'planned habitat', or 'managed range' as pollution modifies atmospheric chemistry, urbanization restructures weather events, architecture encloses whole biomes in sprawling megacities, and biotechnology reengineers the base codes of existing biomass (Luke,1997:195).

But man has to realize that he lives in nature, 'nature is his body' and he has to maintain a proper relationship with her, otherwise it would lead to a catastrophic destruction.

The yearning for a life in harmony and amicability with nature finds expression in pastoral which is a real empathetic engagement with the biophysical world. On the otherhand, Mehta does not advocate the humans directly to save the universe from total destruction, rather indirectly gives the message that 'human beings are alive because the earth is alive'. Her detailed and innumerable description of natural

world especially flora and fauna connected to the river Narmada proves her inner sense of caring and betterment of a healthy environment. "The sky overhead was blue, without a cloud in sight. A thick undergrowth of ferns had sprung up in the jungle...avoiding the fallen creepers-blue convolvulus, white jasmine, orange-pink lantana-floating in the water...and I paused to watch a peacock fanning its tail as it performed in mating dance to some peahen, invisible in the distance" (112-113). The inherent value of aesthetic experience qualifies Mehta's biocentricism.

Through the wandering of her central character – the retired bureaucrat – in pervasive peace and tranquil atmosphere in the jungle surrounding within the perimeter and immediate vicinity of the Narmada, Mehta presents the experiences of a nature lover. In the beautification of nature, the narrator expresses, "THE SMELL of vegetation rose from the earth as I followed the mud path through the trees back to the bungalow. The jungle was seething with activity. Parakeets and cuckoos, wood pigeons and mynahs shrieked and cawed as they built their nests before the heat of summer seared the forest" (167). The bureaucrat's encounter with several animals and birds suggests the ecological diversity of the region. The aesthetic experience of the wilderness seems to establish Mehta's caring about nature.

While the contemporary ecologists claim about our active participation in 'greed economy' and turning nature into a 'carbon sink', in the meantime Mehta distances her characters from that culture. There is no capitalistic mind-set in them; rather they love nature. The bureaucrat denounces luxury and loves for returning to nature. In such context, he says:

On entering the jungle of my morning walk, I loiter under the trees... To dispel my morbid thoughts I admire the red

blossoms shaken from the flame trees by clambering monkeys. Or I pause between the branches rooted in the soil around an immense banyan tree like pillars in an ancient temple to watch birds guarding their nests from the squirrels streaking through the flat leaves... On the far bank of the river the morning sun is striking the canals that irrigate the fields, and I can see farmers moving behind their buffaloes through the flourishing crops interlaced by silver ribbons of water (28-29).

Such spectacular account explains Gita Mehta's awareness of pastoral ecology that gives the idea of nature as stable. It endures "the counterpoint to the disruptive energy and change of society" (Garrard, 2012:63). Through the bureaucrat, Mehta foregrounds the biocentric motto which is far away from anthropocentric vision of life. The quality of aesthetic experience of the locale provides the value of nature. On the otherhand, aestheticization of that region with visual images announces the writer's uniqueness to keep nature free from carbon economy. The question of late-capitalist mind-set that overwhelms the entire world has not touched her, nor has she been fumbled by anthropocentric arrogance.

The text unfolds the colorful portrayal of natural exquisiteness of the region which advocates the ideology that living with nature is a state of extreme pleasure. It occurs with the bureaucrat when he rejects the metropolitan life and comes to the region to enjoy the living. Corollary to this, the bureaucrat expresses, "There was indeed a mood of longing in the jungle. Small flowers foamed over the leaves of the mango trees, the wind carried the scent of lemon blossoms and sandalwood to my nostrils" (61). Some may argue that this description as scenic or picturesque but it is the touchstone of exquisite esthetic tastes. In the ensuing situation, "The emphasis of pastoral has generally been on the impact of the environment on the human rather than the

other way around" (Huggan and Tiffin, 2015:16). It promotes one's love and integrity for nature. If everyone fosters such tendency, nature will not be ruptured and mankind will not suffer what it has been today on account of global pandemic.

Gita Mehta does not separate us from nature through the mega machinic grids for industrial processing nor present 'an economic model based on the idea of limitless growth'. On the contrary, she tries to reshape humans' attitude to return to nature. The writer does not exhibit that landscape as 'toxic riskscape' for consumerism and capitalism, rather designs the region as a space of purity and serenity impregnated with attitude of reverence and humility. Such is understood when the bureaucrat recounts:

Behind me I could hear the rushing of the waterfalls. I pushed the papers away and walked to the end of my small lawn to look down at the Narmada River. At noon the sun is so strong its harsh light gives the river the appearance of beaten metal, but at this hour the morning light catches every nuance of the water's movement. Below me the wind was tossing the rippling waves up so that they sparkled in the light, before disappearing into the shadows below. I watched the water sparkling and disappearing, sparkling and disappearing (62-63)...

The text needs to be examined in the present context of climate change and global warming when the industrial emission damages the planet's basic life – support systems. Instead of demonstrating the background of mechanistic modernism and materialistic culture, Mehta portrays the landscape of flora and fauna. In search of peace, a reader can find out, "Of gardens more beautiful than those of gods themselves with ponds of crystalline water alive with leaping fish, silver among the water lilies and trees bending under the weight of flowering vines. A world devoted to pleasure and learning, its serenity guarded by hooded serpents with great

gems flashing from their hoods”(77-78). It seems that the artist tries to re-establish man’s relation with nature. Such description articulates eco-friendly tendency of the writer. “Yet it also, just as emphatically, envisions this ideal as a beautiful and just relation between human beings and the natural world” (Borlik, 2012: 177).

The healing power of nature is overtly depicted to solace the narrator’s desolate mentality. The idea of glorification and beautification of nature shapes the platform to make it safe from the toxic waste dump. Aesthetically such sentiment nourishes to grief-stricken mind. In case of the bureaucrat, he realizes this and says, “I watched the water slowly redden, catching reflections from the rose colors of dawn, and imagined the river as a woman painting her palms and the soles of her feet with vermilion as she prepared to meet her lover”(90). The appearance of the river turns into coloured beauties as the morning sun shines on her breast. Moreover, the artist becomes elated and thrilled at the tonalities of the Narmada, “Dawn lightened the sky and I was able to see the Narmada leaping headlong through the distant marble rocks, the spraying waterfalls refracting the first rays of sun into arcs of colour as if the river were a woman adorning herself with jewels” (ibid). In such context, Timothy Clark views, “Aesthetic atmospheres are inseparable from the fact that the human body, as a part of nature, participates in the showing and letting-be-felt of things in their multiplicity and varied tonalities” (Clark, 2014:82).

Adoption of nature-description provides a potential boost to ecological sense. The artist contemplates the natural scenes and sights silently, “I sat in the darkness repeating the invocation until the first rays of daylight pierced the monsoon mists shrouding the fields across the river. A strong wind was pushing banks of clouds toward our hills. I watched them changing shapes and colours in the sunlight as they raced toward the eastern horizon like herds of animals or the battlements of medieval cities, some yellow, some the

color of smoke, some white with the pink blush of conch shells" (112). Such soft, tender delicacies aim at reducing mental stress and lead to live in peace and harmony with nature.

The text provides information of the river, the geographical settings of the regions, their climatic condition and their biodiversity. The writer beautifully narrates the environmental elements to unfold stories before the readers. To admit it explicitly, such stories in *A River Sutra*, string together the views of Jainism, Hinduism and Islam to remember the sacred nature of the Narmada. It begins with the introduction of an aged bureaucrat who voluntarily renounces the world of comfort and luxury. Instead of living in 'a built environment' and being 'a planned habitat', he comes to live in natural environment in the lap of the Narmada. The first story is about an affluent Jain businessman Ashok who rejects the enormity of wealth at the age of twenty six and leads to a monk's life. Renunciation is the negation of capitalistic mind-set. It is important to note that the materialistic attitude literary consumes the earth. The second story is about Master Mohan, the music teacher who takes care of Imrat, a boy gifted with a wonderful voice. He does not prefer to run after money and sacrifices his own life for Imrat. Money makes one selfish and self-centered attitude is not good for environment. The third story tells the tale of Nitin Bose who chooses to live in the hills of Kamarupa and later becomes enchanted by a woman. "What this means is that nature is imaged as a woman whose basic tasks include reproduction and nurture" (Nayar, 2015:250). Next is the heartrending story of a courtesan and her daughter who lived in a haveli. Exploitation in life is a reference to nature. Then, the reader reads the story of a young musician who is on a pilgrimage to the Narmada to mediate and cure herself from

the attachment with her past. Involvement in worldly life full of desires is painful and the expansion of such desires starts consuming the earth for fulfillment. In this anthropocentric worldview, humans commit ecocide. The last one is the tale of Naga Baba, an ascetic. Tariq Mia, the bureaucrat's friend narrates everything about Naga Baba who later returns as Professor Shankar to study upon 'body-mind' battle. Thus, the cumulative effect of the narrative tries to bestow the shimmering beauty of nature to afford a safe haven.

Mehta sets the background of the text in a quiet and serene locale in the Vindhya Range which is not yet packed down by the destructive foot of the modern man. Apparently there seems no life-threatening presence of poisons and pollutants in the region. Besides, the characters created by her are detached from human materialism. There is the rare mention of the hustle and bustle of life in mega cities. Instead of fossil fuel – industrialism and competitive commerce, the text delves into pastoral integrity, "Under the great trees glistening with dew-teak, peepul, silk cotton, mango, banyan – the mud path is still deserted, crossed only by bounding monkeys, leaping black buck, meandering wild boar as if the animals are glorying in their brief possession of the jungle" (3-4). As a biocentrist, Mehta connects her vision with animals and plants to form a silent universe free from rustle and bustle of commercialism.

There is naturalness and transcendence in this pastoral landscape, thereby drawing the ascetics to her shores for different kinds of fulfillment in their lives as they believe in the healing and cleansing powers of the Narmada. Moreover, the minstrel sings, "Turtles and river dolphins find refuge in your waters/ Alighting herons play upon your tranquil surface, / Fish and crocodiles are gathered in your embrace,/ O holy Narmada. / Bards and ascetics sing your wonders,/"

Gamblers, cheats, and dancers praise you,/We all find refuge in your embrace/ O holy Narmada" (181). Such descriptions reveal Mehta's notion of nature as a sacred space "what environmental theorists call the "sanctuary" or the "cathedral" concept, according to which sacred space is more distinctly marked off from the profane" (Buell, 1995: 213).

It seems significant to note that stern challenges to nature arise due to population boom and widespread deforestation. Aggressive capitalism and toxic waste put great risk to environment. The writer through the Courtesan reacts, "Where there used to be gardens now we have factories. Our gracious old buildings have been torn down to be replaced by concrete boxes named after politicians. The woods that once ringed the city have been cut down for the shantytowns of labor colonies"(108). Such anthropocene puts a challenge to humanity as the humans change the basic physical processes of the earth. Similarly, the city life in Calcutta, the artist feels restless as it is "crumbled under the weight of neglect, exploitation, poisonous humidity, traffic jams, power failures and the roads plowed up...the devastations of nature that daily drew the desperate to a great metropolis itself desperately surviving as if a war had just ended" (71). The recognition of the realities of these plights is due to the estrangement from nature. Such distorting biocide is antagonism of sustainable living.

Mehta resists humans' aspirations to conquer and subdue the earth. For her, man is not above and apart from the natural world. Her philosophy is "based on a profound respect for nature and the interdependence of all life" (100). Therefore, the narrator admits, "The beauty of the Narmada makes it a perfect retreat for anyone like myself wishing to withdraw from the world" (146). Through this, everyone has to understand that nature is our constant friend. As humanity

is experiencing an unprecedented moment now, it is articulated to maintain a balanced and harmonious relationship with environment. We can return and regenerate the earth. In this presumption, Paula Gunn Allen states, "An Indian, at the deepest level of being, assumes that the earth is alive in the same sense that human beings are alive" (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996:257). It is Indian awareness that becomes reflected in Mehta's creative output with profound insight and powerful vision. The implication of such insight is necessary in the present challenging times.

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## BOOK REVIEWS

### 1

## **Review of Chandra Shekhar Dubey's Poetry Collection, "The Door And the World"**

**(The Door And The World: A Collection  
of Poems, Chandra Shekhar Dubey,  
Authors Press, New Delhi, 2020.pp 84.  
Price: Rs. 395)**

SWATI TYAGI

"The poetry is the Earth, charming; The river, flowing from lofty mountains; Nature, a young woman and a heavenly plant with blossoming flowers, sinking in the garden of the mind."

– Manmohan Acharya  
(*Song of the Bumblebee*, 2008)

The above quote holds true for "The Door and the World" by Dr. Chandra Shekhar Dubey. The poems in this collection written over a span of five years, dwell on multiple themes from personal, social, political and philosophical to contemporary issues. The book under review opens "the door" of human mind to think and introspect over their each and every action. The cover page of the collection depicts a door that "holds key to the world, showing up panoramic life

hidden from the human sight". The collection transports the readers to 'a world of longing, living and survival instincts'.

This collection gives glimpses of the world and opens doors of promises, sunshine and rain. The poet states the fact that the "door to the world is what key is to lock", and highlights the importance of doors in life that bring "rain of hope" and "wind of love". The door transports the reader to an enlightened world where "light of life" is "wrapped in delightful rewards". And therefore, the title of the collection is very apt and suggestive.

There is a source of inspiration for every poet for creation. The poet is also inspired by the "Silent Muse" that has awakened him "to meditative moments, to think, to create a mansion out of ashes". The "silent muse" unlocks the "mind's wings to soar high like wandering Zeus in search of a new constellation". The poet simply translates the "silent whispers into sounds of words, rhythms of thoughts mundane and sublime", and presents it in the form of a collection of poems to the readers.

"The Door and the World" begins with the "Healing Prayer" and chanting of its verses which transport the readers to the ignited world of the "spiritual flames" that would heal its ruptured soul. The collection comes to a full circle with the last but not the least, poem 'Om Sai' centred on Sai Baba as "saviour of humanity", where the poet expresses his feelings of gratitude and abiding faith "safe under the umbrella" of "divine bliss". This serves as an epilogue to this collection and structural integrity to this collection. Between the first poem "Healing Prayer" and last poem the interregnum is filled with a world of diverse themes depicting the variety and richness of this world, a world that amuses and thrills.

Poems in this collection show spiritual faith in the divine power, where the poet is relieved and healed by the divine "touch". The poet sings the song of "lasting glory" of the divine and becomes "a seeker" for the "nectar" of compassion where the benediction lies in the "touch" that heals his "body, mind and soul". The poet stresses on the importance and need of "divine rain" to dispel the darkness and enlighten the world. The "healing grace of *Satchidananda*" representing 'truth, consciousness and bliss' soothes the senses to the "sublime" and "spreads the light of life like blossoms in spring".

The poet is an "alchemist" who transmutes "negative impulses into positive energy" and churns "thoughts into a cauldron of self-retrieval". The poet seeking the "healing grace" calls himself as a "miniscule atom" that dances to the "luminous waves relentlessly in the eternal gyre of endless loop". The poet prays to the "invisible power of divinity to heal his wounded soul. The poet asks the invisible power to provide him the "healing sparks" of light that "cuts all worldly chains".

Some poems in this book also show poet's environmental consciousness. His focus on the tranquility, serenity and "eternal bliss" provided in the lap of the nature is highlighted in several poems of the collection. The nature "heals" the "freezing pangs" of the poet. The poet listens to "the music of nature" and gets uplifted "from deep forest of darkness to the light of eternity".

The poems in the collection contain two odes where one is addressed to the forest and the other to the Earth. The 'Ode to Forest' focuses on "nature's temple of learning" where the poet sings the songs of antiquity and grandeur of green groves of Aranyaka. The poet seeks for the "dignity" of the nature "to see, to feel, to hear and sing" the mystical musings

and “whispers on the windy lyres”. The ‘Ode to Earth’ is addressed to the “Mother Earth” who is a “gentle spirit of benevolent power” and “a container and preserver of life”. The poem gives a personification of nature in the form of the mother where the Earth “foster(s) all forms of life” and the poet seeks for its “fragrance” to “sweeten all mortals with vigour” and “wisdom to see”.

The poet holds a positive outlook towards the life and uses the imagery of lamp and light for life to make the readers aware about life. The poet bears an optimistic outlook towards life and explains the readers that the difference in understanding and temperaments of two entities, is like “two spheres” that “may not overlap or intersect”. The poet explains that the life is “like a constellation” and has its “own pathway “. There is an urge to “understand this truth to live and let live”. The poems highlight the need to “light a lamp” to every dejected soul so as to “restore the fallen hopes” and overcome “the spirit of defiance against the inner darkness reigning every soul”. The poet tells that “light is life and life is light” opening the doors of life to a positive world which knows no defeat. The hope has to be restored “to see love in life and life in love” where the readers find no reason to be happy but only seek happiness “arising as bubble from water to pop up, to flicker and to burst into the oblivion of everlasting desires”.

These poems teach the principle of living life equating life to the river. In a positive way just like the “destiny of a river lies in flowing forward and not receding” so is the way of life to move forward “to breathe life [even] into dying moments”. The poet conveys that life has to be “bloomed in gloom” just like the living spirit of the ‘Forest Spry’. In all these poems the undefeated spirit of human being triumphs over a sea of troubles. It is this positivity which makes his

poems appealing to the senses of the readers. The running motif of hope and positivity is present throughout the poems in the collection, where the 'moon' may not appear at a time but "the other night, the moon blossomed full". The holy bliss filled in the "beatific smile" and charm of innocence possessed by a child makes the poet "lost in the spell" forgetting the "mundane dell of sprite". The poet motivates the readers at every point to enjoy and celebrate life in the collection.

His poem 'Mother' holds that in this festival of life "mother is constant celebration of life – in every breath and every sensation". The mother is held at the high position in life by the poet where "no words can sing mother's glory". The mother is a "great teacher" and "an epitome of courage". She is a "living source" behind all the inspirations who teaches "sagacity in adversity, wisdom in hostility and humility in victory". The poet keeps mother in his prayers "for the countless blessings" and celebrates each day of life as 'Mother's Day'.

The poet laments over the loss of nature in the poems. The poet mourns over the loss of cultural and literary legacy of Assi Ghat where "life giving" Ganga has shrunken and has lost its glory. The poet finds no love or compassion but a "meaningless existence". He finds himself as "an alien" in "his own city" where harmony is swallowed by hatred and the humanity is lost.

The poet cites the great figures of Krishna and Rama from the Indian epics to "awaken" the readers to the "realm of shared humanity in pain". 'Empathy' is the only solution to restore and resurrect humanity in the world. His poems titled "Migrant Labours", "I Walk", "Grand Spectacle" depict the problems of migrant labours during pandemic. The voice of migrant workers becomes the voice of the entire

community. These poems reveal social and moral conscience of the poet. The poet finds solace in the escape where he walks over his past in the “land” of his “memories and dreams”. The poet leaves behind the world and goes to the stories to his “granny beyond the worries of the world that lies behind”. The poet becomes voice of thousands of such helpless workers who were forced to leave their work places to their native homes. There is a quest for peace and harmony and truce with the warring self in the poems.

The poet is the most unpoetic being in the world. His sensibility creates out of the society in which he is related with many or none. The function of “memories” and “consciousness” is central to the poems in the collection. For poet, the memory is “your lotus eyes float in my beleaguered being, gauging my foamy heart”.

The poet addresses the current social and political issues of the present times in the nation and the world in the poems. These issues are about Palghar lynching and CAA protest. The poet also talks about racial inequality and pays a tribute to George Floyd in the poem ‘Day of Judgement’. The poet also touches upon the topic of suicide where he may be possibly referring to suicide of Sushant Singh Rajput. The poem redirects to the view of John Donne of “Death be not proud” where death is “a painful reality”.

Some poems in this collection are addressed to the current pandemic of COVID-19 and its effects and affects on the world. The poet through the poems tells the readers that the “mighty and deadly” Corona’s Ghost arrived “to rule the world” “shifting the paradigms” and “meaning of life”. The poet also conveys the feelings of rootlessness and displacement of the migrants during the lockdown due to the pandemic. The poet muses on the “locked world” where silent night converses with the “salubrious day”. The poems

bring out the hope out of despair for “nature is at work healing all” where life will smile and sing again. The ‘benevolent nature’ gives the world the “impulse for true living” in the difficult time of pandemic where “a pandemic free world” shall surely emerge leaving behind the “swollen faces” of the “zoom meetings”.

The call of the present time is that the “fallen Faustus” in every human across the world needs to “arise, awake and break the veil that clouds their consciousness”. The poems convey the message that human beings should stand together for the welfare of the country and the world just like a “soldier” who “lives to die and die to live in the eternity of our love for the country”.

“The Door and the World” bears the hallmark of true poetry that takes the readers to the ‘colours of life’ in their myriad shades through its rich and vivid, yet, simple and shorter-imaginative, biographical and autobiographical poems. These poems are prismatic like the world thrilling the readers, evoking curiosity in their minds and inspiring their hearts. Truly the poems in this collection can be identified with the view of Salvatore Quasimodo: “Poetry is the revelation of a feeling that the poet believes to be interior and personal but which the reader recognizes as his own.” (New York Times, 14 May 1960). I strongly recommend this collector’s pride and reader’s possession to readers of all reasons and seasons. Authorspress has brought out it magnificently with intelligently worded blurb by a well-known poet and editor Dr. Vivekanand Jha.

## CONTRIBUTORS

1. **Alan Cohen** was a poet before beginning his career as a Primary Care MD, teacher, and manager, and has been living a full and varied life. He has been writing poems for 60 years and is beginning now to share some of his discoveries. He's been married to Anita for 41 years, and they've been in Eugene, OR these past 11.
2. **Alessio Zanelli** is an Italian poet who writes in English and whose work has appeared in over 180 literary journals from 16 countries. His fifth original collection, titled *The Secret Of Archery*, was published in 2019 by Greenwich Exchange (London). For more information please visit [www.alessiozanelli.it](http://www.alessiozanelli.it).
3. **Andrew Scott** is a native of Fredericton, NB. During his time as an active poet, Andrew Scott has taken the time to speak in front of classrooms, judge poetry competitions as well as had over 200 hundred writings published worldwide in such publications as *The Art of Being Human*, *Battered Shadows* and *The Broken Ones*. Andrew Scott has published five poetry books, *Snake With A Flower*, *The Phoenix Has Risen*, *The Path*, *The Storm Is Coming and Searching* and one book of photography, *Through My Eyes*. *Whispers Of The Calm* is his sixth poetry book. [andrewscott.scott@gmail.com](mailto:andrewscott.scott@gmail.com)
4. **Avdhesh Jha** an author, poet, teacher and observer is a strong critic with an inclination towards societal development. Presently he works with EDI of India. With ten doctoral scholars, being awarded the doctorate degree, the guide and mentor to Ph.D. aspirants, has

presented several papers on different topics at national and international seminars. He has written about more than 200 poetries in English and Hindi. Associated with institutes of national repute, he has organised seminars and workshops and delivered talks and lectures at various seminars, workshops etc. He is awarded with CHAROTTAR GAURAV and BHARAT EXCELLENCE.

5. **Beverly Matherne**, the author of six bilingual books of poetry, is professor emerita of English at Northern Michigan University (in the United States), where she served as director of the Master of Fine Arts program in creative writing and poetry editor of *Passages North* literary magazine. Winner of seven first-place prizes, including the Hackney Literary Award for Poetry, she has also received four Pushcart Prize nominations. She is widely published in reviews and anthologies, including *Universal Oneness: An Anthology of Magnum Opus Poems from around the World*. With Samuel Beckett, Vladimir Nabokov, and five other writers, she is the subject of bilingual writing in a completed doctoral dissertation from the University of Paris III.
6. **Bishnupada Ray** is an Associate Professor of English at the University of North Bengal. His poems have appeared in many journals and anthologies.
7. **Christian Loid Valenzuela** is an award-winning writer, an internationally-recognised poet, a former Wattpad Ambassador, a professionally-trained book editor and a Bachelor of Secondary Education with a specialisation in English student from the Philippines. Christian Loid is also a member/researcher of the Social Science and Humanities Research Association. He has an unconditional love for books, literature, research and teaching.

8. **Debra Amirault Camelin** is a 9<sup>th</sup> generation Acadian living in Yarmouth, Nova Scotia. Debra has been published in numerous anthologies and has won prize money for several poems. In 2019, she released a self-published book of poetry: *Light in the Mist* (a Baret Days book). Debra draws much of her poetry from her Acadian heritage and travels. Her poems are described as transporting readers through time and through space on a journey both emotional and geographical. She is a certified labyrinth facilitator with Veriditas and currently hosts labyrinth retreats in Nova Scotia that incorporate writing poetry. Debra has a Bachelor of Journalism from Carleton University in Ottawa and over 30 years' experience working in the field of performance and learning.
9. **Dhruv Somayajula** uses writing as a creative outlet, when he is not at work or busy reading anything and everything of interest. He posts his thoughts on <https://northstartalks.art.blog/>.
10. **Donna Pucciani**, a Chicago-based writer, has published poetry worldwide in *Shi Chao Poetry*, *Voice and Verse*, *Poetry Salzburg*, *ParisLitUp*, *Meniscus*, *Mediterranean Poetry*, *Acumen*, *Journal of Italian Translation*, and other journals. Her seventh and most recent book of poetry is *EDGES*.
11. **Frank Jousen** is a German teacher and writer, member of a one-world group. His publications include two selections of his poetry, one of them being a bilingual collaboration with Romanian poet Ana Cicio. He has co-edited two international anthologies of poetry/fiction in India and one of short stories in Germany. His poems and short stories have also been published in a variety of literary magazines and anthologies in India (*Poet*,

*Metverse Muse, Prosopisia, Poetry Today, Triveni, Canopy, Celebrating India* etc.) Australia, G.B., the Republic of Ireland, Germany, Romania, Malta, the U.S.A., Canada, India, China, Thailand and Japan; some of them have been translated into German, Romanian, Hindi and Chinese. His latest publications include *Pulsar* (G.B.), *Panku Poems* (Canada) and *Earthborne* (Australia), *The Poetry Kit* (G.B.) and *Muse India*.

12. **Germain Droogenbroodt**, is a Belgian poet, translator and promoter of international poetry. He received many international awards and is yearly invited at the most prestigious international poetry festivals, nominated in 2017 for the Nobel Prize of Literature. He wrote 13 books of poetry published so far in 29 countries. Thachom Poyil Rajeevan compared his philosophical poetry with the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore whereas in Spain his poetry has been compared with Juan Ramón Jiménez. According to Chinese critics his poetry is TAO and ZEN. Several of his books, two written in India, are illustrated by Satish Gupta.
13. **Guna Moran** is an Assamese Poet and critic. His poems are published in more than hundred international magazines, journals, webzines, blogs, newspapers, anthologies and have been translated into thirty languages around the world. He has three poetry books to his credit. He lives in Assam, India.
14. **James G. Piatt**, a Best of Web nominee and three time Pushcart nominee, has had four collections of poetry; "Solace Between the Lines," "Light," "Ancient Rhythms," and "The Silent Pond," over 1500 poems, five novels and 35 short stories published worldwide. He earned his BS and MA from California State Polytechnic University, SLO, and his doctorate from BYU. James' fifth book of

poetry, *Serenity-Soft Poems for Hard Times*, a book of spiritual, reflective, tranquil, and meditative poems to soothe the anxiety of these trying times, will be released in March.

15. **James Mulhern's** writing has appeared in literary journals over one hundred and thirty times. In 2013, he was a Finalist for the Tuscany Prize in Catholic Fiction. In 2015, Mr. Mulhern was awarded a writing fellowship to Oxford University. That same year, a story was longlisted for the Fish Short Story Prize. In 2017, he was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. His most recent novel, *Give Them Unquiet Dreams*, is a Readers' Favorite Book Award winner, a Notable Best Indie Book of 2019, a Kirkus Reviews Best Book of 2019, and a RED RIBBON WINNER, highly recommended by The Wishing Shelf Book Awards in the United Kingdom.
16. **James Ragan** has authored 10 books of poetry (Grove/Atlantic, Henry Holt, Salmon Publishing, etc.) with poems in *Poetry*, *The Nation*, *NAR*, *Epoch*, *Bomb*, *World Lit Today*, *Los Angeles Times*, and 30 anthologies. Translated into 15 languages, honors include 2 Honorary Ph.D's, 3 Fulbright Professorships, the Emerson Poetry Prize, 9 Pushcart nominations, a Poetry Society of America Citation, NEA Fellowship, London's Troubadour Poetry Prize finalist, and the Swan Foundation Humanitarian Award etc. His plays "Commedia" and "Saints" have been staged in the U.S, Moscow, Beijing, Athens etc. He has read for 7 international heads of state and for the U.N, Carnegie Hall, CNN etc. and audiences in 34 nations. He's the subject of the documentary, "Flowers and Roots" (Arina Films), awarded recognitions at 17 Int. Film Festivals, including the Platinum Prize at the 49th Houston Int. Film Festival.

17. **Jeffrey Zable** is a teacher and conga drummer who plays Afro-Cuban folkloric music for dance classes and Rumbas around the San Francisco Bay Area. His poetry, fiction, and non-fiction have appeared in hundreds of literary magazines and anthologies. Recent writing in *Former People*, *Ariel Chart*, *Boston Literary Magazine*, *Pensive Stories*, *Third Wednesday*, *Untitled Writing*, *The Nonconformist*, *Corvus*, *Uppagus*, and many others.
18. **John Grey** is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in *Soundings East*, *Dalhousie Review* and *Connecticut River Review*. Latest book, "Leaves on Pages" is available through Amazon.
19. **Joseph Hart** has a BA in psychology. For several years he has had poems published in small magazines, and was twice nominated for a Pushcart. His favorite poets are Keats, Millay and Robinson.
20. **Keith Inman's** work can be found in major libraries across North America, in Dublin, and Zurich. His latest book, *The Way History Dries*, 2021, from Black Moss Press, unfolds like a novel. Canlit compared his previous work, *The War Poems: Screaming at Heaven*, to Atwood, Boyden and Itani. Keith lives in Thorold, Ontario, Canada.
21. **Prof (Dr) Kum Kum Ray** is the Founding Member Professor & Director of Amity School of Language Amity University Lucknow Campus in 2004, who drafted the modules & Course Curriculum for English / Communication Skills / Buss Communication for the Value Added Mandatory Courses of Amity University Uttar Pradesh. She was awarded the Henry Derozio award for Excellence in Education by the Indian Council for Certificate Examination in 2000. Her poems and

papers have been published in renowned indexed journals. [www.profkumkumray.com](http://www.profkumkumray.com)

22. **Laraine Kentridge Lasdon** attended the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa. She studied drama, dance and music in London and pursued writing poetry. Ms. Kentridge hosts a Poetry group in Austin, Texas and has recently issued a Collection of her work. Ms. Kentridge currently lives in Austin Texas with her husband Professor Leon Lasdon. [www.austinmarketing.biz](http://www.austinmarketing.biz)
23. **Loretta Diane Walker**, a member of the Texas Institute of Letters, an award-winning poet inspired by a collection of remarkable people and poets, is a nine-time Pushcart Nominee and Best of the Net Nominee, won the 2016 Phyllis Wheatley Book Award for poetry for her collection *In This House*. She has published five collections of poetry. Loretta received a BME from Texas Tech University and earned a MA from The University of Texas of the Permian Basin. Loretta teaches music in Odessa, Texas.
24. **Michael Keshigian** from New Hampshire, is the author of 14 poetry collections, his latest, *What To Do With Intangibles*, released in January, 2020, by [Cyberwit.net](http://Cyberwit.net). He has been published in numerous national and international journals and has appeared as feature writer in twenty poetry publications with 7 Pushcart Prize and 2 Best of the Net nominations. His poetry cycle, *Lunar Images*, set for Clarinet, Piano, Narrator, was premiered at Del Mar College in Texas. Subsequent performances occurred in Boston (Berklee College) and Moletto, Italy. *Winter Moon*, a poem set for Soprano and Piano, premiered in Boston. ([michaelkeshigian.com](http://michaelkeshigian.com))

25. **Michael Lee Johnson** lived ten years in Canada during the Vietnam era and is a dual citizen of the United States and Canada. Today he is a poet, freelance writer, amateur photographer, and small business owner in Itasca, DuPage County, Illinois. Mr. Johnson published in more than 2,013 new publications, and his poems have appeared in 40 countries, he edits, publishes ten poetry sites. Michael Lee Johnson has been nominated for 2 Pushcart Prize awards poetry 2015/1 Best of the Net 2016/2 Best of the Net 2017, 2 Best of the Net 2018.
26. **Natalia Fernández Díaz-Cabal**. Professor, Ph. D. in Linguistics and Ph.D. in Philosophy. Essayist, poet, traveler, nomad, translator of 7 languages. Author of several books of essay (intercultural communication, gender violence) and poetry, among them: "The tree looking at light", "Sarcoma offspring", "The white statue of your absence", etc. Translated into Italian, English, Arabic and French.
27. **Nilamadhab Kar** MD, DPM, DNB, MRCPsych, writes poetry, and occasionally stories and short essays, in English and Odia. His poems have been published in magazines and anthologies in USA, UK, and India. He has published three poetry books (*Tama Paainin* Odia, selected poems; *Reverberation and Tomorrow's Morning Sun* – translated poetry anthologies). He has edited a few literary magazines and is on the editorial board of some. He is a psychiatrist; besides clinical work he is actively involved in clinical research and publications.
28. **Pankajam Kottarath** retired from BHEL as Deputy Manager/Finance is a bilingual poet and novelist (writing in English and Malayalam), settled at Chennai. She has twenty-three books so far published, including fourteen books of poems, a translated poetry collection in French,

three fictions in English and six books in Malayalam and a couple of books in the pipeline. She is the recipient of many awards such as Rock Pebbles National Literary Award 2019; Cochin Litfest Prize 2019; Essay competition award conducted by ISISAR, Calcutta in the World Thinkers and Writers Peace Meet 2019; Literary Excellence Award from Gujarat Sahitya Akademi and Motivational strips on the eve of India's Independence Day 2020, etc. She can be reached at [kp\\_bhargavrag@yahoo.co.in](mailto:kp_bhargavrag@yahoo.co.in)

29. **Paweł Markiewicz** was born 1983 in Siemiatycze in Poland. He is poet who lives in Bielsk Podlaski and writes tender poems, haiku as well as long poems. Paweł has published his poetries in many magazines. He writes in English and German.
30. **Pooja Vijay** was born in 1999 in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala. Now studying B-Tech Aeronautical Engineering at Rajadhani Institute of Engineering and Technology, Tvm. She published one of her Malayalam poem in the public magazine Sthree Sadbam in 2011.
31. **Rajiv Khandelwal** is an Electrical Engineer by education and is now a business man by profession. Rajiv Khandelwal has published 4 volumes of Poetry – “Conch Shells and Cowries” – published in 1998, “Love is a Lot of Work” and “A Monument to Pigeons” both published in 2013. 4th poetry volume titled “A Time to Forget” – published 2017. Rajiv has been awarded “Literary Creative Award” by Naji Naaman’s Foundation for Gratis Culture, of Lebanon in which the Foundation had 2371 participants in their 2018 competition, from sixty six countries and has declared/rewarded 64 prize winners. Rajiv is one of the prize winners. <http://yourproductfinder.com>

32. **Roger G. Singer**, Poet Laureate Old Lyme, Connecticut; Connecticut Coalition of Poets Laureate; President, Shoreline Chapter; Connecticut Poetry Society.
33. **Sarah Brown Weitzman** was a National Endowment for the Arts Fellow in Poetry and twice nominated for the Pushcart Poetry Prize. She has had poems published in hundreds of journals and anthologies including *New York Quarterly*, *North American Review*, *Rattle*, *New Ohio Review*, *Verse Daily*, *Mid-American Review*, *Poet Lore*, *Potomac Review*, *Miramar*, *The American Journal of Poetry*, *New York Quarterly*, and elsewhere. Her fifth book, *AMOROTICA*, is forthcoming from Main Street Rag.
34. **Scott Thomas Outlar** lives and writes in the suburbs outside of Atlanta, Georgia. His work has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net. He guest-edited the 2019 and 2020 Western Voices editions of *Setu Mag*. Selections of his poetry have been translated into Afrikaans, Albanian, Bengali, Dutch, French, Italian, Kurdish, Malayalam, Persian, Serbian, and Spanish. His sixth book, *Of Sand and Sugar*, was released in 2019. His podcast, *Songs of Selah*, airs weekly on 17Numa Radio and features interviews with contemporary poets, artists, musicians, and health advocates. More about Outlar's work can be found at [17Numa.com](http://17Numa.com).
35. **Sunil Sharma**, Ph.D (English), is a senior academic, critic, literary editor and author with 22 published books: Seven collections of poetry; three of short fiction; one novel; a critical study of the novel, and, nine joint anthologies on prose, poetry and criticism, and, one joint poetry collection. He is, among others, a recipient of the UK-based *Destiny Poets'* inaugural Poet of the Year award---2012. His poems were published in the prestigious UN project: *Happiness: The Delight-Tree: An Anthology of*

*Contemporary International Poetry*, in the year 2015. Sunil edits the English section of the monthly bilingual journal *Setu* published from Pittsburgh, USA For more details, please visit the link: <http://www.dr.sunilsharma.blogspot.in/>

36. **Susan P. Blevins** was born in England and moved to Italy when she was 20, where she lived for the following 26 years. While there she had a weekly column in an international newspaper. She moved to the USA and spent 16 years in Taos, NM, where she wrote about gardens for various magazines, and is now living in Houston, TX, writing about her interesting life and travels. She is published in various literary journals in the USA and overseas, including *New Verse News*, *Scarlet Leaf*, *Chicago Literati*, *Qutub Minar*, *The Ekphrastic Review* and many others. She loves classical music, gardening, reading, writing, cats and intelligent, stimulating conversation. She also enjoys reading for the blind.
37. **Albert Russo** who has published worldwide over 85 books of poetry, fiction and essays (35) and photography (50), in both English and French, his two mother tongues, and sometimes in Italian, (Italian being his 'paternal' tongue) – he also speaks Spanish and German and still has notions of Swahili –, is the recipient of many awards, such as The New York Poetry Forum and Amelia (CA) Awards, The American Society of Writers Fiction Award, The British Diversity Short Story Award, The AZsacra international Poetry Award (Taj Mahal Review – US\$ 500), the Books & Authors Award, several Writer's Digest poetry and fiction Awards (winner and finalist), aquillrelle Awards, the Prix Colette and the Prix de la Liberté, among others. His work has been translated into

about 15 languages in 25 countries, on the five continents.  
<http://www.albertrusso.com>

38. **DJ Tyrer** is the person behind *Atlantean Publishing*, was placed second in the Writing Magazine 'Mid-Story Sentence' competition and short-listed for the 2015 Carillon 'Let's Be Absurd' Fiction Competition, and has been widely published in anthologies and magazines around the world, such as *Apples, Shadows and Light* (Earlyworks Press), and *Marked By Scorn* (Solarwyrn Press), and issues of *Belmont Story Review*, *Tigershark*, *The Enchanted File Cabinet*, and *Carillon*, as well as having a novella available in paperback and on the Kindle, *The Yellow House* (Dunhams Manor). DJ Tyrer's website is at <https://djtyrer.blogspot.co.uk/>
39. **Eric Dreyer Smith** lives in San Antonio. He graduated from Trinity University in 1989. Books published include *No One Blames San Antonio for the Civil War* and *Eligible Atrocities*. He is currently completing an M.A. in counseling and his hobbies include short film production.
40. **Jevin Lee Albuquerque** grew up in California, on the local pier in Santa Cruz, fishing for striped bass. He evolved into a fly fisherman, obsessed with trout and steelhead. Recent publications include: *Catamaran Literary Reader*, *VerbalArt*, *Phenomenal Literature*, and the poetry anthology, *Universal Oneness* (Authorspress, New Delhi, India, 2020); fiction forthcoming in *Confrontation Magazine* (Spring, 2021). In a former life he was a professional soccer player. He has a degree in Latin American Studies from UCLA.
41. **John Andreini** calls Portland, Oregon home. He writes short stories in the horror, thriller and SF genres that

reveal people's darkest fears in an unforgiving world. John has published numerous short stories and flash fiction (list available), and some of those stories have been made into popular Creepyasta YouTube videos. Films based on his short stories have been official selections at seven national film festivals.

42. **M Shamsur Rabb Khan** is an Assistant Professor, Language and Translation department, King Khalid University, Abha, Saudi Arabia. His short stories are published in *Muse India*, *The Statesman*, and *The Children Book Trust*. He has also written six books, several research papers and articles for journals.
43. **Melanie Flores** was born in Toronto, ON. She divides her time working as an editor/proofreader/writer and audiobook narrator and writing poetry and short stories. Her work has appeared online, in print journals, and in various international and national anthologies. Her work has been described as moving and provocative. Melanie recently won first place for "Dandelion Smiles" in Polar Expressions 2020 Short Prose Contest. She has also won awards in several poetry competitions. An Associate Member of the League of Canadian Poets, Melanie published a poetry chapbook, "The She: An Exposé", in 2019 and a YA novella entitled "Whisper of the Golden Feather: A Spirit-Animal Chronicle" in 2021. Melanie is currently working on her first full-length novel and a book of poetry.
44. **Nels Hanson** grew up on a small farm in the San Joaquin Valley of California and has worked as a farmer, teacher and contract writer/editor. His fiction received the San Francisco Foundation's James D. Phelan Award and Pushcart nominations in 2010, 2012, 2014 and 2016, and poems received a 2014 Pushcart nomination, *Sharkpack*

Review's 2014 Prospero Prize, and 2015 and 2016 Best of the Net nominations.

45. **Patty Somlo's** most recent book, *Hairway to Heaven Stories*, was published by Cherry Castle Publishing, a Black-owned press committed to literary activism. *Hairway* was a Finalist in the American Fiction Awards and Best Book Awards. Two of Somlo's previous books, *The First to Disappear* (Spuyten Duyvil) and *Even When Trapped Behind Clouds: A Memoir of Quiet Grace* (WiDo Publishing), were Finalists in several book contests. She received Honorable Mention for Fiction in the Women's National Book Association Contest, was a Finalist in the Parks & Points Fall Essay Contest, and had an essay selected as Notable for Best American Essays.
46. **Tikvah Feinstein's** poetry is widely published in the USA and internationally, including *The BeZine*, *Verbal Art*, *Loyalhanna Review*, *Boston Poetry Magazine* and others. A graduate of the University of Pittsburgh, she has worked as staff writer for a daily newspaper, is author of 4 books, and edited and illustrated others. Editor and publisher of *Taproot Literary Review* for 25 editions, her story "The Purpose of Tears" won the 2017 Westmoreland Short Story Award from Westmoreland Arts & Heritage Festival. She received the "Albert Nelson Marquis Lifetime Achievement Award" for 2019.
47. **Vern Fein**, a retired teacher, has published over a hundred poems and short pieces on over sixty sites, a few being: \*82 Review, The Literary Nest, Bindweed Magazine, Gyroscope Review, Vietnam War Poetry, Ibis Head Review, Soft Cartel, Spindrift, Former People, 500 Miles, and The Write Launch, and has non-fiction pieces in *Quail Bell*, *The Write Place at the Write Time*, and

Adelaide, plus a short story in the online magazine Duende from Goddard College.

48. **Felice Picano's** stories, novellas and novels are translated into seventeen languages, and include national and international bestsellers. Four plays were produced. He's received awards for poetry, drama, short stories, novels and memoirs. His newest books are *Songs & Poems*, and the novel, *Pursuit: A Victorian Entertainment*; his novel *Dryland's End* (2003) was just republished. Several new stories will appear in 2021 anthologies and magazines. Picano lectures on Vintage Hollywood and screenwriting and teaches writing at workshops for the West Hollywood Public Library. [www.felice.picano.net](http://www.felice.picano.net)
49. **David James** has published five books, six chapbooks, and has had thirty of his one-act plays produced in the U.S. and Ireland. He teaches at Oakland Community College in Michigan, U.S.A.
50. **Gary Beck** has spent most of his adult life as a theater director and worked as an art dealer when he couldn't earn a living in the theater. He has also been a tennis pro, a ditch digger and a salvage diver. His original plays and translations of Moliere, Aristophanes and Sophocles have been produced Off Broadway. His poetry, fiction and essays have appeared in hundreds of literary magazines and his published books include 30 poetry collections, 12 novels, 3 short story collections, 1 collection of essays and 3 books of plays.
51. **René van der Klooster** is multifaceted. Besides an author of poetry, prose and plays (in Dutch and English), he practices visual arts, including drawing, painting and sculpting, moreover, formerly he worked as an architect

and in that capacity he is currently designing lamps.  
Website: [www.renevanderklooster.com](http://www.renevanderklooster.com)

52. **Susan P. Blevins** was born in England and moved to Italy when she was 20, where she lived for the following 26 years. While there she had a weekly column in an international newspaper. She moved to the USA and spent 16 years in Taos, NM, where she wrote about gardens for various magazines, and is now living in Houston, TX, writing about her interesting life and travels. She is published in various literary journals in the USA and overseas, including *New Verse News*, *Scarlet Leaf*, *Chicago Literati*, *Qutub Minar*, *The Ekphrastic Review* and many others. She loves classical music, gardening, reading, writing, cats and intelligent, stimulating conversation. She also enjoys reading for the blind.
53. **Subas Chandra Rout** (born 1969) has obtained his degree of M.A., M.Phil. in English Literature, Ph.D. in Language and Literature and LLB. from Utkal University and Utkal University of Culture, Bhubaneswar, Odisha. He started his Professional Career as a Lecturer in English at Biju Pattnaik College of Science and Education, Jaydev Vihar, Bhubaneswar in 1993. He is the Co-Editor of *Rock Pebbles*, a Peer-Reviewed Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies. He has to his credit about fifteen published Research Papers in National and International Journals and also one book, *Amitav Ghosh: An Ecocritical Study* by AUTHORSPRESS. His poems in Odia have been published in different Odia Magazines. His areas of interest are interdisciplinary approaches to the study of Environmentalism, Ecocriticism, Ecofeminism, EcoMarxism and Ecoracism.
54. **Swati Tyagi** is a research scholar at Shri Venkateshwara University, Gajraula, Uttar Pradesh. As a Literature

scholar, she exhibits devout interest in literature encompassing domains of British nineteenth century literature, Romanticism, Modernism, Partition Literature, Indian Writing in English, Classical Literature and Indian Epics. She possesses dynamic skills and great zeal for writing research articles and book reviews. She is also proficient in communication skills along with her creative writing skills.



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